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Thomas P. Shilts

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POLITICAL CULTURE ON THE NORTHERN PLAINS:  
NORTH DAKOTA AND THE NONPARTISAN EXPERIENCE

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Lake Superior State College, 1986  
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Clarion University of Pennsylvania, 1990

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

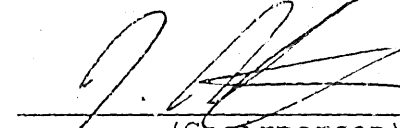
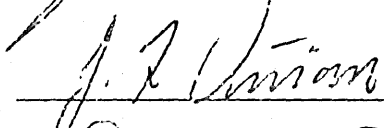
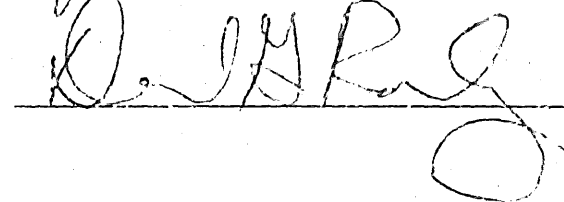
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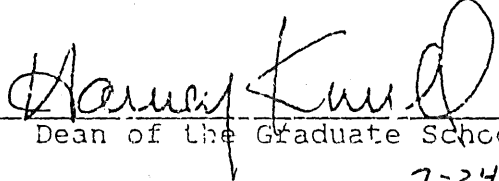
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This thesis meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

  
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My wife Carla deserves recognition for solving my perpetual computer problems -- no small task. Our daughter Lucy proved that John Baer's cartoons are still amusing after eighty years, even to a five-year-old.

To Those Who Fought the Flood

## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the history of North Dakota during the era of the Nonpartisan League (roughly 1915 through 1921). A significant body of research on the League exists, but no study has yet specifically addressed itself to exploring the political culture of the League and of its opponents in such a way that the full nature of the Nonpartisan "revolt" is made clear. The League was indeed the result of farmers' perception of economic exploitation at the hands of big business, yet it was more basically a proactive struggle for inclusion. While employing elements of agrarian ideology, the League was also the product of a world dominated by the urban-based values of "business." Leaguers hoped, through occupationally-based, collective political action, to gain power, dignity, and material success within that world. Although this consciousness was a departure from the received political culture of the 1910s, in other ways the Leaguers' political culture was fairly mainstream. The League's program of political inclusion, for example, kept well within traditional gendered boundaries. Nor was the League's vision of



material progress revolutionary.

Being a historical inquiry, the preparation of this thesis is the result of standard historical research methodologies. In terms of theory, however, this project has been informed by post-structuralist theories of "language." Thus, particular attention has been paid to the process of language building especially during the early years of the Nonpartisan era. How Leaguers and their opponents defined themselves and their world, inclusively and exclusively, provides a more subtle understanding of the Nonpartisan "revolt."

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The story of the Nonpartisan League is one of the more dramatic episodes in the history of North Dakota. Certainly it is one of the most frequently investigated, for a variety of reasons. Some scholars have been drawn to the League because it offers a compelling, well-documented display of successful grass-roots activism. Robert Morlan's Political Prairie Fire, the standard work on the Nonpartisan League since its publication in 1955, is the prime example of this. Morlan portrayed the League as a forebear of later twentieth century governmental liberalism.<sup>1</sup> Another generation of historians also found the NPL to be a positive stage in North Dakota's historical development. In 1981, Larry Remele called the League "a beacon and a symbol of democracy for the modern age."<sup>2</sup> Scott Ellsworth, in his 1982 dissertation, wrote of the NPL's "unusual mode of nonpartisan politics, one which could easily be used again."<sup>3</sup>

Specialists in North Dakota history have also analyzed the Nonpartisan League. Elwyn B. Robinson devoted two

chapters of his monumental History of North Dakota (published in 1966) to the rise and fall of the League.<sup>4</sup> Among his other work on the League era, D. Jerome Tweton in 1981 wrote an important essay on the anti-League Independent Voters Association (IVA).<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars increasingly subjected the evidence to such categories of analysis as ethnicity and gender, revealing more about those people who comprised the League membership. For example, in 1986 Kathleen Moun argued for the importance of community relationships in the League's development.<sup>6</sup> In her 1994 article "'We All Leaguers by Our House,'" Kim E. Nielsen explored the ways League women "stretched, tugged, and battled with the gender boundaries which determined much of their lives."<sup>7</sup>

Of course, not all League studies fall neatly into these categories. Robert Bahmer's 1941 dissertation, for example, examined the economics of the grain trade, the inequities of which, he asserted, were responsible for the League's rise.<sup>8</sup> Other historians have considered such matters as the League's relationship to national politics, the precise nature of the NPL program, and the League's progress in particular geographic areas.

Yet for all the research that has been done on the Nonpartisan League, nearly all League scholarship is

predicated on a basic assumption that has remained unexamined: that the Nonpartisan League was fundamentally a protest movement (usually thought to be a radical one), fighting against the control outside interests had over farmers' productive and social lives. With this in mind, scholars have investigated those conditions that caused Leaguers to "rebel," and have shown how the NPL "revolt" was carried out. While it would be ridiculous to suggest that conflict be excised from the NPL story, the assumption that the League was essentially and unequivocally oppositional (and thus radical) in nature has become imbedded in the historiography of the NPL. This has had three important consequences.

First, viewing the League as an expression "against" something obscures the fact that the NPL was more importantly -- and fundamentally -- a struggle "for" something else. As a result, researchers have tended to overemphasize the acrimony of the League era. Alice Poehls' contention that the NPL experience constituted a social "war"<sup>9</sup> is generally representative of the attitude taken by most League scholars. While the League leadership may have been the implacable foe of big business -- NPL president Arthur C. Townley was an accomplished hater -- Leaguers themselves wanted nothing so much as to be more powerful

players within the world of capitalism. Getting rid of "Big Biz" was merely a means, not an end.

Next, by accepting the League as radical, historians have continually spoken of the experimental nature of the League program, as if Leaguers sought to bring down the governmental structures and dabble in socialism for the sake of curiosity. For the most part, rank-and-file Leaguers had little interest in theories of political economy but a great deal of interest in being more competitive within the economic system. One scholar has made an observation about Canadian agrarian movements that also applies to the NPL.

The radicalism of Leaguers

consisted not so much in the extent of their economic demands (which were not extreme) as in their conviction, born of repeated frustration of these demands, that the economic subordination from which they were suffering was an inherent part of eastern financial domination and of the party system.

Leaguers hoped to participate as equals in the modern world.

Finally, the notion of the Nonpartisan League as an essentially reactive force has made some strange historiographical bedfellows. This is not a problem in itself, but unfortunately historians with very different stories to tell have misinterpreted certain primary sources in the same way. For example, Theodore Saloutos<sup>11</sup>, Robert Morlan<sup>12</sup>, and Dale Baum<sup>13</sup> each made substantial use of a document by League attorney (and Socialist) Arthur LeSueur

to argue that the League message absolved struggling farmers from personal responsibility for their lot. For Saloutos, this was further evidence of the League's radicalism. Morlan cited LeSueur to suggest that this was an argument for the League having a strong centralized leadership. Baum, in one of the few frankly revisionist writings on the League, contended that it was an expression of the League's "Manichean" world view.<sup>14</sup> Yet each of these historians took LeSueur's statement at face value -- itself a somewhat risky move since in this piece LeSueur, always a more dedicated Socialist than Leaguer, was comparing the NPL unfavorably to North Dakota's Socialist party -- because each assumed that the League's farmer recruits were basically reactive. Yet as chapter five will argue, most Leaguers did not desire absolution from their responsibilities, but rather sought a means by which they could more "manfully" assume -- or reassume -- their domestic and social duties and obligations.

Thus, with few exceptions, historians have presented Nonpartisan Leaguers as people who reacted to and struggled against the forces of modernity. Although one author has contended that the essence of the League lay, not in oppositional politics, but in the search for a new, post-agrarian "myth",<sup>15</sup> the assumption that the League was

fundamentally a protest movement has not been systematically tested. It is the purpose of this thesis to do so.

This study will argue that Nonpartisan Leaguers were motivated not by a desire to overthrow the received social and governmental institutions, but rather by a desire to be included more fully within them. As Rozanne Enerson has observed, Leaguers fully believed their program could "succeed within and successfully challenge the existing capitalist economic system."<sup>16</sup> Thus, the League's much-discussed "radicalism" will be called into question. It will be argued that the League should not be seen as a "novel experiment,"<sup>17</sup> nor as a "great socialist experiment,"<sup>18</sup> nor as "a symbol of democracy."<sup>19</sup> Neither should it be seen simply as the result of economic exploitation nor as a "neo-Populist movement."<sup>20</sup> Leaguers sought not political revolution but material prosperity, and were not necessarily any more committed to democracy and social justice than were small-town North Dakota merchants. Defining themselves primarily through the same middle-class, urban-derived social definitions as did their opponents, Leaguers sought self-respect and prosperity. NFL members were encouraged to think of theirs as a class-based movement, founded on agrarian traditions, yet one whose implications of class stretched no further than allowing

them to compete more effectively against other organized interests. The Nonpartisan League was essentially reformist. The League's self-declared enemy was "Big Biz", but Leaguers felt a deep respect for private property and had an ambivalent relationship with local business people. Despite being labeled "bolshhevistic," the NPL accepted the existing governmental structures. Although called "socialistic," the League's program embraced capitalism. And while branded "free lovers," Leaguers operated within conservative definitions of gender roles.

In order to better explicate the breadth of the counter-hegemonic process that characterized the Nonpartisan League experience, this study will use the idea of political culture as a conceptual framework. In employing a broad definition of political culture such as that proposed by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba ("the political system as internalized in the cognitions, feelings and evaluations of its population")<sup>21</sup>, the researcher must ask a wide variety of questions about the period's intellectual, cultural, and social climates. Through the use of the paradigm of political culture, two very broad purposes will be achieved. First, the League will be explored as a concrete expression of popular thought and emotion rather than as an objective political structure. The second purpose, which will



necessarily be achieved in order to fulfill the first, is to place people's internalized experience of the NPL within the context of national intellectual life.

Basing a historical study upon a set of questions essentially borrowed from political science requires careful attention to scholarly tools, since some of those used by the social scientist -- such as the public opinion survey -- are not available to the historian. Instead, people's thoughts and feelings must be accessed through whatever paper trail has survived. The process of attempting to reconstruct the mental world of a particular group of people at a particular time is difficult, but in this case it is not impossible.

Political culture can be examined from a historical perspective. The theory that will be employed in this case, which carries with it a distinct methodology, involves the use of what has become known among labor historians as a "languages approach." This approach assumes that the "language" of a historical movement is not simply an expression of a particular pre-existing social reality. Instead, it proposes that language itself, through the way meanings are constructed, helps to shape the nature of social phenomena. According to Gareth Stedman Jones, an

articulate proponent of "languages", its methodology calls for

exploring the systematic relationship between terms and propositions within the language rather than setting particular propositions into direct relation to a putative experiential reality of which they [are] assumed to be the expression.<sup>22</sup>

Language co-exists with experience in a symbiotic relationship, and to understand the discursive process of the language-building of a particular social movement, in a large way, is to understand the movement itself. Exploring how such words as "socialism", "business", and "class" interacted with the League experience -- rather than viewing them as inert guideposts along the road to historical reality -- will clarify how the social and intellectual currents in which North Dakotans found themselves received expression in the political culture which produced the League and its opposition.

An analysis based on languages carries another powerful interpretive concept that is of particular use for examining the Nonpartisan era. According to historian Joan Wallach Scott,

. . . meaning is multidimensional, established relationally, directed at more than one auditor, framed in an already existing (discursive) field, establishing new fields at the same time. Positive definitions depend on negatives, indeed imply their existence in order to rule them out. This kind of interdependence has ramifications well beyond literal definitions.<sup>23</sup>

With the understanding that meaning is derived through the process of differentiation, the implication follows that the definition of a particular social phenomenon is arrived at both by affirmation and by negation.

This project will attempt to treat political culture in North Dakota during the Nonpartisan Era with special reference to three counties: Grand Forks, Burleigh, and Ward. These counties have been chosen for a number of reasons. First, each had a community with at least one daily newspaper during most of the NPL era, an important factor in obtaining a steady supply of editorial comment on local and state issues. Secondly, these counties provide as much economic and social diversity as possible while still fulfilling the first condition. Grand Forks county, in the extreme eastern end of the state, hosted small grain and potato farms while its main city of the same name -- home of the state university -- was increasingly becoming an urban, regional service center. The state capital of Bismarck is in Burleigh county, and is in the center of a major lignite coal district. Ward county, in north-central North Dakota, had both mining and agriculture while Minot, the county seat, was a railway hub. While many of the primary materials for this project come from these three

communities, documents from elsewhere in North Dakota and the United States have also been used.

It should also be noted that this thesis makes no attempt to retell the story of the League's rise and fall. This work has already been done more than adequately by Robert Morlan in Political Prairie Fire. Larry Remele's "Power to the People," which was cited above, is a good chapter-length account of the Nonpartisan League.

## NOTES

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6. Kathleen Moun, "Harvest of Discontent: The Social Origins of the Nonpartisan League, 1880-1922" (Ph.D. diss., University of California-Irvine, 1986).
7. Kim E. Nielsen, "'We All Leaguers by Our House:' Women, Suffrage, and Red-Baiting in the National Nonpartisan League," Journal of Women's History 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 46.
8. Robert Bahmer, "The Economic and Political Background of the Nonpartisan League" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1941).
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10. C.B. Macpherson, Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System, 2d ed., (Toronto: University of

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11. Theodore Saloutos, "The Rise of the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, 1915-1917," Agricultural History 20, no. 1, (January 1946), 47.

12. Political Prairie Fire, 34.

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16. Rozanne Lea Enerson, "The Bank of North Dakota: Implications for State-Ownership in a Modern Capitalist Economy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1981), 3.

17. Political Prairie Fire, preface.

18. History of North Dakota, 327.

19. "Power to the People," 92.

20. Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order 1877-1920, The Making of America, American Century Series, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 289.

21. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989), 13.

22. Gareth Stedman Jones, Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 21.

23. Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 59.

## CHAPTER II

### THESE ARE STIRRING TIMES:

#### The League and Perceived Limits of the Possible

"It is great to live in North Dakota -- even if we dont [sic] get any crops!" began a letter from a Leaguer commenting on the overwhelming success of the seven NPL-sponsored measures in the statewide referendum of June 1919. Despite the efforts of an increasingly organized opposition, Leaguers in control of the state government had received public support for the execution of their program of state ownership. Reporting to Henry Teigan, secretary of the NPL, Velva jeweler Oscar Anderson wrote glowingly of what this electoral triumph would mean to North Dakotans -- despite the effect of that summer's drought on the wheat crop -- and to Americans: "Reaction is in the saddle all over, but North Dakota is the one bright spot -- the star that is going to show the way for a greater Liberty and Democracy, the world over."<sup>1</sup> Although it is likely that some of Anderson's pro-League enthusiasm was calculated to please Secretary Teigan, whom Anderson addresses as "Friend Henry," this letter is

quite representative of other pro-NPL editorials and correspondences.

Perhaps the most striking feature in pro-League rhetoric -- found in the letters of ordinary North Dakotans like Oscar Anderson, on the editorial pages of such League newspapers as the Nonpartisan Leader and Fargo's Courier-News, and among the official remarks of such prominent NPL figures as Arthur Townley, Lynn Frazier, and Charles Edward Russell -- is its virtually unflagging optimism about the League's possibilities.<sup>2</sup> Enthusiasts were sure that the NPL was the means by which they would make their mark on the world through the "New Day."<sup>3</sup> As one Nonpartisan Leader editorial triumphantly announced,

The armies of progress are being organized. Their way is lighted by enthusiasm and loyalty to the cause. The bands are playing. The slogans of the people marching on to new and better things fill the air. The inspired army is passing your door. It is marching on to victory as certain as the rising sun tomorrow.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the martial imagery, Leaguers saw themselves not as revolutionaries but as redemptionists, responding to "a call to patriotic action"<sup>5</sup> which would "restore health and vigor to the political body."<sup>6</sup> The League's boosterish optimism -- which can in part be attributed to the NPL's roots in traditional agrarianism<sup>7</sup> -- did not obscure the fact that the League's political culture was based on an acceptance of conflict as a feature (although perhaps not an inevitable



feature) of political and economic life. One farmer wrote the Leader commenting on the "catalyptic [sic] fits that the political gangsters of this State are having over this organization of the farmers," and questioned the sincerity of those who ostensibly sought to protect the farmer from demagogues, asking, "Is it their fear for the welfare of the farmers -- or their fear of the march of justice?"<sup>8</sup>

In many ways a product of the culture of "business" itself, the League did not seek to distance itself from the material aspects of twentieth century life, nor did it lose faith in basic governmental structures. A Leader cartoon which portrayed an "Old Gang Politician" swinging a bludgeon labeled "Political Power" against an archetypical farmer was not intended to suggest that the democratic system itself was evil. Instead, said the cartoon's caption, the "purpose of the farmers' organization [the NPL] is to disarm this gentleman with the club and transfer the weapon to the farmers."<sup>9</sup> This cartoon captured the essentially utilitarian view of politics most Leaguers took. Political programs -- whether they were called "progressive," "radical," or anything else -- were to be judged on their usefulness. As a letter from a Grafton Leaguer indicates, farmers felt "the need of organization to effectualize our common want and recognize the necessity of accepting

leadership."<sup>10</sup> Yet Leaguers could not be force-fed ideology, for, to borrow a metaphor from steam engineering (or home brewing, each a possibility in 1916 North Dakota),

No doubt these men who engage to canvass for membership color their appeal with radical views on government and finance. However, such vaporings will become thoroughly cooled and condensed before they are codified.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, "radical views" were not to be rejected outright but rather made use of in whatever ways that suited the individual farmer.

However, while the Nonpartisan League did not call for an overturning of the political structure, it did seek a shift in political culture. The League challenged what was perhaps the central myth in popular political culture: that America was a classless society, and that class-based political movements were therefore a dangerous perversion of "Americanism". However, Leaguers thought that the NPL was a necessity to allow farmers to compete against other organized interests in an increasingly bureaucratized world. As League organizer Ray McKaig insisted, the NPL was "the modern product of a modern, economic and industrial and governmental need."<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not the League program lived up to the optimistic hopes of its supporters is not a relevant question for this investigation. In that regard, it is

vital to avoid the well baited historical trap of assuming that while the material world of the early Nonpartisans was fundamentally different from our own, the underlying cultural assumptions that formed the background for the choices and understandings of daily life were basically the same.<sup>13</sup> Thus, when discussing political culture, the danger is that we project our own ideas about the relationship between the individual and government onto these dead people. Lawrence Goodwyn made exactly this point about the Populists, that it is "quite difficult for people to grasp the scope of popular hopes that were alive in an earlier time when democratic expectations were larger than those people permit themselves to have today."<sup>14</sup> And yet, while the democratic expectations of Nonpartisan League members were large by today's standards -- and even, it should be noted, by the standards of their contemporary opponents -- they are no larger than those allowed by the "agrarian myth"<sup>15</sup> whose spirit of "lusty democracy and social equality"<sup>16</sup> formed an important part of the foundation of the NPL's political culture. The point here is not whether the League "led to" any other historic phenomena; it is rather that Leaguers believed the NPL offered a viable means of overcoming social and economic oppression and inaugurating a "New Day".

In Political Prairie Fire, Robert Morlan made the observation that

It has often been stated that the Republican party of North Dakota was captured in 1916 by the Nonpartisan League. It would actually be fully as correct to say that the Republican party was captured by the Republican voters of the state, who were using a political party as it is theoretically supposed to be used -- as a vehicle for carrying out the will of the majority of its members.<sup>17</sup>

In one sense, Morlan is absolutely correct. An important aspect of NPL rhetoric did emphasize that the League was nothing more than a tool by which farmers could recover their lost political rights. As Charles Russell contended, farmers themselves were responsible for their lack of political power since "they had the power at the ballot box and would not exercise it for themselves."<sup>18</sup> In his 1916 gubernatorial campaign, Lynn Frazier insisted that Leaguers were "law abiding citizens and were exercising their constitutional rights in seeking to elect men to public office" who would carry out the will of the majority of voters. A Minot newspaper, mildly supporting the League, subtitled this story "Frazier's Calm Address."<sup>19</sup> In this respect (although not in others), the League identified itself as politically moderate, and no different in theory from the received political culture. Both Leaguers and their opponents recognized that openness and moderation -- two essential characteristics of a stable democracy,

according to political scientists Almond and Verba<sup>20</sup>-- were cherished myths of the received political culture. Just as the League emphasized that one part of their political culture -- reasserting guaranteed constitutional rights -- was moderate, Leaguers joined Republicans, Democrats and Progressives in calling for an end to the shady back room deals of old-fashioned, bossist politics. The Leader, for example, promised it would be "a search light . . . that will illumine the secret chambers and expose to the gaze of the public the mysteries of the political conclave."<sup>21</sup>

John Fiske's Civil Government, a contemporary High School civics textbook cited positively in the IVA pamphlet "Treatise on Townleyism," made a very similar point. In a passage arguing for New England town meetings as the apotheosis of the democratic way, Fiske contended, "government by town-meeting is the form of government most effectively under watch and control. Everything is done in the full daylight of publicity."<sup>22</sup> And the chapter entitled "Let There Be Light" from Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom illustrates that the theme of openness as the solution to political and industrial injustice was a part of mainstream political thought. Said Wilson:

The people of the United States have decided to do a healthy thing for both politics and big business . . . They are going to open the doors; they are going to let up the blinds; they are going to drag sick things

into the open air and into the light of the sun.<sup>23</sup>

While opponents would brand the League leadership as un-American, Leaguers saw themselves as heirs to the legacy of American patriots standing up for their rights. For example, one Leader columnist connected the farmers' plight to the American Revolution<sup>24</sup>:

We farmers are over three-fourths of the people of the state and have about one-quarter of the representation in the state legislature. If that isn't taxation without representation what is?<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, a Leader advertisement urging NPL members to elect convention delegates, which included a strong dose of Populistic rhetoric (as well as a brief tangent into Utilitarianism)<sup>26</sup>, nevertheless tied the NPL message into a fairly conservative American mythology by featuring a portrait of George Washington, citing the Declaration of Independence in its headline, and telling readers that Washington -- a disinterested, apolitical patriot -- should be the model for delegates they selected. "Many twentieth century Washingtons are among you," assured the Leader. In an address commemorating Lincoln's birthday, League newspaperman David C. Coates (whom the Bismarck Tribune identified as the League's evil genius for a few months in the spring of 1916<sup>27</sup>) also looked to American history -- albeit rather fancifully -- for the League's ideological forebears, contending that the sixteenth president's

"revolutionary spirit and support of the people in their right to throw off existing constitutions or forms of government when they became burdensome" was in line with what the NPL sought to do.<sup>28</sup> Thus Dale Baum's argument that the League was founded on radical, millenarian principles and that A.C. Townley's rhetoric "had taken the League out of history itself"<sup>29</sup> is challenged by an abundance of evidence suggesting that Leaguers understood themselves to be firmly rooted in American historical traditions.

