

CHAPTER VIII

A SURVEY OF THE FARM-ORGANIZATION PRESS

Introduction

Without question, the most salient issue for the farm-organization press was organization itself. Farm-organization journalists readily admitted that they struggled to overcome the individualism of farmers that seemed to be a barrier to cooperative endeavors. Compounding the problem was the deep division among farmers on a wide range of matters. This was the case particularly on matters of personal finance and public policy, areas in which there was no unanimity in rural public opinion.

The survey results reported in this chapter are organized in such a way as to reflect the importance of rural organizational problems. This distinctive feature, foremost among several others, made the farm-organization press unique among the print press community during the Progressive Era. Chapter VIII captures the challenges inherent in uniting disparate rural opinion. Farm organizations encountered formidable obstacles that made it difficult to

compete with their urban competitors in legislative battles. The bankers, "Wall Street Opinion," and conservative, so-called "Moss-backs" in Congress each appeared in the farm-organization press as the dominant legislative influences of the period.

This final empirical chapter presents strong support for the two major hypotheses posed in this dissertation, support which precludes the most likely counterfactuals to H1 and H2. As these survey results demonstrate, the proximate origin of the 1910s rural credit reform movement (H1) clearly was the policy network located in nonfarm sectors of the economy. The most likely counterfactual to H1, the notion that the reform movement was the result of rural political pressure, does not seem tenable given the message revealed emerging from the survey results. Farm-organization press accounts confirm that in 1912, when rural credit reform emerged as an issue in the farm and business press, farm organizations had expressed no desire to increase the debt-taking potential of farmers. Rather, this chapter suggests that farm-organization interest in rural credit emerged only as a response to nonfarm interest in private, cooperative, European models.

With regard to the rise of the agenda-setting hypothesis (H2), Chapter VIII demonstrates that farm organizations had a well-articulated, high-priority

press strategy. Public opinion, thought to be crucial for legislative success, was cultivated both by educational group activities and press coverage of farm-organization decision-making; taken together, these activities were part of the rise of agenda-setting that defined this period. A counterfactual to H2 might suggest that agenda-setting was an unimportant factor in the origin of the FFLA. In fact, Chapter VIII reaffirms that agenda-setting was becoming the preeminent tool in shaping policy during nascent interest-group liberalism. Farm organizations used the tool well, exercising considerable influence through a concerted agenda-setting strategy, one which included the establishment of a national newspaper to cultivate recognition of their legislative demands.

Farm organizations, much like the business- and farm-press journalists, conveyed a serious policy orientation without taking partisan positions. To set the agenda for all agrarians, the farm-organization press sought to control the flow of information about agricultural issues in the national press. Legislative progress resulted when journalists transformed effective publicity into an agenda for practical reforms at the national level. Coverage of farm-organization views in the wider press reflected increasing national prestige

and newly found authority for farm leaders in addressing important agrarian policy matters.

Many of the same patterns of issue saliency appeared in the farm-organization press; however, when compared to the farm and business press, significant differences were apparent. In terms of the agenda for rural credit reform, the differences were apparent primarily around the insistence by the two leading farm organizations that government funds should subsidize a new system, and that a direct lending plan should include the deposit of U.S. Treasury funds into individual farm mortgages. The inclusion of a provision for Treasury funds in the FFLA represents a triumph of farm-organization agenda-setting goals, though it was described as an incomplete victory at best.

This chapter reveals how rural credit reform made a dramatic rise from obscurity to the top of the farm-organization press agenda. This occurred when the direct lending plan emerged in response to nonfarm legislative proposals that relied on private sector funds and cooperative rural credit models based on European methods. Issues such as farm profitability and the cost of living were linked to the rural credit debate, and thus it is a significant finding that both related issues were highly salient in all three press categories. This pattern of salience is supportive of H2, and the rise of agenda-setting as a

defining characteristic of the period. Further, content analysis reveals the various interpretations presented in the different press categories on these issues, thereby increasing the purchase of the periodization.

Finally, this final survey demonstrates that a defining aspect of this period, an issue that was important in all three surveys, concerned the shifting nature of urban-rural class relations. Not only were influential and well-heeled urban agrarians setting a new reform agenda for Congress, they were making inroads into the leadership of the farm organizations with their message that rural uplift would be mutually beneficial for town and country. This final survey reinforces the finding that the period was defined by agenda-setting, urban-policy networks that sought to eliminate radical populist ideas and substitute a vision of rural prosperity that adhered to a rigid business orientation. The paradox, of course, was that farm organizations were busily denouncing urban foes who bested them in the legislative arena, while telling their members that in fact they ought to be more like the successful businessmen in the cities. The essential lesson was that cooperation with urban agrarians was increasingly going to be necessary if farmers were to attain any significant legislative goals.

Farm Organizations

Farm organizations described their own activities, challenges, accomplishments, and defeats at great length in their official publications. Some of the main concerns of farm-organization press editors and leaders were to sustain group membership and increase the influence of farmers on national policy. In part, this involved constant reminders to readers about the purpose behind organizing farmers, and the function of the farm-organization press in this work.

