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THE FARMERS' HOLIDAY MOVEMENT, PLYMOUTH COUNTY, IOWA: 1932-1933

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Rodney D. Karr

December, 1980

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Thesis Committee

Name	Department
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Harl A. Dalstrom	History
Bernard D. Kolasa	Political Science

William C. Pratt
Chairman

December 4, 1980
Date

PREFACE

While reading Studs Terkel's Hard Times, for a seminar in 1974, I first encountered information about a farm rebellion in northwestern Iowa during the Great Depression. As a native of that part of Iowa, my curiosity about this topic provoked further inquiry. In general, the farmer uprising of the 1930s was eventful for northwest Iowa and the surrounding upper midwestern states. Specifically, the rebellion achieved considerable attention for events in Plymouth County, Iowa. Having grown up only twenty miles from LeMars, the county seat of Plymouth County, I became intrigued with the rebellion, its causes, and the people involved in this episode of farmer activism. As the result of an idea sparked by a seminar reading, the topic of the Plymouth County farm revolt grew into this thesis project.

In two contexts the Plymouth County farm revolt seems significant. On the one hand, the county's uprising provides an interesting study of local farmer activism. Studied in the restricted limits of a single county, special insights into the events, characters, and ideology of rural rebellion can be gained. But, there is also a broader importance in the Plymouth County farm revolt. The local rebellion seems to be linked to a long heritage of agricultural unrest in America. Viewed in this second context, there is more than just a local importance to the events of 1932-33 in the LeMars area. Within the story of this local farmer uprising are interesting lessons relative to America's agrarian tradition.

The completion of this project carries with it the customary indebtedness. Numerous librarians, teachers, county officials, and just private citizens, extended assistance without which this project could not have been completed. But, a special thank you is in order for the one other person who believed strongly in the value of this project. Dr. William C. Pratt, as my adviser, showed exceptional patience and guidance as he led me through the thesis process. He was a constant source of research ideas, and never gave up on this thesis topic, even when the writer fell prey to such temptations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF MAPS

MAP

CHAPTER I

THE FARMERS' HOLIDAY MOVEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN AGRARIANISM

A strong agrarian protest movement emerged in the midwest during the early 1930s. In Iowa, scattered incidents of farm protest surfaced from 1931 through 1933. Sometimes organized, frequently undisciplined, this rural insurgency achieved its greatest notoriety in Plymouth County in northwestern Iowa, from August, 1932, until May, 1933.[1] Under the banner of the Farmers' Holiday Association, economically depressed farmers agitated for relief. During that ten month period, farmers resorted to actions ranging from purposeful strikes to uncontrolled violence. The 1930s agrarian uprising in Plymouth County, studied alone, is an interesting and important page in America's depression era history. However, the story of this instance of farm rebellion has a broader significance. A fuller appreciation of the rural unrest of the 1930s generally, and in Plymouth County specifically, can be achieved by placing it in the historical context of both group direct action and the American agrarian tradition.[2]

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[1]John L. Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); and Lowell K. Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," (Columbia University: Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1968).

[2]Examinations of direct action and violence on the part of European rural crowds by George Rude and E. J. Hobsbawm suggest even broader implications for studies of rural upheaval. Similarities in the crowd phenomena of Iowa farmer protests in the 1930s and rural protest from the

American agricultural history contains a rich tradition of unrest and direct action. In colonial times, Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, and the Regulator Movement in North Carolina, symbolized rural protest against unfavorable political and economic conditions.[3] Later, in Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts and the whiskey tax resistance in Pennsylvania, farmers gave further demonstrations of rural discontent and direct action.[4] From the Civil War until World War I agricultural movements underwent a transition from independent, isolated agrarian activism to an organizational period which witnessed the emergence of the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, the People's Party, the Farmers' Union, and the American Society for Equity.[5] It was from this general heritage of farmer direct action and organization that the Farmers' Holiday Association developed in the early 1930s.

The Farmers' Holiday Association served as the organizational base for an important chain of events in Plymouth County in 1932 and 1933.

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eighteenth through early twentieth century in England and France will be discussed in Chapter IV, footnote 32, p. 74, and Chapter VII. George Rude, The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964), pp. 33-47; and E. J. Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries, (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1963).

[3]Oscar T. Barck, Jr. and Hugh T. Lefler, Colonial America, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), pp. 197-200 and 486-88.

[4]Jackson Turner Main, The Anti-Federalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), pp. 59-63; and John C. Miller, The Federalist Era, 1790-1801, (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 155-63.

[5]Wayne C. Rohrer and Louis H. Douglas, The Agrarian Transition in America, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 41-43.

Thus a superficial connection is established between the depression farm rebellion and earlier agrarian movements. In fact, some tactics employed by the Holiday movement were identical to those used over thirty years earlier in the Populist movement in western Iowa.[6] However, the relationship is not so simple as merely reciting organizational ancestry and previous farmer activism. Two contending forces are at work in the history of American agriculture. First, there are the traditional values and ideals of the independent yeoman farmer upholding the old rural folkways. Second, and developing gradually in the American experience, has been the need for farmers to innovate and organize to meet the challenges of new conditions and problems.[7] In order to build an understanding of the development of rural activism in the 1930s, one must explore the evolution of these primary forces in American agriculture.

Paul H. Johnstone's analysis of the agrarian tradition in America is instructive.[8] Johnstone asserts that the literary works of Thomas Jefferson, Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, and others, molded an ideal about country people and country life in American society. The farmer was portrayed as a simple, honest, industrious individual. This ideal took the form of an American agrarian creed based on three principles. First was the concept of the economically independent American farmer. Second,

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[6]Herman C. Nixon, "The Economic Basis of The Populist Movement in Iowa," Iowa Journal of History and Politics, 21 (July, 1923): 394.

[7]Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," Farmers In a Changing World: Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1940): 116.

[8]Ibid. Johnstone's findings, written in 1940, are particularly useful since his perspective on agrarian traditions came immediately after the Holiday movement of 1932-1933.

the creed held that agriculture was the central feature in an economic system around which all other activity revolved. Third, and of greatest importance, was the view that agricultural life was a natural state of being and therefore good. In the scheme of this creed it developed that rural life was good and city life was bad. Thus established in an unwritten creed was the classical rural-urban antagonism.[9]

Prior to the Revolution the agrarian creed may have held a measure of validity in American life. After that time, however, thoroughgoing changes in American economics rendered it impractical. Richard Hofstadter suggests that the agrarian creed represents a tribute to the country's rural origins, but by the turn of the nineteenth century it was no longer applicable and became the "agrarian myth". It was a myth in the sense that it, "so effectively embodies men's values that it profoundly influences their way of perceiving reality and hence their behavior."[10] Hofstadter convincingly demonstrates the lasting impact of the "agrarian myth" by depicting its presence in the twentieth century. In fact, with the passage of time, the myth, though further from reality, became more entrenched in many rural American minds.[11] Milo Reno, nominal leader of the striking farmers in 1932, reflected the mythical agrarian values when he declared that the Farm Holiday movement was "a protest of the assumption that the money lords of the nation have a right to increase their

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[9] Ibid., pp. 116-18.

[10] Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 24.

[11] Ibid., pp. 30-31.

already swollen fortunes by a systematic robbing of those who produce the wealth."[12] Also touching on the rural notions about the central role of agriculture in American society, a Plymouth County farm leader pushed the Holiday idea by proclaiming "the sleeping giant, agriculture, must be roused if it's going to save itself."[13] Perhaps the most genuine reflection of the "agrarian myth" in the Holiday movement came in the lines of a poem in the Iowa Union Farmer, which urged,

> Let's call a farmers' holiday
> A holiday let's hold
> We'll eat our wheat and ham and eggs
> And let them eat their gold.[14]

With such sentiments as these, century old rural beliefs were an important part of the 1930s farm protest, as farmers struggled with monumental changes in the economic system.

Commercialization, industrialization, and urbanization of the American economy were the fundamental changes forced upon the agrarian tradition. As the American farmer moved from the eighteenth through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, he saw his legendary self-sufficiency yield to economic interdependence. Improved seeds, mechanical devices, and farming techniques required capital, so the farmer began to raise crops beyond the subsistence level to sell in the market place to raise money for technological improvements. If the sale of produce did not

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[12] Iowa Union Farmer, August 24, 1932.

[13] LeMars Globe-Post, May 23, 1932.

[14] Iowa Union Farmer, March 9, 1932.

raise sufficient capital, the farmer indebted himself to the local businessmen and bankers. This commercialization of agriculture basically during the nineteenth century made the farmer increasingly dependent on urban middlemen.[15] The creed that had contributed to the rural-urban antagonism alluded to earlier was given substance by nineteenth century developments.[16]

The nineteenth century farmer did not oppose the growth of industrialism and commercialism. Johnstone suggests that he embraced it because he gave great credence to an idea of progress which was the assumption that natural law compelled man and society to "go on improving indefinitely".[17] Faith in progress was easily sustained because the agrarian ideal foresaw the triumph of good. Since, according to the agrarian creed, the agricultural life was good, the farmer would eventually triumph.[18]

This optimism about the future on the part of nineteenth century farmers bred a boom psychology. Agricultural land values had consistently risen in the American experience and increases in land values were occasionally dramatic. Based on a faith in rising land values and the idea of progress, farmers came to rely on the appreciation of their lands for profits rather than on the income from produce sales. A natural outgrowth

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[15] Hofstadter, Age of Reform, pp. 38-39.

[16] Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas," pp. 118-19.

[17] Ibid., p. 124.

[18] Ibid., p. 128.

of the steadily increasing land values was speculation in lands.[19] An underlying assumption persisted that unlimited growth and expansion were natural and to be expected. By the mid-nineteenth century the speculative nature of these beliefs led to an agricultural devotion to land values rather than to the land itself. It was such speculation and boom psychology that led to many of the agricultural evils in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[20]

The second half of the nineteenth century brought accelerated and dramatic changes to American agriculture. Technological advances occurred with stunning rapidity. The Civil War devastated the agricultural economy of an entire region. Slowly there was an exhaustion of the good land supply. American agriculture grew increasingly reliant on foreign markets and domestic suppliers. Also distressing to the rural tradition was the rural-urban migration which eventually resulted in a majority of the nation's population residing in urban areas. In response to these political and economic stimuli significant alterations in rural philosophy and perceptions emerged.

New perceptions by farmers at the close of the nineteenth century fall into several distinct catagories. First, and of primary importance, the farmer was in the process of becoming a minority in American society and came to view himself as an underdog. In this new role the farmer

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[19]Lowell K. Dyson, "Was Agricultural Distress in the 1930s a Result of Land Speculation During World War I? The Case of Iowa," Annals of Iowa, 40 (Spring, 1971): 580-82; Nixon, "The Economic Basis of The Populist Movement in Iowa," pp. 377-79; and William G. Murray, "Prosperity and Land Boom, 1901-1920," The Palimpsest, 48 (October, 1967): 461-80.

[20]Hofstadter, Age of Reform, pp. 41-42; and Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas," pp. 129-32.

perceived himself as being pitted against urban monopolists and international monetary conspirators.[21] The idea of the agrarian underdog in a struggle with urban elements was not hard to sustain. Farmers saw numerous examples of unfair practices by railroads, grain elevators, and banks. Rural money and credit problems abounded in the 1880s and 1890s.[22] These same problems surfaced again in the twentieth century. Speaking in the tradition of farmer as underdog, Farm Holiday spokesman Bob Moore appealed to a group of northwest Iowa farmers in 1932 by saying, "When the international harvester people need some money to buy more diamonds or poodle dogs for their wives they just add a dollar or two to the price of a harvester and Uncle Reuben at the crossroads pays the extra price."[23]

As the farmers' numerical status in society changed, so also did attitudes about the traditional values of rural life. At one time it was deemed honorable to be of rural origins because it suggested an understanding of the humble. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, rural origins were perceived as a station in life from which one should rise. Within this change in perceptions, a sentimental shift occurred in which approval was no longer attached to lowly, rural origins, but rather to the people who rose from them.[24] Slowly the farmer grew to see himself as an unesteemed character.

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[21]Hofstadter, Age of Reform, pp. 62-81.

[22]Grant McConnell, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p. 19.

[23]G. W. Forster and W. C. Weldon, "The Agricultural Problem," Social Forces, March, 1933, p. 370.

[24]Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas," p. 149. For a discussion of rural origins of early twentieth century reformers, see Wayne E. Fuller, "The Rural Origins of the Progressive Leaders," Agricultural History,

In the agrarian tradition, the antagonism between town and country has already been noted. The basic animosity was historic, but late nineteenth century conditions sharpened the conflict. The intense commercialization of agriculture between 1865 and 1900 brought into focus a sharp clash between farmers and middlemen. Farmers came to see the middlemen as price fixers and supply manipulators. At least partly because of this perception, some farmers tried to learn how they might serve their own purposes through cooperative endeavors.[25]

Although farmers harbored a fundamental dislike for the middleman, they began to adopt his business techniques. By the late nineteenth century, with the days of self-sufficiency gone, the farmer began to specialize, producing that which was most appropriate for his given skills, climate, soil, and markets. As farming was increasingly recognized as a business, efficiency was sought. Development along these lines brought record-keeping into the farmers' domain.[26] The sophistication of agricultural bookkeeping brought about the ability to calculate costs and thus income needs. By the time of the Farm Holiday movement, some farmers were calculating and demanding the "cost-of-production" for their agricultural produce.[27] Indeed, farming had moved from an era of family subsistence to one of small and, in some cases, large business.

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42 (January, 1968): 1-13. Fuller contends that many Progressive leaders came from rural origins and took from those origins important attitudes that developed into some of the major reforms of the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, Fuller notes, the significant role of rural origins has been lost in the history of the Progressive Era.

[25] Ibid., pp. 158-59.

[26] Ibid., pp. 144-45.

[27] Ibid., p. 144.

Another new perception by the rural community in the last three decades of the nineteenth century had a profound effect on the agrarian tradition. Farmers began to organize to meet the challenges of an industrial society. The first important organization, the Grange, was designed for social and fraternal purposes, but a structure was provided for political protest that eventually brought some state regulation of businesses.[28] In the 1880s, the Alliance movement spread in the agricultural sector. Lawrence Goodwyn contends that the Alliance cooperative idea brought "a new way of thinking" to agricultural organizations.[29] Driven by economic hardship, farmers began to shed some of their traditional independence and cooperated in marketing and purchasing endeavors. In this cooperative movement, farmers perceived the potential for political action.[30] Political activism was realized in the Populist movement of the 1890s. Although the Populists lacked a formal and coherent philosophy, their ideals brought together the perceptions of American agriculture at the turn of the century.[31] Grant McConnell points out that Populist goals "were not narrow class demands." Rather, they were a sincere attempt to ensure the farmers' position in the political system.[32] Politically frustrated and

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[28]Ibid., pp. 133-34; and Rohrer and Douglas, Agrarian Transition in America, p. 56.

[29]Lawrence Goodwyn, Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement In America, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. xi-xii.

[30]Ibid., p. 177.

[31]Hofstadter, Age of Reform, pp. 60-93.

[32]McConnell, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy, p. 5.

divided, the Populist movement crumbled in the late 1890s, but not before many farmers came to recognize the political potential of agrarian organizations.

The new sense of agricultural organization had its shortcomings. A professional farm leadership developed from this movement. The leadership was sometimes nurtured by the farm organizations. Often it grew from governmental agencies such as the land grant colleges, the Department of Agriculture, and the county agent system. What was significant for the farmers was that all too often the experts attempting to lead and help with his problems were not farmers themselves, but rather were urban agricultural leaders. Even if they had been farm-reared their professionalization had caused them to become urban. Whether created by the farmers' own organization, or by governmental agencies, professional farm leadership was often suspect.[33] Perhaps the corollary was that agricultural organizations themselves were weakened structurally because of this distrust. Despite the shortcomings in early farm organization leadership, an important lesson had been learned by rural people. The problems created by the new industrial society in the late nineteenth century necessitated an organizational rather than a personal approach to solutions. Farmers understood the new organizational requirements and acted upon them.[34]

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[33] Ibid., pp. 45-48; and Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas, pp. 156-57.

[34] Samuel P. Hays, The Response To Industrialism, 1885-1914, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 58-63.

In the twentieth century, the Farmers' Union, the Society for Equity, and the Farm Bureau, were the large member groups that carried on the organizational efforts of American agriculture.[35] Generally, the first twenty years of the new century were good agriculturally. But when the wartime boom turned to postwar readjustment and then to depression at the end of the 1920s, American agriculture was once again faced with economic hardship. Farm organizations united to push the McNary-Haugen Bill in the 1920s as a solution to low prices.[36] But the far reaching economic problems were beyond simple and quick solution. As agricultural problems mounted in the early years of the depression, desperate farmers searched for new direction. It was in this setting that the Farmers' Holiday Association of the 1930s emerged.

The Farmers' Holiday Association was built on the idea that farmers were unfairly treated in the economic system. This economic fate could be changed if the farmer were guaranteed prices that would cover his cost of production. When the "cost-of-production" claim was ignored after several years of preaching its virtue, a group of Farmers' Union leaders formed the Farmers' Holiday Association. The new association proclaimed that if the cost of production ideal was not met, member farmers would go on strike withholding their produce from market until such demands were met. Such a strike was officially called in August, 1932.[37] The events of the strike and actions that ensued during the

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[35]Rohrer and Douglas, Agrarian Transition in America, pp. 57-60.

[36]George N. Peek, "The McNary-Haugen Plan for Relief," Current History, November, 1928, pp. 273-78.

[37]John L. Shover, "The Farmers' Holiday Association Strike, August, 1932," Agricultural History, 39 (October, 1965): 196-98.

succeeding ten months are subjects for later discussion. For present purposes the general ideals of the Farmers' Holiday Association suggested above provide the connection of this 1930s rural rebellion with the agrarian traditions of the preceding century.

In a general sense, the Farmers' Holiday maintained many traditional rural ideas about the farmer and his position in society. The farmer was perceived as the underdog in society, and he suffered economically. He had a fundamental part in the American economy, as evidenced by the vision that a strike would serve to show the importance of his agricultural production. Milo Reno probably overstated, but reflected farmer attitudes, when he editorialized that the Holiday movement was actually an "economic revolution."[38] Further expression of this view surfaced at a Holiday rally in Plymouth County where farmers boosted a sign, proclaiming that "The Farmer is the Life Blood of the Small Town--If He don't Get Production Costs We are all Sunk."[39] Sentiments such as these emanated almost directly from the "agrarian myth". Specifically, the agricultural problems of the twentieth century were caused in part because of rural attitudes developed in the nineteenth century. For example, the boom psychology of the previous century persisted from 1900-1920. Such thinking fostered land speculation that was one major source of farm problems in the 1920s and 1930s.[40]

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[38] Iowa Union Farmer, February 10, 1933.

[39] Ibid., August 10, 1932, p. 4.

[40] Dyson, "Was Agricultural Distress In The 1930s A Result of Land Speculation During World War I? The Case of Iowa," pp. 578-79; and Murray, "Prosperity and Land Boom, 1901-1920," pp. 461-80.

The Farmers' Holiday also incorporated other newer perceptions about rural life developed by late nineteenth century farmers. The overriding view that the Holiday movement borrowed from the late agrarian tradition was the recognition of the need to organize. The new association utilized the organizational structure of the Farmers' Union which, suggests Grant McConnell, was a direct descendant from the Populist tradition.[41] In its strike program, the Holiday broadened the cooperative ideas of the nineteenth century Alliance crusade. Member farmers united to withhold the supply of produce from market, thus hoping to drive depressed prices upward. The cooperative marketing idea was widely practiced by the 1930s and the Holiday withholding idea was a logical extension of the cooperative spirit on the supply side of agricultural economics.

Although the Farmers' Holiday Association demonstrated erratic behavior during its brief existence, it generally patterned itself after nineteenth century rural organizations. The fundamental leadership of the Holiday movement traced its roots to the agrarian crusade of the previous century. Milo Reno, the principal founder and leader of the Holiday Association, had been an activist in the Greenback and Populist organizations of the 1880s and 1890s.[42] A journalist interviewed Reno and found him to be an organizational fundamentalist with ideas dating back to the agrarian crusade of 1870-1890.[43]

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[41]Julius Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, American University, 1961), p. 31; and McConnell, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy, p. 38.

[42]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 25.

[43]James Rorty, "How Radical Are The Farmers?", The Nation, January 23, 1935, p. 104.

A final significant rural attitude that developed in the nineteenth century and carried over to the Farm Holiday movement was the anti-middleman sentiment. Of course, the middlemen were seen as key factors in the farmers' escalated cost of production in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus animosity was engendered. As the Holiday movement progressed, the opposition to the middleman became more refined. Generally the middleman was perceived as the direct economic enemy of the farmer. Specifically, farmers came to vent their anger at those middlemen who showed no apparent sympathy for the farmers' plight. Along these lines, holders of farm mortgages such as bankers and insurance companies, or their defenders, were the recipients of Holiday anti-middleman attacks. The mortgage holders of the 1930s had replaced the railroads and grain companies of an earlier agricultural age.

Richard Hofstadter suggests that the agrarian ideals of this country are important, not because they are true or correct, but because they have been believed.[44] The rural protesters in Plymouth County in the 1930s found credence in their inherited rural traditions. What happened there fits a broader picture of American rural history.

In its active phase, particularly in Plymouth County, the Farm Holiday movement soon broke down. But it represented much of the rich tradition in American agrarian history. The farmers' vision of himself as an essential part of the American economy was apparent in this rebellion. The tradition of the farmer versus the middleman also found support in Plymouth County in the 1930s. Perhaps the most important

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[44]Hofstadter, Age of Reform, pp. 23-28.

tradition inherited by the Holiday was the tendency to organize to solve problems. It was from the organizational base that, once set in motion, the Farmers' Holiday movement achieved notoriety and made the events in Plymouth County in 1932 and 1933 a noteworthy episode in American agrarian history. Although in the stream of American history the farm revolt in Plymouth played a small role, the uprising did not happen in a vacuum. To the contrary, it was part of an important evolution in the American agrarian tradition. It is in this general vein that the 1930s farm rebellion should be examined.

CHAPTER II

THE 1930S FARM REBELLION IN PLYMOUTH COUNTY

By the spring of 1932, the United States was in the midst of economic depression. In agriculture, as elsewhere, the hardships of the depression mounted. Farmers in Plymouth County, Iowa, saw the price of corn, their basic crop, sink to thirty-two cents per bushel by the beginning of May.[1] This price decline represented a 25 percent decrease since early January.[2] During 1932, almost 6 percent of farms in Iowa changed ownership due to bankruptcy or foreclosure.[3] Responding to this economic crisis, Iowa farmers formed an organization on May 3, 1932, popularly known as the Farmers' Holiday.[4] This movement received widespread national attention in the ensuing thirteen months. Normally conservative farmers employed strikes, roadside blockades, picketing, threatened lynchings, and interfered with legal processes. Nowhere was the activity of the Farmers' Holiday more intense than in northwestern Iowa, and at the center of the farmers' revolt was Plymouth County.[5] The conditions, circumstances, and events of this important local farm rebellion are the focus of this investigation.

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[1] LeMars Globe-Post, May 2, 1932.

[2] Ibid., January 4, 1932.

[3] Shover, "The Farmers' Holiday Association Strike," p. 196.

[4] Des Moines Register, May 4, 1932, p. 1.

[5] Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 4-5.

Plymouth County is located on the western border of Iowa, just to the north of Sioux City. In fact, the boundary of Plymouth was within a few miles of the city limits of Sioux City in the 1930s. Sioux City, with a population of approximately 79,000 in 1930, served as the major trade center and agricultural market for the three state area of northwestern Iowa, southeastern South Dakota, and northeastern Nebraska.[6] Map 2 on the following page graphically demonstrates Sioux City's central location. The grain terminals, stockyards, and meat packing industry of the city provided the lure for agricultural products of the region. Running through Plymouth County and into Sioux City was United States Highway 75. In the 1930s, this hard-surfaced road provided the major farm-to-market transportation route for agricultural products from numerous northwestern Iowa counties. Thus situated, Plymouth County was the passageway for regional agricultural trade. In this geographical setting, the Farmers' Holiday achieved its most marked successes and failures.

"For agriculture as a whole," Sidney Baldwin notes, "the Great Depression began not on the fateful day in October, 1929, but in 1920, when farm commodity prices suddenly collapsed and the war-time boom dissolved."[7] Farmers' organizations struggled throughout the 1920s with a bleak economic outlook. The principal agrarian organizations of the 1920s were, in order of size, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the

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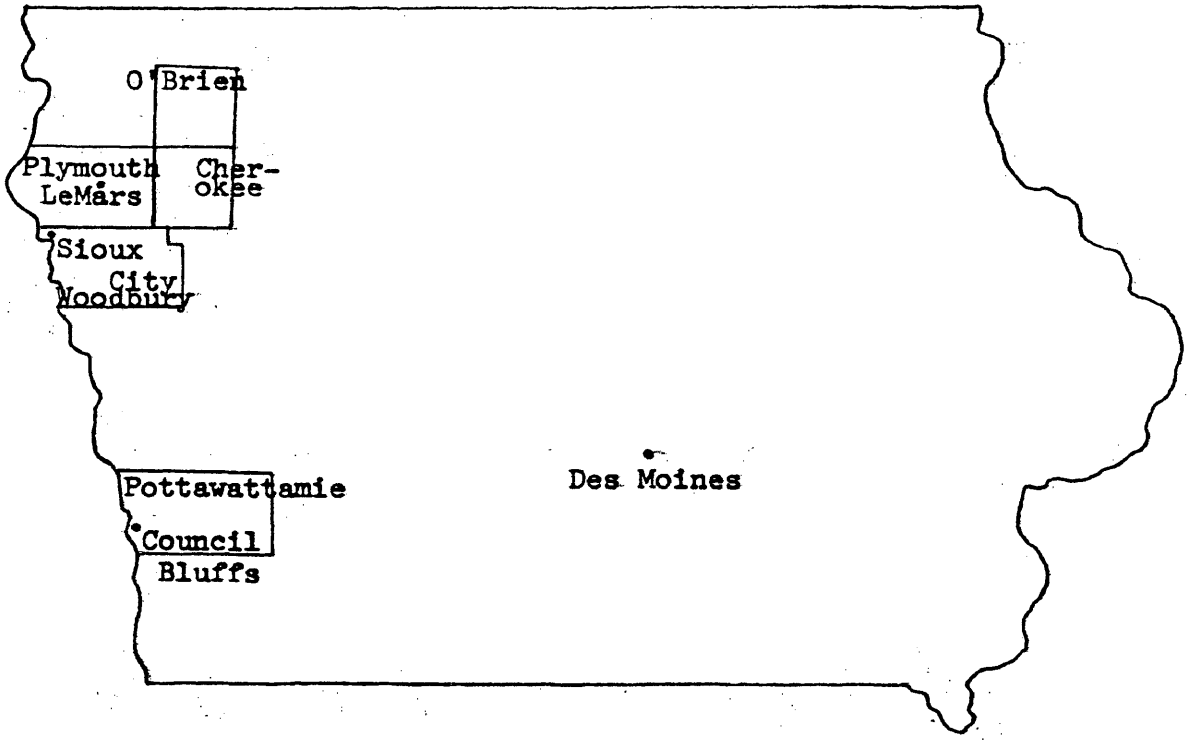
[6]Federal Writers' Project, Iowa: A Guide To The Hawkeye State, (New York: Viking Press, 1938), pp. 229 and 422.

