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Observations from My Life with Farm Movements in the Upper Midwest

Farm movements played a big role in the history of the Upper Midwest, attracting thousands and thousands of farmers, and none of these efforts was monolithic. Whether it was Populism, or the Nonpartisan League, or the Farmers Union, or the Farmers Holiday, their ranks included different political currents, stretching from right to left. Over a forty-year period, I have looked at pieces of this broad topic, focusing much of my attention on left-of-center agrarian efforts in the twentieth century, beginning with the Farmers Union in the Cold War years.[1] One thing led to another as I researched in county courthouses, rural cemeteries, weekly newspapers, state historical societies, local museums and libraries, FBI files, and Moscow archives, and as I talked with former participants and relatives among other observers.[2] From these sources and background experiences, I offer the following six observations and hunches about farm movements in the region.

First, there are important differences between historic Populism and the farm movements that followed it, despite the fact that later agrarian efforts often utilized similar rhetoric and themes. A symbolic illustration of such differences can be shown in the comparison of two historic photographs: one from the 1890s showing Kansas Populists on their way to a meeting in horse-drawn wagons and buggies, the other,

1. William C. Pratt, "Fred Stover, the Iowa Farmers Union, and the 1948 Progressive Campaign," paper read at the Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, Nebr., 8 Mar. 1973; William C. Pratt, "The National Farmers Union and the Cold War, 1946–1954," paper read at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, Duluth, Minn., 24 Oct. 1980.

2. *See* William C. Pratt, "Adventures and Dilemmas of a Grassroots Historian," *South Dakota History* 21 (Summer 1991): 121–35, and "From Montana to Moscow: Researching Rural Radicalism on the Northern Plains," *North Dakota History* 65 (Winter 1998): 2–16.

vintage 1918–1919, of a Nonpartisan League (NPL) meeting in Montana crowded with dozens and dozens of cars.[3] While I do not want to make too much of this comparison, it graphically represents the shift from the age of the horse and wagon to the age of the automobile, and it showcases the greater organizational potential the new conveyances afforded. "Without Ford cars, hundreds of Ford cars," a newspaper reported in 1919, "it is unlikely that the organization of the Non-Partisan League could have been achieved so swiftly and so compactly. [Arthur C.] Townley started with one, to buy which he had to borrow the cash. Subsequently he and his agents employed fleets and squadrons of Fords. They cruised the State [North Dakota], criss-crossed it and covered it up and down and across the middle. The job couldn't have been accomplished by wagon or by horseback. . . . Only by means of the flying squadrons of handy tin lizzies . . . was it possible to visit personally virtually every aggrieved farmer in the State." Added to this advantage, "thousands of the farmers owned Fords themselves, and that fact made it easy for them to attend the rallies organized by Townley." The NPL sponsored picnics and barbecues all over North Dakota to which farmers brought their wives and children, combining politics with socializing.[4]

While the Omaha Platform of historic Populism may have foreshadowed reforms that were later implemented, it took twentieth-century organizational efforts to bring most of those innovations about. The Farmers' Alliance promoted co-operatives in the nineteenth century, but it was the American Society of Equity and the Farmers Union that built co-ops that had staying power.[5] Another big break between the

3. Dickinson County photograph, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kans.; Charles Edward Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League: A Chapter in American Evolution* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1920), facing p. 304.

4. *New York Sun*, quoted in "Mr. Townley, and Fargo's Bank Blow-Up," *Literary Digest* 63 (1 Nov. 1919): 47, 50.

5. If there was such a thing as a "co-operative crusade" in the Upper Midwest, it probably occurred in the twentieth century, even though Lawrence Goodwyn argued that a "cooperative crusade" explained the emergence of historic Populism: "To describe the origins of Populism in one sentence, the cooperative movement recruited American farmers, and their subsequent experience within the cooperatives radically altered their political consciousness" (Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in*

Traveling under a banner and the American flag, a group makes its way in buggies toward a Populist Party meeting in Dickinson County, Kansas, in the 1890s.

Populist era and later decades was in the political arena. Never again were farmers the key constituency for a third party at the national level. Twentieth-century farm movements, specifically the Nonpartisan League and the Farmers Union, had a more lasting legacy than did the Populism of the 1890s; yet, historiographically there is much less attention paid to these later efforts, especially in recent decades. In some

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America [New York: Oxford University Press, 1976], p. xviii). The first sentence of a later chapter entitled "The Cooperative Crusade" reads, "The agrarian revolt cannot be understood outside the framework of the cooperative crusade that was its source" (ibid., p. 110). This intriguing argument has been challenged in Stanley B. Parsons, Karen Toombs Parsons, Walter Killilae, and Beverly Borgers, "The Role of Cooperatives in the Development of the Movement Culture of Populism," *Journal of American History* 69 (Mar. 1983): 866–85. In some locales, the political movement and the formation of co-ops occurred roughly at the same time. John A. Sautter, "Social Transformation and the Farmers' Alliance Experience: Populism in Saunders County, Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 90 (Spring 2009): 6–21.

