Entwined in Conflict: The South Dakota State Prison Twine Factory and the Controversy of 1919–1921

STERLING EVANS

Like the rest of the United States, South Dakota was returning to "normalcy" in the years immediately following World War I. Between 1919 and 1921, however, a controversy erupted that shook its major industry—agriculture—and involved a diverse array of South Dakotans from farmers to farm-supply dealers to state officials. The discord centered on the state's twine factory, housed in the South Dakota Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, where inmates manufactured sisal twine, an ingredient essential for binding harvested grain. The prison product had come under periodic attack for its quality and pricing, but when convicts sabotaged the works in 1919, their actions wreaked havoc in fields across the state and reverberated in the halls of the capitol, demonstrating the vital importance of this nearly forgotten commodity to the state's economy.

The story of South Dakota's twine factory has its roots in the 1870s, when Cyrus McCormick and other implement manufacturers intro-
duced mechanical knotting devices for the power reaper/binder, which cut grain stalks and tied them into bundles that would be hand-gathered into shocks to await threshing.¹ To tie the bundles, binders used wire or, after 1880, twine made from the fiber of the henequén plant (Agave fourcroydes) or from sisal (Agave sisalana) grown in Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula. Maya Indians, and later Spaniards and Mexicans, had long used the fibers to make mats, hammocks, and rope. As demand for the fiber in North America increased with the use of binders, Yucatecan growers converted hundreds of thousands of previously uncultivated acres into henequén plantations.² Some twine was made from jute imported from India, sisal from Haiti and Tanganyika (today Tanzania), and manila hemp from the Philippines, but henequén proved to be durable and much less expensive to transport from the Yucatán and thus became the fiber of choice for binder twine.

Farmers throughout the United States and Canada had quickly adopted binders, which were instrumental in expanding wheat production throughout the Great Plains. Using a binder and a team of horses, one person could do in a day work that formerly took six workers to accomplish.³ Thus, the McCormick Company (known after 1902 as International Harvester), John Deere, Massey, Case, Minne-


². Much has been written on the history of henequén plantations in the Yucatán, but these studies do not discuss the importance of binder twine in the grain-producing regions of North America. Agricultural historians have likewise neglected the dependence of the Wheat Belt on Mexico. The author addresses this relationship in Bound in Twine and “Dependent Harvests: Grain Production on the American and Canadian Plains and the Double Dependency with Mexico” (Agricultural History, forthcoming).

Mechanical binders like the one depicted here used twine to tie wheat into bundles, helping Great Plains farmers greatly expand their production.

South Dakota, and other implement manufacturers competed aggressively for the harvester market and sold tens of thousands of binders. Some South Dakota farmers, especially those in the semiarid West-River region where grain stalks were shorter and thinner, preferred harvesting crops with "headers" that cut off and gathered only the grain heads. Headers could harvest an average of twenty to thirty acres a day, compared to the binders' fifteen to twenty, and they lost less grain (3.27 percent compared to 6.06 percent).4

Still, binders were the most popular harvester for the majority of farmers in the more humid regions of the state. The machine helped South Dakotans increase wheat production in the early twentieth century, especially when World War I heightened the demand for grains. Historian Herbert S. Schell has noted that the war "pushed farm prices to higher levels and led to a greater volume of production" as more acres were brought into cultivation. Schell reported that the amount of "improved" lands increased from 9,805,000 acres in 1914 to 11,190,000 by 1919.5 Wheat production increased dramatically in the same time frame, more than doubling from slightly less than

thirty million bushels in 1914 to sixty million bushels in 1915. In fact, 1915 marked the state's highest production between 1879 and 1943, a result of near-perfect weather conditions throughout the Great Plains and the stimulus of a "Wheat Will Win the War" campaign to assist America's allies in Europe. Wheat dipped to twenty-five million bushels in 1916 but climbed to more than forty-four million in 1917 and then approached its 1915 level (58,500,000 bushels) by war's end in 1918.\(^6\)

Such high levels of production required an immense amount of binder twine. Farmers needed an average of six pounds of twine per acre of wheat harvested, bringing the amount South Dakota farms used from 1890 to 1921 to approximately two hundred twenty thousand tons of twine for wheat harvests alone. Taking into account harvests for barley, oats, and rye, the actual figure would be even higher.\(^7\)

To keep up with the demand, implement manufacturers and cordage companies throughout the United States and Canada developed twine mills. International Harvester, Plymouth Cordage of Boston, Peoria Cordage of Illinois, and others had begun importing Yucatán henequén in the 1880s. International Harvester, however, came to monopolize the industry in both fiber importation and twine production so that by 1904 it imported nearly half the sisal supply from the Yucatán, produced twice as much twine as the other companies combined, and, forming a "trust" with other companies, controlled twine prices.\(^8\)

Wary of these monopolistic trends, policymakers on the Great Plains decided to compete by using prison inmate labor to produce

---

7. The per-acre twine figure need is from Tony Ward, "Farming Technology and Crop Area on Early Prairie Farms," \textit{Prairie Forum} 20 (Spring 1995): 33. The figure for South Dakota was derived by multiplying the total number of wheat acres harvested, adjusting for the fact that about one-third of the state's wheat crop was harvested with headers and that some farmers had early combines and required no twine.
twine for less money. Officials in Minnesota first engineered the idea at their penitentiary in the 1880s, followed by Kansas and North Dakota in 1899, South Dakota in 1909, and Wisconsin in 1916. The Canadian government established a twine plant at its federal penitentiary in Kingston, Ontario, in 1894.9

