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The Farmers' Alliance

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The Farmers' Alliance

The Farmers' Alliance was the outgrowth of clubs that had grown up for various reasons alongside the Grange in the seventies. In time these clubs were formed into state Alliances which in turn were united into two great Alliances: one, the National Farmers' Alliance originating in Illinois in 1880 and commonly known as the "Northern" or "Northwestern" Alliance; the other, the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union which was started in Texas as early as 1875 and is usually referred to as the "Southern" Alliance. These two organizations attempted to effect a merger at conventions held in St. Louis in 1889, but the cleavage in the Farmers' Alliance movement on sectional lines prevented it. The programs of the Northern and Southern Alliances, however, were similar — to unite the farmers for their own advancement and protection "against class legislation, monopoly and swindling."

The Iowa Farmers' Alliance was organized in Des Moines, January 12, 1881, and immediately became affiliated with the Northern Alliance. The Southern Alliance did not gain entry into Iowa until 1891 when the Alliance movement gave way to Populism. The Northern Alliance spread rap-

idly in Iowa, serving in part as a business agent for the farmer, but devoting more attention to politics and legislation.

It was officially connected with the Farmers' Protective Association organized in Des Moines in April, 1881, for the purpose of fighting the barbed wire trust. The Association established a factory in Des Moines to manufacture wire for sale at reasonable prices, but when it began selling wire to the farmers for seven and one-half cents a pound it became involved in patent suits with the trust. The attorney for the Association was A. B. Cummins who carried on a legal contest with the trust until the price of wire was reduced.

The State Alliance also promoted the organization of farmers' mutual fire and tornado insurance companies inaugurated by the Grange. The rapid growth of these companies is attested by the fact that in 1889 there were 116 in Iowa. The Iowa State Alliance also gave some attention to the organization of farmers' cooperative elevators and stores which were established in the eighties. But it was through political and legislative measures that the Alliance, in concert with the Anti-Monopoly and Greenback parties, sought to remedy the ills of the farmers.

While the Iowa Alliance had been growing steadily in political strength and influence since its inception in 1881, it was during the latter part

of the decade that it grew "with astonishing rapidity." In 1887 one hundred forty delegates representing forty counties attended the annual state meeting. By 1890 county Alliances had been established in fifty-two of the ninety-nine counties. More than 1,700 local Alliances had been formed, composed of an estimated 50,000 members. The number of local Granges in Iowa had meanwhile dropped to fifty-two. While the Alliance did not champion the formation of a third party, fearful that this would lead to internal dissension and the destruction of the order, it tended to disregard party regularity and thus threatened Republican power.

It has been noted that the independent movement in politics continued to grow in various forms under a continuity of leadership from 1872 to 1890. The Alliance became active politically in supporting the general demand of the farmers for both state and federal regulation of railroads. It continued the agitation of the railroad question in the state elections of 1885 and again in 1887, when both the Republican and Democratic parties inserted planks in their platforms supporting state regulation of railroads. The result was that the railroad forces were defeated by the election of a legislature which attacked the transportation problem under the leadership of Governor Larabee (1886-1890). Under the pressure exerted by the Alliance, and despite the opposition of the

railroad lobby, a law was enacted in 1888 which provided for an elective commission with power to investigate the transportation question, to make freight classifications, to prepare schedules of "reasonable maximum rates," and to institute prosecutions for extortion. Rates fixed by the commission were held to be reasonable before the courts. Discrimination between shippers, places, and kinds of traffic was prohibited, and freight pools were forbidden. The law went into effect in 1889 and freight rates were materially reduced.

Other remedial legislation, demanded and secured by the Iowa Farmers' Alliance in 1888, included: the prohibition of combinations fixing the price of oil, lumber, coal, grain, flour, provisions, or any other commodity; the imposition of heavy penalties for selling grain and seed under fraudulent names; and the requirement that any article containing "any ingredient but the pure fat of healthy swine" and sold for use as lard must be labelled "compound lard." In 1890 the Alliance secured the enactment of a law reducing the legal interest rate from 10 to 8 per cent; it demanded the election of William Larrabee to the United States Senate to succeed William B. Allison; and it urged that more emphasis be placed on practical and experimental farming at Iowa State College.