In 1907, the year that the National Grange launched its first national paper, the group claimed significant responsibility for the advancing state of rural public opinion on a number of important issues. "Public opinion," concluded one editorial confidently, "is finding expression in legislation and government."¹ Another writer for the National Grange laid out an expansive set of criteria for measuring the success of an association. It could be measured very broadly in two ways: "by its influence on those who are its members and upon those who are not." As self-described promoters of "public sentiment" in a "nation of readers," farm-organization journalists were acutely aware of the function of the print press in setting the public agenda

¹"Honesty in Politics," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 3 (20 November 1907): 1.

and thereby securing the economic and policy goals of the parent organization.²

Oliver Wilson, who later became the National Master of the Grange, wrote in a 1908 editorial that the fundamental principle of the Grange was cooperation. According to Wilson, many people mistakenly thought that this was only economic cooperation. In fact, cooperation was a means to legislative ends as well, particularly when the state Granges united to sway legislators. "Co-operation along legislative measures has proven in the past to be a power in securing friendly legislation as well as defeating those measures which were vicious or against the best interest of the many."³ Farm organizations argued that farmers were a distinct interest group in policy and class struggles, and yet presented their interests as representative of the broader citizenry.

In 1909, the Worthy Master's Annual Address by N. J. Bachelder concluded that "the influence of the [National Grange] in public affairs can only be estimated, but there is evidence it was never greater than to-day."

²Harlan C. Pearson, "Promoter of Public Sentiment," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 2 (13 November 1907): 3.

³Oliver Wilson, "Co-operation," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 14 (February 1908): 1.

Evidence could be found in the report of the Country Life Commission (1909), which was thought to reflect long-time Grange demands for greater attention to be paid to rural affairs. Bachelder stated it was "highly gratifying to find an official commission composed of representative public men endorsing the Grange demands and urging their adoption."⁴

When Congress belatedly approved one of the Grange's longest sought reforms by enacting a postal savings bank system, Bachelder argued, "this legislation was brought about largely through the efforts of the Grange, and is another proof of the ability of organized farmers to secure favorable action by Congress on any wise measure that they may advocate."⁵ This claim, however, probably overstated the power of an organization with a record of mixed results when trying to secure specific legislative results. On the key issue of parcels post reform, for example, the Grange position was stifled by

⁴N. J. Bachelder, "Worthy Master's Annual Address," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-third Annual Session, Des Moines, Iowa, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1909), 11, 14.

⁵N. J. Bachelder, "Worthy Master's Annual Address," 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), 12.

the opposition of existing shipping interests for many years.⁶ On other matters, such as the prevention of oleomargarine tax reform, for example, the Grange was consistently claiming victories in Congress. Simple advocacy upon an issue, it was often admitted in the organization's literature, would never suffice.

In 1911, national Overseer T. C. Atkeson reminded members that farm-organization power depended heavily on internal cohesiveness:

The Grange will be a power in promoting the interests of agriculture and rural people just in proportion to its orderly procedure about its appointed business with a united, harmonious membership exerting all their influence in the same direction. . . . Progress means life, union means power, and co-operation means victory.⁷

While the threats from nonfarm antagonists were presumed to be persistent, the more pressing challenge, in fact, was thought to be internal to the group.

⁶In 1909, the Grange noted that the CLC report found farmers were "unanimous in demanding the parcels post, and there can be no question but that the great majority of the people of the entire country are in favor of this measure. Yet we find that the influence of three or four express companies and a comparatively small number of local merchants has far more weight with the members of Congress than the wishes of their constituents." See Bachelder, "Worthy Master's Annual Address" (1909), 15-16.

⁷T. C. Atkeson, "Worthy Overseer's Report," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-fifth Annual Session, Columbus, Ohio, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Springfield, OH: Springfield Publishing, 1911), 20.

The great need was for a united and harmonious membership. The work ahead required "sane leadership for the agricultural masses," which in turn meant avoiding internal squabbles over policy differences. "The Grange," concluded T. C. Atkeson, "has nothing to fear from outside, but sedition, disloyalty and treachery on the inside means ignominious failure and death."⁸

The concept of leadership was also an important symbol and principle for the National Farmers Union (NFU). In 1911, C. S. Barrett argued adequate leadership was the only remedy for the "so-called `rural problem.'" Past agrarian leaders held no particularly exalted status. Speaking to the annual meeting of the NFU, Barrett lambasted the failures of older agrarian movements:

I point you to the history of every farmers' organization that has been born, risen to dizzy height in some instances, and then fallen to an inglorious death. Who was the fault in every case? That of the LEADERS. The Wheel, the Farmers' Alliance, are they the mighty powers that once made the nation tremble? You

⁸Ibid., 21. The NFU president also complained that the group struggled with "the backsliders, the back-biters, the Job and Jeremiahs, the demagogues and idealists." See Charles S. Barrett, "Address of the President," in Minutes of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 3-5 September 1912 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1912), 10.

know they are not. Selfish leadership, cowardly leadership, inefficient leadership is responsible.⁹