Officials in South Dakota decided that their state penitentiary, established in 1881 as the territorial prison for Dakota Territory, should aid farmers by using low-paid convict labor to supply a less expensive twine. Warden Ole S. Swenson wrote in 1912 that the factory had been established “with the idea that farmers might reap the benefit of the

9. This information comes from various state archives and from the National Archives of Canada, Ottawa. Missouri, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Indiana also opened prison twine factories in the early 1900s. Surprisingly, the large wheat-producing states of Texas, Nebraska, Colorado, and Montana did not. In Washington, farmers used headers and combines with no need for twine.
industry by being able to secure their twine at reasonable prices.” Farmers, he was happy to note, were buying the prison-made product at two to five cents less per pound than twine sold by the “trust.” Two years later, he declared the venture a success, reporting that it had operated in the black for a total net profit of $72,294.21 since opening in 1909 and was paying “a reasonable interest on [the state’s] investments.” Swenson found the figures “very encouraging,” he wrote in his biannual report for 1914, “as there is a probability of a gain every year in time to come.”

The warden went on to recommend to the State Board of Charities and Corrections that the state expand the twine plant. He predicted that by adding 120 new spindles purchased with the plant’s profits from a revolving fund the factory’s output could nearly double and produce almost half the total amount of twine used in the state, between fifteen and sixteen million pounds a year. “It is my opinion that it would be an easy matter to find customers for the increased production,” he wrote, and suggested that the policy of selling to only one dealer in a town be changed to allow the prison to sell to anyone.

When the board declined the proposal, an exasperated Swenson wrote, “In years past our supply has not been sufficient to fill all orders and this year we could have sold once again as much as manufactured . . . Farmers who had not placed their orders for twine before May 1 were not able to procure twine from us direct for the reason that we were entirely sold out at the time of harvest.”

Board members were being pragmatic in their decision, however, recalling that during poor crop years the demand for twine dwindled. For example, between 1910 and 1911, wheat harvests plummeted from 45,000,000 bushels to 16,670,000. The prison was left to carry over 1,700,000 pounds of unsold twine, causing a shutdown of the plant.

operations. The pattern of demand was inconsistent, as a later warden, George Jameson, reported, recalling that the very next year (1912) there was a “big crop and they stormed this place to buy twine.” The legislature finally agreed to expand the plant on a more modest scale in 1923, when it appropriated funds to purchase fifty new spinners to meet increased demand and make use of idle prisoners.

Other factors outside the state’s control had adverse effects on the plant. Periodic cricket and grasshopper infestations from the 1910s to the 1930s were as damaging to twine as they were to the grain itself. On being asked in a legislative hearing if the prison could make twine that insects would not consume, Warden Jameson replied that there was “no such thing as cricket-proofing.” Commercial manufacturers advertised oil- and poison-treated twines to reduce cricket damage, but Jameson explained that the insects would eat the twine after the oils dried out. When asked whether leaving the bundles in shocks for “a long time” could help prevent insect damage, Jameson responded positively but noted the potential for moisture damage. The warden went on to offer the services of the prison in helping farmers, stating, “We have a great many who send their surplus [twine] in and leave it here during the summer time.” By the 1930s, however, the plant was adding greasy oil to help with insect-proofing. In 1938, a particularly bad grasshopper infestation damaged many farmers’ crops, and the factory increased the oil treatment by fifteen percent.

State officials had started to hear complaints about the cricket problem with prison-made twine in the late 1910s. In 1918, a particularly

15. Oral testimony, depositions, and exhibits collected as part of a 1921 legislative probe into the South Dakota Penitentiary were printed in six paper-covered volumes under the title Transcript of Testimony and Proceedings of the Legislative Committee for the Investigation of the State Penitentiary at Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The volumes are deposited with the State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, and are hereafter cited as Testimony. Jameson’s statement appears in vol. 1, p. 12.
good year for wheat in South Dakota, the prison plant could not keep up with demand for twine and was forced to buy two hundred thousand pounds from the state penitentiary in Wisconsin. Jameson took members of his staff to the Wisconsin prison in Waupun to inspect their twine and later wrote, “While we do not believe their twine was as good as that manufactured by the South Dakota Penitentiary, still we were satisfied at that time that it would meet all the requirements.” But a representative of the Farmers Elevator Company in Bryant, South Dakota, informed officials that crickets had cut the “Wisconsin Brand” twine so badly that “considerable loss has been sustained in twine and waste of grain.” He then asked the state for an “adjustment for damage”—5,900 pounds of twine—to be given to eighteen farmers in the area. Jameson responded that it would have been “impossible” for the prison to fill such an order. He further explained that all twine used in the state—whether from the Wisconsin penitentiary, International Harvester, or the Plymouth Cordage Company—had suffered insect damage and that “one twine was not damaged any more than another.” He ended by stating that the Sioux Falls plant would no longer contract for any more out-of-state product, but “as there seemed to be a shortage of twine in this State, we did all within our power to supply that shortage.”

Likewise, international events that affected the flow and price of fiber were far beyond what prison officials in Sioux Falls could control. In 1915, for example, Mexico was in the midst of a revolution and ten-year civil war that ousted long-time dictator Porfirio Díaz, who had supported the Yucatán henequén growers and International Harvester’s control of fiber. Seeking to secure the lucrative industry, forces under opposition leader Venustiano Carranza marched into Yucatán in February 1915, and Carranza ordered a blockade on the Port of Progreso, from which all of the fiber was exported. The blockade tied up two hundred fifty thousand bales of sisal, nearly half

22. One bale equals approximately four hundred pounds of fiber.
of which belonged to International Harvester and the remainder of which was destined for various cordage manufacturers and prison twine plants. News of the blockade, coming in a year in which conditions indicated that a bumper crop for North American grain was in store, caused great concern for farmers, implement dealers, cordage companies, and penitentiary officials, all of whom lobbied the United States State Department to take action to maintain fiber shipments.

