

## CHAPTER VII

### EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY FARM ORGANIZATIONS

#### Introduction

This chapter introduces the three most prominent farm organizations of the early twentieth century. It sets up an historical framework for situating the role of these organizations in the creation of the Federal Farm Loan Act (FFLA) of 1916. Chapter VII examines the status of farm organizations and their aspirations. It reveals the extent to which farm organizations, even in their own estimation, were severely hampered by their inability to deal with basic organizational problems. This effectively precluded their legislative influence. In addition, they perceived themselves as being surrounded by powerful enemies, particularly businessmen who were despised and yet admired for their economic and legislative success.

Chapter VII supports the proximate origin of the rural credit reform hypothesis (H1) in two respects. First, as late as 1916, the farm-organization leadership complained about its inability to influence legislation effectively.

Indeed, the root cause of this claim lay in an inability to effectively organize farmers for cooperative endeavors. Second, and more important, at the time rural credit reform emerged in the press, it was not a farm-organization priority; indeed, it was completely off their agenda. Populist rural-finance radicalism and experiments in cooperative credit conceived during the early 1910s were perceived as past failures that did not need to be repeated. According to the farm organizations, debt was something to be avoided. Again with reference to H1, Chapter VII and the survey results reported in Chapter VIII demonstrate that rather than the Progressive Era reformers refining or neutralizing a rural populist initiative, the proximate origin of the credit reform movement clearly was found in the cities. The farm organizations adopted a populist finance position in an attempt to refine that urban reform initiative.

Chapter VII argues that farm organizations during this period aspired to set the national policy agenda through the national press. This support for the rise of agenda-setting periodization (H2) is evidenced in part by the fact that all the leading farm-organization figures traced their own roots and inspiration to earlier work in agricultural journalism. Each believed that educating the public through the press was critical to farm-organization efforts. For

example, national status and recognition were presumed to be the inevitable result of the successful circulation of an official national newspaper. The substantive agenda of the farm-organization press was different in significant ways from the farm and business press. Some of the reasons for a variation in the pattern of issue salience, a phenomenon discussed in Chapter VIII, are suggested by evidence in this chapter. The difficulty in organizing farmers, for example, was often paramount, draining energy from the more fundamental issues. Thus the farm-organization agenda reflected a pressing need to overcome traditional farmer individualism. This was reflected in many ways. For example, issues such as soil fertility received less coverage, while reports of non-farm-sector misdeeds were covered extensively, possibly in an attempt to motivate farmers and overcome their inherent reluctance as joiners.

The FFLA created the first Government Sponsored Enterprise (GSE) in the United States. This GSE took the form of subsidized Federal Land Banks (FLBs), a supervisory Federal Farm Loan Board (FFLB), and the farmer-organized cooperative National Farm Loan Associations (NFLAs). With passage of this law, Congress abandoned the laissez-faire approach to land credit and adopted a system of subsidy, regulation, and federal guarantee,

thereby establishing a legal basis for rural cooperative credit for a portion of the nation's agricultural capital markets. Given the historical significance of the effort to establish this first GSE on behalf of a particular class, the farmers, the FFLA is a good test case for gauging the agenda-setting influence of farm organizations during this period.

The historian Lawrence Goodwyn asserted the FFLA was one in a series of twentieth-century federal farm credit laws that "had the effect of assisting large-unit farming interests to acquire still more land at the expense of small holders."<sup>1</sup> Depending upon how one interprets the proper function of twentieth-century farm organizations, this outcome could be described as either an early victory for the champions of an emerging agribusiness sensibility or a defeat for the forces, such that they were, allied on behalf of small, tenant, or insolvent farmers.

Despite two major agrarian uprisings, the Granger movement and the populism of the Alliance and the People's Party, farmers in the United States entered the twentieth century largely unorganized. Organized farmers experienced numerous failures in economic and political cooperation during the last third of the nineteenth century. Early Grange efforts at economic

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<sup>1</sup>Goodwyn, 269.

cooperation, for example, left the fraternal Order of the Patrons of Husbandry defending "a record of discredit and indebtedness" at century's end. Railroad legislation sponsored by the Grange failed to accomplish the goal of increasing farm profitability. Later in the century, the electoral defeat of Populism, followed by the rapid decline of Farmers' Alliance cooperative efforts, and the last stages of the low ebb of Grange membership around 1900, all combined to leave agriculturists entering the century of organization in a state of disarray.<sup>2</sup>

Many claims have nonetheless been made by scholars, and of course by participating farm-organization leaders, about the ability of organized farmers to influence legislation. Writing about the original Grange movement during the 1870s, Benjamin Horace Hibbard argued, "farmers were able to put statutes on the books and influence court decisions, both state and national."

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<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Tontz, "Memberships of General Farmers' Organizations, United States, 1874-1960," Agricultural History 38, no. 3 (July 1964): 143-56. Consider also Clemens, 150-55. One farm-organization journalist accused the political demagogue of being responsible, since "he has petted and cajoled farmers, cultivated a spirit of animosity toward everything that is progressive in our farmers. . . . This pernicious creature has taught the American farmer to distrust everyone whom he ought to regard as his friend--including his brother farmer. . . . O, Farmers! There will never come to you prosperity or uplift, until you have faith--faith in each other, faith in the average integrity of men." See William A. Bowen, "Education and the Uplift of the Man on the Farm," Pacific Farmers Union 5, no. 16 (2 May 1913): 5-7.

