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VOL. XVII Number 18

The Paper of the Oppressed and Exploited
PLENTYWOOD, SHERIDAN COUNTY, MONTANA, THURSDAY, JULY 28, 1934

PHOTOGRAPH BY APRETTI

Huge Picnic Endorses the Communist Ticket

AUSTRIAN CHANCELLOR IS KILLED BY NAZIS

Italian Army Mobilized as Dollfuss Is Killed by Hitler Storm Troopers

1400 Communist and Socialist Workers Thrown in Prison Charged With Attempt to Overthrow Dollfuss; Fascist Terror Rages

Vienna Under Martial Law; all Communication With Austria Ceased; Dispatches From Paris, London, Rome Declared

VIENNA, July 25.—The Fascist dictator of Austria Engelbert Dollfuss, the chancellor who instituted a blood bath among the Austrians, was killed without warning at the shooting hour of the day. Nazi storm troops of a Vienna regiment, seized the building.

The Nazis had arrived in three or four hours and left within an hour or two when they released other members whom they had taken prisoner. They were allowed to leave after a certain agreement had been reached with the Austrian army (Austrian fascist troops which had threatened to attack the chancellery).

Martial law has been declared in Austria. The 1400 workers arrested yesterday 1400 Communist and Socialist workers were arrested by Dollfuss government on charge of having planned to overthrow the Austrian regime, and the white terror is going to sweep Vienna.

During the past few days Nazis have again disturbed the Dollfuss government by bombing Austria. Dollfuss is forced to outlaw the Socialist Party (German) in Austria and to declare that anyone who is a leading outrage is arrested. As a result, Nazis immediately arrested a number of Catholics threatening to force a number of Catholics who would be killed by the government. The Dollfuss government has not dared to be killed to death as of the bombings.

Dispatches from Rome, London and Paris state that all telephone and telegraph communication with Vienna has ceased.

Italy Mobilizes
Another dispatch from Rome briefly states that Mussolini, as Italy's minister of War, Army, Navy and Aviation, has issued orders to mobilize all the military and navy forces of the kingdom to be ready for any eventuality as a result of the Austrian developments.

Hitler Imprisoned Is Cable to J. P. Morgan

NEW YORK.—J. P. Morgan & Co. interest here, thru James D. Mooney, General Manager of the General Motors Corporation, have just received a cable cable from their Berlin representatives which reads as follows:

"HITLER ARRESTED BY VON PAPEN—HELD DICOMMUNICATO—SITUATION BAD—GERMANY IN TURMOIL—"

The Great Britain Corporation has been in contact with German Fascist officials in the German region and the Hitler through the Adolf Opel, a C. G. automobile factory at Eisenstein, Germany which is manufacturing new tanks for the Nazis.

Officials of the General Motors Corporation on receipt of this cable were extremely worried over their business in Germany as to the arrest of Hitler.

SEC. WALLACE IN DOUBLE ROLE ON CROP REDUCTION

WASHINGTON, July 27.—Secretary of Agriculture Wallace today took a double role in his handling of the crop reduction program. He announced that he would recommend a 10 percent reduction in the production of wheat, corn and cotton.

HONOR ANTI-FASCIST GIRL MARTYR



Her father, a socialist and laborer, thousands of Spanish workers, the fascist government of Juan Bata, who was able to reach his country by force and a crowd of other young workers were marching in the country near Madrid when the fascist government was, when the young people with the... The girl's father was arrested and the girl was killed. This photo was taken at the funeral.

Bob Minor Speaks At Farmers' Picnic With 1500 Present

LANGER, OUSTED A SECOND TIME CALLS N. D. LEGISLATURE

Had Tried to Rule by Military Force and Martial Law

SIEMEN, N. D.—After his second term from the North Dakota legislature, Langer has definitely stated that he will not run for office at the same time containing it. It was an Acting Governor.

Communist Candidates Introduced by Harberson as Big Crowd Applauds; Resolution Is Passed Protesting Fascist Terror; "Hands Off Thaelmann"

20 APPLY FOR JOINING C. P.

"Capitalism Is Stifling and Choking the Life Out of Our People," Minor Says, "It Must Be Abolished Explain Role of Classes, Class Parties

The huge crowd of farmers and workers gathered at the Seventeenth Annual Farmers Picnic at Brunk Lake last Sunday, unanimously endorsed the Communist ticket for candidates for the coming elections this fall. The endorsement was given after Bob Minor, of Chicago, veteran leader of the Communist Party, had delivered one of the completest and most inspiring speeches ever given in this part of the country.

AT PICNIC



The picnic, arranged over conducted by the United News Service, was held on the shore of Brunk Lake. The picnic was a success and was attended by over 1500 people. The picnic was held on the shore of Brunk Lake. The picnic was a success and was attended by over 1500 people.

15,000 MAY JOIN MINERS STRIKE AT BUTTE, SEC. SAYS

ANATOLIAN COMPANY CALLS ON GOVERNOR FOR NAIL GUARDIANS

BUTTE, July 27.—Fifteen thousand miners will strike here by August 1. This was the prediction made today by Earl Buchanan, secretary of the union of striking copper miners. Buchanan stated that all miners will join a general strike if by August 1 the Anatolian Copper Mining Company had not granted the demands of the striking miners and another workmen.

Miner officials have advised the government to send in Communist forces to break the National Guard for protection of the mine workers.

All efforts of the government forces to break the strike have failed. The strike is being already three months and the miners are determined to hold out.

Several clashes between the miners and striking miners have taken place recently. Apparently the Anatolian company is finding it difficult to maintain its operations.

The head of the union has said that he will lead the strike for two years and six months. For the union head the labor is supposed to receive \$25 while the government \$1.

Two of the men were considered and shot at the farm. However the government and intervention who did the shooting made work had left of it that they retained the strike. After they had left the place the farmer had to break the strike.

NORTH AND SOUTH DAKOTA BUY HAY IN WESTERN MONT.

Montana Farmers are Told There is no Hay in Mont. Sell Your Cattle

North and South Dakota retail agencies have made large purchases of Montana hay and hay. Billings and Livingston, it is reported.

The report should be of some value, since in Montana farmers have been told to sell their hay.

There is a plenty of hay in the state. Why is it that Montana is told to sell their hay?

What has the situation been? What has the situation been? What has the situation been?

Why are no efforts being made to secure some of the hay that is available in the western part of the state?

Why are no efforts being made to secure some of the hay that is available in the western part of the state?

Workers of Billings Protest Starvation Death of Baby in United Front Demonstration

One Worker Arrested; Six Demonstrators are Refused to Give \$100 Bail; Protest Leaflet Finally Secures Freedom of Arrested

By R. H. Gray
BILLINGS.—Slaves of the present economic system, defiled on June 29 to demonstrate to the public in a united front their protest in Roseville a good time back. "Hands Off" were expressing the protest, and indignation of the workers against the administration of the petty bourgeoisie and the Great Western Dairy Company. It was the first time that a demonstration was ever called against the starvation methods of the racketeering association.

