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William C. Pratt

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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RETHINKING THE FARM REVOLT OF THE 1930s

WILLIAM C. PRATT

The northern Plains witnessed the last great farm revolt in its history during the 1930s, when a flood of protest spilled across the region, fed by the springs of hard times and earlier insurgencies. The countryside, for one last moment, forced itself upon the rest of the country and demanded attention for its plight. After a period of high visibility, these efforts receded in the wake of New Deal programs that seemingly undercut the rural revolt. Many of the protesters arrived at an accommodation with the new regime, accepting “half-a-loaf now” in terms of wheat allotment checks and refinanced mortgages instead of “pie-in-the-sky” dreams of “cost-of-production” and the “cooperative commonwealth.” Some, of

course, continued to resist the sirens of expediency and accommodation, at least a bit longer.¹ But most observers agreed that Depression era insurgency peaked in 1933 and had pretty much wound down by the 1936 election.

This article examines several aspects of the farm revolt that need further elaboration. What I have attempted here is not a new interpretation but a new way of exploring the topic. It is based upon pursuing hints in a range of sources, and at places I suggest a new departure for the study of rural insurgencies in this region. Some of my assertions and generalizations are based upon explorations at the county level in northwestern North Dakota and northeastern South Dakota, two sections with extended histories of agrarian activism. While most of the discussion is limited to the northern Plains, a number of the points have applicability to the study of the 1930s farm revolt elsewhere.

This movement was not monolithic, and an examination of its efforts in individual locales frequently shows important divergences. Farm protest was not simply struck from one mold but was shaped by local history and custom, and by local personalities. All too

Professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, William C. Pratt has recently published articles in North Dakota History, South Dakota History, and Annals of Iowa. He was senior historian for the 1985 NETV documentary Plowing up a Storm: The History of Midwestern Farm Activism.

often historians seem to rush to a judgment that obscures such differences and, as a result, obstructs our understanding of this rural insurgency both at the regional level and at the grass roots. To counter this tendency requires a close look at the local history of farm revolt, utilizing weekly newspapers, interviews with participants or their kin, and other tools sometimes relegated in historians' minds to antiquarians and geneologists. A walk in a graveyard, for instance, may turn up a clue unavailable elsewhere.

Such research leads the historian to reformers who had links with earlier radical causes such as the Socialist Party (SP) and the Nonpartisan League (NPL), the most important twentieth-century agrarian political movement in the upper Midwest. At the same time, many participants had ties to more conservative efforts, including taxpayers' groups and the Townsend movement, which sought old age pensions for the elderly. The study of this and many other topics requires an appreciation of complexity and nuance. What happened in one locale was not always reenacted in others, and insurgents did not always resemble or behave like their counterparts elsewhere. The following discussion demonstrates that there were important local variations in the farm revolt of the 1930s and argues that an appreciation of such differences is crucial for an understanding of the movement as a whole.

THE FARMERS HOLIDAY AND THE UNITED FARMERS LEAGUE

Many historians assume that the story of 1930s agrarianism is the story of the Farmers Holiday, which called for farm strikes, picketed roads leading to market centers, and attempted to prevent foreclosure sales. In reality, however, it includes the efforts of other groups, particularly the Communist-led United Farmers League (UFL). The Holiday did not appear in the Dakotas until the late summer of 1932, but the UFL had a presence in eastern Montana and western North Dako-

ta before then. UFL speakers, including "Mother" Ella Reeve Bloor, appeared in many communities in the northwest counties of North Dakota, and UFL locals were formed in several towns.²

By the time the Holiday started up in the Dakotas, a vocal minority of UFL adherents was already in place. In some locales, its prior agitation prepared the way for the more acceptable Holiday.³ On the other hand, sometimes the UFL was not established until after the 1932 farm strike broke out. Whatever the particular case, however, the UFL was sometimes an ally and sometimes a rival to the Holiday. The farm revolt peaked on the northern Plains in 1933 and 1934, and the UFL dissolved in 1935, urging its members to join the Holiday association. This step was in accord with the popular front strategy embraced by the Communist Party (CP) at the time. By the end of 1937, the Holiday itself closed up shop, merging into the Farmers Union.⁴ In North Dakota, however, a separate Holiday organization persisted at least through 1938.⁵ Unquestionably, there was a much lower level of activity from 1935 on, but some county units continued to meet. As late as July of 1938, a small number of Holiday members met in Bowbells, North Dakota, to elect new officers for the Burke County organization.⁶

It is generally recognized that the Holiday movement was a Farmers Union-sponsored effort. One South Dakota activist recently referred to it as "the army and the navy of the Farmers Union."⁷ Milo Reno, the titular head of the Holiday, had been the real leader of the Iowa Farmers Union since the early 1920s, and national FU president John Simpson was a strong backer of the cause until his death in 1934. In the Dakotas and to some extent in Nebraska, the Holiday emerged with the blessing of the state union. Yet the dynamic element of the Nebraska Holiday was outside the official FU orbit and even hostile to the state Holiday organization.⁸ And, in numerous places, the local Holiday developed its own leadership or assumed a somewhat independent stance in relation to the state Holiday

leadership. For example, in Brown County, South Dakota, John Sumption became president of the county Holiday. He was a member of the UFL and a Communist.⁴

Many participants in the 1930s insurgency were veterans of agrarian movements other than the FU. Centers of farm protest in the Depression era, particularly northwestern North Dakota and perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent northeastern South Dakota, often had an earlier radical past. Williams County, North Dakota, elected Socialist sheriffs on three separate occasions and one Socialist county commissioner prior to U.S. entry into World War I, while Burke County had been carried by the SP presidential candidate Eugene Debs in 1912.⁵ Roberts County, situated in the extreme northeastern corner of South Dakota, had at one time been that state's strongest NPL county and was in the 1930s one of the region's most militant areas. There, after the League and its Farmer-Labor Party successor faded, the insurgent nucleus ran an independent ticket behind the presidential candidacy of William H. "Coin" Harvey in the 1932 election.⁶ Perhaps the most unusual antecedent to the Depression era farm revolt in this region was found in the Wilmot area of the same county. There, according to one report, former members of the Ku Klux Klan (organized in the 1920s) joined the CP in the 1930s. One native of northeast South Dakota recently quipped: "Farmers in Roberts County will try anything once or twice."⁷ The linkage of the farm revolt of the 1930s to this region's extended radical past is apparent in terms of both geography and personal biography.