Despite the difficulties of uniting the three major farm groups apparent during the New Deal, and in earlier periods as well, Hibbard, writing in 1935, concluded

that farmers if sufficiently aroused can get political concessions notwithstanding the fact that they represent a relatively small part of the population. Furthermore . . . no matter how necessary the general organizations may be in starting the campaigns for bettering farmer welfare, the brunt of the fights will inevitably fall on the more coherent, more solidly organized economic associations of producers.<sup>3</sup>

Richard Hofstadter compiled a list of several defeated Grange and populist proposals that eventually became law, though often in substantially altered form, during the Progressive Era. Hofstadter counted the Federal Farm Loan Act as one of the most significant Progressive Era reforms with a populist origin.<sup>4</sup> "One of the most striking features of twentieth-century

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<sup>3</sup>Benjamin Horace Hibbard, "Legislative Pressure Groups Among Farmers," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 179 (May 1935): 18. Gerald Berk's discussion of the "Granger Laws" noted that historians "have disagreed whether to credit farmers or merchants with agency. Neither attribution is correct: a farm-merchant alliance was responsible." See Berk, 77-78.

<sup>4</sup>One counterargument is that periodic radical agrarian uprisings necessitated federal intervention not to institutionalize Populist ideals, but rather, to prevent them from becoming law. See, e.g., Caine, 19. Caine suggested that for "some who would become progressives, populism was their first movement . . . for most, populism had little or no appeal."

American politics," wrote Hofstadter, re-articulating Hibbard's logic, "has been the way in which the farm population has *gained* in political striking power with its relative losses in numbers, growing more cohesive, more vocal, more effectual almost in proportion as it has been progressively more outnumbered."<sup>5</sup> As farm organizations turned increasingly to business methods as a means of betterment, historians generally concurred that their legislative influence increased in turn.

Hofstadter's account noted what he described as the shift from "soft" agrarian radicalism to a "hard" position of more businesslike methods to economic and political improvement. Soft agrarians, such as those thought to comprise the bulk of farmers supporting the populist upheaval, followed the "bathos of agrarian rhetoric" down a path of mass politics, third parties, and the rhetorical, at times deeply nativist, conquest over the insidious distant forces of the "money power."<sup>6</sup> For Hofstadter, the key to this transition

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<sup>5</sup>Hofstadter, 115-16.

<sup>6</sup>Hofstadter, 46. See, e.g., the Preamble to the Platform of the People's Party (cited in Hackney), written by Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota, which pointed to specific abuses associated with usury, monopoly, the power to create money, democracy, and the government. For a thorough treatment of the populist traditions, see Thomas Goebel, "The Political Economy of American Populism from Jackson to the New Deal," Studies in American Political Development 11, no. 1 (November 1997): 109-48. Goebel finds

involved farmers slowly abandoning "competitive individualism" in favor of learning from "business about its marketing devices, strategies of combination, or skills of self-defense and self-advancement through pressure politics."<sup>7</sup>

Grant McConnell also described the pivotal lesson gleaned by farmers from the experience of Populist defeats; it was simply that "farmers were inherently difficult to organize, and that any circle of unity about either must be of the smallest possible radius and must be drawn tight with the strongest bonds of immediate and obvious economic self-interest."<sup>8</sup> Nineteenth-century agrarianism had been democratic in character, wrote McConnell, and yet it was ineffective as an agent of policy change or economic betterment. The transformation occurring during the early twentieth century was one in which farmers would, at times grudgingly, learn to emulate the practices of urban

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evidence of the gradual erosion of the old populist sentiment as it was replaced by "twentieth-century conceptions of political economy."

<sup>7</sup>Hofstadter, 59. Clemens argues that "Although in retrospect these reforms may appear as beneficial rationalizations of capitalism, to credit them to industrial rather than agricultural efforts misses the distinctive organizational and strategic innovations made by agrarian activists. Unlike business groups, agrarian 'interests' were linked to large constituencies of voters, representing a challenge to the *electoral* bases of politics that far exceeded that of comparable business associations" (177).

<sup>8</sup>McConnell, 19.

organizations. The new farm organization strategy, in a period of rising prices after 1897, focused on how to maximize the farmers' share of an expanding market for agricultural staples, and concurrently on how to increase the influence of its leaders on shaping political reforms at the national level.

