

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 64 | Number 2 (Spring 2005)

pps. 190-191

Prairie Populist: the Life and Times of Usher L. Burdick

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2005 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"Prairie Populist: the Life and Times of Usher L. Burdick." *The Annals of Iowa* 64 (2005), 190-191.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10906>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://iowaresearchonline.org/)

The next chapter examines Hoover's attempts to establish private philanthropy with communitarian values for numerous depression-era requests for aid. Hoover continued to merge Girl Scouting responsibilities with work as First Lady, even holding her press conferences as camp encounters, with reporters cross-legged on the floor. The third chapter on the White House years details Hoover's modernization of the East Wing and use of the media to advance projects.

Hoover chose to live her life through many roles besides First Lady: mother, philanthropist, geologist, outdoor advocate, clubwoman, academic translator, progressive, and conservative. At times her social causes and societal responsibilities seem quite traditional, which leads one to question the activist title. What did she risk or attempt to change? Often Hoover appears in this analysis as simply more active than activist, but Young offers her definition and reasoning for the thesis: "Lou Hoover became the first modern first lady with an activist agenda—an entity previously unseen in the East Wing. For Hoover, activism meant addressing the problems—large and small—she encountered in the world. This commitment to public works stemmed from her belief that she should use her talents and her means to improve society, and it shaped all aspects of her tenure as first lady" (52).

Young alludes several times to "the ruination of her public marriage," yet contrasts that with "a very strong matrimonial bond with Bert" (141). That complex relationship could have been explored in perhaps more depth within the biography to paint Lou Hoover with more human aspects, complete with frailties, of her personality and life.

Prairie Populist: The Life and Times of Usher L. Burdick, by Edward C. Blackorby. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies and the State Historical Society of North Dakota, 2001. x, 393 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$28.95 cloth.

Reviewer Steven R. Hoffbeck is professor of history at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He is the author of *Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota* (2005), and *The Haymakers: A Chronicle of Five Farm Families* (2000).

Edward C. Blackorby begins his biography of Usher Burdick by describing him as a "big man" in North Dakota history—a man who eventually weighed over 300 pounds. Burdick was indeed a big player in North Dakota history, and his career became entwined with prominent rural radicals of the 1930s. But Burdick's real power, paradoxically, faded when he became a congressman on the national stage.

Blackorby adeptly writes of how Burdick changed from a frontier roughneck into an able student. He tells the tale of a young man who

could seemingly do it all. He starred as a football player while tackling law school at the University of Minnesota. Burdick then became a North Dakota horse-trader, banker, lawyer, and town builder who launched into marriage and ranching and family life and a budding political career. Yet author Blackorby clearly reveals how Burdick's personal life unraveled as he rose to the top of the political heap while in his twenties and thirties. Blackorby unveils Burdick's flaws—his four marriages and two divorces, his financial difficulties, and poor personal decisions. Burdick's finest moments are ably highlighted, particularly his leadership in the Farm Holiday Association in 1932 during the depths of the Great Depression. Readers in Iowa will be particularly interested in Burdick's associations with Milo Reno, the activist Iowan, and the radicals "Wild Bill" Langer and William Lemke.

The major contribution of this book involves its account of Burdick's evolution as a political animal. He was a Progressive who was not truly progressive, a man who showed courage in opposing the machinations of Alexander McKenzie, the state's power broker, but who had no real plan to free the state from McKenzie's grip. Burdick rode the fence on farm issues while the Nonpartisan League installed major reforms from 1916 to 1920.

Ultimately, this flawed man became a 20-year U.S. congressman (1934–1944 and 1949–1959). In North Dakota he was revered for having "a heart as big as an ox," but in Washington he was regarded as being as smart as an ox. Burdick became a clown on the Beltway, annoying Franklin D. Roosevelt with his antimilitarist and isolationist views and bewildering his own Republican Party leadership, which categorized him as a "political misfit from North Dakota" rather than as a "Prairie Populist." Burdick "tilted against windmills" by opposing Lend-Lease and the imposition of a military draft before the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. This odd congressman constantly introduced bills and resolutions, but only a handful of inconsequential acts ever became law. His greatest legacy probably came from his son, Quentin, who later redeemed the family name by bringing many federal dollars to North Dakota as a U.S. senator.

This book is recommended for those who would enjoy the tale of a twentieth-century Davy Crockett-type congressman who took on the power establishment in an entertaining manner. Readers should watch for missing words and apostrophes.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.