respects, the great enthusiasm for the new labor history may explain such neglect, but whatever the reason, it should be addressed.[6]

That said, I do not want to leave the impression that there were no connections between historic Populism and more recent farm movements. Rhetorically, the latter often used the same language of

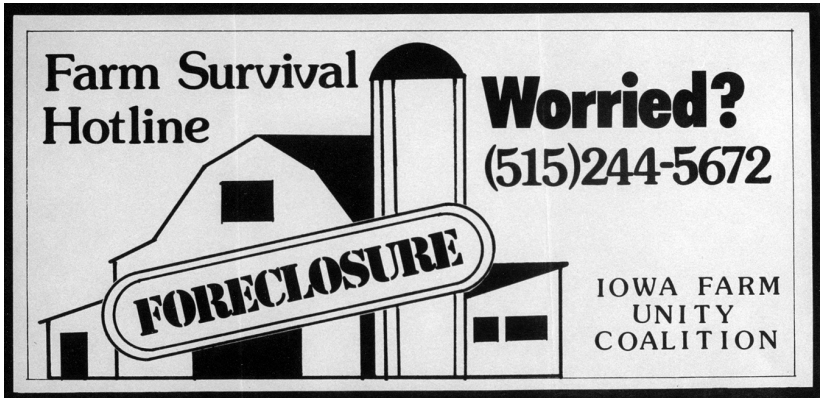
6. More than a decade ago, I wrote, "Over the past forty to fifty years, many American historians seemingly have developed a kind of historiographical amnesia about twentieth-century progressive farm movements." I also suggested, "Perhaps we should consider a paraphrase of Richard Hofstadter's earlier metaphoric comment: 'Our historical imagination was born in the country and has moved to the city'" (Pratt, "Legacy of Populism: Progressive Farm Organizations in the USA in the Twentieth Century" [in Russian], *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia* ["Modern and Contemporary History"] [Jan.–Feb. 2001]: 52). Two recent historical treatments of American reform and radicalism continue this neglect of twentieth-century farm efforts. Neither Doug Rossinow's *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) nor Michael Kazin's *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011) mentions the Nonpartisan League, the Farmers Union, the farm revolt of the 1930s, or the agrarian role in the attempt to build a left-wing New Deal coalition in the post-World War II era.

By the time this gathering of the Nonpartisan League in Montana was photographed around 1918, modes of transportation and grassroots political organizations had changed significantly.

producerism and claimed an identity of interest between farmer and laborer. There also was an attempt to use the earlier history to justify the newer movements. In 1917 and 1918, the NPL newspaper, for example, featured a series that recounted Populist efforts of the 1890s in several states in the region. Its article on the South Dakota third-party experience featured a photograph of cattle in the field with the caption: "Farmers Once Captured South Dakota."[7] More than four decades later, the Iowa-based U.S. Farmers Association claimed a similar heritage, announcing: "In a very real sense this new Association will be a continuation of the comprehensive program of the Iowa Farmers Union and the midwest movements that preceded it such as the old Anti-Imperialist League, the Non-Partisan League, the Populist Party and other independent farmer and political movements."[8] Then, in the

7. E. B. Fussell, "Farmers Once Captured South Dakota," *Nonpartisan Leader*, 7 Jan. 1918. For more on the Populist movement in South Dakota, *see* R. Alton Lee, *Principle over Party: The Farmers' Alliance and Populism in South Dakota, 1880–1900* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011).

8. *U.S. Farm News*, Nov.–Dec. 1959. The U.S. Farmers Association was a left-wing spin-off of the Farmers Union. The Iowa Farmers Union had been kicked out of the national organization over disagreement on foreign-policy issues, particularly its opposition to the Korean War. Aside from losing the Farmers Union affiliation and the name, there was little difference between the old Iowa Farmers Union and the new group, and Fred



The Iowa Farm Unity Coalition was one of many groups formed during the farm revolt of the 1980s, the result of high debt, low prices, and plummeting farm incomes.

At the height of the farm crisis in South Dakota, several thousand farmers marched on the state capitol during the legislative session of 1985.