Barrett, it appears, was no participatory democrat. His view, akin to that of many farm press journalists, was that farmers were best handled by the few carefully chosen leaders among them. "If I had believed every promise made to me by a howling, shouting convention of farmers," he told the 1911 convention, "I would have been in the cemetery or the asylum long ago. You've got to discount what they promise--and discount it liberally."¹⁰

As late as 1912, leaders of the National Grange complained the organization was still largely misunderstood by the press and the public. In general, the group tried to assure its members, legislators, and the general public that there was no communism or even agrarianism in its ranks. For example, the group sought to "discountenance the credit system, the mortgage system, the fashion system and every other system tending to prodigality and bankruptcy."¹¹ The National Grange Overseer in 1912, L. H. Healy, did, however, offer an expression of interest in the efforts described in Chapter II

⁹Ibid., 14.

¹⁰Ibid., 15.

¹¹"Our Declaration of Purposes," National Grange Monthly 9, no. 2 (February 1912): 3.

as "looking to Europe." Healy wrote that in "many of the foreign countries credit co-operative associations have been formed," and he concluded, "they have gone a long way toward alleviating the, at times, straitened financial conditions of the farmer in those countries. We believe that the success of these credit associations have been such that they are worthy of investigation by this body."¹² The NFU similarly expressed initial interest during 1912 in the possibility that European models might be studied closely for possible imitation in the United States.¹³

This farm-organization position, initially favoring investigations of Europe, would change quite significantly, however, to advocacy of direct government loans to farmers at a sub-market-value interest rate. While the farm organizations tried to shed their image as inflationary populists, the fact remained they chose to advocate a radical position, given the status of the existing debate. This was a plan that critics in Congress, the Executive

¹²Leonard H. Healy, "Worthy Overseer's Report," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-sixth Annual Session, Spokane, Washington, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Springfield, OH: Springfield Publishing, 1912), 19.

¹³T. J. Brooks, "Report of the Committee on Rural Credits," in Minutes of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 3-5 September 1912 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1912), 49-50.

branch, and the farm and business press believed would have lead to ruinous speculation in the market for farmland.¹⁴

Within a year it would be official Grange policy to denounce the nonfarm origin of the movement to secure a European policy transplant. European "peasant" farmers, although they were proven cooperators in economic realms where the Grange efforts had been dismal failures, were not thought to be comparable to the sturdy, independent American agriculturists with their quarter sections of land.¹⁵ Grangers had tried and failed, particularly when their cooperatives dabbled in the extension of credit. Despite publicly avowed interest in remaining free of "communistic" and "agrarian" radical ideals, both the Grange and the NFU cited the inability of American farmers to cooperate for credit when they called for direct government lending. This position earned the farm groups touting it precisely

¹⁴Though no exact policy was being offered in 1913, a number of principles were enumerated, and Congressman Bathrick, author of the leading direct-lending bill, was quoted at length by Oliver Wilson, "Worthy Master's Annual Address" (1913), 14-15. Critics of the Grange policy included the Secretary of Agriculture and the President of the United States.

¹⁵Ibid., 15. "A rural credit system that is suited to the needs of the peasant conditions existing in many parts of Europe," wrote Wilson, "must necessarily fail in our free, independent United States."

those antisocialist and antipopulist labels from more conservative observers and participants writing for the press.

Economic policy interests on the part of farm organizations did not, however, translate into party affiliations. Nonpartisanship was the rule in the farm organizations, and in their print press, at a time when much of the nation's newsprint was known for rigid partisan orientations. National Grange leaders, for example, repeatedly pointed to an aspect of their "organic law" stating that the Grange was not a political or party organization. The prohibition against partisan politics, however, did not "include or refer to general questions of political economy." In fact, the National Grange wanted nothing less than to be "a leader in public thought and public action," advocating specific measures "because they are in the interest of the agricultural class."¹⁶ "In matters of legislation," wrote the Grange Overseer in 1913, "it should be *our* leaders who are recognized by our Senators and

¹⁶Oliver Wilson, "Worthy Master's Annual Address," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-sixth Annual Session, Spokane, Washington, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Springfield, OH: Springfield Publishing, 1912), 15.

Congressmen as the ones knowing what legislation is needed and which are the most beneficial for the needs of our farm husbandry."¹⁷

Leaders in the 1910s Equity movement also provided insights into the work of organizing farmers. M. Wes Tubbs, editor and business manager of the Wisconsin Equity News, was a thorn in the pants of ASE founder J. A. Everitt. Tubb's outspoken views on the wide applicability of cooperation to the problems of rural producers and urban consumers, stood in stark contrast to the unyielding price-fixing focus of Everitt. By the 1910s, Tubbs was a seasoned farm organizer in a unique position to foresee the possibilities for agricultural cooperation unfolding in Wisconsin. For the skeptics, those doubting the very possibility of effective farm organizations, his derision was absolute:

We are told various queer things regarding the farmers and their peculiarities. It is stated that farmers are the most difficult people in the world to organize, that they have no confidence in themselves, that they will not trust each other, that they will not work together, and a score of other accusations equally idiotic and ridiculous. . . . Trusts, combines, organization, if you please, is the evolution of the twentieth century business methods. There are but few classes of people unorganized. It has been