[7]Sidney Baldwin, Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 32.

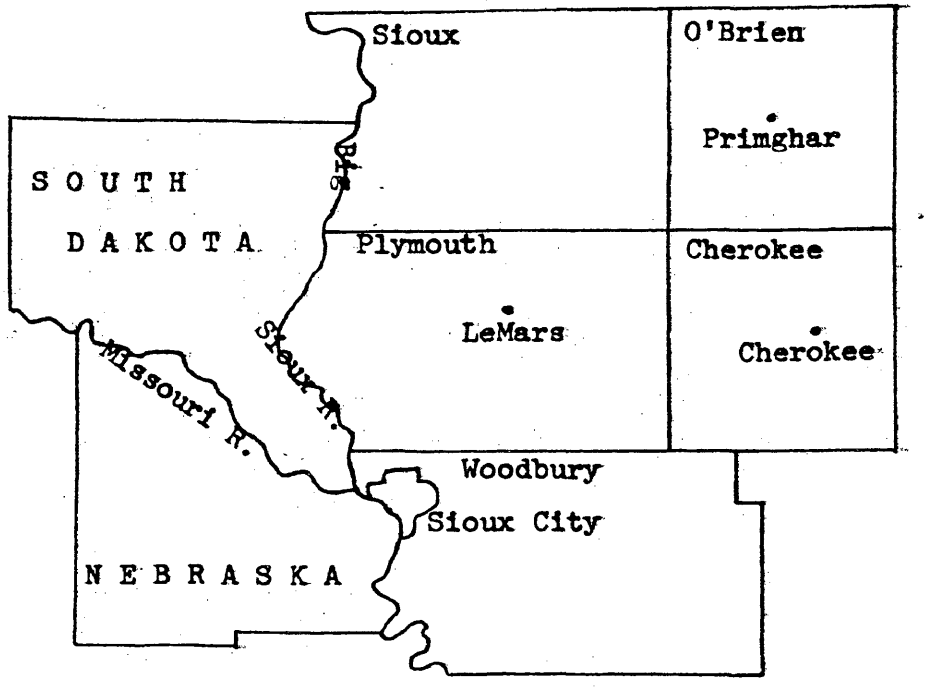
MAP 1

IOWA AND WESTERN COUNTIES OF FARMER PROTEST



MAP 2

TRI-STATE AREA SURROUNDING PLYMOUTH COUNTY



National Grange, and the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union, commonly known as the Farmers' Union. The Farm Bureau focused its attention on attempting to make tariffs effective. While the Grange also sought a tariff remedy, it urged direct government subsidies to agriculture. The Farmers' Union, the third largest of the farm organizations, traditionally pursued a low-keyed political course of action, concentrating instead on cooperative endeavors. But, by the mid-1920s, the Union also turned toward direct political action seeking federal assistance to alleviate the farmers' economic woes.[8] Efforts by these organizations to solve agriculture's economic problems, and particularly the re-establishment of the Farmers' Union as an activist farm organization, set the stage for the farm rebellion episode in 1932-33.

In the early 1920s, some elements of the Farmers' Union began to advance ideas suggesting that farmers should be guaranteed agricultural commodity prices that equalled their cost of producing such goods. Milo Reno, president of the Iowa Farmers' Union, urged state and national farm leaders to call together all farm organizations supporting the "cost-of-production" idea. Reno succeeded in advancing his idea in 1925 when twenty-four farm groups joined in the Corn Belt Committee. In general, the committee subscribed to the "cost-of-production" idea. However, when the McNary-Haugen bill, the chief agricultural relief measure of the 1920s, was twice vetoed and the Agricultural Marketing Act passed

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[8]William R. Johnson, "National Farm Organizations and the Reshaping of Agricultural Policy in 1932," Agricultural History, 37 (January, 1963): 35-36; and Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), p. 238.

as a substitute, the concord between farm groups broke. Factional divisions brought an end to the Corn Belt Committee in 1931. The Farmers' Union, instigator of the Corn Belt Committee, itself became the arena of struggle over the course of action agrarian organizations should take in the 1930s.[9]

Within the Farmers' Union, two groups vied for power in the early 1930s. One group supported the long-standing cooperative marketing ideals of the Union and generally represented grain-producing areas. In opposition was an element generally representing livestock areas and led by Milo Reno. Reno's sympathies were clear. In 1927 he announced that "if we cannot obtain justice by legislation, the time will have arrived when no other course remains than organized refusal to deliver the products of the farm at less than production costs."[10] The "cost-of-production" plan, as outlined by Reno, was a program in which an average farm operator would be guaranteed a price for his products equal to his cost of producing the goods, plus an allowance for his labor and a reasonable profit.[11]

The Farmers' Union generally subscribed to the "cost-of-production" idea, but Reno's plan of a withholding movement aroused little support at first. Then in 1931, a political faction of the Union, representing livestock producing areas and thoroughly dissatisfied with Hoover's

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[9]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 19-21.

[10]Shover, "Farmers' Holiday Association Strike," p. 197.

[11]Philip Stevenson, "Reno's Cost of Production--An Explanation," Common Sense, April 13, 1933, p. 10; and Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 22.

agricultural program, gained authority with John Simpson's election to the presidency. The leader of the National Farmers' Union was now a man sympathetic to Reno's views. Because a withholding movement might endanger extensive cooperative business interests, and because in the event of a strike Reno's political faction would risk its leadership of the organization, the Farmers' Union could not officially endorse the withholding scheme. But Reno, operating through the Iowa Farmers' Union even though he was no longer its president, found support and advice from friendly officials of the national organization as depression conditions worsened.[12] In early 1932, he moved throughout the upper midwest states seeking support for the withholding movement idea. Glen Miller, elected Iowa Farmers' Union president in 1932, citing numerous recent bank closings, declared that if banks could call holidays so could farmers.[13] Thus the popular term "farmers' holiday" was coined for the proposed withholding movement.

The organizing campaign reached a high point with the meeting of 2000 farmers in Des Moines, on May 3, to innaugurate the Farmers' Holiday Association. Reno became national president of the association and plans called for a withholding movement to start on July 4.[14] Because of organizational problems and temporary price gains in early July, the movement did not begin until August.[15]

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[12]Shover, "Farmers' Holiday Association Strike," p. 197.

[13]Iowa Union Farmer, February 10, 1932.

[14]Ibid., May 4, 1932.

[15]Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 31.

The interval between the establishment of the Farmers' Holiday Association on May 3, and the official call for a farm strike on August 8, found Iowa association leaders busy generating local support. During the summer, Reno advocated direct action as he preached the virtues of the farm strike across Iowa.[16] Other leaders also travelled extensively to promote the idea of a farm strike.

Holiday leader visitations to Plymouth County were numerous, and organizational meetings of the Farmers' Holiday were well covered in the LeMars Globe-Post. As early as April 4, a township meeting of the Farmers' Union agreed to a buying and selling stoppage as outlined by Plymouth County Farmers' Union president C. J. Schultz.[17] By late May, the Farmers' Union was advertising local meetings for an explanation of the Farm Holiday by Iowa Farmers' Union secretary Bob Moore.[18] On June 13, Jesse Sickler, secretary of the Farmers' Holiday Association of Iowa, spoke at a meeting in Kingsley in the southeastern portion of the county and a week later Moore addressed a crowd of 800 to 900 in LeMars.[19] With the LeMars Globe-Post editorially endorsing the Farm Holiday, and regularly publishing accounts of holiday meetings, the farmers of Plymouth County were well-informed of the general intent of the ideas behind the strike.[20]

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[16] Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 73.

[17] LeMars Globe-Post, April 4, 1932.

[18] Ibid., May 26, 1932.

[19] Ibid., June 9 and 23, 1932.

[20] Ibid., July 11, 1932.

The Farmers' Holiday Association officially began a movement to withhold agricultural products from market on August 8, 1932.[21] The focal point of the strike was Sioux City, but early newspaper reports indicated little success.[22] Two days into the strike, talk emerged that farmers might resort to picketing the highways to further their cause.[23] The picketing idea was probably related to the sudden emergence of a separate milk strike in the Sioux City area.

The farm strike of August, 1932, received a boost with the emergence of the Sioux City Milk Producers' Cooperative. Twenty-eight angered dairy farmers organized a Producers' Cooperative Association in May, 1932.[24] By August the association claimed 900 members. The chairman of the group was I. W. Reck of Plymouth County. Two other Plymouth County residents, Sam Mosher and Cliff McNaughton, were early leaders of the milk producers.[25] These dairy farmers asked to be paid $2.17 per hundred pounds for milk, a significant increase over the $1.00 they currently were receiving. The chief nemesis of the milk producers was the powerful J. R. Roberts Dairy Company of Sioux City. Similar to the Farmers' Holiday Association action, milk producers resorted to a milk strike on August 11, to press their demands.[26]

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[21]Iowa Union Farmer, August 10, 1932.

[22]Sioux City Journal, August 9, 1932, p. 2.

[23]Ibid., August 10, 1932, p. 2.

[24]Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 35.

[25]John L. Shover Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa, pp. 1-3.

[26]Sioux City Journal, August 11, 1932.

The hard times shared by the milk producers and the Farmers' Holiday, and their struggle for change, brought the two groups together. C. J. Schultz, Plymouth County Farmers' Holiday Association president, stated, "the milk producers' strike is not an organized part of the farm holiday movement, but it has the support and sympathy of every farmer who would like to see himself and his neighbors get the cost of production."[27] The co-existence of the two organizations has been pointed out by Lowell Dyson.

> The dairy farmers wanted an efficient blockade to force the distributors to the bargaining table; but even more, the Farmers' Holiday Association needed a dramatic demonstration of its potential power. No evidence exists to prove that one organization pushed the other into overt action; the question is moot, however, since many of the milk producers had enlisted in Milo Reno's group. Sam Mosher, for example, served as an official in both associations.[28]

On August 15, the Sioux City Journal reported the first incident of hundreds of striking farmers blocking the highways to Sioux City. The largest group of strikers gathered at the Plymouth County line with reports that "no trucks carrying livestock or milk had been allowed to pass."[29] This action was carried on by the milk producers and the Farmers' Holiday so it was "difficult to determine who was conducting the strike."[30] By mid-August, in Plymouth County as elsewhere around Sioux City, the holding action declared by the Farmers' Holiday was entangled with the milk

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[27] LeMars Globe-Post, August 11, 1932.

[28] Dyson, "Farm Holiday Movement," p. 80.

[29] Sioux City Journal, August 16, 1932, p. 7.

[30] Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 40.

producers' strike, indicating that Milo Reno's organization did not completely dictate the direction and method of the farm revolt. In fact, even Reno's leadership was questioned by a reporter who visited the picket lines and found that, while "sitting around the fire with picketers Reno's name was mentioned only once."[31]

A further indication of the inability of the Farmers' Holiday Association to control the August strike was the impulsive eruption of overt farmer action. Shover writes that "although specific leaders may have set the protest in motion, the farm strike was a spontaneous effort pursuing immediate and sometimes irrational goals, different from those of the leaders."[32] Direct action in Plymouth County involved such incidents as two men pouring 300 pounds of milk from a Cherokee Creamery truck.[33] At Kingsley, farmers called on grain elevators and attempted to persuade them to quit buying farm produce, and persuaded some farmers to return home with their grain.[34] Also at Kingsley, farmers seized five milk trucks and planned to distribute the milk among the poor.[35] In order to stop trucks bound for Sioux City, cables were stretched across a bridge.[36] Other Plymouth County farmers attempted to temporarily eliminate the middleman in

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[31]Josephine Herbst, "Feet In The Grass Roots," Scribner's, January, 1933, pp. 46-47.

[32]Shover, "Farmers' Holiday Association Strike," p. 202.

[33]Sioux City Journal, August 13, 1932.

[34]LeMars Globe-Post, August 11, 1932, p. 6.

[35]Sioux City Journal, August 13, 1932.

[36]LeMars Globe-Post, August 15, 1932.

the distribution of certain farm products by selling produce door-to-door.[37] Such door-to-door sales did not have the sanction of the Farmers' Holiday Association, and were probably never the intention of the organization. However, realizing the importance of this publicity, Milo Reno was quick to praise Plymouth County farmers in their boycott of non-cooperating businesses in LeMars.[38] Shover notes that although the impulsive actions were unanticipated, "the spontaneous movement element that seized the initiative from the Holiday leaders in northwest Iowa publicized the farmers' plight and prompted political response more effectively than any ill-organized peaceful withholding movement."[39]

The Farmers' Holiday withholding action in Plymouth County moved immediately from its relatively peaceful early strike activities to outright direct action. As the strike progressed through its first days, an illusion of success gripped farmers in the Sioux City area. On August 15, reports indicated that numerous LeMars truckers had agreed not to haul agricultural products during the holiday.[40] Three days later, the LeMars Chamber of Commerce agreed not to buy produce for the duration of the strike.[41] Out of Sioux City came reports of serious reductions in livestock receipts due to the strike.[42] The news received national attention in the New York Times, and other major newspapers.[43]

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[37] Sioux City Journal, August 15, 1932.

[38] LeMars Globe-Post, August 18, 1932, p. 4.

[39] Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 50.

[40] LeMars Globe-Post, August 15, 1932.

[41] Ibid., August 18, 1932.

[42] Sioux City Journal, August 17, 1932.

[43] New York Times, August 17, 1932, p. 2; and Literary Digest, August 27, 1932, p. 6.

Success in the farm strike was temporary and fleeting. The optimistic reports above belied the actual situation. On August 20, the milk producers arrived at a compromise settlement and declared a truce in their strike.[44] As a result, dairy farmer support for the Holiday was seriously diminished. A truer picture of the livestock receipts story emerged on August 21. Although receipts had been drastically reduced at Sioux City, those at other midwestern livestock markets had increased markedly.[45] The Holiday effort at Sioux City was simply too limited in scope. From late August on, disheartened by the news of failure, some farmers turned to more forceful and violent actions.

In late August, Plymouth County Holiday members sought to broaden the offensive of the strike movement. Their efforts brought close scrapes with legal officials, and violence. At Kingsley, local farmer Fred Blankenburg was jailed for throwing a wood plank in front of a car load of deputies, who were attempting to break up a picket line.[46] One-hundred miles south of LeMars, farmers attempted to blockade the Omaha market. Picketing of other markets was intended to eliminate the transfer of Sioux City area produce to other locations. The Omaha blockade centered on the Iowa side of the Missouri River at Council Bluffs. Two truck loads of Plymouth County farmers joined the blockade effort.[47] Several picketers, including four from Plymouth County, were jailed by

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[44]Sioux City Journal, August 20, 1932.

[45]Ibid., August 21, 1932, p. 2.

[46]LeMars Globe-Post, August 18, 1932.

[47]Sioux City Journal, August 27, 1932, p. 3.

Pottawattamie County Sheriff Pat Lainson.[48] A recognized leader of the picketers, Raymond Snyder of Plymouth County, threatened Lainson that if the pickets were not freed "the farmers would storm the jail."[49] Tensions eased at Council Bluffs when the prisoners were released, following a meeting of Holiday representatives and a businessmens' group. Three of the Holiday representatives were from Plymouth County, and at least four prisoners were from the LeMars area.[50] Although the confrontation at Council Bluffs was resolved, the presence and mood of an activist group from Plymouth County was unmistakable.

On August 30, violence erupted at Cherokee, Iowa, although it was not initiated by the Farmers' Holiday. Located immediately east of Plymouth County is Cherokee County. A group of Plymouth County Farm Holiday people, led by Morris Cope, were soliciting Cherokee County support in the continuing strike effort. During a country crossroads meeting, anti-Holiday forces, allegedly including the Cherokee County Sheriff, drove past and shot into the Holiday group wounding fourteen men.[51] The violence at Cherokee, directly involving Plymouth County

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[48] New York Times, August 27, 1932, p. 1.

[49] Sioux City Journal, August 26, 1932.

[50] Omaha World-Herald, August 25 and 26, 1932, p. 1.

[51] Frank D. Dileva, "Farm Revolts In Iowa," (Drake University: Unpublished M. A. Thesis, 1952), p. 84. Petitions signed by over 3000 residents of Plymouth and Cherokee Counties requested a state investigation of the Cherokee shooting incident. Three men, including the Cherokee County Sheriff, a former Cherokee policeman, and the president of a Cherokee bank, were indicted for the shooting. The first trial was not held until September, 1933, and no one was ever convicted in the shooting. Perhaps the significance of this singular incident of violence was that it demonstrated the pitched emotions surrounding the farm strike. Sioux City Journal, September 5, 1932; Des Moines Register, September 12, 1933, p. 1; and Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," pp. 89-92.

organizers, brought a dramatic turn of events in the 1932 farm strike. Rumors circulated that area farmers planned to seal off Cherokee in retaliation for the shooting incident. Fearful that such reprisals might get out of hand, state Holiday president John Chalmers announced that "we will not jeopardize the lives of unarmed farmers."[52] Chalmers, along with national Holiday president Reno, called a halt to the Farm Holiday strike in Iowa on September 1.[53]

By early September, the inability of the Farmers' Holiday Association to control the strike was plain. Although the strike had officially ceased, a major road blockade incident occurred at James, Iowa, on the Woodbury-Plymouth County line. An estimated 1000 farmers gathered to turn back a convoy of trucks being escorted to Sioux City by Plymouth County Sheriff Ralph Rippey and a force of deputies. The farmers succeeded in turning back the convoy. In so doing, farmers verbally abused Rippey and forcefully removed the badges of many deputies. No livestock from Plymouth County arrived at the Sioux City stockyards that day.[54]

The depressed agricultural economic outlook and the increasing violence and militance of the Holiday movement prompted a hastily called governors' conference at Sioux City. Four midwestern governors attended the conference which met from September 9 to 11. Milo Reno spoke for

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[52] LeMars Globe-Post, September 5, 1932.

[53] Sioux City Journal, September 1, 1932.

[54] Ibid., September 8, 1932.

the Farmers' Holiday Association and recommended a debt moratorium.[55] The governors submitted agricultural relief resolutions to President Hoover.[56] Meanwhile, the farmers showed little faith in the entire proceedings, as pickets ignored the strike cessation orders and remained on Highway 75 at James.[57]

Then, as suddenly as the farm strike had materialized, it faded. By September 20, all roads into Sioux City were clear of pickets.[58] Talk about resuming picketing in Plymouth County surfaced, but did not materialize.[59] Farmer activism temporarily disappeared. Perhaps the corn harvesting season lured farmers back to their farms. Whatever the reasons, the farm revolt quieted in Plymouth County until the winter and spring months when it re-emerged in a different form.

From January until April, 1933, with the farm strike in the background, farmers in Plymouth County turned their attention to the more immediate problem of farm foreclosures. Although the farm strike was spectacular, the resistance to foreclosures and farm sales was more significant.[60] Shover notes that, "farmer direct action was most vigorous in the attempt to halt forced sales."[61] The farm strike demanded an

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[55] Ibid., September 11, 1932. The governors in attendance at the conference included Dan Turner of Iowa, Warren Green of South Dakota, Floyd Olson of Minnesota, and George Shafer of North Dakota. Representatives of governors from five other states also attended.

[56] Ibid., September 12, 1932.

[57] Ibid., September 13, 1932.

[58] Ibid., September 21, 1932.

[59] LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, September 23, 1932.

[60] John A. Crampton, The National Farmers' Union, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 18.

[61] Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 17.

improvement in agricultural prices. The anti-foreclosure movement represented the farmers' desperate, last ditch effort to keep his farm and his livelihood.

The movement to prohibit eviction of farmers from their farms had been prophesied at the beginning of the Holiday. A midwest journalist had declared in August of 1932, that "if the holiday ends with no real results, the irritation of farm people against low prices will not cease. There will be another outbreak. It may logically take the form of neighborhood defense against foreclosures."[62] Plymouth County practice provided that foreclosures take place at the courthouse in LeMars.[63] It was there that farmers organized to block foreclosure sales in early January, 1933.

Stories circulated that representatives of eastern banks would be in the county on January 1, to bid on farm land delinquent in tax payments. A crowd of farmers, estimated at 400 to 500, gathered at the courthouse in LeMars. Either the bidders failed to appear or the farmers' presence silenced them, because no bids were issued and the sale was postponed. The farmers present organized and signed a petition to the state legislature calling for a moratorium on all debts.[64]

Two types of forced farm sales provoked direct farmer action in Plymouth County. A delinquent tax sale occurred when a farmer could not pay the taxes on his land. An auction customarily ensued in which the

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[62]Donald R. Murphy, "The Farmers Go On Strike: The Blockade of Sioux City," The New Republic, August 31, 1932, p. 67.

[63]Charlotte Hubbard Prescott, "An Iowa Foreclosure," The Nation, February 22, 1933, p. 198.

[64]LeMars Globe-Post, January 2, 1933.

high bidder on the land received the land and the outstanding tax obligation. Sales of this sort were typically speculative actions, resulting in bids below the real value of the property. It was this type of tax sale that failed to attract bidders on January 1, in LeMars.[65]

The deficiency judgment represented the other type of forced farm sale. Deficiency judgments arose when a farmer could no longer meet his mortgage payment. In such cases a forced sale resulted. If no one bid on the foreclosed property at the sale, the holder of the mortgage often bid on the property at less than the mortgage value. Since the amount bid fell below the mortgage value, a deficiency existed which would be recovered by selling the farmer's implements and household goods if necessary. Such judgments were roundly despised because they took from the farmer not only his land, but also the tools of his livelihood.[66]

LeMars attorney Herbert S. Martin sought a deficiency judgment on the farm of John A. Johnson on January 4, 1933. Plymouth County farmers responded violently. Approximately 1000 farmers gathered at the courthouse. When the sale began, no bids were issued. Martin represented the mortgage holder, the New York Life Insurance Company. As the representative, Martin entered a sealed bid for $30,000 which amounted to $3,000 less than the mortgage value and would have resulted in a deficiency judgment against Johnson. The crowd of farmers pleaded with Martin to raise his bid. Pleas turned to threats as one farmer dangled a rope. Shouts of "lynch the bloodsucker!" and "hang him on a tree," were reported

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[65] Ibid., January 5, 1933.

[66] Ibid.

by the LeMars Globe-Post. Martin had no authority to change the bid and so advised the farmers. The angered farmers roughly handled the attorney and insisted he contact the New York insurance company to get the bid changed. Martin obliged the farmers and advised the insurance company, "my neck is at stake." The insurance company complied and changed the bid. Feeling strength from their actions, the farmers carried their demonstration to a local implement shop to retrieve another farmer's repossessed tractor. The implement shop locked its doors, but later reopened under threat of a boycott.[67]

Back at the courthouse, District Judge C. W. Pitts' office had been invaded by about a dozen angered farmers who insisted that he declare a moratorium on farm foreclosures. Pitts informed the farmers he had no authority for such action, but that he would write the governor recommending such an emergency measure. While Pitts followed through on his promise, local farmers also received a major increment of support when Plymouth County attorneys agreed not to seek "any decree of foreclosure of land mortgages until February 13, 1933."[68]

The specter of violence had raised its head in Plymouth County once again and local farmers had tasted its results. At a mass meeting of farmers in LeMars on January 7, one spokesman rendered the prophetic announcement that they stood ready to stop forced sales, but "sometimes the boys get out of hand."[69] Milo Reno recognized the contribution of direct action, and praised the farmers' militance in a letter to C. J.

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Sioux City Journal, January 8, 1933, p. 2.

Schultz.[70] Although foreclosure stoppages were widespread, the Iowa Union Farmer noted that "outstanding among the successes of the Holiday was the massing of farmers at LeMars."[71] The mass gathering of farmers in LeMars on January 7, had special significance. Mother Ella Reeve Bloor, an organizer for the Communist Party, delivered an address to the assembled farmers. She asked the estimated 1000 farmers gathered to raise their hands if they favored a march on the state capitol. Reports indicated overwhelming support by the farmers. Further significance in the January 7 rally can be found in the confusion that began to emerge in the local Holiday organization. Although farmers attending the rally indicated a willingness to march on Des Moines, local leadership took a different position. President C. J. Schultz suggested the farmers were "free to do as they like," but felt the movement would "be better served if we stay right here and watch Plymouth County."[72]

On February 8, 1933, the Iowa Legislature seemingly made direct action against foreclosures unnecessary by passing a Mortgage Moratorium Act. The act gave discretionary powers to district judges in foreclosure matters.[73] Iowa Governor Clyde L. Herring went one step further by

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[70]Milo Reno to Lawrence Gaspar, January 10, 1933, Milo Reno Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

[71]Iowa Union Farmer, January 11, 1933.

[72]LeMars Globe-Post, January 9, 1933.

[73]William G. Murray and Ronald C. Bentley, "Farm Mortgage Foreclosures," The Agricultural Emergency in Iowa, (Ames, Iowa: Collegiate Press, Incorporated, March, 1933), pp. 85-86. The surrounding states of Nebraska and Minnesota also passed mortgage moratorium laws in early 1933. Also, some major insurance companies announced a suspension of foreclosure proceedings on their behalf on a nationwide basis. Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 85-88.

requesting that insurance and mortgage companies postpone foreclosure proceedings.[74] For the remainder of the winter, farmers were appeased and, although isolated instances of direct action occurred, the number of incidents subsided. West of LeMars, farmers halted a tuberculin test on cattle being conducted by a state veterinarian.[75] Farmers conducted a "penny-sale" at the W. J. McKibbon farm on February 10, where only $45 was bid by neighboring farmers on machinery valued at $2600.[76] In such sales, neighbors gathered to protect a farmer whose goods were being sold under force to meet debt obligations. The usual procedure saw all unfriendly bidders silenced, while sympathetic farmers bid a few cents for each item auctioned. With the sale completed, the goods were returned to the farmer being forced to sell.[77] This relatively calm action of winter, however, erupted into startling violence in the spring.

