

The Iowa Farmer in Crisis, 1920-1936

JOSEPH FRAZIER WALL

WHILE CAMPAIGNING in Sioux City in the fall of 1932 for what he must have known was a cause already lost, Vice-President Charles Curtis finally grew impatient with the hostile audiences he was encountering throughout the Midwest. He whirled upon one particularly obstreperous heckler and shouted, "You are just too damn dumb to understand this administration's farm policies." The derisive farmers picked up Curtis' unfortunate words with a whoop and a holler. Not that it made any real difference to the outcome in November what this insignificant vice-president said in September, but the delighted Democrats had still another albatross to hang around the beleaguered Hoover administration's neck, and the phrase "too damn dumb to understand" quickly became for the Iowa farmer in 1932 what the Reverend Samuel Burchard's unfortunate "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion" comment had been to the Irish voters of New York in 1884.

Four turbulent years later, as the old militant farm leader, Milo Reno, lay on his deathbed in a Missouri resort spa, he granted a final press interview to a reporter from the local newspaper. When asked what above all he regretted in his long struggle to give the farmers their just rewards, Reno replied that the one thing that continued to vex him was "the fact that the

farmers, for whom he had given his entire life, would not cooperate to the extent that their problems might be solved."¹

It would be difficult to imagine two men more diametrically different in personality, beliefs, or operational methods than Vice-President Charles Curtis and Iowa Farmers' Union President Milo Reno, yet curiously enough they had both arrived at the same evaluation of their rural constituents. Iowa farmers were just "too damn dumb" to understand what was good for them. But in making this final condemnatory judgment, the standpat conservative and the agrarian radical in actuality were making a confession of guilt of the very charge they had levelled against their rural friends. They both were too damn dumb to understand why the programs they advocated were not acceptable to the independent farmer. Curtis never understood why the old Republican formulae of high protective tariffs and trickle-down prosperity, or even the new Hoover programs of a national Farm Board and direct aid to farm cooperatives were not acceptable to the farmer. And although Reno was much closer to the soil than Curtis and instinctively sensed the farmers' basic needs and desires, rationally he was unable to comprehend why he and his organization were unable to get the Iowa farmers to organize to protect their way of life, their status in society. Reno never understood that a basic paradox was built into the whole concept of a union to preserve rugged individualism. He was appalled by the necessity to enforce voluntary embargoes on marketing with coercive picketing on the highways, and as he lay dying, he could in his bitterness, only blame his own people for having made his life work a failure.

Neither Curtis, who had long been rendered insensitive to the needs of his region within his cushy cocoon of Washington politics, nor Reno, who was blinded by his own idealism, really understood what was happening to the people who had elected them to high office within their respective spheres. Along with the immediate economic crisis of ten-cent corn and foreclosure sales of mortgaged farms, there was the deeper problem of personal identification that had been a long time in the making, but

1. Excelsior Springs (Missouri) *Daily Standard*, 5 May 1936, quoted in John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion* (Urbana, 1965), 202.

which was now reaching a critical juncture at this moment of Great Depression. Most farmers themselves would have had difficulty articulating this problem in any comprehensible way. They only knew that something terrible and seemingly inexorable was happening to them and their way of life. The yeoman farmer once had been the very symbol of American life—of Jeffersonian Republicanism and Jacksonian Democracy. In the first census taken in the United States in 1790, 96 percent of the population had been farmers. Cincinnatus had been our greatest hero out of the classical past, and the sturdy yeoman, with wife and children heading west in a covered wagon, was our manifest destiny in a seemingly limitless future.

Within a hundred years, however, farmers had become in Gilbert Fite's apt phrase, "the new minority." But even after the census figures of 1910 revealed their new status, the full impact of being in the minority was not immediately realized. The farmers still had political clout beyond their numbers, thanks in part to the failure of state and national legislatures to reapportion themselves, and the decade from 1910 to 1920 had brought greater economic prosperity to farmers than they had ever known before.

Abruptly in 1920, the farmers discovered not only that they were a minority but that they were an oppressed minority. It was easy, of course, to blame their plight on others, and Milo Reno, John Simpson, A. C. Townley, and other farm leaders were to get a lot of mileage out of demagogic speeches against Wall Street bankers, Chicago grain brokers, and Washington politicians. All of this was useful steam-letting, but if farmers were to rectify in any meaningful way their worsening situation, they had to ask themselves who they were, what they wanted, and what price they were willing to pay for that which they desired.

