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A STUDY OF THE DEFEAT OF
SENATOR BURTON K. WHEELER
IN THE 1946 DEMOCRATIC
PRIMARY ELECTION

by

JOSEPH P. KELLY

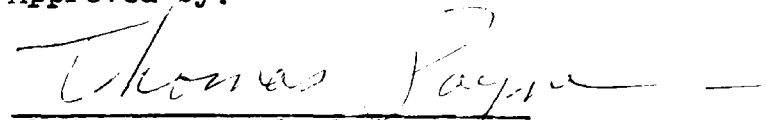
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PREFACE

For twenty four years Burton K. Wheeler represented Montana in the United States Senate. His senatorial career came to an unexpected end in the 1946 Democratic primary election. The man who defeated him, Leif Erickson, was not to succeed him in the Senate. There has been much speculation as to the reasons for Wheeler's loss. Both his opposition to President Roosevelt and his role as a leading isolationist have frequently been cited. Republicans were said to have engineered his defeat by entering the Democratic primary in large numbers to vote for his opponent. His lengthy career and disregard of party regularity and his loss of the liberal farm-labor support have also been given as contributing causes.

It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the campaign and election in order to answer the question why Wheeler lost in the Democratic primary of 1946. No one thought at the time that he was in a vulnerable position. He had not lost a county in an election, primary or general, since 1928.

In his years in the Senate, Wheeler had achieved an international reputation. He had been praised and damned but rarely, if ever, ignored. On the national scene he was a controversial figure and was no less so in Montana. In many respects he typifies the individualistic qualities of Montana politics. The state has never had strong, structural political parties, either Democratic or

Republican. Wheeler, of course, acted within this framework, but, nevertheless, he had a great deal to do with its perpetuation. Any study of Wheeler will, of necessity, include much of Montana's political history. In no way can his career be taken from the context of Montana. To understand the one is to have a better understanding of the other. The same thing is true in regard to elections; no election is an isolated event. The career of Wheeler, the men and groups who opposed him and the voting pattern of the 1946 Democratic primary election have much meaning in the totality of Montana's political history. It is for this reason this thesis was undertaken.

The primary sources in this study include the official election results from 1920 to 1958 received from the Secretary of State's Office, Helena, Montana. Daily and weekly Montana newspapers, thirty in number, were surveyed. Personal interviews with thirty persons intimately involved in the 1946 Democratic primary in particular, and Montana politics in general, were of much value. Dean Ellis Waldron's Montana Politics Since 1864 was an invaluable source. Background and biographical material were drawn mainly from periodicals and books.

The study was limited due to the lack of precinct results in the Secretary of State's archives. Montana County Clerks are required to send only election totals, not precinct returns, to the Secretary of State for certification. In order to fully analyze an election this information is a necessity. The financial cost of obtaining these records from Montana's fifty-six counties made it impossible to analyze the voting in such detail.

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CHAPTER I

THE SETTING AND CANDIDATES

Montana--1946

Politics in Montana has often been characterized as being more personal than partisan.¹ Even a cursory study of the state's history illustrates this. It is conceivable that frontier states, with sparse population and little or no industry or tradition, are inherently less party conscious. Furthermore, Montana's economic structure seems to perpetuate party irresponsibility. Domination of industrial life by two giant corporations, and an almost total lack of partisan press coverage, created a climate for personality and myth over party and issue.

Perhaps in the best traditions of the "rugged West" Montana politics--liberal or progressive, at least--have tended to rely upon one or more strong men who would not sell out to the dominant corporation. Oswald G. Villard wrote in 1930: "If anything you do not like takes place in Montana life, the Senators and Congressmen have sold out."²

¹Thomas Payne, "1956 Elections in Montana," Western Political Quarterly, X, No. 1 (March, 1957), p. 127.

²Oswald G. Villard, "Montana and 'The Company'," Nation CXXXI July 9, 1930, p. 40.

This reliance upon individuals has cost dearly the liberal and progressive cause in Montana life. While those who would oppose the corporate interest were struggling for support from the people, the opposition has been unified and ready for action. The alliance of mining, finance, ranching and mercantile interest has been able to go forth to battle as a unit. Almost always in Montana political life this natural alliance has been able to confuse and divide "the progressive forces before they assembled."³

This tendency towards confusion coupled with personalities overriding parties and issues was well stated by Dan Whetstone in an editorial in 1946. Mr. Whetstone was, at the time, Republican national committeeman for Montana. He wrote concerning Burton K. Wheeler's political unorthodoxy and indirectly told much of Montana's political behavior: ". . . his cavalier disregard of party regularity and his very evident ambition to dominate both major parties in this state, employing as an instrumentality a group in the state capital which included a subservient governor elected by Republicans."⁴

This was the only instance in Montana's history where there had been anything approaching a political "machine." From 1940 to 1946 B. K. Wheeler, while a Senator, allegedly controlled the machinery of state government in Helena. The significance of this control lies in the fact of its being bi-partisan in nature. The logic of its being

³Jules Karlin, "Progressive Politics in Montana," Vol. 1 of A History of Montana, eds., Merrill Burlingame and K. Ross Toole (3 Vols. New York: Lewis Historical Pub. Co., 1957), p. 270.

⁴Cut Bank Pioneer, July 26, 1946, p. 1.

outside or above parties is consistent with Montana's history thus far.

During the campaign of 1946, Senator Wheeler told a St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter that neither Republicans nor Democrats decide elections in Montana.⁵ This is a truism, of course, in almost all elections, but the Senator was speaking of a particular primary campaign. It was obvious that he meant to win the nomination by appealing to and attracting independent voters. He seemed to be assuming that his opponent might receive the Democrats' support while he would gain the majority of independents and thus emerge triumphant once more.

No election takes place outside the framework of economic and social conditions which are prevalent in that time and place. The year 1946, the first full year of peace, was fraught with many major economic and governmental problems. Price controls were an issue, the wage--price spiral threatened to soar to inflationary heights. Over-riding all, of course, was the reconversion to peace time pursuits.

Labor's hopes were for wages to stay ahead of prices. Businessmen, generally, wanted the government to discontinue controls and hasten back to the days of less government. Resulting from this divergence of aims were strikes, threats of abolishing the "tyranny of

⁵The People's Voice, July 12, 1946. Staff Correspondent Richard Baumhoff's wire story to his paper, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

unionism" and bitter debate in regard to the economy, government and the New Deal philosophy in general.

Leading the nation, in a time of such unrest as only seen immediately following a war, was President Truman who was thought to be a political accident and at best an interim president. Republicans and Democrats alike were setting their sights for the presidential election year of 1948. The former felt it would be their year; the latter, after years with no chance for the top post, saw the goal open to almost anyone in their ranks excepting the incumbent.⁶

The problems facing the nation in 1946 were much the same as those affecting Montanans. Farmers, the economic base of the state, feared a decreased market with ever increasing costs. Their future was threatened by surpluses, inflation, decreased foreign markets. Some looked for the government "to get in further"--others for it "to get out" and permit free enterprise to hold sway.

Montana's labor force, union as well as non-union, was threatened with economic peril by the mounting inflation. The same was true, to a greater degree, for those who had fixed incomes or salaries which are slow to react to the cost of living, e.g., most office workers.

The state's economic structure was, and still is, overwhelmingly agricultural. In 1946 agricultural income accounted for approximately 32 per cent of Montana's total income. Manufacturing payrolls amounted

⁶Eric Goldman, Rendezvous With Destiny (New York: Vintage Books, 1958 revised), pp. 314-318.

to only 6 per cent.⁷ In addition to the economy, its political heritage, social outlook and culture are rural rather than urban. Of its three largest cities (large only in relation to the rest of the state's cities) only one, Butte, can be classified as an industrial community. Great Falls and Billings are essentially and characteristically rural centers, mainly dependent upon agriculture for their economic well being.

Failure of Montana labor and farm blocs to form a political alliance, the traditional Populist dream, has been a key to the difficulties liberals and Democrats faced in gaining power. Many hold that, in the West, if either group is to control its destiny this alliance is inevitable. On the other hand those who favor the status quo have cooperated very successfully. The men or corporations controlling the mining industry, finance, business in general and the cattle industry have consistently combined forces to improve their position to hold off "radical influences."

Due mainly to the cities Butte and Anaconda, western Montana was, and continues to be, the stronghold of organized labor and the Democratic Party. It is here that men like Thomas Walsh, Wheeler, Mike Mansfield, James E. Murray, Arnold Olsen, and Leif Erickson have found their greatest strength. Great Falls, though usually pro-Democratic, has not been able very often to match at the polls Republican majorities from Billings. This second district with its great agri-

⁷H. J. Hoflich and Maxine Johnson, The Economy of Montana (Missoula, Montana: Bureau of Business and Economic Research, Montana State University, 1951), p. 4.

cultural base and little union activity, has traditionally been strong for Republican candidates.

One of the significant features of the election being studied is that much of the "preconceived pattern" was abolished, at least for this particular primary. To add further irony to the situation, the young liberal, who finally defeated Senator Wheeler, was not to be his successor in the Senate. This honor was to become the prize of an avowed conservative, Zales Ecton.

If liberals nationally viewed Harry Truman's administration with disappointment in early 1946, they had been suffering only a short time as compared with their counterparts in Montana. The majority of Montana's New Deal liberals had, since the Court fight of 1937, eagerly awaited the defeat of Wheeler.⁸ Once again, though victory for them seemed almost impossible, they set out to challenge Wheeler. This time they had a bona fide liberal. In the Senator's view this distinction was nonsense. He held then, and still does, that he had always remained true to the best liberal--progressive tradition.⁹

An indication of the seemingly sorry plight of those who would defeat Wheeler was evidenced in the candidate to whom liberals and anti-Wheelerites rallied: Leif Erickson, forty-one year old former Associate Justice of the Montana Supreme Court. There had been a time when even Wheeler thought he might be a threat to his position.

⁸Karlin, op. cit., p. 274.

⁹Interview with Burton K. Wheeler, June 18, 1958.

Joseph K. Howard quotes Wheeler as saying in reference to Erickson some years before, "that boy is coming fast; he's the only one who can beat me."¹⁰

But this had been before 1944 when Leif Erickson was undefeated and on the way up politically as Montana's prototype of a liberal. After winning the nomination for governor as a Democrat he lost to the incumbent by a substantial margin. The man who defeated Erickson, Governor Sam C. Ford, was an old friend and allegedly a political ally of Wheeler's.¹¹

Even so, when the time came for liberal Democrats to come up with a challenger, either Erickson was their best choice or the only one with enough courage to attempt a near impossible task. Two editorials in the Miles City Star sum up what was thought then to be majority opinion: "(he) is now about to commit political suicide by barging into a battle with Senator B. K. Wheeler for the United States Senate position held by that veteran Democrat."¹² A week later the same paper said "we are of the opinion Leif is defeated."¹³ The election was then only two weeks away and few thought it would be close, let alone that Erickson might win.

When the final day for filing came and no others had entered

¹⁰ Joseph K. Howard, "The Decline and Fall of Burton K. Wheeler," Harper's Magazine, CLXXXVIII March, 1947, p. 227.

¹¹ Cut Bank Pioneer, July 26, 1946.

¹² Miles City Star, June 21, 1946.

¹³ Ibid., June 29, 1946.

the lists, the stage was set for what might have been described as a "classic struggle." The new liberal opposing the old, the internationalist versus the isolationist, the party man versus the renegade. Experience was pitted against youth while each maintained that the other was a fraud. The younger man was loyal to the New Deal and revered the memory of Franklin D. Roosevelt. His opponent was ever an adversary of the New Deal foreign policy and also the accused calumniator of the late President.

If each candidate had been taken at his own evaluation, the choice of the voter would have been difficult at best. The dilemma would have been that their philosophies, for the most part, were alike. Was it an instance of two similar men, except for age and experience, each claiming righteously that he was the guardian of the rights of the "common man"? They professed allegiance to the same political party, but were they, in reality, very much alike?

Burton K. Wheeler

Burton K. Wheeler was, more than most public figures, a paradox. It was said of him that "his opinions and loyalties would defy dissection."¹⁴ Early in his career he was accused of being pro-German and a Bolshevik at the same time. He was praised or damned at various stages of his career as being a liberal, a progressive, a radical, a political opportunist, a destroyer of the Constitution, a party stal-

¹⁴Kenneth MacKay, The Progressive Movement of 1924 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), p. 136.

wart, a party renegade and finally a reactionary.

He suffered defeat in election only twice, and each time, supposedly for reasons which ideologically, were poles apart. In 1920 his opponents accused him of attempting to "duplicate the orgy of socialism" as a Non-Partisan Leaguer, in the governor's contest.¹⁵ It has been held that his defeat in the 1946 primary was due to charges that he was a reactionary and a fascist.

Time magazine, in a 1940 cover story, wrote: "Burt Wheeler is a Senator's Senator" and "(he) is the most Democrat Democrat in the party."¹⁶ Two weeks later a Nation writer held that "From the point of view of traditional American liberalism Wheeler goes to the 1940 convention with a cleaner political record than any Presidential candidate . . . since the LaFollette campaign of 1924."¹⁷

It has been said that Wheeler lived many lives and each of them was full of controversy. We will also see that his 1946 opponent was born and reared for the role he was to play. What of Wheeler--was it his Massachusetts heritage or his Montana environment that made him as he was?

Burton Kendall Wheeler's ancestors settled in Sudbury, Massa-

¹⁵Karlin, op. cit., p. 265.

¹⁶Time, April 15, 1940, p. 21.

¹⁷Robert Bendiner, "Men Who Would Be President," Nation, April 27, 1940, p. 534.

¹⁸R. A. Haste, "What is Wheeler?", American Review of Reviews, (Oct., 1924), pp. 407-408.

chusetts about the year 1631.¹⁸ This was some 236 years before Erickson's grandparents came from Norway. Wheeler was the youngest of ten children of a poor shoe-maker and farmer.¹⁹ The Kendalls and Wheelers at one time were moderately well off, but by the time Burton was born any semblance of wealth was gone. He was born on February 27, 1882, a month later than his future adversary, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Wheeler's family circumstances were far different than the future President's.

Wheeler graduated from Hudson High School in 1900. After working a year in Boston as a stenographer, he went West to attend the University of Michigan. He worked as a waiter and dishwasher to pay for his schooling. During the summer months he sold cookbooks throughout the Middle West. In Illinois, while selecting books, he met the girl who was to be his wife.²⁰

He received his law degree in 1905 and continued his westward journey which was to bring him to Montana. Butte apparently did not suit him as a place to practice law, but, as the story is told in Butte, he lost his bankroll to card sharps, while waiting for a train, and was forced to accept a job--as bill collector. Wheeler arrived in Butte the year that Leif Erickson was born, 1906. Beginning with no friends or money, he was, in less than seventeen years, to become a United States' Senator from Montana. His law practice, in those early

¹⁹Interview with B. K. Wheeler, June 18, 1958.

²⁰Ibid.

days, of necessity, dealt almost exclusively with personal injury cases. As counsel for the miner and railroader, he soon came to know, and be known by, the controlling interests of Butte and Montana.

The year 1910 saw Wheeler elected to represent Silver Bow County as a Democrat in the State House of Representatives. While a member of that body, he supported Thomas Walsh's bid for a United States Senate seat. Walsh was not chosen by the State Legislature but two years hence he was elected by the people--Montana's first popularly elected Senator. At the new Senator's behest, President Wilson appointed Wheeler to the office of United States District Attorney for Montana.

In those days his philosophy was abrupt and forthright:

He made no secret of his opposition to American entry into the war and was rash enough to advocate, in a mining state, government ownership of natural resources and the railroads.²¹

These positions on war and economics, coupled with his refusal to prosecute workers who were, allegedly, pro-German and seditious, brought to him the full wrath of Montana's guardians of orthodoxy and propriety. Thus it came to be in 1918 that Walsh's re-election was to be had only if Wheeler resigned.²² His terms as District Attorney have been described as "his soul trying years."²³

This was the prologue to his attempt in 1920 to become Governor

²¹Bendiner, op. cit., p. 533.

²²MacKay, op. cit., p. 138.

²³Karlin, op. cit., p. 264.

of Montana. It was one of "the stormiest state campaigns in American political history."²⁴ In defeat, some observers say, Wheeler finally realized that he had "to reconcile himself to the fact that in Montana anti-company politicians seldom lasted long."²⁵

In 1924⁴ Wheeler refused to support the Democratic Convention choice for the Presidency, John W. Davis. He said in accepting the Progressive Party nomination, "I am a Democrat but not a Wall Street Democrat," adding significantly in the light of his party philosophy, "I shall give my support . . . to those candidates . . . who have proven their fidelity (he alone, apparently, would decide their faithfulness, or lack of it) to the interest of the people . . . on whatever ticket."²⁶ While running on the Progressive ticket nationally, he decided to support the Democrats in Montana rather than the Progressive slate.

Two of his more famous exploits were his investigation of Harding's Attorney-General Harry Dougherty and the fight against Roosevelt's Supreme Court plan. The former made him a hero, nationally as well as at home, with most Democrats and all liberals; the latter hurt him with the same people. By his 1940 campaign the damage was not enough even to be noticed as he received more votes in Montana than Franklin D. Roosevelt.²⁷ But there is little question that the "Court

²⁴MacKay, op. cit., p. 139.

²⁵Karlin, loc. cit.

²⁶MacKay, op. cit., p. 141.

²⁷Ellis L. Waldron, Montana Politics Since 1864 (Missoula, Montana: Montana State University Press, 1958), p. 286--p. 288.

Fight" was the major watershed of his career. The course he pursued after that, nationally and in Montana, was to lead inevitably to his defeat in 1946.

Leif Erickson

Oluf Erickson, the father of Leif, tells of his parents' journey from southern Sweden to Quebec in the year 1867.²⁸ Almost immediately they set out for their future home, La Crosse, Wisconsin, via the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes. As if to portend the future political beliefs of the Erickson family, they never set foot on the eastern coast of the United States.