In late March, Plymouth County farmers once again rose to vigorous action. On this occasion, farmers occupied the Ed Durband farm at Struble, north of LeMars. Durband, behind in his rent payments, faced certain eviction from his farm.[78] On April 16, tensions built over the Durband

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[74]Saloutos and Hicks, Agricultural Discontent In The Middle West, 1900-1939, p. 448.

[75]LeMars Globe-Post, January 23, 1933. The anti-tuberculin test episode, the first and only in Plymouth County, was probably a remnant of an outbreak of farm rebellion in eastern Iowa in 1931, where farmers in Cedar County resisted mandatory state tuberculin tests. For a complete discussion, see Frank D. Dileva, "Frantic Farmers Fight Law," Annals of Iowa, 32 (July, 1954): 81-109.

[76]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, February 14, 1933.

[77]John L. Shover, "The Penny-Auction Rebellion," The American West, 2 (Fall, 1965): 65-66.

[78]LeMars Globe-Post, March 27, 1933.

case as thirty to forty automobiles were on the farm that morning, responding to reports that Sheriff Rippey would evict Durband. The LeMars Globe-Post reported that a feeling existed that the situation would result in "shooting it out between the opposing forces." Recognizing the tense situation, Rippey backed down in his eviction attempts.[79] A standoff resulted in the Durband case until the farmers' rebellion reached the pinnacle of its violence in late April.[80]

District Court Judge Charles C. Bradley announced on April 26, that he would hear cases objecting to the constitutionality of the debt moratorium law.[81] Five eastern insurance companies brought the suit that was to be heard on April 27.[82] A melee of violence developed on that Thursday in late April that demonstrated the farmers frustration, and simultaneously led to the demise of the local Farm Holiday movement.

O'Brien County bordered Plymouth on the northeast. On the morning of April 27, a foreclosure sale was scheduled at Primghar, the county seat. Some 600 to 1000 farmers, many from Plymouth County, assembled to stop the sale. The foreclosure was not halted, but violence broke out as farmers rushed the few deputies present, took their clubs, and forced some to kiss the American flag.[83] According to an account of the O'Brien County incident in the Iowa Union Farmer, a group of farmers worked out an

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[79] Ibid., April 16, 1933.

[80] Farm Holiday News, April, 1933.

[81] LeMars Globe-Post, April 27, 1933.

[82] Omaha World-Herald, April 28, 1933, p. 2.

[83] O'Brien County Bell, May 3, 1933.

arrangement between creditor and debtor and thus the sale was concluded outside of court on a compromise basis.[84] While the Modern '76ers, a council of O'Brien County farmers who negotiated foreclosure compromises, met in the courthouse, other farmers heard speeches outside. It was this crowd that provoked a fight that resulted in injuries to some of the farmers. Frustrated by the events at Primghar, and suffering a head wound from the fight, Morris Cope of Plymouth County told the crowd "we'll go to LeMars and get Judge Bradley."[85]

By Thursday afternoon the crowd of farmers from Primghar, although reduced in numbers, entered LeMars. A rally held at the local ball park brought forth threats against the owners of the Durband farm north of town. When Sheriff Rippey persuaded the group to disperse, many farmers moved to the courthouse where Judge Bradley was hearing opening arguments in the case challenging the Iowa moratorium law. The farmers surged into the courtroom and insisted that Bradley halt the hearing. The already irritated farmers were probably insensed when Bradley ordered them to remove their hats and proclaimed "this is my courtroom!" and,when the judge refused to halt the proceedings, some seized him and roughly escorted him from the courthouse. They loaded Bradley into a truck, took him to the outskirts of LeMars, and threatened him with mutilation and hanging unless he agreed to stop signing mortgage foreclosures. A rope was thrown over the cross-member of a utility pole and placed around the judge's neck. While some farmers tugged at the opposite end of the rope, others

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[84] Iowa Union Farmer, May 3, 1933.

[85] O'Brien County Bell, May 3 and 20, 1933; and LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, June 9, 1933.

removed Bradley's trousers. R. F. Starzl, editor of the LeMars Globe-Post, followed the farmers to the country crossroads location and observed that "one gathered that this business was distasteful to them, but they were impelled by some grim destiny that they could not resist. When the judge at last swore a sort of compromise oath they all seemed relieved that they could retire with credit."[86] Controlled somewhat by the presence and wise counsel of Starzl, the mob dispersed and left the judge along the roadside.[87]

The near-lynching of Judge Bradley received national attention. In addition to coverage in the New York Times, newspapers as geographically distributed as the Wichita Beacon, Savannah News, Hartford Courant, and Cleveland Plain Dealer, carried the story.[88] During the preceding ten months, the farmers' movement in northwest Iowa had received considerable attention, and perhaps flirted with success. But the wild events of April 27, 1933, caused the Holiday movement in Plymouth County to lose many of its previous gains. Popular support for reckless and illegal behavior could not be found. Milo Reno, among others, deplored the incident.[89] The LeMars Globe-Post, previously supportive of the Farmers'

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[86]LeMars Globe-Post, May 1, 1933; and personal interview with Leo De Force, LeMars, Iowa, August 18, 1977. De Force was an eyewitness to the attempted lynching of Judge Bradley. He was later called on to testify in the Iowa National Guard's investigation of the incident.

[87]LeMars Globe-Post, July 20, 1933, p. 6. In testimony delivered at the trial of two of the judge's abductors, it was revealed that Starzl warned the farmers of the judge's heart condition and that if they did not stop they might have a death on their hands.

[88]New York Times, April 28, 1933, p. 1; and Literary Digest, May 13, 1933, p. 8.

[89]Sioux City Journal, April 29, 1933.

Holiday, condemned this direct action phase of the farmers' movement.[90] The official governmental reaction to the attempted lynching was swift and severe. Governor Herring proclaimed martial law in Plymouth and O'Brien Counties on April 28, the day after the incident. By that afternoon, the first National Guard troops occupied LeMars.[91] Before the two week martial law rule ended, over one-hundred men, mostly farmers from Plymouth County, had been arrested.[92] The National Guard's investigation, under the direction of Colonel Glen Haynes, lasted for two weeks with the interrogation of hundreds of witnesses and suspects. On May 11, Governor Herring lifted the martial law proclamation.[93]

Locally, the two weeks from April 27 to May 11, were disastrous for the Farmers' Holiday Association. Even the faithful LeMars Globe-Post criticized the lawlessness of the recent episode.[94] By May 11, the leaders of the county Holiday organization were either jailed in a wire encampment at LeMars, or in hiding.[95] A defense fund was begun to finance the expected legal costs of Holiday members, and hopeful plans were discussed to retain Clarence Darrow as the Holiday's attorney. Darrow indicated he was in sympathy with the farmers and said, "I would not say that they took the best way in their difficulties, but they are desperate in

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[90]LeMars Globe-Post, May 1, 1933.

[91]Ibid.

[92]New York Times, May 3, 1933, p. 8.

[93]Sioux City Journal, May 11, 1933.

[94]LeMars Globe-Post, May 11, 1933.

[95]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May 12, 1933; and personal interview with Leo De Force.

their plight."[96] But the famous Chicago lawyer's agreement to come to Iowa to defend the farmers was rendered unnecessary when criminal conspiracy charges were not pressed, and when it was decided to try the farmers on assault charges in civilian court.[97] Trials began on June 9, and culminated a month later with the conviction of numerous local farm activists on various assault charges.[98]

Through the summer months of 1933, with the Bradley incident in the recent background, the Farmers Holiday movement in Plymouth County faded. In October, the 1933 farm strike mustered some support in the county as farmers once again picketed highways. But whereas a year earlier 1000 pickets could have been assembled in Plymouth County, the strike in the autumn of 1933 was pressed to gather 200 farmers.[99]

Enthusiasm for the Farmers' Holiday waned in Plymouth County by the autumn of 1933. Perhaps the wild fling with violence in the spring had soured farmers on the organization. More likely, however, was the fact that some measure of economic relief under the new corn-hog program of the Roosevelt Administration became available in early November.[100] In an attempt to control the hog supply, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration purchased over 6,000,000 animals at premium prices in the autumn

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[96] LeMars Globe-Post, May 4, 1933; and Farm Holiday News, June 23, 1933.

[97] Sioux City Journal, May 4, 1933; and New York Times, May 3, 1933, p. 8; and May 10, 1933, p. 12.

[98] LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, June 9, 1933.

[99] LeMars Globe-Post, October 23, 1933.

[100] Dileva, "Farm Revolts In Iowa," p. 129.

of 1933.[101] Furthermore, with the threat of another Farm Holiday in the autumn of 1933, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration announced plans to make corn loans available to farmers on October 25.[102] The editor of the LeMars Globe-Post, a former Holiday supporter, now admonished Plymouth County farmers to "grab some of the gravy."[103]

Shover discovered two elements in the Farm Holiday movement. First, a core of farm organizers with earnest beliefs in the cost-of-production idea existed. Second, a spontaneous element of farmers motivated by desperate economic conditions evolved. The second group brought notoriety to the Holiday crusade. But when some measure of economic relief surfaced in late 1933, the direct action element of the Farmers' Holiday withered.[104] In Plymouth County, where Dyson maintains "the farm holiday movement attained its greatest strength,"[105] the events of the farm strike and anti-foreclosure movement gave way to hopes for agricultural improvement under a new administration.[106]

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[101]Murray R. Benedict and Oscar C. Stine, The Agricultural Commodity Programs, (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1956), p. 190.

[102]Edwin G. Nourse, Joseph S. Davis, and John D. Black, Three Years of The Agricultural Adjustment Administration, (Washington, D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1937), pp. 153-54.

[103]LeMars Globe-Post, November 16, 1933.

[104]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 166-67.

[105]Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 78.

[106]For a survey of farmer attitudes in the autumn of 1933, see the results of a poll conducted by the Des Moines Register, and reprinted in Bruce Bliven, "Milo Reno and His Farmers," New Republic, November 29, 1933, p. 64.

CHAPTER III

CONDITIONS OF REBELLION

In Plymouth County, Iowa, farmers protested the economic depression of the 1930s by picketing the market places, blockading highways, and stopping foreclosure sales. At the peak of farm activism, a martial law declaration covered the county following the near-lynching of a judge. The agricultural depression had a nationwide impact, yet probably in no other county was the farmers' direct action movement so vigorous, or so extreme. What, then, were the conditions in this northwest Iowa county in which such a sharp rebellion occurred in the 1930s?

An investigation into why Plymouth County assumed a prominent role in the agrarian rebellion of 1932-33 begins with geography. The county's location just to the north of Sioux City made it strategically important in any effort by the Farmers' Holiday Association to withhold produce from the market place. Because the Big Sioux and Missouri Rivers enclosed the city on two sides, and there were only seven truck routes leading to Sioux City, this market center provided an ideal spot for a blockade demonstration. Effective action in Plymouth County could shut down three of the access roads to Sioux City.[1] Since Plymouth County's border was just five miles from this important market, strikers quickly recognized that blockade action in Plymouth County presented jurisdictional problems for

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[1]Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 82.

Sioux City and Woodbury County law enforcement officials. Picketing at the county line necessitated the presence of law officers from both counties to insure the passage of trucks to market.[2]

When the Farmers' Holiday Association strike was joined by the Sioux City Milk Producers' strike in mid-August, 1932, two strike movements simultaneously focused their attention on the Sioux City market place. The development of these two separate, but compatible strikes further augmented Plymouth County's position as an ideal location for picketers.[3]

But other counties bordered Sioux City on the west, south, and east, and the rebellion in those areas did not equal Plymouth's response. Location would seem then to be only one consideration in provoking extreme farmer activism in the Sioux City territory. After all, as pointed out by John Shover, the Farmers' Holiday Association was only a loosely organized and directed movement, hence strategic planning and execution were unlikely.[4] Lowell Dyson agrees that the Farm Holiday movement, in its active phase, was not a highly organized venture. The highway blockades around Sioux City, for example, were not highly orchestrated affairs, but rather were the sudden actions of area farmers.[5] One must dig deeper, then, for the factors that brought on intense direct action and militance by the farmers of Plymouth County in 1932 and 1933.

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[2]Sioux City Journal, August 16, 1932, p. 7; and personal interview with Ralph Rippey, Sioux City, Iowa, September 8, 1977. Rippey was Plymouth County Sheriff during the early 1930s.

[3]Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 34.

[4]Shover, "The Farmers' Holiday Association Strike," p. 196.

[5]Dyson, "Farm Holiday Movement," pp. 76-77.

Bruce Bliven, a native Iowan who covered the farm strike for the New Republic, pointed out that the extreme activism occurred in some of Iowa's most prosperous farm country.[6] The merits of Bliven's contention can be seen in a detailed economic examination of Plymouth County. Indeed, the county was not a poor area, and farmers in the county appeared on the surface to have been economically more successful than the average. Plymouth County had a population of 24,000 in 1930, of which 13,800 were farm residents.[7] In terms of area, Plymouth was the fourth largest county in the Hawkeye State.[8] Located on the western edge of Iowa, and bordering the Big Sioux River, the county can be classified as one of gently rolling, rich farm land. The exception to this geographical pattern is in the western one-third of the county where the land is hilly and serious erosion makes agriculture a more difficult task.[9]

The relative prosperity of Plymouth County at the beginning of the 1930s can be demonstrated through an examination of farm size and value. In 1933, the year of peak violence in the area, the average size farm in the county was 190 acres compared to the state average of 160.5 acres.[10] The relatively larger farms in Plymouth County were no statistical

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[6]Bliven, "Milo Reno and His Farmers," p. 64.

[7]Lauren K. Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts Basebook of Iowa, Special Report Number 1, (Ames: Iowa State College, 1936), pp. 164-65.

[8]H. N. Whitney, editor, Iowa Official Register, 1929-1930, (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1929), p. 202.

[9]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, map insert.

[10]Iowa State Department of Agriculture, Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture, 1933, (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1933), pp. 222-25.

aberration. In fact, 40 percent of the farms in the county exceeded 190 acres.[11] At the time of the farm strike, the foreclosure sale stoppages, and the near-lynching, the county was composed of comparatively large farms on good farm land.

Farmstead and land values further demonstrate relative prosperity in Plymouth County. In 1930, the average value of farm land and buildings per acre in the county stood at $142. This figure compared favorably to the state average of $124. The $142 per acre value far outstripped the averages established in the surrounding states of Minnesota, South Dakota, and Nebraska.[12] While the value of farm land and buildings in Plymouth County dropped to $82 per acre in 1933, it remained above the state average.[13] In both farm size and value, Plymouth County was certainly not a poor county.

Yet, this county was situated in the area of the state with the highest tenancy rate during the 1930s. The nine counties with the highest tenancy rates were all in the northwest section. However, Plymouth County did not rank among the worst. Its rate of 65.1 percent tenant operated farms in 1933 ranked twenty-sixth out of the state's 99 counties. The counties of Sioux, O'Brien, Cherokee, and Woodbury, all bordering on

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[11]U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Marketing Service, and Iowa Department of Agriculture, Division of Agricultural Statistics, Iowa Agricultural Statistics, Plymouth County, 1940, (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1940), p. 42.

[12]Thomas J. Pressly and William H. Scofield eds., Farm Real Estate Values in the United States by Counties, 1850-1959, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 34-35.

[13]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, pp. 114-15.

Plymouth, reported higher tenancy rates for that year.[14] Perhaps farm tenants in Plymouth County persisted on their rented farms more successfully than tenants elsewhere. By 1935, nearly 50 percent of the tenants in the county had been on the same farm for five years.[15] The tenants endured, despite the fact that rent in the county ranked among the highest in the state during the period.[16] Although the county had a high rate of tenancy and rent, its predicament was not as dire as her neighbors. One must be careful here, but the greater tenancy persistence rate in Plymouth County suggests a significant characteristic in that county's rebellion. Perhaps there existed in the county an element of tough farmers who refused to give in to the depression.

Despite the harsh economic years, the farmers in Plymouth County earned relatively good incomes. For example, gross income per farm in 1930 for the state of Iowa stood at $3,303, while gross income per Plymouth County farm was $4,215. Thus, gross earnings per farm in the county were 28 percent higher than the state average, as only eleven other counties reported higher per farm gross earnings.[17]

Additional proof of comparative economic well-being in Plymouth County can be seen in an examination of farm conveniences. If the economic prosperity of a county can be measured in terms of material goods, Plymouth County measures up very well. By 1930, based on the presence of the

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[14] Ibid., pp. 104-06.

[15] USDA, Iowa Agricultural Statistics, Plymouth County, p. 41.

[16] Soth, Agricultural Economics Facts, p. 105.

[17] Ibid., pp. 10-13.

conveniences of agrarian life, farmers in this county were a generally prosperous group. In 1930, 78 of Iowa's 99 counties ranked lower than Plymouth in regard to telephones, automobiles, radios, water systems, and electric lights. Sixty percent of Plymouth County farm homes had radios; 83 percent had telephones; 20 percent were electrified; 34 percent were equipped with indoor plumbing; and 96 percent possessed automobiles. In each category, with the exception of electrical service, the county ranked well above state averages.[18]

The county's farmers also possessed numerous modern farm implements. By 1933, although mired in the agricultural depression, there was one tractor for every three farms in the county; statewide the ratio was one to four. In the same year, Plymouth County farmers owned one truck for every nine farms. Again, the state ratio was higher at one to eleven.[19] This data is instructive; Plymouth County farmers, despite the depression, were economically more prosperous than many of their fellow farmers.

The preceding data substantiates Bruce Bliven's observation that the farm rebellion centered in prosperous farming country. What, then, were the economic circumstances that moved the relatively prosperous farmers of Plymouth County to revolt? One answer lies in the sudden agricultural economic downturn in the early 1930s, and the county's particular type of agriculture.

Dyson argues that the decade of the 1920s represented a period of redirection for agriculture, not depression. He suggests that economically

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[18]Ibid., pp. 155-58.

[19]USDA, Yearbook of Agriculture, 1933, pp. 222-25.

the farmers' situation was not desperate in the 1920s. The agricultural depression came in the early 1930s when prices for farm commodities took a sharp down turn.[20]

Important economic data supports Dyson's argument. An index of farm prices, with the base period 1910-1914 equalling 100, demonstrates the point. In 1919-20 prices were extremely high, indexing at 209 and 205 respectively. Prices sunk in 1921 to an index price of 116, mostly because adjustments following the war had their greatest impact that year. The price index remained relatively stable from 1922 through 1929, ranging from 124 to 147. In 1929 the index of prices stood at 138. Then, in 1930, the index fell to 117. The following year, it retreated even further to 80. When, in 1932, the index price reached 57, it had achieved its low point for the depression period.[21]

In Iowa, corn and hog prices for the period verify the above data and add substance to Dyson's argument. In 1927, 1928, and 1929, hogs sold in Iowa for $9.49, $8.77, and $9.50 per hundred-weight respectively. During the same years, corn prices fluctuated from seventy-four cents to eighty-two cents per bushel. However, by 1932, hogs had lost two-thirds of their value and sold for $3.37. In similar fashion, the price paid for corn had declined to twenty-five cents.[22]

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[20]Dyson, "Farm Holiday Movement," p. 11; and Dyson, "Was Agricultural Distress In The 1930s A Result of Land Speculation During World War I? The Case of Iowa," pp. 577-84.

[21]Forster and Weldon, "The Agricultural Problem," p. 362.

[22]A. G. Black, "The Crisis In The Fall of 1932," The Agricultural Emergency In Iowa, (Ames: Agricultural Experiment Station, Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1933), p. 2.

Surveys conducted by the Iowa Department of Agriculture from 1930 through 1932 revealed the impact of this rapid and sharp price decline. In 1929, Iowa farms showed an average net income of $277⅓. The following year, the average net income dropped to $763. By 1931 a similar survey indicated that average net income was "$818 in the red."[23] As Dyson suggests, the severity of the agricultural depression, and thus the anguish of the farmer, was most pronounced from 1930 to 1933.

Were Plymouth County to be characterized agriculturally in the 1930s, it would have been as a corn and hog producing economy. Corn had long been "king" in the county. As early as the pre-World War I years, the county had led the state of Iowa in corn production even though three other counties contained more corn acreage.[24] In 1932, Plymouth County could claim that 20 of its 24 townships had 40 to 50 percent of their total acreage in corn. Although other crops were raised, the county was principally a corn producer.[25]

Evidence suggests that the long years of corn-dominated agriculture had taken their toll on Plymouth County's major crop. In 1928, the county was the fifth greatest producer of corn in Iowa, and for both 1929 and 1930, the county ranked fourth in total corn production. However, it is noteworthy that the county's yield per acre in each of those years was below

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[23]USDA, Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture, 1931, p. 7.

[24]W. S. Freeman, History of Plymouth County Iowa: Her People, Industries, and Institutions, Volume I, (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen and Company, Incorporated, 1917), p. 237.

[25]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, p. 141.

the state average, and that of northwest Iowa.[26] Even though the price paid for corn ranged in the respectable area of seventy-four to eighty-two cents per bushel in those years, low corn yields pushed the county's farmers toward hard times.[27] The crop season of 1931 brought economic disaster to the corn-dominated county. By autumn of that year, corn prices had plummeted to thirty-eight cents per bushel.[28] For the corn farmers of the county, the real distress in that year was the combination of seriously declining prices and low production. Because of drought, total corn production for the county ranked only fifty-third out of Iowa's ninety-nine counties. The yield per acre represented the second lowest in the state.[29] During 1932 and 1933, corn production resumed more normal levels for Plymouth County, but its yield per acre remained low and prices paid for corn reached disparaging levels.[30] The major county newspaper reported corn prices ranging from a high of forty-four cents per bushel in early 1932, to a low of twelve cents in the middle of the anti-foreclosure movement of 1933.[31]

Plymouth County farmers combined major hog raising efforts with their corn production. Hogs had long been the primary form of livestock produced

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[26]United States Department of Agriculture Marketing Service, Cooperating with Iowa Department of Agriculture, Division of Agricultural Statistics, Iowa Corn, (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1940), pp. 2-5.

[27]Black, Agricultural Emergency in Iowa, p. 2.

[28]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, p. 33.

[29]USDA, Iowa Corn, pp. 4-5.

[30]Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[31]LeMars Globe-Post, January 11, 1932, and February 27, 1933.

in the county.[32] By 1932-33, this northwest Iowa county ranked seventh in the state in hog production. In fact, most of the leading hog producing counties in the state surrounded Plymouth.[33] For this hog raising area, prices were respectable throughout the 1920s. Using 1910-1914 as the base period with an index price of 100, market conditions were favorable to hog producers by the late twenties. From 1927 to 1929, the index price for hogs ranged from 140 to 147.[34] However, beginning in 1930, market conditions soured for pork producers. The index price for hogs in January, 1930, stood at 97. With minor fluctuations, the price dropped steadily until it attained its low point of 33 in December, 1932, and January, 1933.[35] From 1931 until early 1933, corn and hog prices declined markedly for farmers. It was at the low point in market prices for these commodities that agrarian unrest among the corn and hog producers of Plymouth County peaked.

In order to fully appreciate what had happened to corn and hog prices in the early 1930s, an understanding must be gained as to the relationship between corn and hogs. The problem was complex as attested by Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace who foresaw no solution in attempting to formulate relief in this area in 1933.[36] The economic problems of corn and hogs cannot be dealt with as independent commodities. Since corn is

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[32]USDA, Iowa Agricultural Statistics: Plymouth County, p. 34.

[33]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, pp. 38-39.

[34]Black, Agricultural Emergency in Iowa, p. 2.

[35]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, p. 22.

[36]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 142-43.

used primarily as feed in producing livestock, it is in the form of livestock that corn goes to market.[37]

Agricultural economists in the 1920s and 1930s recognized a classic supply-and-demand relationship between hog production and corn prices. Since corn was chiefly used as livestock feed, increases in supply, and consequently reductions in the price of corn, created pressure for increased livestock production. Basically, farmers fed cheaply priced corn to livestock in an effort to make a profit from corn-fattened livestock sales. Reductions in corn supply, and subsequent increases in price, caused an opposite reaction by livestock producers.[38] As a corn and hog producing county, Plymouth felt the impact of the above market workings.

In the years during and immediately after World War I, a serious food crisis existed in Europe. Enlargement of dairy herds and beef cattle raised for slaughter would have taken two to three years to achieve a finished food product. Under the pressure of this war-time demand, emphasis fell upon hog production which could provide a finished product in less than one year.[39] During and immediately following the war, United States exports of pork grew dramatically. By 1919, 24 percent of the pork produced in America was exported. Hog production in the United States boomed. By the middle 1920s pork exports resumed a more normal level of 6 percent as production also leveled.[40] Throughout the post-war

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[37]D. A. Fitzgerald, Livestock Under The AAA, (Washington, D. C.: The Institute of Economics of The Brookings Institution, 1935), p. 1.

[38]Nourse, Davis, and Black, Three Years of The AAA, p. 302.

[39]James H. Shideler, Farm Crisis, 1919-1923, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 16.

[40]Fitzgerald, Livestock Under The AAA, p. 11.

decade, corn acreage and production remained steady, causing normal, anticipated market conditions for corn and hogs.[41] By the late 1920s, these conditions began to change and the result created despair for corn and hog farmers.

Beginning in 1928, a series of events set in motion a drastic decline in the corn and hog markets. In that year, the price of hogs dropped seventy-two cents per hundred-weight from the preceding year's price of $9.49.[42] According to one agricultural economist, four factors--consumer spending, cost of processing, supply, and discrepancies in hog producers' income and expenditures--contributed to this mild price decline. It was calculated that because of the depressed market conditions 100 pounds of pork in 1928 bought only 71 percent of what it bought in the 1910 to 1914 period.[43] The weakened pork market provided a harsh economic blow to Iowa farmers for whom hog sales represented 38 to 43 percent of total income in the 1928 to 1930 period.[44] Hopeful hog farmers attempted to produce their way out of the mild price decline of 1928. Representative of this tendency was the record number of hogs marketed in Plymouth County in 1929 and 1930.[45]

The integral relationship between corn and hog production demonstrated its impact from 1931 to 1933. The general steady trend in corn production

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[41]Benedict and Stine, Agricultural Commodity Programs, p. 187.