These three questions were of varying degrees of difficulty to answer. It was relatively easy for farmers to give an answer as to what they wanted. The farmers wanted to stay on the land that they loved. Each wanted to produce as much of the particular product suitable to that land and to the individual's skills as nature, modern technology, and the farmer's own industry would allow. The farmer wanted a price for that produce that would be based on the cost of production plus a fair return for

the labor and investment involved. The farmer wanted easy, short-term credit to meet the immediate annual need of purchasing seed and fertilizer and of hiring temporary additional labor for harvesting, and the farmer also wanted long-term credit at a low rate of interest for capital expenditures of durable equipment and the possible purchase or leasing of additional land. Above all, the farmers wanted to be able at the close of their lives to turn over to one or more of their children their old home places, debt free, better equipped, and more productive than those farms had been when they had acquired them. These expectations seemed to the farmers to make neither unreasonable nor aggressive demands upon society. Most farmers did not expect nor want great wealth. The Carnegie, Rockefeller, Gould dreams of an imperium did not goad Iowa farmers during their waking hours nor disturb their sleep at night.

As to the question concerned with their own identity, here the farmers would also have a ready answer. If they ever asked themselves the question at all, each would answer shortly and simply, "I am my own person, beholden to no one." A valiant answer, to be sure, but by the 1920s, a quite unsatisfactory answer: Modern industrial America had reduced the productive classes to but two categories—labor and management, and in this new simplified taxonomy, the farmer had become an anomaly. Were the farmers labor? Of course, they were. No factory worker worked as long hours as did the farmers during the busy season. It was not nine a.m. to five p.m. for them, but rather five a.m. until nine p.m. "All right," said society, "if you are labor, why don't you organize and strike to get your just demands?" "But," the farmers would reply, "We are not factory hands. We are the owners and managers. We would be striking against ourselves."

"All right, then—you belong to management. Form trusts and pools and marketing agreements. In times of economic recession, reduce costs by laying off workers and letting the plant lie idle for a few months. If prices get too low, create scarcity by limiting production." To which the farmers would reply, "You don't understand. Most of our labor in addition to ourselves consists of our own families. We can't lay them off. And as for our plants, as you call them—we can't let the livestock stand idle like a blast furnace or an assembly line. The

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animals have to be fed, the cows have to be milked, the eggs have to be gathered. We can't take land out of production if we are to meet our mortgage payments. The lower the prices, the more we had better produce to keep the bank or the insurance company from foreclosing." With a shrug, society would then conclude this imagined dialogue by saying, "Well, you will first have to decide who you are, and then determine what price you are willing to pay to get what you want."

There were many different spokesmen from society to tell the farmers who they were, what they needed, and what the cost would be to obtain those needs. There was the American Farm Bureau Federation, whose meteoric rise in membership immediately after World War I made it the largest farm organization in the history of American agriculture. The Farm Bureau spoke to the large, successful farmers of the Midwest, and it told them they were capitalists, who belonged within the aristocracy of management. To survive, farmers needed to be rational in their planning, expansive in their outlook, scientific in their methods. They had an ally in the government, particularly in the Republican party's administration of that government, who would provide them by an extension service conducted through a county agent system with the latest scientific and technological information on how to produce more at less cost. Like any good capitalists, farmers must continually expand, for the status quo meant not status but decline and death. And what were the costs? Well, there was the cost in increased taxes for these services, but that was minimal. There was the higher cost of abandoning old ways and accepting new ideas—of being willing to listen to your twenty-year-old offspring who had had a couple of years of higher education at Iowa State. And the highest cost of all, an acceptance of the fact that there were going to have to be fewer farmers, farming much larger areas of land. Forget that myth of the yeoman farmer. It was as outdated as the myth of the master-apprentice craftsman. The farmer was going to have to become an ever smaller minority, but minority status need not mean oppression, for the elite of any political-economic system is always the smallest minority of all.