Discrepancies exist, however, between some of the claims about farm organizations and their genuine achievements during the early twentieth century. Groups such as the National Grange were prone to claiming that every favorable legislative outcome was the result of their own organizational activity, while unfavorable outcomes resulted solely from discreditable efforts by nonfarm organizations.<sup>9</sup> These claims are prominently featured in the primary farm-organization literature of the 1910s. Yet what is interesting is that assertions of organizational influence over legislation at times appear side by side in the farm-organization press with more candid admissions that farmers, in general, were poorly organized and unable to influence legislation adequately. Agricultural historians have reported on the inherent political and economic disunity of the farm sector. They point to conflicts generated within

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<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., "Farmers Must Be Wide Awake," National Grange Monthly 11, no. 2 (February 1914): 3, 7. As rural credit reform turned away from farm organization plans, the paper pointed to "a conspiracy to defeat genuine rural credits legislation." See "The Rural Credit Situation," National Grange Monthly 12, no. 4 (April 1915): 6, 7.

the sector, whether due to class, commodity, regional or other cleavages, that traditionally have left agriculture without peak national organization able to speak for all farmers on legislative matters early in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

The remainder of this chapter reviews the limited existing historiography of twentieth-century farm organizations. It provides a framework for the following chapter, which presents a survey of the print press serving the National Grange, the Pacific Farmers' Union, and the Wisconsin Society of Equity. Surveying the pages of the farm-organization press allows us to recast the notion of legislative winners and losers as a case study of early experiments in media agenda-setting. Farm organizations were hardly alone in this public relations exercise. Similar experiments in the education and shaping of public opinion through editorials and articles went on in the sober pages of the leading farm journals, as well as in the leading business papers and magazines.

Mary Cronin's recent study of the Nonpartisan League newspapers points out that all agrarian insurgency movements during and prior to this

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<sup>10</sup>Clemens, 150; Guth, 418-40; Louis Bernard Schmidt, "The Role and Technique of Agrarian Pressure Groups," Agricultural History 30, no. 2 (April 1956): 56-57. Danbom's claim was that "farmers in the first twenty years of this century did not comprise an interest group capable of planning or acting on its own behalf on the national level" (12).

period relied heavily on publications "to promote and defend their cause--returning government to the hands of the people." Given the logistical problems posed by rural isolation, newspapers were "the simplest means of spreading information about agrarian reform movements." Historians, wrote Cronin, have made limited use of farm-organization papers, fearing their bias or poorly developed journalistic skills. "Yet every agrarian reform movement since the Grangers in the 1870s has relied heavily on media to state its case, rally the faithful, and seek new converts."<sup>11</sup> The findings presented in these two chapters reinforce Cronin's findings that the print press was considered an all-important medium, both for securing organizational unity and increasing efficacy in matters of policy.

It was during the 1910s, Elisabeth Clemens suggests, that a new form of political organization refined techniques of pressure-group influence that would come to characterize twentieth-century American politics. "The new currency of political influence included procedural mastery, technical expertise, and the ability to mobilize public opinion." One of the roles for an institutional historian, according to Clemens, is to present "an archaeology of schema, a reconstruction of the scripts available within particular societies at

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<sup>11</sup>Cronin, 128.

particular times. This approach . . . asks how `self-interest' is constructed and under what conditions it becomes the dominant script guiding political action."<sup>12</sup> For farm organizations, the most reliable and efficient means of defining self-interest--and influencing legislation--available during this period were the elaborate agenda-setting efforts found in the pages of the print press. As agricultural historian Roy V. Scott has noted, "The agrarian organizations induced their members to read and to think, to consider questions intelligently, and to reject traditionalism, emotionalism, and apathy so deeply implanted in their nature."<sup>13</sup>

Over the period 1912-1916, the major farm organizations joined in a debate on the prospect of importing a rural cooperative credit model from Europe. It was a policy process the farm organizations clearly did not initiate. The plan to borrow on the principles of rural cooperative credit as practiced in either Germany, Ireland, France or some combination of the collective wisdom of the European continent, originated with several non-farm-organization actors. As Chapter II demonstrated, the idea of looking to

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<sup>12</sup>Clemens, 1, 9.

<sup>13</sup>Scott, The Reluctant Farmer, 37.

Europe came to prominence during the 1910s because of actors and institutions well established in business and banking sectors of the economy.

### The National Grange

The nineteenth-century roots of the Grange have been the focus of much more intense historical study than have the activities of the twentieth-century Grange. According to farm-organization scholar Lowell K. Dyson, "historians have, unfortunately, almost ignored the twentieth-century Grange." The Grange, or Patrons of Husbandry, emerged after the Civil War as a response to the commercialization of agriculture and the growth of new class relations defined in a number of ways, with rural-urban being one of the most important, but also owner-tenant, farmer-merchant, farmer-middleman and farmer-banker. As early as the 1850s, farmers "began to see themselves as a class apart from others in society, with their own special interests." By the 1860s, commodity markets and railroads represented significant sources of agitation for farmers whose crops brought limited income and ensured many

farmers' descent into debt. A deflationary monetary system exacerbated farmer agitation throughout the last third of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

The founder of the Grange, O. H. Kelley, was a writer on agricultural problems and a clerk in the new United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1864. Kelley published regularly in the farm press, and was considered an agricultural journalist, as were the founders of both the Farmers' Union and the American Society of Equity (ASE) a little over three decades later. When he investigated the problems facing farmers in the 1860s on behalf of the USDA, Kelley found that a lack of communication among farmers presented one of the biggest obstacles to better rural organization. Though many different farm journals carried Kelley's stream of writings promoting the Grange, Dyson concluded these nineteenth-century efforts at soliciting and keeping adherents to Grange philosophy were incomplete. "A host of newspapers began to claim to speak for the Grange," wrote Dyson, "but there was no authoritative national journal to provide guidance."<sup>15</sup> The survey presented in Chapter VIII shows that among the farm-organization

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<sup>14</sup>Lowell K. Dyson, Farmers' Organizations (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 233-34.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 235-39.

leadership, it was thought the establishment of an official newspaper was a necessary, though not sufficient, condition to catapult farmers into a secure position as credible and authoritative actors in national policymaking debates.