President Woodrow Wilson and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan (from grain-rich Nebraska) responded by sending two United States Navy ships to monitor the blockade. Bryan issued a stiff ultimatum to Carranza indicating that the navy would use force “to prevent any interference with our commerce” if the Mexicans did not reopen the port. The threat worked; the situation was defused within a month as Carranza bowed to pressure and lifted his naval blockade at Progreso. As historian Kendrick Clements has argued, Wilson and Bryan believed the coercion was justified to achieve “the goal of helping the American farmer.”

The end of the blockade was welcome news in South Dakota. “Carranza’s Blockade Off,” announced the Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader on 15 March 1915. Secretary of Agriculture David Houston, the front-page article reported, had told President Wilson that “200,000,000 pounds of twine are used in the United States each year in binding grain, flax, and corn crops, and that nine tenths of the supply is made from sisal grown in Yucatán and exported from Progreso.” It also related that telegrams had poured into the White House and State Department, stressing that “unless sisal were obtained through Pro-

25. Ibid., p. 487.
greso, the harvest of this year's crops would be embarrassed." Moreover, the news story concluded, the people of Yucatán, who obtained much of their food from outside sources, "were as anxious that the embargo be raised as the United States." The next day the newspaper confirmed the end of the blockade, reporting Wilson as saying that "American representations and notes had been effective" and the port would remain open. Shiploads of sisal were on their way.

The renewed flow of fiber was good for farmers throughout the Great Plains in 1915. That year's bumper wheat crop—the best in eighty years, including South Dakota's record sixty million bushels—would require enormous quantities of twine. Meanwhile, the anti-foreign-monopoly ideals of the Mexican Revolution were being applied in Yucatán to break the stronghold the International Harvester Company enjoyed on importing fiber. The new government of Yucatán established the Henequén Marketing Regulating Commission (CRMH) later that year, formed its own "trust" with five major United States banks, and raised the price of sisal significantly. Once again outraged manufacturers, dealers, and farmers complained to the United States government, charging that one monopoly had replaced another.

Despite these complications, the South Dakota twine plant remained operating at a healthy net profit for the state of $101,254 in 1915 and 1916. Warden Swenson reported that the profit had "not been made by excessive charge for twine, as our twine has been sold for as low a price or lower than prices named by any other jobber [wholesaler] or manufacturer for twine of equal grade and quality." Swenson indicated that his business managers had been able to accomplish this feat "by closely watching the market and taking advantage of low prices" for fiber.

This situation was to change over the next few years. The war in Europe and the revolution in Mexico caused the United States govern-

27. Ibid., 16 Mar. 1915.
28. Congress addressed the issue in early 1916 and conducted hearings on these concerns. See U.S., Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, Importation of Sisal and Manila Hemp Hearings, S.Doc. 440, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916 (hereafter cited S.Doc. 440).
The penitentiary twine factory included a warehouse on the prison grounds where rows of packaged twine awaited shipment.

ment to tighten the reins on commodity industries. As Amund O. Ringsrud, a member of the State Board of Charities and Corrections explained, “After we got into the war, the Government took over the whole business, and controlled the whole output of sisal, and it was done to prevent Mexico from forcing prices up higher than they were. . . . We had to deal with the Government to get the sisal.”30

A new warden, Guy C. Redfield (appointed after the suicide of Ole Swensen, who suffered from ill health31), reported that the United States Food Administration “practically took charge of all the sisal and manila hemp coming into this country.” In October 1917, that agency

called all twine manufacturers to Washington, D.C., for a conference and announced that it had created a new commission “to contract for and purchase raw material, and . . . to fix the price which the manufacturers should charge for the manufactured product.” Because less sisal was available from East Africa during World War I, the only material left was from Yucatán, where the CRMH controlled the market, virtually forcing the United States to accept its prices and grades. Moreover, the Yucatán sisal was of low quality and inferior grade, making it “next to impossible” to keep the twine at its former standards, Redfield complained. Still worse, the prison now needed to take out loans to buy the fiber due to the higher prices the CRMH charged. One CRMH representative testified to Congress that the higher prices were needed to benefit the many Yucatecans who had been impoverished during the years of the International Harvester Company’s monopoly.

Before formation of the CRMH, the prison had ordered sisal through fiber agents in New Orleans, but now prison officials contracted directly with CRMH representatives, purchasing, for example, two thousand bales of fiber in 1918. Despite initial misgivings, officials came to terms with the arrangement. George Jameson, who replaced Redfield, dealt with Albert Tascoe of Mérida, Yucatán, who also sold sisal to North Dakota. In Jameson’s view, the “class of people living in Yucatán . . . are not like the Mexicans; they are industrious farmers. During the Revolution they have taken no part.” For his services, Tascoe earned a quarter-cent per pound commission, “so they have a very fine arrangement for the future,” Jameson concluded.