Then there was the Farmers' Union, older than the Farm Bureau, but much smaller in numbers, which spoke to a dif-

ferent group of farmers in a quite different language. The Union told the owners of the small family farms that they were neither labor nor management—no need to try to fit into one of only two confining categories designed for an urban, industrial society. It told them they were Iowa farmers, tillers of 160 acres of the world's best land, food suppliers of the world, preservers of a way of life that was still the essence of America. All they needed in monetary return was the cost of production plus a fair profit. To achieve this, they must band together cooperatively and work in union. They must use the ballot box and push politically for their economic and social rights.

And the costs? They would be minimal. The Iowa farmer must forget old party loyalties and prejudices as the North Dakota farmer had done with the Non-Partisan League and the Minnesota farmer was doing with the new Farm-Labor party. Farmers would have to give up some of their precious free time for union organization. Above all, farmers must remember they are their brothers' keepers lest they be branded with the mark of Cain, for the forced departure of a single farm family from its land diminished all farmers.

The politicians from the major parties also came to the farmers with their proposals for reform and relief. And in Congress, these last remnants of Progressivism were amazingly effective in the first years of painful, post-war adjustment in giving the farmers what they wanted. The Farm Bloc was successful in enacting the Packers and Stockyard Act, in providing increased capital to the Federal Farm Loan System, in obtaining exemption from the anti-trust laws for farm cooperatives, and by the Grain Futures Act, in providing effective regulation of the grain exchanges. These were necessary and major accomplishments, but they were ameliorative not fundamental reforms. The McNary-Haugen Bill promised more, and the farmers were quite willing to pay the cost of "an equilization fee" to finance this program if it would indeed guarantee "a fair exchange value" within the domestic market. But effective as this small Farm Bloc was within Congress, it was unable to prevail against an administration of Coolidge, Mellon, and Hoover, and the McNary-Haugen Bill was twice slain by presidential veto.

With the collapse of the financial world in 1929 and the

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subsequent precipitous decline of industry, the farmers were dragged into an even deeper depression than they had known in the 1920s. And in this moment of crisis, new, more extreme political voices were heard, eager to tell the farmers who they were, what they should want, and what prices they would have to pay. The Communists in 1932 belatedly discovered that the real action seemed to be not with the unemployed industrial workers in the cities, who were docilely lining up before soup kitchens or quietly selling apples on streets, but rather with the angry farmers in, of all places, conservative Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota. So "Mother" Ella Bloor, Lem Harris, and Harold Ware hurried out to Madison County, Nebraska, and Sioux City, Iowa, to tell the farmers they were of the proletariat, and what was needed was a genuine revolution to abolish capitalism and all private ownership of production.² But few farmers listened. The Communist program was, for them, confiscatory in its cost.

There were voices from the right as well as the left: the priest of Royal Oak, Michigan, Father Coughlin; William Dudley Pelley and his Silver Shirts; and most interesting of all, Lester Barlow and his Seventy-Sixers. Barlow, an engineer and inventor, had been born and educated in Iowa, later had moved to Connecticut and during World War I had made a small fortune from his improved anti-submarine depth charge bomb. In 1931, he wrote a book entitled, *What Would Lincoln Do*, in which he spelled out his program for the political and economic regeneration of America. Much of this interesting little book is devoted to Barlow's grandiose scheme for a national four-lane transcontinental highway. Anticipating by some twenty-five years the interstate system as developed under the Eisenhower administration in 1950s, even down to the exact location of Interstate 80, Barlow argued that for a cost of two billion dollars the federal government could provide jobs for all of America's unemployed as well as stimulate the country's basic industries and provide a safe and economical national transportation system. But Barlow's vision of a new America went far beyond interstate highways. He called for a national Non-Partisan

2. For an excellent account of Communist activity in the Midwest in the 1930s, see Shover, *Corn Belt Rebellion*.

League that would be outside the existing two-party system. Organized like a people's army of voters, with cadres, companies, and regiments and commanded by a national executive committee and a supreme commander-in-chief, the League would in effect determine the country's political and economic agenda. The existing institutions of government at both the state and national level would simply enact and enforce the mandates of the League.³ In 1932, Barlow also appeared on the Iowa scene to gather in what vintage he could in his native state where the grapes of wrath were rapidly ripening. In far northern Iowa, he was to find some measure of success with his secret Modern Seventy-Sixers clubs and his proposal for a constitutional amendment that would limit any one person's total wealth to \$500,000. America would be taken out of the hands of the corrupt financiers and politicians and returned to the small farmer, the small businessman, and artisan. Barlow would later claim, with some measure of truth, that Huey Long had borrowed from him the "Share the Wealth" program which the Louisiana senator would make into a national platform for his presidential ambitions.