This was hardly a simple task, however, and everyone involved recognized that starting a farm-organization newspaper was not going to serve as a panacea for rural organization efforts. Even a prominent academic and lifelong Granger, Kenyon Butterfield, had to admit in 1901 that the "difficulty of uniting the farmers of America for any form of coöperative endeavor long ago became proverbial." For Butterfield, who was to become an elite champion of rural sociology, organization, education, and credit reform, the most obvious barriers to early efforts--isolation, individualism and poor communication--meant it was understandable that "the agricultural masses grew into a state of mind unfavorable for organization--that they became suspicious of one another, jealous of leadership, unwilling to keep pledges of union, and unable to sink personal views and prejudices." Failed early efforts, which Butterfield believed were too radical for a conservative organization such as the Grange, sought to bypass the middlemen through cooperation, and thereby put more money into the pockets of farmers. Some of these efforts were "ill-judged, even fantastic," yet it was also the case "that the weapons of

rural organization have a temper all the better, perhaps, because they were fashioned on the anvil of defeat."<sup>16</sup>

In 1909, Butterfield contested the "popular impression that the Grange is not at present a force of consequence, that long ago it became a cripple, if not a corpse." The Grange, while tempered by early failures in certain experiments, promoted public understanding of the needs of the agriculturist. "The greatest achievement of the order," wrote Butterfield about the Grange, "is that it has taught the farmers of America the value of co-operation and the power of organized effort." While it was admitted the lesson was still being learned, it was considered beyond doubt that the Grange had contributed to the long-term goal of acting as "an educator on public issues." Grange meetings were educative and featured lectures on important rural issues. Butterfield noted that many people would be surprised to learn how well-read Grange

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<sup>16</sup>Kenyon L. Butterfield, "The Grange," The Forum 31, no. 2 (April 1901): 231. Praise for Butterfield as "the best practical student of rural society in the United States" was not hard to find during this period. See "Rural Move Made Toward Betterment," Wisconsin Equity News 3, no. 13 (10 November 1910): 3. Among his numerous duties as a leading agrarian, Butterfield served on the Country Life Commission, was the vice chairman of the United States Commission that studied European rural cooperative credit firsthand in 1913 and served as editor-in-chief of the "Rural America" department for the periodical Business America. Butterfield was also the president of Massachusetts Agricultural College.

members were, and he concluded their discussions were "not seldom informative, and that they make public opinion in rural communities is beyond cavil." For instance, Grange activity was thought to have contributed to a decline in sectionalism, a disinclination to indulge unwisely in credit, and to nonpartisanship on behalf of agrarian policy reforms.<sup>17</sup>

The leading spokesperson and policy analyst of the early twentieth-century National Grange was T. C. Atkeson, who became Master of the West Virginia State Grange in 1897, Overseer of the National Grange in 1903, and a member of the National Grange Legislative Committee in 1907. Atkeson was yet another agricultural journalist who turned into a farm-organization leader. He founded the West Virginia Agriculturist, and served in a number of editorial capacities, while promoting farmers' movements, and running a successful farm of his own.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Kenyon L. Butterfield, Chapters in Rural Progress (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), 136-50. On the Grange attitude toward legislation, Butterfield wrote: "It is possible that in some cases too much faith in law as a means of emancipation from economic bondage; but, in the main, its legislative point of view is sane and conservative. . . . It is unalterably opposed to class legislation." *Ibid.*, 154. This combination led Butterfield to remark that the Grange is "progressively conservative--or conservatively progressive. It is neither ultra-radical nor forever in the rut." *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>18</sup>"State Grange Masters," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 10 (8 January 1908): 8.

Atkeson reported in 1910 that continuing failures to organize farmers for economic and political cooperation meant that Butterfield's turn-of-the-century observations were still valid:

Careful investigation of the causes of the failure in numerous efforts to organize the farmers has almost persuaded us to accept the conclusion of Mr. Butterfield, that, "they become suspicious of one another, jealous of leadership, unwilling to keep the pledge of union, and unable to sink personal views and prejudices."<sup>19</sup>

Atkeson further noted that many in the Grange, as students of sociology, had tried to determine the cause of this outcome and had invariably found "that internal discord has been one of the dominating causes. Somehow [farmers] become inoculated with the deadly virus of distrust and unwillingness to submit to discipline and constituted authority."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, there is considerable evidence that farm-organization leaders struggled to establish central agencies of influence and control over farm activity, whether for economic or political ends. When they were successful, however, they admitted their work hinged in large part on agenda-setting efforts in the print press.