Another fairly conservative aspect of the League's political culture dealt with race and gender. While the League's political culture called for the increased power of its constituency (farm men), and to some degree for members of the working class, its vision of inclusion did not extend far beyond those categories. True, the League endorsed women's suffrage -- in 1917 Frazier opined that "if the men can't take enough interest in public affairs to clean things up, let us franchise the women and let them try it"<sup>30</sup> -- but this was not a very radical view in 1917. In terms of race relations, the Nonpartisan League also had something of a centrist stance. While not condoning the theme of anglophilist chauvinism which sometimes found voice in the popular press<sup>31</sup> -- the Commercial West, a regional financial journal, made the illogical observation that victory over

Germany in the European War was due to Anglo-Saxon superiority<sup>32</sup> -- the League was apparently not far outside its time with regards to non-European races. One of the few available references to non-European races in NPL-related literature concerns Native Americans. A suggested answer in the League correspondence course to the objection, "Suppose we do elect the farmers to office, they will not know enough to run things," told the wavering potential Leaguer, "Don't worry, the men who have the brains to run the farming industry of this country, have brains enough to run the state." And if farmers were not intelligent enough to "run things", then "we should be treated like Indians and made wards of the state."<sup>33</sup> This hints that, while the NPL arose in response to a political culture of exclusion, like the received political culture it had no radical program for inclusion by race or gender.

While in several ways the received political culture had much in common with that of the Nonpartisan League, there were also great differences. The League clearly recognized that their organization was a sharp break from the received political culture's emphasis on moderation for its own sake, on routine, and on classlessness. In a cover story jauntily entitled "The 'Good Old Days' are Gone," the Leader acknowledged as much:



In the "good old days" of party politics, the various bosses of the various parties simply put up the various candidates. Then they tipped off the daily press and the daily press tipped off the country weeklies and the country weeklies tipped off the farmers and the thing was done.<sup>34</sup>

The League self-consciously sought to end this practice.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of how completely the League message permeated North Dakota society comes, interestingly enough, from the NPL's opposition. Lewis F. Crawford, himself an IVA supporter, gave a first-hand account of the NPL era in his 1931 History of North Dakota (not to be confused with Elwyn Robinson's work of the same name):

We had League picnics, women's auxiliaries, public debates, newspaper controversies, iva's, special legislative sessions, HB 44 [House Bill 44, which outlined a new state constitution in line with NPL principles], farmer-owned banks, newspapers, stores and what nots . . . initiatives, referendums, and recalls that consumed the energy and disturbed the peace and quiet of every citizen from the mere voter to the Supreme Court. This controversy was not confined to officials, candidates for office or professional politicians. The daily life of even the common citizen was a round of bitter political acrimony in which each freely backed up his beliefs, however ill-founded many of them were, with his time and money.<sup>35</sup>

Crawford's book has been cited as primary evidence of the stormy North Dakota social and political climate of the late 1910s and early 1920s.<sup>36</sup> For our purposes, it is another illustration of the degree to which the League message found

its way into the consciousness of friend and foe alike. Yet Crawford's remarkable statement is useful in another way. The present discussion seeks to explicate how the Nonpartisan League constituted -- during its five years in power -- a partial shattering of the boundaries and definitions of the received political culture. By closely examining Lewis Crawford's description of the NPL era, we can begin to draw an accurate picture of that political culture.

Social conservatism was perhaps the most striking feature of the political culture outlined by Crawford. Much value was placed on "peace and quiet", while the person supporting his political beliefs with "time and money" possessed, not the courage of his convictions, but a dangerous level of political partisanship. Also clearly enunciated in Crawford's statement was the belief that the "mere voter" had a relationship to the political system significantly different, and significantly more passive, than that of "officials". As chapter three will show, this political culture was in part an aspect of the rise of the urban, middle-class, business standard as a central myth of American citizenship. To the representatives of the state's existing power structures, the League's political nature was truly dangerous. The Grand Forks Herald, the League's most

consistent and articulate critic, clarified this point in an editorial entitled "The Right and the Wrong Way," which contrasted the activities of the Society of Equity with those of the NPL. While launching a standard attack against the League as "being managed in an autocratic, dictatorial and thoroughly un-American manner" by "C.A. Townley [sic] . . . a political shyster and business incompetent," the article's title gives away its more basic message: that class-based political action on the part of farmers was "wrong". The Equity was "a business organization . . . concerned with lightening the labors and improving the condition of men and women on the farms." The League, on the other hand, was an organization "whose avowed object is the capture of the state legislature and executive and administrative officers of the state," making it, the Herald charged, "a political organization pure and simple."<sup>37</sup>

(chapter three will discuss how the words "business" and "politics" were used as rhetorical polarities, the former a label of legitimacy and the latter a badge of corruption.) Thus the Herald, like Lewis Crawford and many other North Dakotans of the day, saw intense political partisanship as an aberration. At best it meant a benighted return to the bad old days of "irresponsibility in a disorganized society"<sup>38</sup>. At worst, the League's partisanship seemed to

signal a future of "occupational prejudice, and class hatred and mutual suspicions among citizens."<sup>39</sup> Making a rather similar point, League newspaperman Charles E. Russell argued before the American Sociological Society that, before the coming of the NPL, it was "under the cloak of partisan fervor that the agents of the corporation got into office and controlled the state's affairs."<sup>40</sup> Thus both the proponents of the received political culture and those of the NPL agreed that "partisanship" was unhealthy. However, well aware that the League called for a new conception of how citizens related to government, Russell distanced his organization from the taint of partisanship, for the League "meddled with no man's politics"<sup>41</sup>-- after all, was it not a "nonpartisan" league?

While the NPL rejected the gospel of moderation in all things political (meanwhile attempting to avoid "partisanship"), it was an article of faith for the opposition. For the Bismarck Tribune, this meant an adherence to the existing two-party system that proscribed extra-party tactics. "If the farmers cannot bring about necessary reforms through the Republican and Democratic party," editorialized the Tribune, "they certainly will never reach the desired goal by a non-partisan organization."<sup>42</sup> This faith, however, also contained a strong

element of what Lawrence Goodwyn has called "political resignation"<sup>43</sup> since, the Tribune believed, "it is impossible to compel good times or to legislate prosperity."<sup>44</sup> This idea, as has been shown, was in direct conflict with the NPL's culture of political optimism (although both Leaguers and their opponents tended to be "boomers" when it came to a belief in material progress). The attitude of Minot's Optic-Reporter is particularly useful in clarifying the nature of the received political culture as during the 1916 primaries the paper was still attempting to maintain an objective editorial stance toward the Nonpartisan League. Early in June the Optic-Reporter gently accused the anti-League Grand Forks Herald of immoderation, while reassuring readers as to the essential moderation of the state's rural population, saying that "from reading the editorial opinions of the Grand Forks Herald, one would think the North Dakota farmer was an anarchist rather than a peaceful, law-abiding citizen."<sup>45</sup> However, the Minot newspaper was well aware that North Dakota had seen nothing like the 1916 political campaign for years, and in an editorial entitled "The Slaughter of the Innocents," suggested that political controversy was a sign of democracy at work. Furthermore, the campaign proved that

North Dakota's voters could "not be led by the nose nor have their minds made up for them by others."<sup>46</sup>

Certainly the 1916 campaign was very different from those before it. On the eve of the 1912 primaries, the Grand Forks Herald declared that it was endorsing no candidates, because

the selection of candidates within the party is largely a matter of personal preference, and, taking for granted the general fitness of the men who offer themselves for those positions, voters will naturally be influenced largely by their acquaintance with the men, and their personal friendship for them. For the important places on the ticket there are plenty of good men to choose from.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the paper that led the anti-League crusade beginning almost with the League's birth abstained from taking sides in the 1912 split within the Republican party. Also evident is a curiously apolitical interpretation of the political system. Voters, it assumed, would be swayed not by debates over substantive issues nor by appeals to party loyalty, but rather by social reasons, the bonds of "personal friendship." The Bismarck Tribune made similar points about the 1912 elections, finding that

after a glance over the state papers of the past week, we have concluded that never before in the history of the state have such capable and patriotic citizens yielded to the solicitations of their friends [and] become candidates for public office.<sup>48</sup>

Again, here we see a political culture based on social relationships, and not necessarily on party loyalty. It

should be noted that while the NPL experience did stretch the definitions of political culture, the League also made use of pre-existing community and social relationships in building up its political organization.<sup>49</sup>

An even more consistent theme in the 1912 campaign, however, was an attempt by party leaders to distance themselves and their candidates from the old-fashioned taint of party politics. In the party platform for that year, North Dakota's Democrats eschewed the interparty challenges of 1908 and, looking back to the election of 1896, located the birth of a nonpartisan ideology. "We have witnessed in the last sixteen years," said the platform,

the growth and development of the principles advocated by that fearless leader of the people, Hon. W.J. Bryan of Nebraska, and we realize that through his great efforts the truths and principles for which he has fought, are receiving the endorsements of Democrats and Republicans alike throughout the United States.<sup>50</sup>

The central issue facing North Dakota Republicans in 1912 was how to deal with Theodore Roosevelt's "bolt" from the party following the nomination of William Howard Taft for the presidency. In order to avoid further division within the state party -- between the "stand-pat" conservatives and the "insurgents" -- the State Committee endorsed neither candidate. "While we remain firm in our allegiance to the Republican party," stated the Committee, "we insist that the support of the presidential nominee shall not be a test of

party loyalty."<sup>51</sup> Thus in the mood of the political culture of 1912, the party sidestepped the knotty issue of partisanship.

The Bismarck Tribune, however, did make a Republican presidential endorsement for 1912, and the language used shows that paper's conception of the evolution of North Dakotan political culture. Comparing the two candidates, the Tribune characterized Roosevelt as "energetic, impulsive, ambitious, fiery, and magnetic," admirable qualities to be sure, but ones which, according to the Bismarck paper, were artifacts from America's stormy political past. Instead, Taft's "judicial, sane, [and] conservative" outlook was the prescription for the ills of modern America and the preventative medicine for a healthy future, since "we already know what the problems are before the people. The thing to do is work them out."<sup>52</sup> So in the last presidential election before the Nonpartisan Era, political rhetoric emphasized moderation, mild partisanship (if not outright nonpartisanship), and, as chapter three will discuss, businesslike efficiency. As we have seen, these qualities were not obvious in the 1916 election.

It was from this ideological environment that the League's political culture emerged. While often employing the language of moderation, League proponents and their foes



recognized that the NPL was not politics as usual. It has been observed that seizure of the mechanism of state government was only an immediate objective for the League, a means of obtaining much larger -- and somewhat more nebulous -- goals. Following the NPL's electoral successes in November of 1916, Charles E. Russell reported that the League was "committed to a program of social reforms more radical than any state in this Union has undertaken or contemplated."<sup>53</sup> In the words of A.C. Townley, the League had "the power to not only wrest control of the state from the Big Plutocrats but to enable you to become an independent farmer and enjoy life in the way that you are entitled to enjoy it."<sup>54</sup> And League opponents, to whom the appearance of the NPL constituted a "very real and present danger," were also convinced that the farmers' organization represented something new and powerful.<sup>55</sup> What this power represented, and what it threatened, deserves closer scrutiny.

To varying degrees, scholars analyzing the motivation for the League's opposition have concluded that a fear of "socialism" was a factor. This argument is not without merit: for example, the Bismarck Tribune's labeling of the League leadership as "a group of Socialist and I.W.W. agitators"<sup>56</sup> in the spring of 1916 was not an atypical

description by the opposition press, and references to socialism would flourish following the country's entry into the World War in 1917. However, Robinson's contention that League opponents were not "ready for state socialism on a broad front, nor were they willing to turn the state over to Townley and a group of Socialists" seems to overstate the role of socialism as a divisive issue.<sup>57</sup> Certainly, by 1920 the word "socialism" was a key weapon in the anti-League arsenal. An editorial of that year in the Bismarck Tribune presented the "Case of North Dakota Against Townley" and bitterly accused the League president of "stealing the Republican organization and exploiting it for socialistic purposes." Furthermore, said the Tribune, Townley operated on "principles of socialism, bolshevism, and communism" while League candidates were "in every instance avowed socialists and in many instances registered socialists."<sup>58</sup> Four years earlier, however, also in the Tribune, a similar piece appeared, equally adamant in opposing the League. Yet in the entire text of this lengthy advertisement (this time actually labeled as such), "socialism" was only mentioned twice, and in a rather different way. Certain members of the League, said the ad,

had been identified with the Socialist organization of the state, but had failed to make great headway in the working out of plans for their personal advantage because others, who were honestly convinced of the

soundness of the principles of Socialism, objected to the exploitation of the organization for private advantage.<sup>59</sup>

Even in the Grand Forks Herald, anti-League editorials before the 1916 primary election placed emphasis, not on "socialism", but on such matters as the presumed irresponsibility of League leadership, the NPL's appeal to occupationally-based class divisions, and on role of farmers in economic and political life.

Thus, in 1916 the word "socialism" had a cachet of near respectability. Activist Henry Martinson recalled that in the years before the League's rise, Socialists were frequently treated with tolerance by local business people. In Minot, said Martinson, they

theorized, if the crazy socialists want to hold meetings, sing their songs and make their speeches without bothering us too much with their peculiar ideas, we can manage to live with them.<sup>60</sup>

However, by 1920 "socialism" had lost nearly all meaning for North Dakota's conservative element except as a pejorative. And yet the Bismarck editorialist in 1916 was clearly disturbed about the League, as was the Herald, which darkly called the NPL primary victories "one of the greatest political upheavals in the history of the state."<sup>61</sup> As has been suggested, it was not simply, or solely, "socialism" that motivated such reactions. Therefore, one must look for additional clues in locating the fundamentally disturbing

element in the League message. As has already been suggested, and as chapter five will argue in detail, the League's organization of political power on the basis of class was at the heart of the controversy.

Returning to Morlan's suggestion that the League's "seizure" of the Republican party was nothing more than a political party achieving its theoretical purpose, it can be said that in a span of a little over one year, NPL members crossed the bridge from democratic myth to political reality. Quite suddenly in North Dakota there ceased to be a gulf between how citizens in a democracy are legally permitted to act and what they actually do. North Dakotans were aware that "the ordinary citizen is not an ideal citizen" in terms of making demands of the political system.<sup>62</sup> As a pamphlet promoting the League's recommended reading list indicates, the NPL was conscious that the political culture was being stretched in new ways. "These are stirring times," intoned the pamphlet's author, "Events are moving rapidly. History is in the making before your eyes . . . you want to be able to have a part in the big fight for political control in the campaign."<sup>63</sup> Yet despite the rhetoric of change, the new political culture of the Nonpartisan League was a tool for inclusion, not an ideology

of revolution. As the above example illustrates, Leaguers wanted "control" within the twentieth century world.

## NOTES

1. Oscar Anderson to H.G. Teigan, 29 June 1919, National Nonpartisan League Papers, Microfilm copy in Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, of original in Minnesota Historical Society.

2. Robert H. Bahmer suggested that optimism was in sharp contrast to the gloomy era of Populism. "The Economic and Political Background of the Nonpartisan League" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1941), 32.

3. The "New Day" became a sort of shorthand for the League's governmental program.

4. "Are You Cast on a Desert of Doubt?", The Nonpartisan Leader, 22 February 1917, 3.

5. "League Members, Attention! A Call to Patriotic Action!", The Nonpartisan Leader, 10 February 1916, 3.

6. "Getting Ready to Carry the State," The Nonpartisan Leader, 30 September 1915, 1.

7. Paul H. Johnstone contended that optimism was a key component of American agrarianism. "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," in U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farmers in a Changing World: The 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture (Washington: GPO, 1940), 129-131 passim.

8. "The League and Its Newspaper are Welcomed," The Nonpartisan Leader, 28 October 1915, 3.

9. "It's Just a Matter of Transferring the Club to a New Individual," The Nonpartisan Leader, 1 March 1917, 3.

10. "League Defended by Granton Man," The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 7 March 1916, 10.

11. Ibid.

12. "Farm Union Coming to Colorado to Emancipate Farmers of the State," The Great Divide (Denver), 24 January 1917, p. 1, in National Nonpartisan League Papers.

13. It might be argued that the reverse is more the case. For people of the NPL era, one might borrow from Robert H. Wiebe in speaking of the "irrelevance of government to most citizens' lives." Yet Leaguers drove automobiles, watched movies, and ate prepackaged foods. The Search for Order, 1877-1920, The Making of America, American Century Series (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 36.

14. Lawrence Goodwyn, The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), xiv.

15. In this still-influential interpretation, Richard Hofstadter argued that while the agrarian myth portrayed farmers as the bedrock of American society, in reality agriculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was increasingly on the periphery of urban-dominated, industrial America. The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 23-59 passim.

16. "Old Ideas Versus New Ideas," 120.

17. Political Prairie Fire, 76.

18. Russell, "The Non-Partisan League," 35.

19. "Non Partisan Special Here Last Evening," Minot Daily Optic-Reporter, 24 June 1916, 1.

20. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989), 86.

21. "Getting Ready to Carry the State," 1.

22. John Fiske, Civil Government in the United States Considered With Some Reference to its Origins (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 30.

23. Woodrow Wilson, The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1913), 116.

24. Theodore Saloutos wrote that Leaguers' arguments for assuming political control of the state resembled those of the French physiocrats "who strongly upheld the superiority of agriculture over other forms of economic activity." However, it will be suggested later that one need look no further than American agrarian fundamentalism for Leaguers' justification. See, Theodore Saloutos, "The Rise of the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, 1915-1917," Agricultural History 20, no. 1 (January 1946), 49.

25. Eric Moen, "We Let the Other Fellow Make the Rules of the Game," The Nonpartisan Leader, 13 January 1916, 7.

26. Although the League worked very hard to distance itself from Populism as a failed political movement, as the language demonstrates it made frequent use of Populist themes. This ad, for example, begins with a paragraph which includes the sentence, "If you should cease to labor every town and city, every railroad, every bank and business house would go out of existence." Further on the reader is told that the agenda of the farmer legislators, whom his vote would help elect, would be "THE GREATEST GOOD FOR THE GREATEST NUMBER." "League Members, Attention!", 3.

27. For example, a Tribune editorial asked "can Coates, the associate of "Bloody" Bridle Waites [sic] of Colorado, tame the bulls and bears of Wall Street, terminate their operations and deliver them bound hand and foot to the farmers of North Dakota?" As chapter three will discuss the reference to Populism (Waite) and the hopelessness of fundamental reform were common themes among anti-Leaguers. "North Dakota's Crisis," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 9 June 1916, 4.

28. "Lincoln -- The Truth About Him," The Nonpartisan Leader, 22 February 1917, 8.

29. Dale Baum, "The New Day in North Dakota: The Nonpartisan League and the Politics of Negative Revolution," North Dakota History 40, no. 2 (Spring 1973), 14.

30. "Governor Frazier is Heckled by New Yorkers," Grand Forks Herald, 14 April 1917, 4.

31. The League, of course, wanted to avoid alienating its membership, which in North Dakota included many people of German and Norwegian extraction.



32. "Placing the Blame for the Downfall of Germany," Commercial West: A Weekly Financial Journal, 11 January 1919, 8.

33. The League Correspondence Course, Organization Work, Lesson VII ([Minneapolis?]: [National Nonpartisan League?], [ca. 1917]), 5, Nonpartisan League Pamphlets. Minnesota Historical Society.

34. "The 'Good Old Days' Are Gone," The Nonpartisan Leader, 13 January 1916, 1.

35. Lewis F. Crawford, History of North Dakota (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1931), 3 vols., vol. 1., 420.

36. Robert Bahmer, for example, made use of Crawford's book in his dissertation. "The Economic and Political Background of the Nonpartisan League," 464.

37. "The Right and the Wrong Way," The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 16 May 1916, 4.

38. The Search for Order, 39.

39. Reasons Why Good Citizens Cannot Vote for Lynn J. Frazier for United States Senate if They Want to be Honest with Themselves and Loyal to Their State and Nation, (Fargo: [Independent Voters Association], 1922), pamphlet in the Theodore G. Nelson Papers.

40. Charles Edward Russell, "The Non-Partisan League," in Papers and Proceedings, Eleventh Annual Meeting, American Sociological Society: The Sociology of Rural Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 35.

41. Ibid.

42. "North Dakota's Crisis," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 9 June 1916, 4.

43. The Populist Moment, xv.

44. "North Dakota's Crisis," 4.

45. No title, Minot Daily Optic-Reporter, 16 June 1916, 2.

46. "The Slaughter of the Innocents," Minot Daily Optic-Reporter, 28 June 1916, 2.
47. "This Week's Election," The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 27 June 1912, 8.
48. "News of the State," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 2 May 1912, 3.
49. Kathleen Moun, "Harvest of Discontent: The Social Origins of the Nonpartisan League, 1880-1922," (Ph.D. diss., University of California-Irvine, 1986), 9.
50. Warren A. Henke, Prairie Politics: Parties and Platforms in North Dakota 1889-1914, ([Bismarck]: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1974), 122.
51. Ibid., 127.
52. "Taft and Roosevelt," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 28 May 1912, 4.
53. Russell, "The Non-Partisan League," 32.
54. A.C. Townley to League members [form letter], ca. August 1916, National Nonpartisan League Papers.
55. "North Dakota is Facing a Crisis," 2.
56. "Its Leadership," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 4 May 1916, 4.
57. Elwyn B. Robinson, History of North Dakota (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 347.
58. "Case of North Dakota Against Townley," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 26 June 1920, 4.
59. "North Dakota is Facing a Crisis," 2.
60. Henry R. Martinson, "Comes the Revolution . . . A Personal Memoir," North Dakota History 36, no. 1 (Winter 1969), 72.
61. "Farmers' Nonpartisan League Scores Remarkable Victory; Nominates All Its Candidates," The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 1 July 1916, 1.

62. The Civic Culture, 340.
63. National Non Partisan League Loan Library,  
pamphlet, National Nonpartisan League Papers.

## CHAPTER III

### THE STATE IS A GREAT BUSINESS CORPORATION:

#### The Language of Business and the Politics of Hegemony

As chapter two has demonstrated, the Nonpartisan League represented a break from and a challenge to the predominant political culture of North Dakota in the 1910s. While League leaders obviously saw themselves as foes of business in the sense of "unshackling the farmers from the blighting grasp of Big Business,"<sup>1</sup> it is also clear that the anti-"business" stance of the League was a reaction not only against the economic exploitation of grain buyers and railroads but to "the rule of business goals and methods in government."<sup>2</sup> For although North Dakota was a predominately agricultural state, the business standard had penetrated to the heart of the state's political culture. Indeed, many observers told farmers they needed to come to

a realization of the fact that if their business is to succeed it must be conducted with the same attention to business methods that has been found necessary in the management of commercial or a manufacturing business.<sup>3</sup>

However, farmers were not -- at least not immediately -- to become middle-class businessmen equal to the merchants and

professionals in town. Rather, they were to accept the paternalistic guidance of merchants and bankers -- particularly bankers -- who had, it was insisted, the same interests as the farmer. While League farmers accepted the material -- and to a limited extent, cultural -- aspects of modernity, they specifically rejected the implication built into the prevailing definition of "business" which cast them as increasingly passive subjects to the economic and political workings of twentieth century America. By the late 1910s, "business" was a shibboleth for political, economic, and social equality. It was against this range of definitions, implying submission and humiliation for the farmer, that the Nonpartisan League rebelled, while never denying that farmers were eager to compete in a modern world economy. An examination of how the meanings of "business" were construed in the first half of the decade illustrates the prevalence of the business world to which the League was opposed.