¹⁷Leonard H. Healy, "Worthy Overseer's Report," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-seventh Annual Session, Manchester, New Hampshire, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1913), 19.

said there are but three, Indians, Idiots and Farmers. Laborers, professional men, merchants and manufacturers all have their organizations for business advancement.¹⁸

In 1911, Pacific Farmers Union reprinted an editorial from Everitt's paper Up-to-Date Farming. The argument revealed the paradoxical challenge facing farm organizations during this period. "In point of numbers," noted the writer, "farmers are strong. They cast more votes in our general elections than any other class--they constitute about one-third of all the voters of the country. . . . But as to concert of action farmers are weak." The editorial argued there was a sense of independence about farmers that contributed to a type of pride that blinded them "to the fact that other classes sink their individuality in united efforts for privileges and powers even beyond their callings." The dilemma, simply stated, was that no class of people was "so divided on public questions as farmers are." A problem existed in the form of long-standing habits and hard prejudices, which, if thrown off, might allow farmers to realize that their interests extend well beyond their farms, into the courts and legislative arenas.¹⁹

¹⁸M. Wes Tubbs, "The American Society of Equity," Wisconsin Equity News 2, no. 23 (10 April 1910): 1-3.

¹⁹"Farmers Weak and Strong," Pacific Farmers Union 3, no. 20 (2 June 1911): 4.

By 1912, the Equity movement was telling farmers that through working together they could "rule America." It had to be admitted, however, that the dominant trend was for farmers to act as individuals. What farmers were able to read--agricultural journals--often seemed to Equity organizers to be making the problem worse. "We do not hear much said about the commercial, social or political influence of farmers. Most magazines are too busy telling the farmers what they ought to do, to spend time in the discussion of the power which this great body of men could wield if united for this purpose."²⁰

Over the years 1912-1915, the seeds of the movement to unite all farm organizations into a single federation were planted by C. S. Barrett and the leadership of the NFU. The delays and defeats associated with the passage of farm credit legislation played a particularly strong role alerting some farm leaders to the need for a unified national organization. In 1914, L. C. Crow justified a plea for improved farm-organization unity on the claim that a good rural credit bill would "revolutionize the farming of this country."²¹ C. S.

²⁰"The Farmer's Influence," Wisconsin Equity News 5, no. 6 (25 July 1912): 3.

²¹L. C. Crow, "Farm Organizations Should Get Together," Pacific Farmers Union 6, no. 31 (7 August 1914): 1, 5. After the passage of the

Barrett later pointed to the many obstacles to securing rural credit legislation as a prime reason to form what became known in 1917 as the National Board of Farm Organizations. The National Grange, however, refused to join this federation and thereby scuttled the hopes of some leaders for a peak national organization that could speak for the entire sector.²²

Farmers' Problems and Enemies

At the outset of the 1910s, two factors were presumed by many agrarians to be constants in the struggle to establish farm organizations. First, farmers' problems were widely assumed to be the result of poor organization. Second, farmers' enemies were thought to be any group that was sufficiently organized to economically or politically hog-tie the dirt farmers of the United States. During the 1910s, however, these ideological constants were becoming increasingly unstable in agrarian discourse. Over time, two

FFLA, the Grange admitted considerable legislative impotence: "The Grange, and in fact all farm organizations, did not have any large influence in the rural credit legislation for the reason that they were not agreed among themselves and could not come forward with any concrete plan that could be labeled what the farmer himself wanted." See "The Summary of a Year's Work," National Grange Monthly 13, no. 10 (October 1916): 3.

²²Guth, 418-40.

intervening trends--more effective farm organization and quasi detente in rural-urban relations--transformed the foundations of traditional rural agrarian ideology.

Ireland's legendary agrarian, Sir Horace Plunkett, was a long-time student of American agriculture. He described the situation facing the National Grange and American farmers in 1909. It was a familiar account by then, emphasizing that American farmers suffered from their geographical isolation and conservative individualism:

The chief difference between the business methods of agriculturists, on the one hand, and of those who conduct all other important industries on the other, is that the farmer does not understand, or at any rate does not know how to apply the principles of combination . . . those engaged in any particular occupation must combine together for mutual advantage, for protection of their particular interests and also to be politically influential where economic legislation or administration affecting that interest is in question.²³

Meanwhile, C. S. Barrett, in a speech to a 1910 rally in St. Louis, claimed to represent "three million militant farmers" who constituted "an organized army." At the same time, Barrett had to qualify this statement, which was approximately a tenfold exaggeration. The farmer, he confessed in a way reminiscent of the tone set by himself, and the other members of the

²³Plunkett, "Ireland's National Grange," 35-46.