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<sup>19</sup>T. C. Atkeson, "Worthy Overseer's Report," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-fourth Annual Session, Atlantic City, New Jersey, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1910), 18.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

Experience with continuing cooperative failures taught the Overseer of the National Grange that a prerequisite for effective organization was the existence of capable leaders able to inspire confidence and action on the part of rank-and-file members. "The paramount mission of the Grange," wrote Atkeson, "is to develop and equip with leadership and discipline such a following as will give power and direction to the best and the broadest of our national farmer thinking."<sup>21</sup> When this was to be the power to influence legislation, it meant using the press to mobilize an effective lobbying force. The official press generated by the work of the Legislative Committee could "only be made effective by local Granges backing up our efforts with emphatic protests to their senators and congressmen."<sup>22</sup>

One of the few careful students of the twentieth-century Grange was Sister M. Thomas More Bertels. Her dissertation on the National Grange raised the issue that "national policy did not always accord with desires of the lower echelons in the Order." While Grange periodicals did allow some room

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>22</sup>"Report of the Legislative Committee," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-fourth Annual Session, Atlantic City, New Jersey, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1910), 125.

for dissent in the editorials and columns, primarily they served as a vehicle to convey the leaders' view from the top down. Bertels concluded that whatever harmony existed between the local, state, and national positions was expressed in Congress largely due to the influence of leaders like T. C. Atkeson, an officer with the National Grange from 1903-1927. National Grange policy was formulated once a year by the State Masters and their wives at a ten-day annual meeting, with the outcome of these discussions synthesized in the annual address of the National Master. The principle means of disseminating the National Grange positions were the annual Journal of Proceedings and the official newspaper. According to Bertels, the Patrons of Husbandry were prone to comparing the National Grange to the United States Senate. Her conclusion, however, was that this deliberative body never attained the influence in Congress that it hoped for. "In spite of significant advantages--the timeliness of its message, the homogeneity of its membership, the centralization of its government--the National Grange was unable to effect the consolidation of the agricultural classes on a national scale."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Sister M. Thomas More Bertels, "The National Grange: Progressives on the Land, 1900-1930" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1962), v, 39-43, 54-55. On the powerful influence of Atkeson, see "Report of the Committee on Resolutions on Rural Credit," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-seventh Annual Session,

In 1916, acting as the official Grange historian, Atkeson produced a Semi-Centennial of the Patrons of Husbandry. Apart from recounting the past positions and organizing principles of the Grange, such as its staunch nonpartisanship, the book also laid down a sixteen-point plan that Atkeson believed the National Grange had to impress upon its members. Prominent on the list was the need for organizational preservation, which was in fact an ever-present concern in the pages of the Grange press. The most vital need, however, was "better business methods" for farmers. Atkeson also charted a course of action designed to make farmers more active in politics. He lamented, however, the underachievement to date of farmers in pressing their demands before Congress:

Considering their numbers and the importance of their occupation to the welfare of mankind, the farmers are woefully impotent at directing the affairs of government. The trend of legislation since the founding of the nation has been toward the building of cities and to the detriment of the country, which should now be remedied.<sup>24</sup>

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Manchester, New Hampshire, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1913), 153-54, in which Atkeson's resolutions were selected to be the centerpiece of the National Grange position on rural credit.

<sup>24</sup>T. C. Atkeson, Semi-Centennial History of the Patrons of Husbandry (New York: Orange Judd Company, 1916), 268. Atkeson recounts the rural credits resolutions from the 1913 meeting of the National Grange, but does not mention the speech of David F. Houston, the Secretary of the USDA at that

Given the expressed concern of Grange leaders with rectifying past economic abuses, and neglect of agriculture in the halls of Congress, the fight over the FFLA presents a good test case for establishing whether claims about the power of organized farmers to influence legislation are valid in this instance. In a demonstrably inaccurate account published in 1949 by the High Priest Emeritus of the Patrons of Husbandry, it was argued that one of the

sane policies of the Grange through the years has been advocacy of the lowest interest rates on farm mortgages consistent with sound loaning policy. It has steadfastly supported cooperative farm credit, as against government lending. . . . The story of the present Farm Credit System is rendered the more interesting because of the constant Grange watchfulness and actual participation. Consistently it has opposed threatened paternalism and government dictation in the conduct of Farm Credit agencies. . . . Grange leaders were impressed with the amortized system of farm credit prevailing in some European countries, under which every payment helped to reduce the principle, so that the loan was paid off over a period of years.<sup>25</sup>

The records of the Grange proceedings and official print press, presented in detail in Chapter VIII, show this account represents a confounding case of historical revisionism, whereby a Grange historian

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meeting. Nor did the published proceedings for that meeting include the text of the Secretary's speech, perhaps because it was decidedly confrontational to the Grange plan for direct government lending to farmers.

<sup>25</sup>Charles M. Gardner, The Grange: Friend of the Farmer (Washington, DC: National Grange, 1949), 117-19.

inverted the positions of the group, presumably to preserve the reputation of Grange conservatism. On the issue of rural credit, however, such a reputation was not deserved, since the direct lending plan, and the eventual rejection of European models, set the National Grange up as a radical element in farm finance debates.

### The National Farmers' Union

"Organization," wrote Charles S. Barrett in 1909, "its present and genesis, is written indelibly throughout the works of nature in the handwriting of the Almighty."<sup>26</sup> This president of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America served in the position for twenty-two years, and was arguably the most influential American farm-organization leader of the early twentieth century. His faith in the creed that organization was divinely ordained remained unalterable even as he oversaw the rise and early decline of his group in legislative and economic issues important to farmers.