In 1912, the year of the last presidential election before the Nonpartisan Era, the most popular word in the vocabulary of North Dakota political campaigners was "business". In preparation for the state's June primaries of that year, the Bismarck Daily Tribune endorsed Louis B. Hanna for governor. Said the Tribune, "The state of North

Dakota needs at this time above all things a business administration of its affairs," and a vote for the Republican Hanna would be "a vote for business competency."<sup>4</sup> Fargo attorney James E. Robinson, running for a seat on the North Dakota supreme court, listed as one of his qualifications "a practical knowledge of law and of common business affairs."<sup>5</sup> Frank S. Henry, a candidate for Secretary of State, opined that "the state offices are a business proposition."<sup>6</sup> "Business" qualifications were also important in local races. The Tribune backed E.H.L. Vesperman for Fifth District Burleigh County Commissioner because, "if there is a county office that requires the services of a successful business man it is the board of county commissioners."<sup>7</sup> So potent was the word "business" that a few candidates identified themselves in contrast to it. Harry W. Sims, running for Burleigh County register of deeds, acknowledged and rejected the business standard by stating in his political announcement "I am not a Real Estate Agent, Insurance Agent or Money Loaner, but a working man."<sup>8</sup> The Iconoclast, official organ of North Dakota socialism, made much the same point about campaign rhetoric. Slamming the "Demo-Rep. papers of the entire state," the Minot-based paper jeered, "every man mentioned for any office these jobberwocks laud as a *business man*."<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, the word "business" had powerful associations. Yet why did such a concept, ostensibly connected with commerce and urbanity, have such relevance in a state whose 1910 population was 72% rural?<sup>10</sup> As we will see, a reference to "business" brought with it a host of understandings, both inclusive and exclusive.

In the broadest sense, the rhetoric of business demonstrates a connection between North Dakota political culture and some of the main themes of Progressivism, "the only reform movement ever experienced by the whole American nation."<sup>11</sup> As a solution to the uncertainties of a world in flux, Progressive leaders sought to impose rational controls upon society through methods of efficiency, professionalism, and scientific process.

In North Dakota, historians have pointed to the administration of Governor John Burke (1906-1912) as the "high point" of state Progressivism.<sup>12</sup> In its 1908 platform, North Dakota's Democratic Party praised Burke's record in a statement that reveals much about the state's political culture and the influence of Progressivism:

We congratulate the people of this state for their independence, wisdom, and patriotism in rising above the desire for party success and voting for a Governor who places the welfare of the state above political expediency . . . Since the day of his qualification he has given his entire time and attention to the office, and has been and is now Governor in every sense. He has not been content with merely performing the duties

of his own office, but has in addition thereto, exercised a supervision and control over every other department within his sphere. He has been efficient, faithful, and fearless . . .<sup>12</sup>

The point must be made that the Progressive era was a time of fluctuating party lines. While the split within the national Republican party before the 1912 election is well known, North Dakota Republicanism was also highly factional during the pre-League era, with the party divided between conservatives and "progressives." Business virtues were supposed to be an answer to the stress of political factionalism. To the Progressive-leaning Ward County Reporter, in a 1910 editorial, good government was simply another form of commerce: "The state is a great business corporation erected and maintained by the people. The voters are the directors and elect the officials."<sup>14</sup>

The Democrats' endorsement of Burke's governorship is a fine illustration of the political manifestation of Progressivist ideology, which, according to Robert H. Wiebe, called for "trained, professional servants [who] would staff a government broadly and continuously involved in society's operations."<sup>15</sup> According to the statement, Burke devoted his full time to the governorship. However, he acted as an "efficient" administrator rather than as a party boss working with an eye to "political expediency." There was no fear of big government expressed here, no sense that Burke's



interest in other state departments might be read as a symptom of an inordinately powerful executive branch. Instead, the Democratic endorsement pointed toward an optimistic faith in "the almost unlimited potentialities of science and administration"<sup>16</sup> that characterized Progressivism.

The state's other political parties (with the exception of the Socialists) also promised a brighter future via efficiency. The 1912 platform of the North Dakota Progressives, for example, condemned the "corrupt servants"<sup>17</sup> of both the Republican and Democratic parties and boldly claimed, "never doubt that a braver, fairer, cleaner America surely will come; that a better and brighter life for all beneath the flag surely will be achieved."<sup>18</sup> Thus it is difficult to support Dale Baum's contention that the Nonpartisan League was unique in attempting to bury "a corrupt past"<sup>19</sup> and build a shining future. At least before the European war, all political factions in North Dakota (excluding, perhaps, radical socialists) were of a similar opinion in this regard.

In the years immediately preceding the League's rise, one notes in political discourse an effort to separate governmental businesslike efficiency -- depicted as an agent of betterment -- from politics, which had become a word

loaded with associations of corruption.<sup>20</sup> A political advertisement for George J. Smith, who sought the Republican gubernatorial nomination for 1916, illustrates how packed with meaning the terminology had become. In the ad, a head-and-shoulders photo of Smith (whom the League would revile as an "Old Gang"-style politician for seeking the NPL endorsement) hovers Magritte-like over the state capitol building. Across the top of the advertisement reads "George J. Smith for Governor," and, below the illustrations, runs the ad's entire text, in bold letters: "**Business-Not Politics.**"<sup>21</sup>

While a connection between Progressivist reform and the language of business seems clear, it should be acknowledged that reform as the business of government in the state of North Dakota did not spring directly from the brains of Progressive leaders. Language relating "business" to politics existed long before the Progressive Era. For example, John Fiske's civics text, which influenced IVA thought, told students that "questions of civil government are practical business questions."<sup>22</sup> Yet while Fiske in his understanding of "business" already posited professionals at the governmental helm -- either men with "some special training" or those able to devote all their "time and attention" to the task<sup>23</sup> -- he did not envision new and

sweeping roles for government as an agent of social betterment, whereas Leaguers, and in a different way Progressives, would.

Just as the link between politics and business was not simply the creation of Progressives, the reaction against the implications of that relationship was not born with the Nonpartisan League. Issues such as electoral reform, increased public support for education, and regulation of big business (particularly railroads) were very much a part of Populism. These and other themes were sufficiently germane to bring about the election of a Populist North Dakota governor in 1892. However, state Populism under governor Eli Shortridge was, according to Elwyn Robinson, "a failure."<sup>24</sup> Yet the Populist experience remained relevant during the Progressive and NPL eras. On the one hand, Populism was a source of reformist ideas, while on the other hand it served as a political reference point for the League and its enemies as an example of farm-based political movements gone wrong, which one researcher has called the "'lesson' of Populism" for North Dakota's farmers.<sup>25</sup> Ever on the offensive, the Grand Forks Herald in June of 1916 warned that the NPL was akin to the "wild and reckless experiment" of Kansas Populism, only worse. Whereas Kansas Populism was at least "a popular movement" -- albeit one

that appealed to people "who did not stop to think" -- the NPL was the artificial creation of "agitators . . . in response to no popular demand and who sought to give expression to no popular sentiment."<sup>26</sup>

Yet the underlying ideological similarities between the Nonpartisan League and the People's Party were clear to others besides the adamantine Jerry Bacon, editor of the Herald. In early 1921, a cattle dealer from McLeod commented on the NPL's recent political setbacks and judged that the League would eventually make "a complete failure of everything like Farmers Alliance [the farm organization which formed an important Populist power base] did in 91 & 92."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the League usually tried to distance itself, not from the agrariansim of Populism, but from Populism as a political movement. As NPL organizer Ray McKaig told one audience:

Don't think the Farmer's Non-Partisan Political League is a revival of the Populist party. It isn't. It's the modern product of a modern, economic and industrial and governmental need. It's not an invention. It's an evolutionary movement.<sup>28</sup>

In his statement, McKaig made three important points. The NPL, he insisted, was not to be seen as a child of failed political movements of the past. Second, the League was modern, proactive, forward-looking, and no enemy of scientific and technological progress ("an evolutionary

movement"). And third, the NPL was not the artificial creation of a gang of demagogues but a natural ("evolutionary") reaction to economic and industrial conditions in the United States.

The political culture of the NPL accepted that competition was a part of economic life, and the League program called for farmers to unite as a class to compete within it. It specifically did not ask farmers to remove themselves from the struggle. The received political culture also saw life as competitive,<sup>29</sup> but looked for individual striving rather than class combinations as a sign of a healthy society. Woodrow Wilson's "men who are on the make"<sup>30</sup> were the ideal citizens. The Bismarck Tribune's endorsement of W.P. Tuttle for U.S. Congressman from the Second District also illustrates this concept. The paper called 1912 "a practical age in a practical state" and stressed that Tuttle, "a big man physically, mentally, and in the world of business" believed "that humanity has the first claim to the attention of the successful man." However, Tuttle "wants all classes treated alike."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Tuttle's business successes were thought to give him a special obligation to serve, but also by implication a special qualification. Who better to represent a practical state than a practical (and successful) man of affairs? The

Mandan Pioneer in backing L.B. Hanna for governor made the point of business qualifications even more clearly:

There is no question that the interests of the people and the great middle classes of business men have suffered, especially in North Dakota, because of the dislike of competent business men to get into politics.<sup>32</sup>

Also present in the endorsements of both Tuttle and Hanna is the idea that no "class" merits privileged treatment, which meant, at least to many Republicans, that no "special interest" should expect governmental protection. Instead, government's role, in Theodore Roosevelt's words, was to foster a "square deal" which would allow "a more substantial equality of opportunity and of reward for equally good service."<sup>33</sup> Wilsonian Democrats had a similar appreciation for free competition in which government's job should be "to break every kind of monopoly, and to set men free, upon a footing of equality, upon a footing of opportunity, to match their brains and their energies."<sup>34</sup> This was an obvious contradiction to the League's spirit of collective action.

"Business", then, in the pre-League era also had a definite taste of Social Darwinism. Tracy R. Bangs, prominent Grand Forks attorney, told the 1916 graduating class of Minot High School that "the world does not owe any one a living but it does offer the opportunity to earn a living."<sup>35</sup> Speaking editorially to the same graduates, the

Minot Reporter portrayed an even harsher picture of modern life. Said the Reporter:

The world is pitiless [sic]. He who is unable to stand masterfully in the severest competition will go down like the poor speller in the old-time spelling contests. Only those who are strong can survive . . . . The one who shirks neither irksome effort nor tiresome drudgery comes in a winner.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, on the eve of the Nonpartisan League's rise, understandings of "business" were a central ideological feature in North Dakota's political culture. Politicians, journalists, and other public figures supposed that these associations were mostly positive, with images of order, thrift, and professional efficiency; the antidotes to what were seen as chaotic political and social environments. This view, although it embraced reform, was essentially conservative, whether it was propounded by Democrat, Republican, or Progressive. Lawrence Goodwyn in The Populist Moment has characterized this attitude as a "sophisticated despair, grounded in the belief that hierarchical American society could, perhaps, be marginally 'humanized' but could not be fundamentally democratized."<sup>37</sup> The Nonpartisan League, when it emerged, recognized that American, and North Dakotan, society was indeed hierarchically ordered, but it set out to upset that order in the farmer's favor. In the words of one Leaguer, the NPL marked "an epoch in the hard, bitter struggle of the producing class towards the ultimate

goal of industrial and political justice."<sup>38</sup> As we have seen, the League's brash optimism about its ability to deliver social justice marked a basic philosophic difference between itself and opponents. A tract produced by the anti-League Independent Voters Association (IVA) argued that

Progress has been made in the matter of making the earth a better place for man, but to think that anything even approaching perfection can be obtained by political action or a sudden overthrow of established methods, is a dream.<sup>39</sup>

In identifying business as the very framework of the existing social and political order, Leaguers obviously opposed the top-hatted, Minneapolis-dwelling agent of "Big Biz." But they did not necessarily reject every definition implied in the word "business." Indeed, Leaguers accepted the capitalist world as a given (although they did not accept the idea of their subordination within it). For example, for a time the Leader had a regular page relating to what later generations would call agribusiness, telling readers that farming really was a business that required "brain work,"<sup>40</sup> and urging them to keep better records, practice methods of soil conservation, and so on. As one historian has observed, the League leadership did make a concerted effort "to attack and destroy the image of the yeoman farmer"<sup>41</sup> as it urged farmers toward modernization, efficiency, and collectivity. Thus Leaguers did not rebel



against the business world but, through the League's program of state ownership, reached for a more powerful position within it. Some researchers have found this position somewhat ambiguous. To one scholar analyzing selected speeches of A.C. Townley, "it appear[ed] antithetical that Townley so strongly supported state-ownership while proclaiming the democratic principles of majority rule and free enterprise."<sup>42</sup> Yet as this thesis has argued, Leaguers generally took a utilitarian view of the NPL program. Whether or not state ownership constituted "socialism" was a less relevant question than whether it worked. League literature also made the point that farmers were not like businessmen in town, contending "the farmer is the only business man in existence who sells at wholesale and buys at retail."<sup>43</sup> Farmers were to become businessmen, not in order to surrender to "business" but to compete with it.

The League's selection and rejection of various aspects of the business standard also led to a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the merchants and bankers in the local Commercial Clubs. The language of business expressed a booming vision of progress. The League had no quarrel with this part of the definition of "business". As we have seen, the League took from the agrarian creed an "extraordinary optimism" for the future,<sup>44</sup> a spirit that probably no

Commercial Club in the state would have disputed. The Leader did not vilify (and even demonize) local bankers, merchants, and professionals to the extent it did the city-dwelling stooges of "Big Biz." Indeed, League leaders emphasized that local business people were not necessarily the farmers' enemy, since they also suffered from the price-fixing of corporate America. As League orator O.M. Thomason told a Minot audience:

We warn you [local businessmen] not to accept without salt the servile tools of big business and the whimpering whine of the soreheaded politicians. This is a business proposition. Look at it like level-headed and sensible business men. We are not trying to eliminate the local business man. We are trying to save him -- from big business by first saving ourselves.<sup>45</sup>

Even while claiming that local business was not an enemy, however, Thomason also made clear that farmers and business people did not have identical interests, and that farmers were able to liberate themselves without assistance. Yet the League and the Commercial Clubs had a similar conception of the role of the individual relative to the community in the great work ahead.<sup>46</sup> A correspondence course for NPL organizers recommended that as part of the field worker's sales pitch, farmers should be reminded that "Things are moving pretty fast these days," and "The farmer who realizes conditions, who wants them changed but won't help change them, is a **slacker**."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the readers of the Grand

Forks Commercial Club's Bulletin were informed that "Grand Forks residents who take no part in affairs of civic and business advancement are stealing rides on the chariot of progress."<sup>48</sup> However, while agreeing that the chariot would be named "progress", the NPL and the Commercial Clubs disagreed sharply over who would be driving it.

Use of the word "business" included an appeal to social and political stability, but it also implied the hegemony of the business standard -- in the words of a contemporary observer, "the discipline of the city's domination"<sup>49</sup> --, and thus the political, social, and economic subordination of the farmer. Minot's Iconoclast well recognized the dark side of the language of business, when it charged "'business men and business interests' absolutely and completely dominate the expressed principles of men in all walks of life" while "'business men and business interests' make our laws, prostitute our press, fill the brothels with our daughters, the prisons with our boys [and] the potter's field with our dead."<sup>50</sup>

However, one need not look only to the socialist press to find evidence of antagonism between the farmer and the local business community. The League leadership continually emphasized that farmers should be suspicious, and especially to beware of those businessmen, who, in the words of a

contemporary sociologist, "took it for granted that the two populations [farmers and villagers] have the same interests and nature."<sup>51</sup> Most Leaguers felt that such commonality did not exist -- as Thomasen's address cited above suggests -- , and a Leader editorial made this point very plain: "It is useless to deny that there is a growing hostility between 'local' business men and the farmer."<sup>52</sup> An interesting document located among the papers of Arthur LeSueur, Minot socialist and NPL attorney, provides an insightful contemporary analysis into the phenomenon:

The catch words under which these farmers [League members] habitually speak of their antagonists are (a) "Big Business," and (b) "The Commercial Clubs," -- the latter being the trade organizations of business concerns in the country towns. These are credited at the same time with an irresponsible control of the local authorities, and, in a degree, of the state authorities as well. Hence the political character of the Nonpartisan League.<sup>53</sup>

Prepared at the behest of the United States Food Administration (possibly by Thorstein Veblen) to investigate farm labor conditions in the Grain Belt, this memorandum provides an outsider's view of the farmer-business relationship.

It is important to recognize that the business standard was not merely a self-conscious canard put forth by greedy small-town North Dakota businessmen. An English observer who toured the United States in 1920 was struck by the

country's "adulation of business." America, said the visitor,

feels that business is the finest, as well as the most valuable, function of man; she perceives in the businessman the qualities of a hero; in her view, he is doing the best that can be done by man.<sup>54</sup>

Echoing the theme of "business" as the solution to the graft and greed of old-style politics, N.E. Franklin of the South Dakota Banker's Association told an audience of bankers that "the sunset of the political agitator, muck-raker, and reformer is fast approaching"<sup>55</sup> and that the future belonged not to the politician but to the businessman. National success, suggested Franklin, would come "only through business, big and little."<sup>56</sup> This attitude was certainly a part of the mental universe of North Dakota businessmen in years surrounding the NPL era. Yet if local merchants were sincere in following the national cultural trend of business worship, they were also, like farmers, "men much concerned with the exploited status of the state."<sup>57</sup> Even if some farmers viewed local merchants as the lackeys of big business, the merchants would certainly not have identified themselves that way. Furthermore, the theme of rural-urban interdependence was a part of mainstream social thought. Carl Vrooman, U.S. assistant secretary of agriculture in the Wilson administration, insisted that

It is high time for both farmers and businessmen to

learn that it is more profitable to work together for their common interests than to squabble with one another over conflicting interests, real or imaginary. This means cooperation.<sup>56</sup>

While Vrooman also made the fine but essential distinction that commonality of interest did not imply identity of interest,<sup>59</sup> other observers made no such distinction. In a commentary entitled "Class Antagonism a Poor Asset," the regional financial journal Commercial West contended that "when the farmers of this country understand investment science . . . they will realize that their interests are identical and not antagonistic to other capitalists."<sup>60</sup> Rural sociologist Dwight Sanderson, writing a few years later, proposed that rural-urban animosity was indeed a false issue, easily solved once everyone came around to the right way of thinking. "The root of the whole trouble," said Sanderson,

lies in the imaginary division of the community into town and country. With the realization that their common interests are essential and that their differences are due to lack of proper adjustment, many of these difficulties will be alleviated.<sup>61</sup>

But this meant that the farmer was to adapt himself to the new, the modern, to the standards of "business". As Sanderson gently reminded his readers, "the city owes its existence to the farm, but without the city the farm would go back to the hoe and the sickle and the "age of homespun."<sup>62</sup> In fact, the farmer was told he needed to

become a businessman in order to survive. Editorials informed farmers that

if their business is to succeed it must be conducted with the same attention to business methods that has been found necessary in the management of commercial or a manufacturing business . . . the farm is, in a sense, a factory.<sup>63</sup>

The idea of efficient farming practices mirroring, or having to compete with, those of industrial America abound. According to J.H. Worst, president of North Dakota Agricultural College, "The application of business principles to farming is as necessary as the application of business principles to banking or merchandising."<sup>64</sup>

Another writer in the 1911 North Dakota Farmer's Institute Annual emphasized the point that all America was falling under the looming shadow of big business. "[T]he day of the small, detached, independent, go-it-alone farmer is over," he began. "Business, outside the field of agriculture, is fast passing into what we know as the Great Trusts stage," therefore, farmers had to behave co-operatively to compete, for "the fact of such industrial organization stares us in the face as the one supreme and insistent problem of farm life."<sup>65</sup> While this author's recipe for rural survival, which stressed large co-operative units rather than family farms, ran counter to the more conservative attitude which "saw rural farm life as ideal, if only it could be upgraded

to match urban economic and cultural levels,"<sup>66</sup> his message of the application of business practices to farming was very much in line with prevailing attitudes. A Fargo editor said in 1911 that "the rejuvenated, revolutionized, urbanized farm is now a common topic of comment."<sup>67</sup> Although advice such as this was given with the intention of promoting "progress", at times it approached the simple-minded. In July of that same year, the Minot newspaper ran an editorial about 1912's harvest worker shortage, suggesting that a way out of that recurrent problem would be for farmers to diversify their operations, and so have "a reasonable amount of work for him and his men all the year instead of a rush during harvest."<sup>68</sup> Farmers hardly needed journalists to remind them of the problems associated with single-crop farming. What they needed was a solution to price gouging by railroads and grain buyers, and they would have to tend to that themselves.

The ultra-reactionary Red Flame, whose purpose was to destroy the League's control of state government, lauded business as the benefactor of man through the mass production of material goods. However, what accompanied material progress was a "modern world, dominated by big business."<sup>69</sup> As one agricultural historian writing from the perspective of the late 1930s noted, abundant consumer goods



"have resulted in a higher standard of living, but they have also involved the surrender of economic independence."<sup>70</sup>

Many newspaper editorials proposed that, since farming was a part of the business-dominated world, farmers needed to cooperate more closely with businessmen in town. In urging farmers to vote against the League candidates in the 1916 primary, the Bismarck Tribune argued that

ours is a great co-operative community, with agriculture as its foundation, and with all its other industries and occupations existing because they have been created and arranged to meet the needs and serve the purposes of the farmer.<sup>71</sup>

While this depiction of farmers as the center of the state's economic universe would have struck most farmers as nothing less than the truth -- indeed, a belief in "agricultural fundamentalism" was a key component of agrarianism<sup>72</sup> -- the League recognized that implied in such statements was a hegemonic relationship in which the businessman cared for the farmer. As one Leader editorial expressed it:

Business men continually harp on the importance of cooperation between themselves and the farmers, and then when the farmers rise up and demand an effective voice in the law making body of the state they become very hostile . . . [farmers] don't want others to tell them what is good and what is not good for them.<sup>73</sup>

Yet whether or not they wanted it, North Dakota farmers did receive a good deal of advice from editors and business people who, "disturbed by the anti-business rhetoric of the agrarian movement and mindful of their own stake in farm

prosperity, began self-consciously to woo the farmers."<sup>74</sup> The state's Commercial Clubs, forebears to the Chambers of Commerce, had the farmer much in mind. For example, in 1913 the Grand Forks club sponsored a contest to honor "the best arranged, equipped and operated farms in this [Grand Forks] county."<sup>75</sup> Seven years later, it hosted a banquet for the local Farm Bureau which, it claimed, helped to "wipe out class prejudice and to tear down the walls of indifference between town and country."<sup>76</sup> The Minot Commercial Club addressed itself to helping secure livestock feed for farmers in the summer of 1910,<sup>77</sup> and in the winter of 1911 decided to fund demonstration work at area farms. This was frankly seen as a means of tying the farmer more closely to town. "What we want . . . is a man [meaning a demonstration agent] who will make it his business to get the farmer to come to him for advice, and instruction."<sup>78</sup> By the middle 1910s, however, the business community already had such a man.

More so than merchants, bankers played a significant role as community leaders and advisors to farmers. The relationship between farmers and bankers could have some positive effects. During the 1919 fuel crisis, with winter bearing down and fuel supplies dwindling, communities' requests for coal that reached Governor Frazier's office

sometimes were written on bank stationery by bank officers. For example, George Janda, vice president of Selfridge State Bank, asked that "our people" be allowed to dig coal on school lands for their household use.<sup>79</sup> And as Velva native Eric Sevareid pointed out in his autobiography, conscientious small-town bankers suffered through the boom-and-bust cycles of one-crop agriculture along with the farmer. Sevareid remembered that his father, the town banker, "was more a confessor than the Catholic priest."<sup>80</sup> Thus, it is necessary to observe that the League press was frequently over-zealous in characterizing local merchants and bankers as the venal agents of "Big Biz", interested in nothing but their own pocketbooks, or, as the Leader flatly stated, "local business men, as a rule, take the side of every exploiting agency in the country against the farmer."<sup>81</sup> As one labor historian has noted, "because a grocer owned his own business and a mayor presided over a bank, it does not mean they sympathized with the social policies of a large factory owner."<sup>82</sup> Certainly, it would be difficult to explain the NPL experience strictly as an uprising of the propertyless against the propertied, since many Leaguers owned their own farms, and that unfair taxation (which in North Dakota during the 1910s usually

meant property tax) was an important issue in the League's rise.