Following the end of World War I, the agricultural prosperity the war had spawned continued for at least awhile in South Dakota. Herbert Schell noted that the “rise in farm prices at war’s end led to a speculative land boom that affected the entire state.” Land values soared from $9.90 an acre in 1900 to $64.43 an acre in 1920. Thus,

33. Testimony of Víctor Rendón, S.Doc. 440, p. 5.
35. Testimony, vol. 1, p. 7. Tascoe’s name also appears in this document as “Tacea.”
despite the higher price for sisal, farmers still benefited from the prison-made twine, and the factory did well for a time. Jameson reported a $50,424.40 net profit for the plant in 1919 and wrote that the demand for twine was so great that orders went unfilled.\textsuperscript{37} But the cricket problem and a significant drop in wheat prices (from $2.40 a bushel to 87c a bushel between 1919 and 1920) left South Dakota agriculture in a “depressed and precarious condition,” according to Schell,\textsuperscript{38} and caused a major net loss for the prison twine plant of nearly eighty-seven thousand dollars in 1920 when it could not sell its output.\textsuperscript{39}

Added to the problems of over- and under-production, insect infestations, and international contingencies, prison officials had yet another issue to confront in 1919 and 1920—sabotage. Some inmates employed in the plant had cut large amounts of twine into small segments as it was being balled. Their actions caused an enormous outcry among farmers and farm-supply dealers and helped to prompt a special legislative investigation into twine-plant operations in early 1921. As Amund Ringsrud of the Board of Charities and Corrections put it, “We got into a bad snarl.”\textsuperscript{40}

Exactly how the snarl was discovered is difficult to discern. The committee formed to investigate the matter worked to discover the answer, but that task was less important than the matter immediately at hand—ruined twine and angry farmers. The state Grain Dealers Association in Sioux Falls received the brunt of the complaints and became the organization representing the farmers and elevator operators who demanded compensation. Its general secretary, Charles Eyler, solicited letters from affected parties, which were entered as evidence in the ensuing investigation.

One letter that best demonstrated the depth of the farmers’ outrage came from John T. Belk of the Alfadale Stock Farm in Henry, South Dakota. “The twine is a bad mess, much of the twine is cut,” he wrote. “One farmer found balls of twine stuffed with rags. Personally I have

\textsuperscript{37} Sixteenth Biennial Report, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{38} Schell, History of South Dakota, p. 351.
\textsuperscript{39} Sixteenth Biennial Report, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{40} Testimony, vol. 3, p. 3.
had a bad time with this prison twine, I am thru with it.” Belk went on to relate his frustration at having to deal repeatedly with loose bundles, short lengths of twine, and the need to stop and relace the needle on his binder. “This,” he explained, “entails a considerable loss in twine, in time lost, and loose bundles cause a loss of time in shocking and loss of time in loading, waste of time in pitching grain at [the] separator, also grain wasted in [the] field by men who do not care whether the loose grain goes on [the] wagon or is scattered.” He concluded, “Any settlement asked by our farmer dealers should be allowed by [the] Board . . . and if they do not allow a settlement . . . I believe we should test the matter in the courts, as the State of So. Dak. should be on a good contract, and not try and welsh.”

Belk, who was also a representative in the legislature and chair of the investigative committee, reiterated many of his points as he pummeled the members of the Board of Charities and Corrections when they stepped up for questioning. Belk remarked, “That goes on continually, and after a while a person’s patience is worn out.” He therefore argued that farmers and dealers had a right to a one-hundred percent adjustment.

A flurry of similar comments and letters poured in from Vermillion to Sisseton and from Wessington Springs to Eagle Butte. Typical was the letter from Lars Larson, manager of the Farmers’ Co-op in Bruce. “We had considerable trouble with the twine this year,” he wrote, “on account of a good deal of it being . . . purposely cut by some of the workers in the plant. They [prison officials] have the right according to the contract to refuse to take the twine back but under the circumstances we believe it would be good policy for them to accept the twine and give the dealers full credit for what is returned.” Larson was left with five thousand pounds of the twine he could never sell. Likewise, Gayle Snedecar of the Farmers’ Elevator in Ravinia complained that he was left with twenty-one hundred pounds of penitentiary twine he could not get rid of. Due to the combined problems of sabotaged twine and cricket damage, he claimed that “farmers will not trust it now.” According to Charles Eyler, the “Twine Situation,” as the controversy became known in the state, was the main topic of conversation during the convention of the Farmers’ Grain Dealers Association in January 1919.

A number of the complainants compared the quality of South Dakota prison twine with that of other brands. John Halverson, a farmer from Dell Rapids, bought two hundred pounds of prison twine in 1919 “and in the center of about ten balls the twine was cut in

42. See, for example, Testimony, vol. 3, pp. 7–9.
46. Testimony, vol. 4, p. 11.
lengths about one foot long and you know that time is busy in harvest so I threw out the balls. In 1920 I bought the International twine. It cost more but I don't like to have trouble in the harvest."47 In the same vein, Thomas W. Stillwell, manager of the Farmers' Elevator in Wentworth, stated that he had a "strong tendency to consider other twine of better quality. The small difference in price between the prison twine and the Deering or other twine makes the price no object to a farmer who is in a hurry to get a crop out. . . . We have handled the prison twine exclusively the past few years, but we are about ready for a change. We ordered 10,000 pounds for use this year, but think that we will cancel the entire order."48

Canceling, however, was not always easy. Emil Mollberg, of Farmers' Grain and Livestock in La Bolt, had tried to cancel his order for four thousand pounds of twine, but the prison had never responded.49 According to Eyler, the same thing happened with "a good many elevators" despite the fact that their contracts contained a "privilege of cancellation clause."50 Edward Rogholt, manager of the Co-op Elevator in Lake Preston, encountered a similar situation and wrote, "We understand that . . . Minnesota stands back of their dealers. . . . Would it not be wise if South Dakota would do the same?"51

Eyler took the concerns of farmers and grain dealers directly to Governor Peter Norbeck in 1920, urging him to push for a refund on defective twine, especially since "the Farmers' Elevators have stood back of this penitentiary twine for years." Furthermore, Eyler contended, it was "unfair that they should take this loss where they wouldn't have to do that with other twine firms." He then asked the governor to call a special session of the legislature during which appropriations for refund monies could be made.52 A hesitant Norbeck responded, "I never thought this question could be opened up. The State has at all times sold the twine to the farmers practically at cost—sometimes less."