Barrett took charge of the National Farmers' Union (NFU) in 1906, shortly after it attained its status as a national farm organization. NFU founder Isaac Newt Gresham, described by one writer as "an official relic of the

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<sup>26</sup>Barrett, The Mission, 21.

Alliance,"<sup>27</sup> was one of the inspired agricultural journalists who acted out of a sense of farm-organization disarray at the turn of the century. Gresham organized the Farmers' Union starting in 1902, recognizing that the decline of the Grange and Alliance left farmers in need of a new movement to guide their political and economic activities. Farm organizers like Gresham and Barrett were driven by a "dogmatic determination to avoid the political mistakes of their forerunners."<sup>28</sup> This meant, foremost, that third-party and all partisan activity was to be avoided, while policymaking skills suitable for early interest-group lobby efforts were to be developed as quickly as possible.<sup>29</sup>

Barrett worried in particular about the relationship between the low level of farmer organization and the dynamic class relations between farmers and the rest of the industrializing world. "Before the farmer organized he was at the mercy of every passing swindler who chose to coin his credulity into currency." This was more than simply an economic problem. It was also a problem of policymaking impotence. "The inequality showed itself most

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<sup>27</sup>Edward Wiest, Agricultural Organizations in the United States (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 475.

<sup>28</sup>Carl C. Taylor, The Farmers' Movement, 1620-1920 (New York: American Book, 1953), 357.

<sup>29</sup>William P. Tucker, "Populism Up-to-Date: The Story of the Farmers' Union," Agricultural History 21, no. 1 (January 1947): 199.

dramatically in matters of quasi-public and legislative nature. Years after mechanical labor had fortified itself with unionism, thereby forcing recognition of its just demands from capital and the public, the farmer was high and dry in his unorganized isolation." Past agrarian crusades all suffered from the debilitating tendencies that Butterfield noted in 1901, such as jealousy, distrust, and selfishness. Furthermore, the farmer failed in his nineteenth-century crusades because "oppression bore upon him from every point of the industrial, political, and commercial compass."<sup>30</sup>

Under the leadership of Barrett, the NFU set out to accomplish many of the same goals for political activity that Atkeson and the leaders of the National Grange were working toward. The NFU was going to rescue farmers from the dangers of the new century. "The farmer must go into politics," wrote Barrett, who was well aware that this attitude was "at radical variance with the old, settled, and conventional opinion on this subject." Yet, there was thought to be a "wide divergence between politics and partisanry." The opposite of partisan politics was "business politics, and the plainest sort of self-preservation." Barrett observed that the farmers "overwhelmingly outnumber not only the laboring but the business classes," and yet had little or

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<sup>30</sup>Barrett, The Mission, 21-23.

no voice in organized politics. This was perceived as "a farcical and most injurious paradox." He argued the "deadliest weapon known to modern history" was the ballot, and if it were used properly by farmers, it could eliminate "hypocrites and demagogues who are opposing our progress with their lying promises." From this perspective there were no other viable alternatives. "Going into politics," he concluded, "is our sole salvation. Until we do, we will be trying to turn over the earth with a toothpick."<sup>31</sup>

Going into politics during the 1910s meant engaging and educating members and the public, both rural and urban, over a period of several years. Farmers and nonfarmers alike needed to be made to understand the nuances of the farm economy, and the influence of such factors upon indicators of prosperity, such as the cost of food in the cities. Battles for control of public opinion on rural credit were carried out with great intensity over a four-year period. One historian of agricultural organizations writing in 1923 noted what every farm organizer in the Progressive Era took to be a fact: "In a republican form of government public opinion is ultimately the force that determines the nature of the laws, and the press is the medium through which such public opinion is formulated. Bills are digested and criticized from the point of view

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 45-48.

of various groups concerned."<sup>32</sup> Certainly this perspective was among the central concerns of farm-organization leaders like Barrett, who wrote:

There is no more potent or influential factor in the promotion of education than the public press. It exerts a far-reaching influence that is felt in every nook and corner of the public domain. It is a moulder of public opinion. It heralds to the world the deeds of men, good or bad, committed in other parts of the world almost as soon as they occur. The press is a recorder of current history, and can by its news items and editorial utterances exert a baneful or beneficial influence. The Union has been at the forefront demanding clean and wholesome journalism. As men read, so they think; and as they think, so they act.<sup>33</sup>

One of the propagandistic goals for Barrett and the NFU (and the Grange as well), prior to the emergence of the rural credit reform movement of 1912-1916, was in fact to "discourage and discredit the mortgage system," which was thought to be "one of the baneful curses of farm life." Picking up a traditional view of debt as something to be avoided as a rule, Barrett argued farmers lived "in mortal terror" of the lender or advance merchant, whose powerful control over them turned them into "slaves." The NFU was

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<sup>32</sup>Wiest, 410.