By 1868 the new immigrants owned their own farm several miles from Ontario, Wisconsin. During the 1880's, the Farmer's Alliance became quite strong in Wisconsin. Leif Erickson's grandfather joined and was a dedicated member. He felt that for once it seemed farmers had found something in common. Regardless of religion or nationality, the Irish, Germans, Yankees and Scandinavians seemed to realize that their problem was common to all.

Soon afterwards the Alliance began its cooperative movement, that in this area was to expand into a farmer's store and a few co-op creameries. Mr. Erickson describes in some detail the methods of a creamery chain in driving the cooperative creamery out of business.

²⁸Oluf Erickson, "Olaf Erickson, Scandinavian Frontiersman," Wisconsin Magazine of History, Vol. 31, No. 1, (Sept., 1947). All information concerning Mr. Erickson's family is taken from these articles written by Leif Erickson's father.

He likens their pricing methods to those used by Standard Oil, i.e., cutting the price where competition was to be met and raising prices in a monopolistic area.²⁹

The author writes that "a new political party known as the Populist, or People's party, sprang up . . . and started out with a very radical platform."³⁰

The Farmer's Alliance was very friendly towards this new party. His father, who had always voted the Republican ticket, cast his ballot in 1892 for the Populist candidate for President, General James B. Weaver.³¹

Of the Grover Cleveland administration he writes: "the only things that held firm were taxes and interest."³² He felt that industries, even labor, had learned an obvious lesson -organize. The former, according to Mr. Erickson, organized as large corporations like International Harvester; the latter into labor unions.³³ "The only class that did not organize, or at best very poorly, was the farmer."³⁴

His analysis of the farmer's predicament follows classic lines. "It has been impossible to get the farmers organized adequately enough to control the sale of their products."³⁵ He envisioned big corporations as the beginners of "our economy of scarcity" and only the organized farmers continuing "an economy of abundance."³⁶ In a searing

²⁹Ibid., No. 1. p. 7.

³⁰Ibid., No. 2, (Dec., 1947), p. 19.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 192.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

indictment of farmers, he told of those who "have remained scabs . . . who not only refuse to join their brother farmer . . . but willingly accept benefits . . . acting as strike breakers."³⁷ His analogy of scabs and strike breakers, terms from labor's struggle, indicates much of the Erickson philosophy that Leif was to learn as a youth.

His description of the 1896 Presidential election is also illuminating. "The old reactionary crowd, controlled and financed by the big banking interests of the nation"³⁸ was desperate and fearful of defeat. He voices, for the recent immigrant, the worst accusation when he says these eastern interests felt that any who disagreed with them were not "good Americans."³⁹

Again, in an almost classic statement of the farmer's movements of the United States, he attributes as a cause of the death of the Farmer's Alliance the fact that it had changed from "an economic organization to a political one."⁴⁰ This position, as old as farm organizations, was in great measure to be abandoned by his son in Montana politics in the 1940's.

Leif Erickson was eleven years old, one of seven children, when his family left Wisconsin to go West. They settled in McKenzie County, North Dakota, just across the border from Sidney, Montana, which was to be their shopping center, school and eventually their home. In short order they became Montanans. Leif and a brother made the journey from Wisconsin, with the livestock, in an immigrant -

³⁷ Ibid., p. 193.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

cattle car. The first year the family lived in a tar paper shack.⁴¹ The Great Plains, being almost timberless, created hardships for settlers. Many tragic episodes are recalled by eastern Montanans who wintered in these tar paper shacks.

In the best American political tradition, Erickson, son of a dry land farmer, worked to pay his way through high school. He was graduated from Sidney High School in 1924, the year Burton K. Wheeler was running with La Follette on the Progressive ticket for Vice-President.

After a year and a half at North Dakota State College, he enrolled at the University of Chicago. His plan was to stay a year and he then hoped to attend Harvard University⁴²--at the same age Wheeler was when he left that area. While attending college he proved to be a man of determination and versatility. He carried the hod, drove cab, was a door-to-door salesman, operated a switchboard, was a waiter and cafeteria manager. Somehow he also managed to have time to win the Big Ten heavyweight wrestling championship.⁴³ He was granted a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Philosophy in 1931 and a Doctor of Jurisprudence Degree in 1934.⁴⁴

He returned to Sidney to begin his practice of the law. After

⁴¹Interview with Leif Erickson, May 16, 1958.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 18, 1946, p. 6.

⁴⁴Ibid.

two years he was elected County Attorney of Richland County; another two years was all he required to become the youngest man ever to be a Montana Supreme Court Justice. His major opinions while on the bench concerned water rights, an important area of the law in dry land country.⁴⁵ His six years expired in 1944 and he did not seek re-election. Rather he entered the race for governor, winning the nomination and losing, by a large margin, to the Republican incumbent.

As a judge during the war, Erickson was not subject to the draft. He was rejected for physical reasons by both the Army and Navy when he sought to enlist.⁴⁶ While still on the Montana Supreme Court, he was appointed referee in several railway labor disputes by President Roosevelt. That he did not serve in the armed forces and that he did act as a labor mediator were to become part of the 1946 campaign.

In order to avert a nation wide railraod strike, President Truman appointed a fact finding board to hear issues between the disputing Brotherhoods. This was March, 1946, just five months before Truman would openly support Wheeler in the Montana Democratic primary. Leif Erickson was appointed one of the three members to the emergency board.⁴⁷

From his earliest days in the legal profession, Erickson was one of the leaders in the fight for the Missouri Valley Authority,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Great Falls Tribune, March 9, 1946.

⁴⁷ Interview with Leif Erickson, May 16, 1958.

reclamation, Rural Electrification Administration and the Farmers' Union.⁴⁸ He was the first chairman of the Regional Committee for M.V.A. and attorney for most of Montana's rural electrification unit. In 1946 he was the owner of a small sugar beet farm near Sidney. His family at that time consisted of his wife, whom he met while a student in Chicago, and three children.⁴⁹

Dry land farmer, self-educated lawyer of Norwegian descent with one Swedish grandparent, Erickson was a natural for Montana politics. His father and grandfather brought to him the Wisconsin idea, the Farmer's Alliance, stories of General Weaver, Bryan, co-op battles, the Farmer's Non-Partisan League, the Farmer's Union, and probably the tale of the "early" Burton Wheeler. Who had a better claim to the allegiance of liberal-progressives than Leif Erickson?

Senator Wheeler 1937 - 1945

Senator Wheeler was half way through his third term when he chose to lead the opposition to President Roosevelt's Court Plan. Until this incident there had been little hope for any Montana Democrat or Republican who wished to succeed Wheeler in the Senate. But from this time on, the course pursued by Wheeler, nationally and at home, weakened his personal power in Montana. That the cumulative effect of these episodes did not bear results until 1946 is, in itself, a testimony to his personal political strength.

When Wheeler joined congressional conservatives to battle

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

President Roosevelt, Jerry J. O'Connell was Montana's Congressman from the First Congressional District. He immediately announced that he would run against Wheeler in 1940 and would unseat him. Several things would be required to defeat Wheeler in a Democratic primary, and O'Connell seemed the likely man. Being from Butte, he might be able to carry Silver Bow County. He would need the support of labor and be as aggressive and appealing to voters as was Wheeler. In 1937, O'Connell appeared to be made to order for the task.

The Butte Congressman was a militant New Dealer, a champion of the Spanish Loyalists and had the support of the C.I.O.⁵⁰ Wheeler's battle against one of Roosevelt's most liberal policies appeared to O'Connell to be the issue upon which the Senator could be defeated.⁵¹ The issues which O'Connell hoped to capitalize on in 1940 were not to materialize until the primary of 1946. But the cleavage was accomplished, significantly, by Wheeler's own hand.

When, in 1938, O'Connell sought re-election to Congress, he was defeated. And with this defeat came the end of his plan to oppose Wheeler in 1940. Dr. Jacob Thorkelson of Butte, with the support of Wheeler, became the Republican Representative who replaced O'Connell.⁵²

⁵⁰Richard L. Neuberger, "Wheeler Faces the Music," Nation, Aug. 28, 1937, p. 217.

⁵¹Interview with Mrs. Jerry J. O'Connell, March 14, 1959.

⁵²Interview with John J. Holmes, Democratic State Auditor, April 20, 1959.

Interview with Judge J. J. Lynch, former Silver Bow County District Judge, April 4, 1959.

Interview with Joseph Monaghan, former Democratic Congressman in the First District, April 5, 1959.

Thorkelson's single term in office was noteworthy in only one respect: his many anti-Semitic Congressional speeches. These were published in a pamphlet by William D. Pelley entitled "Invisible Government."

In 1940, O'Connell tried to regain his seat in Congress. But Wheeler, abandoning Thorkelson, threw his support to Jeannette Rankin. Thus it was that Miss Rankin a second time voted not to go to war. Certainly Wheeler did not bring about two O'Connell defeats by his own power. But the fact that he supported Republicans angered many persons who had always been Wheeler Democrats.⁵³

Even more remarkable was Wheeler's action in 1942 when Montana's Junior Senator James E. Murray faced Wellington D. Rankin in the general election. There are few instances in American politics of such disregard for party affiliation. Murray had been an avid New Dealer and was closely allied with the C.I.O. He was a prime mover of the controversial M.V.A.

Senator Wheeler said of the M.V.A.: "the C.I.O., the ultra radical group in the Farmer's Union, and the Communists are behind it."⁵⁴ When Senator Norris' Tennessee Valley Authority was being fought for, Wheeler had publicly acclaimed and voted for it.⁵⁵ His proclamation against the M.V.A. was vitriolic as any emanating from Montana Power Company sources.

⁵³Interview with Joseph P. Monaghan. Interview with Judge W. D. Murray, son of Senator James E. Murray, April 4, 1959.

⁵⁴Karlin, op. cit., p. 274.

⁵⁵Howard, op. cit., p. 231.

The degree of animosity between Montana's Senators was displayed when Wheeler supported Wellington D. Rankin in his bid to replace Murray. The incumbent won by the narrow margin of 1,212 votes.⁵⁶ This was the only time in ten elections that Murray failed to carry his own county of Silver Bow.

Murray's victory telegram to President Roosevelt concerning the election reveals how flagrantly Wheeler had disregarded loyalty to party:

I have defeated and discredited Burton K. Wheeler and restored the good name of Montana. The Associated Press carries my statement that 'I do not regard this as a personal victory.' It is a victory for you and the nation. It is a repudiation of Wheelerism in Montana . . . Wheeler came here with the conceit and arrogance of a dictator attempting to discredit you and the established policies of our country. . . . If he had succeeded, the Hitler press in Germany would have carried screaming headlines exultantly proclaiming the repudiation of your national policies. He will leave Montana and sneak into Washington a discredited and disgruntled politician with nothing left⁵⁷ but the frazzled remnants of his ruined reputation.

In addition to Wheeler's opposition to O'Connell and Murray was his apparent close relationship with the administrations of Republican Governor Sam C. Ford. This has been characterized as "the alleged bi-partisan axis of Ford, Rankin and Wheeler."⁵⁸

Joseph K. Howard more bluntly described the relationship as the Wheeler crowd demoralizing both major parties and capturing

⁵⁶Waldron, op. cit., p. 298.

⁵⁷New Republic CVII, August 3, 1943, p. 143.

⁵⁸Karlin, op. cit., p. 272.

the government of the state.⁵⁹ He points to Governor Ford working well with Wheeler Democrats in the most important appointive offices. This was a reference to J. Burke Clements, chairman of the Montana Industrial Accident Board and Barclay Craighead, Chairman of the State Unemployment Compensation Commission.⁶⁰

In the same article Howard wrote that Governor Ford's program was eminently satisfactory to the livestock, mining and utility interests of the state. The administration, he continued, voiced only two cries (other than for the status quo): to oppose the M.V.A. and to ask for a sales tax.⁶¹

Governor Ford's Democratic opposition in 1944 was Leif Erickson. The incumbent defeated Erickson by a wide margin even though President Roosevelt won handily over Thomas Dewey. Senator Wheeler, at this time, seemed unbeatable. This seemed particularly true if his opposition in the primary of 1946 was to be Mr. Erickson.

Wheeler had reason to be confident. He had outpolled Roosevelt in 1940. Murray had lost Silver Bow County in 1942 and there was no one on the horizon who had the qualifications that O'Connell had in 1938. When Erickson announced in 1946 that he would run for Senator in the Democratic primary, few people gave him much chance.

⁵⁹Howard, op. cit., p. 230.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 229.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 230.

CHAPTER II

THE CAMPAIGN

Montana political campaigns are generally fought with much vigor and enthusiasm on the part of the candidates. Even for Montana this 1946 primary was exceptional in its intensity and height of antagonism. Charges were hurled which ranged from cries of Communism and Fascism to statements that the result of this election might bring about World War III or even the downfall of this Republic.

Platforms

Senator Wheeler was content to seek re-nomination on the strength of his record; he offered no special program or promises.¹ The incumbent told a St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter that the real issue was "whether we were going to let the P.A.C. and Sidney Hillman run America."²

Mr. Erickson, cast in the role of challenger with no national record to stand on, brought forth a five-point platform:

1. Legislation for full industrial production.
2. A ten year floor under farm prices.
3. Federal loans for servicemen at 3%.

¹The People's Voice, July 12, 1946. Copyright story by Richard Baumhoff, staff correspondent for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

²Ibid.

- 4. A "decent break" for small business.
- 5. Protected water rights.³

In a speech at Opheim on June 21st, he called for a revision of the federal income tax laws to allow farmers to figure their incomes over a five year period. He further advocated that farmers be permitted a 10 per cent reserve of money as a cushion for lean years. Freight rates, he was to contend in every corner of the state, were a disgrace and as Senator he would demand a complete revision.⁴ Erickson maintained that the most important issue of the campaign was "world cooperation." A major theme of his was that lasting peace and Wheeler in the Senate were incompatible.

Early in the campaign the sixty-three year old Senator told a Bozeman audience: "my record supporting veterans, farmers and labor legislation and all classes of people speaks for itself."⁵ It was just this record that Erickson and his supporters thought was the heart of the matter and the reason why Democrats should not vote for the incumbent. Since 1937, they repeated time and again, Wheeler's actions and words had made him inimical to the best interests of the Democratic Party and the welfare of Montana.

Press Coverage

Montana is a large sparsely populated state. Few would argue that the press of the state has ever consistently functioned well in

³Montana Standard, June 2, 1946.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 17, 1946.

serving its readers. The people, accustomed to great distance, are mobile. In spite of poor newspaper coverage (in most cases controversy, economic or political, receives no notice at all), the small population and the mobility of the people, news travels quickly throughout the state. More often than not this "news" is rumor, stories or propaganda, but the tales and the resultant images of campaigners are spread over Montana. Personalities more often than issues are known and, still more often, images rather than persons are judged in Montana politics. Because of this press history, Montanans sought the advertisements for understanding of the political issues rather than looking to the editorials. The election under study is a classic example of this. Editorials were few and, with two exceptions, editorials supported Wheeler.

News coverage was almost totally based upon press releases of the candidates, the bulk of which were speeches. As there were no reporters covering the campaign for any Montana paper, news of speeches and appearances was handled in routine fashion. Stories were written as the candidates spoke in a city and similar reports were put on the wire services. The result was almost uniform reporting of campaign issues and speeches. This simplified, in a sense, the study of this campaign, but it is another sad commentary on the role newspapers have played in Montana.

It should be emphasized, because of its obvious significance, that a high percentage of information from both camps was funnelled to the people through press and radio advertisements. In this particular instance the very nature of news media in Montana should

have favored the incumbent. For a careful study of thirty daily and weekly newspapers showed that Wheeler's cause had better than a five to one edge in column inches. By noting these same newspaper ads telling of radio addresses, the same ratio favoring Wheeler was to be found.⁶

Political Organizations

Montana's lack of metropolitan centers, its sparse population, and possibly its frontier heritage combine to make politics highly personal in nature. It logically follows that the same is true for political organizations. Each of the candidates conducted his campaign with a minimum of staff and few organization men.

The State Chairman of each candidate was a veteran railroad union man. Wheeler chose long-time Milwaukee engineer Sam Winn, a titular chairman. R. Bailey Stortz of Forsyth and a former member of the State Legislature was manager of the Senator's campaign.⁷ Lou C. Boedecker, Milwaukee conductor, former Highway Patrol Chief and later Warden of the Montana State Prison, was named by Erickson as his chairman and manager. In each case the candidates, with some advice, mapped their own way on issues and strategy.

Campaign Finances

When Marcus Daly and W. A. Clark fought for leadership, money

⁶These figures are the result of measuring column inches of paid advertisements appearing in the Montana newspapers which are listed in the bibliography.

⁷Montana Standard, July 6, 1946.

was abundant and the newspapers were partial and vehement. Since then, elections, particularly the 1946 Democratic primary, have been financed in comparatively modest amounts. Bailey Stortz complained that between \$100,000 and \$150,000 was being spent to smear and discredit Wheeler. Erickson's forces named no figure but constantly alluded to the vast amounts at his opponent's disposal. There is no evidence that either side had exorbitant amounts of money.

Were it not for an odd development in the campaign, the financial sources would be impossible to discover. But two and a half weeks remained before the election day when Senator Wheeler announced that he had asked the Senate Committee on Unfair Campaign Practices to investigate the campaign.⁸ He told a Bozeman audience that a "scurrilous book" just published had called him "the most dangerous man in America." It was inspired, he stated, by communist money from New York and Hollywood, and this, too, would be investigated.¹⁰

Erickson called the proposed investigation "an old political trick very often used." He was confident that there was no serious intent on the part of Wheeler to press the investigation. As for the book, which likened Wheeler and Truman to Hitler, he divorced himself from it entirely, stating that he had not yet seen it. But he said, in the event the investigation be held, there were a few things he would like to see on the committee agenda. They were Wheeler's financial

⁸Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 30, 1946.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

sources, the role of the Company press, the Senator's support from the Anaconda Copper Mining Company and the Montana Power Company, and the role of Gerald L. K. Smith and the America First Committee.¹¹

It was little wonder that Erickson was confident that no investigation would be held. The Hatch Act did not cover primary elections, and it was so late in the campaign. But on July 8th the committee convened at Helena. There were no Senators present.¹²

An analysis of the hearing and its importance in the campaign will come in due time. The pertinent factor at this point is the light shed on finances from testimony by Stortz and Boedecker.