[42]Black, Agricultural Emergency In Iowa, p. 2.

[43]Fitzgerald, Livestock Under The AAA, pp. 16-20.

[44]USDA, Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture, 1930, p. 51.

[45]USDA, Iowa Agricultural Statistics: Plymouth County, p. 34.

during the post-war decade broke in 1931 with increased acreage and total production reported. The following year, record corn production resulted nationally.[46] In the autumn of that year, the Agricultural College at Ames, announced with little enthusiasm that, "the State of Iowa is harvesting the largest corn crop in her history."[47] In the glutted market place, corn prices dropped to twenty cents per bushel which was only one-fourth the 1928-29 price.[48] Because of the large supply of cheap corn in 1932-33, hog production expanded. Increased production of pork occurred even though hog prices were extremely low.[49]

Problems in the export market caused further shrinkage in pork demand and thus price. In 1932, Great Britain, the largest importer of United States pork, established import quotas on the product. The following year, Germany instituted higher tariffs on American pork, which further restricted demand.[50] Studying this situation, Shover concluded that "corn-hog farmers picketed highways at a time when their foreign market was at an unprecedented low."[51] By December, 1932, the winter of the rebellion, hogs commanded only one-third of the price paid two years earlier.[52] In corn and hog producing Plymouth County, farmers then resorted to direct action.

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[46]Benedict and Stine, Agricultural Commodity Programs, pp. 187-88.

[47]Black, Agricultural Emergency in Iowa, p. 1.

[48]Ibid., p. 2.

[49]Benedict and Stine, Agricultural Commodity Programs, pp. 196-97.

[50]Fitzgerald, Livestock Under The AAA, p. 13.

[51]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 11.

[52]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, p. 22.

Compounding the misfortune of declining agricultural prices in the early 1930s was the more serious problem of the farmers' struggle to hold on to their land. The land represented the farmers' livelihood. If taxes were not paid, or mortgage payments not met, farmers risked the loss of their land. Because of the agricultural depression in the 1930s, farmers faced the even worse dilemma of foreclosed land not selling for the mortgage price. In such cases, livestock, machinery, and even household possessions were sold to amke up the deficiency. A small town Iowa lawyer commented that witnessing such bankruptcy proceedings, which too often left farmers with nothing to show for many years of hard work, were, "the most discouraging, disheartening experiences of my legal life."[53] In Iowa, and especially in Plymouth County, the threat of this dismal process reached its zenith from 1931 to 1933.

Farmers themselves had helped create the disastrous foreclosure situation of the 1930s. From 1910 to 1920, speculation in agricultural lands caused farm values to rise sharply. Nationally, average values of farm land and buildings increased by 110 percent. In Iowa, values rose by 135 percent for the same period. Plymouth County experienced an extraordinarily sharp increase as average values rose by 157 percent. Values at all levels declined gradually during the 1920s. However, 1930 values still considerably exceeded those of 1910.[54] The consequence of the escalated land values, especially during the war years, was a large debt incurred by the purchasers. As prices tapered off in the 1920s, and plummeted in the 1930s,

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[53]Remley J. Glass, "Gentlemen, The Corn Belt!" Harper's, July, 1933, pp. 205-06.

[54]Pressly and Scofield, Farm Real Estate Values, pp. 34-35.

many farmers were left owing large debts incurred in good times. The mortgage debt picture of 1930 is revealing. Nationally, the debt per farm stood at $3561. For Iowa, which had the highest state average debt, indebtedness reached $9626 per farm. At the same time, the mortgage debt per farm in Plymouth County rose to a staggering $11,926, ranking among the highest in Iowa.[55] As land values tumbled during the depression, desperate farmers feared the impossibility of liquidating their debt burden. Plymouth County land values dropped from a 1930 average of $26,700 per farm to $15,000 in 1935. Only four counties in Iowa suffered greater property value losses during the same period.[56]

In addition to mortgage indebtedness, made worse by declining farm values, farmers faced the oppressive burden of other fixed costs. Among the most burdensome fixed costs were real estate taxes. It has been calculated that a farmer producing an average crop in 1915 could have paid his taxes with income from a little more than three acres of crop. However, by 1932, taxes had doubled and prices slumped dramatically. In that year, it would have taken the same corn farmer income from twenty-eight acres of crop to meet his tax obligation.[57] Based on the assessed value of property, these taxes hit hardest in areas of high property values. At a time when cash income was in short supply, Plymouth County farmers faced an average

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[55]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, pp. 109 and 117.

[56]United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Agriculture, 1935: Statistics by Counties, (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), pp. 236-45.

[57]Dyson, "Farm Holiday Movement," pp. 15-16.

tax burden of $240.[58] The typical county farm was valued at 25 percent more than the state average in 1930. And in January, 1933, the value of farm land in the county was the second highest in the state. Only Pottawattomie County exceeded Plymouth in taxable value that year.[59] Not coincidentally, these were counties of vigorous activity during the farm rebellion.

Shover contends that the farm debt situation took on crisis proportions following the stock market crash of 1929, "The farmers' debt position was vulnerable and when investors and bank account creditors were forced to make calls upon their assets, investment institutions in turn had to press demands upon their farm debtors."[60] The chief institution that supplied short-term credit to the farmer was the country bank.[61] The great decline in farm income and land values in the early 1930s undermined the financial stability of these banks. Bank operations had been suspended and closed during the post-war decade, but the problem became alarming in the early thirties. Iowa ranked as a leader in bank closings. The previous record for bank failures in the state had been established in 1926. However, the 208 banks that failed in 1931 more than doubled the 1926 figure.[62] Plymouth County experienced an almost total failure of its

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[58] LeMars Globe-Post, August 1, 1932.

[59] Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, pp. 118-29.

[60] Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 16.

[61] U.S. Congress, House, The Farm Debt Problem, 73rd Congress, 1st Session, House Document No. 9, Letter from Secretary of Agriculture, March 27, 1933, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), p. 29.

[62] Black, Agricultural Emergency In Iowa, p. 3.

banking system in July, 1932. Virtually every bank in the county closed. Not only did the banks temporarily suspend operations, but they also forced depositors to sign waivers that obligated them to observe a moratorium on withdrawals. According to the waiver, depositors agreed that withdrawals over the ensuing five years could be made only at the discretion of the bank. The ultimate frustration for Plymouth County depositors in this predicament resulted when the banks declared that they would not reopen until all depositors had signed the waivers.[63]

The economically depressed farmer, too often left owing delinquent taxes and at the mercy of unstable local banking, also faced the threat of foreclosure on his farm mortgage. In 1925 less than twenty-five farms per thousand were foreclosed in Iowa. By 1932 the figure had doubled, and in 1933 Iowa led the nation with seventy-eight foreclosures per thousand farms. The 6400 farms foreclosed in Iowa in 1932 represented three percent of all the farms in the state.[64] This total number of foreclosures in Iowa's 99 counties equalled an average of slightly more than 63 per county in 1932.

Shover concludes that "direct action was most vigorous in the attempt to halt forced sales; these actions occurred when foreclosures were highest in number . . . and in the area where they were most frequent."[65] But Plymouth County, where direct action was most pronounced, suffered only seventeen foreclosures in 1932. Shover's conclusion should not be discarded, but in the case of Plymouth County requires refinement. Of the

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[63]LeMars Globe-Post, July 11 and 14, 1932.

[64]Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, pp. 115-20.

[65]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 17.

seventeen foreclosures in the county in 1932, eight took place in November and December. In the first month of 1933, there were five more farm foreclosures.[66] Four other foreclosure sales in January were also halted by farmer direct action.[67] The county's major newspaper had warned in late December, that unless relief came to the area there would be an "avalanche of foreclosures."[68] At the end of 1932, when the number of foreclosures per county in the state averaged sixty-three annually, and five monthly, Plymouth County neared the average. Had it not been for halted foreclosure sales in January, 1933, the county probably would have exceeded the state average.

The prospects for a worsened foreclosure picture in the winter and spring of 1933 surfaced when the Iowa State Agricultural College reported that the state would "harvest the biggest crop of mortgage foreclosures it has ever known."[69] At the precise moment when foreclosures in Plymouth County reached their peak, so also did the local farmers' direct action to protect themselves. The threat of foreclosure as much as the actual event provoked Plymouth County farmers to extreme action.

In the early 1920s, private investors, local banks, and mortgage companies were responsible for most of the foreclosures on farm mortgages. After 1926, however, a new group of mortgage holders emerged in importance. Institutional investors including insurance companies and large banks made

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[66]Plymouth County Land and Deed Record, Book Number 30, (LeMars, Iowa), pp. 7-29.

[67]LeMars Globe-Post, January 2, 5, 9, and 26, 1933.

[68]Ibid., December 26, 1932.

[69]Black, Agricultural Emergency In Iowa, p. 1.

up this new group. In 1925, institutional investors were involved in only 17 percent of all foreclosures. By 1932, that figure had soared to 73 percent.[70]

Corporations held minimal amounts of farm acreage prior to 1929. However, by September, 1933, insurance companies, non-local banks, and large real estate concerns had acquired about 8 percent of the state's farm land. Corporate investment continued to rise during the depression and, by 1937, these institutional investors claimed 11.2 percent of all farm land in the Hawkeye State.[71] Corporate investment in Plymouth County during the period underwent significant changes. While the state recorded 8 percent corporate held land in 1933, Plymouth reported only 5 percent business-controlled land. However, whereas the amount of corporate-owned land statewide grew to 10 percent by 1935, Plymouth corporate-owned land grew to 7 percent.[72] Farm militancy in the county came at the same time corporate interests were expanding rapidly. Desperate farmers fought not only to save their farms, but also against these unwanted outside influences.[73]

As Map 3 on the following page indicates, in 1933, the year of anti-foreclosure uprising, corporate investments were concentrated in the southern

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[70]William G. Murray and Ronald C. Bentley, "Farm Mortgage Foreclosures," The Agricultural Emergency In Iowa, (Ames: Collegiate Press, Incorporated, March, 1933), p. 77.

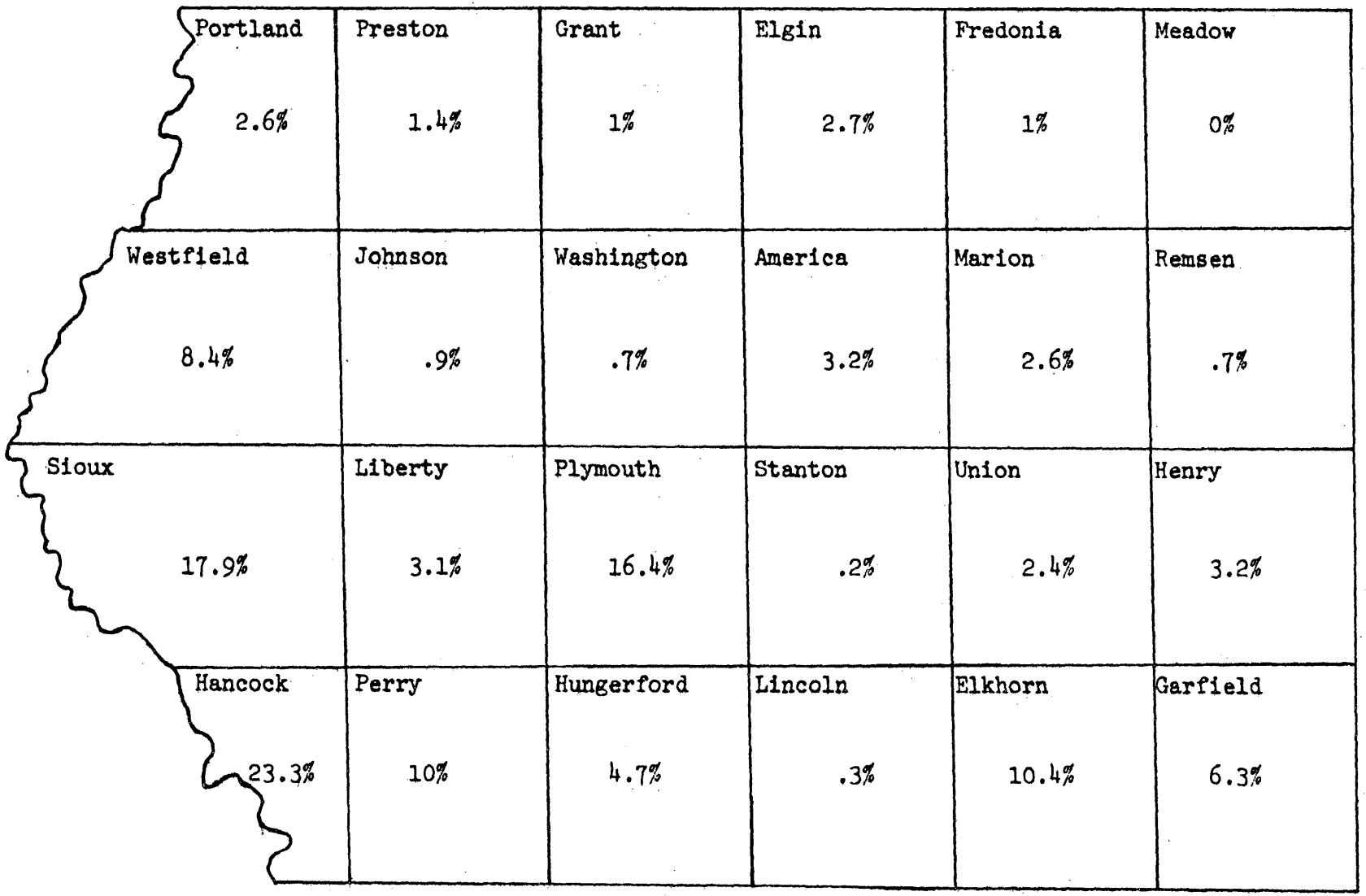
[71]William G. Murray and H. W. Bitting, Corporate-Owned Land in Iowa, 1937, Bulletin 362, (Ames: Agricultural Experiment Station, Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1937), p. 95.

[72]Ibid., pp. 124-25.

[73]See Chapter IV.

MAP 3

PERCENTAGES OF CORPORATE-HELD LAND IN
PLYMOUTH COUNTY BY TOWNSHIPS, 1933



and western townships of the county.[74] By 1934, two townships in the southwestern corner of the county consisted of twenty percent or more corporate-controlled farm land. It was in this section that the poorest land in the county existed. In good times, the land had been drastically overvalued. When severe weather and economic conditions developed, the overpriced poor land quickly lost its value. As the price of this land declined, corporations bought it in substantial amounts.[75]

Corporations held 15 to 19 percent of the farm land in the central and southern townships of Plymouth and Elkhorn. Perry, Westfield, Johnson, Liberty, and Hungerford townships reported corporate owned farm land at less than 15 percent, but in excess of both county and state averages for 1934.[76] With the exception of Westfield, all of the above townships were in the southern portion of the county. The evidence suggests a concentration of corporate investment in a restricted area of the county. As will be seen later, this area of the county may have contained the most farmer activists. In a period that experienced increased tenancy rates, disgruntled farmers found a scapegoat in the corporate absentee landlords. Organized farmers struck out at this threat to their accustomed way of life. It should have come as no surprise that the holder of the mortgage at Plymouth County's first foreclosure sale stoppage in January, 1933, was the New York Life Insurance Company.[77]

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[74] Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory, 1934, (Sioux City: Great Western Map Company, 1934), pp. 1-25.

[75] Murray, "Prosperity and Land Boom, 1901-1920," p. 478.

[76] Soth, Agricultural Economic Facts, p. 109.

[77] LeMars Globe-Post, January 5, 1933.

The preceding discussion of the agricultural depression of 1930 to 1933 demonstrated the economic conditions that moved some American farmers to protest. In some instances, Plymouth County's agricultural situation was not as unfortunate as others. On the other hand, this relatively prosperous northwest Iowa county had developed certain expectations that were thwarted by the hard years of declining prices and diminished land values. In fact, the very land upon which the farmer depended for his livelihood lay threatened. Heaped on all the previous discouraging economic news for Plymouth County farmers, a chain of agriculturally calamitous events in 1931 and 1932 struck the county.

In 1931, the state of Iowa experienced slightly above normal rainfall. One exception to this general precipitation pattern existed in northwest Iowa, in an area including Cherokee, Plymouth, and Woodbury Counties, where rainfall shortages were reported ranging from six to eight inches.[78] The impact on the corn crop was disastrous as Plymouth County's total production was halved, and yield per acre ranked second lowest in the state. In terms of corn production and yield, the 1931 drought hit Plymouth County the hardest.[79] By February, 1932, the LeMars Globe-Post announced that the county had been designated a drought area by the Secretary of Agriculture, and printed procedures by which farmers could apply for government seed and feed loans.[80] Of the several designated drought counties in the state, Plymouth led in the number of federally granted seed and feed loans, requesting a total of 202 loans. Unfortunately, however, in too many

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[78]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 6.

[79]USDA, Iowa Corn, p. 4.

[80]LeMars Globe-Post, February 18 and 22, 1932.

instances already deeply indebted farmers found themselves strapped with additional financial burdens.[81]

The local drought persisted through 1932, with a particularly dry June and early July seriously effecting the corn crop in the county.[82] A break in Plymouth County's long drought came on July 6, 1932, but it did so under the most unfortunate circumstances for the corn producing county. General rains blanketed the county that day. However, in the greatest corn producing sector of the county, severe hail totally ruined what remained of the drought beleaguered corn crop.[83] Piled on man-made economic problems, nature had been cruel to Plymouth County in the months immediately preceding the outbreak of the farmers' rebellion.

Only four days after the drought had subsided, and the hail had destroyed the corn crop in southeastern Plymouth County, came equally discouraging news of local bank failure. On July 10, the four LeMars banks closed and smaller banks around the county also declared holidays.[84] The local reaction to the bank holidays did not go unnoticed. Donald Murphy, reporting on the Farm Holiday strike a month later, noted that "it is not entirely an accident that the area in which the Farmers' Holiday is strongest is roughly the same area of recent bank holidays."[85]

Within a month of this series of economic setbacks, Plymouth County farmers, along with others, had declared their own "holiday" and blockaded

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[81] Ibid., December 29, 1932.

[82] Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 6.

[83] LeMars Globe-Post, July 7, 1932.

[84] Ibid., July 11, 1932.

[85] Murphy, "Farmers Go On Strike," p. 67.

the highways of northwest Iowa. The discouraging events immediately preceding the farm revolt could not, in themselves, have caused the intense farmer activism practised in Plymouth County from August, 1932, until April, 1933. Other factors, including the strength of the local organization and the personalities involved, remain to be examined. However, coupled with the general decline in agricultural prices, and supported by the rising fear of farm foreclosures, the events just preceding the farmers' strike in Plymouth County provided immediate provocation for this important agrarian uprising.

CHAPTER IV

THE ORGANIZATION OF REBELLION

The Farmers' Holiday Association strike of 1932, and subsequent direct action in the ensuing year, was not a highly disciplined and organized effort. In his study of the farm revolt, John Shover argues "that the strength of the movement was a tempestuous and little organized force whose allegiance to the Holiday Association was tangential."[1] Initially the Plymouth County Holiday Association showed signs of a viable formal leadership. However, as the farm revolt progressed through the autumn and winter of 1932-33, an unofficial element in the local farmers' movement replaced this formal leadership. Examination of the origins and eventual collapse of the Plymouth County Farmers' Holiday Association reveals much about the restless and independent nature of the farmers' uprising of 1932-33.

Historically, the Sioux City territory had been the center of activist farm and labor organizations in Iowa. In 1932-33, Iowa farmers over fifty years of age could remember previous rural insurgency. The Populist movement of the 1890s had found its greatest strength in northwestern Iowa. Just to the south of Sioux City, in 1896, angry farmers prevented an eviction by a county sheriff.[2] Labor radicalism also surfaced in the Sioux

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[1]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 57.

[2]Nixon, "The Economic Basis of The Populist Movement In Iowa," pp. 380-82 and 394.

City area in 1914 and 1915. An army of transient farm workers, organized by the Industrial Workers of the World, held large rallies and demonstrations.[3] According to Everett Luoma, Sioux City became a "wobblies paradise" under the mayoral administration of Wallace Short.[4] One reporter of the 1930s rural rebellion felt the World War I labor agitation had left its mark on the area.[5] It was with this heritage of activist organization that Plymouth County farmers forged their Farmers' Holiday Association in 1932.

In the first in-depth study of the Farmers' Holiday movement, Julius Korgan contended that the Farmers' Union and the Farmers' Holiday Association functioned as separate organizations.[6] Despite this technical separation, however, the Holiday Association relied heavily on the sympathy of the Farmers' Union. And, in some areas, the established Union organization machinery was utilized as the organizational base of the Holiday.[7] It was not unusual to find farmers who served as officers in, and supported both organizations.[8] Glen Miller, president of the Iowa Farmers' Union, announced early in the movement "that the Farmers' Union is sponsoring this 'Holiday' movement."[9] At the local level, C. J. Schultz served as president

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[3]Federal Writers' Project, Iowa: A Guide To The Hawkeye State, p. 304.

[4]Everett E. Luoma, The Farmer Takes A Holiday, (New York: Exposition Press, 1967), p. 13.

[5]Bliven, "Milo Reno and His Farmers," p. 64.

[6]Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 18.

[7]Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 78.

[8]Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 31.

[9]Iowa Union Farmer, March 9, 1932.

of the Plymouth County Holiday Association, and was on the Farmers' Union Board of Directors.[10] In Plymouth County, the mingling of the Farmers' Union and the Holiday was evident from mid-1932, but Union importance dwindled and disappeared as the local Holiday Association took form.

On January 8, 1932, C. J. Schultz was elected president of the Plymouth County Farmers' Union. At the same meeting, local members resolved to commend Schultz, Milo Reno, and other leaders who spoke for the betterment of their organization.[11] By early February, Schultz was moving through the county bolstering the Union's organization.[12] The first local mention of a Farmers' Holiday came in a discussion by Schultz at a township Farmers' Union meeting on April 1, 1932.[13] Later, on May 23, the LeMars Globe-Post carried an invitation from the local Farmers' Union which encouraged farmers to attend a county-wide meeting for an explanation of the Holiday.[14] The May invitation was the last local press report on the Farmers' Union for the duration of the Holiday movement. By June, at least in press coverage, the Farmers' Holiday was in ascendance in Plymouth County as mention of the Union disappeared. The two local organizations apparently operated as one, with only the Holiday group receiving public attention. It is noteworthy that C. J. Schultz, the county president of the Union, also had the official title of president of the county's

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[10] Ibid., September 21, 1932.

[11] LeMars Globe-Post, January 11, 1932.

[12] Ibid., February 4, 1932.

[13] Ibid., April 4, 1932.

[14] Ibid., May 23, 1932.

Farmers' Holiday Association. Exactly when the designation as chief of the Holiday group occurred is uncertain. What is certain is that by August, the press recognized Schultz as the local Holiday head.[15] Yet another example of the close relationship of the two local organizations was demonstrated when the Holiday organizers utilized a Farmers' Union meeting to enhance their petition drive for the projected withholding movement.[16]

Throughout the summer, the Farmers' Holiday Association gained organizational strength. State Holiday leaders made numerous visits to Plymouth County organizational meetings.[17] The usual procedure at these meetings included a speech on the Holiday idea and the passing of petitions seeking signatures in support of the withholding movement. Official membership in the Farmers' Holiday Association was solicited at a cost of $1.00.[18] Reporter Donald Murphy noted that "the area around Sioux City has a good many Farmers' Union members and many more supporters of the Farmers' Holiday."[19] Membership statistics support Murphy's observation. Plymouth County had six Farmers' Union locals and 272 members in March, 1932. By March, 1933, the number of locals had risen to nine and total membership reached 322. The county ranked fourth in the state for 1932 in terms of new members. In the first three months of 1933, at the

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[15]Ibid., August 18, 1932.

[16]Ibid., July 5, 1932.

[17]See Chapter II, p. 23.

[18]Personal interview with Henry Erichsen, Plymouth County Farmers' Holiday Association member in the 1930s, Remsen, Iowa, August 18, 1977.

[19]Murphy, "The Farmers Go On Strike," p. 67.

height of the anti-foreclosure movement, the county claimed 29 new members.[20] Indeed, membership in the Farmers' Union seemingly surged in Plymouth County at the same time that the Holiday was active. Since the organizations virtually operated as one, the numbers indicate that the Farmers' Holiday succeeded in attracting considerable Plymouth County support.

The strength of the Holiday organizational effort in Plymouth County lay in the eastern and southern townships. The LeMars Globe-Post gave regular press attention to the Holiday movement. From April through July, 1932, the newspaper reported on twelve Holiday organizational meetings. Map 4 depicts the township distribution of those meetings. Grant and America townships each held one meeting. The remaining ten organizational meetings took place in the eastern and southern townships of the county.[21] As reported by the Iowa Union Farmer, seven of the nine local Farmers' Union organizations existed in the southern and eastern section of the county.[22] The concentration of the farmers' movement in that portion of the county did not go unrecognized by the Globe-Post, which noted that farmers "in that part of the county are quietly forming the nucleus of a county-wide movement."[23] It was precisely this area of the county that had suffered serious drought, heavy hail damages in early July, and numerous bank closings in mid-July.[24]

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[20]Iowa Union Farmer, March 9, 1932, January 25, March 22, and April 19, 1933.

[21]LeMars Globe-Post, April through July, 1932.