Iowa farmers were not lacking a wide range of solutions for their distress in these years of crisis, and with the exception of the Communist program, much in each proposal had its appeal. But each solution also presented difficulties, for each demanded more of the farmers than they were willing to pay. There was either too callous a disregard for one's less fortunate neighbor or else too much cooperation was required with that same neighbor. Some involved too much regimentation or were based on an unacceptable foreign ideology. The farmer was not seeking revolution but rather restoration, not an idealized future Utopia but a past reality. The real revolutionaries, the Iowa farmers instinctively felt, were not they but those creators of a modern America who had brought the farmers to their sorry plight.

So in their anger and frustration, the Iowa farmers struck out blindly—at the insurance companies and banks who were taking their land from them, at the big city dairies and produce

3. Lester P. Barlow, *What Would Lincoln Do: A Call for Political Revolution Through the Ballot* (Stamford, CT, 1931).

houses who were paying the farmers a mere pittance for their milk and beef and pork, and at government who enforced this new order of things and told the farmers with sheriff's deputies and courts of law what they had to do. In the eighteen-month period from September 1931 through April 1933 there were three quite separate and discrete instances of violence in Iowa which received national attention: the so-called "Cow War" of September 1931, in which the farmers of Cedar and Muscatine counties refused to comply with the new compulsory testing of cattle for the eradication of bovine tuberculosis; the picketing of highways in August of 1932 to prevent produce from reaching market which led to shooting and the destruction of property; and the use of force to stop foreclosure sales which culminated in the so-called attempted lynching of Judge Charles Bradley near Le Mars in the spring of 1933. Violence always attracts attention, and these incidents were successful in spotlighting the plight of the midwestern farmer above that of any other group in America's depressed economy.

Much of the credit—or discredit—for these actions was attributed to the Farmer's Holiday Association and its president, Milo Reno, and indirectly, because the leadership was the same, to the Iowa Farmers' Union. Yet as some historians of this period, most notably John Shover and Dale Kramer, have perceptively pointed out, these instances of direct action were far in advance of the organizations that purportedly were sponsoring them.⁴ Milo Reno, John Simpson, and John Bosch neither organized, led, nor even countenanced violence as a means of getting reform. These were the spontaneous acts of individuals, acting without benefit of organization or advance planning. Often these acts had a momentum of their own which carried even the participants along willy-nilly with no clear objective in mind. Some twenty-five years later, I went to the Le Mars area of northwest Iowa and talked with many of the participants in these events. The oral history interviews I conducted confirmed this historical judgment. I talked to people who had stood on

4. Dale Kramer, *The Wild Jackasses: The American Farmer in Revolt* (New York, 1956) and Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*. See also Roland A. White's uncritical biography, *Milo Reno: Farmers' Union Pioneer* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1941) which unintentionally reveals how out of touch Reno was with the activists within his movement.

the picket lines and others who had served as sheriff's deputies to keep the roads open. No one spoke of organization or platforms or goals. They spoke of their fear, their anger, and the kind of exultant joy they found in doing something, anything, no matter how inchoate and purposeless it may have been.⁵

