



State Historical Society of North Dakota

Magnetic stump orator and Nonpartisan League founder Arthur C. Townley addresses League gathering in 1917



Courtesy Mary Ingerson

Class members of the "Farm School-on-Wheels" in 1934 near Flaxton in Burke County, North Dakota

Rural Radicalism on the Northern Plains, 1912–1950

by William C. Pratt

Radicalism has an extended history on the northern plains. Many people in the region participated in a succession of left-wing causes during the early years of the twentieth century, particularly from 1912 to 1924, and again during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In some cases, they joined the Socialist and Communist parties, or were active in the Nonpartisan League, the Farmers Holiday, or the Farmers Union, or perhaps they backed Robert M. La Follette's 1924 independent presidential bid, or voted for presidential candidate Henry Wallace in 1948, when Wallace ran as a left-wing alternative to Harry Truman and Thomas Dewey.

Many activists were committed radicals most of their adult lives and passed their radicalism on to at least some of their children. For example, John Husa, the son of Finnish immigrants, had settled in Mountrail County in northwest North Dakota in 1905. Prior to World War I, he was an active Socialist and in the 1920s became identified with the Communist cause. One of his sons was a leader in the farm revolt of the 1930s, and FBI records suggest that a few Husas (including John) were Communists in North Dakota as late as 1942.¹

Radicalism on the northern plains is noteworthy not because it existed, but because it lasted so long. This article examines the persistence and eventual decline of left-wing efforts in the region, paying particular attention to northeast South Dakota, northwest North Dakota, and northeast Montana. It also treats the involvement of radicals in the Farmers Union, the region's most important liberal farm organization.

Joseph N. Hilsdorf, Burleigh County, North Dakota,
commissioner and early Farmers Union leader

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From 1910 to 1917 the Socialist party was a political force in many parts of the country. Numerous communities had Socialist locals and elected Socialist candidates to office. Eugene V. Debs, the party's standard-bearer, ran for president on its ticket four times and attracted 900,000 votes in 1912—approximately 6 percent of the total vote cast—for his strongest showing. Although Socialists probably enjoyed their greatest electoral success in the small cities and towns of the Midwest, their most significant stronghold may have been Oklahoma, where they had more members in 1910 than in any other state. In the 1912 election, 42,000 ballots were cast for Debs, or 16.6 percent of the total state vote. Two years later, the Socialist gubernatorial nominee in Oklahoma received 52,703 votes, or one out of every five votes cast. Socialism in the Southwest, particularly in Oklahoma, was a mass movement. There, Socialists published newspapers and sponsored many speakers and other activities, including Socialist encampments that lasted for days and drew thousands of people.

The Socialist movement on the northern plains was much more modest, but nonetheless achieved some notable successes. Thousands subscribed to a weekly newspaper, the *Appeal to Reason*; crowds listened to Socialist speakers at local gatherings; and the party claimed several thousand members in Montana and the Dakotas. Socialist mayors were elected in Sisseton, South Dakota; Minot, North Dakota; and Butte, Montana. In 1912 voters in Williams County in northwest North Dakota elected a Socialist sheriff and commissioner. Debs, meanwhile, drew approximately 26 percent of the vote in Williams and Mountrail counties and actually carried Burke County. But the Socialist movement in this region may have been more important as a foundation for later left-wing efforts and a training ground for farm activists and radicals who passed through its ranks.²

Socialism in the pre-World War I era attracted a variety of people. Lawyers like Minot's Arthur LeSueur worked alongside barbers, laborers, miners, farmers, owners of small businesses, and oth-

ers. Some were drawn to the cause by its immediate demands or in protest to the major political parties. Others sought to replace the existing economic order with a "cooperative commonwealth." When the United States entered World War I, however, government and private groups demanded political conformity and often persecuted dissenters. Socialist publications were denied access to the mails, meetings were disrupted, and individual party members were subjected to verbal and physical abuse. Many Socialists quickly jumped ship, and those who remained faithful to the cause often were harassed or coerced into silence. With a few exceptions, organized socialism on the northern plains did not survive World War I.³

But the rural base of the Socialist party in this region had been weakened prior to the United States' entry into the European conflict. In 1915, despite protests from committed Socialists, former party members and others had organized the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota. Instead of forming a separate party, the League sought to advance its reforms through the old parties by nominating its candidates in their primaries. Farmers flocked to the new cause, nominating numerous candidates in the Republican primary, and celebrated their takeover of North Dakota state government the following year.⁴ Ex-Socialists worked for League causes alongside others who never voted for Debs or other Socialist candidates. Some hoped to transform the League into a radical movement, while others found the League politically satisfying as it was. Many ex-Socialists were "deradicalized," while others waited for another day to show their radical colors. Despite charges from its opponents, the League did not implement a radical program, although the Bank of North Dakota, the state mill, and the memory of a time when farmers captured state government are important legacies of the Nonpartisan League.

1. *Tales of Mighty Mountrail: A History of Mountrail County, North Dakota* (Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1979), 418-19; W. J. Husa, January 11, 1954, Minneapolis FBI File 100-10337-1; Communist Party-USA, District No. 9, St. Paul Division, January 23, 1943, FBI File 100-3-17-31.

2. William C. Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains, 1900-1924," *South Dakota History*, 18 (Spring/Summer 1988), 20-22, 28-34. *Appeal to Reason*, March 29, 1913. *Appeal to Reason* was published weekly in Girard, Kansas, and had a national circulation of more than 500,000 in the early 1910s. In 1913, the paper's reported circulation was 7,108 in Montana, 6,330 in North Dakota, and 4,939 in South Dakota. See Elliot Shore, *Talkin' Socialism: J. A. Wayland and the Role of the Press in American Socialism, 1890-1912* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988); John Graham, ed., *Yours for the Revolution: The Appeal to Reason, 1895-1922* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

3. See Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains," 23-27. A party publication referred to a Finnish branch in Stockette, Montana, and Local Woburn, in Burke County, North Dakota. *Eye Opener*, August 15, 1919.

4. Some Socialist opposition to the Nonpartisan League in 1915 and 1916 was designed to help the League avoid the Socialist stigma. See "Interviews: Henry R. Martinson," *North Dakota History*, 43 (Spring 1976), 20.

5. Other considerations include old party co-optation of Nonpartisan League issues, which occurred in South Dakota, and the cultural resistance of many farmers to agrarian radicalism. See Gilbert C. Fite, "Peter Norbeck and the Defeat of the Non-Partisan League in South Dakota," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 33 (September 1946), 217-36; Burton W. Folsom, Jr., "Immigrant Voters and the Nonpartisan League in Nebraska, 1917-1920," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 1 (Summer 1981), 159-68.