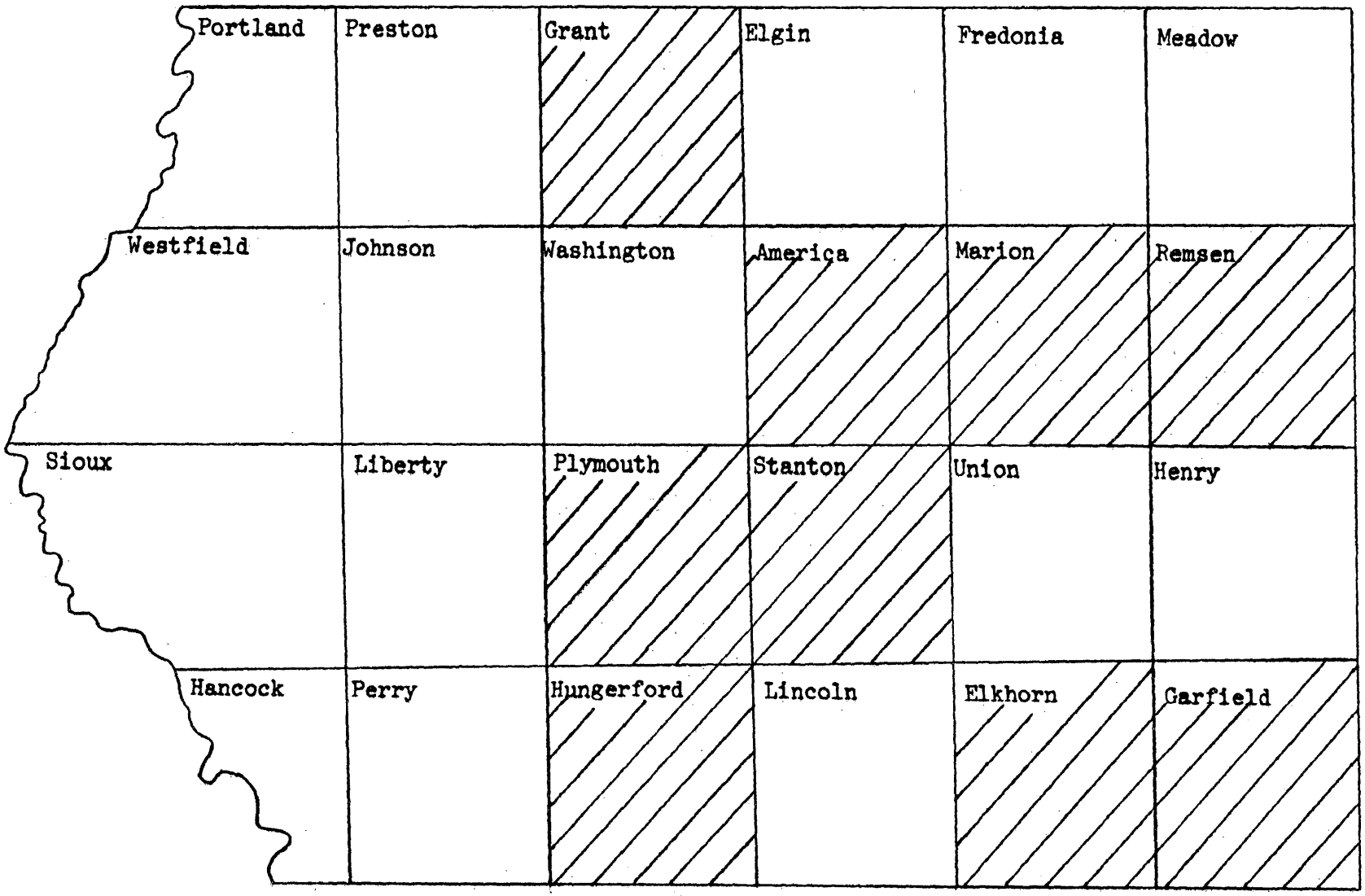
[22]Iowa Union Farmer, March 22, 1933.

[23]LeMars Globe-Post, July 21, 1932.

[24]Ibid., July 7, 14, 18, and 21, 1932.

MAP 4

TOWNSHIP DISTRIBUTION OF REPORTED HOLIDAY ORGANIZATIONAL MEETINGS
APRIL THROUGH JULY, 1932



Although the early months of the Holiday movement in Plymouth County showed encouraging signs of attendance and interest, internal organizational weakness was apparent from the outset. For example, the exact plans and methods of the Holiday remained unclear. In early May, 1932, the LeMars Globe-Post, in response to a letter critical of the newspaper's coverage of the Holiday, claimed uncertainty as to what the movement entailed.[25] Such ignorance was understandable. At a Holiday meeting on June 22, in LeMars, Bob Moore, secretary of the Iowa Farmers' Union, announced that "the farmers' holiday movement is spontaneous. It is so spontaneous that we have not even prepared all our plans. . . . You are going to be asked to share in the planning."[26] This comment suggests that the leaders did not have an overall plan for the Holiday at this point.

One indication of the lack of centralized control of the Holiday movement surfaced at the start of the strike. Shover found that the strike in the vicinity of Sioux City

> was a different movement from that planned by the leaders of the Farmers' Holiday Association. In all the preceding buildup there had been no mention of picketing. Yet at the very inception of the withholding movement farmers in Plymouth and Woodbury counties patrolled highways and threatened non-cooperating farmers.27

Korgan suggests that the early violence around Sioux City was caused by the separate dairy farmers' movement.[28] The first report of direct action against property occurred in Plymouth County when two farmers poured 300

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[25] Ibid., May 12, 1932.

[26] Ibid., June 23, 1932.

[27] Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 41.

[28] Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 40.

pounds of cream from a Cherokee Creamery truck onto the ground on August 12.[29] On the night of August 14, the first picketing arose with estimates that 1000 to 1500 farmers guarded the roads of Plymouth County.[30] Around Sioux City, eight or nine picket camps were established on major truck routes.[31] At these camps anywhere from a handful to 300 farmers were gathered. Pickets huddled around camp fires and were usually notified by telephone and messenger about trucks headed in their direction. When trucks approached, the pickets, armed with clubs and bricks, blocked the roads, a committee man would explain their cause, and they usually held firm against allowing passage of produce.[32] In Kingsley, in southeastern Plymouth County, the Holiday broadened its activity when representatives of the farmers used the threat of boycott to persuade produce houses and stores not to buy dairy goods during the Holiday.[33]

By the end of the first week of the strike, a crowd of 150 farmers near LeMars had reached an agreement with J. C. Gillespie, president of the

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[29] Sioux City Journal, August 13, 1932.

[30] LeMars Globe-Post, August 15, 1932.

[31] Iowa Union Farmer, August 24, 1932.

[32] Herbst, "Feet In The Grass Roots," pp. 47-48; and Mary Heaton Vorse, "Rebellion In The Cornbelt," Harper's, December, 1932, p. 5. In blocking market places by stopping vehicles, the Holiday farmers were employing tactics that were at least as old as eighteenth century rural protests in England. Like their historical counterparts, these crowds sought to satisfy "immediate and particular grievances." The 1930s picketers sought to drive up depressed prices by restricting the supply of goods in the market place. Similar to the activist rural crowds in eighteenth and nineteenth century England and France, these farmers were reformers rather than revolutionaries. See Rude, The Crowd In History, p. 38; George Rude, The Crowd In The French Revolution, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 232-33; and Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels, pp. 5-6.

[33] LeMars Globe-Post, August 15, 1932.

Chamber of Commerce, and local businessmen, not to buy produce during the Holiday. In a press release, Milo Reno praised the Plymouth County organization for its work in attempting to include merchants in the movement, and urged other locals to employ similar tactics.[34] The local organization had taken actions which broadened the Holiday effort, and impressed the national leadership.

Yet even in Plymouth County, the degree of organizational control during the August strike seemed marginal. The LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel pointed out that officials had problems dealing with the strike because "it is difficult to find anyone whose authority is respected by other strikers."[35] The pro-Holiday Globe-Post echoed similar sentiments, when it reported that the local Wells dairy, seeking to cooperate in the strike, "experienced difficulty in getting proposals acted upon, for there seems to be no way of being sure just what has authority among the strikers."[36] Furthermore, once the milk strike ended, an agreement between the Farmers' Holiday Association and LeMars produce houses permitted eggs, butter, cream and milk to move into the town. Despite the agreement, many farmers independently continued to stop the flow of dairy products into the county seat. But the number not abiding by the agreement was small and they were chastised by the LeMars Globe-Post for giving "their cause a black eye."[37]

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[34] Ibid., August 15 and 18, 1932.

[35] LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, August 19, 1932.

[36] LeMars Globe-Post, August 22, 1932.

[37] Ibid., August 29, 1932.

By the end of August, even local control of the striking farmers was beginning to deteriorate.

I. W. Reck, Plymouth County dairy farmer and leader of the milk producers, announced the signing of an agreement and an end to the milk strike on August 26. Farmers, buoyed by the success of the milk producers, intensified picketing in Plymouth County in an attempt to prohibit all produce from reaching LeMars.[38] As a result of the tight blockade of LeMars, many non-cooperating farmers shipped their produce to Cherokee in the next county, thirty miles east of LeMars. Plymouth County Holiday members led by Morris Cope, but without the sanction of county leaders, then attempted to organize farmers around Cherokee in order to blockade that market place from uncooperative farmers.[39] On August 30, at an organizational rally on the Cherokee-Plymouth County line, violence broke out, as an automobile drove past and shots were fired at the Holiday organizers.[40] A sixteen year old Kingsley farm youth attending the Holiday meeting received serious wounds in the incident.[41]

Two days following the Cherokee violence, Reno and John Chalmers, chairman of the Iowa Farmers' Holiday Association, issued a call for cessation of the Farm Holiday activities until a governors' conference scheduled to meet in Sioux City on September 9, had convened. But the same day the order was issued, pickets were increased at the Plymouth-Woodbury County line. A

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[38]Sioux City Journal, August 27, 1932.

[39]Ibid., September 1, 1932, p. 5.

[40]Erichsen, personal interview.

[41]Sioux City Journal, September 1, 1932, p. 5.

Sioux City Journal reporter wrote that Plymouth County farmers, embittered by the Cherokee incident, "still had their grievances."[42] In fact, the most intense picketing of the farm strike occurred after the cessation order. On September 5, four truckers were injured as they attempted to cross the picket line north of Sioux City, in Plymouth County.[43] Two days later, an estimated 1000 pickets massed at the county line town of James and stopped a convoy of twenty-five trucks organized by the Plymouth County Sheriff and bound for Sioux City from LeMars. Sheriff Rippey and fifty deputies escorted the trucks. The strikers successfully turned back the convoy after some violence and many threats to the law officers. In the confrontation, several trucks were damaged and many of the escorting deputies had their badges forcibly removed.[44] Despite the national and state organizations' call for a halt in the withholding movement, the Sioux City Journal reported on September 8, that "no livestock arrived at the yards from Plymouth County today."[45] As far as these local farmers were concerned, the strike was still in effect.

Not only did the striking farmers in Plymouth County ignore the leadership of the state and national Farmers' Holiday Association, they also apparently acted outside the authority of the local formal leadership. Raymond Snyder of Kingsley held no official position in the Plymouth County Holiday Association, yet on August 25 he led a large delegation of Kingsley

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[42]Ibid., pp. 1-4.

[43]Ibid., September 6, 1932.

[44]LeMars Globe-Post, September 8, 1932; and Sioux City Journal, September 8, 1932.

[45]Sioux City Journal, September 8, 1932.

area picketers to Council Bluffs to help in a milk strike at that location. Reports indicated that Snyder assumed the role of spokesman and leader of the pickets at Council Bluffs. It was Snyder who threatened to lead a raid on the jail unless pickets held there were released.[46] Another unofficial leader and organizer of the local Holiday was Morris Cope, also of Kingsley. A former Holiday member recalled Cope as "quite a talker," and remembered him as more of a leader in Plymouth County than C. J. Schultz.[47]

As the strike progressed, Schultz lost control of the local organization and an informal leadership developed. A newspaper list of farmers leading the strike effort at James on September 7, did not include Schultz. Among the leaders, however, was Morris Cope.[48] A few days later, at the Governors' Conference, Iowa Governor Dan Turner called in two strike leaders, identified only by age, for a secret meeting. Turner informed the men that he would be forced to call out the National Guard if the picketing did not cease. Turner himself estimated the men to be about thirty years of age.[49] The meeting and the ages are significant because C. J. Schultz was fifty-seven at the time of the strike and seemingly excluded from an important meeting pertaining to the strike effort. Apparently, by the time of the Sioux City Governors' Conference, the formal leadership of the Farmers' Holiday Association in Plymouth County diminished, as an informal leadership on the part of more activist farmers emerged.

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[46]Ibid., August 26, 1932; and New York Times, August 26, 1932, p. 1.

[47]Erichsen, personal interview.

[48]LeMars Globe-Post, September 8, 1932.

[49]"Governor Dan Turner: Personal Account of Farmers' Holiday," October, 1961, Shover Papers.

Striking farmers of the Sioux City area met immediately following the Governors' Conference and voted overwhelmingly to continue their picketing operations. In a mass meeting at which only Farmers' Holiday members were admitted, a vote by a two-to-one margin favored the continuation of picketing.[50] Another indication that the direction of the Holiday movement was now in the hands of new leaders rather than the original leadership surfaced after a Sioux City Holiday meeting on September 18. At the meeting, the executive council of the National Farmers' Holiday Association voted to resume grain and livestock withholding efforts. The national committee suggested, however, identification and persuasion of non-cooperating farmers rather than picketing.[51] Nevertheless, despite this decision, some Plymouth County farmers continued to support picketing. They met at Kingsley the next day and voted to maintain their operations because they believed, as the LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel reported, "to stop would jeopardize the entire movement."[52] But farmer picketing never achieved the intensity it had had in the preceding weeks, and it soon faded. The last pickets reported were those in Plymouth County at James.[53] When the pickets vacated their posts, the Farmers' Holiday

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[50]Sioux City Journal, September 14, 1932; and Herbst, "Feet In The Grass Roots," p. 49. At this particular meeting the crowd was anything but an unruly mob. One-thousand farmers gathered and only actual picketers were allowed to vote. In order to cast a ballot, each voter had to be identified by two fellow picketers. Although operating outside the sanction of the formal Holiday organization, these were informally organized people who earnestly believed in their picketing cause.

[51]Sioux City Journal, September 19, 1932.

[52]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, September 20, 1932.

[53]Sioux City Journal, September 21, 1932, p. 5.

withholding movement also stopped. The farm strike had achieved some temporary success in mid-August because of direct action picketing, and aid from the milk strike, rather than because of any plan on the part of the Farmers' Holiday Association. Formal leadership of the farm strike of 1932 was an illusion given strength by the bold actions of independently activist farmers. The leadership that planned the Farmers' Holiday at the national, state, and local levels in the summer, witnessed the deterioration of its control as the peaceful withholding idea gave way to sometimes violent picketing and other bold actions.

After the farm strike of August and September, 1932, the agrarian revolt moved to the anti-foreclosure phase of its history. The drive by farmers to protect themselves from foreclosures had its prophets. Reporting on the failure of the strike around Sioux City, Donald Murphy suggested that farmer activism would erupt again and that "it may logically take the form of neighborhood defense against foreclosure."[54] A precedent for this type of activity had been set in the Sioux City area over thirty years earlier in the Populist movement.[55] The official leadership of the Farmers' Holiday Association was sensitive to the foreclosure threat and officially requested a moratorium on mortgage debts at the Sioux City Governors' Conference.[56] As the strike movement collapsed after the governors' conference, the Holiday Association attempted to regain the initiative by acting on foreclosures. At the special executive council meeting of the

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[54]Murphy, "Farmers Go On Strike," p. 67.

[55]Nixon, "The Economic Basis of the Populist Movement in Iowa," p. 394.

[56]Sioux City Journal, September 11, 1932.

national organization in Sioux City, on September 18, a resolution was passed, urging local farmers to organize to prevent foreclosures and evictions during the approaching winter.[57] Once again, however, the Holiday Association appeared to be the promoter of an idea but organizationally incapable of following it through. Shover concludes that the anti-foreclosure movement was "largely uncoordinated and little guided by any formal organization or leaders."[58] Viewed from the national or state organizational level, Shover's contention has merit. However, when examined in a local context, revisions may be in order. Although the formal Holiday organization and leaders may have lost control of the movement, an informal leadership filled the void and provided coordination for local protesting farmers in the winter and spring of 1933. Plymouth County is a clear case of a local Holiday movement whose formal leadership lost control, and then was replaced by a new authority during the anti-foreclosure crusade.

Milo Reno contributed at least one very important idea to the anti-foreclosure campaign. He called for the formation of local "Councils of Defense." These Councils would operate outside the legal system and seek agreeable arrangements between creditors and debtors, thus precluding foreclosure proceedings.[59] The Councils, which were found in many Iowa counties, were composed of local farmers, and were the anti-foreclosure arm of the Farmers' Holiday Association.[60] Although they were organized

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[57]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, September 20, 1932.

[58]Shover, "The Penny-Auction Rebellion," p. 66.

[59]Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 131.

[60]Iowa Union Farmer, December 28, 1932.

for purposes of peaceable negotiation of farm debts, the Councils clearly directed large numbers of Holiday members when direct action was desired. A journalist, who observed them in operation in the LeMars area, reported that the Councils stemmed directly from the Holiday movement, and, if they determined a farm foreclosure unjust, word passed "to a thousand farmers and the foreclosure is halted."[61] The Council of Defense arbitration idea appeared so practical that authorities at the Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station at Ames, recognized it in early 1933, as an important means by which farmers could achieve some adjustment of their burdensome debts.[62] The Council of Defense concept emerged quickly in Plymouth County as desperate farmers sought to ward off foreclosure.

On December 26, 1932, the LeMars Globe-Post announced that Plymouth County could expect an "avalanche" of foreclosure sales if the agricultural situation persisted.[63] On December 27, some farmers in Plymouth County, headed by Sam Mosher, formed their Council of Defense and addressed the task of negotiating mortgage debts.[64] The history of the Plymouth County version of the Council of Defense was short and stormy.

An ambiguous relationship existed between the Farmers' Holiday Association and the Council of Defense in Plymouth County. The Sioux City Journal reported that many members of the Council of Defense were also

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[61]Prescott, "An Iowa Foreclosure," p. 198.

[62]Murray and Bentley, The Agricultural Emergency In Iowa, p. 84.

[63]LeMars Globe-Post, December 26, 1932.

[64]Sioux City Journal, January 9, 1933.

Farm Holiday members. The newspaper cautioned, however, that "the Council is functioning separately from the holiday group."[65] Further Journal reports suggested that the Council of Defense was a separate organization with a body of ten officers and directors.[66] Substantiation for this separate organization theory appeared in a LeMars Globe-Post story. The LeMars newspaper referred to the Council of Defense as an arm of a group entitled the Farmers' Protective Association. According to this account, the Council was the ten-member foreclosure negotiating body for the Protective Association.[67] One indication that the Council of Defense operated as a distinct and separate body from the Farmers' Holiday Association centers on the fact that C. J. Schultz, Holiday chief in Plymouth County, received recognition as only a member of the Council. He was not listed as an officer or director in the Council of Defense.[68] Yet, when Schultz communicated with Reno on January 7, 1933, he wrote of "our defense Council," and stated, "we have got up speed, nothing can stop us now."[69] The tone of Schultz' letter suggests that the local Holiday Association controlled the Council.

Despite the ambiguous relationship between the Council and the Holiday Association alluded to in the local press, two points seem reasonably clear.

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[65] Ibid., January 8, 1933.

[66] Ibid.

[67] LeMars Globe-Post, January 5, 1933. This story is the only reference to the Farmers' Protective Association in Plymouth County. Earlier a Farmers' Protective Association formed during the "Cow War" in Cedar County, Iowa, in 1931. Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 31-33.

[68] LeMars Globe-Post, January 9, 1933.

[69] C. J. Schultz to Milo Reno, January 7, 1933, Reno Papers.

First, the Council operated as the anti-foreclosure body of the local Holiday movement and as such could gather large numbers of farmers to halt foreclosure sales when negotiations failed. Second, even though formal Holiday leadership deteriorated during the anti-foreclosure movement, there existed an informal leadership and coordination in the activities of protesting farmers in Plymouth County. A detailed discussion of the history of the Council of Defense illuminates the importance of this segment of the 1930s farm revolt.

The membership of the Farmers' Holiday Association and the Council of Defense clearly overlapped. The only available lists of Council members reveal that most were also involved with the Holiday group.[70] Sam Mosher, for example, helped organize the Sioux City Milk Producers' Association, and held membership in the Farmers' Holiday. In addition, Mosher served as chairman of the Plymouth County Council of Defense during the anti-foreclosure period.[71]

The Plymouth County Council of Defense attained notable success in its early phase of operation. In the first two weeks of existence, more than a dozen foreclosures were settled by bringing creditors and debtors together for agreeable talks.[72] The most spectacular achievement of the Council occurred on January 4, 1933, when an estimated 800 farmers stopped

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[70]Sioux City Journal, January 8, 1933; and LeMars Globe-Post, January 9, 1933.

[71]Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 80; and Sioux City Journal, January 8, 1933.

[72]C. J. Schultz to Milo Reno, January 7, 1933, Reno Papers.

a foreclosure sale and forced a New York insurance company to raise its bid on a piece of farm sale property. Potential bidders were silenced by the crowd of farmers and the representative of the insurance company was threatened with lynching unless he agreed to wire the company for a change in their bid.[73] Three days later the presence of 1000 farmers convinced officials to cancel another foreclosure sale.[74] In praise of these bold direct actions, Milo Reno wrote to Lawrence Casper, Plymouth County Holiday and Council member, that, "you boys have done more to put the Farmers' Holiday on the map and fix it there for the future than any other group in the United States."[75] Reno's praiseworthy remarks were based on the illusion that what had happened in Plymouth County signaled the resurgence of Farmers' Holiday activism. To the contrary, what had happened in Plymouth County was a brief moment in the spotlight before serious organizational problems wrecked the local Farmers' Holiday Association and the Council of Defense, and destroyed the driving force of the area's farm revolt.

From the beginning, the Plymouth County Council of Defense apparently lacked strong formal leadership. On January 1, 1933, the Council massed its members in LeMars to prevent a tax sale. Reports indicated that 400 to 500 farmers attended and halted the sale. With the sale halted an independent group of farmers, led by Morris Cope and Charles Lite, sought signatures on a petition asking for a moratorium on debts and a repeal of the deficiency law. The petition was to be forwarded to the Iowa governor

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[73] New York Times, January 5, 1933, p. 14; and LeMars Globe-Post, January 5, 1933.

[74] LeMars Globe-Post, January 9, 1933.

[75] Milo Reno to Lawrence Casper, January 6, 1933, Reno Papers.

for action. Although the idea of the petition may have been agreeable, the organizers were not the formal leaders of the local Holiday group or Council of Defense.[76]

Three days later, after the Holiday group and the Council of Defense assembled their farmer members and forced the New York insurance company to raise bids on a piece of property, another independent action occurred. Operating without the sanction of local farm leaders, a group of farmers marched on a LeMars implement shop and attempted to reclaim a repossessed tractor. The tractor incident developed impulsively and, although temporarily threatening, proved ineffective because the implement dealer locked his doors, ignored the farmers' protests, and later reopened without incident.[77] Events of this nature were symptomatic of what one farm leader meant when he told a reporter that "sometimes the boys get out of hand."[78]

The lack of clear leadership and organizational control of the "boys" grew throughout January. Approximately 1000 farmers gathered to prohibit a tax sale on January 7. With the sale postponed, the farmers then held a rally on the courthouse lawn. Ella Reeve Bloor, from Sioux City, addressed the crowd and urged them to organize a march and demonstration at the state capitol. Probably unknown to the local farmers at the time was Bloor's position as local farm organizer for the Communist Party. A petition of support for Bloor's suggested march and demonstration circulated and received many farmers' signatures. Later C. J. Schultz, speaking for the Farmers'

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[76]LeMars Globe-Post, January 2, 1933.

[77]Sioux City Journal, January 5, 1933, p. 2. A possible precedent for this action may have been set by farmers in Newman Grove, Nebraska, one-hundred miles southwest of LeMars, when Nebraska Holiday members reclaimed two repossessed trucks on October 6, 1932. Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 72.

[78]Sioux City Journal, January 8, 1933, p. 2.

Holiday, indicated that his group would "be better served if we stay right here and watch Plymouth County." In fact, while the mass of farmers gathered outside the courthouse for Bloor's speech, Schultz and the Council of Defense met in the judge's chambers to negotiate another foreclosure case.[79] At this point the formal Holiday leadership and divergent elements of the local organization appeared to be moving in different directions.

The loss of leadership by Schultz, Mosher, and other local heads of the Holiday movement worsened as the winter progressed. On the day of the courthouse rally, a small group of farmers went to the local Farm Bureau office in LeMars and, claiming "We're the law here!" told the county agent to get out of town. The feeling was that the agent had been unfair in administering federal feed and seed loans.[80] On the same day, a group of farmers surrounded and threatened the representatives of the LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel who were covering the rally. Reportedly, the farmers demanded, upon threat of lynching that the Sentinel change its position and take a more favorable stance on the farmers' movement.[81]

By late January, a group of farmers operating independently, employed a new technique in which they approached landlords and businessmen and demanded the surrender of debt notes against farmers. The Council of

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[79]LeMars Globe-Post, January 9, 1933. A picture along with the names of the Council of Defense that met that day appeared in the paper. Noticeably absent was Morris Cope whose name has surfaced many times as an informal leader of farmers in Plymouth County. One can only speculate that this known activist was probably in the crowd of farmers on the courthouse lawn on January 7.

[80]Ibid.; and Prescott, "An Iowa Foreclosure," p. 199.

[81]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, January 10, 1933.

Defense claimed no knowledge of such activities.[82] On January 25, the sale of a house in LeMars itself was halted by farmers, indicating further bold actions.[83] The local organizational leadership seemingly lost control as independent factions in the county went their own direction. By this time, it appeared that the local Holiday organization had no well-defined purpose or direction. Combined with a lack of solid leadership, the local movement suffered from impulsive actions by independent groups of farmers.

In the spring of 1933, an extremely activist faction of farmers dominated the rebellion in Plymouth County. A long pending foreclosure suit threatened Ed Durband with eviction from his farm northwest of LeMars. On March 23, the local Council of Defense, suggesting that the mortgage holder had been reasonable with Durband, voted to give up on its attempt to settle the case.[84] But a separate group of farmers, at least thirty to forty strong, ignored the Council's decision and attempted to prevent Durband's eviction. When the county sheriff ordered the farmers guarding the farm to clear the way for eviction, he was informed that the Council of Defense did not bind them. The local press covering the developments reported that an apparently new informal group of farmers had organized.[85] This new group demonstrated their strength by preventing the eviction of Durband

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[82] LeMars Globe-Post, January 23, 1933.

[83] Ibid., January 26, 1933; and Iowa Union Farmer, February 8, 1933. In this case farmers acted to protect the house of a dentist who graciously extended payments for farmers who owed him for services.

[84] LeMars Globe-Post, March 23, 1933.