One of the most valuable interviews I had was with Rome Starzl, then editor of the *Le Mars Globe-Post*. Starzl, who had been editorially sympathetic to the farmer's cause, gave me a most graphic account of the most dramatic episode of the whole period, the Judge Bradley "lynching" attempt. The incident began when a group of farmers, sitting in Bradley's court hearing arguments on the constitutionality of Iowa's new moratorium law on foreclosures, were asked to remove their hats. Angered by this command, they surged forward and grabbed the judge. It was as unplanned, as spontaneous, and as consequential as was Rosa Park's refusal in 1956 to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Birmingham. Having taken the first step in anger, the farmers were swept along by their own temerity. They carried the judge out to a truck, and then drove him a few miles out of town. They asked Starzl to come along to get a story for his paper. There on that country road, they stripped the judge down to his long winter underwear. Then they began, Starzl said, to act out a kind of parody of the crucifixion. The farmers began to jeer "King Bradley, King Bradley," as one farmer put a noose around the judge's neck and flung the other end of the rope over a cross beam of a telephone pole. Someone yelled, "The King needs a crown," and slapped a hubcap off the truck on his head. Then, Starzl recalled, "Bradley said he wanted to offer a prayer. He was praying for his life, but he never once asked them to save his life. What he really said, although he didn't use those words was 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.' Having finished his prayer, Bradley quite unexpectedly fainted and fell down on the road while the mob just stood there. At that point, I stepped forward and said, 'Listen, none of you men intend to kill this old man, but he may die of a heart attack and you'll be guilty of murder just the same.' At that point a few of the men began to move.

5. Interviews with Charles Treinen, Gus Alesch, Ed Clafkey, et al. in the Le Mars-Remsen area of Plymouth County, July 1955.

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back toward their cars and in a matter of minutes they were all gone except the farmer who had brought me out. The judge had come to by that time. We got him into his clothes and took him back into town. The next day the governor declared martial law in Plymouth County. The National Guard arrived and stayed two months. And that brought an end to the Farmers' Holiday movement in Plymouth County."⁶

Starzl was convinced, as am I after examining the available evidence, that the mob never had any intentions of lynching Bradley. It is, of course, possible that they might have been carried to that extreme by the momentum of their own previous actions. But in actuality, they were acting out a kind of medieval allegorical play, a drama to provide catharsis for all their fears and frustration. Or to put it in a more modern context, the Bradley incident is not unlike the guerrilla theatre device used by youthful protesters of the Viet Nam war in the 1970s. It may have been that what saved Bradley's life was the fact that he too entered into the drama and played out his passion role of crucifixion with utter conviction.

The Bradley incident did indeed kill the Holiday movement. Reno and the other farm leaders were appalled and mortified as were nearly all farmers. No serious additional acts of violence erupted in the corn belt. Yet it is an ironic comment on society that these isolated acts of spontaneous and seemingly purposeless protest perhaps did more to place the agricultural relief problem at the top of the New Deal's agenda for action than had all the conferences, programs, and platforms of the various farm and political organizations combined. Within the first hundred days of the New Deal the farmer got the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act, the Farm Credit Act for short term loans, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and the Frazier-Lemke Bankruptcy Act. With this legislation, the farmers within three months had got from the New Deal all that they had sought for the past thirteen years. And what price did the farmers have to pay for all this? Enforced limitation on their production, the redefinition of agriculture as a free enterprise activity, and bureaucratic conformity were the price tags. Far too high a cost, shrieked old Milo Reno. Embittered by Wallace's rejection of his

6. Interview with Rome Starzl, Le Mars, Iowa, July 1955.

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ill-defined formula of cost of production plus, without any limitation upon production, and by Roosevelt's refusal to accept an unlimited inflation of the currency, Reno tried to lead his farmers out of the New Deal into a new political allegiance. But Reno had only old slogans and worn rhetoric to offer the farmers. Wallace had government checks and the assurance of continued land tenure security. The issue was never in doubt.

Along with the checks, the government also provided an answer to the third question that society had asked of the farmers in 1920. The government told the Iowa farmers who they were. In the modern alien world of big business and big labor, farmers of necessity had to be dependents of big government. Only direct government intervention would enable the individual farmer to survive. It was not the answer the yeoman farmer would have liked, but survival in the modern world had become of far greater importance than self identity in a world that was now forever lost. The farmers willingly accepted the government reins along with their United States federal treasury checks.

Post-conference note: George Mills is quite correct in pointing out in his comments that follow that the opening paragraph of this article is in error in attributing Curtis' speech to the 1932 campaign. As Mills says, the speech was actually delivered in 1928. But because Curtis' comment on the intelligence of the heckler became an issue in the 1932 campaign, I unfortunately have repeated the error of previous commentators in stating that the vice-president's comment was made in 1932. I stand corrected.—JFW

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