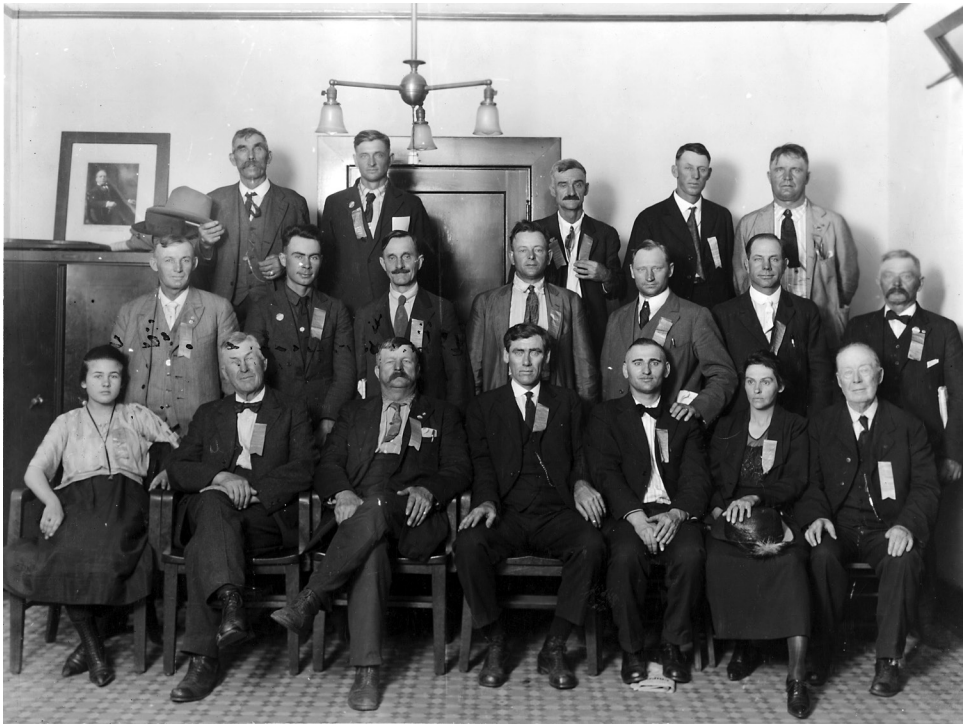
1980s, in what was the last significant farm protest in United States history, numerous groups identified themselves with historic Populism, including the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition and the North American Farm Alliance.[9] But ultimately what emerged in the twentieth centu-

Stover remained as president. William C. Pratt, "When the Old Agrarian Left Met the New: Fred Stover and the U.S. Farmers Association, 1959–1990," paper read at the Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Ga., 14 Apr. 1994. I attended the association's annual convention in the 1970s and 1980s and, as a result, met a number of veterans of left-wing causes such as the farm revolt of the 1930s, the Communist Party, and the 1948 Henry Wallace campaign.

9. William C. Pratt, "Using History to Make History?: Progressive Farm Organizing during the Farm Revolt of the 1980s," *Annals of Iowa* 55 (Winter 1996): 24–45.

ry, whether it was the NPL, the Farmers Union, the Farmers Holiday, or the farm revolt of the 1980s, proved to be quite different from the earlier movement. Times were different; problems were different; and workable solutions were different. Perhaps more than anything else, the Populist label helped legitimize the later protests.

Second, just as they had differed from historic Populism, post-Populist movements differed significantly from one another. The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota was the single most successful agrarian political movement in United States history. For a period of time, it dominated the state's politics to an extent that Populists never did anywhere. NPL-sponsored enterprises like a state mill, a state elevator, and the Bank of North Dakota remain permanent institutions to this



These delegates from South Dakota attended a Farmer-Labor convention held in Chicago in July 1920.

day.[10] The NPL never achieved that level of success anywhere else, but it played a big part in the background of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, which emerged as the most significant third party at the state level in the twentieth century.[11]

The Farmers Union, on the other hand, was a different kind of organization from either the People's Party of the 1890s or the NPL. It was a family farm organization with activities for the whole family, more akin to the earlier Farmers' Alliance than any agrarian political movement. I also believe that women played a more important role in the Farmers Union than in any other farm movement discussed in this article. Education was a major goal of the organization, ranking with co-operation and legislation, and women often served as education directors at both the local and state level. Historian Mary Neth provides a solid account of one woman who played an active role in the Wisconsin Farmers Union, concluding, "While women were not equal in positions of leadership, the [Farmers Union] did recognize their work and the importance of a community and family base, which women generally organized."[12] In addition to its co-operative grain elevators and gas sta-

10. For more on the NPL, *see* Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955); Larry Remele, "Power to the People: The Nonpartisan League," in *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, ed. Thomas W. Howard (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), pp. 66–92; and Scott Allen Ellsworth, "Origins of the Nonpartisan League" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1982). While born in insurgency, the NPL evolved over time into a liberal faction within the Republican Party, where it remained until it shifted to the Democrats in 1956 and then faded into history. *See* Lloyd B. Omdahl, *Insurgents* ([Brainerd, Minn.]: n.p., 1961).

11. *See* Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979); Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

12. Neth, "Building the Base: Farm Women, the Rural Community, and Farm Organizations in the Midwest, 1900–1940," in *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*, ed. Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1988), p. 351. My focus upon women in the Farmers Union is not meant to diminish their efforts in other groups, but historically there has been more opportunity for them to participate actively in organizations such as the Farmers' Alliance or the Farmers Union than in political movements such as Populism or the NPL. *See* Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Women in the Southern Farmers' Alliance: A Reconsideration of the Role and Status of Women in the Late Nineteenth-Century South," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall 1975):

tions and its sponsorship of educational programs, the Farmers Union also lobbied at the state and federal levels. In its prime, especially in the Dakotas and Montana, it was the single most important left-of-center farm organization of any kind.[13]

72–91. For women in the NPL, *see* Karen Starr, "Fighting for a Future: Farm Women of the Nonpartisan League," *Minnesota History* 48 (Summer 1983): 255–62; Kim E. Nielsen, "'We All Leaguers by Our House': Women, Suffrage, and Red-Baiting in the National Nonpartisan League," *Journal of Women's History* 6 (Spring 1994): 31–50. Alice Lorraine Daly was a leader in the South Dakota NPL and its successor, the Farmer-Labor Party, and served as the NPL gubernatorial candidate in 1922. In a 1998 paper, I offered a brief overview of women in regional farm movements, focusing especially on two women in the Farmers Union in northeastern Montana. William C. Pratt, "Women and Farm Movements on the Northern Plains," paper read at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 2 Oct. 1998.