Obvious continuities with earlier insurgencies, not to mention similarities in rhetoric and imagery, however, should not lead us to conclude that the 1930s revolt was simply "twentieth century Populism" or some other similar characterization. The Holiday (as well as the UFL) was more a direct action movement than any other agrarian uprising on the northern Plains. Unlike earlier economic movements, the Holiday did not promote cooperatives or other enterprises. And, unlike



FIG. 1. *Just Another Farm Fake*. Cartoon from *Farmers' National Weekly*, 30 January 1933.

earlier agrarian political movements, it did not attempt to become a vehicle to gain public office. While some of its participants did benefit politically through their involvement, the Holiday itself did not become a partisan political machine. No other farm movement in the region's history proved to be as decentralized and subject to local direction. National and state leaders might recommend a course of action, but county units were virtually autonomous and decided themselves what should be done in given situations.⁸

In their substantial investigations of farm revolt, scholars have paid little attention to the identity of its participants. The most detailed account to date is Rodney D. Karr's profile of thirty-five Plymouth County, Iowa, activists who had been arrested in the famous LeMars episode, in which a mob threatened to lynch a county judge. Karr found, in contrast to other studies and impressions, that the participants tended to be in their mid-thirties and did not own their own farms. Rather, they worked on

their parents' farms, and feared (so Karr speculates) that their inheritance was at stake.¹⁴

In many locales, though the names of leaders are available, the numbers are insufficient to construct a similar sample. To be sure, there were other episodes where a sizable group was named. In Wells County, North Dakota, forty-five were charged with illegally interfering with a sale.¹⁵ The largest single number I have found, however, is in Roberts County, South Dakota, where the state brought an injunction against ninety-two individuals. While this list is somewhat misleading, including non-participants and even some opponents of the insurgents, it offers a potentially useful base for a quantitative study. Seventy-two defendants gave affidavits, and fifteen of them later were brought to trial. Here I have been struck with the number of names that were those of early settlers of the area. Most of Roberts County was not opened to white settlement until the 1890s, and key figures in the UFL in this county were among the first settlers or, in some cases, sons of first settlers residing with or near their parents.¹⁶

WOMEN IN THE FARM REVOLT

The involvement of women in the Depression era farm revolt is a much neglected topic. In fact, a survey of the existing published scholarship might suggest that historians had never considered the subject. Aside from the exploits of Mother Bloor, the Communist matriarch, there is almost no mention of women's participating in the rural uprising of the 1930s.¹⁷ Yet two strong backers of the insurgency were women newspaper publishers. They were Alice Lorraine Daly, who operated the Aberdeen-based *Dakota Free Press*, and Marie Weekes, who published the *Norfolk [Nebraska] Press*. Both of them had enlisted in the farmer's cause at the time of the Nonpartisan League. In 1920, Weekes was a NPL Congressional candidate. Two years later Daly became the first woman in the region to run for governor. She was a long-time associate

and companion of Tom Ayres, and together they were the mainstays of the NPL and Farmer-Labor party in South Dakota. With his death in 1932, she took over the paper and backed efforts to push the insurgency in a left-wing direction.¹⁸ Weekes, on the other hand, was more conservative. Although she ran for Congress as a NPL candidate in 1920 and later provided broad support for the Holiday, there are hints that she was a sympathizer of Father Coughlin, the fiery "radio priest" who acquired an unsavory reputation as an anti-Semitic demagogue.¹⁹

Left-wing farm papers such as the *Producers News* and the *Farmers National Weekly* did devote some attention to the involvement of women, many of whom were active in selling subscriptions to the movement press. Some wrote for it as well. One of the most active women in the northern Plains was Effie Kjorstad of Williams County, North Dakota. The daughter of Norwegian immigrants, she was raised in a radical household. Her father had passed through the Socialist and NPL movements and had been the Communist candidate for sheriff in 1932. She herself ran for Congress in 1934 and state senate in 1936. A very energetic individual, she sold large numbers of subscriptions to the left-wing farm press and was a frequent speaker at protest meetings in the county. She was elected secretary-treasurer of the county Holiday organization at least twice and often was a delegate to Holiday, Farmers Union, and anti-war conventions. In neighboring Mountrail County, women members of the left-wing Husa clan also were quite active.²⁰

Most women participants in the farm struggles of the 1930s, of course, like their male counterparts, were anonymous rank-and-filers. They showed up for "penny auctions" and "Sears-Roebuck sales," fattening the crowd and adding to the volume of the protest.²¹ One male observer recently noted that women often were more vocal than men at these sales. While they were not as inclined to direct action, some of them were quite willing to stand up to the sheriff and curse him for his



FIG. 2. *Farmers Holiday penny auction at the farm of Mrs. Irene Von Bonn, near Elgin, Nebraska, 1932. This was apparently the first such action held in Nebraska.* Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society.

role.²² Students of women's involvement in farm movements on the northern Plains must actively look for references to women and ask questions about them. A substantial amount of information probably is out there; we simply have not hunted for it.