Governor Peter Norbeck and other state officials received numerous complaints about sabotaged twine.

cording to the governor, a “business house operating at a profit can stand an unexpected loss,” but the state could not. He also admitted, however, to not “know[ing] enough about the situation to express an intelligent opinion.”

Dissatisfied with Norbeck’s response, Eyler shot back, claiming that the matter did indeed require a special session. Because the dealers’ contracts with the penitentiary guaranteed quality twine, “very little

twine will be ordered this year unless something is done to compensate these companies,” he wrote. Eyler estimated that it would take about fifty thousand dollars “to make good the whole loss,” but that most companies “would be satisfied if the State would go fifty fifty.”

Norbeck informed Eyler that while the Board of Charities and Corrections was unwilling to offer refunds, it had agreed to accept all old twine and replace it with new twine made at the prison. Eyler retorted that the board was avoiding the real issue and that refund—not replacement—was the point. Now, because of their lack of trust, farmers had started dumping all their prison twine, good and bad, at elevators and were replacing it with other brands.

In January 1921, the legislature took up the matter and created a special committee to investigate irregularities at the penitentiary, among them the problems at the twine plant. Committee members traveled to Sioux Falls, where they began taking testimony at the state penitentiary on 19 January. In addition to chairman John Belk, the committee consisted of state representatives John D. Gill and Leon C. Van Ornum and state senators William G. Waddell and Hyatt E. Covey, all of whom were bent on discerning how the sabotage took place, who was involved, and why. The first person interviewed was the current warden, George Jameson, who explained that the inmates had used wooden-handled shoemaker’s knives (kept “sharp as a razor”) to cut the twine as it went around the bailer, and that prison personnel failed to notice the misdeeds because the twine had already been wound. “If a knife were jabbed in at any time during the winding of the ball,” Sen. Waddell asked, “it could cut it to the center. . . . [and] would have every appearance of being all right?” Jameson responded that such was exactly the case.

Deputy Warden A. H. Muchow testified later that guards found the knives in the twine warehouse, where the culprits could have slit open the sacks of balled twine and cut even more of it.

---

57. Testimony, vol. 1, p. 3.
When prison officials discovered the sabotage but could not identify the culprits, Jameson had reduced the plant to half production in June 1920 and closed it down completely in July. Unfortunately, much of the sabotaged twine had already been shipped. The warden admitted to finding considerable amounts of cut twine in the balls suppliers had returned and were in the process of rewinding it under the guidance of Central Rope Company of New York at a cost of .75 cents per pound.59

Prison officials placed blame for the problems at the plant on personnel. Jameson explained: “To my mind it isn't possible for this institution to make as perfect a twine as can be made by the Plymouth people who have the same men year after year. We have a man here and he serves a year or two years and is in the twine plant, and then we have to instruct a new man. We have to teach them how to operate the machine, how to run the thread, teach them to ball the ball.”60

Twine plant superintendent John S. Noyes added that there were too many transfers of inmates in and out of the factory. Individuals would be transferred to the prison farm, kitchen, or garden, or be paroled just as they learned the factory work. Yet, Noyes, who had previously worked eleven years for Plymouth Cordage, testified to the overall quality of the South Dakota twine. “To be honest,” he said, “I would say it would be just a trifle inferior, not much. I have had Plymouth twine that was not as good as ours, ... and I have had it better.”61 As to how the sabotage could have occurred, Jameson and Muchow noted that they were short by three or four guards in the plant during the time of the sabotage. Superintendent Noyes agreed that the prison was short-staffed, claiming he had noticed more guards on duty in similarly sized prison twine plants that he had visited in North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.62

Discovering exactly who was involved in the sabotage and why was a more difficult matter. Officials identified four convicts whom they believed were the culprits and maintained that they had probably con-

spired with others. The committee wanted to know as much as possible about these men and called on them to testify. The first was George Newman. Prison officers Carl Struck and Martin Brusveen had caught him in the act of cutting twine several times beginning in 1919, and Deputy Warden Muchow testified that Newman had confessed to the deed, although he later recanted. Muchow stated that Newman was "what we call a crank" and had been removed from work in the twine plant because of his quick temper and penchant for making trouble. Superintendant Noyes agreed, calling Newman a "disturber." Furthermore, Noyes had informed Warden Redfield that the prisoner "wasn't fit to be on the baller" because he was "too nervous" and that he had assaulted a guard. Struck told the committee that Newman was "half wild and half crazy" and "had no business in the twine plant." Muchow had transferred him to the warehouse but, according to Noyes, Newman was back working in the plant three weeks later when the twine cutting occurred.