Mr. Stortz told the committee that Wheeler's fund totaled \$18,747. Of this sum, he said \$7,000 was from sources outside of Montana.¹³ The latter reference was to his contention that "outside money" approaching \$150,000 was pitted against Wheeler. On the same day Mr. Boedecker testified that this fund totaled \$12,800. Almost \$10,000 of it was from non-Montana sources.¹⁴

It would be naive to assume that these totals were all that the contending sides had at their disposal, but it is significant that the totals are relatively small and that the Senator had approximately \$6,000 more. It has already been shown that radio and newspaper advertisements should have cost Wheeler's forces five times as much as his opponent's. Of course, some sources and funds are easy to keep hidden, and it would be purely speculation to go farther than

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Independent Record, July 9, 1946.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

this--there was strong evidence that Erickson did not have as much financing as the incumbent. This is only important because much of Wheeler's campaigning was aimed at the vast amounts of money from persons and organizations outside Montana.

An analysis of the listed donors gives some insight into the kind of support each candidate received. Wheeler had more large individual donations than did Erickson. Among them were Russell Hart and R. B. Albin, Billings department store owners, who gave \$2,000. Doctor Harry J. McGregor of Great Falls, unsuccessful Democratic candidate for Lieutenant Governor and subsequently the unsuccessful opponent of Senator J. E. Murray, contributed \$300. A. F. Lamey, Havre attorney, gave \$100. Mr. Lamey was several times a candidate for Governor and a former Democratic State Chairman.

Other donors included a Glasgow medical doctor; the President of Eddy Bakery Company; the President of the Montana Flour Mills Company; the manager of the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, who lived in Chinook; two contractors from Great Falls and Miles City; and the head of the Montana Liquor Dealers' Association.¹⁵

Mr. Boedecker listed 150 Montana contributors who gave from fifty cents to twenty-five dollars. There were two checks from Montana's junior Senator J. E. Murray in the amount of \$2,000. According to newspaper reports, it was not determined at the hearing whether these were Murray's personal donations;¹⁶ however, in most newspaper accounts this \$2,000 was counted as being from "outside" of Montana.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Montana Standard, July 12, 1946.

Much is told by an examination of the sources of money from non-Montanans. Senator Wheeler received \$1,000 from D. B. Robertson, President of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers of Cleveland. A California race horse owner gave \$2,000 in support of Wheeler. An unidentified man from Stillwater, Minnesota, contributed \$1,000, and a Mr. and Mrs. William P. Hunt of New York gave \$2,000.¹⁷

Mr. Hunt told the committee of Wheeler's befriending him when he (Hunt) was a Senate Building elevator operator. Later, according to his testimony, Hunt was in China in the United States Consular Service and made a fortune.¹⁸ Mr. Stortz had inserted in the record that this wealth came after Mr. Hunt left the consular service.¹⁹

Mr. Erickson received campaign funds from the CIO-UAW of Detroit, which gave \$2,250, and \$1,000 from the Railway Trainmen of Chicago. Two Committees of Public Affairs, one of New York, the other of Chicago, gave \$2,250 and \$2,000 respectively. These committees went unidentified or unchallenged by Wheeler and it must be assumed that there was no propaganda value in either. In addition, a Mrs. Greenbaum of New York contributed \$1,000 to Erickson's campaign.²⁰

Some valid conclusions might be drawn from these figures. First, neither candidate had an excessive amount of money; second, much of Mr. Erickson's financial support came from liberal sources who wanted to have Wheeler defeated (this is true for the labor contributors, Senator Murray to a degree, and presumably, the Committees of Public

¹⁷Independent Record, July 12, 1946.

¹⁹Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

Affairs); and finally, liberal Montana Democrats would maintain that many of Wheeler's supporters would have been opposed to him in his 1920 race for the governorship. Wheeler's probable answer to these charges would have been that, with Communism on the move, even threatening America, these men rallied to him. Wheeler told this writer that his actions throughout his entire career had been consistent with the Progressive principles of Wisconsin's La Follette.²¹

The non-Montana support for Erickson must be seen as more anti-Wheeler than pro-Erickson. Wheeler not only made enemies at home in Montana but also throughout the nation. In the year 1946, this opposition came together to unseat him.

Dominant Interest Groups

In the final analysis, it is an image that the public accepts or rejects when it speaks at the polls. In Montana politics, as elsewhere, the image is drawn defined and dramatized by the candidates themselves. Before 1946 Senator Wheeler, on four occasions, presented to Montana voters an image they could support avidly, but in 1946 he faced a dilemma new to him and unique in Montana political history. After four Senate terms, facing a badly beaten candidate for governor, Wheeler was to meet his greatest obstacle within his own party.

Wheeler, standing on his record, felt the image of twenty-four years would still carry the day and accused Communists, Pinks and non-Montanans of marshalling their financial resources to defeat him.

²¹Interview with Burton K. Wheeler, June 18, 1958.

Erickson's attack was of a personal nature; that is, against the record of which Wheeler was so proud, his relationship with President Roosevelt, his views on international cooperation, his lack of party loyalty, and his change in philosophy from Liberalish to Conservativism.

When Burton K. Wheeler was a young man, he ran for Governor on the Democratic ticket. The year was 1920, the first presidential election year after the war. It was a poor year for Democrats and liberals. No longer did the Democratic Party have either its great cause or its great war time President. The result was a resounding defeat and Wheeler never forgot it.

There is reason to believe that Wheeler felt the circumstances were similar in 1946. The people were disillusioned with the sacrifices of war and the troubled international scene which followed victory so closely. In a very real sense these were dark days for liberals, New Dealers and supporters of President Truman.

Wheeler had been a political victim of the post-World War I reaction. But now, following World War II, he seemed safe. He had not been an isolationist, rather a non-interventionist, and had only been opposed to the heedless "sacrifice of nearly a million American boys to create a Frankenstein which insists on changing the economic, social, political and religious standards and beliefs of most of Europe."²² On June 25, 1946, he told a Miles City audience that "instead

²²Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 21, 1946.

of making the world safe for democracy, we made it safe for communism."²³

Repeatedly Erickson told Montanans that world cooperation was the most important single issue and that Wheeler was constitutionally unfit to pursue such a course. He reminded Montana voters of Wheeler's battles with the late President Roosevelt and how his obstructionist tactics had hindered America's preparation for and conduct of the war.

On Sunday, June 23, the candidates officially opened their campaigns. Wheeler, of Butte, began with a state-wide radio address from Westby, a small town near Canada on the North Dakota border. Erickson, of Sidney, spoke at a rally in Butte.²⁴ It is perhaps incidental that each candidate chose to open his campaign in his opponent's home country, but it is significant that each was to win majorities where the other man was better known. Of course, the incumbent's margin in eastern Montana was to fall short of that polled by Erickson in the western end of the state.

A bozeman crowd heard Wheeler say that he had three factors to contend with as he sought nomination. These were the influence of Sidney Hillman and his Political Action Committee, the menace of Communism, and the efforts of the New York financial interest. But he assured them that "Montana voters will not let the New York people tell them how to vote."²⁵

²³Miles City Star, June 26, 1946.

²⁴Western News, June 24, 1946.

²⁵Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 27, 1946.

Erickson, several days previously, told a Bozeman audience that in the twenty-four years Wheeler had served in the Senate, he had never supported any measure that would contribute to the economic future of the state. Wheeler's hatred of President Roosevelt and his constant opposition to the New Deal, according to Erickson, had kept the state at the bottom of the nation's economic list. He pointed out that Wheeler's Montana was last in war industries of all the western states.²⁶

Special attention, of course, was given to such groups as veterans, labor and the farmers. This was certainly a year that veterans would be a major factor in elections. Labor strife was extensive throughout the land, and control of inflation, wages, etc., were at the heart of labor management problems. The farmer feared that after the wartime cry for more production he would soon see a reversal of this.

Interwoven through these interest groups and their related problems was the role of the government. Some looked to the government to continue to be active in the economy; others hearkened to by-gone days and demanded that America return to free enterprise and cease drifting toward the welfare state.

Veteran

Neither candidate had ever been in the military service of his country. Senator Wheeler, however, in almost every speech made refer-

²⁶Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 23, 1946.

ence to the fact that his opponent had been of military age. He told a Roundup audience on June 29, "I cannot stoop to attack or criticize my younger opponent's war record for he hasn't any."²⁷

All through the state in speeches and paid radio and newspaper advertisements the Wheeler forces stressed Erickson's age and lack of military service. By far the most virulent attacks of the campaign stemmed from the Veterans for Wheeler Club of which Willard E. Frazer of Billings was chairman.²⁸ Following are excerpts from a typical newspaper advertisement paid for by this veterans' organization:

Vote for Burton K. Wheeler for United States Senate. Don't let Communish get a foothold in Montana. . . . Where was this young man (Erickson) when the other young men of Montana were doing their courageous bit to defeat our country's enemies? . . . This young man, of military age and supposedly good physical condition, was bravely and courageously fighting the Battle of Last Chance Gulch . . . though he did venture anxiously out to Chicago to accept an extra \$50.00 a day while still drawing his salary from the Montana taxpayer.²⁹

The same veterans' group distributed through newspaper advertisements cartoons depicting "Uncle Joe" Stalin and a group of "New York Parlor Pinks" with the caption "Do you want Sidney Hillman selecting and nominating our Montana Senators?"³⁰

The Veterans for Wheeler Club had no money of its own, according to Mr. Stortz. All their expenses were paid by him out of the Wheeler

²⁷Miles City Star, June 30, 1946.

²⁸Billings Gazette, June 30, 1946.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

campaign funds.³¹ Secretary of this club was a young Helena attorney, John B. Mahan, who was in 1959 to become the National Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Frazer had been Montana chairman of the America First Committee before the outbreak of the war. He denied having any connection with Gerald L. K. Smith's group in his testimony before the investigating committee.³²

Chester Kinsey told the committee that his Veterans Against Wheeler Committee had been organized before Erickson had filed, and "every member was willing to support almost any candidate to defeat Isolationist Wheeler."³³ He further testified that his organization received \$1,500 from the C.I.O.-U.A.W. of Detroit and \$1,000 from the National Maritime Union C.I.O. to use against Wheeler. The national headquarters of the C.I.O.-P.A.C., according to Kinsey, refused a request for funds by his group.³⁴

Mr. Kinsey was also secretary-treasurer of the Montana Council for Progressive Political Action. This council, in the late 1930's, advocated unionizing farm labor and had as its principal aim a political coalition between the city union man and the farmer. In 1940 it supported Republican Sam C. Ford as he unseated Governor Roy Ayers. Four years later it left Ford and endorsed Leif Erickson. In this campaign Ford and his organization had called it Communist dominated. It was then under the leadership of Jerry J. O'Connell. Ford

³¹Great Falls Tribune, July 10, 1946.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

did, though, accept its support in 1940.³⁵

Commenting on the verbal battle at the Senate hearing, the Great Falls Tribune wrote, "The principal argument seemed to be whether the Veterans For Wheeler Committee or the Veterans Against Wheeler Committee was the more patriotic."³⁶ In a very real sense this "for or against" Wheeler idea was to be evidenced in almost every facet of the campaign.

In seeking veteran support Wheeler reiterated that his record spoke for itself and was the equal of any Senator's. He called for a more efficient and inclusive G.I. Bill, better housing, and more aid to widows and dependents of veterans.³⁷ The Senator, in referring to President Roosevelt, recalled that he had voted to over-ride the President's veto of the bonus bill for veterans of World War I.

Speaking at the state Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention at Helena, he said, "Some of you disagreed with me on foreign policy . . . but I can look my maker in the face and say I have served you without fear or favor."³⁸

Mr. Erickson's appeal to veterans was almost identical to that of his opponent. He, also, called for better housing, G.I. Bill, and more money for widows and dependents. But he took issue with Wheeler's voting record--especially his opposition to President Roosevelt

³⁵ Interview with John J. Holmes, April 20, 1959.

³⁶ Great Falls Tribune, July 11, 1946.

³⁷ Lewistown Daily News, July 8, 1946.

³⁸ Ibid.

generally, military preparedness, and his association with America First. Erickson equated these actions with opposition to the welfare of veterans and the nation. He said, as he had done all during the campaign, that Wheeler's re-election could lead to another war.³⁹ Erickson felt that his most potent weapon was the obvious contradiction between the great need for international cooperation and Wheeler's history of isolationism. At the same time, he pointed out at every opportunity that, had it not been for the isolationists, there might not have been a war at all. The point was never successfully challenged by Wheeler--at least with reference to liberal Democratic voters. In a general election, as subsequently happened, this approach failed to be successful.

Erickson felt that the majority of returning servicemen would have little sympathy with isolationism. With reference to Democrats generally, he was certain that Wheeler's actions and general manner had alienated enough Montanans to cause his defeat.⁴⁰

Farmer

The Montana farmer in 1946 was fearful of a repetition of the conditions that had followed World War I. Inflation, loss of world market, labor costs and farm prices were the chief problems confronting the farmer when Wheeler and Erickson went to him for his vote.

Senator Wheeler appealed less directly to the farmer than did his

³⁹Montana Standard, July 12, 1946.

⁴⁰Interview with Leif Erickson, May 16, 1958.

opponent in economic matters. The veteran campaigner told his audiences essentially the same things. He was against every "ism" except "Americanism,"⁴¹ he was for Montana first before all else. And his opponents, in reality, were either "the Wall Street Bankers . . . or the Communist Party."⁴² These perilous times required men with experience: the people should elect "men who have character, intestinal stamina, and intelligence."⁴³ He often asked, "What can a Freshman Senator do?,"⁴⁴ a political maneuver often used by incumbents seeking re-election.

He told rural audiences that they "got Fort Peck Dam in just 15 minutes because I was his (Roosevelt's) friend." He told others when the Farmers' Union wanted boxcars and cheaper railroad rates they came to him and were served.⁴⁵ In almost every speech he referred to Erickson as "the young fellow who wants to take my place in the Senate."⁴⁶

Erickson campaigned on a platform of specific policies. He called for a ten year floor under farm prices in order to avoid another agricultural post-war slump. His plan for "protected water rights" was spoken of as something that Wheeler had left undone.⁴⁷

His theme, to rural audiences, was that national prosperity

⁴¹ Independent Record, July 8, 1946.

⁴³ Miles City Star, June 26, 1946.

⁴⁵ Glasgow Courier, June 27, 1946.

⁴⁷ Shelby Tribune, May 2, 1946.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

was dependent upon the maintenance of a high farm income. This could be accomplished by the following proposals: the ten year price floor, revision of federal income taxes to allow farmers to base their income over a five-year period, to allow them a tax free 10 per cent reserve as a cushion against lean years, and a total revision of Montana's freight rate structure.⁴⁸

These suggestions could well have been made, with minor changes, by the Populists or Progressives of an earlier day. They were specifically adapted to the plight of the wheat farmer of the Great Plains who had inconsistent weather, crops and income.

Erickson's entire agricultural platform was in the classic tradition of the Great Plains and western farmer. He spoke of the farmer's getting tax, price and railroad breaks on a par with American corporations.

The trend of the campaign remained much the same. The incumbent relied on his name and record to sustain him while Mr. Erickson attacked him on these scores and presented the things he would advocate if elected.

On July 11, 1946, Sidney Hillman died in New York. Neither candidate made any mention of this. Throughout the campaign, in speeches, radio and newspaper advertisements, Hillman was accused by Wheeler of trying to run Montana politics, as well as the entire nation's.⁴⁹ Ironically, in 1925 after Wheeler's successful investi-

⁴⁸ Montana Standard, June 2, 1946.

⁴⁹ Cut Bank Pioneer Press, June 21, 1946.

gation of Attorney General Harry Dougherty, the Senator was indicted for an alleged oil lease fraud. A Committee to Defend Senator Wheeler was organized in Washington, D. C. Many outstanding liberals were on it, including the labor leader, Sidney Hillman.⁵⁰

Labor

In 1946 Montana's organized labor belonged, for the most part, to either the A.F. of L. or the C.I.O. The latter's stronghold was in copper mining, smelters, and oil fields. The A.F. of L. was more diverse, having members in the fields of construction, lumber, trades, and services, mechanics, bartenders, etc.⁵¹ The labor vote can often be a deciding factor in Montana elections, particularly in a Democratic primary. The primary election being studied would seem to give validity to this contention.

Senator Wheeler told the laboring people of Montana, "My record supporting labor legislation speaks for itself."⁵² The people had not been accustomed to Wheeler's making more general statements than those he made concerning the labor difficulties, particularly the threatened labor and railroad strikes, in the post-war economy. "Greater labor and capital cooperating, such as prevailed during the days of the founding of the American Republic, is required or we will

⁵⁰Interview with District Judge Lester J. Loble, then State Chairman of the State Democratic Central Committee, April 28, 1959.

⁵¹The People's Voice, July 12, 1946. Copyright story by Richard Baumhoff, staff correspondent for St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

⁵²Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 6, 1946.

crumble like other great nations of old."⁵³

There is little doubt that this thought had less appeal in a Democratic primary than it might have had in a general election. This was true, particularly at a time when emotions, both of union and management, were running high. It is not difficult to understand that many union men who recalled Wheeler as a champion of labor now saw him as a defender of the status quo. This would be the first time in his checkered career that this accusation was leveled at him.