In national affairs, the Iowa Alliance urged the passage of the butter and oleomargarine bill, which defined butter and imposed a tax regulat-

ing the manufacture, sale, importation, and exportation of oleomargarine. The bill was enacted into law on July 20, 1884, Senators William B. Allison and James F. Wilson of Iowa voting for the measure. The vote in Congress was divided sharply on sectional lines; the Southern representatives supported the cotton-seed oil interests. This division is of significance in explaining the cleavage in the Farmers' Alliance and also in later and more recent phases of the butter versus oleomargarine controversy. The Iowa Alliance demanded federal regulation of railroads by the passage of the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887; the elevation of the United States Department of Agriculture to cabinet rank in 1889; passage of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890; the free coinage of silver; eventual government ownership of railway, telegraph, and telephone lines; and the popular election of United States Senators.

In the advocacy of state and national legislative reforms, the Iowa Farmers' Alliance maintained a nonpartisan attitude on the assumption that the major parties could serve the interests of the farmers better than an independent farmers' party which would wreck rather than strengthen the Alliance. It was apparent by 1890, however, that an independent party spirit was rising in both the Northern and Southern Alliances. Rival factions were developed, favoring and opposing an independent party. The *Iowa Homestead*, owned by

J. M. Pierce, and with Henry Wallace as editor, opposed the organization of the Alliance into a third party, urging that it could accomplish more through the major parties than by the third party method; while the *Iowa Tribune*, which became the *Iowa Farmers' Tribune*, controlled by James B. Weaver and E. H. Gillette, championed the independent movement. In 1891 the Iowa Farmers' Alliance (Northern) was incorporated. Factionalism and rivalry were intensified. The question that gave the Alliance leaders great concern was farm support of an independent third party.

As the tendency toward independent political action in Iowa was getting under way, the Southern Alliance entered the state. The Des Moines *Iowa State Register*, the leading Republican newspaper in the state, emphasized the difference between the two Alliances by commending the Northern Alliance for its nonpartisan policy and assailing the Southern Alliance for coming into the state with its third-party heresy. The *Iowa Homestead* denounced the Southern Alliance for its opposition to the Conger lard bill, which taxed the manufacture and sale of compound lard, while *The Farmers' Tribune* became the official spokesman of the Southern Alliance with the declaration that it endorsed "that political organization which supports the Alliance principles and no others." This paper, a consolidation of four others, claimed a circulation of 11,520, comparing