13. *See* Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Twentieth Century Populism: Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900–1939* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1951), chap. 8; John A. Crampton, *The National Farmers Union: Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965); William C. Pratt, "Glenn J. Talbott, the Farmers Union, and American Liberalism after World War II," *North Dakota History* 55 (Winter 1988): 3–13.

The board of directors for the Farmers Union Oil Company in Grenora, North Dakota, posed next to the Farmers Union service station for this photograph taken by Edgar Syverud in 1936.

Perhaps the most unique farm movement of all was the farm revolt of the 1930s, the most significant participant of which was the Farmers Holiday, a protest organization. At its peak in 1932–1933, it seized front-page attention, especially in the Upper Midwest, putting pressure on government at all levels, not to mention on banks and insurance companies, as it protested conditions during the Great Depression. The Holiday often operated in the orbit of the Farmers Union but was not subject to its direction. Picketing roads to market towns, stopping farm sales, and engaging in other kinds of unruly behavior, the rural revolt of the depression era was more decentralized than any other farm movement to that point in United States history.[14] The various organizations involved were different from one another and from earlier movements, but many of their participants were veterans of nineteenth-century rural causes themselves or were sons and daughters (or neighbors) of such veterans. For example, A. W. Ricker, who was a key figure in Farmers Union ranks in the pre-World War II era, was described as "an ex-Producers' Alliance man, ex-Nonpartisan Leaguer, ex-Socialist, ex-Populist, and ex-Farmers Alliance man."[15]

Third, radicals or left-wingers often took part in regional farm movements, whether we are talking about Populism, the Nonpartisan League, or the Farmers Union, and helped to organize and sustain

14. *See* John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); Lowell K. Dyson, "The Farm Holiday Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1968); William C. Pratt, "Rethinking the Farm Revolt of the 1930s," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Summer 1988): 131–44. "Mother" Ella Bloor, a Communist Party notable, played a prominent role in the farm revolt of the 1930s, ultimately being arrested in Nebraska and serving jail time in 1934. *See* William D. Rowley, "The Loup City Riot of 1934: Main Street vs. the 'Far-Out' Left," *Nebraska History* 47 (Sept. 1966): 295–327. Three local women that I researched in western Nebraska and northwestern North Dakota were also active in the insurgency. *See* William C. Pratt, "Women and the Farm Revolt of the 1930s," *Agricultural History* 67 (Spring 1993): 214–23. Other studies on this topic are Leslie A. Taylor, "Femininity as Strategy: A Gendered Perspective on the Farmers' Holiday," *Annals of Iowa* 51 (Winter 1992): 252–77; Linda Ford, "Women on Holiday: Gender and Midwest Agrarian Activism in the Thirties," *Mid-America* 77 (Fall 1995): 285–302; and Linda Ford, "Another Double Burden: Farm Women and Agrarian Activism in Depression Era New York State," *New York History* 75 (Oct. 1994): 373–96.

15. Saloutos and Hicks, *Twentieth Century Populism*, p. 235.

The Farmers Holiday, a protest group active during the 1930s, used dramatic tactics to focus on the plight of farmers. These protesters used logs to block a highway leading into Omaha in 1932.

them. I am not using these terms as interchangeable with "liberals" and "progressives." Rather, by radicals or left-wingers, I mean people who identified themselves as socialists or constituted a less-defined grouping that sought to change or reform the economic order well beyond the mainstream of liberalism. One historian defined "left-wing radicals" as "those who placed extremely high value on equality and who subjected capitalism to severe moral criticism over its allegedly exploitative and dehumanizing aspect. A leftist was not necessarily a socialist."[16]

16. Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*, p. 10. Rossinow also observed: "The line separating leftists from liberals often was smudged or downright invisible, no matter how often people to either side tried to mark it clearly and impassably."