BUSINESS MEN AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

At the time of the 1932 farm strike, it was not uncommon for local newspapers and business men to enlist as backers of the movement. Holiday leaders in the Dakotas sought business support, and numerous merchants came forward. In Ward and Williams Counties, North Dakota, for example, business men ran ads endorsing the strike.²³ The left-wing UFL attracted business support as well. In Mountrail County, the movement was spearheaded by the Husa clan, who ran the community store in the hamlet of Belden.²⁴ While it was unusual for shop-keepers to assume such a leadership role, both the *Producers News* and the *Farmers National Weekly* featured advertisements paid for by a number of businesses.

The attitude of local authorities also was important. The popular image is that of embattled farmers facing armed sheriffs, and there are numerous such confrontations that are documented. On the other hand, some local law enforcement officials acted in collusion with Holiday activists and made themselves "unavailable" in crucial situations. In Adams County, North Dakota, the sheriff reportedly arranged for the protesters to grab the papers out of his hand, thus stopping the proceedings. Harry Lux of the Nebraska Holiday tells of a \$50 contribution made to him by a sheriff and of the report about another in Colorado that he was going hunting at the time of a proposed farmers' action.²⁵ And, we should note that local authorities were sometimes thwarted by their inability to line up a sufficient number of deputies. One of the region's most explosive episodes occurred at Milbank, South Dakota, in the summer of 1933. There, a forced sale of a farmer's equipment and livestock was attempted at the county fairgrounds. A large number of Holiday and UFL activists from South Dakota and Minnesota showed up. When protesters at-

tempted to prevent a deputy sheriff from bidding, he pointed his gun at someone, and in the melee that followed, the gun was fired and struck the victim in the face with a tear gas shell. Upon seeing one of its number shot (and perhaps believing him killed), the crowd disarmed the deputies and then proceeded to conduct a "Sears-Roebuck sale." The state of South Dakota eventually brought an injunction against the United Farmers League and the Unemployed Council, and some ninety individuals, and prosecuted fifteen of them for participation in this episode and others. The case was brought in Roberts County, and all defendants were from there as well. After a dramatic trial in Sisseton, they were acquitted by the local jury.²⁶

In some respects, Herbert Gutman's analysis of labor disputes in small nineteenth-century communities seems applicable here.²⁷ When outside financial interests sought to foreclose or evict a neighbor, much of the community interceded. We also have many examples where that did not occur, and, over time, a conservative backlash developed, particularly against the UFL. American Legionnaires adopted vigilante tactics in Britton, South Dakota, in the summer of 1934, and the sheriff reportedly was a leader of a mob which beat several men, including a disabled World War I veteran. Neither local nor state authorities intervened, and no arrests were made.²⁸

THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITIES

The rural upheaval of the 1930s is first and foremost the story of a grass-roots movement. Accordingly, the best vantage point from which to study this episode is at the individual community level. It is, of course, helpful to examine the papers of key national and regional figures and to survey the daily and farm press. On the other hand, I suggest that it is also important to explore the particular settings in which this episode occurred. Each community that took part in the farm revolt of the 1930s has its own distinct history. The story of this insurgency is different in Roberts

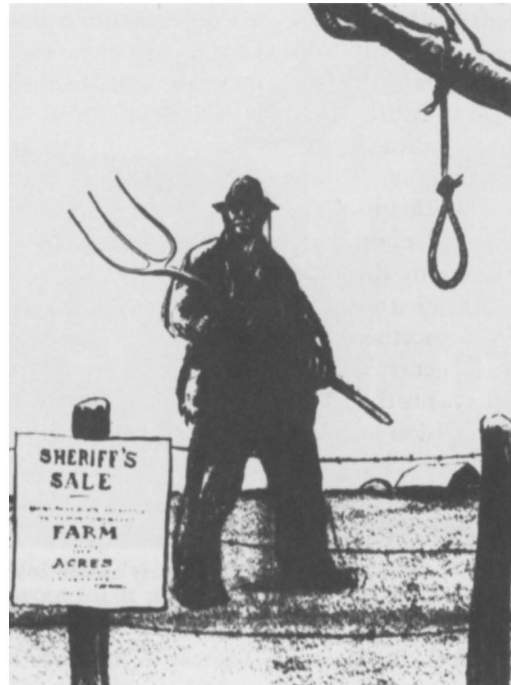


FIG. 3. *Anybody Want to Bid?* Cartoon from *Farm Holiday News*, 23 June 1923.

County, South Dakota, from that of Williams County, North Dakota. But then it is also different in Williams County from that of neighboring Mountrail County. And, to make the task even more complicated, the story in Bossko Township may be significantly different from that in Springdale, even though they both are in Roberts County. Such differences may be of real importance, yet existing published accounts usually do not consider them.

What is required, I suggest, is a thorough historical exploration of individual communities in which this revolt took place. My own preference involves an examination of the area's political and cultural history, before, during, and after the insurgency. That the UFL was apparently stronger in Roberts County than the Holiday may be explained by earlier historical developments. This same county also had three or four Communist Party locals into the 1940s, suggesting that it was very different from anywhere else in South

Dakota.²⁹ Is that difference explained primarily by events prior to the Depression or by more recent ones? The farm revolt of the 1930s, like earlier rural movements, consisted of numerous local efforts. Here, neighbors often organized and mobilized neighbors, people with whom they had had a background of association over a period of time. With outside help on occasion, these men and women worked with others whom they already knew or knew about. Together they protected what they had and perhaps enhanced it as well. Different approaches and appeals worked in different places, and the only way to learn about such matters is through a close examination of diverse and separate communities. Such local studies may force us to qualify long-accepted generalizations such as John Shover's assumption that the farm revolt of the 1930s was more prevalent in corn-hog sections and John Miller's conclusion that the Holiday in South Dakota was more conservative than in neighboring states.³⁰