The vast and fine of workers defied not to send a message to the workers after the demonstration office of the General Motors Company. The workers have long been known that they could not approach anything that would hurt the workers and make any response. It was in this case that it was known that it was known that it was known.

The workers had taken a stand of open rebellion against the starvation methods of the petty bourgeoisie. The workers had taken a stand of open rebellion against the starvation methods of the petty bourgeoisie.

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CCC Camp Gets 30 Sheridan Boys

First Contingent Leaves Plentywood Friday to Get Training as Strikers and to Be Trained How to Behave as Wall Street's Cannon Fodder

PLENTYWOOD, July 25.—Thirty Sheridan county boys are going to be sent to a Civil Conservation Corps camp this week, it was announced by the county relief administration today.

The boys are to leave Friday morning by train. Their destination was unknown to the officials. Other sources state that they were to be sent to Fort Ord, Calif.

This is the first contingent of young men from the county that is going to receive military training in the form of "civilian" work.

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RADICAL RULE IN MONTANA

by CHARLES VINDEK

PLENTYWOOD, the seat of northeastern Montana's Sheridan County, is a busy, prosperous, sturdily growing, politically conventional town now approaching a population of 3,000. To a visitor in the 1960's, unaware of its history, it looks and sounds like any other vital American village. Yet in the 1920's when Plentywood had a thousand people or less, the town and country became widely known as the only American community actually governed by practicing "reds" who, far from concealing their radicalism, proclaimed it through the columns of a uniquely militant newspaper, the *Producers News*.

The reasons why this happened, and happened precisely where it did, can be stated only hypothetically. Geography entered into it, and local economic realities. Climate certainly played a part. But other western communities shared the climate and geography and endured the economic seesaw without going to ideological extremes. In Sheridan County special external influences coincided with special internal stresses at a difficult time. Perhaps there were also predisposing traits in the character of the populace. There were extensive settlements of people of the Scandinavian stocks, who already had a tradition of social experimentation together with fine organizing talent. Danish cooperatives at Dagmar, in the southeastern part of the county,

had accumulated several years of successful operation before the radical period began.¹

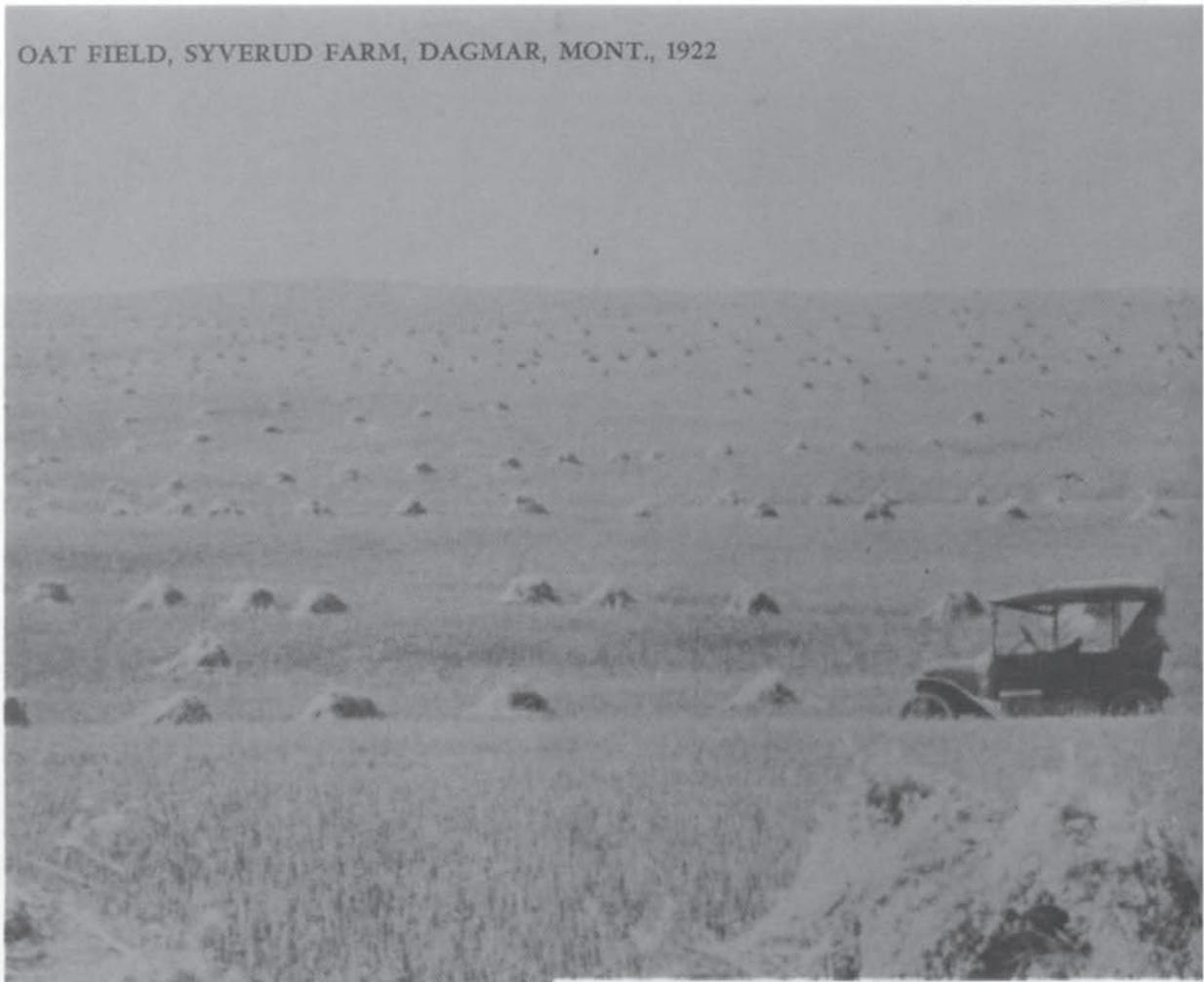
The word "red," as used by the participants themselves, meant anyone who subscribed to radical principles in politics or economics—specifically the principles enunciated by the local leadership in the 1920's and 1930's. Beyond that, the region had no single ideology to which all had to conform; it would be a mistake to suppose that this farm population ever consisted of political sophisticates. Some identified themselves as Social Democrats, some as "Debs Socialists"; many, having no clear conception of political realities, were merely dissatisfied and eager for change. So long as they followed the selected leaders, they were accounted "reds."

The leaders, too, were militant Socialists rather than Communists in 1918 and the early 1920's; after all, the success of genuine Communism was then a very new thing, even in Russia. Affiliation with the Communist party did not become widespread in Sheridan County until well along in the 1920's; it is unlikely that the actual membership ever grew much larger than the 575 who voted the ticket straight in 1932. The others, those who helped swell "red" majorities in the successful 1918-1926 elections, were persons under the influence of radical ideas in general, never disciplined Communists.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Handsome, personable Charles E. Taylor (oval) had been deposed as editor of the Plentywood *Producers News* when the front page reproduced here was printed in the Summer of 1934. He returned shortly thereafter, however, in a vain attempt to bring the paper back to its old influence and readership.

