

Comment

GEORGE MILLS

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, I have problems with the reference to Vice-President Curtis in the Wall paper. Professor Wall says Curtis, in the 1932 campaign, told a heckler in Sioux City: "You are too damned dumb to understand this administration's farm policies." That didn't square with my recollection and so I checked.

The incident took place in the 1928 campaign, not 1932. Curtis was the nominee and not yet vice-president. The location was the Clay County Fair in Spencer and not Sioux City. And what was said appears to have been something different: The heckler—I once knew his name but have forgotten it—peppered Curtis with unfriendly questions. He asked about Congress cutting taxes paid by the wealthy. Curtis answered, not responsively, that the lower rates had resulted in an increase in federal revenues. The heckler repeated the question. Curtis fired back: "You're asking what I just told you a minute ago, but you were too damned dumb to understand it."¹

Perhaps there's another version of the exchange, but if there is I don't know of it. They did argue over farm policies of the Coolidge administration but the "too damned dumb" comment doesn't appear to have been injected in that context. I agree that the Democrats charged many times in 1932 that Cur-

1. *Spencer Reporter*, 26 September 1928.

tis had said Iowa farmers were "too damned dumb to understand." That charge may have become embedded in that campaign. It is easy to see how some may have come to regard the 1928 Curtis comment as part of the 1932 picture.

Then, I have some reservations about bracketing the Cow War of 1931 with the farm outbreaks of 1932 and 1933. It was my privilege to have been at Tipton as a newsman at the beginning of the Cow War. A major reason for that flareup, in my opinion, was the inflammatory broadcasts over Muscatine Radio Station KTNT (The Naked Truth) by station owner Norman Baker. He was a nationally famous cancer quack. He was out to raise all the hell he could with the state government, the newspapers, and anybody else who got in his way. The Cow War erupted when farmers maltreated or threatened state veterinarians testing cattle for tuberculosis. The war was confined to the few counties in the range of KTNT and neighboring areas in eastern Iowa. Trouble elsewhere was minimal or nonexistent. Yet the testing was statewide. It was my belief there might have been no Cow War at all without KTNT and Norman Baker even though farmers were not doing all that well. A prominent legislator-farmer expressed that same view to me.²

Then there's the infamous attack on District Judge Charles Bradley at LeMars in 1933. Wall concludes that the attack was unplanned and spontaneous, on the basis of his interview with Rome Starzl, the feisty editor of the LeMars *Globe-Post*, plus additional interviews with Gus Alesch and others in northwest Iowa twenty-five years later.

It was my privilege in 1948, fifteen years after the attack, to have interviewed six of the participants—Morris Cope, Martin Rosburg, John Sokolovske, Lawrence Krause, Carl Sabe, Albert Kaiser, and Scott Reininger, Judge Bradley's court reporter. Reininger was in the courtroom and was knocked cold by a punch he didn't see coming when the farmers rushed the bench and grabbed the judge.

On the basis of those interviews and other research, I doubt that the attack was spontaneous. I like better Professor Wall's backup statement when he says: "It is, of course, possible that they might have been carried to that extreme by the momentum

2. Interview with Iowa House Speaker La Mar Foster, c. 1937, West Branch, Iowa.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

of their own previous actions." I think they had been bent on intimidation and violence for more than three months, admittedly based on their real and imagined economic fears. Somebody planned enough to bring a half-inch rope to Judge Bradley's party. One of the group told me they tightened the rope around his neck to a point where his feet were about to leave the ground.³

This group of farmers had been using what you might call "rope psychology" for more than three months. In January, some of them forced a LeMars attorney to say in a wire to an insurance company that his neck was "at risk."⁴ That same day farmers trapped District Judge Chan Pitts in his LeMars courthouse office and demanded that he sign no more mortgage foreclosures. He said that would violate his oath of office. Cope said: "I would think you would be more worried about your neck than your oath of office."⁵

In March, Cope and others from the area were among the three thousand farmers who marched on the legislature and forced the legislature to cease deliberations. A few marchers carried ropes and clubs.⁶ They demanded fast action on mortgage relief, or else. There was a threat to hang State Senator Mike Fisch of LeMars over the bannister in the rotunda.⁷ He retreated up into the statehouse dome. Later he assured some farmers that a bill they strongly opposed would be killed.⁸

In February, some of the same farmers took part in a gun battle on a highway west of Sioux City in which one man was killed and four wounded. Slain was Robert Markell, a South Dakota hauler, who was attempting to bring a load of milk into Sioux City. The names of two wounded pickets were reported immediately. A third showed me in 1948 how his thumb had been shot off fifteen years before. That wound was not reported at the time.⁹

3. Interview with Lawrence Krause, 1948, Plymouth County, Iowa.

4. Le Mars *Globe-Post*, 5 January 1933.

5. Interview with Morris Cope, 1948, Plymouth County, Iowa.

6. Interview with Leo Elthon (state senator) and Dewey Goode and Arthur Hanson (state representatives), in the Des Moines *Register*, 10 March 1963.