THREE EARLY FARM LEADERS



N. B. Ashby
Farmers Alliance



William Larrabee
Governor



James B. Weaver
Populist Leader

THREE MODERN FARM LEADERS



Ralph W. Smith
Past Master
Iowa State Grange



D. H. Zentmire
County Agent
32 years at Marengo

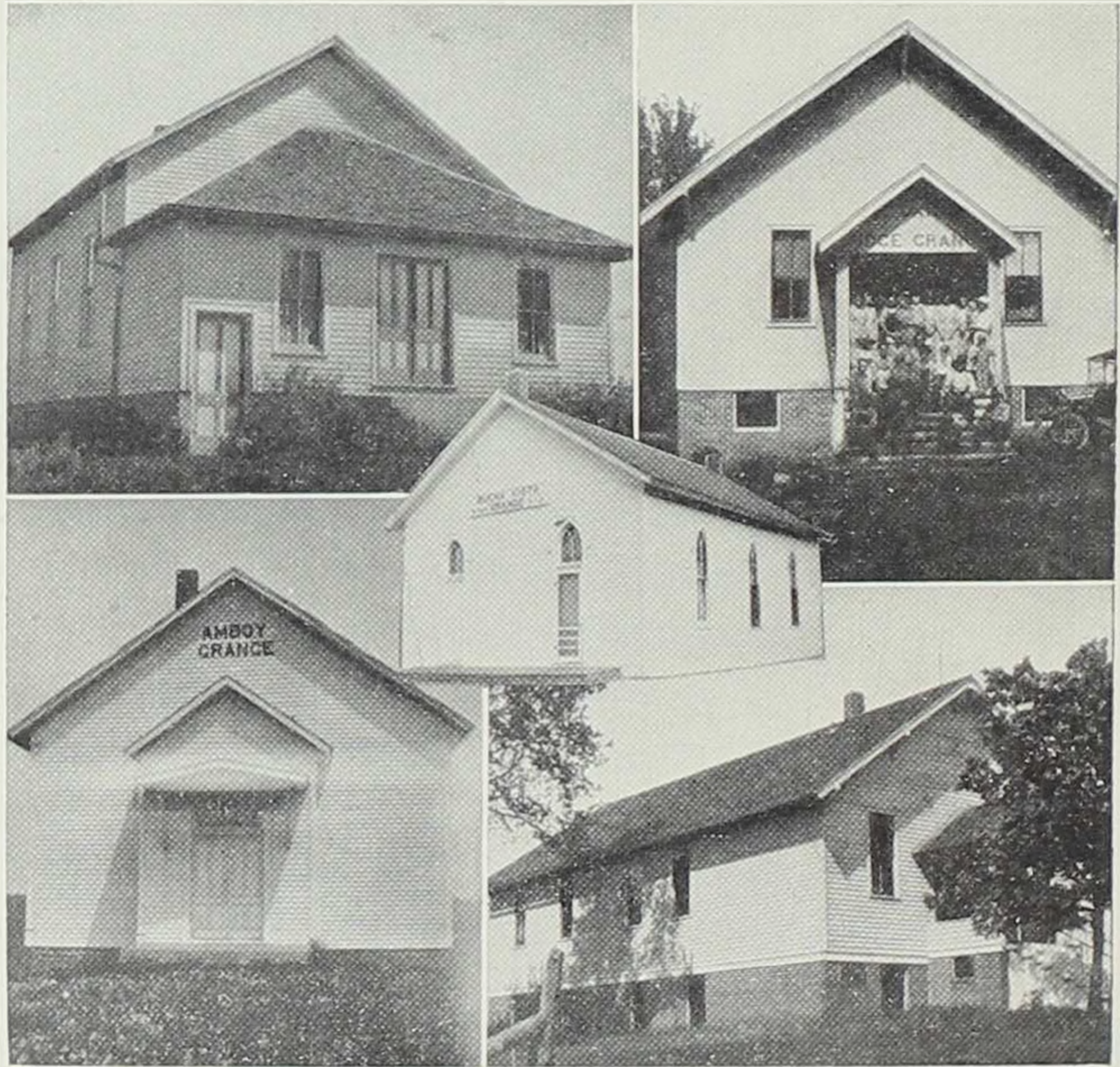


Mrs. Raymond Sayre
Past President
Women's Division IFBF

FIVE JASPER COUNTY GRANGE BUILDINGS

Sugar Grove
Amboy

Oak Ridge
Palo Alto



Buena Vista Grange (center) near Newton is home of oldest existing Iowa Farm Organization. Organized in 1872 — meetings held regularly ever since.