[85] Ibid., March 27, 1933.

for a month.[86] John Le Moine, one farmer who participated in the Durband episode, believed that the faction was led by two or three radicals whom he did not identify.[87]

In late April, this more radical faction of the Plymouth County farm movement planned and executed a series of protests that briefly demonstrated their influence, but seriously damaged the local Farmers' Holiday Association. On April 27, a crowd of 200 to 300 Plymouth County farmers went to Primghar, in O'Brien County to stop a foreclosure sale.[88] A hint that the demonstration was well-planned surfaced when O'Brien County's leading newspaper later revealed a letter it had received, suggesting that its presence at Primghar on April 27, would get a good story.[89] Harold Rohwer, arrested after the Primghar incident for his involvement in a fight with deputies, later testified that O'Brien County farmers would have handled the foreclosure suit peacefully, "but the bunch from LeMars came up and started a fight."[90] Trial testimony later identified Morris Cope of Kingsley as the leader of the Plymouth County contingent.[91]

Following the affair at Primghar, the farmers went to the Durband farm and then on to LeMars where they attacked Judge Bradley.[92] Again, the

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[86]Ibid., April 16, 1933.

[87]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May 12, 1933.

[88]O'Brien County Bell, May 3, 1933.

[89]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, June 9, 1933.

[90]O'Brien County Bell, May 10, 1933.

[91]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, June 9, 1933.

[92]LeMars Globe-Post, May 1, 1933.

attack on Bradley appeared planned. A newspaper reported that Morris Cope, speaking to the crowd earlier in the day at Primghar, urged the farmers to "go to LeMars and get Judge Bradley."[93] Later trial testimony confirmed that Cope had led the violent attack on the judge.[94]

Milo Reno was quick to condemn the violence in Plymouth and O'Brien Counties.[95] In fact, he contended that outside influences, particularly Communists, were the cause of such violent tactics.[96] But Reno was mistaken, and his judgement revealed his lack of insight into the workings of the organization he had fathered. The LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel editorialized:

> When the farm strike brought defiance of law and order and disregard of the rights of others and failed to bring any relief many of these representative farmers severed active connection with the organization and its leadership passed into the hands of a small group of men whose unlawful actions culminated in the disgraceful affair last Thursday.[97]

Some support for the Sentinel's opinion exists. The LeMars Globe-Post thoroughly and accurately reported the events of April 27 and subsequent developments. In its coverage, the violence of that day was in no way linked to the Farmers' Holiday Association or the Council of Defense.[98] Although some of those later arrested and convicted were members of both

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[93]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, June 9, 1933.

[94]LeMars Globe-Post, July 20, 1933.

[95]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 124.

[96]Farm Holiday News, July, 1933.

[97]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May 3, 1933.

[98]LeMars Globe-Post, May and June, 1933.

organizations, they probably did not represent those farmer groups on that fateful day in late April.

The actions of the radical faction of farmers seriously damaged Plymouth County farmers' organized efforts to deal with the depression. Holiday and Council leaders, although not involved in the April 27 violence, were arrested under martial law authority placed on the county. Sweeping arrests of many of those involved with the Holiday resulted. Sam Mosher, chairman of the Council of Defense, was arrested on April 29.[99] A week later authorities arrested C. J. Schultz, head of the local Farmers' Holiday Association.[100] Ironically, while the leaders of the formal organizations were imprisoned, Morris Cope, an identified leader of the more radical farmers' faction, remained in hiding until he turned himself in on July 19.[101] Damaged by a small faction's violent behavior and the resultant martial law decree, the local farm movement collapsed in early May, 1933.

Shover concludes that the spontaneous activity in the farm strike and anti-foreclosure movement gave the Holiday Association its driving force.[102] In Plymouth County, bold, planned actions by a group of farmers led primarily by Morris Cope gave the local Holiday its driving force. When this element fell prey to martial law, the county's organization lost its momentum. During the two months following the Bradley incident, neither the previously faithful Globe-Post nor the Sentinel reported anything on Holiday

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[99] Ibid., May 1, 1933.

[100] New York Times, May 6, 1933, p. 6.

[101] LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, July 21, 1933.

[102] Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 166.

activities.[103] At least one of these local newspapers had previously granted generous attention to the farmers' movement. Ostensibly, in May and June, 1933, there was nothing to report as the Plymouth County Farmers' Holiday Association ceased to function as a viable farmers' movement.

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[103] LeMars Globe-Post, May and June, 1933; and LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May and June, 1933.

CHAPTER V

WHO REVOLTED?

Immediately after the violence in Plymouth County on April 27, 1933, speculation mounted as to who was involved in the rural uprising. Iowa Governor Clyde Herring proclaimed martial law in the county, declaring "Sioux City hoodlums were in the crowd that attacked the judge."[1] Within a week of the near-lynching, Park A. Findley, who as head of the Iowa Bureau of Investigation was dispatched to LeMars to investigate the farm violence, claimed "red backing" existed in the local upheaval.[2] Charges of Communist involvement had surfaced as early as the farm strike in the autumn of 1932.[3] Despite the concerns about outside influences, available evidence suggests that the farm revolt in Plymouth County comprised a movement of and by local farmers.

National press coverage of the rural revolt is helpful in determining the farmer composition of the uprising in Plymouth County. Writing for Scribner's, Josephine Herbst visited the picket lines around Sioux City during the farm strike in the late summer of 1932, and found the picketers to be local farmers.[4] Remley Glass, a small town northwest Iowa lawyer during the 1930s, wrote an article for Harper's on the agrarian insurgency.

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[1]New York Times, April 29, 1933, p. 1.

[2]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May 2, 1933.

[3]Ibid., September 16, 1932.

[4]Herbst, "Feet In The Grass Roots," pp. 46-51.

He found the activists in the uprising to be farmers threatened by economic depression.[5] Rumors had circulated that the farm activists were actually outsiders. Based on these rumors, Philip Stevenson, representing Common Sense, visited the cornbelt and attended farm meetings. Stevenson reported that "the strikers were not bums, not agitators, but farmers threatened with losing their land."[6]

Local newspaper reports also confirmed the fact that those involved in the rural rebellion were area farmers. After the major confrontation between six-hundred pickets and fifty law enforcement officials at James, Iowa, on September 7, 1932, rumors circulated that Sioux City agitators caused this most serious of the farm strike incidents.[7] However, only two newspaper reporters, one from the LeMars Globe-Post and one from the Sioux City Journal, neared the picket line that day. The editor of the LeMars paper announced that "the men who held the picket line yesterday were practically all real farmers. I know because I know them personally."[8] The Sioux City Journal confirmed the presence of local farmers at the James incident and reported discussions with farmers involved.[9]

Prominent observers of the most serious and violent incident of the agricultural rebellion in Plymouth County also concluded that the insurgency consisted of local farmers. Commenting on the arrests after the

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[5]Glass, "Gentlemen, The Corn Belt!" pp. 199-209.

[6]Stevenson, "Reno's Cost of Production," p. 11.

[7]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, September 9, 1932.

[8]LeMars Globe-Post, September 8, 1932.

[9]Sioux City Journal, September 8, 1932.

attack on Judge Bradley, Wallace Short attested to the character of those involved. Short, a one-time mayor of Sioux City, an Iowa legislator, a minister, and publisher of the local labor newspaper, the Unionist and Public Forum, mingled among those arrested and later held in a LeMars stockade. Short knew the men to be farmers. He is reported to have said that because of the arrests of local farmers, "at least two Sunday schools will be without superintendents."[10] Another report that the farm rebellion consisted of farmers came from a prominent Plymouth County politician. Gustave Alesch, Plymouth County farmer and representative in the Iowa Legislature, attributed the Bradley incident to mob psychology, but noted that the mob of attackers were local farmers.[11] Finally, R. F. Starzl, editor of the LeMars Globe-Post, attested to the farmer composition of the rebellion in the county. Starzl had followed the mob that assaulted Judge Bradley from the courthouse to the site of the near-lynching. The editor later testified in court that he recognized many of the men present and knew them to be farmers.[12]

The fact that arrests during the farm strike of August and September, 1932, failed to turn up any outsiders, seems to verify the farmer element in the agricultural uprising. The first arrests for blockading highways in the Sioux City area occurred on September 13. The Sioux City Journal announced the arrest of five men; all were farmers from the territory

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[10]Mrs. Wallace M. Short, Just One American, (Sioux City: By the Author, 1943), p. 154.

[11]Roland S. White, Milo Reno: Farmers' Union Pioneer, (Iowa City: Athens Press, 1941), pp. 148-49.

[12]LeMars Globe-Post, July 20, 1933, p. 6.

surrounding Sioux City.[13] A few days later the first mass arrest of pickets occurred as officials attempted to clear the highways around Sioux City. Ninety arrests resulted and these picketers were detained in the Woodbury County Jail in Sioux City. This group consisted of men from the area surrounding Sioux City, including Plymouth County. Of the group of ninety picketers arrested, a reporter discovered that, "five were farm owners; twenty had owned farms and were now renters; twenty-five had always been renters; fifteen were farm boys living with their parents; seventeen were farm laborers long living in the community; and there were eight packing house employees."[14]

The arrest record for Plymouth County further substantiates the farmer composition of the 1930s agrarian rebellion. The first arrests in Plymouth County followed the near-lynching of Judge Bradley. Because of conflicting reports, it is difficult to determine the exact number of arrests. On May 3, following the attack, the New York Times announced that 105 men were in custody.[15] However, on the next day the LeMars Globe-Post reported a total of only sixty-nine arrested.[16] Probably the New York paper included all the arrests in Plymouth and O'Brien Counties, both of which experienced violence in the farm revolt on April 27. On May 6, the Des Moines Register recorded ninety-two arrested in Plymouth County alone and identified them all as farmers.[17] Generally,

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[13]Sioux City Journal, September 14, 1932.

[14]Vorse, "Rebellion In The Cornbelt," p. 4.

[15]New York Times, May 3, 1933, p. 8.

[16]LeMars Globe-Post, May 4, 1933.

[17]Des Moines Register, May 6, 1933, p. 1.

however, there was uncertainty in the actual number arrested. Even the local Globe-Post account of sixty-nine arrests is unclear, because published reports provided far fewer than sixty-nine names. This much is certain: by cross-referencing local press coverage of actions after the assault on the judge, a total of thirty-eight Plymouth County residents were named. Some of the arrests were not made until more than two months after the incident because of successful evasion by at least two individuals.[18] Important Plymouth County court records are missing for pertinent cases relative to the April 27, assault. Thus, the Criminal Court files of Morris Cope, Ed Casper, Martin Rosburg, and Dick Popken are missing. These men all received convictions on various assault charges.[19] Furthermore, most of the arrests occurred while Plymouth County was under declaration of martial law. Therefore, the Iowa National Guard was in charge of all arrests during a two week period. Two previous scholars of the farm rebellion, John Shover and Lowell Dyson, were unable to locate the National Guard records of this incident.[20] So, a compilation of newspaper reports provides the available arrest evidence. Of the thirty-eight persons arrested in Plymouth County, all were identified as farm owners, farm renters, or farm hands.[21]

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[18]LeMars Globe-Post, May 1, 4, 29, July 13, and 20, 1933; LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May 12, and June 1, 1933; and Sioux City Journal, May 1, 3, and 11, 1933.

[19]Plymouth County Criminal Court Records, Cases 782 A, 789 A, 791 A, and 792 A, Court House, LeMars, Iowa.

[20]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 121.

[21]LeMars Globe-Post, May 1, 4, 29, and July 13 and 20, 1933; LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May 12 and June 1, 1933; and Sioux City Journal, May 1, 3, and 11, 1933.

An examination of the people associated in some way with the Farm Holiday movement from August, 1932, to May, 1933, further documents the farming status of those involved in the rebellion. By utilizing local newspaper coverage of the farm strike in August and September, 1932; the anti-foreclosure sale campaign of January and February, 1933; and the assault on Judge Bradley and subsequent arrests in April and May, 1933, an interesting pattern emerges. Newspaper reports about organizational meetings, leaders, committee members, incidents of farm activism, and arrests revealed sixty different names in some way associated with the Plymouth County farmers' rebellion. Of the sixty names, fifty-six were Plymouth County farmers or farm workers. Three were farmers from neighboring counties.[22] Only one person actively involved or associated with the rebellion appeared to be an outsider. That person was Mother Ella Reeve Bloor, reportedly from Sioux City, and formerly from North Dakota. Ironically, Mother Bloor's position as a prominent figure in the Communist Party escaped the attention of local newspapers. Although Bloor was present in LeMars, she apparently did not have a substantial impact on area farmers.[23]

One final indication of the presence of local farmers in the 1930s rebellion in Plymouth County can be found in the conviction and sentence record for those arrested in the Bradley incident. Although thirty-eight

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[22] LeMars Globe-Post, August and September, 1932, and January, February, April, and May, 1933; and LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, August and September, 1932, and January and May, 1933.

[23] LeMars Globe-Post, January 9, 1933; and John L. Shover, "The Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis of 1933," Journal of American History 51 (September, 1964): 255. Bloor, along with Harold Ware and Lem Harris, provided the nucleus of a Communist effort to lead the farm revolt. A more complete discussion of Communist involvement in the Plymouth County revolt is found in Chapter VI of this study.

were arrested, only twelve were convicted in subsequent legal proceedings.[24] Three of the twelve were cited for contempt of court and sentenced to one day in jail with fines of $50.[25] Seven received suspended jail sentences of varying lengths on different assault charges.[26] Only two, Morris Cope and A. A. Mitchell, served lengthy jail sentences. Cope received one year in the state penitentiary, paroled to the local county sheriff to serve his time with the opportunity for release time to complete farm work.[27] Mitchell received thirty days in the county jail and served his time fully.[28] All of these men were local farmers, and, in view of the number of eyewitnesses available to testify against them, the limited number of convictions and the frequency of suspended sentences suggests leniency by local officials.[29]

Although the farm rebellion in Plymouth County consisted almost exclusively of local farmers, they represented only a minority of the farm population in the county. In 1932 there were 823 farm owners, 272 part-owners, and 1770 tenants in Plymouth County. This total number of 2865 farmers for 1932 does not account for any hired farm laborers.[30] Farm population data and reports of farmer activism demonstrates a distinct minority of the

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[24]LeMars Globe-Post, May 29 and July 13, 1933; LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, July 21, 1933; and Des Moines Register, June 28, 1933, p. 16.

[25]LeMars Globe-Post, July 13, 1933.

[26]Ibid., May 29, 1933; and LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, July 21, 1933.

[27]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, July 21, 1933.

[28]Des Moines Register, June 28, 1933, p. 16.

[29]A further indication of leniency surfaced in a search of the Plymouth County Sheriff's Department records. A letter found there, written by Sheriff Rippey to Governor Herring on June 12, 1934, requested a reduction of Morris Cope's sentence. Plymouth County Sheriff's Department Criminal Files, Number 105, Ed Casper and Morris Cope, Court House, LeMars, Iowa.

[30]USDA, Iowa Agricultural Statistics, Plymouth County, p. 40.

county's agrarian element involved in the rebellion. That a small percentage of the county's farmers participated in the revolt is not surprising. Such a condition is probably not unusual in protest movements. But, an examination of the numbers of farmers involved reveals much about the nature of the brief rebellion in Plymouth County.

The largest reported group of farm pickets during the strike of August and September, 1932, was 1000 to 1500, guarding the roads near James on the night of August 14 and 15.[31] If the maximum number of this press estimate was actually present, it would have indicated slightly over 50 percent of Plymouth County's farmers involved in at least one picketing incident. However, farmers from the surrounding counties of Woodbury in Iowa, and Union in South Dakota, helped swell the picket lines.[32] Therefore, even at the largest gathering of protesting farmers during the strike only a minority of Plymouth County's 2865 farmers were involved.

At the most violent incident of the farm strike, less than one-fourth of the county's farmers participated. On September 7, at the "Battle of James," a convoy of trucks escorted by deputies attempted to break the farmers' blockade. The LeMars Globe-Post estimated approximately 600 farmers at the incident with another 400 onlookers.[33] If all those present were from Plymouth County, a fact which seems improbable, they would have represented approximately 20 percent of the county's farmers.

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[31]LeMars Globe-Post, August 15, 1932.

[32]Sioux City Journal, August 15, 1932.

[33]LeMars Globe-Post, September 8, 1932.

Reports of large gatherings of farmers also emerged during the anti-foreclosure sale movement in the winter of 1932-33. On January 2, 1933, 400 to 500 farmers massed to halt a tax sale in LeMars. Five days later, 1000 farmers met and halted a foreclosure sale.[34]

Reports vary on the number of people involved in the near-lynching of Judge Bradley. A neighboring county newspaper claimed that 600 to 1000 men were present at the incident,[35] but one of the LeMars newspapers estimated that only 200 to 300 men participated.[36] Perhaps most indicative of the number involved in the assault was the report, when martial law had been declared, that the National Guard had the names of 250 men present at the attack.[37]

Suggestive of the small portion of farmers involved in the rebellion were the names of the fifty-six Plymouth County activists whose names appeared in print because of some association with the agrarian uprising.[38] These men constituted only about 2 percent of the farmers in the county.

Based on available evidence, the farm revolt in Plymouth County was a distinct minority movement. On most occasions, only 10 to 12 percent of the area farmers could be counted at meetings and incidents of agrarian rebellion. And only 2 to 3 percent were specifically named in the

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[34]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, January 3 and 10, 1933.

[35]O'Brien County Bell, May 3, 1933.

[36]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May 2, 1933.

[37]LeMars Globe-Post, May 4, 1933.

[38]Ibid., August and September, 1932, and January, February, April, and May, 1933; and LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, August and September, 1932, and January and May, 1933.

newspapers. But it is a rare activist movement that attracts major numbers. The mere physical assembly of large groups of farmers, ranging from 200 to 1500 in number, for purposes of striking, protesting, and stopping sales, indicates the strength of the Farm Holiday movement in the county. Moreover, on a comparable basis, the number of participants in Plymouth County is significant. In his study of the farm revolt, Shover found no other locality that surpassed Plymouth County in numbers of farmers actively involved in rebellion incidents. Shover has also noted that Plymouth ranked second in frequency of incidents of farmer activism.[39] Even though a minority of the county's farmers participated in the agrarian movement, they did so with notoriety and an effectiveness that placed Plymouth in the center of the 1930s farm rebellion.

The geographical distribution of farmers involved in the Plymouth County rebellion provides further insight into the county's farm movement. Utilizing the 1934 Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory and newspaper reported addresses, a reasonably accurate distribution of farmer activists can be attained. Of the fifty-six names that appeared in press reports during the rebellion, fifty-two were located. Map 5 on the following page demonstrates the approximate geographical distribution of the farmer participants in the rebellion.[40]

The most outstanding characteristic of the distribution of rebellious farmers was its concentration in the southeastern section of Plymouth

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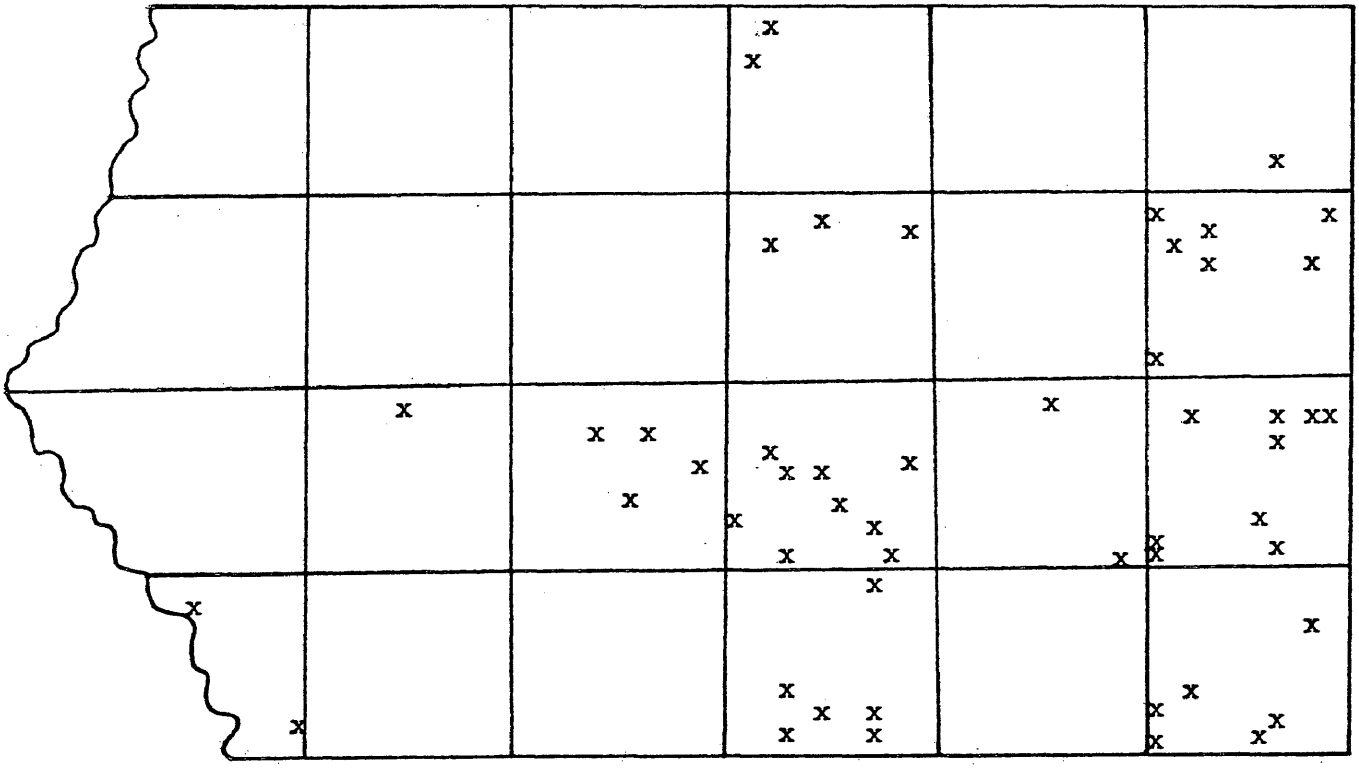
[39]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 3-46.

[40]LeMars Globe-Post, August and September, 1932, and January and May, 1933; and 1934 Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory, (Sioux City: The Great Western Map Company, 1934), pp. 1-25. The Atlas and Farm Directory, provides data for the year 1933.

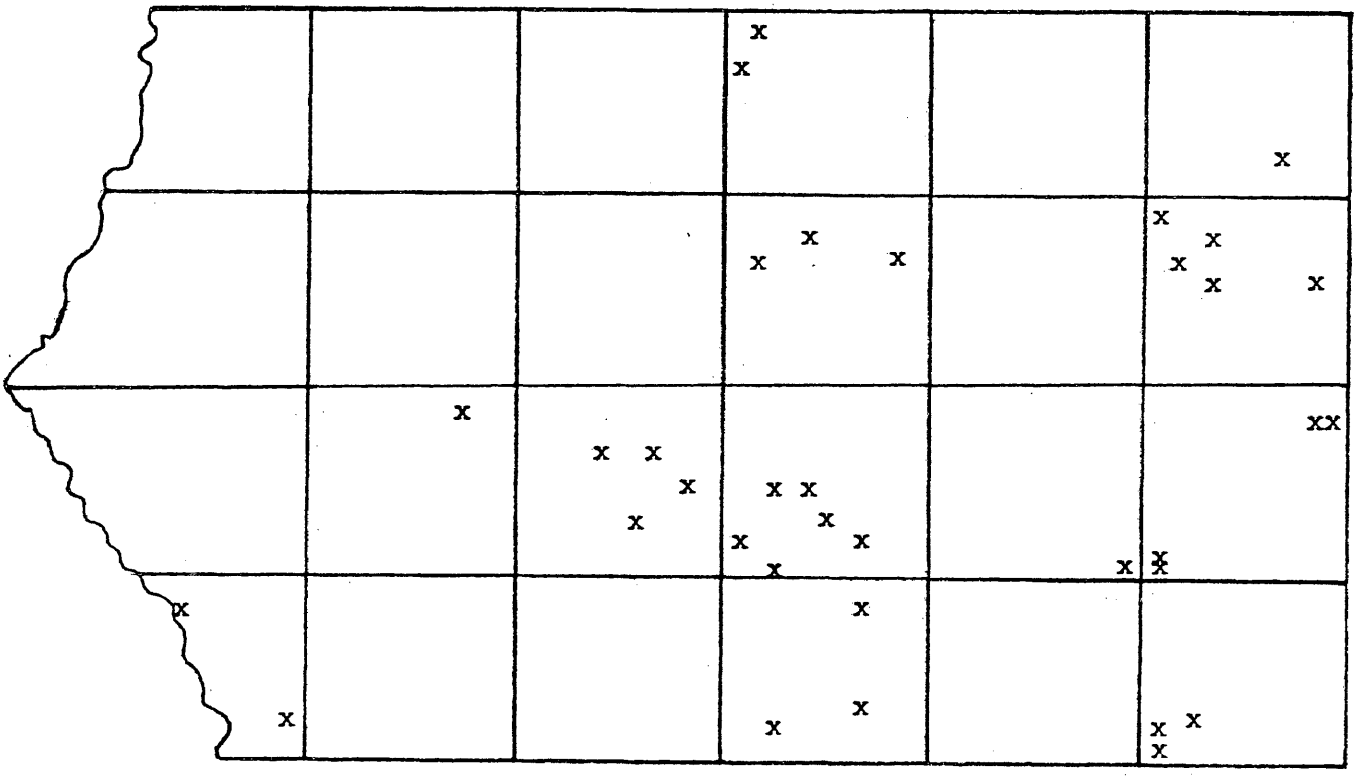
MAP 5

DISTRIBUTION OF PLYMOUTH COUNTY REBELLION PARTICIPANTS



MAP 6

DISTRIBUTION OF ARRESTED FARMERS IN PLYMOUTH COUNTY



County. Thirty-two of the fifty-two located farmers came from the six southeastern townships of the county, with Stanton and Henry townships accounting for eighteen of the identified farmers. Such heavy concentration in one area suggests special circumstances in that portion of the county.

To further substantiate the location of identified farmer activists in southeastern Plymouth County, an examination of the arrest record following the assault on Judge Bradley is helpful. Thirty-eight names of arrested farmers appeared in local newspaper coverage after the attack.[41] The county-wide distribution of the arrested farmers is illustrated on Map 6. Out of the total of thirty-eight reported arrested farmers, thirty-five have been located. The residences of seventeen of the located farmers were in the six southeastern townships of the county. Eleven of those arrested resided in the previously mentioned townships of Stanton and Henry.[42] When compared with the areas of most organizational activity (see Map 4), and number of participants in various phases of the rebellion, the arrest distribution further suggests the concentration of rebellious farmers in southeastern Plymouth County.