PROTEST AND ANTI-SEMITISM

In important respects, the 1930s era insurgency is more akin to contemporary farm protest than to any earlier effort. That being the case, it may be useful to examine the seamier side of Depression farm revolt. In the 1950s some social scientists turned their attention to "exposing" the crankiness of Populism. This discussion sometimes touched upon twentieth century midwestern figures, including William Lemke, the North Dakota Congressman who ran for president in 1936 on Father Coughlin's Union Party ticket. Few dispute Coughlin's anti-Semitic credentials, and Lemke's reputation never has recovered from this episode. Still, we should note that Lemke's biographer, while treating Lemke's shortcomings, makes a good case that the North Dakota Congressman was not anti-Semitic.³¹ Other evidence demonstrates that many Lemke backers in 1936 were not Coughlinites but rather reformers who were alienated from Roosevelt and his "brain-trusters" and who were deter-

mined to continue their fight for "cost-of-production," which they were convinced was a better basis for a farm program.³² It also should be pointed out that not all support for Coughlin can properly be characterized as anti-Semitic. Initially, the "radio priest" backed FDR and only over a period of time did his public positions become more extreme. In 1933 and 1934, his anti-banker rhetoric was not that different from traditional farm insurgents and normally was not openly anti-Semitic.³³

All this said, however, there was anti-Semitism in the countryside, and it spilled over into the protest of the 1930s. Sometimes it was obvious and explicit. Perhaps the single most dramatic example occurred at the Nebraska state capitol in February of 1933. There, approximately 3000 to 4000 demonstrators gathered to pressure the legislature for relief. The group photograph on the steps of the building shows a placard that reads:

THE JEW SYSTEM OF BANKING YEARS OF APPARENT PROSPERITY

It is illustrated with a large rattlesnake (Figs. 4 and 5).³⁴

How we interpret this episode is extremely important. If we see the gathering as a group of anti-Semites, that certainly will color our view of the Depression era insurgency. Within the Nebraska Holiday movement, there was an ongoing struggle between the Madison County group, which was close to the Communist Party and had a following in other parts of the state, and a group that was close to Milo Reno and the state Farmers Union.³⁵ The Madison County group organized the capitol demonstration, but anybody could attend and no one took roll. That Coughlinites or other Jew baiters were in the crowd that day does not tell us very much, but the anti-Semites who did show up have left an indelible mark on the historical record. Anti-Semitism surfaced elsewhere in Nebraska as well. Harry Lux recalled a man in northeast Nebraska who "claimed he was an attorney yes and he was the fella that

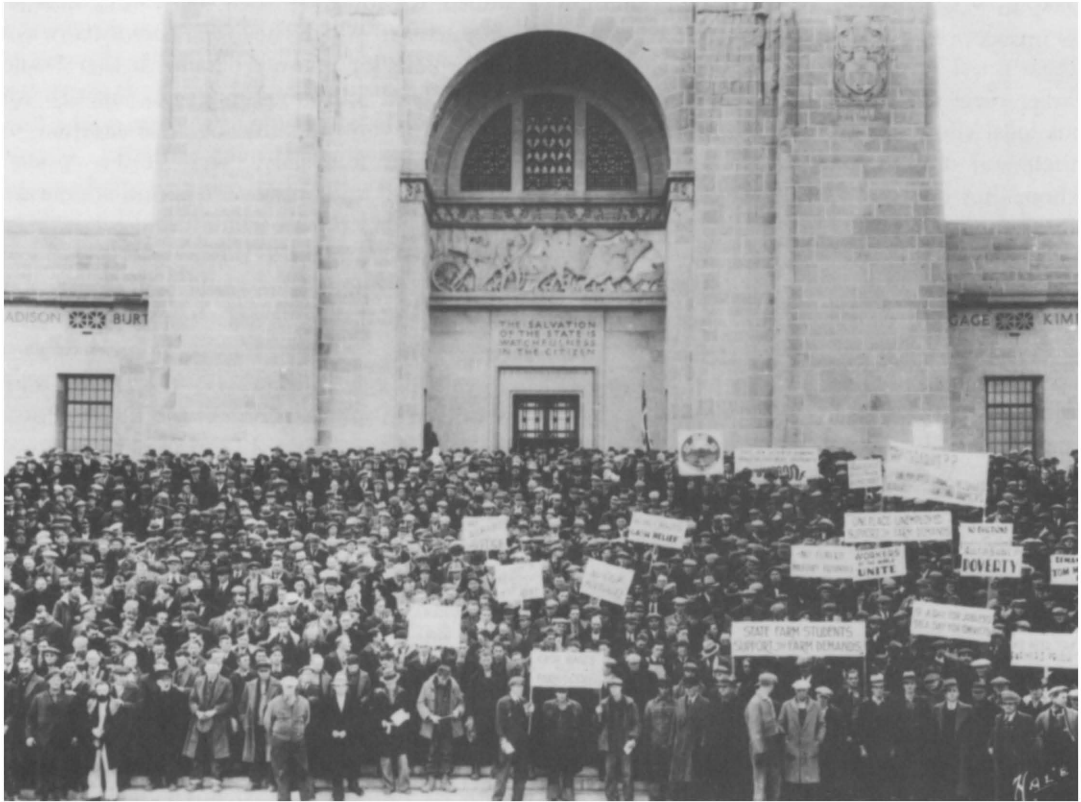


FIG. 4. *Demonstration on the capitol steps, Lincoln, Nebraska. This photograph is a cropped version of one that originally appeared in the Lincoln State Journal, 18 February 1933. Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society.*

brought that. . . Anti-Jewish leaflet with a picture of a rattlesnake on it.” Another Nebraska Holiday supporter railed at “Communist Jews” and praised Hitler’s persecution of them.³⁶ The depth of anti-Semitism in the 1930s farm revolt warrants further research, particularly in light of contemporary reports of anti-Jewish sentiment in rural areas of the northern Plains.