6. Charles Vindex, "Radical Rule in the State of Montana," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 18 (January 1968), 5-8; Jerry W. Calvert, *The Gibraltar: Socialism and Labor in Butte, Montana, 1895-1920* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1988), 129. Sheridan County had an active Socialist group prior to the Nonpartisan League. *Montana Socialist*, December 30, 1916, July 28, 1917.

7. *Sisseton Courier*, November 9, 1922; *South Dakota Legislative Manual* (Pierre: State Publishing, 1923), 340. Alice Daly's Republican and Democratic opponents received 45 percent and 28.7 percent respectively; Daly attracted 26.2 percent.

8. *Lesterville Ledger*, April 16, 1920; C. E. Ruthenberg, "The American Revolutionary Movement Grows," *Daily Worker*, January 13, 1924.

The movement spread quickly throughout the upper Midwest and northern plains. Despite its political influence in several states, including Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana, and Idaho, the League never met with the same degree of success elsewhere as it did in North Dakota. Explanations for this relative failure vary from state to state, but World War I hysteria played a key role in the organization's difficulties. State and county councils of defense joined other groups in harassing the League, and reports of vigilante and mob assaults on League organizers and candidates were frequent. Repression was not the sole reason for League failure in these states, but repression, bad timing by the League, and skillful exploitation of patriotic themes by its opponents go a long way toward explaining it.⁵

Still, the movement did attract a loyal following in many locales outside North Dakota. Sheridan County, in the northeastern corner of Montana, was a strong League outpost. In 1918 League backers there and in other parts of the state elected sixteen legislators.⁶ South Dakota's most persistent Nonpartisan League territory was Roberts County, located in the state's northeastern corner. There, after the League swept almost every office in the 1922 election, a local paper accused county Republicans of going "to sleep at the switch." That year also, the South Dakota League nominated Alice Lorraine Daly for governor. Daly, who finished third in a three-way contest, was the first woman in the region to run for governor on a major ticket.⁷

For some rural activists, the Nonpartisan League was too much like near beer. They wanted something stronger, and when the Communist movement emerged after World War I, they joined it. In 1920 South Dakota newspapers reported a United States government investigation of suspected Com-

munist farmers in their state. The *Daily Worker* claimed that two hundred North Dakota farmers were in the Workers Party by early 1924, and voters in Williams County elected a known Communist to the state legislature that year.⁸

Montana also had one or two Communist legislators in the 1920s, and the Nonpartisan League leadership in Sheridan County, Montana, was close to the Communist movement by 1922.⁹ A key figure was Charles E. ("Red Flag") Taylor, who had migrated to Plentywood, Montana, in 1918 to edit *The Producers News*, the local League newspaper. Two years later, Sheridan County "reds" took over the county government and sent Taylor to the state senate. He joined the Communist cause in the early 1920s, but did not announce his affiliation. The left-wing machine controlled the courthouse, including the sheriff's office, until 1928 and remained a political contender into the 1930s.

Sheridan County radicals were a pretty wild bunch. When they controlled the courthouse, bootlegging was tolerated, and Taylor and sheriff Rodney Salisbury were involved in a scheme to cure cancer. In the late 1920s the FBI investigated activities in Plentywood for possible violations of postal laws and for stolen cars. The most controversial episode involved a 1926 courthouse robbery allegedly totaling \$106,000. Initially, the bonding company refused to pay the claim, maintaining that the robbery was an inside job. Some FBI evidence supports that conclusion. The summary of one bureau report reads: "Communist Party has majority of officers in Sheridan County, including Sheriff, Clerk of District Court, Treasurer, etc., also Party, through 'The Producers News,' their paper which runs in the form of a blackmailing proposition, is reported to have formed a conspiracy with Federal prohibition officers and to be interested in car thefts and the looting of banks in



Charles E. ("Red Flag") Taylor stands to the right of the sign. Taylor was a leader in radical rural groups from 1918 to 1935.

Courtesy Mary Ingerson

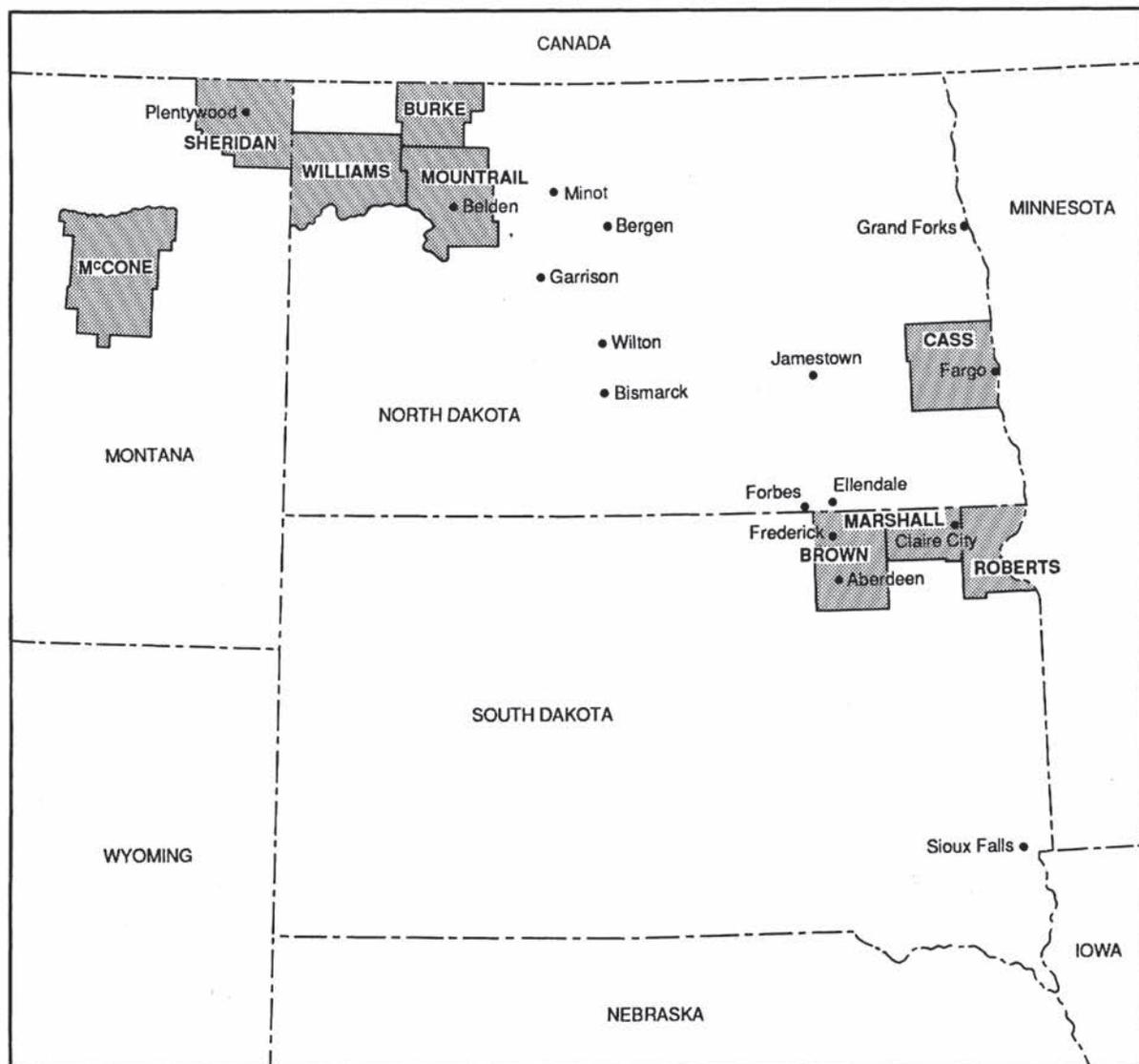
Sheridan County and adjacent thereto." Plentywood remained an important left-wing outpost on the northern plains, and most of its radicals were close to the Communist camp most of the time until 1935, when Taylor and his followers left the Communist party.¹⁰