However, neither does paternal benevolence on the part of bankers and merchants imply (as anti-League rhetoric proposed) complete unity of economic interest or homogeneity of class. No matter how kindly it was offered, paternalism was still tantamount to social control, a tangible social control that was deeply resented. As one Leader story argued,

Think of the unwarranted paternalism small-town business men attempt to assume when they take it upon themselves to decide who are fit persons for farmers to listen to, as if the farmers were a lot of sheep under their special care and as if they had wisdom and patriotism beyond that which farmers possess.<sup>83</sup>

Farmers needed no clearer example of middle-class paternalism than the situation that developed over the way a number of banks handled checks paying NPL membership dues. In some cases banks flatly refused to pay such checks. The Leader reported that the Farmers and Merchants Bank of Robinson refused to pay "about 100" such checks, although most were drawn on accounts with sufficient funds. More common than returning checks unpaid, however, was bankers' exerting their influence over would-be Leaguers and convincing them to cancel their memberships. In Tuttle, the Leader reportedly found one such "banker who thought his mission in life was to act as guardian to the farmers and

safeguard their money against any use except his [the banker's]."<sup>84</sup> Similar situations, said the Leader, existed in Antler and in Souris, where dwelt "a 'farmer's friend' in the person of a banker[,] Watchful of the 'interests' of his 'flock'."<sup>85</sup> In some cases, bankers even took it upon themselves to write to League headquarters, informing the NPL that a particular farmer wanted to quit the organization and have his membership dues returned.<sup>86</sup> Thus the paternal guidance of bankers was an important aspect of the hierarchically ordered society of the "business" culture.

While the tone of most such advice for farmers was paternalistic in the pre-League era, it took on a note of shock and befuddlement after the League's stunning electoral successes in 1916. This was a reflection of the business community's attitude toward the farmer, who, not meeting the standards as articulated in the various meanings of the word "business", was treated as less than equal. As a contemporary sociologist observed, the "attitude of townspeople to farmers in general is likely to be that of superiors to inferiors."<sup>87</sup> The Red Flame clarified the nature of what it regarded as the proper relationship between farmer and local businessman in a cartoon that reveals much about power in social organizations. A farmer shaking hands with a merchant says, "John, I want you to

forgive me, we were friends until these darn agitators came around, now I am beginning to realize that the farmer needs the business man and the business man needs the farmer." The prosperous-looking businessman replies, "Yes Hiram, when you had no money and wanted groceries I trusted you . . . I always helped you out when you were in need -- so now I gladly forgive you."<sup>88</sup> Here, despite the reference to the theme of "co-operation", clearly the farmer is depicted as a humble, even childlike, penitent while the merchant is patient and forgiving, who, despite his kindness, holds the power to forgive or not forgive, just as he chooses. In this presentation of the ideal farmer-business relationship, Hiram is grateful to John, who, being the representative of the middle-class power structure -- the "voice of bureaucracy", to borrow a phrase from Marshall McLuhan --, can afford to be benevolent.<sup>89</sup> This was a contradiction for, as Eugene Genovese has observed in his work on another hegemonic agrarian society, "gratitude implies equality."<sup>90</sup> Farmers were told that they should both accept the subordination implied in the standard of business and feel the gratitude which only arises among equals. Leaguers' resentment was, at least in part, based on this perceived social inequality and logical discordance. As chapter five will discuss more completely, language relating to pride

-- such as "manliness" and "insolence" -- revealed that Leaguers indeed felt the sting of paternalism, and that the NPL experience was a proactive effort to regain equality as much as it was an attempt to secure higher prices for farm commodities. When the NPL later reached out to organized labor, primarily in Minnesota, it was both an attempt to build political power<sup>91</sup> and a conscious refutation of the standard of "business".

While rejecting the subordination of farmers implied by the business standard, the League was not therefore retrogressive or anti-modern. It instead attempted to combine agrarianism with the hard-headed professionalism which was one aspect of "business". Speaking to a North Dakota farmer's convention, President Worst -- later to become Commissioner of Immigration Worst in the Frazier administration -- presented his vision of the new agriculture, in which a belief in modern methods would be combined with the Jeffersonian notion of farmers as the nation's bedrock:

The soner (sic) agriculture is raised to the rank of a learned profession and made an attractive and honorable career for ambitious and scholarly young men, the sooner will the nation be fortified against want and national decay . . . We who today enjoy the institutions that the fathers of the Republic purchased with their blood more than a century ago should be no less patriotic in transmitting to future generations a soil capable of sustaining the increased millions that will live under our flag.<sup>92</sup>

In Worst's vision, farmers would still be America's bulwark against national decay, as he assumed they always had been. Yet while making use of the traditional "honorable" image of farmers as sturdy, yeomanly, and salt-of-the-earth, Worst added the characteristics of the new urban America -- "ambitious" and "scholarly." He assumed America would grow by "increased millions", and the farmer would be a vital part of that progress. Soil conservation was not only sound stewardship; it was nothing less than a patriotic duty. Thus the farmer, deriving an almost mystical strength from his relationship to the earth, would boldly lead his country into the future.

The language of business, then, reflected and helped shape North Dakota reformism during the Progressive and NFL eras. It meant an attempt to purify corrupt politics with good administration, and to deal rationally with social change. However, it also meant an acceptance of middle class, urban values as the standard which told farmers they must change and become businessmen tied into the commercial world, or fade into political oblivion. Yet while farmers confidently attempted to shape a new role for themselves within the social and political system through the use of the Nonpartisan League, they also sought a new relationship



with the economic system and attempted to control the forces of an increasingly industrialized America.

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13. Warren A. Henke, Prairie Politics: Parties and Platforms in North Dakota 1889-1914, ([Bismarck]: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1974), 85.

14. "Selecting Public Servants," Ward County Reporter, 21 July 1910, 2.

15. Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order 1877-1920, The Making of America, American Century Series (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 160.

16. Progressivism, 116.

17. Prairie Politics, 129.

18. Ibid., 132.

19. Dale Baum, "The New Day in North Dakota: The Nonpartisan League and the Politics of Negative Revolution," North Dakota History 40, no. 2, (Spring 1973), 13.

20. When the Nonpartisan League entered Canada, it had some success in Alberta's provincial elections of 1917. The Albertan League's "main aim was the supersession of the party system by a 'business government,' in which the legislature would deal with public business on its merits and not along party lines." Although outside the scope of this thesis, here is an illustration of the fact that the NPL did not take 'business' to be a simple pejorative, and understood the word's power as a symbol of reform. C.B. Macpherson, Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System, 2d ed., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 26.

21. "George J. Smith for Governor," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 4 May 1916, 4.

22. John Fiske, Civil Government in the United States Considered With Some Reference to its Origins (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), ix.

23. Ibid., 6.

24. Elwyn B. Robinson, History of North Dakota (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 225.

25. Scott Ellsworth, "Origins of the Nonpartisan League" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1982), 73.

26. This is also another illustration of the theme that the 50,000 League members were contented yet gullible farmers who for some reason enthusiastically joined an organization that did not operate in their interests. "As it was in Kansas," The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 6 June 1916, 4.

27. Albert Hauge to Theodore Nelson, 9 March 1921, Theodore G. Nelson Papers, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

28. "Farm Union Coming to Colorado to Emancipate Farmers of State," The Great Divide (Denver), 24 January 1917, p. 1, National Nonpartisan League Papers.

29. The observation applies particularly to the years before the European war. In the war's aftermath, some thinkers turned away from the gospel of competition since, in the words of rural sociologist Dwight Sanderson, "German militarists carried the doctrine to a logical conclusion." As we will see, Sanderson was especially uncompromising on the necessity of rural-urban cooperation. The Farmer and his Community (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), 49.

30. That the League, despite its struggle against "business," was not universally opposed to individualistic themes is borne out by the fact that this book was prominent of the NPL reading list. Woodrow Wilson, The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1913), 17.

31. "W.F. Tuttle for Congress," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 21 May 1912, 2.

32. "Political Comment," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 17 June 1912, 2; from Mandan Pioneer.

33. Theodore Roosevelt, "The New Nationalism;" selection in The Annals of America (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1968), vol. 13, p. 250.

34. The New Freedom, 54.

35. "Twenty-Seven Graduates Were Awarded Diplomas," Minot Daily Optic-Reporter, 10 June 1916, 3.

36. "The High School Graduates," Minot Daily Optic-Reporter, 9 June 1916, 2.

37. Lawrence Goodwyn, The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 270.

38. Thomas B. Wood to editor, The Nonpartisan Leader, 28 October 1915, 13.

39. Treatise on Townelyism, (Fargo: Independent Voters Association, [1919]), p. 7, in the Theodore G. Nelson Papers.

40. "Accounting Necessary on the Farm," The Nonpartisan Leader, 15 February 1917, 10.

41. Philip A. Kouth, "The American Yeoman Versus Progress and the Nonpartisan League," North Dakota History 37, no. 2, (Spring 1970), 133.

42. Alice C. Poehls, "An Analysis of Selected Speeches of A.C. Townley, 1915-1921" (M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1978), 44.

43. The League Correspondence Course, Farm Economics, Lesson V ([Minneapolis?]: [National Nonpartisan League?], [ca. 1917]), 5, Nonpartisan League Pamphlets, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

44. Paul H. Johnstone also suggested that this "boomer psychology" (p. 129) led to economic woes for farmers who, possessing an unlimited faith in future prosperity, borrowed too heavily and over-capitalized their operations. "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," in U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farmers in a Changing World: The 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture (Washington, DC: GPO, 1940), 131.

45. "10,000 Attend Nonpartisan Meeting in Minot; Tremendous Ovation Greets Governor Frazier," The Minot Daily News, 8 June 1917, 3.

46. Following Goodwyn's "movement culture" perspective, Kathleen Moun argued that the cultural apparatus of small-town communities explained the NPL's

rapid rise and that the socially conservative "values of the community" contributed to the League's downfall. "Harvest of Discontent: The Social Origins of the Nonpartisan League, 1880-1922" (Ph.D. diss., University of California-Irvine, 1986), 216.

47. The League Correspondence Course, Organization Work, Lesson Lesson VII ([Minneapolis?]: [National Nonpartisan League?], [ca. 1917]), 6, Nonpartisan League Pamphlets, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

48. No title, Commercial Club Bulletin, 20 December 1920, p. 10, in Grand Forks Commercial Club Records, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.

49. Warren H. Wilson, "Country Versus City," in Papers and Proceedings, Eleventh Annual Meeting, American Sociological Society: The Sociology of Rural Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 20.

50. "Free-Men? No, Slaves!", The Iconoclast (Minot), 24 May 1912, 1.

51. John Morris Gillette, Rural Sociology, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 566.

52. "Local Business Men and the Farmer," The Nonpartisan Leader, 2 December 1915, 6.

53. "Memorandum -- Farm Labor and the I.W.W. -- Veblen," p. 4, in the Arthur LeSueur Papers, Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection, St. Paul.

54. W.L. George, "Random Impressions" selection in The Annals of America (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1968) vol. 14, 278.

55. "South Dakota Bankers at Sioux Falls," Commercial West: A Weekly Financial Journal, 8 July 1916, 19.

56. Ibid.

57. Robinson, History of North Dakota, 347.

58. Carl Vrooman, "The Agricultural Revolution," The Century 93, no. 1 (November 1916): 118.

59. Ibid., 122.

60. "Class Antagonism a Poor Asset," Commercial West: A Weekly Financial Journal, 29 July 1916, 7.

61. The Farmer and his Community, 57.

62. Ibid., 70.

63. "Agricultural Awakening," 4.

64. J.H. Worst, "The Business of Farming," in North Dakota Farmers' Institute Annual No. 11 (Minneapolis: Deere and Webber Co., 1911), 138.

65. Hugh J. Hughes, "The Business Organization of Farming" in North Dakota Farmers' Institute Annual No. 11 (Minneapolis: Deere and Webber Co., 1911), 26-27.

66. Although Joan M. Jensen made the useful point that the Country Life Movements and the Farm Bureau were conservative forces, it should not be allowed (nor does Jensen suggest) that these were simply forces of reaction. With These Hands: Women Working on the Land (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1981), 104.

67. "Electricity on Farms," The Fargo Forum, 19 January 1911, 4.

68. "Harvest Hand Shortage," Minot Daily Reporter, 23 July 1912, 2.

69. "Big Business," The Red Flame, August 1920, reprinted in The Red Flame: A Chronicle of the Fierce Controversy Surrounding the Early Days of North Dakota's Non-Partisan League (Minot: Lowe and Larson Printing, 1975), 370.

70. "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas," 142.

71. "North Dakota is Facing a Crisis," 2.

72. According to Paul Johnstone, the three elements of agrarianism were, first, the concept of complete economic independences of the farmer, second, "agricultural fundamentalism," the idea that everything in society rests ultimately on agriculture; and third, that rural life is

natural and good and urban life is therefore artificial and bad. "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas," 117.

73. "Cooperation of Farmers and Business Men," The Nonpartisan Leader, 2 December 1915, 6.

74. Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 124.

75. "Club Inaugurates Prize Farm Contest," Commercial Club Bulletin, May 1913, p. 4, in Grand Forks Commercial Club Records.

76. "Community Affairs," Commercial Club Bulletin, December 1920, p. 1, in Grand Forks Commercial Club Records.

77. "Commercial Club to Take up Matter of Feed for Drouth-Stricken Farmers," Ward County Reporter, 4 August 1910, 4.

78. "Six Hundred Dollars Pledged for Support of Demonstration Work Among Farmers After Secretary Cooper's Address Last Evening," Ward County Reporter, 18 January 1911, 3.

79. George W. Janda to Lynn Frazier, 8 November 1919, Lynn Frazier Papers, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

80. Eric Sevareid, Not so Wild a Dream (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 4.

81. "Fellows That are Good to Themselves," The Nonpartisan Leader, 2 December 1915, 7.

82. Herbert C. Gutman, Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working Class and Social History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 255-256.

83. A.B. Gilbert, "What Kind of Town do Farmers Like?," The Nonpartisan Leader, 5 August 1918, 10.

84. "League Organizers Start Speaking Campaign," The Nonpartisan Leader, 16 December 1915, 8.

85. "League Meetings Fill Towns With Farmers," The Nonpartisan Leader, 30 December 1915, 7.



86. Nonpartisan League to Thomas Schirade, 7 August 1916; Timmer State Bank to Farmer's Nonpartisan League, 7 August 1916; First State Bank of Martin to Non Partisan League, 21 August 1916; National Nonpartisan League Papers.

87. Rural Sociology, 619.

88. Cartoon, The Red Flame, no date, in The Red Flame, reprint ed., 1.

89. Marshall McLuhan, The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 16.

90. Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 146.

91. Theodore Saloutos, "The Rise of the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, 1915-1917," Agricultural History 20, no. 1 (January 1946), 59.

92. "Most Successful Convention of Farmers Ever Held in N. Dakota was Brought to a Close Last Evening," Ward County Reporter, 8 February 1912, 5.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MEN IN THE CAB ARE ONLY THE COMPANY'S TOOLS:

#### The Role of Material and Productive Life in Shaping the League's Political Culture

This thesis has suggested that the Nonpartisan League offered its membership a self-consciously new paradigm for political culture. Chapter three explored ways in which the League defined itself relative to cultural understandings implied in the word "business." This chapter will show how the League's activist, class-based message generally inculcated the work culture and time sense of industrial America. While Leaguers certainly rebelled against the control outsiders exerted over their lives -- "Old Gang" politicians in Bismarck, or "Big Biz" grain dealers in Minneapolis -- they basically accepted that their productive lives were bound up in a national, or even world, economy. The NPL did not call for a return to the task-orientation<sup>1</sup> of a pre-industrial world, did not eschew materialism, but rather hoped to use such putative agrarian values as neighborly cooperation and earthy common sense to harness the clanging chariot of progress. Like labor unions for

urban workers (an analogy NPL leaders often made) the League was the means by which farmers would secure their piece of the future. This future, true enough, included a Ford and an up-to-date kitchen for everyone, but it would also "fulfill the mission of struggling humanity to a higher and better civilization."<sup>2</sup>

Previous chapters have shown that while North Dakota in the 1910s was a predominately agricultural state, its people spoke the language of business. Leaguers recognized that "business" meant efficiency and increased profits, but "business" also indicated political and social hegemony. Similarly, North Dakotans were increasingly familiar with the material products of business America. Here again rested a duality. People generally appreciated the products of industry but recognized that with industrialization came a new relationship to productive processes, in which the individual was subject to powerful forces beyond his or her control. An example from the Minot area makes clear that in the Nonpartisan era and the years immediately preceding it, North Dakotans were aware that material progress could have a human price.

The eastbound Fast Mail was running six minutes late when it pulled out of Minot one Saturday night in November 1911 and headed into a snowstorm. Engineer Isaac Wright, at

the throttle of the Great Northern locomotive, was determined to make up the time.' As Wright's Fast Mail hurtled east, another train proceeded west on the same track. Henry Acker, engineer of the westbound freight, was to have taken the east switch onto the siding at Tunbridge, thus clearing the track for the eastbound train. However, Acker missed the east approach in the howling storm, and continued on with the intention of backing his train into Tunbridge from the west. When the freight passed the western switch and prepared to reverse, fireman E.J. Owens peered out his cab window and saw the headlight of the Fast Mail bearing down. With a shout to Acker, the fireman and engineer jumped from their engine just as the eastbound train slammed into the freight "with a report that could be heard for several miles."<sup>4</sup>

Art O'Leary, fireman of the Fast Mail, was killed instantly, crushed when the tender's front gate collapsed. Engineer Wright was "frightfully bruised and scalded."<sup>5</sup> He died while being transported to the hospital in Rugby. Several other crew members from both trains were injured.

The railroad workers of Minot mourned. It was reported that "nearly a hundred sorrowing brother railroad men" turned out the next day, and formed a procession escorting Wright's body -- O'Leary's had been sent to his hometown in

Wisconsin -- from the railyard to a downtown funeral home.<sup>6</sup> Wright was given an elaborate funeral, as befitted his considerable social status as a locomotive engineer -- indeed, the Minot Daily Reporter referred to Wright's body lying "in state,"<sup>7</sup> and commented that his and O'Leary's deaths had "cast a deep gloom over the entire city."<sup>8</sup>

Yet while the tone of bereavement is obvious in such newspaper reports, another far more interesting theme can be seen in these and subsequent stories on the accident and funeral. A close examination shows that the accident was seen by contemporaries not as a regrettable piece of bad luck or merely as the consequences of another deadly North Dakota blizzard.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the train wreck was portrayed as nothing less than a harbinger of the new industrial America in which the individual struggles mightily -- and perhaps fruitlessly -- to reconcile within himself the traditional attitude of individualism with the new and growing pressures of mechanization, standardization, and industrialization.

In its report on Wright's funeral, the Reporter observed:

Brave and fearless and yet not reckless he has driven his engine through storms and dangers that the public can little realize, to comply as closely as possible, with the schedule the company furnishes. "Ike" had grown in knowledge, as the motive power of the road had grown in equipment.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Wright is depicted as a courageous man, but one whose human virtues are used to feed abstractions. He is asked to

risk his life by a faceless corporate entity, "the company," for the sake of an arbitrary temporal construct, "the schedule." Ike Wright is confronted by growing forces that are beyond him -- beyond, in fact, any one person. The comment on Wright's increased knowledge is a compliment to his workmanlike attitude. And yet there is a foreboding feel to the phrase referring to the waxing "motive power of the road." That Wright's skills so closely paralleled mechanical advances suggests that humans are perhaps only nominally in control of what they create.

Another comment on the Fast Mail accident appeared in the Reporter a few days later, in the form of a poem entitled "Don't Blame the Engineer," whose author is identified only as "a Minot woman". The poem was intended to exonerate the crews of both trains; however it is, all in all, a rather remarkable articulation of the main themes of early twentieth-century American work culture. First, the anonymous poet contends that the engineer is only a cog in the industrial machine:

. . . you know there's the power behind the man / And  
it's there that they make the rules / And the men in the  
cab, on right and left<sup>11</sup> / Are only the company's tools /  
It is only their duty, to hark and heed / With never a  
thought of fear / The orders -- make haste -- make time  
-- more speed / Don't blame the engineer.<sup>12</sup>

According to the poet, the engineer has given himself over to power, the corporate power of the railroad company and

the mechanical power of the locomotive. He is loyal to the power structure, does not question it, "He's been a faithful, patient man, / Looking forward to something higher."<sup>13</sup> His explicit loyalty to the railroad is accompanied by a tacit adherence to the success myth, the idea being that a worker need only perform his duties faithfully and he will be rewarded. Here, the poet is quite correctly pointing toward a breakdown in the system of reciprocal obligations and rewards; for Ike Wright the wages of loyalty were, not success, but death.

"Don't Blame the Engineer" also asserts the basic dignity of work in the face of a society embracing scientific notions of efficiency in manufacturing, under which labor processes are simply another variable to be studied and regulated. The poet asks, "You who sit by a fire warm and bright, / What can you know of the life of these men / In the cold, and the storm, and the night?"<sup>14</sup> She suggests that there is some value in labor beyond that which the worker actually produces. Although working people must reconcile themselves to the machine, it is clear through such expressions of working class pride that, as one labor historian has noted, "Men and women who sell their labor to an employer bring more to a new or changing work situation than their physical presence."<sup>15</sup>

The preceding chapters have shown that North Dakota Populism and Progressivism each addressed themselves to the problems of society in the industrial age. As the above example suggests, concerns over the effects of business and corporate control on human life were not the exclusive preserve of politicians and journalists. Indeed, the NPL was based partially on the rejection of the hegemony of "business." Most farmers would have needed little convincing that railroads were a disquieting though essential presence in their lives. Furthermore, people living during the first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed nothing less than a revolution in material life.