7. Interview with Eddie Stout, statehouse reporter for International News Service.

8. Le Mars *Globe-Post*, 24 March 1933, 1.

9. Le Mars *Globe-Post*, 6 February 1933; interview with Lawrence Krause; Des Moines *Register*, 6-13 February 1933.

Comment/Mills

On April 27, the morning of the Bradley attack at LeMars, many of the same farmers engaged in a pitched battle with deputy sheriffs wielding ax handles in the courthouse at Primghar. The farmers were beaten back when they tried to rush the steps inside the courthouse to halt a foreclosure sale. Several farmers were injured, including Morris Cope, who suffered a slight skull fracture. That didn't keep him from continuing to play a major role in the day's activities, bandaged head and all.¹⁰

After the Primghar tussle, the farmers drove to LeMars, forty-five miles to the southwest.

An untold story: Some of the attackers were drinking that fateful day. There was a bottle in the truck that carried Judge Bradley out into the country. Martin Rosburg said: "Come on, Judge, have a drink on us." The judge didn't reply and clenched his teeth. Rosburg took a screwdriver, forced it between Bradley's teeth and poured the liquor down his throat.¹¹

My differences are not so much with Professor Wall as with Rome Starzl. He saw it all, but I think on the basis of what the farmers told me that he toned down his report considerably because he was a friend of the participants. It was understandable that he and Gus Alesch should present their case in the best possible light.

The violence, incidentally, didn't stop immediately after the Bradley attack. More violence occurred on the highway picket lines in the weeks ahead.¹² The situation really didn't cool down until the government started lending farmers forty-five cents a bushel on their corn several months later.

These comments may sound as if I have substantial disagreement with the Wall paper. I don't. I very much liked the bulk of it, his reports on Milo Reno and Lester Barlow, his analysis of the longtime evolution of the farmer and his place in society, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s.

I also liked Dorothy Schwieder's observations on rural life in the 1920s. I was a little surprised, though, at her report that

10. Interview with Morris Cope; *Le Mars Globe-Post*, 28 April 1933 *passim*; *Des Moines Register*, 28 April 1933 *passim*.

11. Interview with Martin Rosburg, 1948, Hinton, Iowa.

12. *Des Moines Tribune*, 8-9 November 1933.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

some rural youngsters said they were ridiculed as "dumb farm kids." I wasn't aware of that in my time in Marshalltown beginning in 1928. Perhaps that was because of the tremendous success of Marshall County farm youngsters that fall in the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago. Clarence Goecke and his sister Emma of State Center showed the grand champion steer and received, as I recall, some \$8,000—a huge amount of money in those days. Keith Collins of Liscomb won additional thousands of dollars with a champion beef carcass.¹³

The Schwieder paper also carried the implication that living in town was altogether superior to country life in those days. That wasn't necessarily the case. It was true that as recently as 1933 or 1934 only one farmhouse in ten had a flush toilet, two had bathtubs, two had piped water, and five had sinks with drains.¹⁴ But the lack of some facilities was widespread as well within small towns and county seats, and even in Des Moines. As recently as 1936 there were 10,931 dwellings in Des Moines and immediate suburbs without indoor toilets, 20 percent of the units in the city itself. Fifteen percent had no city water. And 10,686 units had no central heat.¹⁵ (That was true of seven of ten farm families.) Fewer farm families appeared to be in need of relief than urban families in the Depression. In 1936, 35 percent of Iowa families lived on farms and only 6 percent were on relief.¹⁶

Leland Sage expressed the belief that the deflation of the 1920s had only been delayed, that the farmer would have found himself in trouble after 1914 if it hadn't been for World War I. In trouble, maybe, but certainly not to the extent he was after the tremendous fall from wartime prices in 1920. Also he said the Farm Holiday members wanted from government only help of the magnitude given the banks in their holiday of March 1933. But two-thirds of the banks in Iowa had been wiped out by that time, a much greater casualty rate than the farmers suffered.

13. Marshalltown *Times-Republican*, 5 December 1928, 8; 6 December 1928, 1-17; 14 December 1928, 9.

14. "The Second Report," Iowa State Planning Board, April 1935, 113.

15. "Report on Housing, Des Moines, Iowa," Iowa State Planning Board, April 1935, 49, 51, 52.

16. "An Analysis of Iowa's Relief Population," Committee on Population Trends, Iowa State Planning Board, April 1936, 34.

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