Wheeler had rarely taken a moderate position on issues before, and his moderate statements about the volatile labor-management difficulties of 1946 made him vulnerable to the charge he had changed and was now a conservative. In the mind of organized labor, this vulnerability cost him dearly when it went to the polls. Erickson, seeking the vote of organized labor, placed legislation for full industrial production foremost in his platform. Inherent in this plank was his unqualified support of the New Deal philosophy and legislation. At no point in the campaign did Wheeler take the offensive concerning his labor record, which, according to former Governor John W. Bonner was "in reality, a very fine one."⁵⁴ This lack of action was not in keeping with Wheeler's traditional method of campaigning.

A Roundup audience heard Erickson say, "Twenty years ago railroad workers stood second in hourly wages and are now

⁵³Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 27, 1946.

⁵⁴Interview with John W. Bonner, Governor of Montana, 1949-1952, March 8, 1959.

twenty-seventh."⁵⁵ His campaign, combined with Wheeler's lack of aggressiveness, seemed to show the Senator as a defender of the status quo and in opposition to government intervention in the economy.

Erickson charged that Wheeler in his chairmanship of the Interstate Commerce Committee had accomplished nothing for the Montana economy, whereas, according to Erickson, much could have been done if Wheeler had remained loyal to the liberalism he had displayed as a young man and to President Roosevelt. Wheeler seemed to place himself at all times above the details of the campaign, while Erickson, although attacking, was also gradually building a strong case for his own liberalism as opposed to Wheeler's shift in philosophy.

Erickson told all Montanans of his allegiance to Roosevelt and the New Deal, and told how his opponent, a former liberal, had forsaken them. He told Butte, Great Falls, and Anaconda groups that the "full development of Montana's industrial capacity" was only possible through the New Deal philosophy.⁵⁶ While speaking in this manner, he equated Montana's industrial plight to a coalition between Wheeler and Montana's two largest corporations. The Senator's stand that the C.I.O.-P.A.C. and Sidney Hillman were communistic must certainly have lead many a C.I.O. union man to think Wheeler had joined the opposition. This position was so close to the Republican battle cry of the Dewey presidential campaign of 1944 that the compari-

⁵⁵Independent Record, June 30, 1946.

⁵⁶Montana Standard, July 12, 1946.

son was inevitable.

Wheeler traditionally had presented to Montana voters a vigorous, well defined platform. In this campaign he lacked vigor but, more important in a primary election, he appeared vague on some central problems or entirely ignored them, only alluding to his record. His opponent felt the capitalization of Montana's resources could be accomplished by processing raw materials in the state rather than shipping them to other areas. He presented this solution to the labor people,⁵⁷ saying that rigid freight rates by eastern interests, industrial monopoly and the policy of less government intervention in the economy stood in the way of fulfillment of their dream.

In an earlier campaign, Senator Wheeler had told the Butte and Anaconda people that if they ever saw his picture on the front pages of the Company papers they would know that he had sold out.⁵⁸ Erickson made much of this statement even though it is natural that a Senator's picture would appear from time to time. None the less, it was a fine stroke locally, for it symbolized in a few words the tenor of Erickson's attack on Wheeler.

The laboring people of Butte, however, did note that the Erickson of 1946 sounded very much like the Wheeler of bygone days.⁵⁹ Wheeler, the master prosecutor, was ill-fit to be on the defense. To much of organized labor, the Senator's position sounded like that of

⁵⁷Great Falls Tribune, July 10, 1946.

⁵⁸Interview with Judge J. J. Lynch, April 4, 1959.

⁵⁹Interview with Federal Judge W. D. Murray, April 4, 1959.

management.

The Senate Investigation

The importance of the Senate Committee investigation, which convened just a week before election day, is difficult to assess. In the opinion of Erickson, Montana papers "were to be commended for their fair coverage."⁶⁰ Robert A. Barker was counsel in charge of the hearing. Erickson protested that the former Dies Committee investigator was friendly to, and had been actually nominated by, Wheeler.⁶¹

Senator Wheeler, in a prepared statement before the committee, denied heatedly that he had received support from the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, the Montana Power Company, the Company newspapers or Gerald L. K. Smith's America First Committee.⁶²

Taking the offensive, he continued, "I want to know how much money the P.A.C. and the C.I.O. are sending into this state against me."⁶³ He declared that he had never been a member of the America First Committee and had received no fees for speaking under their auspices. As to Erickson's statement that Montana's two largest corporations were supporting him, Wheeler said the truth was that they in reality were opposed to him.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Interview with Leif Erickson, May 16, 1958.

⁶¹ Montana Standard, July 1, 1946.

⁶² Great Falls Tribune, July 9, 1946.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Erickson asked that Gerald L. K. Smith be subpoenaed by the committee. He again accused Wheeler of having the support of Anaconda Company and the Montana Power. If believed generally, this can mean political death in Montana. Company newspapers, according to the challenger, were carrying the bulk of his opponent's campaign and a minimum of his.⁶⁵

He blasted Wheeler's voting record, as he had throughout the struggle, quoting seven votes which were against appropriations for military matters. He denied any knowledge or responsibility for the book Wheeler had termed "scurrilous." It seems clear in the record that the book played no part whatever in the campaign, other than as a curiosity. Wheeler had twice been the inspiration for a book. The first one was in 1925 and portrayed him as a Communist. The second, in 1946, described him as the man "who Hitlerized Montana."⁶⁶

Law Risken of Butte and Taylor B. Weir of Helena told the committee that their papers in no way favored the Senator. They said that no instructions had been given to any editor or reporter concerning the campaign. The inference here is that all these men were free to write editorials or stories in whatever manner they wished. Whether these papers favored Wheeler or not is incidental to the fact that during Anaconda's reign over these newspapers there was little freedom from control evidenced. Weir said that Wheeler's name appeared more

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ David George Kin, *The Plot Against America* (Missoula, Montana: John S. Kennedy, Publishers, 1946), p. 98.

often because there was more news value in what he said and did, and that the Company newspapers "are run for profit not propaganda. . . . if Mr. Erickson will bite the dog, we will print it."⁶⁷

Mr. Weir, a prominent Helena attorney, told the committee that he, L. J. MacDonald, and J. H. Dickey, Jr., assistant to the Vice President of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, formed a holding company controlling these papers. He added, "We must hold it in trust for the Anaconda Copper Mining Company."⁶⁸ Commenting on this testimony, the Great Falls Tribune carried a story which read in part: "For the first time the relationship of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company to a considerable section of the Montana daily press went into a public record."⁶⁹

In what was the only debate in the campaign, Wheeler answered his opponent's accusations with regard to America First and Roosevelt. He said the former must not be confused with the America First Committee of which he was a member. Smith's committee had no connection whatever with it. And Roosevelt must not have felt too badly toward him, he testified, because "he wanted me to accept the nomination as his Vice President in 1940."⁷⁰

The final testimonies were those of David Plotkin, whose pen-name was George Kin, and John Kennedy, of Missoula, who hired him to write the book on Wheeler. At this stage, the name of Jerry J.

⁶⁷Great Falls Tribune, July 9, 1946.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

O'Connell entered the record. O'Connell, then executive secretary of the Washington State Democratic Central Committee, had arranged a loan for Kennedy from a Seattle cafe owner.⁷¹ This was his only connection with the campaign. However, during the campaign, Senator Wheeler maintained that radicals Hillman and O'Connell would gain if they could bring about his defeat.

Kennedy, several times unsuccessful as a Democratic candidate for state offices and secretary to O'Connell when he was a Congressman, said that he had no connection with Erickson and, on the contrary, he testified that he had hoped that the former Attorney General, John W. Bonner, would run against Wheeler.⁷²

The hearing lasted three days and then adjourned to Washington, D. C., where it was said it would continue the investigation. Needless to say, after the election no more was heard of it. The main value of the hearing was that it caused much excitement and interest, giving Montana voters a closer look at both Wheeler and Erickson. It seems evident that Wheeler, who brought about the investigation, gained nothing by it. There is reason to believe that in Butte, Great Falls, and Anaconda, the strongholds of the C.I.O., it may have hurt him.⁷³

⁷¹Great Falls Tribune, July 11, 1946.

⁷²Ibid

⁷³Interview with Judge J. J. Lynch, April 4, 1959.
 Interview with Elmer Shea, Chairman of Butte Wheeler for Senator Club, April 4, 1959.
 Interview with District Judge Lester J. Loble, then State Chairman of the State Democratic Central Committee, April 28, 1959.
 Interview with Hoseph Monaghan, April 5, 1959.

Endorsements

Senator Wheeler was endorsed by an imposing list of persons and organizations. But the people and organizations who counted most in a Montana Democratic primary went for his opponent.

For the first time in Wheeler's career, the Silver Bow Trades and Labor Association, whose members included both A.F. of L. and C.I.O. unions, did not endorse him. Its Great Falls counterpart, the Cascade County Trades and Labor Assembly, also rebuked Wheeler and endorsed Erickson.⁷⁴

The Great Falls group stated it was shocked and alarmed to learn of William Green's (President of the A.F. of L.) endorsement of Wheeler. They passed a resolution that said in part:

Wheeler is anti-semitic, he is today in the propaganda stages of his attack against the Jews. . . if the people send Wheeler back they will have done all they can to start a chain of events which may, and probably will, lead to the third, and last, world war.⁷⁵

The Hill County Farm Labor Council endorsed Erickson, stating "he (Wheeler) is not for Democrats when Ford runs for Governor, when Rankin runs for the Senate, when J. J. O'Connell runs for Congress, or when F.D.R. runs for President."⁷⁶

Senator Wheeler, on the national scene, was supported by Green of the A.F. of L.; John L. Lewis, President of the United Mine Workers

⁷⁴The People's Voice, July 5, 1946.

⁷⁵Cut Bank Pioneer Press, June 21, 1946.

⁷⁶Havre Daily News, June 18, 1946.

of America; Wisconsin's Robert La Follette, Jr.; Colorado's Senator Edwin C. Johnson; Nevada's Senator Patrick McCarran; and Massachusetts' Senator David I. Walsh.⁷⁷

At home he was endorsed by the Montana Woolgrowers Association and several railway locals. Erickson, too, had the support of some railway locals. This was the first time in Wheeler's career that he had split this support with an opponent in a primary campaign.⁷⁸ Neither candidate was to get much advantage over the other from the railroad unions, but the bulk of the C.I.O. unions were endorsing Erickson.

Wheeler had diverse support from various nationally famous people. The following are examples of endorsements used during the last week of the campaign in newspaper advertisements in most Montana papers.

D. B. Robertson, President of the Locomotive Firemen and Engineer's Union wrote, "give Wheeler the nomination by the largest majority he's ever received."⁷⁹ This was described as part of a letter Robertson had sent to all affiliated locals.

Omar Ketchum of Washington, D. C., national legislative representative, endorsed Senator Wheeler's candidacy. The Presidents of

⁷⁷Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 19, 1946.

⁷⁸Interview with Judge J. J. Lynch, April 4, 1959.

⁷⁹Miles City Star, July 14, 1946.

twenty national railway brotherhoods favored Wheeler.⁸⁰

These testimonials to Wheeler were certainly imposing on the national scene and demonstrated Wheeler's reputation in many places. But the election was to be won or lost on the home ground, more specifically among Democrats. And Wheeler had left many fences not only unattended but torn down completely.

Montana newspapers had long been either noncommittal or indifferent. Only a few papers had editorials on the election at all. The Great Falls Tribune did not comment editorially on the election either during or after the campaign. As if to symbolize the role of Montana newspapers, the Tribune waited until after election day to eulogize, editorially, Sidney Hillman.

Five papers covered the campaign intensively: the Miles City Star, the Dawson County Review, the Missoula Times, the Western News, and The People's Voice. The latter three are weekly papers. The People's Voice and the Western News were for Erickson. Significantly, The People's Voice had been established in the 1930's by "elements within the Farmers' Union, the C.I.O., and the A.F. of L."⁸¹

The Bozeman Daily Chronicle, in its only editorial, spoke of Wheeler as being a "national figure discussed and cussed . . . a free thinker, a man who knows his way round."⁸² The Missoula Times described Wheeler as one of the few men in Congress with "intelligence

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Karlin, op. cit., p. 271

⁸² Bozeman Daily Chronicle, June 2, 1946.

and ability" enough to be able to get things done. The same paper called for civic organizations to give him a public endorsement as labor does for candidates it favors.⁸³

Another editorial from the same source read in part: "any Montanan under attack by the C.I.O.-P.A.C., Eastern reds and pinks, The People's Voice and the Pink Reporter is a friend of mine."⁸⁴ When Wheeler won the Supreme Court fight, it continued, he also won the hatred of the President and "all his pink and red friends."⁸⁵

The Miles City Star was violently opposed to Erickson. "Erickson is now about to commit political suicide."⁸⁶ A June 29 editorial in the same paper told of Erickson's dilemma because Roosevelt was dead and Harry Truman's coattails were of little use, and that Leif was crying wolf in regard to the Anaconda Copper Mining Company as is the custom of his mentor, Senator Murray, when "he's (Murray) not too busy fronting for a bunch of fake fronts down in New York."

Erickson was called the "High Priest of the Missouri Valley Authority and the Farmer's Union" in a Dawson County Review editorial, which also referred to Erickson's receiving fifty dollars as railroad mediator while he was on the Montana payroll as a Justice of the Supreme Court.⁸⁷

Erickson's support, in the newspaper field, was from The People's

⁸³Missoula Times, June 21, 1946.

⁸⁴Ibid., July 5, 1946.

⁸⁵Ibid

⁸⁶Miles City Star, June 23, 1946.

⁸⁷Dawson County Review, June 30, 1946.

Voice and the Western News. The latter was less vocal and more limited in circulation. The theme of the attack of The People's Voice on Wheeler was much the same as that taken by Erickson. Wheeler had forsaken, for money and power, the liberal cause. The laborer and the farmer in Montana were suffering because Wheeler was in the Senate. Senator Murray needed help, not obstruction, from his Montana colleague. Finally, Wheeler had capitulated to Anaconda Company and the Montana Power Company.

It must be concluded that editorial comment had little, if any, major effect upon the campaign. But the statements and policies of the candidates were given wide coverage.

Wheeler was afforded more attention and, in some instances, more favorable positions as to page and heading. But Erickson's speeches and stories were included in most papers with little, if any, changing. The reasons for Wheeler's seemingly preferential treatment could be ascribed to the fact that he was more newsworthy or that the newspapers were having more advertising business from him. However, it seems certain that only by way of more money for advertisements did Wheeler have any real advantage over his opponent.

President Truman and the Campaign

The role played by President Truman in this campaign was certainly unorthodox. At the outset it was Erickson who was the "party man" and his opponent the opposite. But when Truman, contrary to advice from national leaders of the Democratic Party, sent a letter to Baily Stortz, Truman himself became something of an issue.

Mr. Stortz, testifying before the Senate Committee, read a letter to him from President Truman. This seemed like an endorsement of Wheeler and read in part that Wheeler's "fidelity to railroad labor" could not be doubted.⁸⁸ The letter was reprinted and sent throughout the state in newspaper advertisements.

Mr. Truman's popularity was subject to quick change in these days and perhaps even more so among liberal Democrats. This is graphically illustrated by a comparison of three consecutive editions of The People's Voice.

The liberal weekly referred to Truman's labor bill as a "fascist bill" and complained that such a bill ordinarily would have gone through Senator Murray's Committee on Education and Labor. But the President, they wrote, in collusion with Wheeler, had it brought to the floor of the Senate through Wheeler's Interstate Commerce Committee.⁸⁹ They claimed that Truman knew Murray would not have passed on the bill in committee.

A week later, on the fifth of July, the same paper called President Truman "one of the statesmen of the 20th Century and a true leader of the people."⁹⁰ This accolade was for his veto of the price control bill passed by Congress that week.

Three days before the election, on July twelfth, a story carried this headline: "Wheeler's Vote to Draft Strikers May be Reason for

⁸⁸Great Falls Tribune, July 10, 1946.

⁸⁹The People's Voice, June 28, 1946.

⁹⁰Ibid., July 5, 1946.

Truman's Endorsement."⁹¹ Let it be understood that if The People's Voice was vacillating so were Wheeler and Erickson in the matter of President Truman's value to their cause.

Truman's letter must be classified as an example of placing loyalty to a friend above duty as head of the Democratic Party. Wheeler was a friend but most certainly did not agree with Truman's foreign policy, whereas Erickson was basing his campaign on allegiance to Truman's administration.

The effect all this had on the campaign is difficult to determine. There is much reason to believe that Truman's part in the railroad and general labor crises probably hurt Wheeler with some railroaders and laborers. Truman's letter, coming when it did, certainly did not have the effect that Wheeler and Stortz thought it would.

Last Days of the Campaign

As the campaign entered its last few days the candidates brought forth advertisements, newspaper and radio, reiterating endorsements, slogans, and statements. Wheeler had a taped speech by his friend John L. Lewis played over a state-wide radio hook-up. Erickson did the same thing with a taped speech by James Roosevelt, son of the late President.⁹² John Thomas Taylor, legislative representative for the American Legion, told of Wheeler's fine support of labor legislation.⁹³

⁹¹Ibid., July 12, 1946.

⁹²Miles City Star, July 15, 1946.

⁹³Montana Standard, July 14, 1946.

Wisconsin's Senator La Follette, son of Wheeler's running mate in 1924 on the Progressive ticket, took time off from his campaign against Judge Joseph McCarthy to tape a speech for Montana's Senior Senator.

As election day approached Wheeler told Butte and Anaconda audiences that the issue was not OPA, beer, nylons, or a new car, but whether or not the people are going to be able to preserve this country as a democratic republic.⁹⁴ It was ironic that this threat, as he saw it, to the traditional government and values of America, was similar to that raised in connection with his candidacy for Governor in 1920.