North Dakota was indeed following the broad national pattern of increased urbanization and mechanization of daily life. In 1910, the population of North Dakota was 577,056, with 72% of that population living in rural areas.<sup>16</sup> In 1911 and 1912, North Dakotans had nearly 30 times as many horses as they had registered automobiles.<sup>17</sup> By 1925, however, the state's population was 65% rural. While there were 641,192 North Dakotans in 1925, the state's horse population had fallen from 488,628 in 1911 to 477,278.<sup>18</sup>

During the Nonpartisan era, automobile ownership increased markedly. In the early years of the century, autos were primarily "playthings of the rich,"<sup>19</sup> but with



the development of low-priced, reliable models, most notably the Ford Model T in 1908, automobile ownership lost its "frivolous" stigmatization and fell within the reach of common people.<sup>20</sup> A 1921 extension study of the economics of operations on 126 North Dakota farms found that while forty-nine of the farms operated tractors -- which were not, according to the bulletin's author "sufficiently used to overcome the high relative overhead cost of interest and depreciation" -- 114 of the 126 farms had automobiles.<sup>21</sup> In 1923, an investigation of the living conditions of Midwestern farm wives revealed that 56.6% of North Dakota farm households included in the study had cars, while 46.8% had telephones. Running water and gas or electricity were present in only 6% and 5.8% of the homes, respectively.<sup>22</sup> From 1911 through 1912, North Dakota took in \$45,294.00 in automobile registration fees.<sup>23</sup> For 1925, however, registration of Ford passenger cars alone resulted in \$491,813.90, with another \$443,217.45 for non-Ford models.<sup>24</sup>

As at least one historian has contended, it is necessary to recognize that rural America did not pass from muscle-driven to mechanized overnight. Automotive inroads on farm life were smoothed by rural familiarity with other forms of technology. For example, "before Americans had ever seen an automobile, approximately seventy-five thousand

farm engineers were driving their steam engines across the fields in the major grain-producing regions of the nation."<sup>25</sup> Non-automotive, non-domestic farm technologies touched rural productive life quite directly in that farm operations required fewer hired hands. In 1910 North Dakota, there were 40,777 farm laborers.<sup>26</sup> By 1924, the figure had dropped to 27,823.<sup>27</sup> While it would be too much to suggest that this decrease was due solely to the effect of new farm equipment<sup>28</sup>, it is useful to note that in 1924 91,475,466 bushels of spring, durum, and winter wheat were harvested in comparison with 40,412,893 bushels in 1910.<sup>29</sup> Also, the persistence of the gendered system in which men were expected to do field work and women domestic work<sup>30</sup> combined with the fact that 35% fewer men and only 21% fewer women worked as farm laborers, gives an indication that farm workers, especially men working in the fields, were to some degree being replaced by machines. In a 1918 University of Minnesota extension bulletin examining tractor ownership in that state, it was found that eighty-eight out of 145 farmers using tractors reported that they could thereby cut back on hired help while continuing to farm the same number of acres.<sup>31</sup> The same study reported that, on average, two work horses were replaced by each tractor in operation.<sup>32</sup> Despite the impact of machinery, it is important to note

that people at the time, even experts, did not uniformly see a horseless future for the farmer. A 1917 extension bulletin attributes the rise of powered equipment in North Dakota not to the pervasiveness of technology, but to poor farm management practices:

The principle reason why the truck and farm tractor have made the progress they have has been the failure of horse production to keep pace with the demand and the consequent inability of prospective purchasers to secure horses suitable to their needs.<sup>33</sup>

Yet even in this passage, whose author is in no sense enamored with the possibilities of mechanization, a sense of existing within a power-driven world is evident.

Yet if automobiles, farm equipment, and domestic technologies were aspects of material life in business America, the clock was its very symbol. Although they lived in an agricultural state, North Dakotans were well acquainted with temporal regulation. As was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, people were accustomed to the time schedules of the railroads, and an hourly pay schedule prevailed in the workplace -- from the office to the harvest field. Two contemporary advertisements, for example, suggest the time-centered (and male-dominated) nature of the workplace. A 1911 Fargo ad shows a disgruntled-looking young woman polishing a kettle, rolling her eyes toward the clock which sits on a shelf above her left shoulder. The

advertisement assures readers that even if "you lose your Servant Girl . . . You can have another in a few hours by using or reading our little Want Ads."<sup>34</sup> In a 1921 ad for the "'Y and E' Direct Name Filing System", another young woman, smiling this time, stands before a filing cabinet. Over the filing cabinet looms a giant-sized male hand clutching a pocket watch. The text urges "you" to "take your watch" and test the clerk's speed at retrieving files. In this ad, the copy writers took for granted that "you", the boss, would be male and the clerk young, female, and probably unmarried, since the prevailing attitude assumed that, for women, marriage and paid work were incompatible. And both ads are dominated by that symbol of regulation and standardization, the clock.<sup>35</sup>

Much agricultural work also ran by the clock, since the size and nature of grain farms usually required the hiring of paid laborers.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, a shift was underway which saw the employment of fewer hired hands and more harvest workers. Harvest workers were quite distinct from hired hands. The latter were often local young men and women who worked for the same family throughout much of the year. Farm families often treated hands virtually as members of the family. It was these people the state Commissioner of Agriculture reports attempted to count, and whose numeric

decline another report noted, observing that "farm labor is becoming more transient," and that "the democratic relationships are more difficult to maintain."<sup>37</sup> Hired hands were likely to be firmly rooted in the work culture of the time, on the way up the agricultural career ladder, in which "farm sons and daughters would begin as wage laborers on neighboring farms, save their earnings to become farm tenants or renters, and then eventually become owners of farms themselves."<sup>38</sup> John Morris Gillette reported that in the early 1920s sons-in-law accounted for 24% of all tenant farmers in the Dakotas.<sup>39</sup> To be a hired hand carried no burden of shame, and a 1918 Leader feature on Governor Frazier's homespun Monday luncheon meetings at the state capitol was proudly entitled, "a State That is Run by Hired Hands."<sup>40</sup> Harvest workers, by contrast, were regarded as another sort, often seen as little better than vagrants. Eric Sevareid recalled them as

hordes of itinerant workers, I.W.W.'s (which meant "I won't work," according to the businessmen of the town). . . [who] hunched like tattered crows on the hitching rails, spat tobacco juice at the grasshoppers on the dusty street, and frightened the nice women of the town.<sup>41</sup>

This image was prevalent. During its media campaign against the Nonpartisan League, the IVA depicted the NPL leadership as friendly to harvest workers, who were invariably portrayed in IVA literature as vicious, shiftless bums.<sup>42</sup>

Yet the harvest labor force was not simply an army of tramps; according to one agriculture historian, it was composed in roughly equal proportions of small farmers, urban industrial laborers, and artisans out to make additional money.<sup>43</sup> The shift from hired hands to itinerant workers resulted in the increasing importance of the hourly wage system. Hired hands were, in some ways, farm apprentices on the way up the agricultural ladder. Itinerant workers were simply paid employees.

Even with regards to himself and his family, the farmer was increasingly encouraged to think in terms of cost efficiency and hourly wages. A 1912 editorial in the *Minot* newspaper commented on the disparity between urban and rural work hours (and alluded to the problem of flight to the cities by young rural people):

The farmer and his family must be able to earn a good profit on ten or twelve hours a day. The time has passed when intelligent, ambitious people will be content, even under the favorable conditions of the great outdoors, to labor sixteen or eighteen hours a day merely to make a living. Women are not allowed to work in stores and factories more than eight or nine hours; but on the farm they work sixteen or eighteen.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, North Dakota was not the only farm state where the rhythms of industry were being felt in agricultural pursuits. Responding to a U.S. Department of Agriculture query as to how the Department could help improve the lives of rural women, a Kansas farm wife suggested legislation

which would serve to shorten women's work hours. Since women were at work getting breakfast before the men left for the field, and continued working long after the men were in for the night, she suggested that "farmers quit at a fixed time, like factory people, and that a law be passed making more than 10 hours' work a day in the fields a misdemeanor."<sup>45</sup> Clearly, these examples are an articulation of farming in industrial America, with farming depicted not as a semi-mystical craft but as a wage-paying business.

There are hints that, at least in some areas of the state touched by the NPL, there was what might be called a frontier between a time-centered and a time-oriented work culture. In one instance, the editor of the Minot Reporter condemned one of "the habits of the city," namely, "the disposition of those in charge of public entertainments of delaying the opening of the same until a half hour or an hour after the time specified for the program to begin." While bemoaning the inconvenience such a practice brought to those who did show up on time, the writer placed the blame squarely on the fact that such "entertainments" were not regulated by the exigencies of the cash nexus. "These delays do not occur at the moving picture shows," said the editor. "There the operator is paid for his time and he has no interest in waiting any longer than is absolutely

necessary."<sup>46</sup> The solution, he insisted, was that events should begin on schedule no matter how many people were or were not present.

While the clock was a symbol of the culture of "business," the Nonpartisan League did not attempt to overthrow the time-centered culture of work, but instead sought merely to dominate it. For example, the League-controlled state government brought about minimum wage and hour legislation and worker's compensation, hardly the work of an organization that sought, as its opponents charged, to overturn American society. While the League's opposition was wont to accuse the NPL of "I.W.W.ism" (according to the Grand Forks Herald, in both the League and the IWW "the appeal is made in each case to an unreasonable class spirit"<sup>47</sup>), the NPL and the Industrial Workers of the World had fundamentally different philosophies and goals. The League had great faith that the political system itself was sound and could be revitalized through class-based action once the forces of corruption -- "Old Gang" politicians and the minions of "Big Biz" -- were removed from power. For the IWW, on the other hand, the entire political and economic system was unsalvageable, and the Wobblies' goal was nothing less than "the interment of capitalism in America."<sup>48</sup> The NPL's attempt at contract negotiations with



the IWW-affiliated Agricultural Workers Union to secure harvest workers for 1917, which to League opponents seemed a clear case of collusion with the Wobbly menace, may simply have been what League president Townley suggested it was: an agreement between an organization of producers and a labor union, much like other "agreements as exist in most lines of industry today."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, a copy of the would-be agreement deals, not with syndicalism or revolution, but with wages (\$4.00 per day for a ten hour day), overtime pay, break time, and conditions of board and lodging for itinerant workers.<sup>50</sup>

Members of the Nonpartisan League, as has been suggested, did not draw back fearfully from this ocean of technology of which the clock was but one aspect. In fact, evidence suggests that most farmers welcomed machines and what they represented. In 1910, with the Model T only two years into its production run, Minot's Reporter found it necessary to rebuke people who complained that automobile use was a sign of frivolity and decadence. The Reporter told such "pessimists" that farmers used cars in legitimate ways.<sup>51</sup> The thought of farmers gallivanting in their automobiles was apparently a common fear, however, for in 1915 the Leader responded to the same charge, hoping "to see the day when every farmer will own an automobile. On the

average the farmer does too much work and not enough motoring."<sup>52</sup> Here, the Leader proposed that farmers, like city people, had a right both to cars and to leisure time. In a prize contest for Christmas 1915, the Leader asked high-school aged readers to submit responses to a set of nine questions, most of which related to the amount of money lost to North Dakota farmers through grain dockage<sup>53</sup>, and what this lost money could have purchased. Significantly, question two asked, "How many automobiles at \$460 each would that amount buy?" This was an obvious suggestion that farmers were being cheated out of something they deserved, namely automobiles. Incidentally, question four indicates that leisure was also becoming a part of the Leaguers' vocabulary. It asked how many farmers' wives and children could take a months' vacation with the money lost to unscrupulous grain buyers.<sup>54</sup> Leaguers also considered the recreational use of automobiles to be a legitimate need. Since "leisure" was by definition time not spent working, this is further evidence that North Dakotan society was following the broad national pattern of the separation of "work" from "life" that characterized industrial culture.

It is clear that the NPL was enamored of technology on many different levels. To begin with, there was the League's use of "dozens of Fords"<sup>55</sup> in its organization work

-- according to Charles E. Russell of the Leader, the Ford fleet was 140 in December of 1916.<sup>56</sup> However, the League's acceptance of technology was not limited to a passion for automobiles. For example, Leader columnist Audrey A. Harris made the argument that "bankers should advance money for washing machines and other conveniences on the farm just as readily as they lend money to the farmers for threshing machines and silos."<sup>57</sup> The rationale for this was simple: not only did drudgery contribute to farm youngsters' emigration to cities, but it had serious consequences for the health of farm wives. "Coffins are the most expensive commodity sold," said Harris, "It is better to invest in labor saving devices."<sup>58</sup> As historian Katherine Jellison has pointed out, American farm women embraced mechanization not only to ease their workload but also to "gain greater status and control within the farm family work unit."<sup>59</sup> Technology, then, was seen not as an intrinsically evil by-product of business but as a potentially controllable tool of advancement. One Leader editorial made this point very clearly, arguing that the farmer

must be equipped with complicated farm implements. He must have the latest and most convenient farm improvements. He must have telephones, daily newspapers, and automobiles that will enable him to keep in communication with the markets. He must utilize, directly or indirectly, the great factory, for there is where machinery comes from.<sup>60</sup>

The farmer was to accept the modernity implied in understandings of "business", with an emphasis on professionalism and material progress; however, he was specifically to reject the subordination also implicit in the standard of "business," for "being compelled to utilize the instruments of modern advancement he must not be made the victim of them."<sup>61</sup> Whereas train engineer Ike Wright had been a victim of one of the instruments of modern advancement -- the railroad -- the activist political culture of the NPL offered its members a way to control and benefit from changes in material life.

The League's acceptance of the material aspect of industrial America was related to that of its opposition. An editorial in the Grand Forks Herald, entitled "Not So Long Ago," was based on the premise that since "[t]oday all are sharing in a condition of general prosperity", farmers had no cause to get involved with the NPL. To the Bismarck Tribune, acquisitiveness was a healthy sign. "We get out of our energetic money-making," enthused the paper, "power and independence and enjoyment -- things that are good for us." The self-made man was not humble about being *nouveau riche*, rather "he is glad that he made his pile, himself."<sup>62</sup> Of course, Leaguers sought to bring about the blessings of

material prosperity and "manfully" function as equals with other members of society.

The vigorous acceptance of emerging technologies paralleled, and supported, the Nonpartisan League's activist political culture. While embracing the tools themselves, the League rejected the control of those who made and sold the tools. In seeking a more powerful role relative to "business," the NPL reached out to organized labor, which was in part, as Morlan has suggested, a political maneuver to form a farmer-labor coalition which would have potency in states where the labor movement was much larger.<sup>63</sup> However, chapter five will argue that the establishment of a farmer-labor alliance also had great ideological significance. A short examination of the North Dakota labor movement will reveal features of the work culture which emerged, like the Nonpartisan League, from the culture of industrial America.

In North Dakota, as in the rest of the United States, labor organizations during the first two decades of the twentieth century represented only a fraction of working people. However, this era did see the "high tide" of a genuine North Dakota labor movement.<sup>64</sup> In its twelfth biennial report, the state commissioner of agriculture and labor found that in 1910, only one labor organization (in Burleigh county) existed in North Dakota, and that it had

twenty members.<sup>65</sup> Yet by 1921, the North Dakota Federation of Labor reported that there were 24 locals in the state with approximately 3600 members, with miners, building trades, and railroad workers comprising well over half the membership.<sup>66</sup> These figures are to be used with caution. As at least one labor historian has recognized, in general relatively few workers throughout American history have belonged to trade unions, and the experiences and feelings of those who did belong are not necessarily identical to those of workers who did not belong."<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, these statistics clearly do not account for all union membership within the state. The NDFL figures, for example, only include unions affiliated with the Federation. In 1911, when the state reported only one union local in operation, other labor organizations were obviously in existence. For example, the labor news page of the Fargo Forum for the week of February 4, 1911, offered a schedule of meeting nights for several local unions, including those of musicians, tailors, plumbers, bookbinders, machinists, and bricklayers.<sup>68</sup> Notably absent is any reference to the Industrial Workers of the World, who were nevertheless a presence in North Dakota -- especially in the harvest fields, hobo jungles, and nightmares of business people.

However, it is worthwhile to look at the NDFL for what it reveals about the above-mentioned themes. Founded in 1911, the NDFL prepared a constitution whose preamble employed the language of class conflict:

A struggle is going on in all nations of the civilized world between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries. A struggle between the capitalists and the laborers, which grows in intensity from year to year.<sup>69</sup>

Yet even while acknowledging the existence of class struggle, the NDFL was apparently not interested in revolution. One League historian has portrayed the NDFL (along with the Socialist Party) as a pre-League protest movement.<sup>70</sup> While any labor organization is in one sense an instrument of "protest", it is perhaps more useful to see the NDFL as reformist, for its self-identified goal was to achieve the "best possible wages and best treatment to the laboring classes by all honorable means."<sup>71</sup> The Federation's essentially gradualist program was solidified throughout the 1920s. Economic demand number sixteen of the NDFL's 1921 constitution explicitly endorsed worker education and political action, intending "to stimulate the political education of the members of organized labor to understand their political rights and the use of the ballot intelligently, thru their political organizations."<sup>72</sup> The language of class struggle was still prominent in the 1921 constitution's preamble. Yet when issues of class were

discussed elsewhere during the 1921 convention, the rhetoric used was an interesting hybrid between rigid class analysis, populist resentment of the eastern money power (much like that used by the anonymous Minot poet in "Don't Blame the Engineer), and the culture of loyalty to the material aspects of the new industrial America -- all of which had much in common with the message of the Nonpartisan League. NDFL president Lee Brundage articulated this position in the 1921 convention proceedings, when he "shouted" on paper: "IT IS TIME FOR THE ORGANIZED WORKERS, FARMERS, AND SMALL BUSINESS MEN TO STOP RAILING AT THE MONEY POWER AND TO BEGIN TO COMPETE WITH IT" [capitalization is from the original text].<sup>73</sup> While Leaguers would have been hesitant to group themselves along with small business people, the essential message of opposition to control by urban, industrial interests was the same.

Clearly, the NDFL sought to work within the system to improve conditions for workers, which can be regarded as a reflection of the attitudes of most NDFL-affiliated union members. This attitude became more pronounced as the crucial year 1919 passed. The convention proceedings for that year show an organization waxing in power, reporting on the success of an AFL organizing drive in Grand Forks, calling for government ownership of industrial concerns,



commenting on the "splendid progress" in wages and working conditions for North Dakota railroad workers (up from 18 ½ cents a hour for a ten hour day to 45 cents an hour for eight hours), and passing a resolution endorsing the Winnipeg General Strike.<sup>74</sup> Springing from a number of fruitful organizing drives, and no doubt benefiting from the success of the 1919 strike by the NDFL-affiliated United Mine Workers, the NDFL increased in membership by 38% between 1920 and 1921.<sup>75</sup>

One other issue discussed by the Federation that year is very revealing. Said one delegate, "we should be promoting and working for Old Age Pension legislation."<sup>76</sup> That this subject was brought up is some indication of the way the relationship among the worker, the employer, and government had evolved since the early years of the century. Newspaper stories from around 1910 reveal a free market, free contract attitude concerning the relationship between employee and employer. The employer had very few obligations to the worker besides paying wages. A story appearing in the Fargo Forum in February 1911 makes this point abundantly clear. Entitled "Fargo Laborers are Not Careful," the story reports on a number of lawsuits in the Fargo area brought against employers by workers injured on

the job. The Forum noted that the court actions were dismissed, and editorialized,

The results of these actions should be a lesson to the local laboring men, and cause them to examine every thing with which they are working before starting on a job, and inform the employer of any neglected conditions that might cause an accident . . . . [C]arelessness in not making such an examination has lead [sic] to the courts finding a verdict against the laborer on the grounds of contributory negligence.<sup>77</sup>

Of course, this attitude was not restricted to Fargo.

According to a state report, prior to the passage of the Workmen's Compensation Act in 1919 only 20% of workers injured on the job received compensation of any kind.<sup>78</sup>

While the Forum article does portray the *laissez-faire* attitude of employers, it also shows that workers had a consciousness of their own rights, and were willing to fight for them. Another example of the clash between the ideology of free contract employment and working class consciousness was the 1912 strike by a group of section hands near Mandan. Informed that they could no longer have free use of discarded railroad ties "as fuel for their cave bake ovens," the 25 "Italian laborers" went on strike. That the workers had the self-confidence to strike for a perceived right -- even lowly section hands in a state with a very limited tradition of labor activism -- suggests that while the work culture of twentieth century America was engendered by the world of industry and commerce, it was fashioned by the

workers themselves. Perhaps more to the point, however, is the fact that the Bismarck Tribune reported the incident as causing "considerable amusement."<sup>79</sup> The condescension implied in that phrase -- which overlooks the fact that at \$1.85 for a ten hour day, free fuel may have been more than a luxury -- is obvious, but it also illustrates that the fuller meaning of such actions were clearly misunderstood. When the Nonpartisan League arose three years later, the Tribune and other papers like it continued to view class-based protests as unfathomable aberrations. Yet for students of subsequent American history, these examples are a reminder that "the modern 'welfare state' was not just the child of concerned and sensitive early twentieth-century upper- and middle-class critics of industrial capitalism,"<sup>80</sup> but also the result of activism on the part of the working class. So, the historian may recognize at least a kernel of truth in the statement John J. Handley of the Wisconsin Federation of Labor made to the NDSFL, to the effect that "Every step of progress has been made thru the efforts of the working people in one form or another."<sup>81</sup>

Most of Handley's NDFL audience would probably have accepted his proposition -- that working people are agents of social change -- as a statement about reality, not as a handsome and wishful piece of oratory. The Nonpartisan

League was itself a graphic demonstration of grass-roots power. Although the NPL's power base was the farm, the League was unquestionably pro-labor. Two prominent NDFL members, S.S. McDonald and Frank Milhollan, were also significant figures in the Frazier administration. The NPL passed a variety of labor-friendly laws relating to worker's compensation, minimum wages and maximum hours for women,<sup>82</sup> and mine inspection, all during the heady legislative session of 1919. Frazier himself spoke at the 1921 Federation of Labor convention. Referring to his own farming background, Frazier expressed the theme of brotherhood between farmers and workers, based on producership, that ran through the NPL and the North Dakota labor movement: "I know what it means to labor, as I have been a worker almost all my life. It seems to me that organized labor and the farmer are up against the same proposition."<sup>83</sup> Nor was the executive the only branch of state government where the Federation of Labor could find support. During the same convention, the Federation's Legislative Committee reported on nine bills it had caused to be introduced into the legislative assembly through Representative George Lakie, a member of the Brotherhood of Railway Fireman.<sup>84</sup>

The culture of productive life in North Dakota of the 1910s was, like that of the United States, deeply influenced by technology and business. Similarly, the state's work culture was also arranged by gender distinctions. This may be regarded in part as an illustration of the different ways men and women related to the industrial system in terms of work culture. Where "women's employment was shaped around the family . . . man's work, in a real sense, shaped the family."<sup>85</sup> That society saw a woman's work as an adjunct to her domestic role is clear after even a casual glance at primary documents. Newspapers, for instance, categorized help-wanted ads by sex. Teaching and nursing were assumed to be women's professions, the former because "the child and the education of the child are, and always have been, the peculiar province of woman's activities"<sup>86</sup> and the latter because it involved "doing good for others."<sup>87</sup> Jobs in household service, viewed as another aspect of the domestic sphere, were thought to be suitable for women, as were support-level clerical positions in business.<sup>88</sup>

The working lives of rural North Dakota women were similar to those of urbanites, at least in so far as they related to existing power structures. In common with farm women throughout the nation, those in North Dakota were part of

a gendered work system in which men were primarily responsible for performing cash-producing field work, [and] women's labor in the farmhouse, vegetable garden, and poultry house was viewed as secondary.<sup>89</sup>

In 1915, the U.S. Department of Agriculture prepared a series of reports on the lives of rural women. The USDA solicited input from the wives of crop correspondents as to how the Department could help "farm women in their important tasks of homemaking and domestic manufacturing."<sup>90</sup> This obviously reflected the attitude that a woman's place was not in the field. State agricultural agencies had a similar view. A 1923 Minnesota bulletin featured the results of a study of farm women in which approximately four percent of respondents explicitly said they sometimes did work in the field. This finding worried the bulletin's sociologist author: "Farming can not be very promising when we find so many women doing the work of a man . . . The best interests of the community can not be conserved, if this is a common practice."<sup>91</sup> Instead, the woman was to be encouraged to stay in the domestic realm, and extension readily provided her with information on duties directly related to that role, on such subjects as canning and preserving fruits and vegetables, advice on labor-saving kitchen arrangements, and information concerning child care.