Radicals took part in farm organizing efforts from an early date. There was a left-wing of Populism, and after the third-party cause declined, many ex-Populists enlisted in the Socialist Party (SP) of Eugene Debs, himself a veteran of the Populist movement. Yet, most ex-Populists rejoined the two major parties; in the Upper Midwest that usually meant the Republican Party. What is often overlooked is that quite a bit of homesteading took place in this region after 1900, especially in the Dakotas and Montana, and many farmers, new to their particular locales, opted for the Socialist cause in the years before United States entry into World War I. As a result, Socialists often ran for office in rural districts. While they did not meet with the same degree of success as counterparts in Oklahoma, some candidates were elected on the SP ticket, including sheriffs in Williams County, North Dakota.[17]

Socialism as an identifiable political movement, however, never enjoyed the electoral success of historic Populism. On its own, Socialism was a fringe movement in rural areas of the Upper Midwest. Yet, Socialists did play a major role in organizing the region's most significant agrarian political movement—North Dakota's Nonpartisan League. Many of the organizers, including key figures such as Arthur C. Townley and A. E. Bowen, came out of the SP, not only in North Dakota, but in other states including Minnesota, South Dakota, and Montana. Even so, despite opponents' charges, the NPL was not a Socialist organization, and its major officeholders in North Dakota were not Socialists.[18]

17. *See* William C. Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains, 1900–1924," *South Dakota History* 18 (Spring/Summer 1988): 1–35. *See also* Jackson Putnam, "The Role of NDSP in North Dakota History," *North Dakota Quarterly* 24 (Fall 1956): 115–22. For Oklahoma Socialism, *see* Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910–1924* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1976); James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

18. *See* Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*; Remele, "Power to the People." Among league opponents, however, it was an article of faith that the NPL was a dangerous Socialist operation. *See* [Jerry D. Bacon], *A Warning to the Farmer against Townleyism as Exploited in North Dakota: An Expose and Inside Story of the Methods, Personnel and Menace of the Most Remarkable Phenomenon of Fifty Years in American Political History* (Grand Forks, N.Dak.: By the Author, 1918); Asher Howard, comp., *The Leaders of the Nonpartisan*

The NPL, like the Farmers Union or the farm revolt of the 1930s, was a broad-based movement that had a constituency that ranged from the radical left to the center. For left-wingers, the NPL, the Farmers Union, or the Farmers Holiday often was the only show in town. For them, the only choice was to back the broad-based effort or to maintain a position as a solitary radical witness. There were times and places, however, when the options did include left-wing groups, the most controversial of which was the Communist Party. From the early 1920s, some Communist presence could be found in the rural areas of the Upper Midwest.[19] While Communist efforts in the countryside should not be exaggerated, they were most pronounced in the 1930s and 1940s.

Communist influence during the early years of the Great Depression was most likely to be found in Communist-led groups like the United Farmers League rather than in the party itself. In this era, "reds" were critical of the Farmers Union and sought to promote the United Farmers League. Once the Farmers Holiday movement emerged in 1932, however, Communists in many locales participated and sometimes assumed leadership roles, especially in the Dakotas and parts of Minnesota and Nebraska.[20] By 1935, however, the insurgency was over, and the Communist movement world-wide shifted away from an earlier sectarian stance to the broader-based Popular Front, seeking to build an anti-fascist coalition. In the United States, that meant an attempt to work out alliances with groups it earlier had denounced as "social fascist." The United Farmers League was shut down and its followers urged to join the Farmers Holiday or the Farmers Union. Now, reds

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League (Minneapolis, Minn., [1920]); W. E. Quigley, "The Truth about the Non-Partisan League," *Lincoln Daily Star*, 14, 30 Apr. 1919.

19. The most comprehensive study of Communists and farmers is Lowell K. Dyson, *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). In 2002, I attempted a briefer account of Communist activities in the 1920s, utilizing Communist Party materials unavailable to Dyson. William C. Pratt, "Communists and the American Countryside in the 1920s," paper read at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, Minneapolis, Minn., 11 Oct. 2002.

20. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*; Dyson, *Red Harvest*; William C. Pratt, "Communists and the Farm Revolt of the 1930s," paper read at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, Grand Forks, N.Dak., 11 Oct. 2001.

tried to work within the Farmers Union, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, and the Democratic Party.[21]

With the exception of the period of the Stalin-Hitler nonaggression pact, Popular Front politics continued, at least in some ways, throughout World War II and immediately after. The Farmers Union was part of this development, as its national leadership and some of the state affiliates often were willing to work with the left on organizational and broader issues. The president of the Minnesota unit for most of the 1940s probably was a Communist, and the presidents of the Iowa and Montana (and perhaps North Dakota) organizations were considered on the left until the 1948 Henry Wallace campaign. At that point, only Fred Stover of Iowa was publicly willing to back Wallace's third-party presidential effort.[22] Communism became an issue within the Farmers Union in these years, resulting in the adoption of illiberal policies in regard to dissenters in its ranks.[23] By the time of the Korean War, left-wingers, Communist or not, were increasingly isolated in the rural areas of the Upper Midwest with little chance to participate in any kind of leadership role in the Farmers Union or other organizations unless they kept their politics to themselves.

Fourth, state lines make a difference whether we are talking about Populism, the NPL, the Farmers Union, or the farm revolt of the 1930s; each movement's make-up and experience differed from state to state. Jeffrey Ostler published an important book in 1993 entitled *Prairie Populism*, which has relevance to other farm movements as well. In his study, he examined why Iowa Populism was much less successful than it counterparts in Kansas and Nebraska. His basic explanation was that Iowa's political culture at the time was significantly different from

21. Dyson, *Red Harvest*, pp. 125–49.

22. William C. Pratt, "The Farmers Union and the 1948 Henry Wallace Campaign," *Annals of Iowa* 49 (Summer 1988): 349–70.