Erickson, no less extreme than his opponent, told the Montana voter, and Democrats in particular, that the whole world would be watching on July 16 to see if they would reject Wheeler, as one of many, who would place America on the path to isolation and ultimately into world war three.⁹⁵

Both candidates closed the campaign in the Butte area. Their final addresses pointed out just how totally in disagreement they were as to the role of the United States in the post-war era.

Wheeler spoke of the moral breakdown in European nations and of this being the most critical period the world had seen since the Dark Ages. He said that if the United States would furnish England,

⁹⁴Ibid., July 15, 1946.

⁹⁵Lewistown Daily News, July 12, 1946.

France, and Italy with men, money and material, they would go to war tomorrow with Russia.⁹⁶ Without calling for isolation, but strongly implying it, he told of the moral breakdown of our allies by making an impassioned plea for "handing the torch of liberty to our children."⁹⁷

Erickson, at the Slav Picnic in Butte, said the answer to the world's dilemma was international cooperation rather than power politics. He disdainfully referred to those who were silent when Hitler began his conquest of nations, but even worse, to him, were the isolationists who even fought preparedness.⁹⁸

On election eve, as is the custom in all campaigns, candidates and party leaders called for all persons to vote. At this time, though, came an announcement from Dan Whetstone, Republican National Committeeman from Montana, and Ashton Jones, State Republican Chairman. They issued a statement asking Republicans to vote in the Republican primary. It was the duty of Republicans, they said, to support their own candidates rather than vote in the other party primary to either elect or defeat Democrats.⁹⁹

Whetstone, editor of the Cut Bank Pioneer Press, had written earlier that Republicans should not vote for Wheeler just because he was reputed to be "as good a Republican as good Republicans."¹⁰⁰ He

⁹⁶ Montana Standard, July 14, 1946.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lewistown Daily News, July 15, 1946.

⁹⁹ The Daily Missoulian, July 12, 1946.

¹⁰⁰ Cut Bank Pioneer Press, July 12, 1946.

pointed out in the same editorial that in organizing the Senate, Wheeler would be with the Democrats.

Thus ended one of the most interesting, pivotal and most heated of Montana primary election campaigns. It had been a primary in which the candidates proclaimed philosophies of opposite extremes.

CHAPTER III

ELECTION RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Montana and the nation were shocked on July 17 to learn of Senator Wheeler's defeat. The margin was 4,906. Wheeler polled 44,513 in comparison to Erickson's 49,419. The victor received 52.6 per cent of the Democratic Primary vote, and the incumbent 47.7 per cent. Wheeler won in thirty-four of Montana's fifty-six counties. A heavier than usual vote in an off year primary was cast with 52.9 per cent of registered voters going to the polls. The per cent of registered voters participating in Montana primaries for the years 1942, 1944, 1950, 1958 was 45.8, 42, 51.1, and 50.2.¹ So while the 1946 primary was somewhat higher than normal, it can be accounted for because of the intense interest in the Wheeler-Erickson contest.² And it was also the first post-war election. Democratic votes in the primary amounted to 73.4 per cent as compared to the Republicans' 26.6 per cent of the total vote cast. The former total was 93,932 and the latter was 33,237.³

In order to facilitate analysis, the following categories have been selected: the political-geographical division of eastern and western Montana as defined by the two congressional districts,

¹Appendix 11.

²Great Falls Tribune, July 18, 1946.

³Official Election Returns from the Office of Secretary of State.

the population as defined by rural and urban counties, counties whose agricultural economies had 70 per cent or more of their cash receipts from either crops or livestock, counties whose agricultural economics were more evenly divided between crops and livestock, counties with significant dairy and lumber industries, and counties having the largest labor force.

Congressional Districts

In the First Congressional District, which is roughly the western third of the state, Senator Wheeler won six counties and his opponent eleven.⁴ Mr. Erickson's margin over the incumbent was 5,939 votes. The significance of this is obvious in an election that was decided by only 4,906 votes.

Western Montana has six counties with relatively large urban populations and labor forces. Erickson received a majority in every one of these counties. By way of contrast, Senator Wheeler carried the four counties which have predominantly livestock economies. In the First District, which traditionally has been the stronghold of the Democratic Party, Erickson won in all counties where laboring people were in the majority. There were no western Montana counties which had crops as their dominant agricultural base. Wheeler won in all the livestock counties. In two counties, Lincoln and Sanders, which had no large urban centers, but had both livestock and lumber industries, Erickson was the victor.

⁴ Appendix 3.

The Second Congressional District contains the heart of the livestock and crop industries.⁵ This central and eastern two-thirds of the state has fluctuated more violently in past elections than has its western counterpart. More often than not the Republican Party, nationally and locally, has received support in this area. By 1946 both Yellowstone and Cascade had surpassed Silver Bow in population.⁶ With these exceptions, which were centers of labor, trade, and services, there were no large urban areas in eastern Montana. The other counties were rural by nature of their crop or livestock orientation with little or no labor force.

Senator Wheeler won twenty-eight of the thirty-nine counties in Montana's second district. Despite the numerical superiority in counties won, Wheeler's margin over Erickson was only 1,033, which was more than offset by the incumbent's loss in western Montana by 5,939 votes. Wheeler won, significantly, all nine livestock counties and split the six wheat counties with his opponent. Furthermore, in the twenty-four counties having a relatively even percentage of crops and livestock, Wheeler was given majorities in sixteen.

Urban and Rural Population

The 1950 census listed thirteen counties with cities of 5,000 or more. By way of contrast this same census reveals seventeen Montana counties which had no town or city of 1,500 or more persons. For

⁵Appendix 4.

⁶Appendix 6.

purposes of this thesis, the former counties shall be classified as urban, the latter as rural.⁷ The other thirty-four counties were split evenly, seventeen for each candidate. But the larger counties, with labor as a base, gave majorities to Erickson and thus, insured Wheeler's defeat.

Senator Wheeler was defeated in the ten largest counties, which also contained the ten largest cities. Erickson polled 7,836 more votes than Wheeler in these counties. Only in the three urban counties with the smallest populations did Wheeler have the edge in this election. In these counties the incumbent was given 1,102 votes more than Erickson. Urban Montana gave Erickson 6,734 more votes than it did Wheeler.

In rural Montana, the reverse was true. Wheeler received a majority of votes in fourteen of the seventeen least populated counties.⁸ Due to the sparseness of population, the incumbent gained only 298 votes over his opponent. But Wheeler won eight of the nine livestock counties and six of the eight counties in which livestock and crops are comparatively even in regard to cash receipts.

Wheat Counties

In 1944 Montana had six counties which received 70 per cent or more of their agricultural cash receipts from field crops.⁹ The cash crop of these six counties was wheat. Senator Wheeler won three and lost the other three wheat counties. Mr. Wheeler's total vote was

⁷Appendix 5.

⁸Appendix 5.

⁹Appendix 6.

eighty-six more than that received by Erickson. But if Hill County is taken from this classification, due to the relatively large labor force located in Havre, Wheeler's margin in the wheat counties was 259 votes. In 1946 the Montana Farmers' Union dues-paying members totaled 6,403. The six wheat counties contained 3,218--more than half of the group's members.¹⁰ The fact that Wheeler did so well in these counties is further indication that his agricultural, rural support remained with him. It was the labor, urban counties which abandoned Wheeler in the 1946 Democratic primary.

Livestock Counties

Sixteen Montana counties had, in 1944, 70 per cent or more of their agricultural cash receipts from livestock operations.¹¹ Senator Wheeler lost only three of these to Mr. Erickson. But, if Lewis and Clark and Sanders Counties are taken from this classification, then Wheeler lost only one bona fide livestock county--Beaverhead. Lewis and Clark had a significant labor, government and service force, whereas Sanders' economy was more dairy and lumber than cattle.

The incumbent received the most impressive support from these livestock counties. With the deletions mentioned, his margin was 1,587 over Erickson. If Lewis and Clark and Sanders Counties are counted, Wheeler's margin was 998 votes.

¹⁰ Interview with Leonard Kenfield, President of Montana Farmers' Union, Aug. 3, 1959.

¹¹ Appendix 7.

Counties Equally Balanced in Crops and Livestock

The remaining thirty-two counties, excluding industrial Deer Lodge, had substantial percentages of their economies in agriculture. But with neither field crops nor livestock being dominant, they have been classified, for this study, as more or less balanced in their agricultural economies.¹² Of these agricultural counties, Wheeler won eighteen and Erickson thirteen. Erickson's margin over the incumbent was 1,702 votes. Contained in these counties carried by Mr. Erickson were four which also had large urban populations with the corresponding labor, trade, and service personnel. Remove these (Yellowstone, Cascade, Fergus and Missoula), and the remaining twenty-seven counties are almost exclusively agricultural in their economic base. In these twenty-seven counties, Wheeler's majority was 431 votes. It becomes apparent, once again, that the larger urban counties gave significant majorities to Erickson, and that the rural, agriculturally oriented counties generally favored the incumbent.

Lumber Counties

During the war Montana's lumber production was curtailed greatly. In 1944 only four counties cut a substantial board foot volume of lumber.¹³ Wheeler lost all of these by a total of 655 votes. Of these counties, all of which were in western Montana, Ravalli and Sanders had substantial dairy economies. Flathead, of course, had a relatively large urban population along with the lumber industry.

¹²Appendix 8.

¹³Appendix 9.

Lincoln, the dominant lumber producer in the state, by more than four times in terms of board foot production, gave Erickson a majority of 104 votes.

Dairy Counties

In 1944 Montana's dairy industry centered in fifteen counties. All but four of these were located in western Montana.¹⁴ Wheeler polled majorities in six of these. Seven of Erickson's nine counties had urban centers; thus, he received 6,161 votes more than Wheeler. Omit the seven urban counties and Erickson's total is only 467.

Labor Force Counties

The most thorough analysis of the role of labor, union and non-union, admittedly would require precinct comparisons. As this was not feasible, this task was accomplished by considering the fifteen counties with the largest labor force.¹⁵ They ranged from Yellowstone with 21,402 to Valley with 4,170 laborers. The two counties having the largest labor forces were Yellowstone and Cascade. The former has a tradition of non-union labor, and the latter's labor force is for the most part organized. Silver Bow and Deer Lodge were predominantly industrial and almost totally unionized. Missoula, Lewis and Clark, Flathead and Gallatin can be called neither strictly union or non-union. Each had strong organized labor force and at the same time much of their labor was non-union.

In summary then, as to labor: Silver Bow, Deer Lodge, and Cas-

¹⁴ Appendix 9.

¹⁵ Appendix 10.

cade were strong union counties; Missoula, Lewis and Clark, Flathead, and Gallatin, though not anti-union, were not overwhelmingly union oriented; and Yellowstone, with the largest labor force, was the least unionized.

Senator Wheeler, who had always had strong labor support in previous contests, lost every one of the first ten counties as measured by their labor force. The defeat he suffered in these labor, urban centers was to be more than enough to cost him the re-nomination. He polled 7,837 fewer votes in these counties than his opponent. The election itself was lost by only 4,906.

Only in Custer, Park, Lake and Valley, of the fifteen largest labor force counties, was Wheeler able to gain majorities. These four, which were more rural than urban and more agricultural than industrial, gave the incumbent 1,106 votes above Erickson. It is significant that only Valley of these pro-Wheeler counties did not have a livestock based economy. Senator Wheeler, in the fifteen largest labor force counties, trailed his opponent by 6,731 votes.

It has been noted that Silver Bow and Deer Lodge were Montana's most industrialized and unionized counties. This is due, of course, to the urban centers of Butte and Anaconda. It is in these counties that the best measurement of the labor vote and of the usually Democratic voter can be ascertained. Wheeler began his political career in Butte and had always received his greatest support, in both primaries and general elections, in these two counties. The election being studied was the only exception to this tradition of pro-Wheelerism.

Silver Bow, the home of the Montana union movement, and possessing the third largest labor force in the state, handed Wheeler a resounding defeat by 3,279 votes. Deer Lodge gave a majority of 1,096 to his opponent. Thus, counties which had been Wheeler's stronghold for twenty-six years in ten elections left him with a deficiency of 4,375 votes.

Wheeler lost Cascade and Fergus by lesser totals--763 and 786 respectively. The incumbent came closer to winning in Yellowstone, losing by only 417 votes. Lewis and Clark, with a mixed economy and a large number of government personnel, gave Erickson a majority of 540. Gallatin did the same by a margin of 441 votes. Hill, Missoula, and Flathead, of the top labor counties, gave smaller majorities to Erickson--173, 157, and 84 respectively.

Throughout the entire analysis the urban-rural contrast was evident. The population centers gave majorities to Erickson and the rural, agriculturally based counties, in a great percentage of cases, backed the incumbent.

CHAPTER IV

THE CANDIDATES IN PREVIOUS CAMPAIGNS

The election record of Senator Wheeler, excluding the 1946 Democratic primary, is truly amazing. In the 1940 and 1934 Senatorial elections, primary and general, he won every county in the state.¹ When he defeated Governor Joseph M. Dixon in the 1928 general election, he lost only Lewis and Clark, Broadwater and Prairie Counties in the Democratic primary.²

On the same ticket as Al Smith in 1928, Wheeler polled a 12,470 victory over Dixon. Smith lost to Hoover by 44,722 votes. Wheeler won thirty-five of Montana's fifty-six counties, and Smith won in only three.³ A vivid illustration of the personal popularity of Wheeler in Montana is evident in the 1940 general election. President Roosevelt received a plurality of 46,119 votes in his contest with Wendell Willkie. Wheeler, who had broken with the President and was stumping the land speaking for the America First Committee, was re-elected by 112,812 votes.⁴

In the 1922 Democratic primary, Wheeler won by more than a three to one ratio.⁵ He failed to carry twelve of the state's then

¹Official Election Returns.

²Waldron, op. cit., pp. 220-221.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 288.

⁵Official Election Returns.

fifty-four counties. But none of these twelve were urban centers, as defined by this study. The general election of the same year was won by Wheeler with overwhelming support from western Montana. He lost twenty-three counties, only one of which was in the First Congressional District.⁶

There is no data available as to county totals of the Democratic primary of 1920. The future Senator won the nomination by more than a two to one ratio. In the general election of the same year, Wheeler won only seven counties as he lost to Dixon by 36,238 votes.⁷ Of these seven counties which supported Wheeler at his lowest political ebb, Daniels, Sheridan, McCone, and Mineral gave him majorities in the 1946 Democratic primary. The other three (Silver Bow, Missoula, and Sanders) gave their major support to Erickson in 1946.

From 1922 until 1946 it is evident that Wheeler was never seriously challenged in Montana politics. Even in his 1928 contest with Governor Dixon when he lost twenty-one counties, Wheeler lost only Missoula and Flathead of the more populous counties. There is a striking similarity in the rural support received by Dixon in the 1928 general election and that of Wheeler's in the 1946 primary.

The power of Wheeler was weakened to the point of collapse during the years 1941 to 1946. The answer does not lie in the person of the man who defeated him in 1946. Leif Erickson was elected only

⁶Waldron, op. cit., p. 189.

⁷Ibid., p. 177.

once by Montanans--as a Supreme Court Justice. Just two years before his successful 1946 primary, Mr. Erickson was defeated by 27,237 votes for Governor. He carried only five of the fifty-six counties in this election against Governor Sam C. Ford.⁸ Two were counties in which Wheeler had never been defeated--Silver Bow and Deer Lodge. Cascade had only once, in the 1920 general election, failed to support Senator Wheeler. In the 1946 Democratic primary all three gave majorities to Erickson.

Zales N. Ecton defeated Erickson in the 1946 general election by 15,425 votes. The Democratic candidate received majorities in only fifteen counties.⁹ He won in Silver Bow, Deer Lodge, and Cascade as he had in the primaries of 1944 and 1946. But the urban counties which had enabled him to defeat Wheeler abandoned him for the Republican, Ecton. These were Yellowstone, Missoula, Lewis and Clark, Gallatin, Flathead and Fergus.

Erickson's support, excepting Silver Bow and Deer Lodge, came, in this election, from the wheat counties of northcentral Montana. It is in this area that the Farmers' Union has its largest concentration of members. Only Liberty and Phillips of the nine northcentral counties gave majorities to Ecton.

Erickson's remaining support came from Lincoln, Musselshell, Sheridan, and McCone. Against Wheeler he carried twenty-two counties, including all the urban centers. Against Ecton he lost six of those counties having large urban populations. The other county that he lost

⁸Ibid., p. 307

⁹Ibid., p. 319

was Ravalli which had supported him against Wheeler.

Two years later, in 1948, Erickson again sought the Democratic nomination for Governor. To date this has been his last campaign as a candidate, although in 1956 Arnold Olsen, Democratic nominee for governor, chose him as Chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee. Mr. Erickson ran third, in 1948, to John W. Bonner and Arthur Lamey. He carried nine counties with only Flathead of the ten most urban counties giving him a majority.

There is no basis of comparison between the candidates as to impact on Montana political history. Senator Wheeler, until 1946, had almost unchallenged support of the Montana electorate. On the other hand, Mr. Erickson twice had strong primary support but in neither instance was able to win in the general election. He was elected on a state-wide basis only once, in 1938, as Associate Justice of the Montana Supreme Court.

The political demise of Wheeler then must have been caused by factors other than his opponent. He lost to a lesser figure but to one who had the support of regular party Democrats. Perhaps the seeds of his defeat were sown equally by his actions and the very length of his career.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The 1946 elections seemed to reveal a national trend toward conservatism and away from the New and Fair Deal candidates. Montana, in 1946, elected a Conservative Republican to serve as its United States Senator. But in the Democratic primary, Montana voters abandoned Senator Wheeler for a relatively unknown young liberal. It had been thought that Wheeler's victory was certain in both the primary and general elections.

He had been in opposition to the Roosevelt administrations and was not closely associated with that of Truman. Not since 1928 had Wheeler been seriously challenged in a Montana election. Erickson was not thought to have been strong enough politically to cause Wheeler much concern. He had been soundly defeated just two years before as the Democratic nominee for Governor.