Twelve convictions resulted from the investigation and trials of those involved in Bradley's assault. Three were given minor contempt citations. Nine men were convicted on various assault charges. Once again the area of residence of this activist element was the southeastern section of the

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[41] LeMars Globe-Post, May 1, 4, 19, July 13, and 20, 1933; LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, May 12, and June 1, 1933; and Sioux City Journal, May 1, 3, and 11, 1933.

[42] Ibid.; and 1934 Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory, pp. 1-25.

county. Five of the convicted men lived in the townships of Stanton, Lincoln, or Union.[43] Thus, in terms of arrests, southeastern Plymouth County also seemed to be the center of farmer activism.

Perhaps the key to the Plymouth County farm rebellion, centered in the southeastern section of the county, is found in the land-holding status of participating farmers. Shover found, by way of thirty-five personal interviews, that survivors of the farm uprising were almost unanimous in their belief that the movement was one of property holders.[44] But based on the land-owning situation in Plymouth County, some revision of Shover's interpretation may be in order. Relying on the list of fifty-six farmers, property-holding was not common to rebellious farmers in Plymouth County.[45] Only thirteen of the reported farmers owned land in 1933, among them were C. J. Schultz, I. W. Reck, and Morris Cope. Yet, these men held leadership positions in the Farmers' Holiday Association, the milk strike, or in spontaneous incidents during the rebellion. Of the three, only Schultz held a sizable amount of land, claiming 266 acres.[46] The thirteen property-holding farm activists were relatively large land holders, averaging 230 acres each in 1933.[47] In that year, the average size farm in the county was only 190 acres.[48] Nine of the thirteen property holders resided in the six

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis of 1933," pp. 248-49. Shover travelled the area of the farm rebellion in 1961 and located and interviewed survivors.

[45] 1934 Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory, pp. 1-25.

[46] Ibid., p. 17, 18, and 25.

[47] Ibid., p. 12, 14, and 23.

[48] USDA, Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture, 1933, p. 222.

southeastern townships of the county; seven maintained their land in Stanton and Henry townships.[49] Shover's contention of a property holder's rebellion does not fit the evidence from Plymouth County. However, perhaps the small element of property holding farmers mentioned above provided important leadership in the local revolt.

Of the forty-three non-property holders involved in some way in the rebellion, thirty-nine were located. Map 7 on the following page shows the distribution of non-propertied rebellious farmers in Plymouth County.[50] The concentration in the southeastern part of the county is again noteworthy. However, since a relatively large number of participants were non-property holders, the suggestion of a rebellion by propertied people threatened with loss of property is called into question. Non-propertied farmers were certainly afflicted by the depression, but were not threatened with loss of land. What, then, motivated direct action and rebellion among this group of farmers?

Perhaps the answer to the above question lies in the farming status of many of the forty-three non-propertied rebellious farmers in Plymouth County. Sixteen of the non-propertied class farmed with or for their parents. Map 8 shows the distribution of those farmers with a connection to their parent's land. Most of this group resided in the southeastern portion of the county.[51] It seems reasonable to assume that these farmers normally would have

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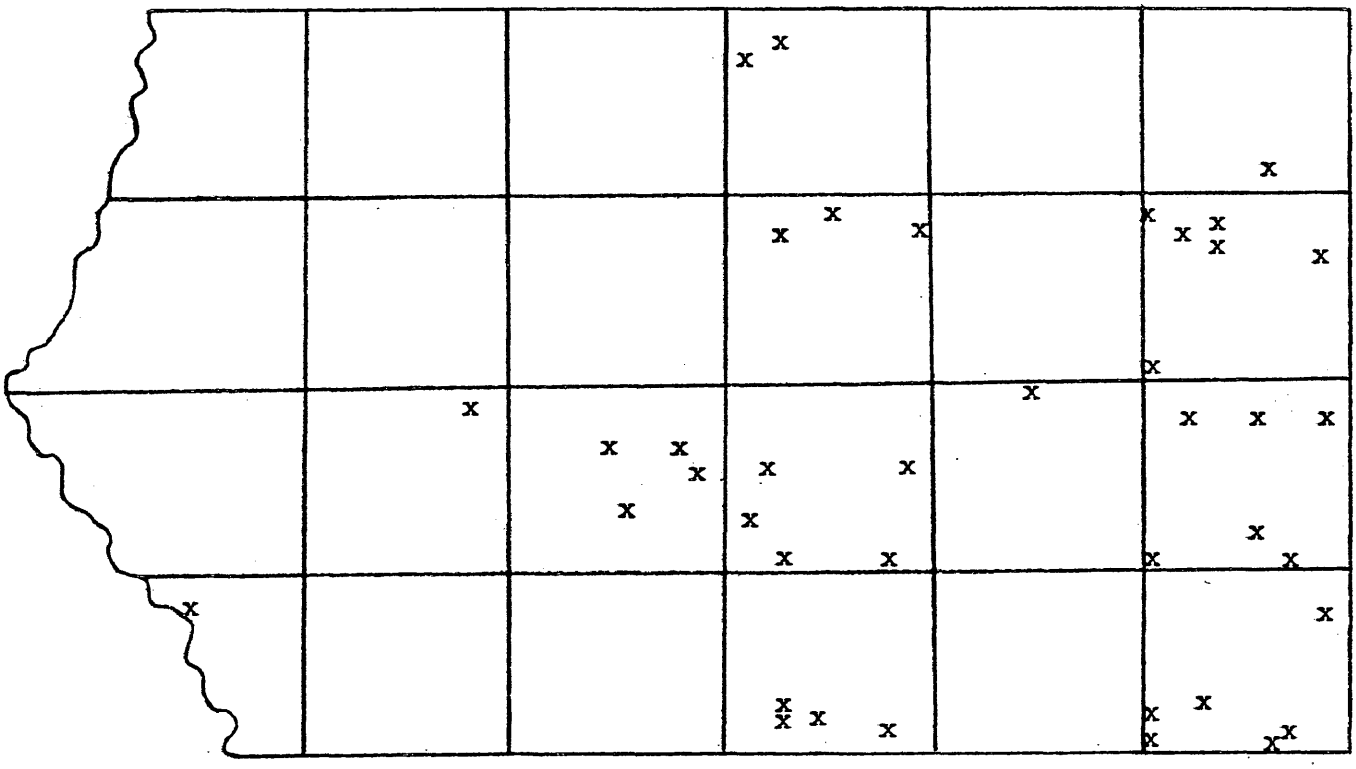
[49] 1934 Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory, pp. 12-25.

[50] Ibid., pp. 1-25; and LeMars Globe-Post, August and September, 1932, and January, February, April, and May, 1933; and LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, August and September, 1932, and January and May, 1933.

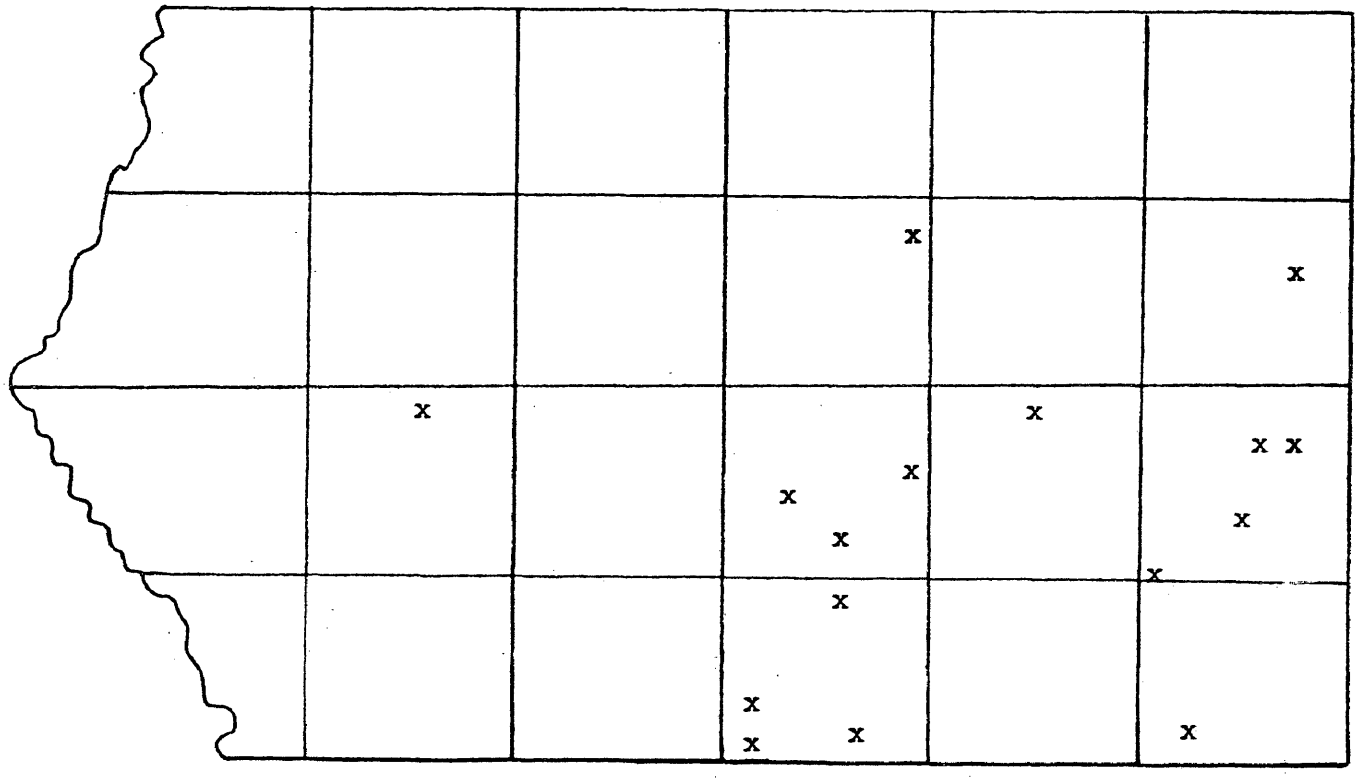
[51] 1934 Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory, pp. 1-25.

DISTRIBUTION OF NON-PROPERTY HOLDING PARTICIPANTS IN PLYMOUTH COUNTY REBELLION



MAP 8

DISTRIBUTION OF FARMERS WHO STOOD TO GAIN PARENT'S LAND



inherited their parent's property at some future date. In Plymouth County in the 1930s, this situation presented special circumstances that contributed to some of the most serious agrarian rebellion.

Two previous studies of the farm revolt concluded that the average age of participating farmers exceeded forty. Frank Dileva found that the age of rebellious farmers in the many scattered incidents of the Iowa rebellion averaged 42.5 years.[52] Shover determined, through a questionnaire distributed in the early 1960s, that the average age of former Farmers' Holiday respondents was 43.5 years.[53] But, based on the list of the fifty-six identified Plymouth County activists, a somewhat younger age for rebellious farmers emerges. Ages were given for sixteen of the identified men. The average newspaper reported age for these rebellious farmers was 34.[54] With the ages of less than one-third of the actively involved farmers available, conclusions must obviously be tentative. Nevertheless, the fact that the average age for Plymouth County farmers seemingly differs as much as eight to nine years from earlier studies may be meaningful. With parents twenty-five to thirty years their senior, farmers in line for parental lands may have already inherited the land or assumed general management of a farm by age forty-two or forty-three. However, a farmer at age thirty-four, working with his parents on a farm was likely to find the parents still actively involved in the operation. Thus, the relatively

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[52]Dileva, "Farm Revolts," p. 108.

[53]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 17. Thirty-four former Holiday members responded to Shover's questionnaire.

[54]LeMars Globe-Post, August and September, 1932, and January, February, April, and May, 1933; and LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, August and September, 1932, and January and May, 1933.

young rebellious farmers in Plymouth County found themselves propertyless and threatened not by the loss of their own land, but rather by the loss of a family farm which might some day be theirs. For more than one-fourth of the identified farmer activists in Plymouth County, the above potential threat posed real danger.[55] The existence of farmers endangered in the described manner in a small section of the county established an interesting combination of circumstances. In a restricted area of the county, important elements of the farm rebellion merged. Influential propertied farmers such as C. J. Schultz and I. W. Reck possessed leadership talents. In the same area, an element of relatively young, unpropertied farmers, who stood to inherit their parents' land, were concentrated. Set against these human features, the southeastern part of the county received the most severe impact from the depressed agricultural conditions of 1930 to 1933. In this environment, propertied leaders, would-be land holders, and unpropertied farmers, all threatened with the loss of their livelihood, provided the human ingredient in the 1932-33 agricultural rebellion in Plymouth County.

The case of one particular Plymouth County farmer may be instructive in an attempt to fully comprehend the nature of those who rose in rebellion. Morris Cope was a successful farmer, seriously threatened by the depression. Although a member of the Farmers' Holiday Association, he operated as an independent agrarian rebel, and left an indelible mark on the 1932-33 farmers' rebellion. Throughout the unrest, Cope always appeared at significant events even though he held no official position among the farmers. He

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[55] Ibid.; and 1934 Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory, pp. 1-25.

apparently was the chief organizer in an attempt to blockade Plymouth County farm produce from sale in Cherokee. Then, at a crossroads meeting on August 30, 1932, Cope and others were shot at for their organizing efforts.[56] In January, 1933, during the anti-foreclosure movement, he was among those who circulated a petition for a moratorium on farm debts and urged a march on the state capitol in pursuit of such legislation.[57] On April 27, 1933, prior to the assault on Judge Bradley, he led a group of Plymouth County farmers to nearby Primghar, Iowa, and sought to stop a foreclosure sale. In a fight with local sheriff's deputies, Cope suffered head injuries which later required medical attention.[58] On the same day, he also reportedly led the attack on Judge Bradley of LeMars.[59] After the assault on the judge, he avoided arrest for over two months. A Hartley, Iowa, doctor revealed that he had treated Cope's head injury, after which Cope fled to South Dakota with another suspect.[60] Upon surrender, he was convicted on assault charges, based on testimony that he was the leader of the rebellious farmers in the attack on the judge. His sentence of one year in the state penitentiary, paroled to the county jail, was the harshest sentence handed out for illegal actions on the part of rebellious farmers in Plymouth County.[61]

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[56] Sioux City Journal, August 31, 1932.

[57] LeMars Globe-Post, January 2, 1933.

[58] LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, June 9, 1933.

[59] LeMars Globe-Post, July 20, 1933.

[60] Sioux City Journal, May 4 and 11, 1933.

[61] LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, July 21, 1933. A search of Plymouth County Sheriff's Department records revealed two pieces of information of interest in the Cope case. First, on June 12, 1934, Sheriff Rippey requested a reduction for time served in Cope's sentence which was to run until August,

As a farmer, Cope had tasted success. He resided and farmed in Union township in southeastern Plymouth County, near the town of Kingsley. He owned only eighty acres of land himself, but farmed across the road from his father and younger brother.[62] Cope was primarily a hog producer and apparently an ingenious operator. He invented a hog house door which received a patent in July, 1933.[63] Following the assault on Judge Bradley, a reporter from the Omaha World-Herald visited Cope's father. The reporter found that Jacob Cope had farmed on the same location for twenty-five years as one of northwest Iowa's most prosperous farmers. The Cope farmstead featured a large eighteen room house. Until just prior to the agricultural uprising, Jacob Cope had held 550 acres of excellent farm land.[64] However, on January 9, 1932, the elder Cope had 510 acres of mortgaged land foreclosed.[65] By the planting season of 1932, he had been reduced to forty acres of farm land because he could not meet mortgage and tax payments. Moreover, Cope was embittered because he had acquired his land immediately after World War I and felt the debts he incurred were honest debts. By 1933, those debts had rendered him a poor and downcast man.[66] The father

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1934. Second, a letter written on May 8, 1933, from C. W. McNaughton, state agent in charge of the Plymouth County investigation, to Park A. Findley, head of the Iowa Bureau of Criminal Investigations, suggests a protective attitude about local tenant farmers, and some informal leadership on Cope's behalf. Cope wrote a letter threatening a Colorado tenant planning to move to Plymouth County. In later trial testimony, five witnesses acknowledged that the letter, signed by the Farmers' Holiday Association, was the work of Cope. Plymouth County Sheriff Department Criminal Files, File Number 105 and 106, LeMars, Iowa.

[62] 1934 Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory, pp. 18-19.

[63] LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, July 4, 1933.

[64] Omaha World Herald, May 1, 1933, p. 2.

[65] Plymouth County Transfer of Lands, Book Number 5, Court House, LeMars, Iowa, p. 6.

[66] Omaha World Herald, May 1, 1933, p. 2.

hoped to leave his 550 acres unencumbered to his sons.[67] But by 1932 and 1933 there was little left for inheritance. The father had seen much of a life's work lost in a few short years. The son had seen his hope for the future wiped out by depression conditions.

With this background, Morris Cope embarked on desperate actions in 1933. Wallace Short later summarized what was probably felt by Cope and others like him. Commenting on the agricultural rebellion and hard times, Short argued that "at such times men turn their backs on the question what is legal, and act with energy and conviction on their sense of what is right."[68] Certainly Morris Cope was one of the most energetic of the rural insurgents of the 1930s. His case was, if not representative, surely indicative of the desperation of activist farmers in Plymouth County.

In summary, then who were the men who rebelled in the agrarian uprising in Plymouth County? First and foremost, they were local farmers, albeit a small percentage of the county's agrarian population. Compared to the best estimates on the age of farmers throughout the midwest uprising, Plymouth County farmers identified as being involved in the rebellion were relatively younger. Significantly, a majority of these individuals hailed from a concentrated area in the southeastern section of the county. Land owning was not a common trait among them. However, more than one-fourth of those farmers involved appeared likely to inherit family property. Reporting on the farm crisis in 1933, Bruce Bliven concluded that those who

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[67]James R. Parker, "The Farm Holiday Movement In Northwest Iowa," Unpublished Research Paper, Drake University, (Des Moines: Iowa State Historical Library, 1968), p. 38.

[68]Short, Just One American, p. 153.

rebelled were "farmers who had something a few years ago, and have had it suddenly taken away."[69] This journalist's observation applied to Plymouth County. Although not all who rebelled were property holders threatened with loss of land, many saw their expectations for future property quickly dashed by the agricultural depression. This feature of property expectation on the part of an element of farm rebels in Plymouth County suggests a qualification of Shover's view that the 1930s farm rebellion was one of property holders.[70]

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[69]Bliven, "Milo Reno and His Farmers," p. 64.

[70]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 9.

CHAPTER VI

POLITICS OF REBELLION

An extended study of the farm rebellion in Plymouth County should treat important local political developments. Significant political developments in this county fall into two categories. Of primary importance, the county experienced a major change in voting behavior prior to and during the years of agricultural discontent. Second, representatives of the Communist Party appeared in the county during the rebellion. Examination of these political factors may provide additional insight into the farm revolt in Plymouth County in 1932-33.

Iowa had been a traditionally Republican state and it voted overwhelmingly in the Republican column in presidential elections from 1896 through 1928.[1] Reflecting this state-wide pattern, Plymouth County had also voted staunchly Republican since Populist days.[2] Starting in 1924, signs of voter discontent emerged in the county, which lingered until the end of the decade. In the election of 1930, the county threw over its traditional Republican heritage in favor of the Democratic Party. Throughout the years

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[1]Edgar Eugene Robinson, The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1934), p. 61.

[2]Even in the 1892 election when the Populists fielded James B. Weaver as a candidate, Iowa voted strongly Republican and gave Weaver, a native son, less than 5 percent of its popular vote. John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 263.

of the farm rebellion, Plymouth County retained its newly found political alignment.[3] The political change in the county, strongly influenced by rural voters, reflected the stirrings of American agriculture in the early 1930s.

Americans elected Calvin Coolidge to the Presidency in 1924. The Republican scored almost a two-to-one margin of victory over Democratic candidate John Davis, while Progressive candidate Robert La Follette placed third.[4] Iowa voters also responded favorably to the Coolidge candidacy and gave him a two-to-one margin of victory. However, their second choice was La Follette. Receiving over 100,000 votes less than the Progressive candidate, Democrat John Davis finished third in Iowa.[5] Perhaps Iowa's strong showing for La Follette was not so unusual. After all, as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. pointed out, the 1924 Progressive campaign "centered its whole appeal around the farmers' sense of inequality."[6] Responding to that appeal, five Iowa counties voted a plurality for La Follette and another five counties narrowly voted a plurality for Coolidge over La Follette by less than two percentage points. Among the later group was Plymouth County.[7] Of these ten politically divergent counties, Plymouth and Crawford were later significantly involved in the farm rebellion.

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[3]Robinson, The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932, pp. 83-85.

[4]John D. Hicks, Republican Ascendancy, 1921-1933, (New York: Harper-Row, 1960), p. 102.

[5]Whitney, Iowa Official Register, 1925-26, p. 537.

[6]Schlesinger, Crisis of Old Order, p. 105.

[7]Whitney, Iowa Official Register, 1925-26, pp. 536-37.

Available evidence for Plymouth County suggests that the vote for La Follette was primarily rural. In 1924, the county had thirty voting precincts. Eight of the precincts were influenced or dominated by a sizable town population. The remaining twenty-two precincts were almost exclusively rural. In the 1924 election, fifteen of the rural precincts voted a plurality for La Follette, but only one of the eight town precincts voted a La Follette plurality.[8] The noteworthy feature of the 1924 election in Plymouth County was that a traditionally Republican county experienced a significant change in voter behavior. Rural areas dominated the political change in the county. The motivating force for the change was apparently agricultural discontent which ran deep enough to drive voters from Republican ranks. However, voters did not cross over from Republican to Democrat, but rather crossed all the way over to a third political movement. The seeds of voter unrest were thus apparent in Plymouth County by 1924.

In 1928, Plymouth County continued to deviate from the Iowa political mainstream. In that year the nation overwhelmingly elected Herbert Hoover to the presidency, giving him 58 percent of the popular vote.[9] Strongly Republican Iowa provided Hoover 62 percent of its vote. However, six counties in the Hawkeye State voted a majority for the Democratic candidate, Al Smith. Of the six, Audubon, Carrol, Crawford, Plymouth and Shelby were in the western portion of the state. Only highly Catholic Dubuque County was outside the area of strongest farm rebellion in subsequent

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[8] Ibid., pp. 530-31.

[9] Schlesinger, Crisis of Old Order, p. 129.

years.[10] Of the six counties that voted for Smith, only Audubon and Plymouth had been staunchly Republican since the Populist days. Therefore, the change in those counties' voting patterns represented a significant political realignment. Perhaps the La Follette vote in 1924 was a transitional stage in the eventual switch to the Democrats.[11] In two consecutive presidential elections, Plymouth and Crawford Counties demonstrated voting behavior that strayed from their traditional local politics. It may be significant that these were the same counties that experienced martial law during the farm revolt of 1933.

In the 1928 election, Plymouth County's farm vote again explained the altered voting pattern of the county. Of the twnety-two exclusively rural precincts in the county, thirteen reported a majority for Smith. Only two of the eight town-influenced precincts cast a majority for the Democratic candidate.[12]

Iowa's gubernatorial election in 1928 was easily won by the Republican candidate. Only nine counties, including Plymouth, voted for the Democratic candidate. Again dominated by rural precinct majorities for the Democratic candidate, Plymouth County cast the state's fourth greatest percentage vote

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[10] Whitney, Iowa Official Register, 1929-30, pp. 422-23.

[11] Robinson, Presidential Vote, 1896-1932, pp. 83-85. Another study, related to the 1924 vote in Pittsburgh, suggests that the La Follette vote in that city was a step in the transition from a traditional Republican voting posture to the Democratic party by the 1932 election. Perhaps a similar transition was present in Plymouth County. See Bruce M. Stave, "The 'La Follette Revolution' and the Pittsburgh Vote, 1932," Mid America 49 (October, 1967): 244-51.

[12] Whitney, Iowa Official Register, 1929-30, pp. 417-18. Although covering a different time period, an excellent discussion of the voting behavior differences and political animosity between the farmer and the villager can be found in Stanley B. Parsons, "Who Were The Nebraska Populists?" Nebraska History 44 (June, 1963): 85-92. One can speculate that similar forces that pitted farmer against townsmen in the 1890s persisted into the Depression years of the 1930s.

for the Democratic gubernatorial aspirant.[13] However, the county's political turn-about was not thoroughgoing in 1928. Plymouth County voted heavily for a Republican congressional candidate in that year. With the exception of the governor's race, the county vote for all other state offices favored the Republican candidates.[14] At the local level, there were nine politically contested county offices in 1928. In those elections, Plymouth County elected eight Republicans and only one Democrat. In addition, the county elected a Republican state senator and state representative.[15] By 1928, Plymouth County displayed a significant change in political behavior, indicative of discontent, and this change was grounded in the farm precincts of the county. But the discontent was not thorough enough to change the political complexion of the county entirely. However, as the depression mounted, Plymouth County continued to undergo political alterations.

In the 1930 local elections, Plymouth County took a decided turn toward the Democratic Party. Of the nine county officials elected, five were Democrats which represented an increase of four Democratic county officers over 1928. And in terms of county officials, Plymouth became the most Democratic county in northwest Iowa.[16] Plymouth County also elected a Democratic state representative in 1930.[17] However, in statewide elections Plymouth County continued to vote Republican. The county joined

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[13]Whitney, Iowa Official Register, 1929-30, pp. 417-18 and 424-25.

[14]Ibid., pp. 417-18 and 435.

[15]Ibid., pp. 195 and 203-06.

[16]Whitney, Iowa Official Register, 1931-32, p. 189.

[17]Ibid., p. 209.

the rest of the state in electing Republican Governor Dan Turner and a host of other Republican state officers. Turner, however, won only a narrow victory in Plymouth County with one-half of the rural precincts voting for the Democratic candidate.[18]

By 1932, the economic depression dominated the political scene. Nationwide, the Democrats swept into political office. In Plymouth County, the movement to the Democratic Party was also exceptionally strong. This political movement occurred between the farm strike of autumn and the anti-foreclosure campaign of the winter of 1933. Led by the farm vote, the political change in Plymouth County reflected the frustration of rebellious farmers.