Country Life Commission in 1909, had in fact been slow to awaken to the possibilities of organization. "His environment, in the first place, was against his awakening. The tardiness of facilities of communication, the infrequency with which newspapers penetrated to the far rural districts, and the natural suspicion which is a part of his temperament all militated to keep him in shackles as to his own power." Nevertheless, the "era of sleep," predicted Barrett, was about to end.²⁴

As the rural credit debate moved from the early agenda-setting stage to the center of congressional inquiry in late 1913 and early 1914, the farm-organization press turned away from the farmers' traditional problems with organization and focused instead on an array of political and economic enemies. National Grange leaders conducted an intense public campaign against those in Congress and the banking community seen as hostile to the farmers' legislative and financial interest.

The leading bill for privately financed cooperative, land mortgage credit associations was based on the investigations of European systems of

²⁴Charles S. Barrett, "The National Field," Pacific Farmers Union 2, no. 17 (6 May 1910): 1. Consider also the editorial "A Recognized Power," Pacific Farmers Union 2, no. 27 (15 July 1910): 4. It argued that "politicians realize the power of the organization far more than do its members."

cooperative rural credit, and was sponsored by Congressman Moss and Senator Fletcher. The National Grange Monthly, which was at that point advocating a government-sponsored direct-loan program, warned the Moss-Fletcher bill was a "Moss-back-Fletcherized" bill, representing the most conservative approach possible to rural credit reform. The lines were clearly drawn, according to Grange leaders, as to whether there was to be a farmers' or a bankers' bill. "The whole conception of this bill," wrote the paper's editors, "is financial and not agricultural." The Grange complained that leaders of the agricultural organizations were never properly consulted and as a result "organized finance has carpentered this bill to ludicrous shapes in a vain effort to please the money lenders and at the same time appear to do much for the debt-ridden farmers."²⁵

Section 18 of the Moss-Fletcher bill was particularly derided as the most "drastic demonstration of paternalism possible. It is distinctly, special legislation for private profit." Noting that the Secretary of Agriculture had scolded advocates of class legislation favoring farmers at the National Grange meeting, the editors of the National Grange Monthly professed to be perplexed to find that Secretary Houston had become one of the chief architects of the

²⁵"Farmers Must Be Wide Awake," 3.

Moss-Fletcher bill, with special privileges extended directly to powerful financial interests. The Secretary, it was argued, was out of the business of "restoring equal rights," and into the business of restoring the special privileges "not to farmers, but to bankers."²⁶ Readers of the National Grange's annual Journal of Proceedings must also have been perplexed to find that the Secretary's stern speech--a pointed affront to his host's policy position--did not merit inclusion or even mention that year. Perhaps this omission reflected the farm-organization view that on matters of rural credit, Secretary Houston was one of the chief obstacles preventing the establishment of a genuine "farmers bill."

From the Grange perspective (NFU leaders supported this position as well), to be labeled a farmers' enemy in 1914, one simply had to oppose provisions for direct government lending to farmers, or some other form of government financial aid to underwrite rural credit reform. A letter from the National Grange Legislative Committee to all the local Granges urged support of the bill closer to the resolutions adopted by the Grange. This was the Bathrick bill (HR 11897), which the National Grange claimed to have had a hand in writing. The Moss-Fletcher bill, which was an end-product of elite

²⁶Ibid.

efforts at looking to Europe, in contrast, was predicted to do little for farm credit, but a great deal for establishing a new class of banks "strengthening the hold of the money power upon the people." In short, the business-sponsored Moss-Fletcher bill was to be rejected on the grounds it was in "utter opposition" to the Grange resolutions on rural credit.²⁷ At the 1914 meeting of the NFU, the Rural Credit Committee weighed in that:

The voice of the American farmer must be heard upon this question and his power and influence must be directly exerted in its solution. The politicians, the bankers, and the creditor classes are busy in the halls of congress [*sic*], but it is all too painfully evident that the plans proposed by these elements for the relief of the farmers add to their own revenues, but do not relieve the farmers.²⁸

Testifying before Congress in December 1913, Grange leaders had defended their position by claiming to have "no particular scheme or plan," and "nothing in the form of a bill." When asked whether the idea of floating a

²⁷"Legislative Committee Acts," National Grange Monthly 11, no. 2 (February 1914): 17. See also "Report of the Legislative Committee," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-eighth Annual Session, Wilmington, Delaware, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1914), 114.

²⁸"Report of the Committee on Rural Credits," in Minutes of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Fort Worth, Texas, 1-3 September 1914 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1914), 56.

billion dollars in government bonds at 3½% might imperil other industries seeking capital, or else incite laborers who could not themselves borrow at 4½% from the government, Legislative Committee Chairman S. K. Hobbs mustered what must have been viewed as an unconvincing reply, but one that sheds some light on the way farm-organization views on finance were conceived in the wake of populism:

We are farmers, pure and simple--raised on the farm--and not skilled in the ethics of high finance, such as you gentlemen are. We are going to outline here what we farmers want, and when it comes to the questions of high finance, we will leave it to you people to discuss it hereafter . . . [the farmer] is an independent citizen so far as his citizenship is concerned; but as far as financial matters are concerned he is the biggest slave that walks the earth.²⁹

The documents of the period reveal there was no particular bond between the Democratic administration under President Woodrow Wilson and the major farm organizations.³⁰ The 1914 "Report of the Special Legislative

²⁹Congress, House, Statement of Mr. S. K. Hobbs, 192-93.