With no apparent loss of popularity in Montana, Senator Wheeler had defied Roosevelt and party regularity. But the six years between Senatorial elections is a long time. Since 1940 there had been a war, new voters, more flagrant disregard of party on Wheeler's part, as well as the alleged alliance between him and Republican Governor Sam Ford. More important than any change in the Montana electorate, though, was the change on the part of Wheeler. He made fewer trips home and met with fewer of his early day liberal friends. Perhaps the cause of

his remoteness after 1940 was due to the length of his career in the Senate or to overconfidence. The cause might have been either of these, or a combination of both. The result, however, was that many supporters of Wheeler had begun to feel that his political philosophy was no longer the same as it had been. To younger voters his remoteness kept them from knowing him; many wondered, in 1946, why Wheeler was elected again and again to serve in the Senate. This lack of rapport cost Wheeler much of his support and kept him from gaining the allegiance of newer voters. The campaign he conducted in 1946 was not designed to renew the faith of his older liberal supporters or to appeal to the younger members of the Democratic orientated youth. Rather it seemed aimed at a broad, non-partisan electorate. It was as though Wheeler felt he had found the key to political success in the manner of a statesman--by being above party politics entirely.

Wheeler had served in the Senate since 1923 with much distinction. His loss was a surprise more especially because it came in a Democratic primary at the hands of a man who was not to replace him in the Senate. An analysis of his victories in previous Democratic primaries shows that Wheeler's hold on the Montana electorate was greatly weakened by 1946 in every area of the state. However, he received slight majorities in agriculturally based counties. His failure to gain majorities in urban, labor counties was the most significant factor in his defeat.

Wheeler's loss of the 1946 Democratic primary can be attributed primarily to the loss of three counties--Silver Bow, Cascade and Deer

Lodge, in which his margin of defeat exceeded the 4,906 total by which he lost in the primary. These counties, traditionally strongholds of the Democratic Party and organized labor, had supported Wheeler strongly in past primaries. The shift from Wheeler was definitely urban, labor and Democratic in nature. In defeat, his greatest support came from counties where livestock industry was dominant. Counties in which wheat was king gave Wheeler more votes than Erickson. Wheeler, although not overwhelmingly, did carry rural, agricultural Montana. This support, however, was not sufficient to offset the sharp defection in urban, labor centers.

The inability of Erickson to win the Senate seat in the general election makes it obvious that his candidacy as such was not a major cause of Wheeler's defeat. If Erickson had won in November, the answer would be simple--the state had voted for a liberal and Wheeler's image as a liberal was badly tarnished since 1937. But Ecton's victory in November of 1946 illustrates more emphatically the irony of Wheeler's loss in the primary. By that year Wheeler's greatest appeal was to conservatives--Democratic, Republican and Independent. It was the latter group, presumably the greater share of Montana voters, who voted for Ecton over Erickson. There is much evidence that these voters would have supported Wheeler in a general election.

Factors frequently cited as the reasons Montana voters abandoned Wheeler in 1946 are: his break with President Roosevelt, his role as an isolationist, his lack of party loyalty and regularity, and that Republicans entered the Democratic primary in great numbers to vote for

Erickson in order to eliminate Wheeler. All but the last of these were instrumental in the defeat of Wheeler. However, if it had not been for other more personal actions on the part of Wheeler, these factors would not, of themselves, have been potent enough to put an end to Wheeler's tenure in the Senate.

Both his break with Roosevelt and his isolationist activities were well known by 1940 when Wheeler was elected to serve his fourth term. Though at odds with Roosevelt, he polled more votes than the President in the Treasure State. This apparent ambivalence of the Montana voter is another example of the personal nature of the state's politics. Both men were Democrats, of course, but were poles apart in foreign affairs. The vote for Wheeler was probably due to the pride Montanans felt in him as a national figure as well as sympathy with his isolationist stand.

There was little wonder that Wheeler was thought to be unbeatable in 1946. Roosevelt was gone from the scene and most signs pointed to a conservative year at the polls. There were no strong candidates in either Democratic or Republican primaries. In neither party was there a candidate from the ranks of returning veterans. It appeared certain that Senator Wheeler would have little difficulty being re-elected to serve a fifth term in the Senate.

Wheeler's disregard of party loyalty was not a new occurrence in 1946. In 1920, when he was the Democratic nominee for Governor, he told the Non-Partisan League dominated convention that he would run

under whatever banner they chose.¹ He bolted the Party in 1924 to join La Follette in the Progressive camp. Both before and after 1940 he supported Republican candidates against Democrats. While it is true that these affronts, to liberal Democrats for the most part, were significant in his defeat, they did not, of themselves, bring it about.

The theory that Republicans caused Wheeler's defeat in the Democratic Primary has been based, in the main on two things. First, in the primary 73.4 per cent of the total vote was cast in the Democratic column.² And second, Ecton won in the general election coupled with the fact that 60,488 more votes were cast than had been in the primary.³ The reasoning from these facts has been that a large number of Erickson's primary vote was Republican. These Republicans swung to Ecton in the November election to complete the plot to eliminate Wheeler.

Much credence has been given to the claim that Republicans caused Wheeler's defeat by entering the Democratic primary. This assumption will not stand close scrutiny. There is no question that Wheeler's political behavior, nationally and in his home state, made enemies for him within the Democratic Party. But these same actions endeared him to many conservatives--Republican and Independent.

¹Interview with Judge Lester Loble, April 28, 1959.

²Waldron, op. cit., p. 318.

³Official Election Returns.

There were few, if any, Montanans who thought that Wheeler might lose in 1946. Neither Leif Erickson nor Zales Ecton was the strongest candidate available at this time. But Wheeler was thought to be unbeatable; thus, the dearth of candidates in both primaries. It would seem obvious that a plan by Republicans to invade the Democratic Primary would have to be based on the assumption that Wheeler could be beaten. There is no evidence that this was thought to be very probable.

When Dan Whetstone and Ashton Jones, the top officials in Montana's Republican Party in 1946, requested officially that Republicans remain in their own primary, implicit in it was the thought that Republicans might vote Democratic to insure Wheeler's victory over Erickson. The motivation for this perhaps was to lessen Wheeler's chances; if this is so, it is obvious that Whetstone and Jones thought that by keeping Republicans in their own primary Wheeler would be hurt.

Mr. Wellington D. Rankin is of the opinion that not enough Republicans entered the Democratic primary to enable Wheeler to win. At least 90 per cent of all Republicans who "crossed over" voted for Wheeler, according to Rankin.⁴ Mr. Barclay Craighead, Democrat and Wheeler's long time associate, believes that close to 10,000 Republicans voted for Erickson, thereby causing Wheeler's defeat.⁵ Evidence from this study would seem to give more support to Rankin's contention

⁴ Interview with Wellington D. Rankin, July 13, 1959.

⁵ Interview with Barclay Craighead, July 13, 1959.

than that of Craighead's.

The state-wide turnout for the 1946 primary was 52.9 per cent.⁶ This was the largest off-year vote from 1942 through 1958, but in three counties which hurt Wheeler most (Cascade, Silver Bow, and Deer Lodge), the average turnout was 66.9 per cent.⁷ In the general election these three counties gave a total of a 7,484 margin to Erickson over Ecton.⁸ This indicates there was little or no "cross over" where Wheeler's reversal was most evidenced. In the remaining counties interest was certainly less evident if measured by the per cent of people voting. The weight of evidence points to the fact that Wheeler was beaten by Democrats in normally Democratic counties.

As for the supposition that Erickson should have won the general election because of the greater number of votes cast in the Democratic primary, Montana's political history is replete with elections disproving this assumption. As well as the primary being studied, the following examples are indicative of the role Independents play in Montana elections as well as the lack of widespread, disciplined party organizations. Montanans, obviously, vote for the individual more often than for his party or issues.

Twice Senator Wheeler won general elections following primaries in which more votes were cast in the Republican primary.⁹ Senator

⁶Official Election Returns.

⁷Montana Standard, July 18, 1946; Great Falls Tribune, July 18, 1946.

⁸Official Election Returns.

⁹Waldron, op. cit., pp. 187, 188, 217, 223.

Thomas J. Walsh had the same experience on two occasions, 1924 and 1930.¹⁰ In 1938 more than 50,000 voters participated in the Democratic primary to approximately 12,000 in the Republican. Congressman J. J. O'Connell received more than 26,000 votes as compared to less than 6,000 for Dr. Jacob Thorkelson, Republican nominee. Dr. Thorkelson, however, defeated O'Connell by more than 7,000 votes in the general election.¹¹ Republican Governor Sam C. Ford was victorious over Democrats in 1940 and 1944 in spite of the Democratic primary having more voters.¹² As recently as 1956 the same phenomenon occurred. Former Governor John W. Bonner, Arnold Olsen and Danny O'Neill totaled approximately 121,000 votes in the Democratic primary gubernatorial contest. Governor J. Hugo Aronson, unopposed, received slightly more than 50,000 in the Republican primary.¹³ Governor Aronson, however, was re-elected, defeating Olsen by 7,000 votes.¹⁴

In every instance cited, the greater number of votes was cast in the primary in which the most heated contest was held. Apparently there can be little or no assurance that a large primary turnout means success in the general election. This is another manifestation of the personal nature of Montana politics.

Any attempt to pinpoint causes of a man's defeat in an election is fraught with difficulties. This is particularly true in regard to

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 195, 199, 231, 232.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 277.

¹³ Ibid., p. 376.

¹² Ibid., p. 376.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 384.

the 1946 loss by Senator Wheeler in the Democratic primary which was decided by a relatively small number of votes. None the less a few factors seem to have been more dominant than others. It has been stated previously that Wheeler's break with Roosevelt, his isolationism and lack of party loyalty were not, of themselves, enough to cause his defeat.

In every one of Wheeler's campaigns prior to 1946 he had labor's unqualified support. More important he had never assumed anything less than the role of protector of labor. In 1946 this image was not accepted by voters in Butte, Great Falls, and Anaconda. The major share of the fault for this must be laid at the door of Wheeler. The campaign he waged was designed for a much broader electorate than normally Democratic primary voters. His success in the 1940 election had shown him to have tremendous support at the height of his opposition to Roosevelt. Significantly, he made it clear that although he opposed Roosevelt's foreign policy he was, as always, a friend of organized labor.

Senator Wheeler, perhaps more than anyone else, typifies the personal nature of Montana politics. He had won victories as an individualist; in 1946 he lost in much the same role. His campaign was based either on overconfidence or non-partisan high principle. Much of the evidence derived from this study points to the former as the more predominant motivation. Wheeler maintains that the course he pursued in the campaign was the result of his realization of the

Communist threat facing labor and the United States.¹⁵ It is Mr. Erickson's opinion that his opponent's campaign was conducted with overconfidence coupled with a complete change in philosophy.¹⁶

The very length of Wheeler's career most certainly worked to his disadvantage. Many persons who had supported him through the years were deceased by 1946. There is, of course, no way to measure the extent of this, but it appears to have been significant.¹⁷ And new generations of voters who knew Wheeler only in relation to Roosevelt, isolation and the war, had come on the scene by this time. This may also have been detrimental to Wheeler. It is likely that a good number of these younger persons voting in a Democratic primary would have been for his younger internationalist opponent. Mr. Barclay Craighead says that during the war young people had been indoctrinated in the belief that Roosevelt was great and those who opposed him were to be shunned.¹⁸ The effect of this, he stated, caused Wheeler to lose many of the young servicemen's votes.

As a result of Roosevelt's success in gaining the support of labor and farmer, Montana liberals, since the 1930's, have attempted to duplicate this in Populist fashion. This coalition began almost concurrently with Wheeler's leadership of the opposition to Roosevelt's

¹⁵ Interview with Burton K. Wheeler, June 18, 1958.

¹⁶ Interview with Leif Erickson, May 16, 1958.

¹⁷ Interview with John W. Bonner, March 8, 1959. Interview with Associate Justice Hugh Adair of the Montana Supreme Court, April 28, 1959.

¹⁸ Interview with Barclay Craighead, July 13, 1959.

Court Plan. From its inception this group had opposed Wheeler. The advent of C.I.O. and Farmers' Union leadership joining together politically was to challenge Wheeler's strength within the Democratic Party. With his overwhelming 1940 victory, Wheeler must have felt that with such tremendous Independent support he was unbeatable. His campaign in the 1946 Democratic primary indicates such confidence. From O'Connell in 1938 to Arnold Olsen in 1956, this liberal group has supported candidates, all of whom have been Democrats. A study of candidates with this support shows that their success, and thereby the coalition's greatest strength, is in the Democratic primaries. O'Connell won in the primary twice and lost each time to Republican opponents. Arnold Olsen won the Democratic nomination for Governor in 1956 but lost to the Republican incumbent. The 1946 Democratic primary contest between Wheeler and Erickson fits this pattern. The inability of the farm-labor candidates to win in general elections might well be attributed to the very nature of Montana politics with its lack of party discipline. Wheeler directed his 1946 campaign to the Independent and mostly conservative Montana voter. He seemed to be either confident of labor's support or that he could win without much of it. There is little doubt, in the light of Ecton's victory, that Wheeler's campaign would have been successful in a general election. Furthermore, if enough Republican voters had entered the Democratic primary, he might have been the winner.

Leif Erickson was the opposition against Republican Sam C. Ford in the 1944 general election as well as Wheeler in the 1946 Democratic primary. The similarities of Wheeler's campaign to that of Ford's are

striking. In each instance Erickson was accused of having Communist support. Both men made much of Erickson's lack of military service and his acceptance of money as a railroad mediator while receiving his salary as Associate Justice on Montana's Supreme Court. Wheeler, as had Ford in 1944, told Montana that O'Connell and Hillman wanted Erickson's victory so that they could subvert and control the government of the State of Montana.

Wheeler, possessor of a fine liberal labor voting record, assumed, or was put in, the position of calling a great portion of Montana labor communistic. For the first time in his career, Wheeler attacked a section of organized labor. It may have cost him the election. Whether Wheeler did this out of principle or overconfidence is difficult to ascertain; however, the result was the loss of Silver Bow, Cascade and Deer Lodge Counties.

Wheeler's call for a Senate investigation, provoked by righteousness or fear, hurt him, particularly among liberals and labor. The press coverage of the investigation reiterated Wheeler's cry of Communism in labor. The entrance of President Truman into the campaign, by Wheeler forces, proved to have been a tactical error. At this time Truman's popularity among liberals and labor was at a low ebb. His role in the railroad strike and the Farmers' Union open break with his administration¹⁹ are indicative of his low prestige among liberals in July 1946. At a crucial time, Wheeler, the non-party man,

¹⁹Great Falls Tribune, July 12, 1946.

became associated with an unpopular Democratic President. The extent of harm done is not ascertainable, but there is no doubt that it contributed to Wheeler's loss.

No man can serve the public for nearly thirty years without making enemies. The type of man and politician that Burton K. Wheeler was made this statement more applicable to him than to most men. He said, in 1958, the fact that he was "never bound by party"²⁰ was one of the aspects of his career of which he was most proud. Joseph K. Howard wrote that while Wheeler's sincerity was suspect, "few, if any, politicians have dared to tell off the voters back home as he did."²¹

Wheeler lost by only 4,906 votes with much of labor against him. The ravages of time, the enemies that his unorthodox political behavior brought him and his apparent overconfidence were able to defeat him only by a comparatively small margin. It seems certain that Wheeler could have won the 1946 primary if his approach to labor had been less virulent. But Wheeler was always the strong willed, aggressive individual. Any opposition to him was taken as a personal affront. He felt that his loss in 1946 was due to one factor--"Jewish money from New York."²² Though Wheeler was accused of becoming a conservative, even reactionary, he remained consistent to the Populist-Progressive tradition in blaming eastern bankers for his ills. In his early years he lumped together the eastern financial interests with capitalism; in

²⁰Interview with Burton K. Wheeler, June 18, 1958.

²¹Howard, op. cit., p. 230.

²²Interview with Burton K. Wheeler, June 18, 1958.

1946 they were partners in crime with Communism. The man was the same, as were his methods, but his sense of timing and knowledge of the Montana voter were not as acute as they had been. By 1946 Wheeler was more acceptable to conservatives than liberals.

The degree of Wheeler's political decline after his 1940 victory can best be shown by a comparison with his loss in 1946. In the Democratic primary of 1940, he won by 47,370 votes²³ over Harry J. Freebourn of Butte. His opponent had been Montana's Attorney General and was later to serve on the Montana Supreme Court. Wheeler's margin over Freebourn in Silver Bow, Deer Lodge and Cascade Counties was 8,564 votes.²⁴ This was despite Freebourn's popularity in Butte and Anaconda. In 1946 Wheeler lost these three counties by 5,136 votes.²⁵ From a victory of 47,370 votes to a loss of 4,906 votes can certainly be classified as a voter's political revolution. But significantly, Wheeler was still able to carry in 1946 the livestock, wheat, and mainly agricultural counties. The margin by which he lost came in counties with relatively large union labor forces.

Senator Wheeler's defeat was due to several important reasons, all of which were somewhat personal in nature. They were: the length of his Senatorial career; his individualism manifest by his almost total disregard for party loyalty; his remoteness, especially from the people who had initially formed the foundation upon which Wheeler rode

²³Official Election Returns.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

to political success; his enemies who were the result of the three factors listed above; and finally, the campaign he waged in the 1946 Democratic primary. With all these against him, Wheeler had been able to carry the agricultural counties of Montana. His complete loss of the labor counties was due, in great degree, to his charge that C.I.O. labor was communistic and thereby a threat to America. This description of labor made it relatively easy for his opposition to claim that Wheeler was no longer a friend of organized labor.²⁶ Wheeler, in a close election, needed desperately the support of Montana labor. In 1946 he appealed to a broader electorate than usually found in a Democratic primary. In doing this he failed to attract enough conservatives and alienated much of labor. This appears to have been the dominant cause of his defeat.