The northern plains had a small number of Communist branches in the middle and late 1920s, but Sheridan County and two Finnish communities in the Dakotas may have been the party's most important rural bases in these states.¹¹ Belden, a hamlet about ten miles south of Stanley, North Dakota, was settled in the early twentieth century. There, the Husa clan emerged as community leaders and opted for socialism. John Husa ran the local store, had served as postmaster, and sold Pontiac cars in the late 1920s. He and some other Belden Finns were affiliated with the Workers party by 1924. That year independent presidential candidate Robert M. La Follette carried their precinct. William Z. Foster of the Workers party fin-

ished second and won the district four years later.¹²

The Belden Finns had ties with Finnish comrades in other communities, including Frederick, South Dakota, a few miles south of the North Dakota line and about thirty miles north of Aberdeen. More numerous than their North Dakota comrades, the Frederick Finns had established several cooperatives by the mid-1920s, and one observer characterized their community as the "co-operative 'center' of North and South Dakota." Despite strong Finnish influence, socialism was not exclusively an ethnic affair in either place, and the Workers party in Frederick had both English and Finnish-speaking locals in the mid-1920s.¹³

Numerous attempts were made during the 1920s to align farmers politically with urban labor. Farmer-Labor parties emerged in the West and the upper Midwest and met with particular success in Minnesota. In Montana and both Dakotas ex-Socialists and ex-Nonpartisan Leaguers joined the movement. Legislative and local candidates were elected



Map by Barbara Lien



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W. J. (John) Husa stands on the steps of the Husa and Johnson store in Beldon, North Dakota, in 1916. Paul Johnson sits in the driver's seat of the truck.

in some Montana and South Dakota districts, but North Dakota efforts were less successful. Like their Montana counterparts, the South Dakota Farmer-Laborites were Leaguers under a new banner, and their strongholds in the eastern portion of the state earlier had backed the Nonpartisan League. Perhaps the strongest agrarian outpost was Roberts County, in the state's extreme northeast corner. In 1922 Roberts was one of three South Dakota counties carried by the League's gubernatorial candidate, and two years later was "the only county in the state carried by the farmer-laborites." La Follette also overwhelmed his major party opponents in this district in the 1924 presidential election.¹⁴

Farmer-Laborites had high hopes for the La Follette campaign initially, believing that a national Farmer-Labor ticket headed by the Wisconsin senator would establish their cause as a potent force. In June 1924 Charlie Taylor; Jasper Haaland, a Montana state senator from Hill County; and South Dakota's Alice Lorraine Daly assumed prominent roles at a Farmer-Labor convention in St. Paul. This gathering, however, was not simply a Farmer-Laborite affair. Communists dominated it, and their publicized involvement led to La Follette's repudiation of the convention three weeks before it was held. The delegates nominated a national ticket, but to no avail. La Follette's repudiation of a third party, while assuring his campaign of backing from the American Federation of Labor, undercut the Farmer-Laborite cause. His repudiation of

Although rural radicals worked throughout the northern plains during the first half of the century, they were especially active in the nine counties outlined on this map of North and South Dakota and eastern Montana.

Communist support also played a role in dividing left-wing agrarian forces. Yet, it should be noted that La Follette, as the Progressive standard-bearer, finished second in every northern tier state and obtained 45 percent of the vote in North Dakota.¹⁵

Following the failure of the La Follette movement, new attempts were made to organize farmers into economic organizations such as the Farmers Union and the Progressive Farmers of America, which attempted to regroup the rural left. At its head was William Bouck, a former Grange president in Washington State, who was radicalized during the war years and often worked with Communists. His organization spread across the northern tier states and recruited Nonpartisan League veterans in Montana and the Dakotas, including those from a former Socialist enclave in Burke County, North Dakota.¹⁶

The Progressive Farmers were quickly bypassed by the Farmers Union, however, which launched a major organizing drive in 1927. Building on the remnants of earlier farm groups, its leaders spread the cooperative gospel across North Dakota, Mon-

9. Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains," 29. A former Montana legislator said he knew of two Communists who served with him in the legislature. Jasper Haaland to editor, *The Worker*, April 13, 1965, in Jasper Haaland, Minneapolis FBI File 100-11-447. Haaland was active in the Communist party in North Dakota beginning in the early 1930s, but was not a Communist while a Montana legislator.

10. Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana," 3-18; Communist Activities in the State of Montana, June 16, 1941, FBI File 100-3-51-16; Charles E. Taylor, interview by Lowell K. Dyson, August 2-3, 1965 (transcript loaned to author); Rodney Salisbury, FBI File 62-15962; Charles E. Taylor[,] Rodney Salisbury[,] P. J. Wallace, December 23, 1927, FBI File 62-15962-9.

11. Ten Workers party branches were reported in North Dakota and seven in South Dakota. *Daily Worker*, February 3, 1925.