³⁰In a correspondence dated January 9, 1914, President Wilson wrote to congratulate Senator Duncan Fletcher on the report of the American Commission to Europe. He enclosed a letter from Sir Horace Plunkett to Colonel House which, the President noted, "is so true that I wish I might have written it myself." The Plunkett letter, noting resolutions of the Farmers' Educational and Co-operative Union of America on the need for a Bureau of Markets, remarked: "That body has not, I think, much economic sense, but as you know, has great political influence." See Arthur S. Link, ed., The Papers

Committee" of the NFU recalled meeting with Secretary Houston in September of 1913 to discuss the newly formed Bureau of Markets. Houston was noted for making the same replies over and over, such as "there are three thousand experiments going on, and we must see further before we can begin a definite plan." The report continued to openly question Secretary Houston's disposition: "He seemed imbued with the idea that we must 'make haste slowly,' which he kept repeating, and all I could say on the matter would not budge him from that position."³¹

By 1915, Secretary Houston was deeply resented, and seen as a proven enemy of the farm-organization marketing and rural credit positions. With intense derision, the Grange mocked Houston for sending copies of his annual report all over the country. In addition, his comments on rural credits were put into the USDA's "Weekly News Letter to Crop Correspondents." The National Grange Monthly lamented that Secretary Houston seemed to "have

of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 28 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 114-15.

³¹"Report of the Special Legislative Committee," in Minutes of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Fort Worth, Texas, 1-3 September 1914 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1914), 31-32. The trope "making haste slowly" appeared in the rural credit debate at various stages, in the vocabulary of Secretary Houston, President Woodrow Wilson, and the American Commission to Europe.

flooded the country with it, as many people have received at least a dozen copies. The secretary evidently thinks what he said in his report is very smart and that all the farmers of the country should have a copy at government expense, and be convinced." However, the six pages in the Secretary's 1914 annual report,

which he devoted to this great subject treat the matter so vaguely as to suggest that he has no policy at all, and so superficially as to lead the unformed to wrong impressions about government aid. . . . I cannot but regret that the secretary's report should discuss the proposal in a totally misleading manner and in terms calculated to discredit any suggestion of government aid in any form.³²

In the same early 1915 edition of the National Grange Monthly, a comprehensive statement put out by the Legislative Committee registered the group's displeasure with the slow progress on rural credit legislation. Through most of 1914 and 1915, farm-organization leaders distrusted the drift of the debate "and the delay caused by those who demand the last ounce of concession to the power of the money-lending interests, and to tightly laced theories of government which have not been so rigidly applied in other cases of legislation." To argue, as President Wilson and Secretary Houston had, that

³²"Great Speech on Great Subject," National Grange Monthly 12, no. 1 (January 1915): 6.

the Federal Reserve Act constituted a remedy,³³ one that could suffice in place of a proper farm credit law, was the "veriest of nonsense," and would not be likely to "fool the farmers."³⁴

The National Grange attributed the delay to Houston's, and the President's, strident no-government-aid position, the desire of Congress to adjourn, and "a strong element of influence of various money-lending interests which are fearful that interest rates may be generally lowered and their profits curtailed." While the Grange admitted backing away from the details of the Bathrick bill, such as direct, low-interest government loans, it claimed to have stuck to Grange principles. "We have very little patience," declared the Legislative Committee as an illustration, "with those who contend that the

³³In remarks at a press conference on January 5, 1915, Wilson replied to a question about the demand for rural credits as follows: "As a matter of fact, an extraordinary amount of relief was afforded in the granting of rural credits by the Federal Reserve Act . . . a number of men representing the agricultural interests of the country were very emphatic in their statement that they thought a great deal had been done and that the proposition had been a good deal relieved, but that doesn't slacken their desire to go forward. It's wise to go forward only when we can get a thoroughly satisfactory bill." See Arthur S. Link, ed., The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 32 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

³⁴"Strong Farm Credit Declaration," National Grange Monthly 12, no. 1 (January 1915): 11.

helpless should help themselves."³⁵ While direct lending might have been sacrificed, a battle was being won to establish the principle of using federal money to establish a system of farm mortgage banks.

In the spring of 1915, it seemed clear to Grange leaders that Senators and Congressmen favorable to "Wall Street opinion" planned to put through "a fake rural credits bill" in June or July of 1916, on the eve of the national election. This revised Hollis bill, one that would omit government aid, was feared primarily because it was likely to fool the public. The plan to delay the bill until just before the election, reasoned the editors of the National Grange Monthly, ensured that farmers would not have time to assess the results prior to the election. "Some one is at the bottom of and has been directing this plan, which we consider a conspiracy to defeat genuine rural credits legislation." The paper noted that the latest commission charged by Congress with the task of preparing a final compromise bill, by the end of 1915, was stacked with enemies of government aid, including the chairmen of the House agriculture and banking committees (Congressmen Lever and Glass). The Grange was also foreboding about the presence of Senator Gore, the agriculture committee chair in the Senate, who was on record in favor of Moss-Fletcher-style