THE COMING OF THE NEW DEAL

It has become a cliché to say that New Deal programs ultimately destroyed the appeal of the 1930s era farm insurgency. In November of



FIG. 5. *A close-up of the scene, showing the lettering on the rattlesnake placard. Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society.*

1933, an aide to Harry Hopkins wrote about the unsuccessful Holiday strike:

Apparently one thing that is contributing largely to its failure is the arrival of wheat allotment checks. I have that from a chap named McCandless, farm reporter for the *Omaha World-Herald*. I believe our CWA program will also do a lot to calm them down. Quite a few farmers will be getting jobs out of it. It will give them something to do and a little money.³⁷

Even UFL leaders who denounced New Deal allotment programs signed up for them.³⁸ Reform had taken its toll, so to speak, as government programs eroded the earlier appeal of insurgency.

OTHER FACTORS

Yet there were other factors at work as well. Many farmers in the region had not had a real crop since 1930, and substantial numbers either lost their farms or quit before they did. A large exodus from the region dates to at least 1934, and it included militant activists. Burke County UFL leader James Pearson moved his family to Washington state in late 1934.³⁹ Numerous other radicals were among the North Dakota "Okies" who ended up on the west coast. South Dakota militants felt compelled to leave as well. Clarence Sharp, former Communist Party state secretary, remembers a number of Party members in the Frederick area leaving by 1935.⁴⁰ Whatever their destination, their departure from the Dakotas diluted the ranks of militants in the region.

Radical forces were also depleted by internal strife and factionalism. Key UFL figures in both North and South Dakota defected or were expelled from the Communist Party by 1935, with negative consequences for the left wing of the insurgency. Perhaps the case of "Red Flag" Charlie Taylor, long-time editor of the *Producers News* and former national UFL secretary, and Ashbel Ingerson, a prominent

activist from Burke County, was most important. Both of them broke with the Party in 1935 and affiliated with the Trotskyists. Their departure from UFL ranks proved disruptive in much of eastern Montana and northwestern North Dakota.⁴¹ On a more local scale, the expulsion of Helge Tangen from the Communist Party in Frederick, South Dakota, had a similar effect in the immediate area and perhaps as many as one-third of the Party members dropped out.⁴²

More disruptive overall was the growing anti-Communist sentiment on the northern Plains. In some cases, it grew out of publicity identifying particular farm activists as Communists. The 1934 trial in Sisseton and vigilante episodes in Marshall County, South Dakota, marked the beginning of a long retreat for radicalism in northeastern South Dakota. More than a year earlier, a similar "red scare" had developed in Nebraska in the wake of the Holiday march on the state capitol. Much of it was provoked by the pro-Reno element as it sought to discredit the more radical Madison County group. The day after the demonstration, an insurgent leader noted: "The red scare is something awful in this state."⁴³

The diffusion of energies into other causes also played a role in undercutting the rural insurgency. While some leaders obtained government positions, others enlisted in the Workers Alliance (a labor organization for federal relief project workers) or the Townsend movement. The latter cause, which promised not only old age pensions but a substantial boost to the economy, attracted impressive numbers in some communities. It was popular in Burke County, where long-time activist L. L. Griffith took up its banner in 1935. There, several Townsend groups were formed, and Griffith was elected as a county commissioner. Townsend Clubs met on a regular basis while the Holiday faded into inactivity, though it continued to elect county officers.⁴⁴ More research into the place of Townsend efforts on the northern Plains is needed. Holiday leaders like North Dakota state presi-

dent Usher Burdick were strong proponents, and earlier assessments of this movement as a conservative development probably should be qualified. It attracted progressive elements to its colors in the region and at least in some communities stood side by side with the Holiday and the Farmers Union.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Overall, the 1930s insurgency dramatized the plight of the farmer, protected many from eviction and foreclosure, and forced politicians to develop new programs to address the needs of rural America. Of course, it was not a complete success. "Cost-of-production" never was obtained and many farm families were uprooted from their communities and forced to start over again somewhere else. Still, it must be said that the revolt bought time for a large number of farmers on the northern Plains, and that is not an insignificant achievement. In some sections, such as northeastern South Dakota, the Farmers Union got its second wind, and it emerged from the Depression as a stronger force than before. New recruits from the earlier insurgency signed on and helped remake the national union into a modern progressive group.⁴⁶ This, too, is a partial legacy of the struggles of the 1930s. The Communist Party also recruited a number of farmers to its cause during the Depression era insurgency. While some quickly dropped out, others signed up for the long term. Enclaves of Communist farmers persisted in several Dakota communities well into the 1940s (and sometimes longer), resulting in FBI surveillance for two decades or more.⁴⁷

The farm revolt of the 1930s was the last major agrarian outburst on the northern Plains. While a number of radicals lived on and hints of radicalism surfaced from time to time, the era of large scale farm protest in this region had passed. Yet, when the National Farmers Organization (NFO) emerged a generation later, it drew support from sections that had risen up in revolt in the 1930s.⁴⁸ And even now, some farm activists link their efforts with

those of the Depression era protest. Insurgents of that time helped shape the historical contours of the region, and further research into their activities is warranted.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was read at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, October 1987. The author wishes to thank the referees for their comments on the manuscript.

1. John Shover, *Combelt Rebellion: The Farmers Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); Lowell K. Dyson, *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). See also Lowell K. Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1968.

2. Dyson, *Red Harvest*, provides a detailed account of the UFL and its antecedent, the United Farmers Educational League. See also Allen Mathews, "Agrarian Radicals: The United Farmers League of South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 3 (Fall 1973): 408-21. The *Bowbells Tribune*, the official paper of Burke County, ran numerous stories on UFL meetings in that county in 1931.