¹ "Historical Data," *Plentywood Herald*, Sept. 24, 1936.

OAT FIELD, SYVERUD FARM, DAGMAR, MONT., 1922



H. B. SYVERUD ALBUM, MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE REGION did not have even the beginnings of a land survey until 1906, when the homesteading era was approaching its end in the country at large. It had no railroad until 1910. White men came late here, and came to a West that had left Wild West traditions behind. The country saw little of the bustle of ranching, which had been—or had been made to seem—the pre-eminent western activity. The area was part of Valley County until 1913 and did not choose Plentywood as its seat until 1914.

This was a frontier of plowlands, not of herds; of group effort to solve group problems, not of gunsmoke and dubious heroics. Its familiar everyday figure was a farmer in blue bib overalls driving a team of nodding draft horses across a dusty field. Because of pressures created by frequent crop failures, its folk heroes would be politicians promising solutions.



The first influence bearing large implications for the future was a soil especially adapted to growing high-protein spring wheat that would later command premium prices. In a good year, such as 1912 or 1915, this land could and did reward six weeks' work in spring and fall with yields as high as 40 bushels of wheat to the acre.

Dry years tended to come in series and at the worst possible time . . . when war drove prices up. For six years following 1915 farmers here had almost nothing to sell, but because of adverse shipping rates, they paid higher than standard prices for everything they bought. Before they had harvested another good crop, the wheat market collapsed.

This demonstration of what they came to regard as settled injustice in the conditions of their lives became the second ruling influence to many in Sheridan County.

From the beginning, the region was politically nonconformist, though not yet "red." It started mildly by endorsing Theodore Roosevelt's split from the Republican party in 1912. During the bitter years of drought and failure, discontented persons organized Socialist groups throughout the county.

In 1917 the Nonpartisan League began spilling over from North Dakota. The League's platform included such planks as abolition of taxes on farm improvements and state ownership of terminal elevators and flour mills. These principles understandably appealed to an area which had great improvements still to make and desperately needed a fairer marketing system. Townspeople at first supported the new hopes, for when farmers lacked money the towns—which had prospered in 1912 and 1915—could only hang on the edge of disaster. Everyone felt the thing to do was spread the League gospel.

EARLY IN 1918 the Socialist and League groups banded together in the People's Publishing Company to found a newspaper at Plentywood. Since no adequate editorial talent existed locally, an editor was chosen by League headquarters in Minnesota—a newspaperman of varied experience named Charles E. Taylor.

The people of the county found Taylor's abilities impressive. Later, when the *Producers News* called him "Sheridan County's most distinguished citizen,"² they accepted the judgment without reference to the fact that its source was a paper he edited.

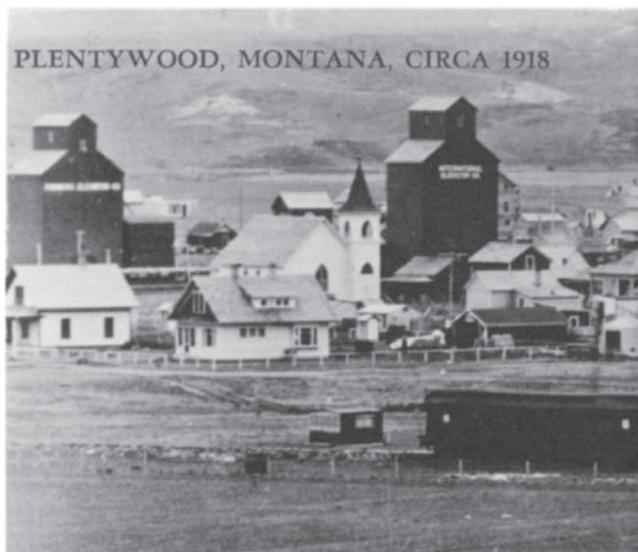
Nevertheless, Taylor's qualities suited his immediate task. He knew how to put himself in the farmer's place, to see issues as the farmer saw them, to express the farmer's feelings as the farmer could not. Initially, at least, he seemed to be the best friend the farmers ever had.

Taylor was born in Wisconsin in 1884, into a family of twelve. From his fifth year the family lived in a "poor quality log cabin" in central Minnesota. He walked three miles to "what was called a school" for three to five months each year until he was 12, when he began supporting himself. At 14 he took a job with a local newspaper and found his life-work.³ Thereafter, he worked in printing plants in many places and in all capacities. In his twenties he briefly edited the Socialist *Border Call* at International Falls, Minnesota.

Taylor took a homestead near International Falls, studied law by correspondence, and in 1908 won election as judge in Koochiching County. Then his health failed. He gave up his homestead and Minnesota career and spent six years in Wyoming recovering from tuberculosis.

² This or similar language was used whenever Taylor ran for office, which was frequent in the 1920's. He was elected to the State Senate as a Republican, serving in the 18th Assembly in 1923. He ran on the Farmer-Labor ticket thereafter, and served in the 19th, 20th and 21st Assemblies. His crowning political achievement was nomination to the U.S. Senate on the Farmer-Labor ticket in 1930, opposing Democrat Thomas J. Walsh and Republican Albert J. Galen.

³ Taylor to author, Sept. 20, 1965.



In 1918 he offered his services to the Nonpartisan League, which had set up the Northwestern Service Bureau to sponsor three dozen new publications. It sent him to Plentywood in March, with authority to launch the *Producers News* and wage Montana's first League campaign.

That first year the Leaguers elected every official on the county ballot except state senator and superintendent of schools. The *Producers News*, starting on April 19, outstripped already established local papers of a dozen communities and won almost total circulation in the county, although many recall that the paper was mailed to hundreds who never really subscribed, but from whom the *Producers News* later tried to collect. Nine months of circulation success, however acquired, established a Taylor legend, an almost superstitious faith in his capacities. Even his enemies swore he could solve any problem, outargue any man.

The fact is that Charles E. Taylor was, by the record of his own printed words and in the memory of many still living, an alternately brilliant and oddly unstable man. He had great personal charm but with overtones of such chameleon-like qualities that he was a difficult editorial and political foe.

In one of his earliest editorials upon assuming editorship of the *Producers News*, he went to considerable length to set forth his own patriotism. Printed on



May 10, 1918, it was in response to some remarks about Socialism printed by rival editor Joseph F. Dolin of the Plentywood *Pioneer Press*:

"If he [Dolin] wants to attack the Socialists, it's alright with us. Most of them are used to it anyway. However, for the benefit of any person interested, the editor would like to remark that he comes from pretty old American stock; in fact his ancestors, several of them, fought with General Washington, also in the second war for Independence, and that they helped save the Union in '61, that many of the family were in the Spanish War and that he is the only member of his own immediate family old enough that is not with the colors and before this thing [World War I] is fought out very likely he will be with them. He also owns a Liberty Bond and helps the Red Cross as much as his means will allow. He is also a citizen of the United States . . . his ancestors were neither Tories nor Hessians . . ."⁴

As time went on, Taylor's editorials became more vigorous, if not faultlessly worded. He once called a rival paper "that nauseous rag that emits itself once a week from its sty down the street."⁵ Caught up in the excitement of political argument, he wrote sentences that became paragraphs and touched on a dozen

⁴ P.N., May 10, 1918.