³⁵Ibid.

legislation. There was also Senator Owen, the banking chair and one of the most prosperous 12% of bankers in Oklahoma. At this late date in the debate, the farmers' most serious problem seemed to be the cast of characters they described as their enemies, many of whom happened to sit in key places as crucial compromise decisions were worked out, and a deal was made with the President heading into an election year.³⁶

The repeated delays and attempts to pass legislation opprobrious to farm organizations did not escape condemnation of the NFU president. At the 1915 annual meeting, Barrett noted the failed, yet heroic, efforts to secure rural credit legislation during the previous year. Little justice could be expected from Congress "until that happy day shall come when the organized farmers shall have these supple gentlemen cornered and they realize that their political lives are at stake." For the time being, however, that influence was latent and untapped, and farmers, therefore, faced the possibility that their enemies would win the battle in Congress. "We are now told," warned Barrett, "that a measure has been perfected and will be presented at the next session. So far as I am advised, if my information is correct, the proposed

³⁶"The Rural Credit Situation," 6, 7.

measure is of the `gold brick' variety, and I warn to you most emphatically to be wary, vigilant and active, that none of our people are deceived."³⁷

Agrarian Journalism

Throughout this period, all discussions of journalistic content referred to material that made it into the pages of the print press. With no competition from radio or television, newspapers and magazines were the primary mass-media battleground for contestants believing they were shaping public opinion and government policy. Controlling the flow of news, information, and editorial opinion reaching the readers of the print press was a foremost concern of farm-organization leaders. In 1911, a statement by C. S. Barrett demonstrated the importance of print press coverage to his farm organization. "It is a pleasure," wrote Barrett, "to report that more than 3,200 papers regularly print the statements issued from the national headquarters."³⁸

³⁷Charles S. Barrett, "Address of the President," in Minutes of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Lincoln, Nebraska, 7-9 September 1915 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1915), 10.

³⁸Charles S. Barrett, "Address of the President," in Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Shawnee, Oklahoma, 5-7 September 1911 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1911), 13.

When the National Grange announced the arrival of its first official national newspaper in October of 1907, it admitted that up until this point the group had been "seriously hindered in its work by not having such a publication." Every organization had to have an official organ, explained the advance issue, for the expressed purpose of disseminating information. A good paper was the only reliable method for making organization members, and the outside press, aware of the organization's opinions and accomplishments. These points, raised by state Masters, and exhaustively discussed at the 1906 annual meeting, became the basis for inaugurating a national paper.³⁹

Farm-organization papers represented a distinct breed of agrarian journalism. As opposed to the farm trade papers, which steadfastly focused on making farmers over in the emerging image of the scientific agriculturist, farm-organization papers stuck to the task of boosting farm organizations, and their members' economic interests. "Your OFFICIAL ORGAN," announced the Grange, "comes to you not to displace any of the able agricultural papers

³⁹"Announcement," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 0 [10?] (2 October 1907): 3.

that now hold necessary place in every Grange home."⁴⁰ In 1914, Barrett articulated much the same argument about the role of the NFU paper The National Field, and made an important connection between circulation and influence:

The work of our weekly paper, THE NATIONAL FIELD, constantly grows in importance, and while we have had for this a considerable measure of support, I shall never be satisfied in this direction until The Field goes regularly each week into the hands of every member. . . . As you know, its purpose is not so much to tell farmers how to farm as it is to show them the way by which they may conserve the profits of their labor. . . . You can readily understand the tremendous importance of the work which THE NATIONAL FIELD is attempting to do, and it will bring you results just exactly in proportion to the effort you make to extend its circulation and its influence.⁴¹

There was some tension evident between farm organizations and the businessmen and agricultural journalists who made their living circulating the farm trade papers. Both types of press linked their influence to circulation figures. There was some natural competition for leadership of the farmers. One writer for the farm-organization press lamented it "took even the

⁴⁰"To the Patrons of Husbandry," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 0 [10?] (2 October 1907): 9.

⁴¹Charles S. Barrett, "Report of the President," in Minutes of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Fort Worth, Texas, 1-3 September 1914 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1914), 10.

agricultural press some time to realize the importance of the Grange movement."⁴²

In 1912, Oliver Wilson described the object of the National Grange Monthly as "being to furnish information to our members in every section of the country, showing to them, as can be done in no other way, what this organization of ours is accomplishing, and how we are knit and bound together for the common good."⁴³ The farm journals rarely objected to this sort of farm-organization message, but they did regularly take exception with specific policy and marketing proposals put forward by organization leaders.

A contrast was also evident in the editorial content peculiar to farm-organization press versus the farm trade journals. Journalism at the start of the twentieth century was openly understood by readers and writers as a subjective profession. The different forms of press were very often perceived to be acting as organs of a roughly unified viewpoint. For better or worse, these viewpoints could be best described in class terms, as they were in the official paper of the National Grange:

⁴²Pearson, 3.

⁴³Oliver Wilson, "Worthy Master's Annual Address" (1912), 15.