3. Other efforts in the background of the North Dakota Holiday were a "\$1 Wheat" campaign and local taxpayers' groups. For the "\$1 Wheat" movement, see Larry Remele, "The North Dakota Farm Strike of 1932," *North Dakota History* 41 (Fall 1974): 5-8. An unsympathetic story on the Burke County taxpayers' group is found in *Columbus Reporter*, 24 December 1931.

4. Dyson provides the most detailed treatment of the various maneuvers of the UFL and the Holiday. See Dyson, *Red Harvest*, pp. 67-82, 99-147. To simplify the discussion, I have not mentioned the Farmers National Committee for Action (FNCA), another Communist-led group, which also was active on the northern Plains. It represented a somewhat more flexible tendency and sponsored several farm relief conferences. See Dyson, *Red Harvest*, and Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 141-45. As a practical matter, at the grass-roots level, individuals who worked with the FNCA also were UFL members.

5. For the North Dakota Holiday, see James William Dodd, "The Farmer Takes a Holiday," M.S. thesis, North Dakota Agricultural College, 1960; Larry Remele, "The Public Reaction to the North Dakota Farmers' Holiday Association," M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1969. For the South Dakota Holiday, see John E. Miller,

"Restrained, Respectable Radicals: The South Dakota Farm Holiday," *Agricultural History* 59 (July 1985): 429-47.

6. *Bowbells Tribune*, 29 July 1938. The Burke County Holiday apparently had not been as active as the Williams County organization in recent years, however.

7. Author's interview with Oscar Brekke, Clinton, Minn., 26 September 1987. Brekke was president of the Grant County (S. Dak.) Holiday and then president of the South Dakota organization.

8. Gilbert C. Fite, "John A. Simpson: The Southwest's Militant Farm Leader," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 35 (March 1949): 563-84; John L. Shover, "The Farm Holiday Movement in Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 43 (March 1962): 53-78.

9. *Dakota Free Press*, 28 October 1932; author's interview with Clarence H. Sharp, Minneapolis, Minn. Sharp is a native of South Dakota and was the state secretary of the South Dakota CP from late 1932 until 1940. I have had several interviews and numerous conversations with him which have dealt (among other things) with topics discussed in this article.

10. *Williston Graphic*, 7 November 1912; 9 November 1916; *1913 Legislative Manual* (Devils Lake, N. Dak.: Journal Printing Company, 1913), 262-64. For a survey of Socialist efforts in the region, see William C. Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains, 1900-1924," *South Dakota History* (forthcoming).

11. The most detailed account of the UFL in Roberts County is Gordon Smith, "History of the United Farmers League in Roberts County" (unpublished manuscript in author's possession). See also Mathews, "Agrarian Radicals" and "The History of the United Farmers League of South Dakota, 1923-1936: A Study in Farm Radicalism," M.A. thesis, University of South Dakota, 1972.

12. Author's interviews with Clarence H. Sharp, Minneapolis, Minn.; author's interview with James O. Monson, Sisseton, S. Dak., 13 August 1986.

13. Usher L. Burdick, former Holiday president in North Dakota, wrote: "The power of the Holiday rested with the Grass Roots. The county organization determined when to stop a foreclosure and the State organization had nothing to do with that. I could advise them, which I often did, but I could not control any county organization." (Quoted in Dodd, "The Farmer Takes a Holiday," p. 102.) See also Miller, "Restrained, Respectable Radicals," p. 429.

14. Rodney D. Karr, "Farmer Rebels in Plymouth County, Iowa, 1932-1933," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (Winter 1985): 637-45. This article is drawn from a

larger unpublished study. See Rodney D. Karr, "The Farmers' Holiday Movement, Plymouth County, Iowa: 1932-1933," M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1980.

15. *Producers News*, 7 June 1935.

16. State of South Dakota vs. United Farmers League, et al, Case File 6800, Roberts County Court House, Sisseton, S. Dak. Of those offering affidavits, twelve denied membership in either the UFL or the Unemployed Council, eleven admitted their affiliation with the latter group, and approximately fifty belonged to the left-wing farm group. Knute Walstad and his son Julius were key figures in the Roberts County UFL. Fifty-five years old in 1934, Knute had immigrated from Norway and homesteaded in the northwestern part of the county in the 1890s. See Smith, "History of the United Farmers League of Roberts County." Other UFL influentials involved in these proceedings were Leonard Ruckdaschel and his son Ralph. The elder Ruckdaschel had moved to the area as a boy in 1909 and was in his mid-fifties at the time of the injunction case. Elmer Eddy was another Roberts County pioneer who was enjoined for his alleged UFL activities. In 1898, he had homesteaded in the county. Before moving to his permanent farm site, Eddy also had operated a store and a post office in the northwestern part of Roberts County. He was 59 in 1934. Gilbert Gilbertson moved to the area with his parents in 1900. At the time of the injunction case, he was 47. C. S. Christianson, a UFL activist in the southern part of the county near Wilmot, farmed near his father's homestead. He was 48 when he was enjoined for his alleged deeds. Another UFL figure was Orville Monson. Although he had participated in the Milbank episode, he was not named in either the injunction or the riot case. His father had been an early settler just across the Roberts County line. The above information is taken from obituaries, recent interviews with children of these individuals, and tombstones.

17. One of the very few published historical studies treating women in any farm movement on the northern Plains is Karen Starr, "Fighting for a Future: Farm Women of the Nonpartisan League," *Minnesota History* 48 (Summer 1983): 255-62. The most focused account on Bloor is Thomas L. Edwards, "Ella Reeve Bloor: Urban Radical in the Upper Midwest 1930-1936," unpublished paper, Northern Great Plains History conference, Grand Forks, N. Dak., 29 September 1983. See also Dyson, *Red Harvest*; and William D. Rowley, "The Loup City Riot of 1934: Main Street vs. The 'Far-Out' Left," *Nebraska History* 47 (September 1966): 295-327.