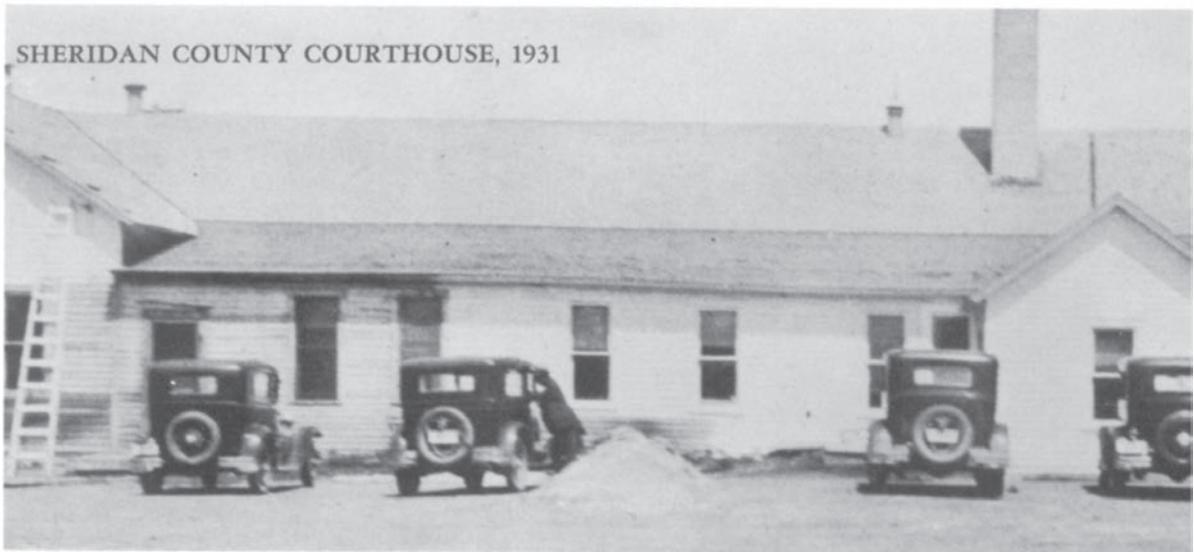
⁵ P.N., Nov. 17, 1922.

subjects before they reached a full stop. In a statement called "The Policy of the *Producers News*," the paper declared:

" . . . a group of class-conscious socialists in Sheridan County, then composing what is now Roosevelt, Daniels, and Sheridan counties, Montana, conscious of the great struggle existing between the classes, the exploited and the exploiters; the farmers and workers in one class whose labor produces all of the wealth, and the bosses and bankers in the other class, who produce nothing but grow rich and mighty on the loot plundered from the workers in the fields and factories, and conscious that this struggle existing throughout the world and nation, also was just as ruthless here in Sheridan County and Montana as elsewhere, and understanding fully that farmers must organize to win in the struggle with these class enemies, and realizing that the press, large and small, supported and defended the exploiters and their system, the capitalist profit system, and consistently and consciously fought the working and producing class in the interest of the robbers and the looters, and especially that the local press, dominated by the bankers and bosses through their local agents were especially vicious and unreliable and misleading, and feeling the necessity of a local paper, owned and controlled by the farmers and workers, to support the cause of the farmers and workers in the great class struggle and to

SHERIDAN COUNTY COURTHOUSE, 1931

H. B. SYVERUD ALBUM.



print the news, including the news which the ruling class suppressed, and interpret it from the workers' point of view so that the workers understand the significance, and just as important, to lead and direct them in their daily struggles with their exploiters; this group of socialists organized the People's Publishing Company, selling the small denomination shares widely among farmers and workers of the area, and finally in the spring of 1918 launched the *Producers News* in a modest way, as a class struggle paper."⁶

But Charles Taylor used words with infectious enjoyment, and knew how to deflate pretensions by burlesquing them. When a Plentywood lawyer advertised himself as a *Norsk advokat* (Norwegian attorney), hoping to win the Norwegian settlers as clients, Taylor took to mentioning him as the *Norsk abekat* (Norwegian monkey). The Norwegians were convulsed; the idea of Taylor making effective use of Norwegian terms struck them as the height of humor.

A controversial thinker since boyhood, Taylor soon made no secret at all of his Communist convictions. He thoroughly believed in the "dictatorship of the proletariat," the ultimate magic of the Communists of the period. Known as "Red Flag" Taylor, he hailed Marx and Lenin as prophets of the inevitable. At the same time he delighted in H. L. Mencken's all-enveloping scorn of prophets.

⁶ P.N., April 15, 1935.

On a public platform he was a compelling figure, approximately six feet tall and massively handsome, with a tendency to put on weight. Since his conquest of pulmonary illness, his voice had developed great power and was well adapted to open-air exhortation in the days before speaker systems.

THE NONPARTISAN League ran its candidates on whatever ticket seemed convenient—in 1918, the Republican. But unsettling changes took place within its ranks almost at once. In its home state its troubles culminated in the recall of Governor Lynn J. Frazier in 1921; in Minnesota and Montana it was transformed into the Farmer-Labor party.

Plentywood leaders had not been content with the League system of handling funds. Members paid annual dues of \$16 each, which, with a membership including virtually every farmer in the region, meant a lot of money in those days. Now, with the League disintegrating and the new party not disposed to police its members' other affiliations, the Taylor group saw a chance to keep the contributions of money in local hands. Using the Farmer-Labor name for their candidates, they began adapting for their county machine an earlier organization, the Progressive Farmers' Club, which under their direction became a "brotherhood" with oaths, grips, passwords, and every device commonly used by such groups.



They elected all their candidates in 1922, easily repeated the performance in 1924, and almost repeated it in 1926, losing only the county superintendent of schools.

A Socialist force limited to a small region necessarily modified its objectives. The original platform was all but forgotten by the mid-20's. In place of abolition of taxes on farm improvements, the region settled in 1922 for the honor system of assessments: i.e., each taxpayer himself assessed his taxable property. Instead of control of terminal markets, farmers had to be content with radical-minded men as managers of local grain elevators.

Taylor saw the task of exposing current wrongs as no less vital than that of propagandizing for the future. This crusading function did sometimes mobilize public opinion and correct abuses: e.g., in its first year the *Producers News* told the full story of a seed-grain swindle by which farmers, after a total crop failure, were sold seed which contaminated new ground with noxious weeds.