Newman, who was incarcerated for thirty-eight months, had since been released, but Muchow encountered him by chance in Yankton and summoned him to appear at the hearing. The former prisoner admitted that he knew of the cutting, but the dialogue that followed during questioning by Senator Waddell reflects the difficulty of discerning the entire truth:

Waddell: In fact, you did some cutting yourself, didn't you?
Newman: That would not be for me to say.
Waddell: You might say whether you did or not. This committee wants to know.
Newman: It might get me in bad if I did it, anything like that, you know.
Waddell: What is the ground on which you fail to answer this?
Newman: I say no, I never cut any myself.
Waddell: We have the testimony of a number of men here who say

64. Testimony, vol. 1, p. 32.
that they saw you cut twine. I would suggest that if you want to get in bad, the best way to do it is to shy around the proposition. . . .
You are under oath. . . . What have you to say? 66

Newman again denied committing the act and went on to implicate fellow convicts Joe Foreman, Otto Lehman, and Joe Kofka, saying that he not only had seen them do it, but they had talked to him about it. 67

Foreman and Lehman testified at the committee's next hearing, where both men denied the charges. Lehman even suggested that if any twine had been cut, it had happened by accident, although he subsequently admitted to knowing that guards had caught Newman in the act. Kofka also denied any involvement but told Muchow at one point that he had accidentally cut one string of twine. 68 Kofka then attempted to pin the blame on Foreman, testifying that he had heard that Foreman "was the best cutter." Asked if he knew of others involved, Kofka replied that he would not mention names because he did not "want to see anybody else get into trouble." 69

Uncovering the reasons for the twine-cutting incidents proved even more difficult than fixing blame. Several theories emerged from the committee's proceedings. Warden Jameson offered that his predecessor, Guy Redfield, had denied the inmates parole and that "they made up their minds they would get even, and they did get even." 70 Deputy Warden Muchow, Superintendent Noyes, and convicts Foreman, Newman, and others agreed, with Newman claiming that Redfield "would promise them anything they would ask for, and he never fulfilled his promises, so they figured they would get even with him that way." 71 Prison officer Martin Brusveen also suggested that Redfield "probably made more promises than anybody could keep in a place of this kind." 72 As usual, however, some of the inmates contradicted one an-

68. Testimony, vol. 1, pp. 27, 154, 168, 179, 300, 304.
70. Testimony, vol. 1, p. 4.
71. Testimony, vol. 1, p. 98. See also pp. 14, 158.
other. Otto Lehman continued to insist that there was no revenge involved, only accidental cutting.73

As testimony proceeded, other issues and possible reasons for the twine cutting surfaced. Inadequate pay (eight cents an hour for nine-and-one-half-hour shifts) and poor living conditions during Redfield’s administration topped the list. Foreman told of “tiny cells” that had “hot, foul air” in summer but were cold in winter, had no toilet system, and were infested with bedbugs.74 Noyes explained, “The men were pushed from those unsanitary cells to that dusty, noisy, greasy twine plant, and back again, and it bred dissatisfaction.”75 Kofka complained of poor medical service, claiming that the doctor who regularly made rounds at the penitentiary was always drunk. “In October [of 1920] he was so drunk,” the inmate stated, “he couldn’t even [drive] out of the gate, and that’s a wagon gate.”76 Several inmates testified that there was never enough to eat, and inmates William Vandry and Thomas Hubbard complained about occasionally having to work with wet and rotten sisal.77 “Poor management [and] cheap grade of material,” Hubbard testified, “had something to do with the state of mind which caused men to chop twine.”78 Redfield later told the committee that the bad twine was purchased from the United States Food Administration.79

Perhaps even more disturbing were the stories of the cruel treatment that former deputy warden Mike Colligan (now deceased and replaced by Muchow) meted out. Vandry testified that the treatment was inhumane, and Foreman referred to Colligan’s brutality as one of the grievances that led to the twine cutting.80 Hubbard testified, “I saw a man beaten ’til you couldn’t tell whether he was a Negro or what he was. Then he was chained up for eight days in an unconscious condition.” He added, “I believe that some of the men quit cutting twine

73. Testimony, vol. 1, p. 179.
when Muchow came to the prison, but he couldn’t do very much toward eliminating Colliganism while . . . Redfield was warden.\textsuperscript{81}

In fact, the committee’s proceedings aired quite a bit more of Redfield’s dirty laundry. Matters like filling his personal car with gasoline from the penitentiary pump, taking home between twenty-five and sixty-five pounds of sugar every month from the prison kitchen during the war when individuals were allowed only two pounds a month, serving prisoners spoiled venison from a hunting trip to the Black Hills, and even absconding with twelve quarts of cranberries designated for a prison Christmas dinner all surfaced here.\textsuperscript{82}

Redfield had been equally remiss in his handling of the twine-cutting situation. Prison guard Carl Struck testified that he had seen Newman cut the twine and had reported it “six or seven times,” but that no action was ever taken. Struck also mentioned that Deputy Warden Colligan had even told him he could do nothing about the situation.\textsuperscript{83} State Examiner Leonard Shagar, however, testified that Colligan then went over the warden’s head and reported the incident to his office. Shagar told the committee he had advised Colligan “to put the man in the hole [solitary confinement].” Colligan replied that he had done so but that “the big man” had taken him out. Shagar indicated he was sure Redfield knew all along about the sabotage but refused to deal with it.\textsuperscript{84}

A more serious charge, and part of the reason Redfield resigned, was that he had allegedly accepted a bribe of four-hundred-fifty dollars to give prisoner Earl Butters early parole and help him escape to Ontario, Canada. The tale unfolded during testimony from various prisoners, Butters, his wife Leonara (who learned he had married another woman while he was still married to her), and a special agent of the state sheriff’s office in Pierre working in tandem with the state’s attorney’s office in Minnehaha County. Most of the committee’s questioning of the former warden, however, revolved around the twine plant, concerning which he denied any misconduct. Redfield, who