23. William C. Pratt, "The Farmers Union, McCarthyism, and the Demise of the Agrarian Left," *The Historian* 58 (Winter 1996): 329–42. *See also* Bruce E. Field, *Harvest of Dissent: The National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998). Crampton noted, "McCarthyism and its repercussions prompted some of its [the Farmers Union's] most forthright statements on civil liberties, and some of its most timid actions" (Crampton, *National Farmers Union*, p. 50).

By 1948, when former secretary of agriculture Henry Wallace (center) ran for president with the endorsement of the Communist Party, the Farmers Union had begun to look on its own left-leaning members with disfavor.

that of the other two states, constituting a greater factor than differing crops, weather, or soil.[24]

Significant state differences are also apparent in twentieth-century farm movements. While the NPL had great appeal to many farmers, it was unable to meet with the same degree of success outside of North Dakota.[25] It came closest in Minnesota, but even there its strength was

24. Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880–1892* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993). D. Jerome Tweton looked at the differences between Populist movements in the two Dakotas in "Considering Why Populism Succeeded in South Dakota and Failed in North Dakota," *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): 330–44.

25. Morlan observes: "Despite the fact that the League program was designed to operate primarily at the state level, the existence of state boundaries in a very real sense

limited to the western part of the state. Significantly, however, the NPL played a big part in creating the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, which became a major player in state politics for more than two decades, electing United States senators, congressmen, and governors.[26] In some respects, the league campaign to organize Minnesota marks the peak of the NPL insurgency. Even before the 1916 election triumph in North Dakota, the NPL launched an organization drive into the neighboring state, sending organizers in more than eighty Fords into the western part of the state. In 1918, it reportedly bought 260 cars for $130,000 for its campaign.[27] That the NPL could muster that kind of money (and/or credit) and recruit that many organizers for an organizational drive in that era is simply astounding. No rural movement since then has

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hindered its spread. North Dakota had been taken by storm, almost before an organized opposition could develop, but the opposition was prepared in advance for the entry of the League into other states" (Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, p. 357).

26. *See* Charles R. Lamb, "The Nonpartisan League and Its Expansion into Minnesota," *North Dakota Quarterly* 49 (Summer 1981): 108–43; Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*; Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*.

27. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, p. 126; Saloutos and Hicks, *Twentieth Century Populism*, p. 186. *See also* Ralph Lee Kloske, "Nonpartisan Leaguers in Minnesota: A Consideration of Organizers, Members, and Voters" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1976).

Members of the Nonpartisan League in South Dakota gathered on the state capitol steps in December 1921.

mounted an effort on that scale. Elsewhere in the region, the league's political success was much more limited, electing some county officials and legislators in states like South Dakota and Montana.[28]

The most important left-of-center farm organization after the NPL heyday was the Farmers Union, which remains to this day a significant player, especially in North Dakota. While not a political organization, it was interested in politics and had the equivalent of a political or organizational culture that varied from state to state. It was active in Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota prior to 1920, but it did not establish a permanent presence in North Dakota and Montana until the late 1920s. Since it was not a political organization, the political allegiances of its members varied greatly. In this sense, like the Farmers' Alliance of the late nineteenth century, it was more like a labor union than a political party. Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, and even Communists might be involved, and left-wingers were quite active in some locales at times. The North Dakota affiliate was a major force in the national organization for decades.[29]

In the early Cold War era, there was quite a bit of debate particularly on foreign policy within the Farmers Union, and Iowa, Minnesota, and Montana had left-wing leadership. Following the 1948 Henry Wallace campaign and especially with the outbreak of the Korean

28. The United States-Canadian border also served as a barrier to NPL efforts in the Prairie Provinces, where crops, terrain, and weather often were similar to North Dakota. There, differences in political culture and political institutions are most responsible for NPL lack of success. *See* Paul F. Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels* (1948; reprint ed., Regina, Sask.: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1997), pp. 57–76; Kelly Hannan, "The Non-Partisan League in Alberta and North Dakota: A Comparison," *Alberta History* 53 (Winter 2004): 13–23. Provincial borders in Canada have played the same role there as state lines in the United States, with different political movements emerging in the neighboring provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta. *See* Seymour Martin Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan: A Study in Political Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1968); Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

29. *See* Crampton, *National Farmers Union*; Saloutos and Hicks, *Twentieth Century Populism*, pp. 219–54; Charles and Joyce Conrad, *50 Years: North Dakota Farmers Union* (N.p.: 1976).