Some traits of the leadership were but little known to the local population. After 1922, when Rodney Salisbury, Taylor's lieutenant, was elected sheriff, Sheridan County became a secure haven for laborers who moved with the harvest. Many were "wobblies" — members of the International Workers of the World — determined men who carried red cards and

took the rights of Labor seriously. In a sense an American underground, "wobblies" were repeatedly subjected to murderous attack—as in Butte on August 1, 1917, when Frank Little was lynched, and in Centralia, Washington, November 11, 1919, when the IWW hall was mobbed and several persons killed.⁷

The regime gave almost equal consideration to bootleggers—with the approval of most of the public. The sheriff's men occasionally raided a saloon and captured or destroyed a few bottles of fluid; but surviving old-timers swear that not one raid came without ample warning. The county was, in fact, wide open. Saloons offered a choice of gambling games and devices which in Outlook (population 200) included an improbable roulette installation. Every hamlet had at least one illegal joint, Plentywood half a dozen. Enemies of the regime, however, were subject to raids by authorities, duly reported by the *Producers News*, which stated on Sept. 16, 1927: "Cases against several persons who were alleged to be operating slot machines in Sheridan County were tried before Justice John McElroy on the complaint of Sheriff Rodney Salisbury . . ." Apparently the laws could be enforced, if the cause was right for the administration.

THE 1920's were generally good years for farmers. In 1927 and 1928, wheat was so heavy that teamsters hauled smaller loads to spare wagons and horses during threshing time. Region and regime prospered together, although the latter's luck began and ended a bit the sooner.

Business boomed in towns of the region. Scobey expressed its exuberance in 1925 by hiring scandal-ridden Chicago White Sox players such as Happy Felsch and Swede Risberg to help in its baseball rivalry with Plentywood. Old-timers recall that Plentywood, which had hired the famed colored pitcher, John Donaldson, went down to defeat twice to Scobey that year, betting enthusiasts winning several thousands of dollars from rival fans.

⁷ William D. Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book*. International Publishers, New York. 1929. pp. 301 and 352-358.

Meanwhile, the *Producers News* created a continuing sensation. The informed air of much of what was printed about the larger world and world issues gave its front page and sometimes its editorial page the quality of a much bigger publication. This was a matter which Taylor himself oversaw. Usually he saw it with a judicious, measuring eye.

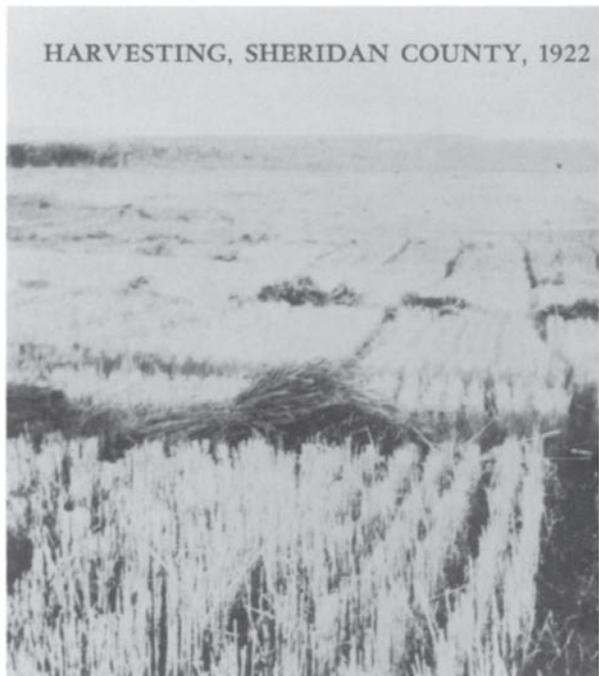
The exception was the Russian experiment. He held steadfastly to the view that Communist good faith was the rock on which humanity's future could be founded. " 'Soviet' Means Honesty," said the headline over one of his editorials as early as March 21, 1919.

Of 18 weeklies established in the county, only three survived the circulation blitz of the *Producers News*—the *Plentywood Herald*, the *Medicine Lake Wave*, and the *Redstone Review*. One by one, the others failed. Only three seriously attempted to fight Taylor—The *Plentywood Pioneer Press*, the *Sheridan County Farmer*, and from 1928 to the end, the *Plentywood Herald*.

In the first ten years Taylor made no attempt to please businessmen. With his paper in virtually every home in the county and with facilities for blanketing wider areas at will, he felt no need to solicit advertising. He let advertisers come to him. His attacks on businessmen began when the paper began. "Small Town Kaisers Get Some Jolt from Organized Farmers," said a headline in his second issue, April 26, 1918. He took it as axiomatic that businessmen on whatever scale cared little for their country, much for their own profits. Farmers, on the other hand, he characterized as selfless patriots who planted wheat "to help feed the country in its hour of terrible ordeal."⁸

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to tell the story of the *Producers News* without some attention to its attacks on individuals; for, though the least attractive of its features, they were by no means the least

⁸ P.N., April 19, 1918 et. seq.



influential, especially on the paper's own career. During its 19 years it launched campaigns of out-and-out criminal libel against dozens of persons, of whom many had no means of striking back. These attacks maintained constant and widespread fear in the area, a feeling of absolute certainty that any man who opposed or offended the Taylorites would be abused and possibly destroyed.

Most of the early attacks had some intelligible motive involving politics or group advantage. The *Producers News* denounced the Anaconda Copper Mining Company mercilessly, calling it "the enemy of popular government."⁹ Many Montana officials were portrayed with a copper collar. It seems ironic that the Anaconda Company ran a series of ten large advertisements called "Taxation Talks," in late 1921 and early 1922. The issue after the last ad appeared, the scathing denunciations began.

Candidates for office and rival newspapermen were the most consistent victims, however. Joseph F. Dolin, who published the *Plentywood Pioneer Press* until its suspension, and then continued publishing the *Medicine Lake Wave*, bore ten years of frequent assault¹⁰ and retaliated

⁹ Feb., 1922, et seq.

¹⁰ P.N., early 1918 at least to 1928.



by denouncing Taylor as “Chief Bolshevik” of a “socialistic red-flag, IWW organization.”¹¹ But as time went on, Taylor’s shafts lost whatever precision of aim they might once have had, and struck woundingly at obscure men whose pain served no end.

From that welter of slander one can cite only a few examples within the scope of an article:

1. When the manager of a Plentywood restaurant withdrew his advertising from the *Producers News* in August, 1927, he received brutal publicity. Front-page stories asserted that cockroaches had been found in the food at the Elgin Cafe. Finally an emissary of the paper chose a busy hour to display a well-cooked mouse which he swore had just been served to him in his soup. References to the “mouse in the soup” continued in the paper for at least two years, and became a boomerang in the 1928 election campaign.