IOWA GRANGE LEADERS



Oliver H. Kelley

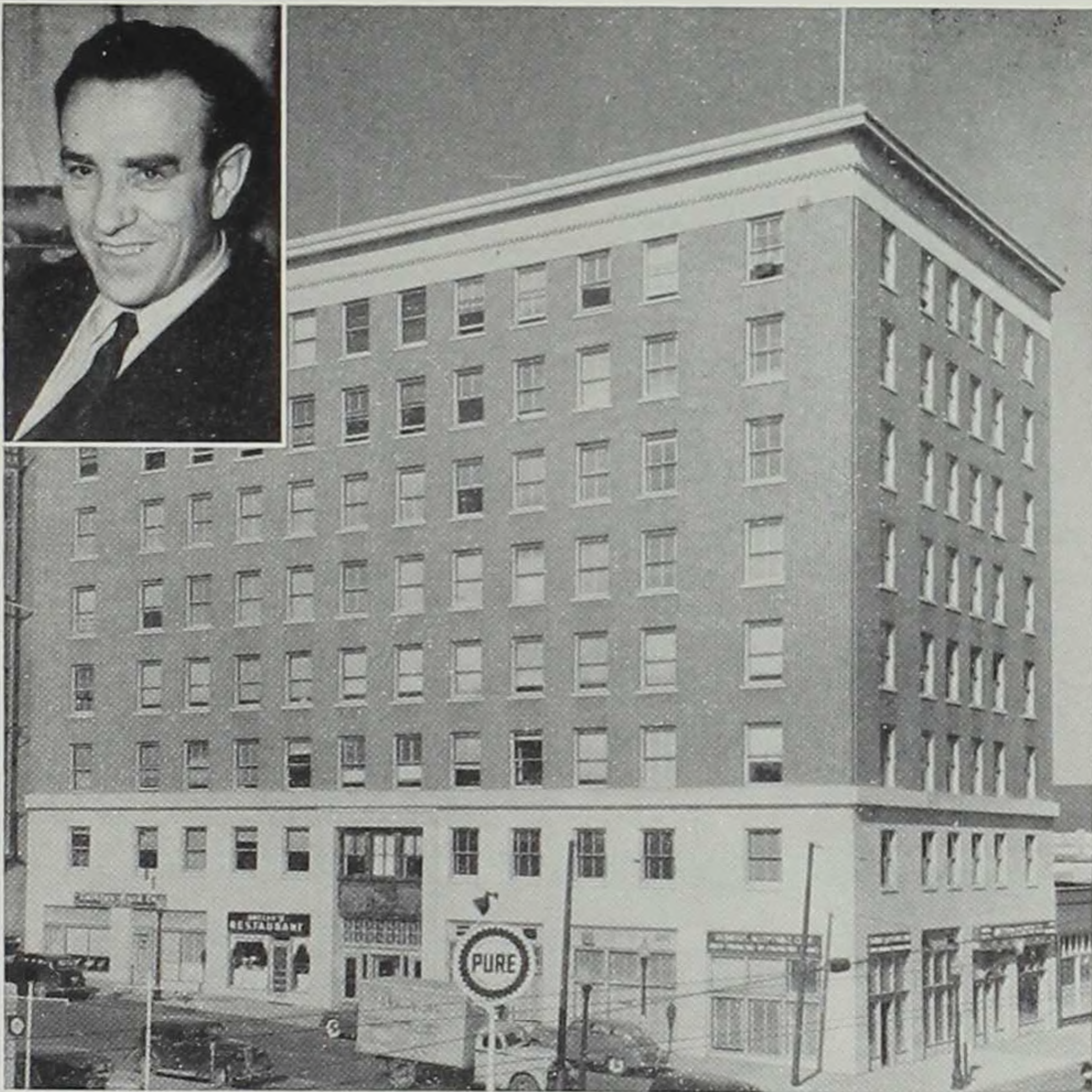


Wm. D. Wilson



Dudley W. Adams

FARM BUREAU FEDERATION BUILDING IN DES MOINES



SOME PRESIDENTS OF IOWA FARM BUREAU



E. Howard Hill



Francis Johnson



James R. Howard



Charles Hearst

Top — Allan Kline — President American Farm Bureau Federation

IOWA LEADERS OF FARMERS' UNION



Milo Reno



Fred W. Stover



Photos Des Moines Register

Milo Reno addresses Farm Holiday Association Meeting in
Des Moines (1933)

with the *Homestead's* estimated 15,000 circulation.

The Farmers' Alliance movement for an independent political party culminated in a call for a conference which met in Cincinnati in May, 1891, and adopted a resolution favoring the formation of the People's party of the United States. This movement was supported by the Iowa delegation headed by General James B. ("Jumping Jim") Weaver and E. H. ("Heifer-calf") Gillette. Pursuant to this action, a People's Independent State Convention composed of delegates from sixty counties was held June 3, 1891, and adopted the platform of the Cincinnati conference.

While the People's, or Populist, party was a continuation of all the independent party movements following the Civil War, it was more directly the outgrowth of the Farmers' Alliance. The Iowa Alliance was merged in the Populist party which attracted only a small per cent of the Alliance members, the great majority of whom supported the two major parties. Thus did the Iowa Alliance pass into history. The Grange was the only surviving nonpartisan farm organization (barely surviving in Iowa) until the emergence of the Farmers' Union and the Farm Bureau.

LOUIS B. SCHMIDT