<sup>33</sup>Barrett, The Mission, 89. When the NFU established its official organ, The National Field, its aim was "not so much to tell the farmers how to farm as it was to show them the way by which they may conserve the profits of their labor." See Commodore B. Fisher, "The Farmers' Union," University of Kentucky Studies in Economics and Sociology 1, no. 2 (March 1920): 26.

determined to change this relationship, though in 1909 this was not to be done through the creation of a new system for acquiring low-cost land credit. Instead, Barrett reported with some pride that in states where the Union was firmly established the levels of mortgage indebtedness were declining, as if to reaffirm that the best organized farmers would have fewer reasons to operate heavily leveraged farms.<sup>34</sup> It would be a few years still before the organization would assume the position of advocacy for low-interest, government-sponsored loans, and then only as an alternative to the private, business-sponsored rural cooperative system advocated by the most prominent figures looking to Europe. As the historian Carl Taylor noted,

The three old issues of transportation, monopolies, and cheap money, legislation concerning which the Grange and Alliance had so ardently fought, were at no time the heart of the Union program. . . . It advocated better rural credits and wanted government loans made directly to farmers without banks and associations acting as intermediaries, but in its early history it never insisted on the same degree of inflation as the Greenbackers and Populists demanded.<sup>35</sup>

### The American Society of Equity

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<sup>34</sup>Barrett, The Mission, 98-99.

<sup>35</sup>Taylor, 363-64. See also Dyson, 218; and Wiest, 491-93.

Less well known, and distinctly less national in scope than either the Grange or NFU, though by no means any less interesting, the American Society of Equity was yet another farm organization sprung from the "fertile pen" of an unhappy farm journalist.<sup>36</sup> The Indianapolis-based publisher of Up-to-Date Farming, James A. Everitt founded the ASE in 1902, the same year that Gresham initiated organizing activities for the Farmers' Union. In his 1903 treatise, The Third Power: Farmers to the Front, Everitt insisted that "farmers own the earth," and he played up a powerful theme in American agrarianism that "farming exists by Divine right."<sup>37</sup>

Everitt's teleological claim about agriculturists' theological status aimed at attaining worldly rewards in the form of more certain economic business conditions for producers. "If any people, any one class, or any one industry is entitled to distinction as the preferred business, or its people `the select of the earth,'" argued Everitt, "that business is agriculture and those people are the farmers." An already organized money power and growing labor power

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<sup>36</sup>On the idea of the "fertile pen," see Clay, 11-20; and Stuart Shulman, "The Progressive Era Farm Press: A Primer on a Neglected Source of Journalism History," Journalism History, forthcoming.

<sup>37</sup>James A. Everitt, The Third Power: Farmers to the Front (New York: Arno Press, 1975), v.

would be humbled in the face of a third power, organized farmers. "The farmers united would be the greatest union--greater than all other unions combined. They would represent a strength and power such as the world never knew before. The farmer power is the third power to assert itself, but it will be the first power in strength and importance."<sup>38</sup>

Everitt was widely noted for his single-minded focus on fixing the price of staple crops. It was a dogmatic position that contributed to his eventually losing control of the Equity movement as it splintered and turned against him. The logic driving Everitt's rigid and comparatively narrow agrarian philosophy was straightforward. Manufacturers and workers had a voice in level of production and wages that affect their lives:

But the farmer allows others to make prices for him. All he is supposed to know under the present system is how to work many hours a day and the road to market. When he gets there he finds a man who tells him how much his produce is worth, and if he wants to take something home with him he is told the price of that also. He has no organization, and no method of bringing pressure to bear on those who buy of him.<sup>39</sup>

Everitt reasoned that farmers were victims of intense competition to overproduce staples for expanding urban markets demanding a cheap and

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 15.

reliable food supply. Arbitrary price fixing in the speculative grain pits and among the leaders of the Boards of Trade all came as the result of farmers being unorganized. "Commercial slavery of this degree is as bad as personal slavery," wrote Everitt, simply because "farmers unorganized are demoralized industrially, and without any influence in the situation at all proportionate to their importance." The Equity movement was not to be "a war of offense but simply one of defense," though to read Everitt's or some of his followers rhetoric, you might not reach the same conclusion.<sup>40</sup>

Regarding the history and prospect for farmers influencing legislation, Everitt was extremely skeptical. "The fact is there are practically no laws for the benefit of the farmers, and it is the intention of the corporated powers, through their political machines, that there shall not be any." His passion was

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 15-21. Everitt disparaged the existing market structure of American agriculture. On the nature of commodity markets, he wrote: "The grain pits are a curse to everybody they touch. They are barnacles that have attached themselves on the produce of the earth. The speculators and gamblers in farm products are sap-sucking, unholy, Godless things that are holding up and gorging themselves on labor's portion as it is created on the farm. Boards of trade now run in the large cities are the Devil's own workshop" (25). At the 1908 meeting of the ASE it was noted that in "years gone by we were at the mercy of cormorants that would prey upon the farmer and gloat upon him." See Thomas Emerton, "President's Address," in Second Annual Report of the Convention of the American Society of Equity, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 14-17 January 1908, ed. []. [editor] (Madison, WI: American Society of Equity, 1908), 9.

collective action, just not the type that sought to legislate farm profitability. According to Everitt, the goal of increasing the price paid for farmers' goods was within their own reach. Solutions would never come from Washington, because the real power, self-help, was already available. This meant for Everitt there was no need to ask for policy favors: "The politicians can not greatly help and we don't propose to call on them." Nothing was required except treatment by the government that would make it possible to deal equitably with other classes:

And unless the American farmer rouses himself, he will have to be always content to have his business controlled by others, to be called a "jay," a "rube" or "hayseed," and to see himself caricatured in the comic papers and on the stage as the ridiculous victim of the gold-brick swindler and the hey-fork peddler, and indeed no gold-brick swindle was ever so palpable as that which is inherent in our present industrial organization. The Third Power can end it when it becomes a real power.<sup>41</sup>

In his Plan of the American Society of Equity of North America (1904), Everitt announced that the key to the ASE was in fact the official paper, which he published, Up-to-Date Farming. Equity was the only farm organization that made subscription to a periodical the only requirement for full

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<sup>41</sup>Everitt, 31, 43-46. "Everitt warned against what he believed to have been the dangerously flawed programs of the Grange and the Alliances: premature cooperatives and joint-stock companies, railroad regulation, and political activity." See Dyson, 25.

membership. The paper was intended to increase the flow of information reaching farmers about markets. Crop reporting and controlled marketing, to be overseen by the ASE, were advertised as definitive answers to farm profitability problems. A pamphlet asked, "Manufacturing and mercantile enterprises are not conducted by chance. Why should farming be the exception?" The ASE offered a plan of selling crops at a definite price that sought to avoid the mistakes of past cooperative efforts, which many people argued had often failed by holding out too long for the highest possible price.<sup>42</sup>

One of the defining struggles on the battlefield of public opinion during this period had to do with the steadily rising cost of living. Urban dailies, the business press, and the farm press all weighed in on where the blame lay for the rising food prices in the cities. Farmers were publicly encouraged, oftentimes scolded, regarding the need to increase their yields through scientific agriculture in order to keep pace with rapid population gains. Dire consequences were forecast as the first decade of the twentieth century came

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<sup>42</sup>American Society of Equity, Plan of the American Society of Equity of North America (Indianapolis, IN: American Society of Equity, 1904), 1-3.

to a close if the farmers did not undertake a plan to grow "two blades of grass where one grew before."<sup>43</sup>

Everitt's position represented a staunch rejection of the gospel of productivity gains as a matter of national security. "It may be set down as the rule (and there are few exceptions) that the shortest crops sell for the most money and the largest crops sell for the least money." Give this axiom, "farmers are putting forth, we might say, to commit industrial suicide, [when] they are goaded by the agricultural press, by government experiment stations, agricultural colleges and farmers institutes. Has the world ever witnessed a spectacle like it in any other industry?" As for his plans about strictly defending the farmer, the urban interests must have shuddered at the prospect of a genuinely united agricultural Third Power under J. A. Everitt's control. Here was a man more than willing to hold up the nation's bread supply to put some extra money in the pockets of farmers: "If the farmers in this country would not market anything for a week the world would be taught such a lesson as they never learned before. If they would withhold marketing for a month

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<sup>43</sup>Hill, "The Natural Wealth," 1-12; see also Hill, "Agriculture in the United States," 117-20; and Yoakum, "The High Cost of Farming," 519-33.

they could force prices to any height they pleased. Thus we see the power farmers can exert."<sup>44</sup>

In the Q&A section of the pamphlet, the following mock exchange appeared:

Q. Could the government help the farmers by loaning them money at a low rate of interest? A. No, not permanently. Besides, the farmers don't need help in that way. It would be the most degrading thing that could be offered them to make them the special objects of the country's charity. If they will only rise to their true position they will never need to look to the government or outside sources for help.<sup>45</sup>

Another question was: Why don't other farm papers help establish the ASE and the profitable price goals? Other farm papers, it seemed to Everitt

have not the welfare of the farmer close enough to the heart to lay aside all petty jealousies, excuses and selfish interests and help the farmers try out this plan. Farmers should know their friends at a time like this. Any editor and publisher who opposes this movement is your enemy . . . there is only one farm paper at present championing the rights of farmers to put a price on their investment, toil and skill, and that paper is Up-to-Date Farming.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>American Society of Equity, 7.

<sup>45</sup>Everitt, 17.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 17-18. The entire history of the ASE was perhaps never so prolific as the rhetoric of the movement would lead one to believe. However, one part of Equity's impact on agrarianism was quite significant. The Wisconsin Society of Equity, after a split with Everitt over his "obsession with price control," grew until it "dwarfed the national organization into

### Conclusion

Agricultural organizations grew out of the perceived shortcomings of agricultural journalism to materially improve the fate of the farmer. The founders and leading figures of the three farm organizations presented in this chapter all came to agrarian problems with an appreciation for the role of the print press in the lives of farmers and the formulation of public opinion. As the survey in the following chapter demonstrates, the journalists and contributors to the farm-organization press believed as much as any of the actors in the Progressive Era that it was in the pages of the print press that the agenda for agrarian development and legislative reform would be set. Farm organizations during the period 1907-1916 clearly understood the importance of using their own press to circulate ideas among their members, and a larger public audience, thereby stimulating a substantive democratic debate.

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insignificance" and became a force in the progressive Wisconsin experiments in European-style rural cooperative efforts. See Saloutos and Hicks, 113, 126.