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats swept into office in 1933. In the presidential election Roosevelt garnered 59 percent of the popular vote.[19] Even traditionally reliable Republican strongholds fell to the Democrats. Iowa, which had voted Republican in nine previous presidential elections, also gave 59 percent of its popular vote to Roosevelt.[20]

Plymouth County made almost a complete transition to the Democratic Party in 1932. To local observers, the altered political climate came as no surprise. As early as March, 1932, the county's chief newspaper predicted a Democratic sweep locally.[21] In the presidential election results, Plymouth County gave Roosevelt a three-to-one victory margin. Only two counties in Iowa exceeded Plymouth's overwhelming Roosevelt vote.[22] And

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[18]Ibid., pp. 429-30.

[19]Leuchtenburg, Roosevelt and the New Deal, p. 17.

[20]Robinson, The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932, pp. 61 and 198.

[21]LeMars Globe-Post, March 21, 1932.

[22]Lester W. Drennen, ed., Iowa Official Register, 1933-34, (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1933), pp. 246-47.

in the cases of both Carroll and Dubuque Counties, there had been an established history of Democratic voting.[23] Plymouth County, on the other hand, had surrendered its traditional Republican posture and produced one of the greatest margins of victory for Roosevelt in the state of Iowa. Every precinct in the county voted a majority for Roosevelt.[24]

In other 1932 election contests as well, Plymouth County changed to a new political persuasion. Iowa elected Democrat Clyde Herring governor with a 53 percent majority vote.[25] Plymouth County gave Herring 66 percent of its gubernatorial vote, and the county voted with the majority for seven other Democratic state office contenders. Furthermore, the county sent a Democratic representative to Congress by a two-to-one margin of victory.[26]

Locally, Plymouth County selected nine county officials. Democrats won seven of the races as the county continued its 1930 distinction as the most Democratically controlled county in northwest Iowa. The county's voters also elected a Democratic state senator and elected as state representative a local farmer and Democrat.[27]

Overall, the county's voting behavior may be instructive in attempting to comprehend the local farmers' rebellion. The voting transition which began in 1924, culminated in 1932 amidst vigorous rural insurgency. The Republicans had not met the farmers' demands, thus they turned to the Democrats for solutions. Perhaps the political behavior of Plymouth County

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[23]Robinson, The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932, pp. 83-85.

[24]Drennen, Iowa Official Register, 1933-34, p. 241.

[25]Ibid., p. 249.

[26]Ibid., p. 241.

[27]Ibid., pp. 72-73 and 127.

farmers was the logical result of an agrarian thinking that, by the 1920s, demanded governmental intervention in the farm problem. At the polling place, farmers agitated for governmental action. Shortly after the 1932 election Milo Reno stated that "We are asking the government to regulate the prices in this basic American industry. . . . We intend to keep on agitating until we get justice."[28] In this spirit, rural Plymouth County voters agitated for relief from their plight in elections from 1924 to 1932.[29]

In addition to voting behavior alterations, the presence of the Communist Party in the Plymouth County area during the farm rebellion deserves attention. Speculation about Communist involvement in the Iowa farm rebellion emerged in the early stages of the uprising. During the milk strike around Council Bluffs, Pottawattomie County Sheriff Pat Lainson suspected Communists among the picketers.[30] In the LeMars region, a local newspaper leveled charges of Communist infiltration at area farm meetings.[31] When

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[28]Bliven, "Milo Reno and His Farmers," p. 63.

[29]Plymouth County's political divergence during the farm revolt years continued until 1936. In the 1936 election, the county again strongly supported Roosevelt. Of additional interest in the 1936 election, Plymouth County voters gave William Lemke of the Union Party 11.3 percent of their vote. Only one other county in Iowa exceeded Plymouth's support for Lemke. Statewide, 2.6 percent of the vote went to Lemke and, nationally, only 1.9 percent voted for Lemke. Again, in 1936, Plymouth County's voting behavior took on exceptional characteristics. Drennen, Iowa Official Register, 1937-38, pp. 312-13; William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963), p. 195; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Politics of Upheaval, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 642; and Edward C. Blackorby, Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), pp. 227-29.

[30]Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 77.

[31]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, September 16, 1932.

the Plymouth County revolt turned to violence in the spring of 1933, claims of Communist influence intensified. During investigation into the assault on Judge Bradley, officialdom seemed preoccupied with the Communist threat. In a letter to Governor Herring, Iowa Assistant Attorney General L. W. Powers reported on the situation in LeMars, claiming that "these men openly assert that their purpose is to overthrow the government, and unfortunately they have received a lot of aid and encouragement out of Sioux City."[32] Confirmation of the Communist presence came shortly thereafter when Attorney General E. L. O'Connor announced the discovery of a Communist headquarters in Sioux City.[33] Later, O'Connor blamed the episodes at both Primghar and LeMars on Communist promoters.[34] But despite the claims of a Communist role in the farm rebellion, no proof of Communist instigation surfaced.[35]

Communist presence in and around Plymouth County was undeniable. An appreciation for the Communist existence can be gained through an examination of the Communist Party's official position on the agrarian rebellion. John Shover investigated Communist Party involvement in the depression era rural insurgency, and found that the Communist Party's program for agriculture was ennunciated at its 1930 convention. Basically, the Communists acknowledged their previous lack of attention to the agrarian problem and

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[32]L. W. Powers to Governor Clyde Herring, May 3, 1933, Governor Clyde Herring Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

[33]Dileva, "Farm Revolts In Iowa," p. 109.

[34]O'Brien County Bell, May 10, 1933.

[35]Dileva, "Farm Revolts In Iowa," p. 139.

resolved to actively pursue a revolutionary program on the farm front.[36] In view of agriculture's economic dilemma, Communist leader Earl Browder spoke for the party when he reported to the convention that "conditions among the farmers are ripe for us."[37] In initiating their agrarian policy, the Communists developed a plan known as the "draft program." Their plan foresaw the coming farm revolt as one of property holders versus an economic system which had driven them to despair.[38]

The major personalities involved in the Communist's agrarian efforts were a cadre of well-established Party regulars. Harold Ware, experienced in the Party's agricultural interests, oversaw the rural program. Lem Harris was the chief field man on the rural front.[39] Finally, Ella Reeve Bloor, Ware's mother, managed local rural organizing drives with her husband Andrew Omholt.[40] But before this group could fully swing into action, the rural revolt began in earnest with the farm strike of August and September, 1932. Recognizing Sioux City as the center of the rebellion, the Communists moved to action in the Sioux City area in an attempt to catch a revolt that was running ahead of them.[41]

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[36]Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 250.

[37]Earl Browder, "Report of Political Committee To Plenum," The Communist 10 (January, 1931): 18.

[38]Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 250.

[39]Ibid., pp. 250-51.

[40]Ella Reeve Bloor, We Are Many, (New York: International Publishers, 1940), pp. 231-32; and Lem Harris, "Communists In Farm Struggles," Political Affairs 58 (August-September, 1979): 67.

[41]Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 252.

The Communist Party's newspaper, the Daily Worker, quickly announced support for the strike movement, but suggested that farmers broaden their struggle and aim it at banks and the taxation system as well as the market place.[42] Later, in an editorial, the Daily Worker urged farmers to unite with the working class to enlarge their movement. Perhaps most important, the Communist paper denounced farm organizations, including the Farmers' Union, because "everyone of these organizations is carrying out the policy of Wall Street." Rather than blindly follow the existing farm organizations, the Daily Worker encouraged farmers to establish local committees of action to carry the fight.[43] Communist condemnation of farm groups even carried to the Farmers' Holiday Association itself, when the Daily Worker urged striking farmers to ignore Milo Reno's call for the end of the strike prior to the Sioux City Governors' Conference.[44]

The first indication of actual Communist presence in the farm strike in Plymouth County came in mid-August, 1932. Sam Mosher, Plymouth County Farmers' Holiday Association member and leader of the milk strike, informed the local press that "Communists tried to horn in on the milk strike in the last 48 hours."[45] The Communists reportedly offered assistance in the distribution of dairy products to the needy during the strike and volunteered to lead more drastic actions including dumping milk, overturning trucks,

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[42]Daily Worker, August 18, 1932.

[43]Ibid., August 19, 1932.

[44]Ibid., September 2, 1932.

[45]LeMars Globe-Post, August 15, 1932.

and halting railroad milk shipments.[46] In an interview with O. N. Kelly, a Plymouth County Holiday member, Lowell Dyson found that local farmers conversed with Harold Ware and other Party members during the farm strike, but were not swayed by them.[47]

When the farm strike waned in September, the Communists capitalized on the Sioux City Governor's Conference, in an attempt to strengthen their operation. Approximately 15,000 farmers attended a parade and rally on September 9. The assembly, organized for the convening governors by the Farmers' Holiday Association, was to symbolize the farmers' plight.[48] Capitalizing on the farmers' protest, the Communists, under the direction of Ware and Mother Bloor, organized a meeting of approximately fifty farmers. The only significant development was a call for a farmers' march on Washington, D. C., in December.[49]

The march on Washington held importance for the farm revolt around Sioux City. At the Washington conference, the Communists established the Farmers' National Committee for Action as the organization to coordinate local committees for action.[50] The Farmers' National Committee established a local office in Sioux City and conducted rural organizing efforts in the Sioux City territory from this office.[51]

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 84.

[48] Sioux City Journal, September 10, 1932.

[49] Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 252; and Bloor, We Are Many, pp. 234-35.

[50] Shover, "Communist Party in the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 257.

[51] Bloor, We Are Many, p. 238.

Mother Bloor spent much of the autumn of 1932 involved in the Communist's presidential election campaign in nearby North and South Dakota.[52] After she attended the Washington conference, she embarked on a speaking tour of the Sioux City area. Her return to western Iowa coincided with, but was unrelated to, the outbreak of anti-foreclosure sales.[53] One of Mother Bloor's addresses reportedly attracted 1,000 farmers in LeMars on January 7, 1933. Earlier in the day, many of the same farmers had halted a local foreclosure sale. At the LeMars gathering, Bloor was able to rally numerous local farmers in support of a march on the state capitol. However, the local Holiday Association countered by condemning the march and suggesting that farmers could better serve their purposes locally by halting foreclosure sales.[54] Apparently, the Communists were still recognized and treated as outsiders during the winter of 1933 in Plymouth County.[55]

Following the attack on Judge Bradley in April, 1933, there was a brief contact between Plymouth County farmers and the Communists. The night after the National Guard arrived in the county, several local farmers approached Mother Bloor at her Sioux City headquarters seeking manpower and arms with which to resist the National Guard. Bloor convinced the farmers that local rallies and protests to the governor against the use of the National Guard were better solutions to their problems.[56] In

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[52]Ibid., pp. 231-32.

[53]Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 258.

[54]LeMars Globe-Post, January 9, 1933.

[55]Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 258.

[56]Bloor, We Are Many, pp. 237-38.

1962, Dyson interviewed Otto Anstrom who was present at Bloor's headquarters that night and he independently confirmed Bloor's account of events.[57] Three days after the encounter between Plymouth County farmers and Mother Bloor, the National Guard raided the small Communist headquarters in Sioux City and arrested four workers. Mother Bloor was not among those apprehended.[58] Before the raid, however, the Communists had sent a letter of protest to Governor Herring on behalf of Plymouth County farmers. The letter condemned Herring for using "the National Guard as a collection agency for the Wall Street bankers and their powerful insurance companies."[59]

During the formal investigation into the Plymouth County disturbance, numerous charges of Communist involvement arose. The preceding information appears to be the extent of Communist presence in and around Plymouth County. The Communist Party was present and tried to organize local farmers, however, its position in the local rebellion was peripheral and the overall impact was marginal. Specifically, Communist ineffectiveness in Plymouth County can be traced to two causes. First, the Party never led, but rather followed farmer activism in the local rebellion. Second, the Communists' did not understand the local, limited nature of the Plymouth County unrest.

In the major events of the local insurgency, the farmers provoked actions on which the Communists attempted to capitalize. The August, 1932, Holiday and milk strike were in progress when Communists joined the

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[57]Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 184.

[58]Sioux City Journal, May 2, 1933.

[59]Farmers' National Committee for Action, Sioux City, to Governor Herring, Herring Papers.

struggle.[60] Plymouth County farmers had also effectively conducted their first anti-foreclosure tactics prior to Communist aid and guidance in that area.[61] Moreover, after the assault on Judge Bradley, local farmers appealed to Mother Bloor for assistance rather than the Communists reaching out to assist the desperate farmers.[62] While Bloor and Ware were present during the Governors' Conference in Sioux City, they determined that farmers in that territory were organized and they saw "more chance of making gains" with a newly forming group of Nebraska farmers.[63] Apparently the Communists turned their attention to areas where they could lead or have more influence rather than areas where farmers appeared already organized.

Second, the Plymouth County revolt was aimed at short-range goals and parochial concerns. The Communists, as early as 1930, had announced that "the immediate task of the Communist Party is to bring class struggle into agriculture."[64] But there was not a great deal of Plymouth County farmer interest in affairs beyond the immediate area. They desired improved prices for agricultural produce and the maintenance of their farms. In this spirit, the Holiday, the milk strike, and the anti-foreclosure crusade were conducted for local gains. When farmers were urged by Mother Bloor to organize for a march on the state capitol, the Plymouth

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[60] LeMars Globe-Post, August 15, 1932.

[61] Ibid., January 9, 1933.

[62] Bloor, We Are Many, pp. 237-38.

[63] Lement Harris, Harold M. Ware (1890-1935): Agricultural Pioneer, USA and USSR, (New York: American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1978), p. 61; and Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," pp. 253-55.

[64] The Communist, 9 (April, 1930): 372.

County Holiday president quickly dashed the effort by pressing the farmers to "stay right here and watch Plymouth County."[65] The overall Communist program was out of step with Plymouth County farmers' goals. The Party had a long range plan with national goals that were intended to eventually revolutionize American agriculture.[66] But little in the broad Communist program appealed to the immediate and particular demands of Plymouth County farmers.

In a general sense, the Communists failed to gain significant influence in the Plymouth County farm rebellion because they did not understand the midwestern agrarian mind. Commenting on farmer receptivity to communism in 1933, the editors of The Nation suggested that "most of them have never heard of Karl Marx, or if they have, think he is a brother of Grocho."[67] The editors' sarcasm belied the intelligence of Iowa farmers. Farmers were sensitive to charges of Communist association and distrustful of outside leadership.[68] In February, 1933, Reno indicated a concern about Communist involvement, fearing "that Russian Communists are endeavoring to gain a foothold in the Holiday Association and either control or destroy it."[69] Later Reno warned farmers of their two enemies; the capitalistic group and the "more vicious" Communists.[70] The LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel provided an indication of anti-Communist sentiment on the local level by

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[65]LeMars Globe-Post, January 9, 1933.

[66]Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 250.

[67]The Nation, May 17, 1933, p. 544.

[68]Shover, "Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis," p. 261.

[69]Reno to Jake Taylor, February 20, 1933, Reno Papers.

[70]Farm Holiday News, July, 1933.

portraying Communism as a "snake in the grass" in a cartoon prior to the farm strike of 1932.[71] Striking farmers often quickly rejected Communist aid when the farm strike began, and were careful to prevent outside or Communist influence at meetings where picketing votes were taken.[72] In the LeMars area, the Communists saw a fertile field for their revolutionary program, but because they misgauged rural sentiment they had a very small impact on the local rebellion.[73]

Perhaps Ware struck a sensitive cord in his own analysis of the Communist position in the farm rebellion. The Farmers' Holiday Association threatened another farm strike in May, 1933. Pending the outcome of the agricultural legislation then being debated in Congress, and because of the recent violence around LeMars, Milo Reno led an effort to stall the planned May 13 strike.[74] Ware prepared to blast Reno editorially in the Farmers' National Weekly.[75] But when Ware travelled to Iowa, visited with farmers, and heard Reno's speeches, he changed his approach. He notified the editor of the Farmers' National Weekly,

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[71]LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel, July 8, 1932.

[72]Sioux City Journal, August 15, 1932, p. 8; and Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," p. 79.

[73]Korgan, "Farmers Picket The Depression," pp. 189-90.

[74]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 134-35.

[75]Lement Harris, Harold M. Ware (1890-1935): Agricultural Pioneer, pp. 62-64. Ware had long believed that the key to organizing an effective Communist movement in the countryside was in formulating the right type of farm publication. At the Communist-sponsored Farmers' National Relief Conference held in Washington in December, 1932, organizers launched the Farmers' National Weekly as the hoped-for farm publication. The paper began publication on January 30, 1933, with Ware giving close attention to editorials and circulation.

> Don't print the next issue until you get my full report! We have got to about face! I was all wet on planning to continue to attack. Reno personifies their movement to the great majority of Iowa farmers. To attack him personally is to attack them--until he slips again--as he will when his latest truce ends.[76]

Ware's comment is instructive. Although Holiday Association leadership did not have firm control of the farm rebellion it had initiated, Reno and other leaders apparently did express fundamental ideals that appealed to many agrarian rebels.

In terms of political behavior, one point is clear about Plymouth County. The county's farmers were essentially a conservative body. Even though some rural elements diverged politically to vote for La Follette in 1924, and Lemke in 1936, the dominant tendency was adherence to the two major political parties. That the Communists failed to achieve significant inroads in the county is a further indication of political conservatism. In conclusion, Plymouth County farmers sought improved agricultural prices and security on their farms, not political revolution.

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[76] Ibid., p. 64.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In its most successful phase, the Farmers' Holiday Association gained important attention for its actions in Plymouth County, Iowa, from August, 1932, to April, 1933. After the violence in the spring of 1933, the Holiday movement lost support and slowly faded in Plymouth County. Perhaps rank and file farmers in the Holiday group were driven off by the violence. Certainly, by the autumn of 1933, popular sentiment in the county turned against the Holiday's renewed effort at striking, when "Law and Order Leagues" emerged under the auspices of the county sheriff. These leagues, led by H. W. Brosamle and containing 500 members, opened roads as small numbers of Holiday picketers tried once again to prevent the flow of farm produce to market.[1] Even I. W. Reck, one of the leaders of the previous year's milk strike, joined the law and order group and denounced the new Holiday effort, exhorting local farmers instead to "get their feet on the ground."[2] John Shover has concluded that the abortive strike attempt in the autumn of 1933 bordered on lunacy and extremism.[3] Exemplifying this extremism, Roy Martin of Kingsley was arrested and convicted for carrying

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[1] LeMars Globe-Post, November 9, 1933.

[2] Ibid., November 16, 1933.

[3] Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, pp. 149-67.

a gun as he and other Holiday members crashed a meeting in which the Sioux City Milk Producers were voting non-support for the strike.[4]

The changing agriculture picture probably also hindered the Holiday's 1933 strike effort. As local corn prices rose from twenty-two cents per bushel in late April to thirty-nine cents by the end of July, some farmers undoubtedly saw a brighter day ahead for agriculture.[5] Reflecting the shift in northwest Iowa farmers' attitudes, the secretary of the local Sioux City Holiday Association resigned his post in order to take a position with the recently formed Agricultural Adjustment Administration.[6] The impact of the New Deal agricultural program was noticeable in Plymouth County, as the LeMars Globe-Post admonished farmers to sign up for the corn-hog program, asserting that "when you have a chance to get Uncle Sam's check for anywhere from $300 to $1,000, and even more, there's something wrong with you if you don't take it."[7] Later the local Holiday Association, itself, met to hear president C. J. Schultz discuss how the corn-hog program would help farmers.[8] The combination of anti-Holiday sentiment, and an improved agricultural outlook, eased the Farmers' Holiday Association from center-stage. But in its heyday, the Holiday in Plymouth County illustrated features of an important rural rebellion that should not escape historical attention.

The assembly and management of crowds of farmers for direct action purposes was no small accomplishment. With crowds reaching perhaps as many

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[4]LeMars Globe-Post, November 23, 1933.

[5]Ibid., July 27, 1933.

[6]Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," p. 252.

[7]LeMars Globe-Post, November 16, 1933.

[8]Ibid., December 4, 1933.

as 1500 in number, and composed almost totally of farmers, the 1930s' activism in Plymouth County became a significant protest movement.[9] George Rude has studied crowds in history and found a popular tradition in direct action rural protest. In investigations of rural crowds in England and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Rude has concluded that the protests stemmed directly from conditions related to livelihood and economics.[10] Citing the specific case of crowds during the French Revolution, Rude points out that they were "composed of ordinary men and women with varying social needs, who responded to a variety of impulses."[11] Bearing in mind the general farm strike, the milk strike, penny-sales, and the anti-foreclosure movement, all conducted by local farmers, the farm revolt in Plymouth County would seem to fit a broad historical pattern of crowd behavior and rural protest. Conclusions on this point must, of necessity, be tentative. But, the general characteristics and importance of the crowd phenomenon suggests there might be implications for the Plymouth County Farmers' Holiday movement beyond the confines of the county and its activism of the 1930s.

Individually, farmers in Plymouth County could not contend with the impersonal economic conditions of the 1930s. Rapidly declining commodity prices, bank closings, and an avalanche of farm foreclosures, left many farmers destitute. In these circumstances, there was a strong movement toward organization by local farmers. This organizational tendency fit

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[9]Ibid., August 15, 1932.

[10]Rude, The Crowd In History, pp. 35-44.

[11]Rude, The Crowd In The French Revolution, pp. 232-33.

an agrarian tradition since the beginning of this society's industrial age.[12] Plymouth County farmers showed an exceptional turn toward organization in the 1930s. In 1931, the county ranked second in Iowa in increased membership in the Farmers' Union, and fifth in total membership in what then was Iowa's largest member farm organization.[13] At the peak of the farmer activism in January, 1933, Plymouth County ranked fourth in total Iowa Farmers' Union membership.[14] With the Farmers' Union serving as the unofficial parent organization of the Farmers' Holiday Association, local farmers looked to cooperative action for resolution of their problems.[15] In the tradition of the Grange, the Alliance, and the Populist movements, the Holiday Association applied a collective rural approach to the problems of the depression. Although extreme in some of its views, the Holiday movement, epitomized by the activities in Plymouth County, illustrated a continuation of the important organizational theme in the American agrarian tradition.

In terms of leadership, another feature of the Plymouth County Holiday movement reflected the heritage of agrarian organizations. During the rural unrest of the late nineteenth century, agricultural leadership came primarily from the farm. Although there was a tendency toward a professional guidance in the early twentieth century, much agricultural leadership still consisted of real farmers. Writing about the depression

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[12]Hayes, The Response To Industrialism, pp. 58-63.

[13]Iowa Union Farmer, January 13, 1932.

[14]Ibid., January 25, 1933.

[15]McConnell, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy, p. 68.

farm revolt, Paul Johnstone suggests that "probably no movement was ever more genuinely indigenous than the farm-holiday movement of the early 1930s."[16] Milo Reno himself certainly upheld the role of a genuine rural-based leader.[17] In Plymouth County, the Holiday leadership, both formal and informal, consisted of real farmers threatened by the depression. Examination of the local Holiday movement makes for an engaging study of an important rebellion. Perhaps more important, however, is the appreciation to be gained in examining ordinary people, led by real farmers, as they agitated for immediate relief from their desperate condition.

One further trait of the Holiday uprising, reminiscent of earlier agrarian crusades, was the division of the movement into two clear factions; one seeking short-range solutions and the other demanding long-range agricultural reform.[18] Milo Reno's "cost-of-production" ideal of the 1930s, not unlike the "free coinage of silver" in the Populist movement, served as a rallying cry for economically depressed farmers. However, when a measure of economic improvement and security emerged in 1933 in the form of mortgage moratorium laws and some increase in prices, support for Reno's longer range agricultural reform waned. In a similar fashion, as agricultural prices moved upward in 1896, the Populists lost support for their broader agrarian reform ideas.[19] The defection from the Holiday in the face of an improved agricultural outlook has already been pointed out.

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[16]Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas," p. 157.

[17]Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, p. 25.

[18]Ibid., p. 206.

[19]Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, pp.109-11.

A general significance may be found in the tendency of agrarian organizations to thrive in crisis situations when rank and file farmers are moved by immediate and particular problems. However, genuine enthusiasm for long-range agricultural reform fades quickly in the presence of even modest economic gains. The case of the Plymouth County Holiday in the 1930s clearly lends credence to this inclination in American agrarian movements.

Motivated by the desire for economic stability, it is probable that the agrarian rebellion in Plymouth County in the 1930s was basically a mainstream agricultural movement. Some of the rhetoric and actions of the rural revolt took on extreme characteristics, but the depth of feeling in such expressions is questionable. For example, C. J. Schultz, excited by success when the Holiday stopped a foreclosure sale and temporarily bested a creditor, wrote to Milo Reno boasting, "who said we can't drive the fear of God into those robbers and cutthroats."[20] However, although local farmers resorted to bold direct action, and occasional violence, they were generally law-abiding mainstream types. Following the prevention of a foreclosure sale in January, 1933, LeMars Globe-Post editor R. F. Starzl was invited to write a guest editorial for the New York Times. In his editorial, Starzl noted that the assembled crowd was dominated by middle-aged, conservative farmers. The local newspaper suggested that the extent of radical farmer behavior could be judged by other simultaneous actions. Therefore, Starzl pointed out that at the same time the farmers prevented the execution of a legal process, "they obeyed all the no parking signs around the courthouse."[21]

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[20]C. J. Schultz to Milo Reno, January 7, 1933, Reno Papers.

[21]New York Times, January 8, 1933, p. E6.

In making the preceding conclusions about the Plymouth County farm revolt of 1932-33, one must be cautious. After all, the events in this single Iowa county were only a small part of a larger agricultural rebellion directed against general economic hard times. But the extent of activity and basic trends of the rural unrest in the county are worthy of tentative judgments.

The Holiday activities in Plymouth County served to help focus national attention on the plight of American agriculture. Even though the broad goals of the Farmers' Holiday Association were not achieved, the farm srtike and the anti-foreclosure crusade gave an urgency to the agricultural program of the Roosevelt administration in the spring of 1933.[22]

The Plymouth County Farmers' Holiday movement, taken as a microcosm of agrarian sentiment in the 1930s, is helpful in understanding the desperation of those years for some elements of American society. The drive by common farmers to improve prices and save their farms from foreclosure was consistent with earlier agrarian experiences of protest and activism. In this spirit, northwest Iowa farmers were not widely separated from the likes of Daniel Shays, Pennsylvania whiskey tax rebels, or the late nineteenth century agrarian movements. The search by Plymouth County farmers for remedies to immediate and pressing problems in the 1930s constitutes an important local uprising in the general stream of farmer activism and the American agrarian heritage.

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[22]Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, pp. 48-51.

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