18. *Dakota Free Press*, 10 June 1932; telephone interview with Homer Ayres, Sturgis, S. Dak., 9

March 1986. She continued publishing the paper until late 1935. For Coughlin, see Charles J. Tull, *Father Coughlin and the New Deal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965); David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Party, 1932-1936* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969); Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

19. Marie Weekes and her paper are discussed in James A. Stone, "Agrarian Ideology and the Farm Program in Nebraska State Politics with Special Reference to Northeast Nebraska, 1920-1933," Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1960; David Kathka, "The Farmers' Holiday Association in Madison County, Nebraska: 1932-1934," M.A. thesis, Wayne State College, 1966; and Burton W. Folsom, Jr., "Immigrant Voters and the Nonpartisan League in Nebraska, 1917-1920," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1981): 159-68. Harry Lux, a key figure in Nebraska Holiday, later reported that Weekes liked Father Coughlin and believed in the *Protocol of the Elders of Zion*. John Shover interview with Harry Lux, 1 March 1962, transcript, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska. For Coughlin, see Charles J. Tull, *Father Coughlin and the New Deal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965); David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Party, 1932-1936* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969); Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

20. This sketch of Effie Kjorstad is based on a survey of the *Williams County Farmer Press*, the *Farmers National Weekly* and the *National Farm Holiday News*. Numerous references to Ellen and Lillian Husa are found in the *Stanley Sun*, *Producers News* and the *Farmers National Weekly*. Mother Bloor had presided at their grandmother's funeral. That provoked a great deal of local attention. See *Minot Daily News*, 3 January 1931 ("Mrs. Husa's Funeral Will Be Without Clergy"); *Ward County Independent*, 8 January 1931 ("No Minister at Rites for Belden woman"). Other women who were mentioned by name often were related to prominent male participants in the 1930s era insurgency. This tendency is found in other movements as well. See William C. Pratt, "Women Socialists and their Male Comrades: The Reading Experience, 1927-1936," in *Flawed Liberation: Socialism and Feminism*, ed. Sally M. Miller (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 145-78.

21. The protesters either sought to block a sale altogether or to arrange that the farm or livestock and equipment were sold to friendly bidders at a nominal price. In the latter case, the debt was

satisfied at a loss to the creditor and the farm or chattels were returned to the original owner. An action protecting the farm itself was called a "penny auction"; a "Sears-Roebuck sale" protected chattels. See John L. Shover, "The Penny Auction Rebellion," *The American West* 2 (Fall 1965): 64-72.

22. Author's interviews with James O. Monson, Sisseton, S. Dak., 13 August 1986; Veblen, S. Dak., 23 September 1987. Yet Irene Paull reports that a key UFL figure in Northeastern South Dakota later told her: "Women took charge of evictions. They came over with boxes of pepper. They faced the sheriff and told him if he comes, he'll face a barrage of pepper." Paull manuscript on Julius Walstad, Irene Paull Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

23. A headline in a Williston, N. Dak., paper reads: "Williston Business Men Add Their Approval to That of Minot and Jamestown" (*Williams County Farmers Press*, 18 August 1932). See Remele, "The North Dakota Farm Strike of 1932," pp. 14-15; Miller, "Restrained, Respectable Radicals," p. 444.

24. Members of this family were often mentioned in the *Stanley Sun*, the *Producers News* and *Farmers National Weekly*. W. J. Husa operated the community's only store.

25. Author's telephone interview with Homer Ayres, Sturgis, S. Dak., 9 March 1986; John L. Shover interview with Harry Lux, 1 March 1962.

26. Author's interviews with Clarence H. Sharp, Minneapolis, Minn.; and Oscar Brekke, Clinton, Minn. 26 September 1987. For accounts of the trial, see Smith, "History of the United Farmers League of Roberts County," and Mathews, "History of the United Farmers League of South Dakota."

27. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

28. For this episode, see Smith, "History of the United Farmers League of Roberts County"; and Mathews, "History of the United Farmers League of South Dakota." Almost sixteen years earlier, A. C. Townley, the major figure in the formation of the NPL in North Dakota, had been prevented from speaking in Britton. See Gilbert C. Fite, "Peter Norbeck and the Defeat of the Non-Partisan League in South Dakota," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 33 (September 1946): 230. It was unlikely that mob action of the Britton variety could have occurred in Sisseton or Milbank, S. Dak., or Williston or Stanley, N. Dak.

29. According to a FBI document, a local Communist reported in 1941 "that there are three branches of the CP in Roberts County with a total membership of about 50 members. He stated that

the Mother Bloor Local Branch has ten members but he refused to give the names of any Party members. . . ." [Deleted], 18 May 1953, FBI File 100-28935-38. At its peak in 1934, the CP may have had as many as one hundred members in Roberts County. Author's interviews with Clarence H. Sharp, Minneapolis, Minn.

30. In *Cormbelt Rebellion*, Shover assumes rather than demonstrates that the farm revolt was most active in the corn-hog sections. Yet as Smith has pointed out, that description does not fit Roberts County and evidence from the Dakotas to date suggests that corn-hog production is not the sine qua non for this farm revolt. Miller's thesis about the conservative nature of the South Dakota Holiday probably will be revised as historians come to a more complex understanding of Emil Loriks, a key figure who served as executive secretary-treasurer of the South Dakota organization. On one hand, he promoted a conservative image for the Holiday and clearly sought business backing. On the other hand, he actively participated in "stirring up" the farmers. (Author's interview with Oscar Brekke, Clinton, Minn., 26 September 1987.) The extensive correspondence between Loriks and Homer Ayres also suggests that this "restrained, respectable radical" had a working relationship with less "respectable" elements in the farm movement. Ayres was active in the UFL, and ran for Lieutenant Governor in 1934 on the Communist-backed United Front ticket. Ayres was a Loriks ally in several of the battles of the late 1930s. The personal relationship between the two men was cordial and they respected one another. (Loriks Papers, American State Bank, Oldham, S. Dak.) A recent popular biography of Loriks follows Miller's "restrained, respectable" thesis on the South Dakota Holiday. See Elizabeth E. Williams, *Emil Loriks: Builder of a New Economic Order* (Sioux Falls: Center for Western Studies, 1987).