12. "Waino John (W. J.) and Aina Husa," *Tales of Mighty Mountrail*, 418-19; Communist Party-USA, District No. 9, Saint Paul Division, January 23, 1943, Minneapolis FBI File 100-3-17-31; Stanley Sun, January 31, 1929; November 27, 1924; North Dakota, *Compilation of Election Returns: National and State, 1914-1928* (Bismarck, N.D.): n.p., 1930), 67.

tana, and several other states. Charles Talbott led the drive in North Dakota. Like many early Farmers Union recruits, he was an ex-Socialist and ex-Nonpartisan Leaguer. Within a short time, the North Dakota organization became one of the largest Farmers Union state affiliates. Talbott served as its president until his death in 1937.¹⁷

The Depression Thirties radicalized a large number of people on the northern plains and elsewhere. In many cases in this region, however, it was simply a renewal of an earlier radical faith. "Red Flag" Charlie Taylor emerged as a key figure in Communist farm circles, and veterans of earlier left-wing causes joined new recruits in the party's farm front, the United Farmers League, which had its greatest influence in Montana, the Dakotas, and Minnesota. In 1930 the Communist party sent Mother Ella Reeve Bloor to North Dakota where she organized her headquarters in Minot. Her work sparked unprecedented Communist activity, and Communist candidates in 1930 garnered a surprising vote in some locales. The Communist gubernatorial candidate in North Dakota, for example, attracted almost 11 percent of the total vote in Mountrail, Williams, and Burke counties west of Minot. Several others on the ticket obtained a similar vote, and in some rural districts, including the Finnish community of Belden, the Communist slate finished second.¹⁸

Taylor, Bloor, younger members of the Husa clan, and new recruits such as Ashbel Ingerson of Burke County, expanded their efforts, organizing Communist party locals and United Farmers League units. In August 1931 the league organized a "Drought Relief Caravan," which exchanged coal mined in northwest North Dakota for wheat raised in northeast South Dakota. A line of trucks, accompanied by Taylor, two Husas, and others, left Van Hook—several miles south of Belden—drove through Garrison, Wilton, Bismarck, Jamestown, and Ellendale, North Dakota, en route to Frederick,

South Dakota. United Farmers League locals were organized at several places, including one in Brown County near Frederick, which soon claimed almost one hundred members. Later, in 1932, the first president of the Brown County Farmers Holiday was drawn from the ranks of this group.¹⁹

The farm revolt of the 1930s is a complicated story with many facets. Rural activists attempted to block highways leading to market centers, stopped farm sales, marched on state capitols, pressured local and state authorities, and generally raised havoc for several years in some locales. Their efforts influenced elections, New Deal farm and relief programs, state mortgage moratorium laws, and numerous decisions not to foreclose on hard-pressed farmers. They also assisted with a variety of other local accommodations that ultimately helped restore the frayed social fabric of the depression era.

Unquestionably the most important organization of the farm revolt of the 1930s was the Farmers Holiday Association. It emerged unofficially as the direct-action arm of the Farmers Union and swept across the upper Midwest and northern plains in 1932 and 1933, capturing headlines and pressuring government officials at all levels. Yet the organization itself tended to be decentralized, and state and local Holiday units often did as they pleased. More than any other farm movement of the twentieth century, the 1930s insurgency was a grassroots affair. But neither the Farmers Holiday nor the United Farmers League emerged in a vacuum. Their ranks included many veterans of earlier agrarian and radical movements, who brought with them experience, useful contacts, organizational skills, and, many times, an anti-capitalist ideology or frame of reference.

One of these veterans was Emil Loriks of Oldham in eastern South Dakota, who was secretary-treasurer of the state Holiday from 1932 to 1934. A state senator, he had been in the Nonpartisan League and later was a key figure in the Farmers Union for more than three decades. An important

13. *History of the Finnish Settlement in Brown and Dickey Counties of South and North Dakota, 1881-1955* (n.p.: Savo Finnish Historical Society, 1955); Arvid Pennala, "Co-operation in Frederick, So. Dak.," *Co-operative Pyramid Builder*, 11 (May 1927), 103; *Daily Worker*, February 3, 1925. Frederick Finns organized a local in 1908 and maintained a socialist organization into the 1920s. Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains," 12, 30.

14. Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana," 8-9; *South Dakota Legislative Manual* (1923), 240; *Sisseton Courier*, November 6, 1924.

15. David P. Thelen, *Robert La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 190.

16. Lowell K. Dyson, *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 36-41. On this group's predecessor, the Western Progressive Farmers, see Carlos A. Schwantes, "Farmer-Labor Insurgency in Washington State: William Bouck, the Grange, and the Western Progressive Farmers," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 76 (January 1985), 10. On Progressive Farmers in Burke County, see *Bowbells Tribune*, November 12, 19, 1926, November 11, 1927.

17. Theodore Saloutos and John Hicks, *Twentieth Century Populism: Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (1951; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, n.d.), 219-54; Charles Conrad and Joyce Conrad, *50 Years: North Dakota Farmers Union* (n.p.: North Dakota Farmers Union, 1976); Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains," 31-32.

18. Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 67-82; Thomas L. Edwards, "Ella Reeve Bloor: Urban Radical in the Upper Midwest, 1930-1936" (unpublished paper, Northern Great Plains History Conference, Grand Forks, N.D., September 23, 1983); Stanley *Sun*, November 20, 1930. Communists may have benefited from Nonpartisan League candidates doing poorly in the Republican primary and their not being on the ballot. See Stanley *Sun*, October 23, 1930. The United Farmers League was the new name of an older Communist front, the United Farmers Educational League. Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 34-50.

19. *Producers News*, December 4, 1931; Clarence H. Sharp, series of interviews by William C. Pratt, 1975-1988.

20. Elizabeth E. Williams, *Emil Loriks: Builder of a New Economic Order* (Sioux Falls: Center for Western Studies, 1987); Oscar Brekke, interview by William C. Pratt, September 26, 1987, Clinton, Minnesota. On the National Producers Alliance, see Theodore Saloutos, "The National Producers Alliance," *Minnesota History*, 28 (March 1947), 37-44.

21. Sharp interviews by Pratt. I heard Sharp make the comment about going broke at a U.S. Farmers Association meeting in Mason City, Iowa.

Researching in FBI Records

A growing number of scholars use in their research material obtained from the FBI through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). FBI holdings are an extraordinary resource for the study of twentieth-century political and social history in the United States. In fact, research on liberal and radical organizations after 1920 and national political and cultural figures is probably incomplete without FOIA inquiries to the FBI, which has gathered a vast amount of information, gossip, and rumors on many groups and individuals in the United States.

On occasion FBI agents interviewed the subjects of their investigations, and documents based on these interviews reveal a range of responses and sometimes useful personal information. They also often make interesting reading. More often, however, FBI reports contain data provided from sources other than those being investigated. While these accounts may be based on organizational records or newspaper articles, letters or subscription lists, or even membership information obtained through "black bag jobs," they also may be drawn from subjective impressions or faulty memories of neighbors, rivals, or enemies. Consequently, such reports are often misleading or totally inaccurate.