For both urban and rural women, producing and raising sturdy children was enshrined as the ideal form of work, and

women's participation in political life was often justified as a defense of the family, a logical extension of the role of protector and nurturer. According to Ruby Kraft, a driving force behind the development of women's Nonpartisan Clubs, "a family is the 'Heart of Politics' and who should be interested in the affairs of the world if not the mothers[?]"<sup>92</sup> The Minot Reporter editor articulated his vision of the place of women in society. Condemning the activism of "club women" and "shemale conventions," he concluded,

Nine out of ten of these women who spend their time drafting resolutions condemning everything and everybody for imaginary short-comings, would be of far more service to humanity caring for a brood of healthy youngsters in a happy home.<sup>93</sup>

The Minnesota sociologist who was concerned over women in the fields opined that those who spoke glowingly of motherhood and the farm life had a healthy attitude: "The nation need not look forward with dismay or hesitancy when the mothers of rural America have a philosophy as safe, as sound, and as reassuring as that of the wisest sages."<sup>94</sup>

As these examples indicate, the work roles of women were undergoing a profound transformation. The Nonpartisan League, one of whose planks was women's suffrage,<sup>95</sup> realized this, as a short article in the Leader illustrates. The article included a picture of two women in work clothes

standing in a field, whom the writer identified as "two North Dakota farmers." Aware that the reader would pick up the irony of that phrase, since "farmer" was gender-typed as implying "male," the writer went on to suggest that "commercial clubs, real estate agents and booster clubs" would be particularly disturbed by this mixing of gender roles. The article ended with a cheeky argument for women's suffrage, saying the "two farmers pictured above are women and are forbidden to have a vote in changing conditions. It would not do, you know, for "woman's place is in the home."<sup>96</sup>

Yet despite the NPL's support of women as voters, chapter five will show how the League's vision of political action as an extension of "manly" responsibility left women to remain in a subordinate role. However, while home and motherhood was regarded as the bedrock of women's productive life, the work lives of some women were illustrations of non-domestic "competency," rather similar to the notions of businesslike professionalism urged for men.

By the early 1920s, then, a new work culture was emerging on the northern plains that reflected that of the United States. Even though working North Dakotans faced peculiar problems, such as isolation, especially for farm people, even more so for farm wives, they were subject to



the cultural pressures associated with mechanization and urbanization. Although most people's working lives were probably living expressions of adherence to one editorialist's code of "a steady Diet of Hard and Faithful Work -- eight hours and more . . . that's what all the World needs,"<sup>97</sup> they were not unwitting recipients of a received culture of work with hierarchical and gendered elements. The North Dakota Federation of Labor still endorsed the ideology of class conflict while fighting to improve daily living and working conditions. During the great North Dakota lignite strike of 1919, United Mine Workers members followed the direction of national union leadership and struck despite confidence among North Dakota mine operators that their employees were happy and unconcerned about events beyond the state.<sup>98</sup> Responding to a USDA survey, a North Dakota farm wife sought political solutions to hard times on her farm, but used the language of rural radicalism: "I don't understand how the farm women can be helped when the man is put in the sweat box from the power of the money sharks." Another rural North Dakotan understood clearly that other visions were available: "I don't belong to the 'I won't works,' but would like a little pay."<sup>99</sup> Nor were farm women universally oppressed by the patriarchy of husbands, for

men and women in a number of Midwestern farm families developed systems of cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual dependence that allowed for a more equitable distribution of labor and resources among farm family members.<sup>100</sup>

During the League and pre-League eras, men and women of North Dakota existed in a booming material world that was an aspect of "business" America, and this experience helped to shape a new work culture. However, although the prevailing structures urged people to measure the fulfillment of human potential by personal and national economic "progress," working people retained a sense of the pride of labor and a consciousness of their own worth. The farmers of the Nonpartisan League also faced the products of the industrial world directly, and sought to control that world with agrarian values.

## NOTES

1. It will be argued that although the predominance of agriculture made North Dakota something of a work culture frontier in terms of time discipline versus task orientation, the Nonpartisan League accepted the basic division between "work" and "life" characteristic of industrial capitalism. See E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," Past and Present no. 38 (1967): 93.

2. Frank J. Sullivan to editor, The Nonpartisan Leader, 16 December 1915, 11.

3. According to reports, Wright had indeed gained time. He was only two minutes behind schedule by the time his train cleared Towner, some thirty-five miles east of Minot. "Minot Men Killed in a Disastrous Wreck," Minot Daily Reporter, 20 November 1911, 1.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. "Escort Bodies to Morgue," Minot Daily Reporter, 20 November 1911, 1.

7. "Body Lies in State," Minot Daily Reporter, 21 November 1911, 1.

8. "Minot Men Killed," 1.

9. Of course, people did not discount the effects of weather. This recalls Elwyn Robinson's contention that adaptation to a harsh climate is a central theme in North Dakota history.

10. "Pays Tribute to Wright," Minot Daily Reporter, 23 November 1911, 1.

11. On steam locomotives, the engineer usually sat on the right side of the cab, the fireman on the left. On hand-fired engines this also facilitated shoveling for a right-handed fireman.

12. "Don't Blame the Engineer," Minot Daily Reporter, 25 November 1911, 3.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Herbert C. Gutman, Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 18.

16. North Dakota Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Twelfth Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor to the Governor of North Dakota for the Term Ending June 30, 1912 ([Bismarck]: n.p., 1912), 6.

17. In 1911, there were 488,628 horses in the state. For the year 1911-1912, there were 15,098 registered automobiles. Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Twelfth Biennial Report, 15; Secretary of State of North Dakota, Ninth Biennial Report of the Secretary of State of North Dakota, July 1, 1910 - June 30, 1912 ([Bismarck]: n.p., 1912), 39.

18. Secretary of State of North Dakota, Sixteenth Biennial Report of the Secretary of State of North Dakota, Period Beginning July 1, 1924 and Ending June 30, 1926 ([Bismarck]: n.p., 1926), 1258; Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Nineteenth Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor for the Period Ending June 30, 1926 ([Bismarck]: n.p., 1926), 1083.

19. Reynold M. Wik, Henry Ford and Grass-Roots America (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973), 15.

20. According to one newspaper editor, cars had become a practical piece of equipment for the level-headed farmer. "The Panic-Producers," Ward County Reporter, 11 August 1910, 3.

21. Rex. E. Willard, Farm Costs and Farm Organization (Fargo: North Dakota Agricultural College, Agricultural Extension Division, Circular 57, 1923), 6, 4.

22. Katherine Jellison, Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 28.

23. Secretary of State, Ninth Biennial Report, 39.

24. Chief Engineer and Secretary of the State Highway Commission, Twelfth Biennial Report, Part I, Chief Engineer and Secretary of the State Highway Commission Made to the Governor and Legislature of North Dakota for Period July 1, 1924 to June 30, 1926 ([Bismarck]: n.p., 1926), 2270. This statistic also points toward the fact that in North Dakota, as in most of rural America, the Model T was the predominate car. See Henry Ford and Grass-Roots America, 42.

25. Henry Ford and Grass-Roots America, 19.

26. This breaks down to 33,805 men and 6,972 women. Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Twelfth Biennial Report, 15.

27. This figure includes 22,206 men and 5,617 women. Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Nineteenth Biennial Report, 1091.

28. For instance, we do not know how much the 1924 figures were affected by the slump in farm prices beginning about 1920.

29. Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Nineteenth Biennial Report, 1055, 1056, 1057; Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Twelfth Biennial Report, 14.

30. Entitled to Power, 1-4 passim.

31. C.D. Patterson, Shall I Buy a Tractor? (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, Agricultural Extension Division, Special Bulletin No. 31, 1918), 2.

32. Ibid., 4.

33. W.H. Peters, Horse Production in North Dakota (Fargo: North Dakota Agricultural College, Agricultural Extension Department, Agricultural Extension Bulletin No. 8, 1917), 5.

34. "Tips -- On Getting a Servant Girl or a Position as Servant Girl," The Fargo Forum, 11 January 1911, 2.

35. "The System that Makes Your Files Almost Human," The Minot Daily News, 12 January 1921, 3.

36. Thompson identifies this phenomenon as a milestone in the adaptation of agriculture to the demands of industrialism, for "as soon as actual hands are employed the shift from task-orientation to timed labour is marked." "Time, Work-Discipline," 61.

37. G.A. Lundquist, What Farm Women are Thinking (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, Agricultural Extension Division, Special Bulletin No. 71, 1923), 4.

38. Joan M. Jensen, With These Hands: Women Working on the Land (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1981), 104.

39. Rural Sociology, 513.

40. "A State That is Run by Hired Hands," The Nonpartisan Leader, 1 July 1918, 19.

41. Eric Sevareid, Not so Wild a Dream (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 4.

42. The NPL's negotiations with the IWW-affiliated Agriculture Worker's Organization to attempt to supply laborers for the 1917 harvest were not forgotten by the enemies of the NPL.

43. The same author contended that popular impressions of harvest laborers as a bunch of college students seeking money and adventure was a false impression engendered by the contemporary media. Thomas D. Isern, Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 135, 171.

44. "Farm Drudgery Passing," Minot Daily Reporter, 28 August 1912, 2.

45. United States Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary, Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women, Report No. 103 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1915), 50-51.

46. "An Unmitigated Nuisance," Minot Daily Optic-Reporter, 10 June 1916, 2.

47. "The League and the I.W.W.," The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 7 April 1916, 4.

48. Melvyn Dubofsky, Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865-1920, Crowell American History Series (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1975), 101.

49. "League Abandons Plan to Import Organized Labor to Harvest N.D. Crops," Arthur LeSueur Papers, Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection, St. Paul.

50. Ibid.

51. "The Panic-Producers," 2.

52. "Farmers and Automobiles," The Nonpartisan Leader, 4 November 1915, 8.

53. Grain elevators would automatically subtract, or "dock," from the total weight of a load of grain a certain number of pounds which was supposed to represent the unusable portion of the load.

54. "Winners in the Leader's Big Prize Contest," The Nonpartisan Leader, 30 December 1915, 6.

55. Robert Morlan, Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League 1915-1922 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1985), 27.

56. Charles Edward Russell, "The Non-Partisan League," in Papers and Proceedings, Eleventh Annual Meeting, American Sociological Society: The Sociology of Rural Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 36.

57. "The Farmers' Wife," The Nonpartisan Leader, 23 December 1915, 15.

58. Ibid.

59. Entitled To Power, xxi.

60. Otto T. Monroe, "The Passing of the Independent Farmer," The Nonpartisan Leader, 21 October 1915, 6.

61. Ibid.

62. "Some Hope for us," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 3 June 1916, 4.

63. Minnesota, as Morlan indicated, was an important testing ground for farmer-labor politics. Political Prairie Fire, 127.

64. D. Jerome Tweton, In Union There is Strength (Grand Forks: The North Dakota Carpenter/Craftsman Heritage Society, 1982), 45.

65. Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Twelfth Biennial Report, 55.

66. North Dakota State Federation of Labor, Official Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Convention of the North Dakota State Federation of Labor, (Fargo: NDSFL, 1921), 7.

67. Work, Culture, and Society, 10.

68. "Meeting Nights of Fargo Unions," The Fargo Forum, 4 February 1911, 3.

69. North Dakota State Federation of Labor, Constitution (n.p.: NDSFL, 1911), 1.

70. Theodore Saloutos, "The Rise of the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, 1915-1917," Agricultural History 20, no. 1, (January 1946), 44.

71. NDSFL, Constitution, 1.

72. NDSFL, Tenth Annual Convention Proceedings, 1-2.

73. Ibid., 9.

74. North Dakota State Federation of Labor, Report of the Eighth Annual Convention, State Federation of Labor, Minot, June 1, 1919 (Minot: NDSFL, 1919), 7, 14.

75. NDSFL, Tenth Annual Convention Proceedings, .

76. North Dakota State Federation of Labor, Official Year Book of the North Dakota State Federation of Labor Containing Official Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Convention held in Fargo, N. Dak., December 15, 1929 (Bismarck: NDSFL, 1929), 22.



77. "Fargo Laborers are not Careful," The Fargo Forum, 4 February 1911, 3.

78. The North Dakota Workmen's Compensation Act: Considered From the Viewpoint of the North Dakota Workmen, July 1 1919 - March 1 1920 ([Bismarck?]: [Workmen's Compensation Bureau], 1920), 9.

79. "Section Laborers go on Strike," Bismarck Daily Tribune, 23 May 1912, 2.

80. Work, Culture, and Society, 290-291.

81. Handley was apparently acquainted with the Whig interpretation of history in that one of his evidences for this assertion is that the barons who forced the Magna Carta upon King John were "nothing more than the Trade Unions of today." NDSFL, Tenth Annual Convention Proceedings, 57.

82. Under these laws, women in selected occupations (such as housekeeping, retail sales, and light manufacturing) were to work no more than 8 ½ hour days, six days a week, for wages of around \$14 to \$15 weekly. Worker's Compensation Bureau, Minimum Wage Department, Fourth Biennial Report of the Minimum Wage Department of the Workmen's Compensation Bureau to the Governor of North Dakota for the Period Ending June 30, 1926 ([Bismarck]: [Workmen's Compensation Bureau], 1926), 531-545 passim.

83. NDSFL, Tenth Annual Convention Proceedings, 62.

84. Ibid., 34.

85. Carl N. Degler, At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 395.

86. "Real Woman's Work," Minot Daily Reporter, 23 July 1912, 2.

87. "The University Hospital School of Nursing," The Minot Daily News, 2 February 1921, 4.

88. Of course, this is not to say that women necessarily took particular jobs because of the gender-based explanations offered at the time. For example, Degler points out that the "principle reason women were

concentrated so heavily in teaching was because it was so low paying." At Odds, 380.

89. Entitled to Power, 1.

90. Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women, 5.

91. What Farm Women are Thinking, 16.

92. Ruby Kraft to Mrs. Cart [1922?], Ruby Kraft Papers, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.

93. The editor was inspired by reports of "a bunch of busy-body women" attacking Alice Roosevelt Longworth's smoking cigarettes. "Smoke Up, Alice," Ward County Reporter, 18 August 1910, 2.

94. What Farm Women are Thinking, 4.

95. According to Ruby Kraft, the men of the League-controlled state government brought about women's suffrage despite realizing "that they thereby invited defeat by bringing into the electorate a large group of inexperienced voters who might be (and were) swayed by false propaganda." Silver Biennial, North Dakota Federation of Nonpartisan Clubs, p. 3, in the Ruby Kraft Papers.

96. "The League and its Newspaper are Welcomed," The Nonpartisan Leader, 15 October 1915, 13.

97. "Advertising," The Minot Daily News, 12 January 1921, 2.

98. Thomas Shilts, "'To Prevent a Calamity Which is Imminent': Governor Frazier and the Fuel Crisis of 1919," North Dakota History 63, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 8.

99. United States Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary, Economic Needs of Farm Women, Report No. 106, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1915), 35, 34.

100. Entitled to Power, 30.

## CHAPTER V

### SHAKE HANDS ACROSS THE PLAINS AND SO BUILD FOR BETTER THINGS:

#### Class, Gender, and the Nonpartisan League

A little more than a month before the hotly-contested primaries of 1916, the Grand Forks Herald printed an editorial that, if taken out of the context of the battle over the Nonpartisan League, seems almost incomprehensible. "In this country," said the Herald, "there is just one basis for political action. That basis is neither race, nor creed, nor sex, nor wealth, nor occupation. It is just American citizenship."<sup>1</sup> This statement, which might otherwise be read as a self-deluded paean to the notion of America as a great melting pot, was instead a flank attack on the League as a creator of class antagonism, for, according to another Herald editorial,

the farmers are told that all who are not farmers, the merchants, the manufacturers, and what not, are arrayed against them and that if their rights are to be protected they must stand together as a class, arrayed in hostility against every other class.<sup>2</sup>

Previous sections of this thesis have provided a sampling of the rhetoric used in attacking the League -- as a group of carpetbaggers, communists, and so on. However, here,

according to the opposition, lay the essential danger of the League: it was a class-based political movement which, with its call for a new conception of political culture, threatened to overthrow all governmental and social structures. As chapter three has argued, the word "socialism" as used in the lexicon of the anti-League press was transformed into another term of derision, roughly synonymous with such words as "Bolshevism", "radicalism", and "I.W.W.ism." Yet, especially in the early years of the NPL, "socialism" had two underlying meanings upon which the word's pejorative connotation was based. First, "socialism" could signify a program of public ownership of the means of production and distribution. However, "socialism" was also thought to mean class-based social and political activism. While many members of the League's opposition were opposed to government ownership -- an IVA pamphlet opined that "one of the wisest statesmen once said that government ownership was the coming form of slavery"<sup>3</sup> --, there was a certain flexibility on the issue. For example, when the IVA came to power in 1921 it pledged support for the state mill and elevator project.<sup>4</sup> As the Leader never tired of pointing out, state ownership was not really the point of contention for League enemies who feared "socialism", for

the state of North Dakota already operates a school system, a penitentiary, an insane asylum, a twine plant,

a street car system and several other enterprises for public purposes . . . The city of Williston is operating an electric light and power system . . . Are not these all evidences of "Socialism"?<sup>5</sup>

Government ownership could even be cause for levity -- albeit grim levity -- as when, following the Frazier administration's seizure of 34 privately-owned lignite mines during the 1919 miners' strike, Jerry Bacon of the Herald quipped that Frazier now had a pretext to "seize the blacksmith shops, the farms, and the peanut stands of the entire state."<sup>6</sup> Yet "socialism" as class conflict was seen neither as an intellectual exercise in political economy nor as a joke, for the idea of the Nonpartisan League as an expression of class-based political power was perhaps the most basic departure from the received political culture of the day. Although they attacked the League for many different reasons -- ranging from the substantive, such as the "complete fiasco" of the Home Building Association<sup>7</sup> to such inanely trivial matters as Lynn Frazier's receding hairline<sup>8</sup> -- opponents recognized that the League was, in the words of one observer, "a class organization, seeking class advantage, and rest[ing] on a sentiment of class antagonism."<sup>9</sup> And, anti-Leaguers believed, it was therefore dangerous.

Class must be used judiciously as a category of historical analysis. According to Lawrence Goodwyn, because

of the "many psychological, social, and economic ingredients . . . embedded in the concepts of class . . . "class" is a treacherous tool if handled casually and routinely."<sup>10</sup> As Goodwyn pointed out in one of his works on Populism, class is a particularly troublesome concept when dealing with agrarian movements. Land-owning farmers, not a landless rural proletariat (although the League also included tenant farmers), made up the larger proportion of the League membership. With Marxism and its emphasis on property ownership and class formation as one of its intellectual forebears, class analysis would seem of limited value in discussing the Nonpartisan League.<sup>11</sup> Yet the question of what "class" meant to North Dakotans of the 1910s must certainly be asked, for it was an important part of the political dialogue of the Nonpartisan era. One need not be a Marxist to recognize this. Furthermore, little work has been done investigating the League from the standpoint of class. Philip Brewer's 1933 thesis proposed that the NPL, like earlier agrarian movements, had similar "elements of class warfare."<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, Brewer's work took a rather romantic view of the League's rise, and made the highly arguable suggestion that ceaseless animosity between farmers and small-town merchants "turned the whole movement

into a bitter class conflict."<sup>13</sup> As we have seen, matters were much more complicated.

Whether or not Leaguers fit into a particular, externally-defined definition of class, they did possess a collective consciousness based on their occupational status as farmers.<sup>14</sup> Because of the hegemony of the business standard, because of the pressures of the material world, and, as this chapter will discuss, because of their ruralness, Leaguers felt themselves to be a distinct social and economic group, and this was the most common definition of "class" as the word was actually used. One might almost call Leaguers a class in the analytical sense. As E.P. Thompson has contended,

class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.<sup>15</sup>

As this thesis has argued, however, the League was most significantly a proactive effort by farmers to gain a more powerful position within the world of "business."

"Business" was the enemy only insofar as it implied a hegemonic relationship in which the farmer was of inferior status, and Leaguers did not want to bring down the business world so much as they wanted their piece of it. Thus the NPL probably should not be thought of as a "class" in the

technical sense. Yet while NPL members might have shared a number of goals and cultural values with other groups, Leaguers, much like members of conservative labor unions, did believe that farmers were in dire need of collective action to protect their interests against other organized groups, or "classes."<sup>16</sup>

As chapter three argued, the Nonpartisan League borrowed from Populism the credo of agrarianism. The League embraced such agrarian concepts as agricultural fundamentalism, the idea that all human activities are based upon agriculture. However, one agrarian idea that the NPL implicitly -- and frequently explicitly -- rejected in the formation of class-based activism was (as Philip Kouth has observed<sup>17</sup>) the notion of "Rugged Individualism," which pictured the farmer as an independent, self-supporting entity. According to a modern rural sociologist, "a major contradiction of agrarian ideology is revealed when the Rugged Individualist tradition is set alongside agrarian populism."<sup>18</sup> Leaguers recognized this contradiction. As a Leader editorial entitled "The Passing of the Independent Farmer" argued, "There was a time when the farmer was truly independent. But times have changed. He is not an isolated atom anymore but is an integral part of society." The same



author insisted that class-based organization was made necessary by modern conditions:

The farmer is independent no more. He is a part of the great social structure and he cannot avoid his responsibility to society and should not be denied his share in the future of modern developments and progress. Being compelled to utilize the instruments of modern advancement he must not be made the victim of them.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the argument was frequently made that since other business and professional men had long been organized, farmers needed the same protection to help them escape from "the grasp of the organized classes."<sup>20</sup> As a contemporary sociologist observed,

We have the exhibit of business from top to bottom being regimented for defense and offense, while on the other side the farmers are forming in ranks, sometimes recruited by organized labor of cities, to improve their economic position. It is a menacing picture, but one that appears inevitable as classes come to self-consciousness and form themselves into organizations.<sup>21</sup>

In the League correspondence course, the suggested answer to the objection that NPL dues were too expensive argued that railway conductors and firemen each paid more than \$6.00 to belong to their organizations, while a membership in the Board of Trade or Chamber of Commerce could cost thousands of dollars.<sup>22</sup> Ruby Kraft made a similar point about the necessity of women's Nonpartisan Clubs, for "the town women are organized and the farm and labor women will not be content until they too are ready for instant action."<sup>23</sup> The

League, as chapter three has shown, made strenuous efforts to recruit people for the organization and to retain members through an appeal to the spirit of unity. As the League headquarters told one farmer, the "League needs you -- for in Union there is Strength."<sup>24</sup>

As the above examples illustrate, Leaguers looked to the cities and towns and, finding the people there organized, attempted to do the same thing themselves. For this reason, it is not wrong to say that in some ways the pro- and anti-NPL struggle was "a town versus country conflict."<sup>25</sup> Although Lewis Crawford argued that North Dakota's "rural and city society is homogenous" and that "there are no social or racial cleavages separating the cities from the country,"<sup>26</sup> there was a flavor of anti-urbanism in the rhetoric of rural North Dakotans of the League Era, some of which can probably be attributed to a tradition of a deep, though somewhat inarticulate, distrust of cities which was a feature of traditional agrarian thinking.<sup>27</sup> In 1915, for example, a rural North Dakota woman despairingly reported that her family would

have to sell this fall, because we are so deep in debt -- it will nearly kill me if we have to leave the farm. I do so want to keep my husband and children there. I don't see how I can part with the horses. I hate the cities and am afraid of them.<sup>28</sup>

More often, however, anti-urban sentiment had a more specific target. After all, the culture of business and "Big Biz" himself were products of the big cities, and in North Dakota the heart of the League's opposition beat most strongly in the cities of Grand Forks and Fargo, in the relatively urbanized Red River valley. As will be discussed below, rural people also railed against being characterized as rubes. Furthermore, farm people deeply resented their children being educated away from the farm because of a vaguely urban influence in school curricula. "Give us schools in the country that will give our children a fairly good education in their own neighborhood," requested one North Dakotan, "instead of compelling us to send them to the large cities where their heads are filled with foolish notions and the desire for farm work driven entirely out of their heads, both boys and girls."<sup>29</sup> This statement alludes to what was considered "the great rural problem"<sup>30</sup> of the day: the flight of rural people, especially young people, to the cities.<sup>31</sup> This was another factor in anti-urban sentiment.