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{footnote}81. Testimony, vol. 2, pp. 73, 107. \end{footnote}  
\begin{footnote}82. Testimony, vol. 1, pp. 159–60, 243. \end{footnote}  
\begin{footnote}83. Testimony, vol. 1, pp. 81–82. \end{footnote}  
\begin{footnote}84. Testimony, vol. 4, pp. 70–71. \end{footnote}
\end{footnotes}
had gone on to work in the automobile business in Sioux Falls, blamed the problems on the poor conditions that existed at the penitentiary when he took over following Warden Swenson’s death, the cricket infestations at the time, and other factors. As for Butters, Canadian officials extradited him back to South Dakota, where he was reincarcerated at the penitentiary and put to work in the factory reballing cut twine.85

Committee members also pursued another line of questioning in an effort to discover whether the twine-cutting episode was part of a larger conspiracy to attack the state or destroy the twine plant. Board of Charities and Corrections member Charley Day raised suspicions that the action was fueled by inmates who belonged to the radical labor union known as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or “Wobblies”). He told the investigating committee that the whole state was suffering “from I.W.W. sabotage.” According to Day, “They burned elevators and corn cribs, damaged crops, and . . . supplied the very worst type of men we have had in the prison.”86 Day’s accusation that IWW members had sabotaged the twine was based more on conjecture than fact but prompted others on the committee to question several witnesses about a possible Wobbly plot. While none believed such a plot existed, Martin Brusveen, who served for a time as the plant’s assistant superintendent, did not rule the possibility out. Senator Waddell asked him, “Might it not come from the doctrine of organizations like the I.W.W., which we know as a matter of fact, has a propaganda for the destruction of property?” Brusveen replied, “Possibly so,” but admitted he had never heard talk of any such plot.87 Nor had John Noyes or guard Tom Finlay.88

None of the suspect convicts drew any links to the Wobblies. George Newman, whom Warden Jameson had identified as an IWW member, denied any connection in his testimony. When Senator Waddell asked him, “What do the Industrial Workers of the World call this when anything is done to delay or damage the output of any-

thing?,” Newman replied that he did not know. Waddell, seemingly exasperated, then asked, “Did you ever hear the word sabotage?” “No sir,” was Newman’s terse reply. Joe Foreman testified that the prison did not even “allow any I.W.W. papers, or anything like that to come in.” Foreman was aware of the accusations, however. He continued, “The State’s Attorney told me that they had . . . some [Wobbly] literature [that] came out of the twine wrapped up in the balls, and they tried to make me say that I was an I.W.W. and that I had helped destroy the twine and so on.” None of the alleged Wobbly literature was ever presented as evidence. As historian Herbert Schell has noted, Wobblies during the World War I era were often scapegoats, “suspect whenever acts of violence . . . occurred.” The vast majority of the comments taken during the committee hearings reveal that the most probable reason for the twine cutting was a desire to get even with a despised warden rather than make a political statement.

The committee also queried prison officials and the Board of Charities and Corrections concerning what measures had been taken to prevent such misdeeds in the future. Warden George Jameson reported that he had ordered warehouse knives to be stored under guard and that guards were to accompany workers when they went to obtain additional tools. While there had been a shortage of guards and low employee wages during Redfield’s term, Jameson assured the commission, “We have a better class of fellows here and there is a better feeling, and that has a whole lot to do with it.” Finally, the warden suggested that “the proper thing to do” would be to double inmates’ wages from twenty-five cents to fifty cents a day, as “I am getting good work out of them.”

The Board of Charities and Corrections itself came under fire when the committee interviewed its members. They reacted testily, especially in regard to the notion that they had neglected their oversight duties. Charley Day stated that he would occasionally inspect the twine, which was all that was “humanly possible for the members of

the Board to do. [We] can’t stand at the machines and superintend the manufacture of that twine,” he exclaimed. Furthermore, Day added, “I don’t know why the farmers of South Dakota can’t trust the machines that wind this twine ... as much as they ... trust the machines that wind the twine of the International Harvester Company.” Clearly irritated at this statement, Chairman Belk questioned Day on how much the board actually knew about the plant operations. “We fear you know very little,” he asserted. Day snapped back, “Suppose you were on this Board, how would you expect to find out what was being done ... except by having it reported to you?” He then assured the committee that no one regretted the shipments of cut twine more than did the board members.94

A statement the next day from board member Amund Ringsrud was equally defensive. “The warden is responsible for the management of this institution,” stated Ringsrud. “We are not supposed as a Board to act and manage every detail and inquire to see whether they are properly handled.” He went on to point out that the Board of Charities and Corrections had seven institutions under its care, and that “it would take more time than all the members of this Board have to look after these details.” Ringsrud concluded, “We are not experienced in the manufacture of twine and are not supposed to be.”95

Despite the negative tone of much of the testimony, a number of individuals stepped up to defend the prison twine plant. State Examiner Leonard Shagar testified that it was a valuable asset to the state by keeping “a leverage on the outside trust” and preventing exorbitant prices. He quoted one farmer who had pleaded, “Don’t let them destroy the twine plant. The only time it caused any trouble was when Redfield got in and we had the cut twine.”96 Samuel Torgeson, a farmer from Carthage, traveled to Sioux Falls to make a similar statement. “I wish this plant would keep right on making twine,” he said. “I think that if it hadn’t been for this twine plant, twine would have

been a good deal higher for us.” Torgeson stated that his neighbors held similar opinions, having experienced one year when they failed to get their order in to the prison and had to pay five to ten cents more per pound for twine from a private company. As for the quality of prison twine, Torgeson “didn’t see much difference” in comparison with other products.97