Historians and others have found the FBI holdings to be a treasure trove of information, but the researcher needs to proceed with caution. While the FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., possesses an enormous number of files on organizations and individuals, it is not the sole depository of FBI records. The FBI's various field offices, in cities such as Minneapolis, Omaha, and Salt Lake City, also have vast files, which

routinely contain a wealth of grass-roots information never forwarded to headquarters in Washington, D.C. Thus the researcher interested in a topic on the northern plains or elsewhere would be well advised to make FOIA requests to appropriate field offices.

FOIA releases are often heavily censored. The FBI does not want researchers to know how it obtained much of the information in its files and seems particularly eager to protect the identity of informants who provided information on their friends, relatives, neighbors, employees, employers, colleagues, and enemies. In an effort to protect its sources—a practice which in itself has been interpreted very broadly—the FBI often blacks out much more than would be required simply to obscure the name of an informant or a technique used to acquire particular information.

More than thirty years ago, Theodore Draper wrote: "A little research on the Communist movement can be a dangerous thing."¹ Likewise, a little research in FBI files also can be misleading. The best way to cope with problems inherent in FBI research is to research thoroughly the topic being studied. This may entail looking at additional FBI material; searching newspapers and archival holdings; and personally interviewing former participants, family members, and observers. As a practical matter, the more familiar a researcher becomes with FBI records and procedures, the more information he or she can glean from FBI documents.

1. Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (1957; reprint, New York: Viking Press, 1963), 6.

ally of Loriks was Oscar Brekke, another eastern South Dakota farmer and president of Grant County Holiday, who became state president in 1935. Brekke had settled in South Dakota in the 1920s, after working in the Nonpartisan League as an organizer and then with the short-lived National Producers Alliance in a similar position.²⁰

Clarence Sharp was another key figure in the South Dakota rural insurgency. The son of a Populist, Sharp had sold the Socialist newspaper, the *Appeal to Reason*, on the streets of Bristol, South Dakota, before 1910. Later, he took part in the Nonpartisan League and "went broke twice as a farmer and once as a farm implements dealer." Sharp also had worked as an organizer for the Producers Alliance in the mid-1920s and, after a

variety of jobs, set up an implements dealership in Torrington, Wyoming. There he joined the Communist party in 1930 or 1931. Losing his business in 1931, he moved on to Chicago, where he was involved briefly in the Communist-led unemployed movement. He returned to South Dakota in late 1932 to become the party's state secretary.²¹

Sharp spent much of his time on the road helping organize branches of both the Communist party and the United Farmers League. He met with his greatest success in the northeastern part of the state. Among those recruited into the party were Knut Walstad and his son Julius, who farmed in northern Roberts County and had prior experience in the Nonpartisan League and the Farmer-Labor party. Unlike left-wingers in the Frederick

area who backed William Z. Foster during the 1932 election campaign, the Walstads and other former Farmer-Laborites there enlisted in the Liberty party, which promoted the presidential candidacy of William H. ("Coin") Harvey, a relic of the Populist era. More bizarre, however, was the reported Ku Klux Klan background of Communist party recruits near Wilmot in southern Roberts County. This county was ripe for Communist organizing, and it may have had as many as one hundred party members by the end of 1933. While some of those recruited quickly dropped out, enough stayed to support four small Communist party branches in the area into the 1940s.

Although Sharp's efforts were concentrated in the eastern part of the state, he also traveled into the West River country, where he signed up a few recruits for the Communist cause. In some cases, these were second-generation radicals whose fathers had participated in the Socialist and Nonpartisan League movements. One of the new recruits in Perkins County, for example, was a rancher named Debs Hinds, who was the son of a 1918 Socialist congressional candidate. At their peak, the South Dakota Communists had between three hundred and five hundred members, but their numbers dropped significantly after 1934.²²

The backgrounds of North Dakota rural insurgents often paralleled those of their South Dakota counterparts. In the Forbes area, across the state line a few miles from Frederick, small Communist and United Farmers League groups were established, and one of their leaders—a county commissioner—was returned to office repeatedly. Near Minot in north western North Dakota, communities that once had a strong Socialist presence now joined the farm revolt. Bergen, about thirty-five miles southeast of Minot, had claimed sixty-three Socialist party members in 1915, and its cemetery contains two tombstones from that era with the inscription: "Workers of the World Unite." Some Bergen farmers first joined the Communist party and then the United Farmers League. They never constituted a large group, but a few individuals remained Communists into the 1960s.²³

West of Minot a number of former Socialists and Socialist families, such as the Husas in



Courtesy William C. Pratt

Julie Kjorstad from Williams County, North Dakota, was youth director of the United Farmers League in 1934–1935.

Mountrail County, enlisted in the Communist cause. In adjacent Williams County, some of the John Kjorstad family also became active Communists. John Kjorstad had migrated from Norway in the early twentieth century and settled in the western part of the state. He had participated in the Socialist, Nonpartisan League, and Farmer-Labor movements before he became a Communist candidate for sheriff in 1932. His two daughters, Effie and Julia, were active in the farm revolt. Effie was a firebrand. Active in the United Farmers League and later an officer in the county Farmers Holiday organization, she was a Communist congressional candidate in 1934 and a Farmer-Labor legislative candidate in 1936.²⁴

Jasper Haaland, another important party member in North Dakota, had homesteaded in Montana where he participated in the Nonpartisan League. He served in the state legislature with Charlie Taylor for several years and helped organize the state's Farmer-Labor party in 1923. Falling

22. Communist Party USA, District 9, St. Paul Field Division, May 20, 1946, FBI File 100-3-17—274. William H. Harvey was the author of *Coin's Financial School*, a tract espousing "free silver" first published in 1894. See Richard Hofstadter, "Free Silver and the Mind of 'Coin' Harvey," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1965; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 238-415.

23. Sharp interviews by Pratt; William C. Pratt, "Farmers, Communists, and the FBI in the Upper Midwest," *Agricultural History*, 63 (Summer 1989), 66-67, 73-75.

24. "John and Rena Kjorstad," *The Wonders of Williams: A History of Williams County, North Dakota* (n.p.: Williams County Historical Society, 1975), 1810-11; Pratt, "Rethinking the Farm Revolt of the 1930s," 134. Julia Kjorstad's involvement apparently occurred mostly outside of North Dakota.

25. Lem Harris, *My Tale of Two Worlds* (New York: International Publishers, 1986), 167; Taylor interview by Dyson, August 2-3, 1965; Jasper Haaland, FBI File 100-10459.