2. Lawrence S. Olson, an early Taylorite who resembled Taylor in silhouette, left the group to join the staff of the *Plentywood Herald*. Thereafter the *Producers News* called him only Lard S. Olson, with the initial universally under-

stood to be drawled. It charged that he had been caught crawling out of some belle’s bedroom window; and when Olson cried “character assassination!” it declared its regrets: “Wonder where he keeps his character. No one ever dreamed that old baboon had any such thing.”¹²

3. A Plentywood surgeon who had spoken out on some forgotten issue, found himself accused—though never in legal form—of kidnapping a patient from a hospital in another town and directly causing his death.¹³

4. After an Outlook resident demanded payment of money he had loaned to the People’s Publishing Company, the *Producers News* sought to fix upon him the moral responsibility for two deaths in his family, and in effect suggested that he be mobbed and manhandled if not lynched. There was neither proof nor charge against him; but the malignity of the attacks, following soon after a family disgrace and tragedy, left him broken. “The *Producers News* refuses to howl with the pack,” Taylor wrote in an editorial which managed to repudiate the pack while boasting of his own incitement of it, “but this might be an appropriate time to call attention to the fact that many cocky fellows have howled before they got through trying to wreck the *Producers News*.”¹⁴

AN INEVITABLE accumulation of resentment hastened the movement’s fall. Few people had at that time developed deep convictions hostile to its ideology; indeed few understood its ideology.

A few of Taylor’s followers voiced their opinions loudly, however. In a letter to the editor, one U.F.L. member warned: “The capitalists are coming out with all the dirty lies they can think of against the Communist Party, but the truth will prevail. The Communist Party stands for humanity, truth and hard-boiled facts. In that they are closer to God Jehovah than the capitalists, whose God is money,

¹² P.N., Feb. 7, 1930.

¹³ P.N., Nov. 17, 1923, et seq.

¹⁴ P.N., June 27, 1930.

¹¹ Plentywood Pioneer Press editorial defiantly reprinted in P.N., April 18, 1919.



SHERIDAN COUNTY COURTHOUSE STAFF, 1926

All but a few members of the courthouse staff on duty at the time of the theft of Sheridan County funds in 1926 are identified in this picture, taken from the H. B. Syverud album in the Montana Historical Society archives. Back row, left to right: an unidentified man; Surveyor Hans Rasmussen; Pete Gallagher; County Agent Melvin Ostby; Justice of the Peace George Wheeler; Deputy Assessor Chris Christensen; Representative to Congress Clair Stoner; Assessor Ole Aspelund; Unidentified; Clerk of District Court Dan Olson, Sheriff Rodney Salisbury; E. S. Koser; Clerk and Recorder Neils Madsen; Bert Thurlensen and G. C. Bantz. Front row, from left to right: Linda Hall; Alice Redmond; Mrs. L. Pass; Unidentified; Superintendent of Schools Emma Crone; County Attorney Arthur C. Erickson; Associate Justice of Supreme Court S. E. Paul; Anna Hovet; Mrs. Hansh (Hendrickson); Miss Hansen; Mrs. Erna Timmerman, and an unidentified woman.

power and greed. Don't let the Capitalists confuse you. They are bigger liars than Jim Crow, and he was kicked out of hell."¹⁵

Had the leadership possessed the judgment to check its aggressions, to refrain from pushing its advantage too far, it might have stayed in favor and in power. As it was, all that was needed to give hostile sentiment swift growth was a pretext for a campaign on grounds that could be represented as moral.

A pretext offered itself at the end of November, 1926. After a day of heavy tax receipts, County Treasurer Eng Torstenson and Deputy Anna Hovet were preparing to leave the office. Masked bandits burst in, locked them in the vault, and made off with a reported \$106,000 in cash and bonds.

If not a perfect crime, it was a competent one: the professional investigators failed to solve it. To enemies of the regime, however, it was simple. That winter and the following spring and summer they discussed it endlessly and solved it easily in every saloon and on every street corner: Taylor and Salisbury, they said, had committed the robbery by prear-

rangment with Eng Torstenson, who had unlawfully kept large sums in his office for the raid. The insurance company's three-year refusal to pay the county's claim was cited in support of this thinking.¹⁶

Harry E. Polk, a North Dakotan, bought the Plentywood *Herald* and led the 1928 campaign on more sober issues. With the whole record since 1918 to draw upon, he showed, for example, that the *Producers News*, which for ten years had accused Joseph F. Dolin of padding bills for county printing, had in fact padded its own bills. He showed that Salisbury—headlined as the “marathon sheriff”—had collected mileage for distances he could not possibly have traveled in six years. He cited the “mouse in the soup” as a convenient symbol of *Producers News* irresponsibility and hammered relentlessly at the rule by blackmail which the region had endured.

When the votes were counted, two Farmer-Laborites survived in office. The whipped candidates airily staged a “banquet” in honor of the winners and pretended to feature a real crow as their own share.

¹⁶ The claim was paid by the National Surety Company in August 1929, increased to \$126,000 by accumulated costs and interest.

¹⁵ P.N., May 27, 1932.

THE *Producers News*, however, showed the real depth of discouragement. For the first time in its career it spoke of a "boost Plentywood policy" and tried to conciliate the business community. It repudiated its old political affiliations and declared itself independent. This phase lasted only long enough for Taylor to learn that nobody believed a word of his new policies. He resumed his support of the radical party. In 1930, the year the Depression really began to make itself felt, he was rewarded with nomination to the U.S. Senate on the Farmer-Labor ticket.

In Northeastern Montana, depression meant not just one thing. Disasters haunted the region following the economic crash. Drought and dust storms returned year after year; there were overwhelming insect infestations; wireworms destroyed potatoes; grasshoppers and army worms struck in such force in many localities that they hid every green thing with their bodies and left nothing behind, not even weeds, when they passed on. Farmers who owned reserves of wheat saw the price fall to 50 cents a bushel, then to 25 cents.

Revolutionists believed this to be the chance for which they had been waiting. Capitalism, they insisted, had demonstrated its fatal weaknesses. Radical ideas were spreading everywhere. Surely here, in the one American community where radicals had governed for a decade, there could be no doubt of success. Once more the leaders rebuilt their machine, and created a new organization: The United Farmers League or UFL.

But something had been irretrievably lost. Faith in the leaders was dwindling; the leaders, as if under compulsion to hasten the end, blamed and denounced one another. The *Producers News*, its advertising falling off, was cut in May, 1930, from its usual eight or more pages to a single sheet of four pages. As its appearance declined, so did its circulation and, by an odd corollary, its interest as reading matter. The extravagant Taylor devices which had made the paper enter-

taining, even when abusive, departed from it. It no longer had room for anything but propaganda in a style which depended chiefly on reiteration for its effects and seemingly sought to exhaust rather than persuade. Party release followed party release, spaced by exclamatory upper case fillers: SUPPORT THE UFL! DEFEND THE SOVIET UNION!

Its original slogan was "A paper of the people, for the people, by the people" but this was soon changed to "An official organ of the United Farmers League." Eventually a slogan in line with Communist ideology was chosen when the *Producers News* was proclaimed "The Paper of the oppressed and exploited."