On 5 February 1921, following ten days of testimony and often contentious debate, the legislative committee concluded its hearings and returned to Pierre. “State Twine Plant Not To Be Abandoned,” announced a front-page headline in the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* two days later. The article reported that officials had found “nothing startling” in their investigations and quoted Senator Covey as saying the factory would remain open.98 In its final report, the committee also recommended that retailers and consumers be refunded 2.8 cents per pound for twine sold in 1919 and 1.96 cents per pound for twine sold in 1920. All damaged twine brought in was to be reballed and sold for 2.5 cents less per pound than the price for new twine, which was to be set by the State Board of Charities and Corrections. The Seventeenth Legislature enacted the committee’s recommendations before adjourning its 1921 session.99

The measures Warden Jameson instituted to prevent further twine sabotage appear to have worked, for there are no more records of such disturbances in the prison’s twine plant. It continued to be productive and profitable throughout the 1920s. Jameson reported in 1928 that he was then employing two hundred inmates and running two shifts a day to keep up with demand. Inmates continued earning twenty-five cents a day into the 1930s. Many convicts, Jameson noted, sent the full amount of their low earnings home to assist their families. In 1929, the penitentiary added a factory for the manufacture of license plates and road signs.100

Prison workers loaded twine bundles onto carts at the factory warehouse to prepare for shipping.

The twine plant survived the depression of the 1930s, but not without suffering from the weaker demand brought about by drought and insect infestations. Wheat harvests in the state hit an all-time low of 158,000 bushels in 1934. Even though restrictions on the sale of twine out of state had been lifted to help with cash flow, other penitentiary twine plants began competing aggressively with one another and with
corporate manufacturers. In 1932, a price war broke out when International Harvester and Plymouth dropped their prices by three-fourths of a cent per pound, prompting the Minnesota and Wisconsin prisons to reduce their prices in order to compete.\(^{101}\)

South Dakota jumped into the fray when Warden Jameson announced that twine would be cut to seventy-five cents a hundred-weight “so as to be in line” with Minnesota. “This price is ruinous,” he told George D. Wagar, an official with the North Dakota State Penitentiary, “But it cannot be helped.”\(^{102}\) Wagar, worried that South Dakota’s action would hurt his business, wrote, “What is to stop dealers and other customers in North Dakota [from] going to your dealers in South Dakota close to the border and buying twine at your prices?”\(^{103}\) Jameson’s terse response reflects just how competitive the twine business had become. “We are not going to deviate from our announced price,” he declared. “We are not caring whether we are selling outside of the State or not. . . . We deemed it necessary to make the price equal to Minnesota, because they are serious competitors of ours.”\(^{104}\)

Aggressive marketing, however, could not make up for the shortfall caused by dwindling crops. By 1936, Acting Warden Leo F. Craig announced that “owing to the severe drouth” he was being forced to curtail twine production dramatically. “This leaves most of our men who have been employed in the twine plant idle,” he wrote, mentioning that he was studying other “possible methods of keeping the men busy.”\(^{105}\) By 1939, the bad crops resulted in a net loss of $78,749.89 for the twine factory.\(^{106}\)

The 1940s were better for the plant, but by the end of the decade the growing use of combine harvesters across the state severely cut the

102. Jameson to Wagar, 24 May 1933, State Penitentiary, Twine and Cordage Plant Misc. Correspondence, Series 30374, Box 2, Archives, State Historical Society of North Dakota (SHSND), Bismarck.
103. Wagar to Jameson, 22 May 1933, SHSND.
104. Jameson to Wagar, 24 May 1933, SHSND.
106. Twenty-Sixth Biennial Report of the State Board of Charities and Corrections (1940), p. 120.
need for binder twine. By 1950, the twine business was “a mere shadow of its former self,” according to Warden G. Norton Jameson. “The situation has become quite acute,” he remarked, “and new industries to employ prison personnel are now most important.” The prison factory had started to manufacture baler twine for hay in 1949, as other state prisons had done, but the volume of production would never approach that of the binder-twine business. In 1950, the penitentiary discontinued making binder twine.107

The combine, which could both cut and thresh grain, eliminating the need to bind the stalks, had an immense impact on Great Plains agriculture and labor, as has been discussed at length elsewhere.108 The widespread adoption of the new technology not only halted the production of twine at numerous state penitentiaries but also ended the demand for sisal from Yucatán, Mexico, putting that state in a downward economic spiral from which it has never recovered. It further changed the labor patterns of prison inmates, farmers, and migrant harvesters. The various twists and turns in the story of binder twine in South Dakota demonstrate how a variety of events—local, state, national, and international—intertwined to form a vital chapter in the state’s agricultural history. In the end, it was technological change, not sabotage, that concluded the story.

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society 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.

All illustrations in this issue are property of the South Dakota State Historical Society, State Archives Collection, except for those on the following pages: p. 111, from Karl Wegner, Sioux Falls, S.Dak.; pp. 130, 133, 135, from Craig Oberle, Mellette, S.Dak.; p. 158, from William E. Lass, Mankato, Minn.; pp. 159, 170, from Harry D. Latta, Winchester, Va.; p. 188, from Homestake Mining Company, Lead, S.Dak.