26. Edward C. Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963); Pratt, "Rethinking the Farm Revolt," 137.

27. Pratt, "Rethinking the Farm Revolt," 138-39, 143, n. 38.

28. For detailed accounts of these episodes, see Gordon Smith, "History of the United Farmers League in Roberts County" (unpublished manuscript, copy in author's possession); 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, Vermillion, 1972); and Allan Mathews, "Agrarian Radicals: The United Farmers League of South Dakota," *South Dakota History*, 3 (Fall 1973), 408-21.

on hard times, he left Montana in 1926 and moved to the Red River valley of eastern North Dakota. There, he became a successful farmer. Taylor helped recruit him into the Communist party in the 1930s, and Haaland played an active role in state party affairs for more than two decades, remaining loyal to the cause to the end of his life. He was active in the Holiday, was a Communist candidate for public office several times, and in 1940 was a member of the party's national committee.²⁵

The farm revolt of the 1930s was not dominated by Communists, nor were all rural radicals Communist party members. In some cases, in fact, there was considerable acrimony among insurgents. In South Dakota, some backed "Coin" Harvey for president in 1932, while others opted for William Z. Foster or Socialist Norman Thomas. In the 1936 election a similar fault line appeared among agrarians. This time, the choice was between William Lemke, a North Dakota congressman with a Nonpartisan League background and a strong proponent of farmer-debtor legislation, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

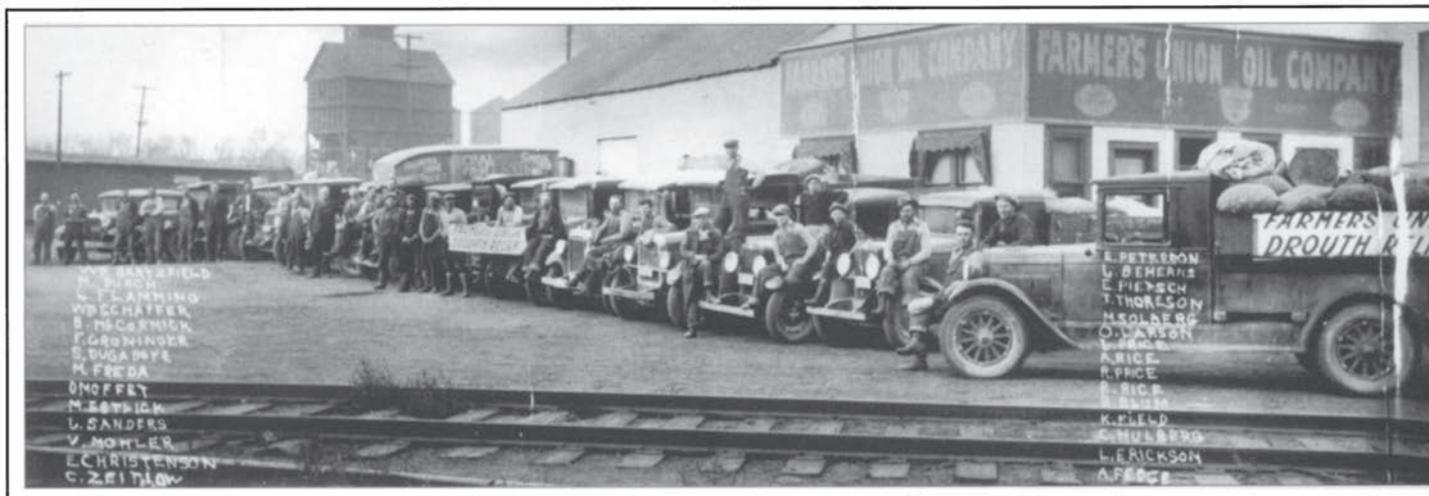
Historians have stressed Father Charles Coughlin's backing of the Lemke candidacy and portrayed it in generally negative terms. Both Coughlin and Huey Long had followings among rural insurgents, but Lemke's rural support in his native North Dakota was not synonymous with Coughlinite sentiments. Ultimately, Lemke attracted a number of votes from former Socialists and Nonpartisan Leaguers, particularly in Burke County, which Debs had carried in 1912. While Communists and many other left-wingers voted for Roosevelt in 1936 and denounced the Lemke campaign as fascist, other insurgents and ex-Socialists opted for the North Dakota congressman. The 1930s insurgency was complicated and did not

play itself out the same way in every local.²⁶

As early as 1933–1934, New Deal farm and relief programs undercut the appeal of the farm revolt and ultimately played a major role in deradicalizing many left-wingers on the northern plains and elsewhere. The wheat allotment and the corn-hog programs did not restore farm prosperity, and neither program satisfied more radical leaders. Nonetheless, both left-wing leaders and rank-and-file members participated in programs with their more conventional neighbors.²⁷ Many of the insurgents were not committed radicals in the first place. In other cases, however, radicals eventually opted for "half-a-loaf-now," as they reconciled themselves to the half-way measures of American liberalism.

Other factors besides New Deal programs helped extinguish the farm revolt. In northeast South Dakota, anti-Communist hysteria and old-fashioned repression did their part. There, in early 1934, the state attorney general obtained an injunction against the United Farmers League and arrested seventeen activists for "rioting" when they interfered with a sheriff's sale. A local jury failed to convict the defendants, but the charges hurt the movement. More ominous was vigilante activity in neighboring Marshall County. In July 1934 a mob, reportedly led by the local sheriff, seized and beat five United Farmers League members in Britton. The incident was followed by a Legionnaire attack on the United Farmers League "Farm School on Wheels" in the same county. Several individuals were beaten, and the facility was driven from its site. Such assaults seemed to fuel anti-Communist sentiments, and the United Farmers League's United Front ticket did poorly in the 1934 fall election in South Dakota.²⁸

Divisions within the left also helped disrupt the



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Drivers and trucks in the "Drought Relief Caravan" in August 1931

rural insurgency of the 1930s. When the Communist party attempted to discipline its ranks, the result often was expulsions or defections, which weakened its cause. In Frederick, cooperative members, who also were Communist party members, quarreled among themselves. One was Helge Tangen, a former Socialist and longtime Communist who commanded a local following. In 1933 the party intervened in a controversy involving Tangen and expelled him. When his expulsion was upheld, a number of party members quit. Years later Clarence Sharp observed that the Tangen expulsion "was a terrible mistake."²⁹

The most serious disruption of Communist rural efforts occurred when Charlie Taylor and Ashbel Ingerson left the party in 1935. Taylor, always somewhat of a free spirit, had been outside the party on an earlier occasion. He was valuable to the party, however, and was welcomed back as a farm leader in 1931. Upon Taylor's return to the fold, the Communist party sought to use his abilities in the field while installing its choice of editors at *Producers News* between 1931 and 1935. Taylor meanwhile had a close relationship with Ashbel and Mary Ingerson, and together they tried to organize a "farmers and workers cancellation league" as a political vehicle to mobilize the countryside. North Dakota communist leaders apparently backed the effort initially. Then, perhaps because the national leadership opposed it, they repudiated the Taylor-Ingerson program.³⁰