However, it would not do to overstate or misunderstand the nature of the rural-urban conflict in the Nonpartisan League experience. First, the League explicitly considered itself the friend of urban laborers (who built the labor-

saving machinery farmers appreciated) and urban consumers who, it argued, were robbed by the same "middlemen" and "food profiteers" who cheated farmers. And if Grand Forks was the home of Jerry Bacon, it was also the native city of the North Dakota Federation of Labor, of whose support the NPL was a happy recipient.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, much of the language used by rural people in their complaints against the cities displays envy rather than hatred. A part of anti-urban sentiment was based on the perception of urban life being more rewarding, and less laborious, than rural life.

Resorting to verse, Emmitt E. Kraft chanted,

We have stayed at home and slopped the swine  
Have kept some hens and fed the kine,  
We have worked so hard and lost our health  
While the fat boys raked in all the wealth.<sup>33</sup>

Here is a reference to politician Treadwell Twichell's supposed jeer that farmers "go home and slop the hogs," which became such a potent NPL slogan. It is significant that Leaguers' attitudes were based on a presumed consciousness of what city life entailed, not on ignorance.

According to one League speaker,

We want every farmer in this state to be able to have a six or eight room modern house on his farm. . . . furnished with the best furniture, the finest carpets, rugs and musical instruments. . . . We want every farmer to drive a sixty-horse power Crackerjack instead of a tin lizzy.<sup>34</sup>

The Leader, in fact, assumed that a good deal of farmers' antagonism toward urban men was based on the idea that townsmen were better providers for their families. Bankers, suggested the Leader, were to be envied because "their boys do not stay out of school to plow nor do their wives and daughters spend long hours at hard, unremunerative labor."<sup>35</sup>

Kate Waller Barrett, speaking at the 1916 convention of the American Sociological Society, suggested that a consciousness of rural-urban inequality was a particular problem for rural women:

The rural delivery brings to her door the most up-to-date information with regard to the activities of women elsewhere, and even if she did not subscribe to magazines, the advertising of today, which is so freely distributed, is so attractive and effective that one cannot be in ignorance of the efficient activity of woman everywhere, which is in the very air we breathe . . . The rural woman is almost entirely cut off from this phase of modern life.<sup>36</sup>

As this suggests, and as preceding chapters of this thesis have argued, Nonpartisan Leaguers and their families saw themselves as modern people who wanted to participate more fully in the political and economic governance of life. However in order to fully participate as equals, farmers had obstacles to overcome that were embedded in American culture. Jeffersonian images of the sturdy yeoman agriculturalist notwithstanding, the farmer had always been "scoffed at and jeered at and he has been made the butt of

ridicule, sarcasm, and caricature by townspeople, especially in cartoon and on the stage. Many extravagant jokes have been perpetrated at his expense."<sup>37</sup> Rural people were often depicted in the popular media as uneducated drudges, concerned only with working, eating, and sleeping. For example, a series of articles in Collier's magazine in the spring of 1912 were a humorous account of one man's experience working as a farm hand. The toil was endless and the living conditions poor, the writer reported, and the farmer for whom he worked was a penny-pinching slave driver who could not "endure the thought of the hired hand being idle for ten minutes."<sup>38</sup> In 1915, a Massachusetts farmer spoke of "the sham sneering sentiment that it is unrefined for women to be laboring on the farm."<sup>39</sup> An Ohio man complained that "scarcely a daily paper or periodical of any kind but caricatures and pictures the farmer as old 'Hayseed'. "<sup>40</sup> A New York woman concurred, adding that a second common image pictured the agriculturalist as a food profiteer. The farmer, she said, "is represented either as a 'Rube' with chin whiskers and his trousers in his boots or as having several motor cars bought with his ill-gotten gains." <sup>41</sup>

The Nonpartisan League tapped into farmers' resentment of the suggestion that they were rubes. John M. Baer's

cartoons in the Nonpartisan Leader, which one researcher has called "the usual extension of the views and methodology of early-day Nonpartisan League leaders,"<sup>42</sup> acknowledged the prevalence of this image, but instead of accepting it, turned it into a symbol of what might be called class pride. The drawings of Baer and other Leader cartoonists often featured a farmer looking much like the one described above, wearing overalls (although his pants legs were more often outside the boots), often sporting a straw hat, and almost always with a chin beard like Uncle Sam's. Quite early on in his career as a Leader cartoonist, Baer named this nearly ubiquitous character "Hiram A. Rube" (which was sometimes contracted to "Hi'am A. Rube", to make clear that the name was to be pronounced "I am a rube").<sup>43</sup> As far as the League was concerned, Hiram was Everyman, and his plight was one the Leader's readership understood and identified with. Sometimes Hiram was pictured as the victim (although always a cognizant one) of a fat, checked-suited character often labeled "Big Biz" or "Old Gang Politician". In a cartoon commenting on the widespread fear of food shortages and high prices following the United States' decision to enter the European war, Hiram is shown, Atlas-like, supporting on his shoulders a teetering pile of boxes and barrels representing the world's food supply, at the summit of which sits a

portly figure called "Middleman".<sup>44</sup> Yet more often, Hiram is the canny victor of the struggle, as when he smilingly prevents a horse labeled "Nonpartisan League" from being branded with an iron called "I.W.W.ism, Socialism, Atheism" wielded by an oily-looking cowboy named "Old Gang".<sup>45</sup>

Baer's cartoons were influential in driving home the Leader's message. Writing to inform the paper of the value of her family's NPL membership, one woman said, "if a person hasn't got time to read the paper one glimpse at the cartoons is enough."<sup>46</sup>

Through cartoons featuring Hiram Rube, farmers could see themselves as a group of intelligent, powerful people who could deal effectively with the depredations of opposing interest groups. Hiram became a symbol of the League's political culture in the same way as did the phrase "Go home and slop the hogs" -- both began as perceived insults, as comments on the farmer's subjugation to the powers of urban America, but through the agency of collective consciousness were turned around into expressions of political and social empowerment. In a similar way Leaguers proudly identified themselves as "sixteen dollar suckers" or members of the "North Dakota 'Sucker Club'"<sup>47</sup> (in reference to anti-League papers which supposedly so-labeled farmers who paid the NPL's sixteen dollar membership fee), and as "stickers", a



term which became so pervasive that it found its way into the vocabulary of both Leaguers and their enemies. For example, in the spring of 1921, a resident from the McVille area responded negatively to an IVA query asking whether a recall election in the near future would meet with good results, saying "when one gets out among the leaguers it is surprising to find how they are still sticking."<sup>48</sup>

Answering the same IVA request, the manager of the Washburn Grain Company also remarked on the tenacity of the "'We'll Stick We'll Win' Nonpartisans" in his district.<sup>49</sup> As part of the correspondence course for NPL organizers, would-be League field workers were given specific instructions on how to counter the objection that "Farmers won't stick."<sup>50</sup> In North Dakota, while the electoral majorities for League-endorsed candidates generally declined from 1916 through 1920 -- for example, Lynn Frazier received 79% of the vote in the general election of 1916, 60% in 1918, and 51% in 1920<sup>51</sup> -- many farmers remained loyal to the League, proudly identifying themselves as "stickers". As one NPL adherent proudly signed himself in a 1919 letter to the governor's office, "I beg to remain yours Resp. a sticker til the last dog is hung and we will hang two or three next fall."<sup>52</sup>

Returning to the influence of the Nonpartisan Leader on the consciousness of the League's membership, in her

discussion of the importance of existing social networks to the League's rise, Kathleen Moum made the useful observation that the "Leader itself served as a kind of League community newspaper."<sup>53</sup> This is certainly the case, as even a cursory journey through the pages of the Leader reveals. The paper allowed ample room for letters to the editor, ran photos of "League Boosters" and their families, included contests for young people (such as the Christmas contest discussed in chapter three), and included a page for farm women which featured fashion and homemaking tips as well as social and political commentary. Combined with the jaunty irreverence and homespun metaphors of its editorial staff (which once compared the supposedly outmoded "food marketing system of the United States" to a broken-down automobile, saying "'Poor ole Nancy, she was a good nag, but she done broke down'")<sup>54</sup> and the cartoons by Baer and other illustrators, the Leader effectively brought the farmer a message of community. However, it did more. While Leaguers were certainly concerned with and influenced by the local community, they did not generally possess, as some contemporaries implied, a peasant mentality. As a noted labor historian has argued, for peasants "the unit of their organized action is either the parish pump or the universe. There is no in between."<sup>55</sup> Leaguers, on the other hand,

were well aware that neither local solutions nor metaphysics would help them gain power in the world of industrial America, a world they attempted to join on their own terms. The Leader, which by December of 1916 claimed a weekly circulation of 65,000 copies,<sup>56</sup> helped farmers meet this challenge. Although readers' reactions to the publication ranged from praises to curses, it was influential. A young woman from Bottineau resorted to verse in describing the effect the Leader had on her household:

Sometimes dad says the paper somehow ain't got up right, / And he does a lot of kickin' when he reads it Friday night. / He says there ain't a dad-burned thing in it worth while to read, / An' that it doesn't print the kind of stuff the people need. / He throws it in the corner and says it's [sic] on the bum / But you'd oughter hear him holler when the Leader fails to come.<sup>57</sup>

The Nonpartisan Leader was not intended to be a daily newspaper like the Herald, the Tribune, or Fargo's Forum; for most of the League Era, Fargo's Courier-News was the NPL's big daily. The Leader was, as its masthead indicated, the "Official Magazine of the National Nonpartisan League." Thus the publication served a quite different purpose from a daily paper. While the front page of daily papers (and even the weeklies of small towns) had an assortment of news -- world, national, state, and local -- the first news page of the Leader in its early issues generally featured a half-page cartoon and an accompanying editorial on the same

theme. These were always about some issue affecting the existence of the farmer, be it local, national, or international. The contrast between the effect of a daily newspaper and the Leader was marked. According to communications theorist Marshall McLuhan, the format of the daily tends to foster a world, rather than a local, view:

That huge landscape of the human family which is achieved by simply setting side by side disconnected items from China to Peru presents a daily image both of the complexity and similarity of human affairs which, in its total effect, is tending to abolish any provincial outlook.<sup>58</sup>

Even a paper with important local news had room on the front page for other stories. For example, Minot's Daily News for June 8, 1917, featured a story of a vast NPL meeting in Minot which included the governor, other League luminaries, and about 10,000 attendees. Yet it also included stories on General Haig's successes in the European war, the progress of efforts to secure military inductees in both Washington and Ottawa, and the presence of a arsonist in the small North Dakota town of Anamoose. Thus the traditional newspapers served to "evoke the image of a world society,"<sup>59</sup> which was supported by cultural attitudes that told farmers that they were "an inseparable unit of an indissoluble mass . . . as much a part of a closely knit social body as is the hand or foot a part of the physical body."<sup>60</sup> The daily paper was another aspect of business America, another sign

for the North Dakota farmer that he was bound into a world that he had not made and in which he was not expected to join as an equal.

While the newspapers presented a world view in which the reader saw himself as a very small part of the whole, the Leader presented the news through the lenses of class. Often it engaged in a dialogue with material appearing in the anti-League papers, refuting charges made against the NPL and ridiculing its enemies. In October of 1915, the Leader ran a cartoon entitled "When a Feller Needs a Friend." This was the same title as a series of syndicated cartoons by Clare Briggs which appeared in newspapers across the country (including North Dakota) during the League era.<sup>61</sup> However, while Briggs' cartoons were supposed to be warm and witty observations on "the inner recesses of the small-town secret heart,"<sup>62</sup> the Leader cartoon by the same name depicted a farmer with a wagon load of grain being cheated by the operator of a grain elevator.<sup>63</sup> The NPL publication assumed its readers would note the irony of its presentation. The Leader also interpreted the news of the day, discussing items, not for intrinsic value, but for how they affected the North Dakota farmer and the League program. In this sense it was more an educational tool than a source of information. For example, an early issue of the

Leader led off with a story intending to show that the modern (1915) farmer received comparatively less return for his wheat harvest than did the farmer of 1865. Referring to the illustration accompanying the article, readers were told to

Look at this cartoon again. Hang it on the wall. Look at it every morning. Look at it every night. Get it pictured in your mind. It will do you good. It is the kind of picture you should think about. It will show you some reasons why things are as they are. It will show you why you work and why the other fellow profits from your work.<sup>64</sup>

Clearly, this was an attempt to raise the consciousness of the farmer as to his relationship with those groups, the "other fellow", who would cheat him of the just rewards of his work. So while daily newspapers served to make the farmer feel more a small part of a much larger world, the Leader made him feel a member of a distinct interest group. As Seymour Martin Lipset has suggested, an environment of political homogeneity in which outside influences are limited is often associated with radicalism.<sup>65</sup> The Leader helped increase the homogeneity of the farmers' political culture, telling them that they had a common enemy ("Big Biz" and "Old Gangism") which should be dealt with in a united way (by gaining political control of the state through the instrument of the NPL).<sup>66</sup> This was indeed the radical part of the League -- its effort to promote

collective political action within a political culture that feared class combinations. In a story giving biographical information on some early League boosters, the Leader told readers to "write them your appreciation. Get acquainted. Shake hands across the plains and so build for better things."<sup>67</sup>

The Nonpartisan Leader, then, was both a catalyst for collective consciousness and a reflection of it, and one theme that especially cropped up in the later years of the League era was the necessity of an alliance between farmers and organized labor. A Leader cover from November of 1919, featuring a giant-sized farmer and an equally colossal industrial workman looming over a puny, frightened agent of big business, made this point quite clearly.<sup>68</sup> On one level, the putative farmer-labor brotherhood was an exercise in political coalition-building. If the League hoped to expand to states that were not dominated by agriculture, it simply needed more votes. Even in North Dakota, as chapter four illustrated, the League was on friendly terms with the state Federation of Labor. Yet the farmer-labor alliance also had ideological significance.

Writing in 1940, Paul Johnstone identified "a long trend toward the identification of farmers with businessmen" which constituted

an almost complete reversal in attitudes toward labor. Whereas a century ago farmers generally identified themselves as of the working class and did not ordinarily distinguish themselves from other groups of workers, they have in the course of time acquired an employer consciousness and have developed a strong inclination to regard those who work for wages as a different class, with other and even hostile interests.<sup>69</sup>

Through the idea of producerism, the League sought to link itself to the working class, which like farmers produced wealth. Here again was an attempt to revive a traditional agrarian idea and put it into service in a modern struggle against exploitative interests. This concept was a matter of faith to the NPL's leadership. According to the Leader, the NPL was brought about due to

'A realization that the toilers, the producers of wealth, have not had a square deal; a desire, the result of that realization, for a better, broader life for those who work and create the wealth; a determination, based on that desire, to get these better living conditions through organization of the people and use of the machinery of government, so long run for the benefit of the few only.'<sup>70</sup>

Many Leaguers themselves did accept the idea of producerism. That the League even attempted to negotiate with the IWW-affiliated Agricultural Workers Union is evidence that the League leadership expected North Dakota farmers to have a certain level of respect for that much-hated labor organization, even if motivated simply by a desire to get in the crop. An observer of the Great Plains harvest situation in the summer of 1917 found "virtually no antagonism between



the employing farmers and these members of the I.W.W."<sup>71</sup> A potential agreement between the NPL and the AWU that same year was dropped because, according to NPL president Townley, "League members are divided on the subject." This is evidence that even if some farmers opposed negotiations with the union, other did not.<sup>72</sup> Few Leaguers were probably as sympathetic toward the Wobblies and other tramp workers as a Hillsboro man, who told the Leader

It also gives me pleasure to see that you recognize 'editorially' the man whom the average farmer has a tendency to look down upon, that is the itinerant worker or 'Jungleite' as he is termed in his own land. This man, voteless and driven from place to place through economic necessity is and has been fighting for the same thing the farmers are now battling for -- the right to organize and secure more for his toil.<sup>73</sup>

However, many Leaguers did write and speak easily about common interests of farmers and the working class. As Ruby Kraft indicated, members of the NPL-endorsed state government "were chosen by the rank and file of the people, the farmers and laborers."<sup>74</sup>

Leaguers were aware that their society was not classless, and were fearful of becoming a landless rural proletariat. Nor was this a groundless fear. Farm tenancy was increasing during the Nonpartisan Era; between 1900 and 1930, tenancy increased 20% and 59% for the East North Central and West North Central regions, respectively.<sup>75</sup> In North Dakota, 14.3% of farmers were tenants in 1910, but by

1920, 25.6% of farmers were renters.<sup>76</sup> Using more immediate terms, one NPL manual told farmers that "every year in the United States at least 50,000 farmers are foreclosed on, and become renters."<sup>77</sup> The same publication warned of a grim future for farmers, whose only hope to save their land (and thus their pride, as will be discussed below) was through collective action. "If you still have a hold on your farm," it warned, "now is the time to organize and save yourself."<sup>78</sup> Whether or not the future was indeed as bleak as the League depicted, it is significant that the NPL acknowledged that the specter of tenancy was a common nightmare for farmers. A 1918 Leader article entitled "Will Farmers Be Only Factory Hands?" rhetorically asked its readers,

How would you like to see this big corporation farming spread all over the country and gobble up the little farms and reduce you and your sons, and perhaps your daughters, to the condition of propertyless wage-earners working in rented houses for corporations?<sup>79</sup>

Other evidence also suggests that North Dakotans were no strangers to the gradations of social stratification. In July of 1912, the Minot paper remarked on how the mayor of Rugby was actually taking part, albeit probably symbolically, in the construction of that town's new city hall: "To be sure it is rather an uncommon sight to see the mayor hauling sand, but this is not the only precedent that

Mayor Dale has established."<sup>80</sup> Thus in Minot, still something of a frontier town in 1912, an expectation of a division of labor existed which assumed that a town official would not do the work of a common laborer. In the nearby town of Velva, Eric Sevareid spoke of growing up in a nearly classless "agrarian democracy"<sup>81</sup> in which even his banker father would "remove his hard white collar, change to overalls" and help with wheat harvesting.<sup>82</sup> However, young Eric was mortified when a playmate once said "'Your father is a pretty good man, even if he is the richest man in town.'"<sup>83</sup>

The Nonpartisan League, as we have seen, was an expression of the awareness of such subtle social divisions. For example, during the 1919 coal strike, a newspaper article used this understanding of class differences to poke fun at the attempts of the "prominent citizens" of Williston to take the place of striking coal miners: "Seven prominent citizens . . . went to the mines very confidently," said the report, "but got their shoes muddy upon entering the tunnel and decided they had enough digging. They all retired in dismay after being in the mine less than fifteen minutes."<sup>84</sup>

The Nonpartisan League's conception and practice of collective, occupation-based political action was a departure from the received political culture of North

Dakota in the 1910s. Yet as this paper has shown, while the League program was radical in terms of political culture, it was built upon a foundation which included some rather conservative ideological elements, not the least of which was an acceptance of selected agrarian principles. Yet no facet of the League's appeal was more fundamentally conservative than was its appeal to "manliness." League recruits were encouraged to think in terms of cooperation at the expense of independence in the traditional agrarian sense (although maintaining private property rights), but it was always expected that they would see themselves as men who had a family to provide for, and who took great pride in being able to do so. Thus the implication of the business standard, of "go home and slop the hogs", of the imagery of hick farmers, was that Leaguers were not only being robbed by "Big Biz," but that their manhood was being impugned by allowing the exploitation to continue. The League represented not only a way to get better commodities prices, but also a means of recovering personal honor and building occupational pride.

Yet manliness was not simply an invention of the NFL. Non-Leaguers also frequently sounded themes of manliness in their political advertisements. For example, bitter anti-League Oscar J. Sorlie announced that, in order to

"preserve [his] manhood," he was a candidate for the 1916 lieutenant governorship. "I decided to become a candidate on that platform alone," declared Sorlie.<sup>85</sup> As a League opponent, Sorlie felt he could only vote for Republicans running without League endorsement. While all other state offices had non-League Republicans in contention, League-endorsee Anton Kraabel was the only Republican candidate for lieutenant governor. Manliness, Sorlie contended, required him to stand for nomination to that office. Similar appeals were offered for the candidacy of Usher Burdick, himself a non-League Republican running for governor. An advertisement touted Burdick as a "hard worker," with a "winning and unassuming way" who "has himself gone through the school of adversity." "U.L. Burdick is a MAN," enthused the ad, "He is THE man."<sup>86</sup> Yet while an appeal to gendered definitions of masculinity were clearly being made all across the political spectrum in North Dakota in the mid-1910s, for the Nonpartisan League manliness had special connotations.

As with any other definition, the concept of manliness worked by both inclusion and exclusion and was thus quite in line with the League's message of class conflict. Manliness required men to be plain-spoken, honest, neighborly (implying a receptivity to being drafted for political

office), physically hard-working, and proud in the role of family provider. It specifically excluded being a "'smooth talker'"<sup>87</sup>, a dandified dresser,<sup>88</sup> or being fearful of physical labor. Indeed, the first range of definitions offered here were supposed to be characteristics of the League farmer, and the latter of the agent of "Big Biz." An early Leader commentary praising League boosters illustrates how concepts of gender and class were intertwined:

These men form a part of the real backbone and sinew [sic] of this great state. Without them and their class -- without the sacrifice of them and their wives and their children, North Dakota would as yet be a barren waste and civilization would be as yet unknown here.<sup>89</sup>

Leaguers were encouraged to select candidates for public office based on the virtues of manliness. Ideal candidates were described as "solid, trustworthy neighbors," and "strong, levelheaded men" Unlike the conventional politician, the "smooth grafter," League endorsees would "never lower their manhood by asking you to vote for them."<sup>90</sup> The Leader quoted the Antler American as suggesting that the NPL would bring about a political upset, replacing "the oily-haired feeders at the public trough" with "horney-handed sons of toil who have so long and patiently submitted to a biennial fleecing from the men who were supposed to represent them."<sup>91</sup> Farmers who worked to seize the reins of government were thought to be conveying

the message that "this is a man's job. Don't send the office boys of Big Business."<sup>92</sup> Lynn Frazier was praised as "a plain every-day farmer [who] has made the best governor North Dakota ever had."<sup>93</sup> A 1920 Leader feature emphasized that Frazier was a family man and a "real" farmer ("not one who lives in town and gets reports from the manager"), showing pictures of the Frazier family and of the governor himself at work on his Hoople farm.<sup>94</sup> Frazier embodied many of the qualities of manliness; a plain, hard-working man of the soil who took care of his family, and yet as a University of North Dakota graduate also a man of the world who knew of the necessity of collective agrarian activism.<sup>95</sup>

As was suggested above, responsibility to one's family was considered another important aspect of manliness. The NPL tapped into the resentment of rural men who felt that city men could provide better for their families. The argument ran this way: all men provide for their families; farmers do not provide for their families (because of the depredations of "Big Biz"); therefore, farmers are not men. In some cases, this loss of honor, or "manhood", simply led to despair. According to Arthur LeSueur, this despair was one reason the Socialist Party never gained significant support from farmers (only twice did any Socialist candidate receive more than 8,000 votes in elections held from 1912

through 1916<sup>96</sup>). According to LeSueur, the Socialists had preached a hard message of self-reliance "which meant more work for the already overworked farmer, stupid from economic abuse and fatigue."<sup>97</sup> And few were up to the challenge, because the farmer

went home from the socialist meetings convinced of his wrongs, but did not have the moral stamina to take his due share of responsibility for thei[r] existence. After these meetings the sight of his ragged [sic for "ragged"] wife was a scourge to his self esteem and only a few of the higher type of the farmers who were in bad strights [sic] had the manhood to face the facts.<sup>98</sup>

The Nonpartisan League entered the fray and gained immediate and numerous converts because, contended LeSueur, by providing what the IVA would label a "'Big Biz' Bogey man,"<sup>99</sup> the League absolved the farmer from guilt and personal responsibility over poor living conditions on the farm. The farmer, receiving NPL absolution, "experienced a pleasant glow all over his anatomy and sent his w[i]fe to milk the cows, and his boy to the field instead of to school with a clear conscience." When he "looked at his ragged wife and overworked children he could exercise his indignation over their plight by hating big business."<sup>100</sup>

LeSueur gave a graphic picture of the rural despair that often seemed to lurk just below the surface of the Nonpartisan League story, and, as we have seen, opposition to big business interests was a League fundamental. But



farmers did not see NPL membership as a release from responsibility. Instead, they saw the League as a vehicle with which they could retain (or regain) their manliness by joining together to fight the combined forces arrayed in opposition to them. Leaguers did not articulate their membership in terms of passivity. Leader contributor and farmer Eric Moen said "we farmers need a scolding" because while

I have made sacrifices, denied my family and overworked everybody on the place . . . there has been a small bunch of smooth fellows living in this state who never do a tap. . . . Their wives have everything they want. Their children go to private boarding schools and drive in automobiles. . . . They don't exist, they LIVE!<sup>101</sup>

Farmers, it was implied, needed "scolding" because they had not lived up to their manly obligation of taking necessary action to ensure that their families were well provided for, and not overworked, ragged, and ill-educated. "This League must be built and right NOW," exclaimed Moen, "We have wasted too much time already."<sup>102</sup> Leaguers did place much of the blame for their plight on big business. However, the point was repeatedly made that farmers who did not awaken to a consciousness of their situation and then take action to remedy it deserved whatever was given them. As the language used indicates, farmers saw themselves as nonmembers of those groups that they thought did need to be cared for, such as "boys" and "Indians." As another North Dakotan

wrote, "I do not lay the blame on the business man, but I do blame the farmers."<sup>103</sup> Thus the League did not call for a reactive stance, but rather an assumption of responsibility and proactive striving.