31. Daniel Bell, *The Radical Right: The New American Right* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1963); Edward C. Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963). For Coughlin, see n. 18, above.

32. L. C. Miller, editor of the *Bowbells Tribune*, backed Lemke in 1936 but had voted for Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party presidential candidate, in 1928 and 1932.

33. Apparently Emil Loriks was somewhat sympathetic to Coughlin at least as late as 1935. Wrote one observer: "Loriks made several bad blunders. He said that the fascist[s] Father Coughlin and Huey Long, were men like old Thomas Jefferson." (*Farmers National Weekly*, 26 July 1935.) See also Elizabeth Evenson Williams, "A South

Dakota Agrarian's Views of Huey Long," *Midwest Review* 8 (Spring 1986): 40-55.

34. The anti-Semitic placard was first called to my attention in a discussion with Michael Farrell and William Locke during the making of the 1985 Nebraska Educational Television Network documentary, "Plowing Up a Storm: The History of Midwestern Farm Activism."

35. Shover, "The Farm Holiday Movement in Nebraska"; Kathka, "The Farmers' Holiday Association in Madison County."

36. John L. Shover interview with Harry Lux, 1 March 1962; Dyson, *Red Harvest*, p. 132. According to a *Farmers National Weekly* account, Milo Reno told the 1934 National Farmers Union convention: "The New Deal ought to be called the Jew Deal." See Lem Harris, "National Convention of Union Avoided Actions Called for in Speeches," *Farmers National Weekly*, 7 December 1934.

37. Quoted in Richard Lowitt and Maurice Beasley, eds., *One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 97.

38. Most of the UFL leaders in Roberts County enrolled in the 1934 wheat allotment program (Smith, "History of the United Farmers League of Roberts County"). In Burke County, N. Dak., that also apparently was the case. See *Bowbells Tribune*, 7 December 1934.

39. *Bowbells Tribune*, 7 December 1934.

40. Author's interview with Clarence H. Sharp, Minneapolis, Minn.

41. Taylor had a long history of involvement in the left wing of the farm movement. See Dyson, *Red Harvest*; and Charles Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 18 (January 1968): 2-18. After he left the Party, Taylor maneuvered a takeover of *Producers News*, and, as a result, the paper no longer covered the left-wing farm movement outside of Montana nor sympathized with the CP. Ingerson also had been a key UFL figure. A FBI report dated 1941 asserted that the Trotskyists in Plentywood, Montana (Taylor's old stronghold in the extreme northeastern part of the state), "have driven the Stalinists back as far as Belden, North Dakota." ("Communist Activities in the State of Montana," 16 June 1941, FBI File 100-3-51-16.) Though this comment is an exaggeration, the Taylor-Ingerson defection had serious consequences. The *Bowbells Tribune* editor answered an Ingerson criticism in 1938: "As a matter of fact, Ash, you have become so famous over Burke County as disorganizer No. 1 that you are almost considered infamous, even among your old friends, who saw you destroy the Communist Party because it would not bend to your will. . . ." (*Bowbells Tribune*, 16 September

1938).

42. *Dakota Free Press*, 3 November 1933; author's interviews with Clarence H. Sharp, Minneapolis, Minn. Sharp has repeatedly said that Tangen's expulsion "was a terrible mistake."

43. Quoted in Shover, *Combelt Rebellion*, p. 132. The publicity surrounding the so-called "Loup City Riot" the following year had a devastating impact as well. See Rowley, "The Loup City Riot of 1934."

44. The *Bowbells Tribune* provided a substantial amount of attention to the local Townsend movement between 1935 and 1938.

45. The then left-wing *Williams County Farmers Press* seemingly gave the Townsend movement and the Holiday equal billing in 1936. That year the county Townsend leader joined the presidents of the local Holiday, Farmers Union, and relief workers organization in endorsing this paper in the forthcoming election for official county newspaper (*Williams County Farmers Press*, 29 October 1936).

46. For an overview of the Farmers Union, see John A. Crampton, *The National Farmers Union: Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965). This organization on the northern Plains is treated in Robert S. Thompson, "The History of the South Dakota Farmers Union, 1914-1952," M.A. thesis, University of South Dakota, 1953; and Charles and Joyce Conrad, 50

Years: North Dakota Farmers Union (North Dakota Farmers Union, 1976).

47. Clarence Sharp served as a CP traveling representative in the Dakotas during the 1940s and 1950s (Author's interviews with Clarence H. Sharp, Minneapolis, Minn.). His travels in the region were monitored by the FBI. In 1959, for example, six FBI agents participated in the surveillance of one of Sharp's trips in the Dakotas ("M. H.," 30 September 1959, FBI File 100-390741-7; "V.C.F.," 24 September 1959, FBI File 100-38183-12). Some party members continued to pay dues, subscribe to the *Daily Worker* or the *Worker*, and visit with Sharp when he made his rounds, but there was little Communist activity in these states by the late 1940s.

48. Author's interview with James O. Monson, Veblen, S. Dak., 23 September 1987. Monson, the son of a 1930s activist, reported that some former UFL members joined NFO in the 1960s. Though undercut by the prosperity of the next decade, the NFO had considerable success in northeastern South Dakota (Roberts, Marshall, and Brown counties). I have personal knowledge of a former UFL activist who later was involved in NFO in McHenry County, N. Dak., and sons of earlier insurgents who participated in the newer movement in Burke and Williams counties, N. Dak., and Madison County, Nebraska.