²⁶ Interview with James J. Umber, President of Montana A.F. of L.-C.I.O., July 13, 1959.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1

Democratic Primary 1946

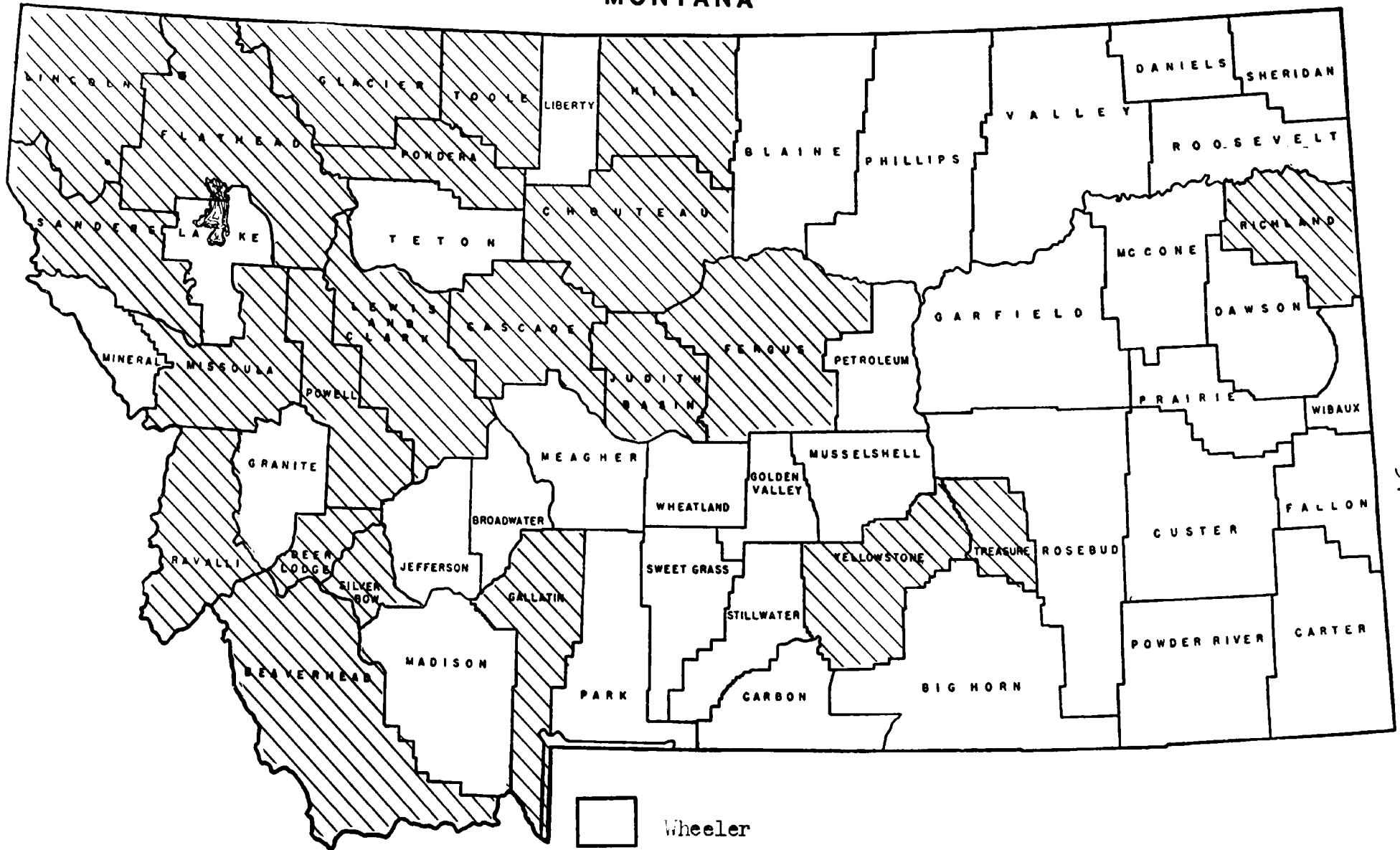
United States Senator

<u>County</u>	<u>Wheeler</u>	<u>Erickson</u>	<u>Margin</u>
Beaverhead	138	201	63
Big Horn	445	258	187
Blaine	590	451	139
Broadwater	210	191	19
Carbon	768	723	45
Carter	273	246	27
Cascade	4,417	5,180	763
Chouteau	835	1,052	217
Custer	885	473	412
Daniels	485	280	205
Dawson	654	258	396
Deer Lodge	1,537	2,631	1,094
Fallon	245	164	81
Fergus	906	1,692	786
Flathead	1,411	1,495	84
Gallatin	935	1,376	441
Garfield	249	201	48
Glacier	728	820	92
Golden Valley	169	62	107

<u>County</u>	<u>Wheeler</u>	<u>Erickson</u>	<u>Margin</u>
Granite	363	231	132
Hill	978	1,151	173
Jefferson	451	432	19
Judith Basin	407	553	146
Lake	987	857	130
Lewis and Clark	2,118	2,658	540
Liberty	274	232	42
Lincoln	689	793	104
Madison	386	309	77
McCone	340	338	2
Meagher	319	228	91
Mineral	258	200	58
Missoula	2,229	2,386	157
Musselshell	875	563	312
Park	860	575	285
Petroleum	78	73	5
Phillips	347	295	52
Pondera	424	653	229
Powder River	84	69	15
Powell	540	683	143
Prairie	226	152	74
Ravalli	543	961	418
Richland	674	681	7
Roosevelt	878	676	202

<u>County</u>	<u>Wheeler</u>	<u>Erickson</u>	<u>Margin</u>
Rosebud	416	200	216
Sanders	573	622	49
Sheridan	912	533	379
Silver Bow	6,088	9,367	3,279
Stillwater	249	234	15
Sweet Grass	124	111	13
Teton	559	548	11
Toole	733	875	142
Treasure	54	72	18
Valley	1,313	837	476
Wheatland	301	179	122
Wibaux	203	142	61
Yellowstone	1,779	2,196	417
	<u>44,513</u>	<u>49,419</u>	

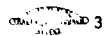
MONTANA



91

No. 1050 — County Outline Map

STATE PUBLISHING COMPANY
Helena



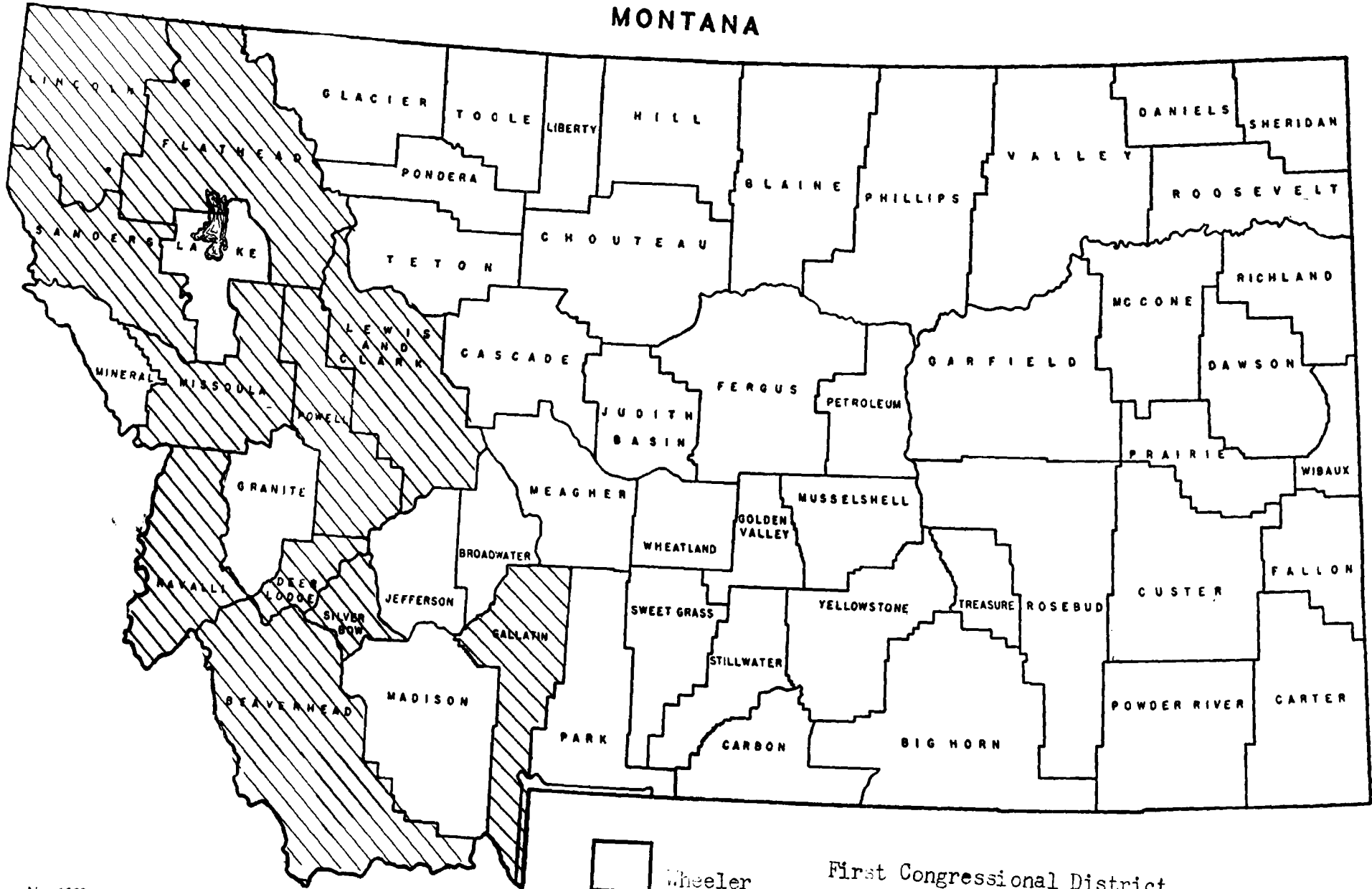
AZ Pads — R - YY

-  Wheeler
-  Erickson

Appendix 2

Official Election
Results



MONTANA



92

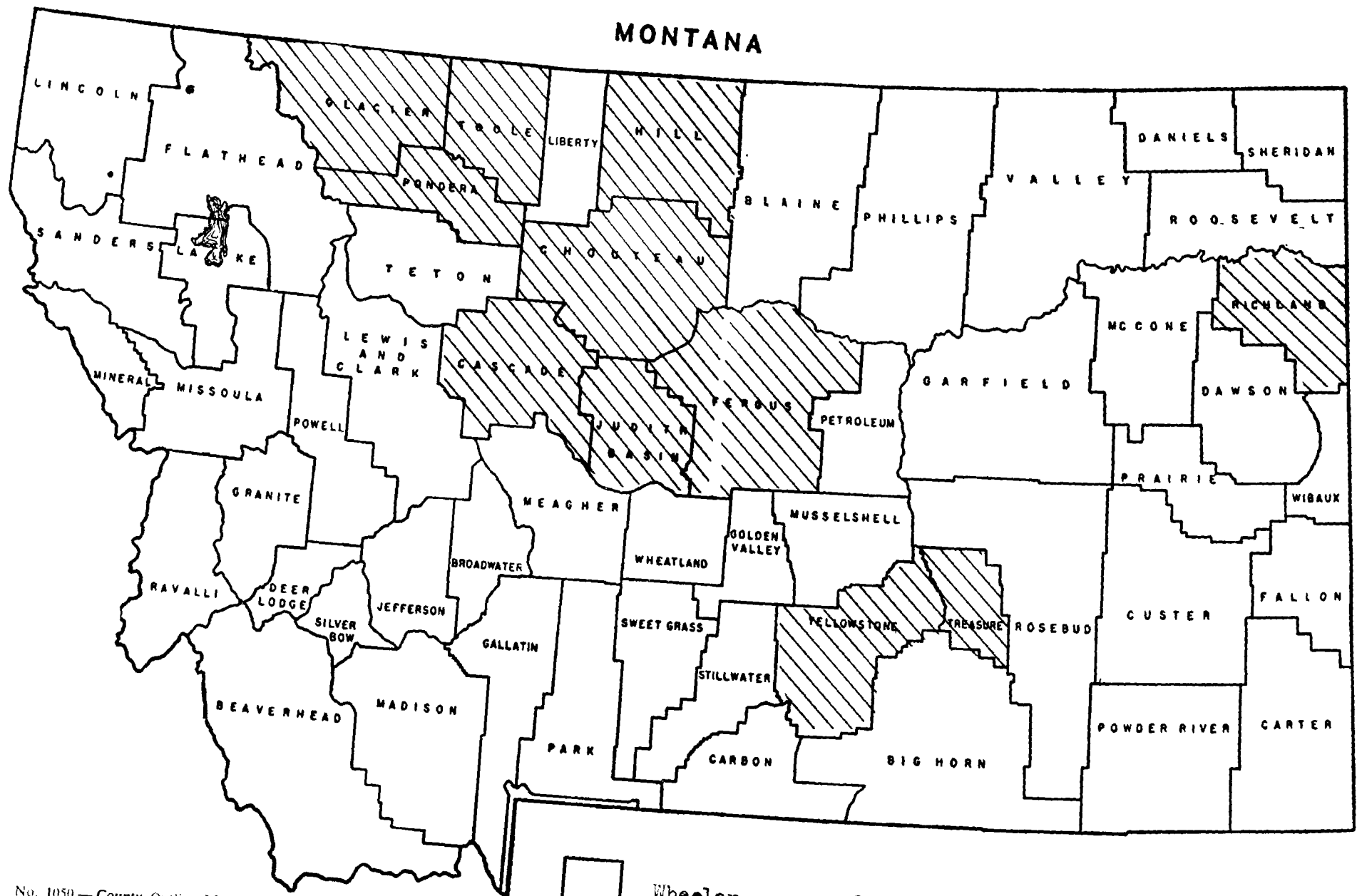
No. 1050 — County Outline Map
STATE PUBLISHING COMPANY
Helena