The evidence is unclear, but Taylor and Ingerson said they resigned from the Communist party and then were expelled. Party sources, however, announced that the two renegades were expelled for their opportunism. Whatever the actual turn of events, Taylor and the Ingersons were out of the Communist party, and by July 1935, Taylor managed to recapture control of the *Producers News* in Plentywood. A majority of the Sheridan County left wing aligned with Taylor, and some followed him into the Trotskyist movement. Though the Trotskyists recruited very few individuals in northwest North Dakota, the Taylor-Ingerson bolt and the loss of the *Producers News* were blows to local Communist party efforts.³¹

Another factor undercutting the rural left-wing insurgency was the population exodus from the

northern plains during the Great Depression. When the drought and lean years hit, many people were forced to move out. A sizeable number of United Farmers League and Communist activists had left the region by the late 1930s, thus weakening the movement. These included James Pearson, a longtime North Dakota party figure, who left as early as 1934; Arvo Husa and Julius Walstad, United Farmers League secretaries in North Dakota and South Dakota respectively; and Charlie Taylor, who left Plentywood after the *Producers News* stopped publication in 1937. Most of the departing rural activists moved out for economic reasons, but their leaving robbed the insurgency of both leaders and followers. Although limited in their success, New Deal measures undercut the appeal of radicalism, and people who were helped by New Deal programs may have left the radical fold.³²

Still, the decline of the rural insurgency did not bring a complete demise of left-wing activity on the northern plains. Many activists who had taken part in the farm revolt now enlisted in the Farmers Union. Membership increased in old strongholds, and locals were organized in new territories. Earlier, Communists had criticized the Farmers Union leadership. By the mid-1930s, however, many of them joined the organization and participated in its affairs. The story of the rural left from the late 1930s into the cold war era takes place largely within the ranks of the Farmers Union.³³

As the depression decade came to a close, foreign policy became a more important issue. The political left never was monolithic, and its various components had different views on foreign affairs. Although the 1939 Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union alienated many Communist party supporters elsewhere, it seemingly had little effect on the northern plains, where the party had been in serious decline for some time. Perhaps more important was the impact of

29. Sharp interviews by Pratt.

30. Dyson, *Red Harvest*; Taylor interview by Dyson; Ashbel Ingerson to members of the Communist party in North Dakota, February 20, 1936, Box 2, Dwight I. Todd Papers, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks. Taylor disagreed with the Communist party over formation of a national Farmer-Labor party. During its most sectarian period, the Communist party denounced such ideas as "social fascism" and openly criticized Taylor and his Montana supporters. See *Daily Worker*, October 4, 15, 1930. The idea of a national Farmer-Labor party persisted in the 1930s. See Hugh T. Lovin, "The Persistence of Third Party Dreams in the American Labor Movement, 1930-1938," *Mid-America*, 58 (October 1976), 141-57; and "The Fall of Farmer-Labor Parties, 1936-1938," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 62 (January 1971), 16-26.

31. *New Militant*, July 13, 1935; *Farmers National Weekly*, June 28, 1935; Hans Hardersen, "Taylor-Ingerson Clique Seizes *Producers News*, Rank, File Lose Control," *Farmers National Weekly*, August 9, 1935; *Producers News*, July 5 and 26, 1935; *Daily Worker*, September 17, 1935; Central Control Commission, C.P.U.S.A., "Workers Enemies Exposed During 1935," May 1936, attached to W. F. Kelley to Director, FBI, March 2, 1951, FBI File 100-3-3762; Communist Activities in the State of Montana, June 16, 1941, FBI File 100-3-51-16. A 1941 FBI report claimed that the Plentywood Trotskyists had "driven the Stalinists back as far as Belden, North Dakota." That was an exaggeration, but the Plentywood defection was a serious setback.

32. Pratt, "Rethinking the Farm Revolt of the 1930s," 139; Martha Husa conversation with William C. Pratt, July 27, 1985, Belden, North Dakota; Julius Walstad, FBI File 100-170048; Charles E. Taylor, FBI File 100-55987. Pearson, Husa, and Taylor relocated in Washington State; Walstad moved to northern Minnesota.

the Russo-Finnish War of 1939–1940.³⁴ Even that episode probably did not lead to major defections in the region. The ranks of the Finnish left never were fulsome in the Dakotas or eastern Montana anyway, and they already had been depleted as a result of prior disaffection and migration. Once both the Soviet Union and the United States entered the war against Germany in 1941, the Communist party again changed its policy and strongly supported the war effort. To many observers, Communists were then in the mainstream of American liberalism.

The Communist party enjoyed a revival of influence during World War II. Party membership did not reach earlier levels on the northern plains, but Communists sometimes played active roles in a wartime “popular front.” In the Dakotas, where they were more likely to farm than follow any other occupation, Communists’ 1945 membership totaled 181 in North Dakota and 152 in South Dakota. While it should not be exaggerated, a number of Communists were active in the Farmers Union in North Dakota and Montana. Perhaps the most significant popular front victory in this era was the 1944 election of North Dakota Democrat, Governor John Moses to the United States Senate over incumbent Senator Gerald P. Nye, an isolationist. Moses’s untimely death in early 1945 minimized the result, but the defeat of Nye was significant in itself.³⁵

With the advent of the cold war, Communists and their popular-front allies were often on the defensive. Still, the Farmers Union in both North Dakota and Montana assumed the militant posture of its national organization by opposing the Truman administration on a number of issues, particularly on foreign policy. Both Don Chapman, president of the Montana organization, and Glenn Talbott, his North Dakota counterpart, identified with Henry Wallace and his criticism of Truman’s cold war policies.