It was, in fact, being kept alive by direct contributions of Communist party funds. In return the party demanded direct supervision. Taylor was suddenly not radical enough. Under suspicion as a "revisionist and renegade," he was quietly eased out; Erik Bert of New York took his place. Eventually Taylor separated from the party—"expelled," say old-timers. Taylor's version is that he "left the party in June 1935, about the time the informers were joining."¹⁷

Certain that cumulative disasters had brought a truly revolutionary mood, the new leaders ignored the popular scruples that Taylor had tried to conciliate, and behaved more and more like citizens of a soviet state. They established a quasi-military Young Communist training center in the Farmer-Labor Temple, the auditorium which everyone in the movement, radical or less so, had helped build in 1924. They organized their children as Young Pioneers, the red model for all later political training groups for children.

When Rodney Salisbury's 14-year-old daughter Janis died, they gave her a "Bolshevik funeral"—so named in the *Producers News*—which deeply shocked church-going adherents by its blunt exclusion of religious rites. Hundreds turned against the movement when ideological saboteurs whispered that members of the

¹⁷ Taylor to author, Sept. 12, 1965.

UFL would thenceforth have to be buried in the same way.

In the following thirty years, radicals in the county and elsewhere adopted the defensive pretense that this funeral never really happened;¹⁸ but the *Producers News* for March 11, 1932, reported every detail of the catastrophic blunder.

The windows and stage of the Farmer-Labor Temple, it said, were covered with red and black draperies decorated with hammer and sickle emblems. The Young Pioneers followed the coffin to the front of the hall, bearing a red flag which they draped over the flowers on the coffin. People attending were required to stand and sing *The Internationale*. Leading Communists spoke; then the Pioneers sang "Red Flag," described as "Janis's song." At the grave on the Salisbury homestead they repeated this song as the coffin descended, then recited the Pioneer pledge: "I pledge allegiance to the workers' red flag and to the cause for which it stands. One aim throughout our lives—freedom for the working class." A prominent party member dropped the girl's Pioneer scarf into the grave, with "a few final words."

DURING the campaign of 1932 the *Producers News* announced that its candidates would run on the Communist ticket. It turned against all the things it had been before. Socialists, Nonpartisans, Farmer-Laborites, and all liberals were frauds who existed only to "split the Communist vote."¹⁹

Election day, 1932, fell on November 8. On November 11 the *Producers News* acknowledged defeat for its candidates but boasted that 575 citizens had voted the Communist ticket straight. Next time, it promised, the total would be larger.

It was wrong. Open, avowed Communism had passed its crest in Sheridan County. Now it could only recede.

"We didn't have enough paper for this issue. Comrades, come to our rescue!" said the *Producers News* in September,

¹⁸ Everett Luoma: "Montana Socialist Continues Fight," *The Militant*, May 3, 1965.

¹⁹ P.N., Nov. 2, 1932.

1932. Flax and wheat would be accepted in payment for subscriptions.²⁰ It would be a dreadful day for farmers and workers, coaxed the editor, when the *Producers News* was no longer there to fight their battles.

On February 3, 1933, Charles Taylor's name reappeared on the masthead. A partial revolt had taken place within the People's Publishing Company. The Trotskyites, or Taylorites, had won a point—the return of Taylor—but in other respects the Stalinist wing held control. For a year Taylor labored to breathe life into the dull pages; then he was out again. Alfred Miller, a refugee from Nazi Germany, took over.

Soon a curious notice appeared on the editorial page. Someone had organized a "Save the Producers News Club," using Taylor's name freely in club publicity. The party felt, it muttered ominously, that Taylor had no knowledge of this.²¹ In a May 4, 1934 editorial entitled "A Back Stabbing Attempt," Editor Miller blasted the so-called club for its use of Taylor's name.

Seven weeks later Rodney Salisbury, Plentywood's sturdiest old Bolshevik, was denounced as a renegade because he had come out for a "so-called United Front ticket" for 1934—two years or more before the idea became the official party line.²² A dozen members, along with Salisbury, were expelled for this grave offense.

Meanwhile the county survived its only experience with "force and violence." Early in 1933 a small group of militants trained by the Young Communist school raided the Red Cross office and seized a supply of winter clothing. The *Producers News*, stimulated by this success, began announcing frequent "demonstrations" and "mass meetings." For May Day, 1934, it planned a big demonstration in the streets of Plentywood. A band of angry citizens met it with fire hoses and pick handles and broke it up.

²⁰ P.N., Sept. 2 and 9, 1932.

²¹ P.N., May 4, 1934.

²² P.N., June 21, 1934.



DISTRIBUTING RELIEF CLOTHING, 1931

Sheridan County farmers were sorting out clothing for every member of the family in this picture, taken in 1931, when depression and drought combined to bring misery and want to the community. The donated clothing was gathered and shipped to Plentywood by the Farmers Union Central Exchange in St. Paul, Minn.

The radicals continued demonstrating in the countryside—often with the sympathy of other groups—against foreclosures and repossessions of farm machinery. But interest and attendance waned. At length the Plentywood *Herald* shrugged it all off with the comment, “Two is company, three is a crowd, and four is a Communist mass meeting.”²³

“The Communist party,” cried a *Producers News* editorial on August 2, 1934, “leads the struggle toward the final solution—a Soviet America!” But this aggressive tone, once so typical, was beginning to give way to something milder. Faithful members now concentrated their efforts on merely rescuing the dying movement. On September 27 Taylor, in a letter given a three-column display, pleaded with the “renegades” to come back and submit to the party’s discipline.

The 1934 red vote reached only half its 1932 total. The *Producers News*, in a mood for understatement, said, “A number of people believe the election resulted in a defeat for communism.”²⁴

Editor Alfred Miller alone still refused to compromise with anything less than

the hard party line; but early in 1935 conservative forces lent practical-minded local reds a hand by starting deportation proceedings against him.

Columns of the *Producers News* were full of the Miller deportation case, in which the editor was charged with “activities to overthrow the government by force and violence.” But on July 26, 1935, Taylor again took over the paper, hinting at corruption in the staff during Miller’s editorship. No further mention of Miller’s deportation case was made in the paper.

At this juncture, the *Producers News* published a review of its own history which blandly concluded that it was not a Communist paper at all, never had been, “nor never pretended to be.” It had simply supported the Communist party in the absence of any other working class party.²⁵ “The paper will support the idea of a mass labor party . . . and fight for the producers,” the paper said, “but in a . . . more tolerant and less sectarian way.”²⁶ In his final return, Editor Taylor came as peacemaker and healer.

²³ Plentywood *Herald*, Sept. 13, 1934.

²⁴ P.N., Nov. 9, 1934.

²⁵ P.N., April 5, 1935.

²⁶ P.N., July 26, 1935.

It was too late. Within six months the paper's single sheet was cut to tabloid size; then it began to miss its publication day. On September 12, 1936, Taylor's house burned with most of its contents. Thereafter there was only trouble. The issue that reported Roosevelt's 1936 reelection was dated October; a notice to readers explained that it was "two weeks behind"—actually three weeks—and blamed breakdowns and inadequate help.

