

THE PALIMPSEST

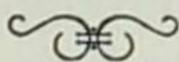
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VOL. XXXI

ISSUED IN APRIL 1950

No. 4

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Early Agricultural Societies

The earliest type of farm organization in the United States was the agricultural society which began with the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture in 1785. George Washington was one of its founders. Such societies became the predominant form of association during the middle nineteenth century, and were the principal mediums for the formation and expression of rural opinion and the promotion of the interests of the farming class.

Agricultural societies were organized in nearly every county of the nation. In 1858 the United States Patent Office listed over 900 agricultural and horticultural societies. There were 95 societies in New England, 97 in New York, 94 in Illinois, and 74 in Iowa. These societies — township, county, and district — led to the organization of the state agricultural societies which generally underwent the transition from private to semi-public and then to public organizations supported and directed by the states.

The agricultural fair became the institutionalized expression of the agricultural society. It performed two functions: educational and recreational. It was the chief agency of the society in the diffusion of new ideas, the introduction of better farming practices, new types of livestock, grains, and fruits, and the development of social unity.

The first Iowa State Fair was held at Fairfield, October 25-27, 1854. Thereafter it was held annually in different sections of the state until 1879 when it was established permanently in Des Moines. Newspapers gave full accounts of each State Fair and annual reports were published. The agricultural fair provided exhibits of the best breeds of livestock, improved varieties of grain, fruits, and vegetables, and the most recent farm implements and machines. Evening meetings were held for discussions of these subjects, and formal addresses were given by prominent men invited for the occasion.

These early agricultural societies were the antecedents of the great farm organizations that emerged after the Civil War as the nation entered upon the triple economic revolution in agriculture, industry, and transportation that effected fundamental and far-reaching changes in American economy.

The forces contributing to the revolution in American agriculture were: (1) the passing of the public lands into private ownership; (2) the

rapid growth of population and immigration; (3) the invention and popularization of improved farm implements and machines; (4) the extension and development of transportation; (5) the migration of industries from the farm to the factory; (6) the expansion of domestic and foreign markets; (7) the establishment of agencies for the promotion of scientific and practical knowledge relating to agriculture; and (8) the political organization of the farmers in their efforts to secure and maintain "an equitable place for agriculture in the economic structure of the nation." These forces effected the rapid transition of agriculture from self-sufficing to commercial farming and gave rise to economic and social conditions over which the farmer had little or no control. Recognizing the need of group action in order to deal effectively with the problems growing out of these conditions, the farmer turned to organization on a local, state, and national scale.

Farm organizations may be divided into two major groups: those that are designed to promote the special interests of the farmers; and those that unite the farmers as a class in the pursuit of their common interests and objectives. The first group includes a very considerable number of farm organizations, among which may be mentioned the farmers' elevator companies, cooperative creamery associations, fire and life insurance companies, and livestock shipping associations. The second group

may further be divided into nonpartisan organizations, such as the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, the Farmers' Union, and the Farm Bureau; and political third parties represented by the Anti-Monopoly, Greenback, Populist, and Farmer-Labor parties. Both groups may be designated as private organizations based on voluntary action and control by the farmers, as distinguished from public organizations supported and implemented by the state, such as the state departments of agriculture, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the land-grant colleges.

Four fundamental conditions — economic, political, social, and psychological — have united the farmers as a class in pursuit of their major objectives.

Economic Conditions. The primary need of the farmer, in the disposal of his surplus products in the domestic markets, was adequate transportation facilities. Before the Civil War the chief route for the shipment of wheat, corn, pork, and beef was down the Mississippi by steamboat to southern markets and New Orleans, whence the surplus was exported to the Gulf Coast and Atlantic seaboard and to Europe. The Civil War destroyed the river trade and, although it was revived, it never recovered its former importance. The railroads, which had entered the Middle West in the fifties, were rapidly extended beyond the Mississippi, in response to a public demand supported by liberal

land grants, federal, state, and municipal bonds, and purchase of stock. Four lines were built across Iowa by 1870. Railroad mileage for the country as a whole almost doubled each decade to the end of the century, expanding from 30,626 miles in 1860 to 193,345 miles in 1900, an almost sevenfold increase. During this same period, railroad mileage in Iowa increased from 331 miles in 1860 to 9,171 in 1900, an almost thirtyfold increase!