3 AZ Pads — R-YY

 Wheeler
 Erickson
First Congressional District

Appendix 3

Official _____ Returns



93

No. 1050 — County Outline Map
 STATE PUBLISHING COMPANY
 Helena

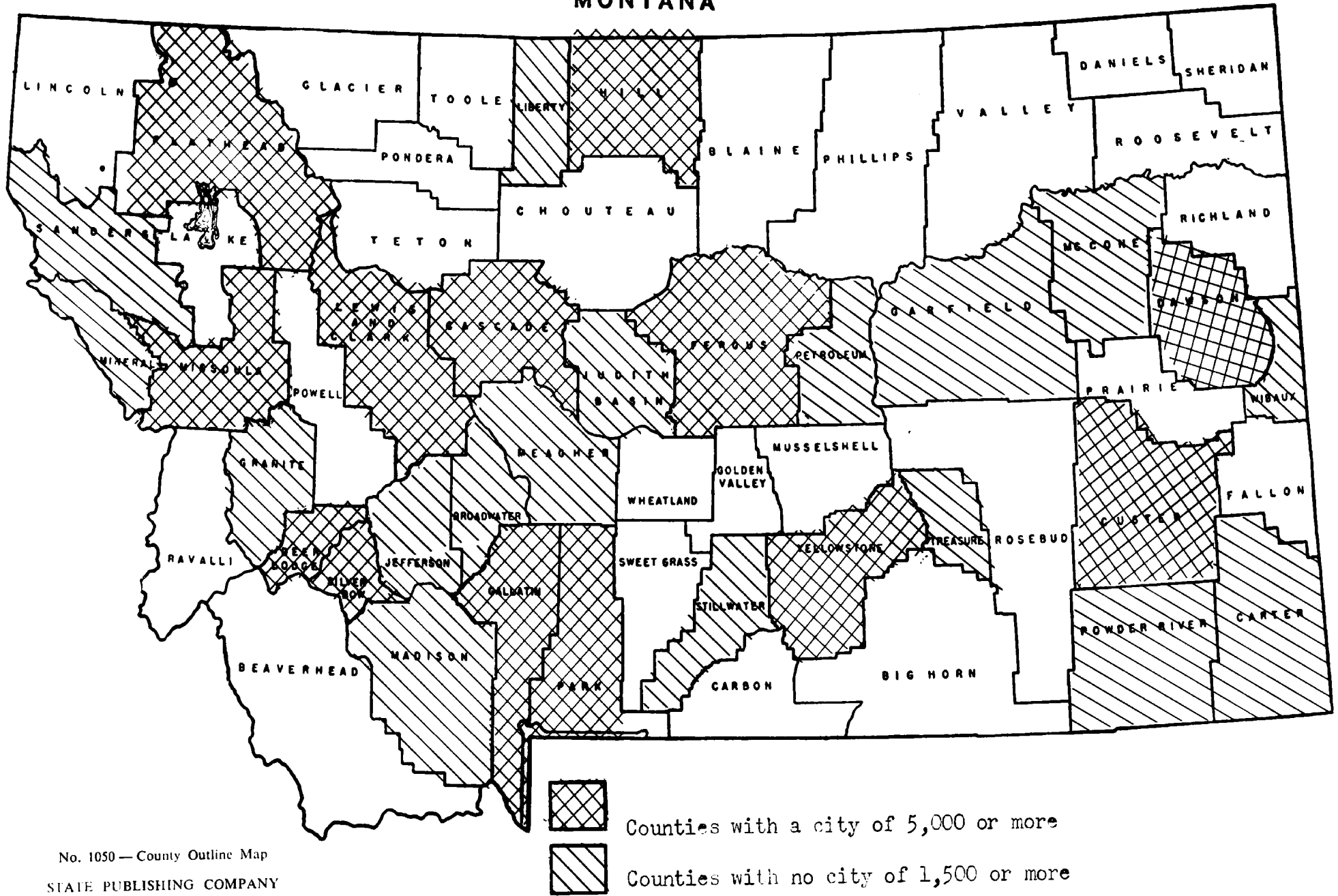
AZ Pads — R - YY

Wheeler
 Erickson
 Second Congressional District

Appendix 4

Official Election Returns

MONTANA



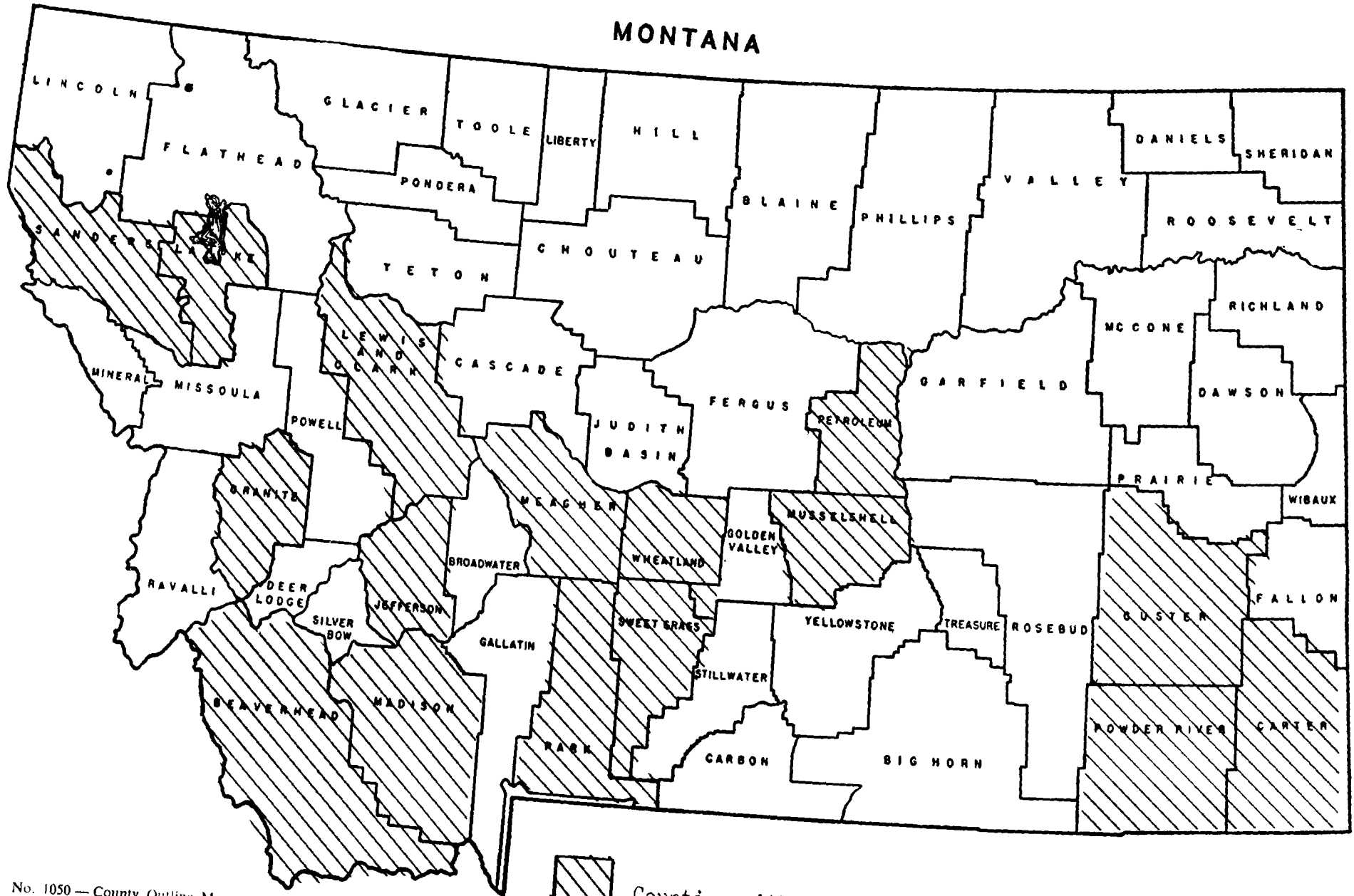
No. 1050 — County Outline Map

STATE PUBLISHING COMPANY
Helena



AZ Pads — R-YY

MONTANA



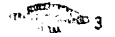
Counties with 70% or more in livestock

Appendix 7

No. 1050 — County Outline Map

STATE PUBLISHING COMPANY

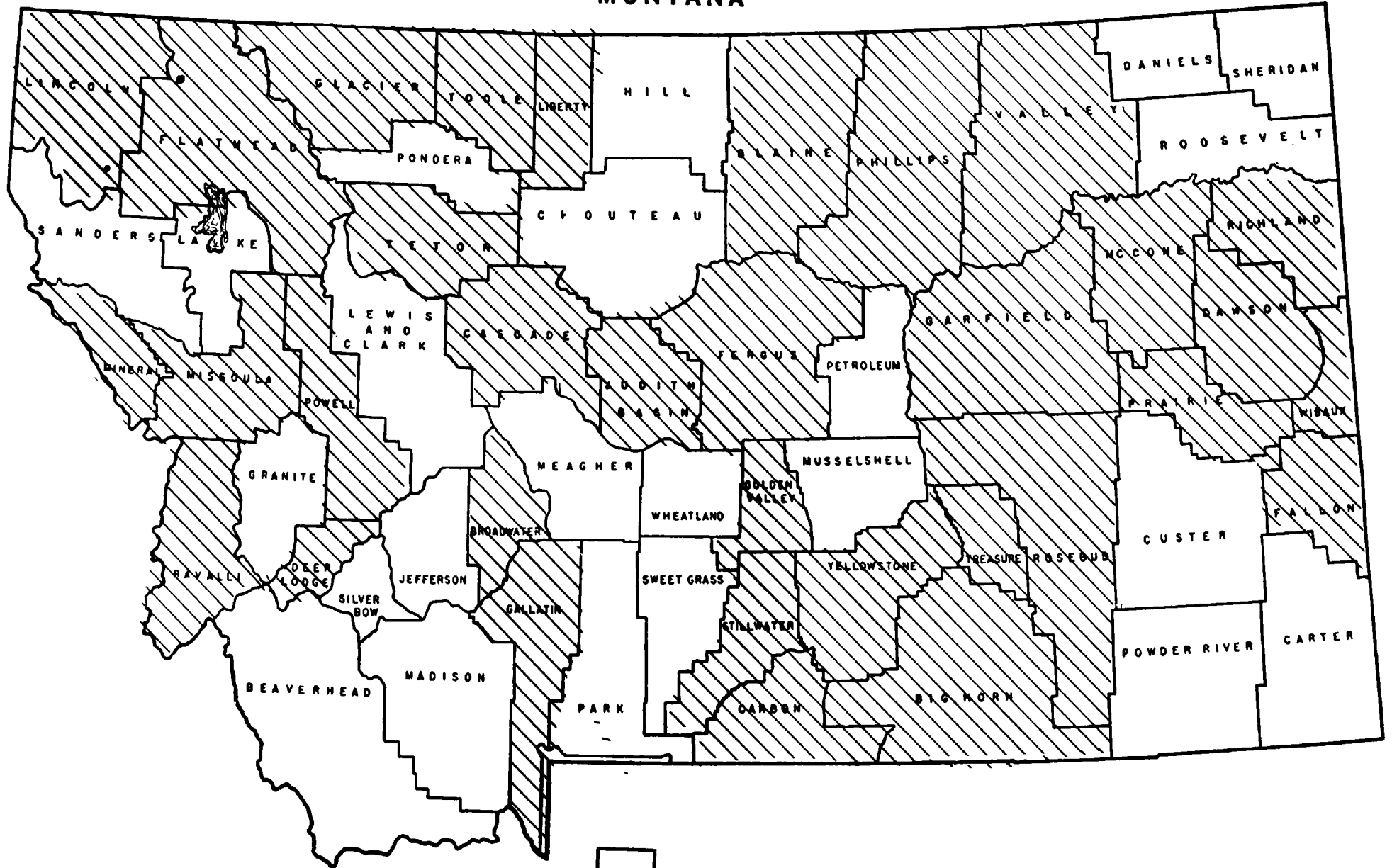
Helena



AZ Pads — R - Y Y

1950 Census - data for 1944

MONTANA



No. 1050 — County Outline Map

STATE PUBLISHING COMPANY
Helena



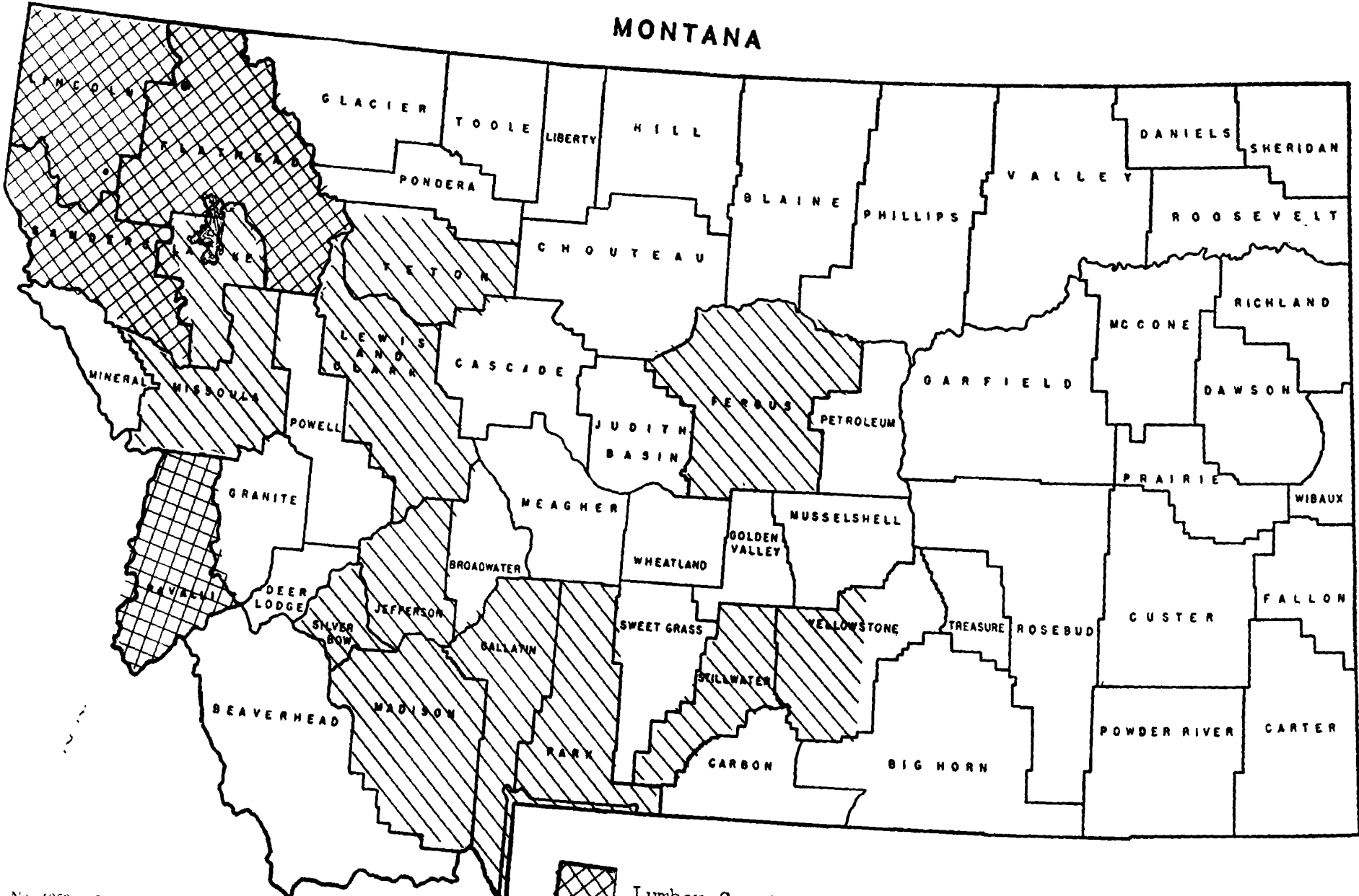
AZ. Pads — R-YY





Counties evenly divided between livestock and crops

1950 Census-data for 1944

MONTANA




 Lumber Counties

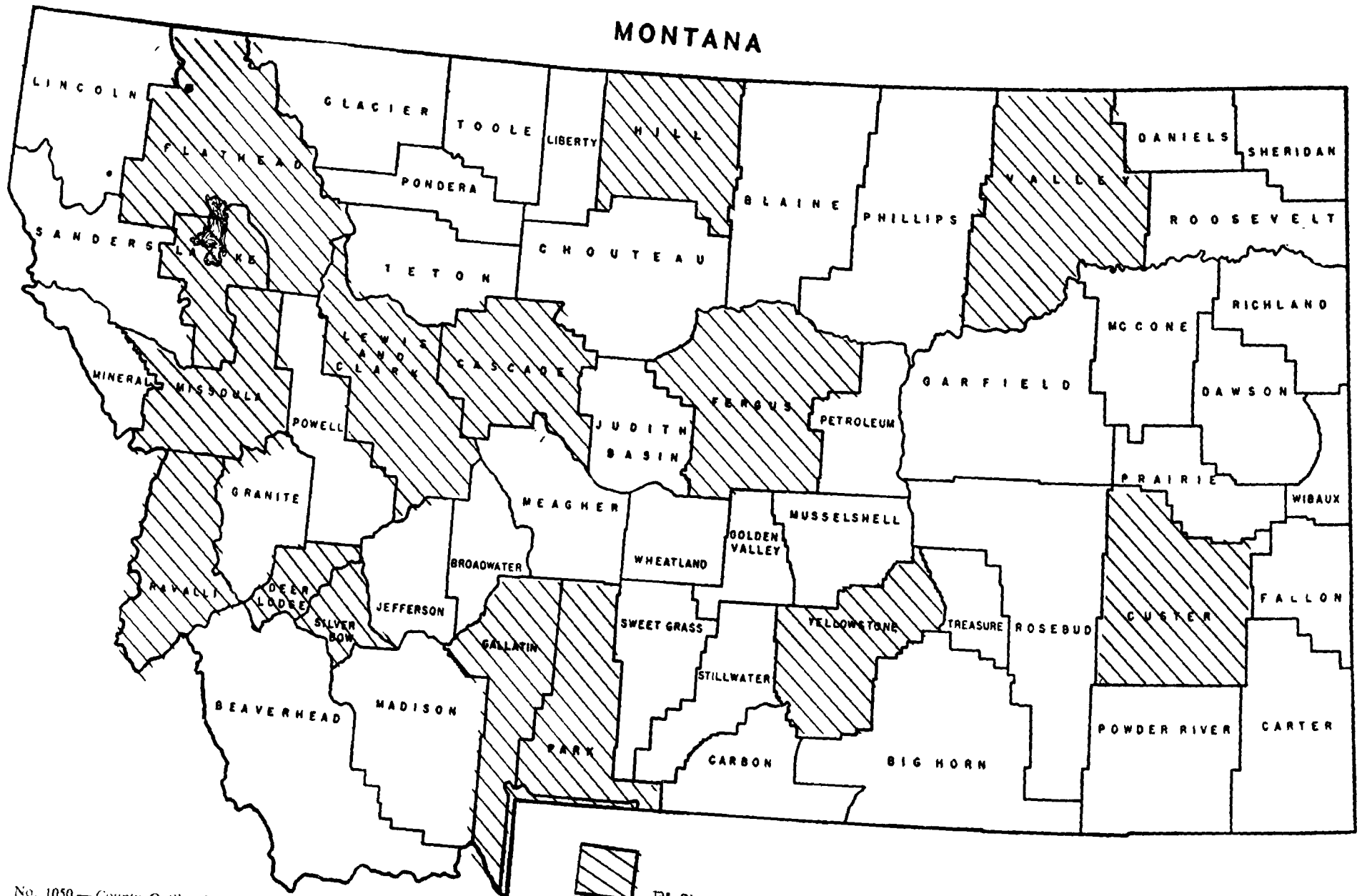
 Dairy Counties (Kalispell, Sanders and Ravalli are also Dairy Counties)


Appendix 9

1958 Montana Almanac-data for 1954

No 1050 — County Outline Map
STATE PUBLISHING COMPANY
Helena

 3 AZ Pads — R-YY



 Fifteen counties with the largest labor forces
 appendix 10

No. 1050 — County Outline Map
 STATE PUBLISHING COMPANY
 Helena
 AZ Pads — R - YY

1958 Montana Almanac—data for 1950

APPENDIX 11

Voting in Primary Elections in Montana

1940 - 1958

<u>Year</u>	<u>Democratic</u>	<u>Republican</u>	<u>Progressive</u>
1940	103,716 (70.8%)	42,728 (29.2%)	
1942	76,535 (64.6%)	41,943 (35.4%)	
1944	50,309 (58.5%)	35,237 (41.2%)	
1946	93,932 (73.4%)	33,957 (26.6%)	
1948	76,762 (57.5%)	56,980 (42.5%)	
1950	79,641 (62.6%)	47,923 (37.4%)	494 (.4%)
1952	74,239 (50.7%)	71,629 (49.0%)	384 (.3%)
1954	75,798 (55.5%)	60,668 (44.5%)	
1956	86,168 (63.3%)	49,913 (36.7%)	
1958	105,978 (72.9%)	39,484 (27.1%)	

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Vote (100%)</u>	<u>Primary Registration</u>	<u>% Voting</u>
1940	146,444	253,138	57.9
1942	118,478	258,749	45.8
1944	85,546	203,749	42.0
1946	127,889	241,550	52.9
1948	133,742	236,236	56.6
1950	128,058	250,374	51.1
1952	146,252	274,929	53.2
1954	136,466	283,651	48.1
1956	136,081	273,236	49.8
1958	145,462	289,851	50.2

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