War, the national organization shifted to the "vital center" and became part of the liberal anti-Communist mainstream. While pockets of left-wing sentiment persisted in the region, only the small Iowa organization continued to support left-wing positions, including opposition to United States involvement in the Korean fighting.[30]

My fifth observation is that any discussion of the left or radicalism also needs to take into account anti-radicalism, which was endemic in the Upper Midwest, both in town and in the countryside. While always present, it probably was most pronounced in 1917–1920, after the United States entered World War I, through the postwar Red Scare, the late 1930s, and the early years of the Cold War from 1946 to 1954. Both governmental authorities at all levels and private vigilante groups played a major role in hindering and suppressing the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) across the Midwest and West.[31] This wave of repressive anti-radicalism was so broad that it hurt liberal reform causes as well as the left, and the NPL also found itself under attack, despite its leaders publicly backing the war effort and providing each of its organizers with a twenty-five-dollar Liberty Bond. Aside from North Dakota, where the league was in power, its organizers and speakers often were subjected to harassment, including mob violence. Historians in Minnesota and Nebraska have best documented these abuses, but they occurred in other states as well.[32] While such harassment is not the sole reason the NPL failed to thrive outside of North Dakota, it clearly was part of the explanation.

In some locales in the 1930s, vigilantes assisted by local officials attacked participants of left-wing farm protest. For example, in Marshall

30. Pratt, "Farmers Union, McCarthyism, and the Demise of the Agrarian Left." *See also* Field, *Harvest of Dissent*.

31. For the IWW, *see* Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905–1930* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001).

32. Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety during World War I* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), chap. 8; Robert N. Manley, "The Nebraska State Council of Defense and the Nonpartisan League, 1917–1918," *Nebraska History* 43 (Dec. 1962): 229–52.

County, South Dakota, a group of thugs attacked a United Farmers League school, seizing and beating seven men in the basement of a local business.[33] Anti-radicalism also was a useful weapon for conservative politicians, particularly in the 1938 elections. In South Dakota, liberal Democratic candidates for Congress and the governor's office were denounced as soft on Communism. One historian who has studied this campaign referred to the episode as "McCarthyism before McCarthy."[34] In Minnesota, the Republican campaign against the Farmer-

33. "Fascists Attack School on Wheels," *Producers News*, 30 Aug. 1934; "School in SD Raided by Gangs," *Farmers National Weekly*, 31 Aug. 1934. *See also* Allan James Mathews, "The History of the United Farmers League of South Dakota, 1923–1936: A Study in Farm Radicalism" (Master's thesis, University of South Dakota, 1972).

34. John E. Miller, "McCarthyism before McCarthy: The 1938 Election in South Dakota," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 15 (Summer 1982): 1–21.

"Workers of the World Unite," a slogan popular with members of both the Communist Party and the International Workers of the World, tops a child's gravestone in the Bergen, North Dakota, cemetery.

Labor administration also utilized anti-radicalism (not to mention anti-Semitism) successfully.[35] Communists and their allies had backed the Democratic candidates in South Dakota and the Farmer-Laborites in Minnesota, to be sure, but the charges of Communism were often overblown, especially in South Dakota.[36]

In the post-World War II era, the Farmers Union frequently was a target of the "red" issue. Its vulnerability worsened with the outbreak of the Korean War. The national and state leadership assumed more cautious positions, aligning themselves with Truman's foreign policy. Even so, United States senator Styles Bridges denounced the Farmers Union as a Communist front in a long speech, and opponents of the organization, including the Farm Bureau, used that speech against the union in many communities.[37] Despite moving to the "vital center," the organization could not immunize itself from the "red scare." In northeastern Montana, a Farmers Anti-Communist Club was formed to at-

35. For the 1938 campaign, *see* Steve J. Keillor, *Hjalmar Peterson of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), pp. 143–69; Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, pp. 251–75. *See also* Hyman Berman, "Political Antisemitism in Minnesota during the Great Depression," *Jewish Social Studies* 38 (Summer–Fall 1976): 247–64. Berman argues: "Political anti-Semitism was used successfully in the United States to defeat the Farmer-Labor governor in the 1937 election" (p. 247). An important source of anti-radicalism came from within the Farmer-Labor Party itself. Its more conservative elements raised the Communist issue against Farmer-Laborite governor Benson's administration and unsuccessfully challenged it in the 1939 primary. That bitter fight foreshadowed issues of the fall campaign that resulted in the Farmer-Labor defeat. There was Communist involvement in the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party in the mid and late 1930s, but that topic is outside the scope of this essay.

36. For a well-researched account that is critical of Communist involvement in Minnesota politics, *see* John Earl Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's DFL Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Communist involvement in left-liberal causes has been the subject of a bitter political and historiographical controversy for decades. For some observers, no good whatsoever could come from such involvement, and those who believe the contrary are considered naive at best. For such involvement at the local level or in groups such as the Farmers Union or the Farmer-Labor Party, I think it more productive to evaluate that kind of effort on a case-by-case basis. I also am reminded of a comment attributed to John L. Lewis when questioned about the use of Communists in organizing the CIO in the 1930s: "Who gets the bird, the hunter or the dog?" (quoted in Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*, p. 149).