In 1948 when Wallace launched his third-party crusade for president, he and many of his backers

were hopeful that the Farmers Union would enlist in the campaign. That never happened. National president James Patton announced his neutrality, and none of the state organizations on the northern plains endorsed Wallace’s candidacy. Their reasons included concern that the third-party effort would hurt liberals seeking other offices and their support of Charles Brannan, Truman’s newly appointed secretary of agriculture. But pockets of pro-Wallace sentiment existed within the Farmers Union in the upper Midwest and on the northern plains. In North Dakota and Montana several figures in the Wallace campaign were Union members. Chet Kinsey resigned as organizer to become secretary of the Montana Progressive party and a county president in eastern Montana became vice president of the state organization. In North Dakota, most of the new party’s executive committee were Farmers Union members, and Quentin Burdick, the Union’s counsel, was a delegate to the national convention.³⁶

The Wallace vote in 1948 was disappointing. Nationally, he received but 2.4 percent of the vote, and his best showing on the northern plains was in North Dakota and Montana, where he attracted 3.8 and 3.3 percent respectively. In northwest North Dakota, Wallace drew 13 percent in Williams County, where the Socialists had elected the sheriff in 1912, and 10.5 percent in Mountrail County. Overall, Wallace carried ten rural precincts west of Minot. In eastern Montana, McCone and Sheridan counties gave the former vice president 10.6 and 9 percent of the vote.³⁷

In some respects the 1948 Wallace showing was the agrarian Left’s “last hurrah” on the northern plains. Radicalism in the region had been in retreat for some time. Many old activists had been weaned away from the old cause, moved away, or retired, and a new generation did not take their place. With the outbreak of the Korean War, the mainstream of the Farmers Union leadership endorsed cold war liberalism, or much of it, and did what it could to disassociate itself from left-wing critics of Truman’s foreign policy. Outwardly, this accommodation was easier in North Dakota. In Montana, the organization fired at least one employee and defeated a state board member who had served since 1939.³⁸ Communists and a larger number of

33. The Williams County Farmers Union membership increased from 683 in 1937 to 1,217 in 1940. Old Records of 1935-1939, Box 3, Williams County Farmers Union Records, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck. Dickey County, home of the Talbott family, had only one Farmers Union local until the county was reorganized in 1939. *North Dakota Union Farmer*, May 15, 1939. Communists supported pro-New Deal groups that took over the Farmers Union national leadership in the late 1930s. Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 144-49.

34. Carl Ross, *The Finn Factor in American Labor, Culture and Society* (New York Mills: Parta Publishers, 1977), 176-77. One of John Husa’s daughters told FBI agents that her father and an older brother “lost interest in the party in about 1939 during the Russian-Finnish war,” although the family’s complete break came later. Ellen Ingeroi, January 29, 1953, FBI File 100-396524-2.

35. Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Pratt, “Farmers, Communists, and the FBI in the Upper Midwest,” 62-69. The Montana Farmers Union is discussed in Communist Infiltration of National Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union of America, July 22, 1949, FBI File 100-45768-81.

36. William C. Pratt, “The Farmers Union and the 1948 Henry Wallace Campaign,” *Annals of Iowa*, 49 (Summer 1988), 349-70.

37. Curtis D. MacDougall, *Gideon’s Army* (3 vols., New York: Marzini & Munsell, 1965), 3:inside cover; Williston *Herald*, November 3, 1948; *Mountrail County Promoter*, November 5, 1948; Ellis L. Waldron, *Montana Politics Since 1864: An Atlas of Elections* (Bozeman: Montana State University Press, [1958]), 326. Wallace carried Sikes Township, where John Husa lived.

38. William C. Pratt, “Glenn J. Talbott, the Farmers Union, and American Liberalism after World War II,” *North Dakota History*, 55 (Winter 1988), 9-12; Communist Infiltration in the National Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, November 18, 1950, FBI File 100-45768-91; February 11, 1952, FBI File 100-45768-116.

progressives who had identified with left-wing causes were isolated and silenced in 1950 and 1951. To be sure, a handful of Communists and other radicals continued to subscribe to left-wing publications, contribute money to unpopular causes, meet with one another occasionally, and even circulate a petition now and then, but a historic era of the agrarian left in the region had ended.

Rural radicalism may have been more persistent on the northern plains than anywhere else in the United States in the twentieth century. Prior to 1917, the Southwest had had a stronger Socialist movement, but the Socialist party in Oklahoma and neighboring states never recovered from the adversity of World War I. On the northern plains, however, the broader-based Nonpartisan League took hold before the nation went to war. Ex-Socialists and others built the new movement and, in North Dakota, it became the most successful agrarian political insurgency of this century. There, the Nonpartisan League took over state government and elected legislators in South Dakota and Montana. Despite such successes, the rural Left's good years at the ballot box were relatively brief on the northern plains. With a few exceptions, radical candidates did not fare well after the early 1920s.

Election statistics, however, are not the only index of radical activity. Many individuals remained on the left and some became Communists. While they participated in a variety of causes, the most significant involvement for many of them came during the farm revolt of the 1930s. Radicals of different stripes assumed active roles in both the United Farmers League and the broader-based Farmers Holiday. Others, at least for a short time, were radicalized in the process. Their insurgency called attention to the terrible conditions in the countryside and pressured government at every level to provide relief. In addition, demonstrations and the halting of farm sales helped buy some time for thousands of farmers. Then, New Deal programs undercut the insurgency and significantly reduced the opportunity for other radical efforts as well.

Not everyone was deradicalized. Beginning in 1936 and continuing after World War II, a number of left-wingers worked within broader-based groups

39. The FBI followed Sharp on a twelve-day trip Sharp made through western Minnesota and the Dakotas in 1959. SA [name deleted] to SAC, Minneapolis, 5-19-59, FBI File 100-7811-58.

such as the Farmers Union and the Democratic party. During the war, Communist ranks increased somewhat, as did opportunities for Communists to participate in public life. But the cold war quickly ended the "era of good feeling" and it, along with war in Korea, largely destroyed the remnants of historical radicalism on the northern plains.

The persistence of radicalism in this region can be documented in the lives of individuals and often their families who passed through a succession of left-wing movements. Along with Charlie Taylor and Clarence Sharp, many others were Socialists and Nonpartisan Leaguers before they became Communists. Radicalism also often carried over to the second generation. The historical record reveals a number of radical families living in left-wing neighborhoods scattered across the northern plains. In North Dakota, they include the Husas in Belden and the Kjorstads in Stony Creek, and in South Dakota, the Walstads in Claire City. As time passed, particularly after 1936, people dropped out or moved away, and declining numbers and long distances between them weakened left-wing enclaves. Clarence Sharp, as farm representative of the Minnesota-Dakotas Communist party district, continued to visit party members, sympathizers, and old acquaintances in the Dakotas for more than a decade after the Wallace campaign, but he seldom recruited replacements for those who dropped out or died.³⁹

Radicalism on the northern plains was not monolithic. It always contained different currents, and even when Communist ranks were at their fullest in the early 1930s, many left-wingers still did not join up. Although little has been written about the Communist party in the history of this region, Communists played noteworthy roles in rural radicalism. They were a fringe to a larger radical fabric, and an examination of their role leads to a better assessment of the broader topic of northern plains radicalism. The developments and struggles discussed in this study helped shape the political and rural history of the region. Radicals participated in a variety of movements, including the Socialist and Communist parties, the Nonpartisan League, the farm revolt of the 1930s, the Farmers Union, and the 1948 Wallace campaign. They lost most of their battles, but they influenced the political and social history of the northern plains. Their efforts deserve a full accounting. *am*

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