The Iowa farmer soon was almost entirely dependent on the railroads for the transportation of his products to the market. It was not long before he found himself in the grip of a transportation monopoly. Rates were high and discriminations between places and persons were common practices charged against the railroads. These abuses, including the free pass system and other personal discriminations, aroused the embittered farmers. They contended that the railroads were semi-public corporations subject to state control and demanded legislation to correct these abuses.

Next in importance to the railroads as an economic cause of discontent were the middlemen who served as agents in the distribution of commodities between producer and consumer. The farmer contended that his profits were "not in proportion to those of the merchant or the miller," and that the commission men had facilities for taking advantage of market conditions and fluctuations

which were denied the farmer. The exactions of the middlemen aroused the farmer and led him to regard the merchants and commission men as his enemies. He proposed to eliminate them by instituting direct buying and selling agencies.

Low prices of farm products and high prices of non-agricultural products have been a major factor in the rise and growth of farm organizations. "The farmer took what the other fellow paid and he paid what the other fellow asked." Viewed in still another way, "he got it both coming and going" in the market place. To remedy the situation and bridge the gap between the producer and the consumer, he demanded remedial legislation and turned to the formation of cooperative selling and buying organizations and the establishment of processing plants for farm products.

Currency and banking conditions have been a constant factor in the farmers' organization movement. "As long as prices are rising, contentment is the rule, but let prices fall [and] all the agricultural regions are swept by whatever monetary scheme is upper-most at the time." The lack of ready money left the farmer in straightened financial circumstances which resulted in widespread indebtedness as shown by the rapid increase of farm mortgages. The attendant evil of speculation forced the market value of farm land to extravagant heights. Interest rates were excessively high. These forces, in combination with low prices on farm products,

were followed by protracted depressions that the farmer suffered in common with the business groups. To remedy these evils, the farmer demanded legislation designed to provide adequate currency and banking facilities for a rapidly expanding and commercialized system of farming.

State and federal taxes bore with unequal weight on the farmer, whose property in land was easily assessed, while the railroads and other corporations, with their ever-present legislative lobbies, escaped their fair share of taxation. In the field of federal taxation, the progressively high customs tariffs on articles competing with domestic manufacturers raised the farmer's costs without affording him any advantages, since he produced a surplus of food and fibers for export which "protection did not protect." The farmer's situation was summed up in the familiar phrase: "The farmer buys in a protected market and he sells in an unprotected market."

The Political Factor. The economic ills of the farmer were laid at the doors of the state legislatures and of Congress. The farmer complained that he was not adequately represented in the law-making bodies which, he charged, were controlled by the corporations; and that legislation favored the business interests with little or no consideration for the farmer, except as he made his voice heard in the councils of the nation. To remedy this situation, the farmer must always be prepared to

express himself politically and to do this effectively he must be organized. He must fight organization with organization. The formation of non-partisan groups and political third parties enabled the farmer to exert pressure on the major parties and in time to translate his demands into remedial legislation.

Social Conditions. Farming was being transformed from a pioneer occupation into a commercial enterprise. The new conditions thus created broadened the farmer's outlook and awakened in him a realization that his educational advancement and social development had not kept pace with that of the business and professional classes in the cities and towns.

The Psychological Factor. The environmental conditions that gave rise to agrarian discontent were supplemented by another factor inherent in the farmers' movement: the psychology of the farmer. The farmer is withal an individualist. His extreme individualism is the outgrowth of his pioneering experience with the soil in which independence of thought and action were nurtured. Resourceful and self-reliant, he was accustomed to do his own thinking and follow the dictates of his own judgment. Only when environmental conditions bore down heavily upon him was he ready to join any organization that gave fiery utterance to his grievances and proposed remedies for the economic and social ills of an agrarian society.

Added to these grievances were the struggles with natural forces: floods and droughts, insect pests and fungus diseases, hail storms and winds. All this intensified the spirit of revolt and led to organized protests on a nation-wide scale. The extreme individualism of the farmer also explains a lack of social consciousness, based on real class sympathy, which has served as a barrier to the promotion of the solidarity of the farmers as a class.

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