37. Pratt, "Farmers Union, McCarthyism, and the Demise of the Agrarian Left," pp. 332–33.

tack the Farmers Union, and anti-Communist speakers attacked the union across the region for years. The Farmers Union was not the only target of anti-radicalism, however, and this kind of hysteria could have a chilling effect in a small rural community.[38] The fact that FBI agents had circulated in the region since the early 1940s asking questions about individuals also cast a pall over communities, helping to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.[39]

Sixth, the local history of farm movements remains a wide-open field for study. To date, few localized studies of any rural movement ap-

38. William C. Pratt, "Farmers, McCarthyism, and Politics on the Northern Plains, 1950–1960," paper read at the Western History Association Annual Conference, Tulsa, Okla., 15 Oct. 1993.

39. William C. Pratt, "Farmers, Communists, and the FBI in the Upper Midwest," *Agricultural History* 63 (Summer 1989): 61–80, and "The Fox and the Hounds: FBI Surveillance of Communist Activity in the Upper Midwest," paper read at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, St. Cloud, Minn., 6 Oct. 1989. In the six observations in this article, I am not addressing the self-inflicted wounds that occurred in these movements, though they played a big part in hindering and disrupting their efforts. Morlan writes at one point about the NPL: "The fact remains that the League itself was in no small degree responsible for the decline of support. Who can say what the result might have been had the North Dakota League administration been more wise in its selection of managers for state industries, had the League not become involved in the various subsidiary enterprises" (Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, p. 350). For a detailed account of one example of NPL overreach that undercut its political support, *see* Larry Remele, "The North Dakota Farmers Union and the Nonpartisan League: Breakdown of a Coalition," *North Dakota Quarterly* 46 (Autumn 1978): 40–50. Remele looked at the effect of the NPL's attempt to establish a Consumers United Stores network that would compete with co-op stores sponsored by the Farmers Union. The NPL stores were owned by the league and were not co-operatives. The Farmers Union had initially backed the NPL but broke with it after the Consumers Stores episode and became one of its opponents. This break hurt both organizations and played a major role in the temporary decline of the Farmers Union (in the 1920s, it underwent a revival and became the most important farm organization in the state). I have elsewhere discussed the oligarchical nature of the NPL under Townley's leadership. *See* William C. Pratt, "Radicals, Farmers, and Historians: Some Recent Scholarship about Agrarian Radicalism in the Upper Midwest," *North Dakota History* 52 (Fall 1985): 19–20. Internal division and factionalism were problems within the Farmers Union in both South Dakota and Minnesota in the 1930s, not to mention the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. The 1948 Henry Wallace campaign proved to be disruptive, and other examples of self-inflicted wounds in the region's farm movements could be cited as well.

Places like the library in Frederick, a stronghold of socialism in northeastern South Dakota, can be rich sources of material for those researching farm movements.

pear in print.[40] Nevertheless, it is at the grassroots that we have the opportunity to learn how insurgencies like the NPL and the farm revolt of the 1930s functioned, or how organizations like the Farmers Union persisted as long as they did. Almost thirty years ago, I wrote: "Existing scholarship has provided us with a vast amount of information and in-

40. Those that have been published include Jeffrey Kolnick, "Rural-Urban Conflict and Farmer-Labor Politics: Blue Earth County, 1885–1886," *Minnesota History* 54 (Spring 1994): 32–45; Sautter, "Social Transformation and the Farmers' Alliance Experience"; Rodney D. Karr, "Farmer Rebels in Plymouth County, Iowa, 1932–1933," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (Winter 1985): 637–45; Kim E. Nielsen, "Who Were These Farmer Radicals? The Douglas County Farm Holiday Association," *Minnesota History* 51 (Fall 1989): 270–80; Verlaine Stoner McDonald, *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2010); and Daryl Webb, "'Just Principles Never Die': Brown County Populists, 1890–1900," *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): 366–99. For a local study outside the region, *see* Marilyn P. Watkins, *Rural Democracy: Family Farmers and Politics in Western Washington, 1890–1925* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995).

sight into agrarian radicalism, yet, it is in the 'specific situation,' often at the local level, where we discover the clues that help explain its persistence and ultimate decline. It was there that the temptations 'to be "practical"' were rebuffed or accepted, and it is there that we need to dig."[41]

What is required, however, is serious local study rather than simply a search for local examples to support a broader point. Local newspapers often prove to be the best source for information about the goings-on of these rural efforts, reporting names and episodes that can be investigated elsewhere. And, it should be noted, a visit to a place off the beaten path may result in unanticipated rewards in terms of new information and artifacts such as photographs of participants. Simply stated: we do not know what is out there unless we go out and look. State historical societies, archives here and abroad, government agencies and websites, all can provide needed information. But some of us still should look at the map, pack up the car, and drive to places where farmers once organized to save and maintain their farms while dreaming of a better tomorrow. I did it for years, and I heartily recommend it.[42]

41. Pratt, "Radicals, Farmers, and Historians," p. 24 (based on a paper presented at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, in Grand Forks, N. Dak., 29 Sept. 1983).

42. For more on my travels and methods, *see* Pratt, "Adventures and Dilemmas of a Grassroots Historian" and "From Montana to Moscow."

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On the covers: Historians and their work are the focus of this issue, which includes an interview with John E. Miller (front), reflections on farm movements like the Farmers Holiday (back, top), and a reminiscence of George McGovern (back, bottom).