The language with which Leaguers attacked their enemies reveals that femininity was explicitly prohibited from the gendered associations of manhood. For example, in the spring of 1917 the Grand Forks Herald challenged the veracity of a set of agricultural statistics which J.H. Worst had presented to a grain grower's conference to prove that "the farmers of North Dakota are robbed of \$50,000,000 each year."<sup>104</sup> The Herald pointed out with ribald glee that one item in the set of figures referred to the value of cattle manure, and gigglingly referred to the statistics as "these 'B.S.' figures."<sup>105</sup> The Leader exploded. The front page story of the publication's next issue was devoted to refuting the Herald item, which it interpreted as another example of urban, middle-class condescension toward the working farmer.<sup>106</sup> The Leader attacked Herald editor Jerry Bacon as a "lily-handed effeminate" who

shrinks from the crude facts of life out here next to the soil. In his coarse-minded moments the idea that cattle manure is a valuable resource, useful in agricultural enterprise, fills his vacuous cranium with inexpressible merriment. It is his idea of a good joke."<sup>107</sup>

This is also another illustration of the theme of craft pride, rooted in the tradition of working-class agrarianism, and, as has been suggested, this tapped into the culture of western resentment against the east that long preceded the Nonpartisan League. A 1917 editorial in the Minot newspaper indignantly replied to USDA bulletins which proposed that, as part of the war emergency, women and girls should be "utilized in doing the lighter work on the farms." While stating that women had been doing work on the farms of the Great Plains all along, and scarcely needed to be told to do so by a "worthless army of clerks and hangers-on," the editor also revealed, by his choice of words, something about the presumed characteristics of masculinity, for the unmanly eastern pamphleteers were "effeminated, soft-handed and pompadoured dudes" and "kids."<sup>108</sup> Thus built into the language was an understanding that femininity implied the inability to do the work of a man.

The League's definition of manliness, like that of broader society, was patriarchal. Although the NPL endorsed women's suffrage, it was supposed that women as voters would have a special interest in matters pertaining to child rearing and domestic stability. A 1920 Leader article suggested that a major reason newly enfranchised women should support League-endorsed candidates was because of its

support for consolidated schools in North Dakota.<sup>109</sup> The anti-League Red Flame also made a special appeal to women, suggesting that the NPL constituted nothing less than an attack on family, home, and religion. As Ross Martin of the state Livestock Sanitary Board said in a 1919 letter to Frazier, "the opposition are trying to make a church fight and such would mean our defeat."<sup>110</sup> Ruby Kraft acknowledged that women's suffrage was a great responsibility, and as voters women had a duty to "study the economic conditions of today" in order to vote intelligently. However, Nonpartisan Club women had a special responsibility within the domestic sphere since,

Our efforts along political lines is [sic] not an end in itself, only a means to gain economic freedom. We have to put a great deal of stress on the political part in order to keep our program intact, our true place in club work is to make a pleasanter community life where the young folks receive and help with entertainment and study of home problems can be worked out to the benefit of all.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, if by definition a "man" was assumed to be a husband and father, a "woman" was defined as being a wife and mother. And therefore a woman's role, regardless of what else it was or was not, was to care for her home and children and to support her husband. As Kate Waller Barrett concluded, "the rural problem is the problem of rural woman, and the solving of this problem lies in the hands of rural men."<sup>112</sup>

The Nonpartisan League's collective consciousness and occupational group activism (which to the League's enemies looked like class warfare) was the essential difference between its political culture and that of the broader society. It emerged as an answer to what was seen as the exclusion of farmers from social and economic equality due to the combinations of business. This consciousness was built on some of the principles of agrarianism, combined with the distrust of cities also evident in that creed. However, while Leaguers sought to be included as equal contenders in the economic and political sphere, the NPL's philosophy also depended on a definition of manliness that excluded women from equality within the League. Even though women in North Dakota were given full suffrage under the League's Frazier administration, it was assumed that women would necessarily vote with an eye to protecting home and family. While the League did call for a new level of inclusion in the political system, this included exclusions of its own.

## NOTES

1. No title, The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 2 May 1916, 4.
2. "The League and the I.W.W.," The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 7 April 1916, 4.
3. Treatise on Townleyism, (Fargo: Independent Voters Association, [1919]), p. 76, in the Theodore G. Nelson Papers, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.
4. D. Jerome Tweton, "The Anti-League Movement: The IVA," in The North Dakota Political Tradition, ed. Thomas W. Howard, (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 117.
5. "Trying to Misbrand the Farmers' League," The Nonpartisan Leader, 3 May 1917, 3.
6. "A Flat Fizzle," Grand Forks Herald, 14 November 1919, 4.
7. Robert L. Morlan, Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League 1915-1922 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985), 334.
8. In several Red Flame cartoons, the nearly-bald Frazier is depicted with a comb and hairbrush. However, cartoonists were relatively restrained in making personal attacks on the clean-living governor, focusing on more colorful League figures such as Townley and William Lemke. The caricature of Townley -- showing a tall, lean, hawk-nosed figure in a business suit and bowtie -- was extremely prevalent in anti-League literature. Even Townley's nose became such a recognizable symbol of NPL wrongdoings that one IVA publication included a cartoon of Frazier -- whose face quite incongruously featured a long curved nose. Treatise on Townleyism, 14.

9. "Memorandum -- Farm Labor and the I.W.W. -- Veblen," p. 4, in the Arthur LeSueur Papers, Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection, St. Paul.

10. Lawrence Goodwyn, The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), xv.

11. Not to mention Marx's comment on "the idiocy of rural life." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto, introduction by A.J.P. Taylor, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1967), 84.

12. Philip Edwin Brewer, "The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota" (M.Ph. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1933), 2.

13. Ibid., 48.

14. In his work arguing that Albertan agrarian movements employed a *petit-bourgeois* consciousness, resulting in an oscillation between identifying alternately with the working class and the middle class, C.B. Macpherson contended that occupational group consciousness did not necessarily imply class consciousness. Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System, 2d ed., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 227.

15. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 9.

16. In the 1910s, while some intellectuals seemed to have had a close definition of "class," in the word's everyday usage it could mean little more than "organized interest group." So by the common definitions of the day the NPL was a decidedly class-based movement.

17. Philip A. Kouth, "The American Yeoman Versus Progress and the Nonpartisan League," North Dakota History 37, no. 2, (Spring 1970), 135.

18. Nancy A. Naples, "Contradictions in Agrarian Ideology: Restructuring Gender, Race-Ethnicity, and Class," Rural Sociology 59, no. 1 (spring 1994): 115.

19. Otto T. Monroe, "The Passing of the Independent Farmer," The Nonpartisan Leader, 21 October 1915, 6.

20. J.M. Brinton to editor, The Nonpartisan Leader, 28 October 1915, 13.

21. John Morris Gillette, Rural Sociology, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 624.

22. The League Correspondence Course, Organization Work, Lesson VII ([Minneapolis?]: [National Nonpartisan League?], [ca. 1917]), 9, Nonpartisan League Pamphlets, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

23. Ruby Kraft to unknown recipient, [1921?], Ruby Kraft Papers, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.

24. Nonpartisan League to K.P. Armann, 23 September 1916, National Nonpartisan League Papers, Microfilm copy in Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, of original in Minnesota Historical Society.

25. Kathleen Moun, "Harvest of Discontent: The Social Origins of the Nonpartisan League, 1880-1922" (Ph.D. diss., University of California-Irvine, 1986), 215.

26. Lewis F. Crawford, History of North Dakota (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1931), 3 vols., vol. 1, 419.

27. Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," in United States Department of Agriculture, Farmers in a Changing World: The 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture (Washington, DC: GPO, 1940), 117.

28. This was the same woman who, in chapter four, was cited as saying she did not belong to the "I won't works." United States Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary, Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women, Report No. 103, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1915), 20.

29. United States Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary, Educational Needs of Farm Women, Report No. 105, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1915), 17.

30. Although Gillette suggested that rural emigration was only one of several problems in rural America, he



acknowledged that it was widely regarded as the most important of them. Rural Sociology, 201.

31. It is also a reminder that high schools were generally located only in towns.

32. The NDSFL's organizing convention was held in Grand Forks, but included union representatives from both Grand Forks and Fargo. Minutes, NDSFL organizing convention, Sept. 30-Oct. 1, 1911, in the North Dakota AFL-CIO Records, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

33. Ruby Kraft to "Dear Club Members," [ca. 1936], p. 1, Ruby Kraft Papers, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.

34. "10,000 Attend Nonpartisan Meeting in Minot; Tremendous Ovation Greets Governor Frazier," The Minot Daily News, 8 June 1917, 3.

35. "The League and the Men Who Back it," The Nonpartisan Leader, 30 September 1915, 3.

36. Kate Waller Barrett, "Discussion," in Papers and Proceedings, Eleventh Annual Meeting, American Sociological Society: The Sociology of Rural Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 42.

37. Rural Sociology, 620.

38. "The Laborer and His Hire," Collier's: The National Weekly, 20 April 1912, 22.

39. Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women, 23.

40. Ibid., 24.

42. Ibid.

43. In this 1916 example, Hiran sits around a potbellied stove in a general store with a group of men -- each representing a North Dakota political faction which, Baer pictorially suggested, would support the NPL program. Incidentally, the "Socialist" wears overalls and sits upon a soap box, while the "Progressive" has a derby hat and a passing resemblance to former governor John Burke. "Hi'am

A. Rube Tries to get in an Argument, but it Can't be did," The Nonpartisan Leader, 3 February 1916, 16.

44. "The Holdup." The Nonpartisan Leader, 17 May 1917, 3.

45. "He Knows the Horse-Theif's Touch," The Nonpartisan Leader, 3 May 1917, 3.

46. Mrs. Jake Kuller to editor, The Nonpartisan Leader, 15 March 1917, 7.

47. C.A. Oliason to editor, The Nonpartisan Leader, 3 February 1916, 14.

48. W.[?] Quanbeck to Theodore Nelson, 7 March 1921, Theodore G. Nelson Papers, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

49. John Bibelheimer to Theodore Nelson, 8 March 1921, Theodore G. Nelson Papers.

50. The League Correspondence Course. Organization Work, Lesson VII, 7.

51. Lloyd Omdahl, Tim Gelinske, and Bruce Grindy, North Dakota Votes ([Grand Forks]: University of North Dakota, Bureau of Governmental Affairs, [1993]), 135-137.

52. R.R. DeLaue to Lynn Frazier, 27 November 1919, Lynn Frazier Papers, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

53. "Harvest of Discontent," 150.

54. "The Good Old Nag 'Done Broke Down'," The Nonpartisan Leader, 31 May 1917, 3.

55. Eric Hobsbawm, Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 20.

56. Charles Edward Russell, "The Non-Partisan League," in Papers and Proceedings, Eleventh Annual Meeting, American Sociological Society: The Sociology of Rural Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 36.

57. Miss D.B., "Dad and the Paper," The Nonpartisan Leader, 8 March 1917, 19.

58. Marshall McLuhan, The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 3.

59. Ibid., 5.

60. "The Passing of the Independent Farmer," 6.

61. Stephen Becker, Comic Art in America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 174.

62. Ibid.

63. "When a Feller Needs a Friend," The Nonpartisan Leader, 21 October 1915, 9.

64. "The Farmer Fifty Years Ago and Today," The Nonpartisan Leader, 14 October 1915, 3.

65. Seymour Martin Lipset, Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1960), 87-88.

66. It may be suggested that the NPL phenomenon was also the result of the shattering of material boundaries. While new and efficient modes of communication and transportation tied farmers more closely into the cultural world of business America, automobiles and telephones and newspapers also brought farmers into an unprecedented level of contact with one another. Thus the League came to people who already has a sense of thinking and acting in terms of class.

67. "The League and the Men Who Back it," 3.

68. Cover, The Nonpartisan Leader, 17 November 1919.

69. "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas," 145.

70. "Are You Cast on a Desert of Doubt," The Nonpartisan Leader, 22 February 1917, 3.

71. "Farm Labor and the I.W.W.," 8.

72. "League Abandons Plan to Import Organized Labor to Harvest N.D. Crops," Arthur LoSueur Papers, Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection, St. Paul.

73. Ira C. Frensburg to editor, The Nonpartisan Leader, 7 October 1915, 7.

74. Ruby Kraft to "Dear Club Members," 2.

75. Rural Sociology, 507.

76. Robert Bahmer, "The Economic and Political Background of the Nonpartisan League" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1941), 71.

77. The League Correspondence Course, Organization Work, Lesson VII, 11.

78. Ibid.

79. "Will Farmers be Only Factory Hands?," The Nonpartisan Leader, 1 July 1918, 3.

80. "Rugby Mayor Hauls Sand," Minot Daily Reporter, 24 July 1912, 1.

81. Eric Sevareid, Not So Wild a Dream (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 7.

82. Ibid., 5.

83. Ibid., 7.

84. "No Coal Mined at Williston," Grand Forks American, 13 November 1919, 6.

85. "Oscar J. Sorlie," The Grand Forks Daily Herald, 4 June 1916, 6.

86. "The Man of the Hour," Bismarck Tribune, 30 May 1916, 4.

87. The League Correspondence Course, Organization Work, Lesson VIII ([Minneapolis?]: [National Nonpartisan League?], [ca. 1917]), 18, Nonpartisan League Pamphlets, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

88. Proposing social responsibility as a key element in manliness, the League would expect responsible men to always dress appropriately. Of course, this excluded being a dude.

89. This is yet another example of how the League saw itself as an engine of progress. "These Are the Men Who Back the Big League," The Nonpartisan Leader, 23 September 1915, 3.

90. "League Members, Attention! A Call to Patriotic Action!," The Nonpartisan Leader, 10 February 1916, 3, 14.

91. "League Meetings Fill Towns with Farmers," The Nonpartisan Leader, 30 December 1915, 7.

92. "Bewar[e] of Greeks Bearing Gifts," The Nonpartisan Leader, 9 December 1915, 6.

93. The League Correspondence Course, Organization Work, Lesson VII, 12.

94. Richard Hofstadter pointed out that posing as a son of the soil was a common device for politicians hoping to tap into the "agrarian myth," which reached a kind of ludicrous height in a photograph of Calvin Coolidge which showed the president sitting "on the edge of a hay rig in a white shirt, collar detached, wearing highly polished black shoes under a fresh pair of overalls." While a part of the League message did indeed make use of agrarian fundamentalism, the organization maintained a strong distinction between "fake farmers," who perhaps owned land but did not work it personally, and soil-covered Leaguers. The Frazier photographs have an unmistakable air of authenticity, with the governor clad in worn coveralls and work boots and a battered slouch hat. Except for the hat, in fact, Frazier's work outfit is indistinguishable from that worn by many modern Red River valley farmers. See, Age of Reform, 31; "A Farmer Governor -- Why not a Farmer President?," The Nonpartisan Leader, 26 January 1920, 5.

95. "A Farmer Governor," 5.

96. North Dakota Votes, 131-135.

97. [Arthur LeSueur], "The Nonpartisan League," p. 6, Arthur LeSueur Papers.

98. Ibid.
99. "To the Independent Voters of North Dakota," Theodore G. Nelson Papers.
100. LeSueur, "The Nonpartisan League," 6-7.
101. Eric Moen, "We Let the Other Fellow Make the Rules of the Game," The Nonpartisan Leader, 13 January 1916, 7.
102. Ibid., 7.
103. H. Brody to editor, The Nonpartisan Leader, 3 February 1916, 2.
104. This was the Tri-State Grain Grower's Association conference in Fargo, held January 1916. Morlan uses a quote from Worst's presentation there at the very beginning of his book. Political Prairie Fire, 3.
105. "The Worst 'Bull'," Grand Forks Herald, 4 May 1917, 1.
106. Like Treadwell Twichell and other anti-Leaguers, Jerry Bacon was a farm owner. Indeed, during the 1910s prize contests in the Herald sometimes involved winning purebred Holsteins from the J.D. Bacon farms. However, the Leader maintained that such men did not have a farmer consciousness because, one, they were the hirelings of "Big Biz" and, two, they spent little time actually doing farm labor.
107. "The Worst 'Bull' -- And More of it," The Nonpartisan Leader, 24 May 1917, 5.
108. "Light Work for Women of Farms," The Minot Daily News, 12 June 1917, 2.
109. "National Federation of League Women," The Nonpartisan Leader, 5 January 1920, 7.
110. Ross R. Martin to Lynn Frazier, 4 December 1919, Lynn Frazier Papers.
111. Ruby Kraft to "Dear Club Members," 2.
112. Barrett, "Discussion," 45.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most difficult challenge facing the scholar who studies the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota is realizing, throughout the course of research and writing, that the NPL era was a historical phenomenon, replete with contradictions and seeming inexplicabilities, and not a well-staged tragedy featuring heroes, antagonists, and timely dramatic resolution. For the League's meteoric rise, the articulation of themes of justice and freedom by ordinary people, the ringing rhetoric of the NPL and opposition leadership are indeed the stuff of theater. As Larry Remele commented on the traditional interpretation of the League's founding: "It's a wonderful story, romantic, evocative, and compelling. The romance, in fact, overcomes the leaps of faith required to make it plausible."<sup>1</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to suggest that the League story was a case of good versus evil, nor did most Leaguers see themselves as warriors in "an eternal struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps no historian may lay claim to complete scientific objectivity

in discussing the Nonpartisan League, but any historian should treat the Leaguers and their opponents with fairness.

A fair examination of the NPL's political culture, then, would indicate that it was not all of one thing. Like any historical phenomenon it had multiple sources and expressions which at times appear contradictory. The NPL sought to use the existing machinery of government and party politics, and indeed Leaguers cast themselves as patriotic citizens standing up for their constitutional rights. The received political culture also valued patriotism and political participation, while joining the League in damning machine-like partisanship. However, Leaguers and their opponents both realized that the League's class-based mode of political action was a sharp break from the individualism of the received culture (and of traditional agrarianist conceptions). Yet Leaguers and non-Leaguers alike, especially in the years prior to the European war, accepted competition as a given part of economic and political life. Both also believed in a future of material progress.

The League contended that its most basic enemy was "Big Biz," and an opposition to urban control of all aspects of rural life was a key element in NPL philosophy, which was rooted deep in agrarianism, appearing in Populism but stretching even further back into American history. Yet the



League was also a product of business America. The League leadership made good use of new transportation and communications technologies in recruiting and educating its members. Furthermore, farm people themselves appreciated consumer goods which made their lives less laborious and more rewarding. While accepting the city, its material products, and (to some degree) its time sense as a given, Leaguers did not accept that they were under the social and economic domination of the forces of urbanized, business America. They instead attempted to combine with other farmers, and later with urban laborers, to control the cities, or at least get on equal terms with them.

The League was an attempt to fight for increased economic rights, which necessitated taking political action. However, the League was also very much an instrument for regaining the farmer's lost honor in the face of the paternalistic humiliations implied by subjugation to urban control. Leaguers took intended urban slights and turned them into symbols of agrarian pride. Thus the "hayseed" farmer became Hiram Rube, Leaguers proudly became "sixteen dollar suckers" and the supposed jeer "Go home and slop the hogs" became a rural rallying cry. In terms of political culture, Leaguers sought to build a bright future of material prosperity through the agency of collective,

occupation-based political action, which was to be founded on the agrarian virtues of agricultural fundamentalism, neighborliness, and manliness and all that those terms implied. Class conflict, to use the term somewhat loosely, was implicit in this understanding, whose parameters were clear enough when it came to conflict between the North Dakota wheat farmer and the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, but not so clear when it came to the farmer versus the Minot grocer or the Grand Forks implement dealer. Yet Leaguers felt that as the power of their organization increased, their equality with small town businessmen would be established. When in 1920 the Grand Forks Commercial Club, hoping to woo the NPL into placing the proposed state mill and elevator in that city, held a meeting and sang the praises of the League program, a Leader editorialist wrote, "What looks to Leaguers very much like the dawn of a millennium has come about in one portion of North Dakota."<sup>3</sup> While anti-Leaguers would scoff at the NPL's optimism as a muddle-headed dream, and would repeatedly accuse the organization of being socialistic, and its leadership a group of irresponsible, demagogic failures, evidence suggests that the League's appeal to class differences and activist political culture based on those differences was seen as the NPL's central and most basic threat.

The League was, among other things, a struggle for political inclusion. Yet another irony in the League's political culture is that, while its message of collective activism was a radical departure from the received political culture, the NPL was fairly conservative with regards to other modes of political and social inclusion. Considerations of manliness were important in taking political action, and the NPL's definition of manliness, with gendered understandings of "man" as father and provider and "woman" as mother and protectress of the home, was not far outside the mainstream. Women, children, and non-European races were thought to have a significantly different relationship to the governmental system than did "men".

The political culture of North Dakota's Nonpartisan Leaguers, then, was neither thoroughly revolutionary nor reactionary. In general, Leaguers were neither utopian socialists nor the reactionary dupes of slick-talking radical politicians. They were instead a group of people who increasingly saw themselves as economically, socially, and politically excluded from being full participants in "business" America. The League farmer built on a legacy of agrarianism and used the existing mechanics of government to gain power and dignity within twentieth century American

society. The NPL was a means to this end, for, as a Leader editorialist concluded, the farmer could only take his rightful place "when, by constituting his class a well organized force in society, he makes his power and influence felt in all the affairs of government."<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Larry Remele, "The Immaculate Conception at Deering," North Dakota History 47, no. 1, (Winter 1980), 28.
2. Dale Baum, "The New Day in North Dakota: The Nonpartisan League and the Politics of Negative Revolution," North Dakota History 40, no. 2, (Spring 1973), 18.
3. Herbert E. Gaston, "Where Merchants and Farmers Agree," The Nonpartisan Leader, 2 February 1920, 5.
4. Otto T. Monroe, "The Passing of the Independent Farmer," The Nonpartisan Leader, 21 October 1915, 6.

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