Working almost alone with failing plant and resources, Taylor managed throughout that winter to keep bringing out the singled folded sheet equivalent to the front page and page 2 of the old-time *Producers News*. On March 6, 1937, he published the issue of February 19—two weeks and one day late. On the front page of this issue a boxed story announced:

READERS ATTENTION!

In the next issue of the *Producers News* a brilliant expose [sic] of the fakery of the late Moscow trials and executions will be presented by Max Schactman.

Mr. Schactman is a widely known writer and lecturer who has devoted

his exceptional talents to the cause of the working class.

Don't fail to read the next issue.

The next issue was never published. The following week the plant stood silent.

Sheridan County people at first could hardly take in the fact that the *Producers News* was gone, their revolution over, the chapter closed. To some the paper had meant hope, challenge, the excitement of purposeful action, to others an object of apoplectic hate; but for everyone its absence left an unaccustomed quiet, a sense of vacancy. Each of them had been personally concerned; nobody had ever been indifferent to the *Producers News*. Nobody would be apt to see its like again. The real significance of the Plentywood experience, indeed, may lie in the certainty in the minds of those who lived through it that nothing of its kind can be repeated. These people took the measure of the ideological assault in their own lives, not without pain, but inevitably. Today, if the term "Communist threat" makes timid persons elsewhere hide under the bed, it evokes only skepticism in Sheridan County, Montana.

EPILOGUE BY AN EDITOR

We can think of no more appropriate way of ending this treatment of a strange, difficult period in the history of a corner of Montana than to publish portions of a column which appeared in the May 25, 1967, issue of the Daniels County Leader of Scobey, Mont., soon after the death of Charles E. Taylor. It was written by Burley Bowler, publisher of this weekly newspaper. By personal association and long-time journalistic encounter, Mr. Bowler knew the mercurial Taylor as well as or better than any person living. In spite of many years of contention, it is obvious that Bowler's judgment of his fellow editor was touched, after the passage of more than 50 years, with warmth and no little understanding. We were informed of Publisher Bowler's death Dec. 18th, just as we go to press.

An old friend, a bitter opponent, a colorful character and one of the most talked-about, abused and abusive scribes of his day passed on a few weeks ago in his 80th year. Of course we refer to Charley "Red Flag" Taylor, the first and long-time editor of the defunct *Producers News* at Plentywood.

Charley was no ordinary country editor. He was more than brilliant at times, and quite often ridiculous. He used his talents to cajole, to abuse, to extort and frighten his followers as well as his enemies and detractors.

I knew the real Charley much better, perhaps, than those who served as his stooges or those who threatened him. I worked as a printer for several months in 1920 in the Producers News shop.

Charley had come to Plentywood as editor for the old Non-Partisan League, which endorsed candidates on both party tickets. But Charley was far ahead of that early day Townley organization in his thinking.

One evening when we were alone at the shop he told me, "This Non-Partisan set-up is a farce that will not last. It has got to follow the Lenin-Trotsky line and become part of the world revolutionary line. But I can't tell these dupes that or it would scare them to death."

It was several years later before he tipped his hand. He and Bill Dunne of Butte finally conceived the idea of organizing the Farmer-Labor party, fore-runner of the Communist party which got on the ballot for a couple of elections in several counties of Montana—including Daniels, Sheridan and several others.

The Bolshevik revolution in Russia had thrilled Charley but when Stalin succeeded Lenin and exiled Trotsky, Charley was jolted. "Stalin is no Communist," Charley wailed, "he will have Trotsky killed." He was right in that. Stalin arranged for Trotsky to be assassinated by a servant in his home in Mexico.

For some time Stalin's New York organization had been keeping a close tab on Taylor and eventually sent Mother Bloor to Plentywood and she deposed him as editor of the P.N., for by this time the Communist party had gained control of the paper, although the mortgage was held by the late Bill Haas, prosperous Outlook farmer.

After the Sheridan County treasury was "robbed," Haas and Charley became bitter enemies. Just a few hours before the robbery took place Bill Haas was warned to go to the treasury and retrieve his diamonds and a few thousand dollars he had stored there for safe keeping.

"I knew something was brewing," Haas told me later, "so I paid attention to the warning." This information, relayed to the defense counsel, upset a \$100,000 snap judgment against the old Helena Independent for libel.

Bill Haas told me about his dispute on one of his several trips to Scobey trying to induce me to take over the Producers News. "I will foreclose the mortgage and give you the plant. If you make good you can pay me as you can; if you can't make anything of it I am no worse off as it is going to close anyway and become worthless."

I was not interested. At that time I owned 52 percent of the Plentywood Herald corporation which I later sold to Harry Polk of Williston.

The Producers News closed. Charley Taylor and some more of the reds left for Seattle. Charley returned months later and retrieved the P.N. press and trucked it west. The Communists failed there, however, and Charley eventually took a job as proof reader with the daily Seattle Post-Intelligencer, a job he held for more than 22 years. He retired in 1962 with his union pension and social security and returned to Minnesota.

Often I have wondered about how a man with a brilliant streak such as Charley showed at times could possibly become as warped as he did in his thinking. When he used to tell me how Communism would eventually engulf the world and remedy all its ills, I would try to convince him that Americans cherished their liberty and constitutional rights too much to be deceived by impractical and despotic Communist leaders. Charley would come back with the argument that "these poor dupes around here are just like all other Americans; once they understand the principles of Communism they will swing into line." I would remind him that Communists had no principles, no honesty, no practical plans. Then I would have to listen to another half hour oration as Charley waxed eloquent on the beauties of the world under Communist direction.

In the more than 50 years since I first met Charley I have never known a more impractical man. With more customers than he could serve, Charley couldn't run an ice cream stand successfully. He had no business sense whatever. Big hearted, he would dole out money to anyone who asked for it when he was flush. But he was usually broke and borrowing where he could without a thought of repayment. At times he would go to one of the banks, demand money on his plain note with the threat that if not accommodated he would have the county treasurer withdraw county funds deposited there.

One of the saddest cases was when he induced an old retired bachelor farmer to withdraw a few thousand dollars from the bank—"as they are going broke anyway" he told him—and Charley gave the old fellow his note for the cash. The old fellow died broke, unable to collect from Charley. I have photostats of those unpaid notes.

Volumes could be written on this subject. Away from his politics and troubles, Charley was a charming and brilliant conversationalist, a big, happy-go-lucky fellow whose varying attitudes were never understood by anyone—not even himself—a character not easily forgotten. I never knew another comparable to him.

CHARLES VINDEK, who met Charles E. Taylor a number of times and was acquainted with others involved in the strange years told here about Plentywood and Sheridan County, is a native and still a resident of Minnesota. Interested in the history of the West since boyhood, Vindex now owns a library of some 2500 volumes, "probably because as a boy I hungered for books and had none." The strength of this preoccupation with history, he says, "is suggested by the fact that I bought several books in the worst year of the Depression, when my total cash income was \$65.00." Mr. Vindex has had a varied career, from road construction to teaching school, but in recent years has turned more fully to writing, mostly on western topics, for newspapers and periodicals.