It is one of the weaknesses of class papers to magnify the importance of class. . . . The financial publications assume that "finance" is the greatest concern of enlightened nations. Shall the agricultural editor be blamed for declaring that farming is the greatest industry and that the farmer represents the most fundamental business?⁴⁴

In 1907, Master of the National Grange N. J. Bachelder relied on a favorite agrarian refrain in the pages of his organization's new national weekly. This was simply the idea that national strength should not be measured in battleships, but rather in the "prosperity of its agriculture." Farmers were told of their "need to exert a greater influence in public affairs than they have in the past, for, as the great producing class, they bear the burden of unjust legislation and extravagant appropriations more than other people." A particular vexation in this regard was expressed by Bachelder toward the yellow press, though it was argued that the number of journalistic catastrophes was small when compared to the army of honest, clean, and well-edited newspapers. The good journalist's "share in the credit for the progress of America is a great one. To an equal or perhaps even greater extent the

⁴⁴"Farmers in Command," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 4 (27 November 1907): 3.

weekly and monthly publications of national circulation are factors of great weight and good weight in our progress."⁴⁵

During 1908, the National Grange Monthly campaigned for greater public relations efforts on the part of the organization at the state and local levels. "The average Grange member," wrote the editors, "has yet to learn the great value of publicity given by the press." Thirty years earlier there had been a great deal of secrecy surrounding the activities of the Grange. In those days, the typical Grange member was ridiculed as "a long-haired granger and a moss-back." Subordinate Granges in 1908 were instructed to assign a press correspondent whose duties would include sending reports to local newspapers. Businessmen were "paying hundreds of thousands of dollars in cold cash for advertising, and even this pays them royally. The same amount of advertising the Grange can have for nothing! How many of you are taking advantage of the liberality of the press?"⁴⁶

At the Wisconsin Equity News, journalism was openly understood as a process of manufacturing public opinion. The content in other types of papers

⁴⁵Bachelor, "American Agriculture Leads," 5-6.

⁴⁶"The Grange and the Press," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 19 (11 March 1908): 4.

produced a confrontation between competing groups in a power-skewed pluralist struggle. Of particular concern was the perception of a hostile mass media forum in which upstart farmers unsuccessfully fought their public opinion battles against the grain dealers, Boards of Trade, Chambers of Commerce, and other traditional enemies of the unorganized farmer:

Public Opinion, made-to-order and disseminated by Press Bureaus through the great daily, weekly and monthly magazines and the country newspapers has so conveyed misinformation and distorted facts and true conditions--has so moulded and shaped and formed opinion that an inherent prejudice, based upon positive ignorance of the truth, will rebel and become mad and violent if the truth is really presented . . . [any voice raised against the system] is at once branded by the people as Socialist, Anarchist, Freethinker, Infidel, Atheist, or all combined.⁴⁷

Given the fractured status of the Equity movement as a national organization during this period, the Wisconsin paper preferred to define itself as unbound to any master. "The WISCONSIN EQUITY NEWS is the farmer's own paper. It is independent, fearless and progressive. It claims little as being authoritative or as voicing sentiments of the organization."⁴⁸ Instead of making policy pronouncements, M. Wes Tubbs and the Equity journalists guided the paper to the practical work of securing better business

⁴⁷"Public Opinion," 4.

⁴⁸"Editorial Policy," Wisconsin Equity News 3, no. 3 (10 June 1910): 4.

arrangements for farmers. "These [Equity] papers exist for the unity of the unions in the methods of improved marketing and through that prosperity to gain the fraternity and solidarity of all plowmen."⁴⁹

The paper clearly served both economic and political ends. "To aid the people to recover their government, to secure the execution of just laws and the original power of recall of unworthy servants," wrote R. H. Aldrich, "we should make our papers to be broad, open and serving our plowmen's cause by commending such men and measures as aid to the common people to have common opportunities, with special privileges to none, regardless of partisan politics." The Equity papers sought to capture the progressive spirit, and thereby serve as 1910s exponents of a cooperative, democratic commonwealth. "The duty, regardless of all previous party-claims, is to combat the advancing forces of privileged wealth, reaction and oppression. . . . The great battle between special privileges and democracy is on."⁵⁰ By 1913, the renamed Equity News declared it had become the official paper of the ASE, and in doing so it was embracing the comprehensive program and motto

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰R. H. Aldrich, "The Nature and Duties of Our Periodicals," Wisconsin Equity News 3, no. 6 (25 July 1910): 10.

("Better Farming, Better Business, Better Living") of none other than the oft-cited Irish organizer Sir Horace Plunkett.⁵¹

While the period of the survey began with the Grange and NFU visibly frustrated about the status of their press relations, some signs of change for the better began to emerge during the 1910s. In 1913, C. S. Barrett told the annual NFU meeting:

We have received greater and more valuable publicity in the past year than at any previous period in the history of the organization . . . not only through Union publications but through the great dailies from coast to coast and the great magazines of the country. In the main, this publicity has been fair and intelligent.⁵²

Glowing reports also started to appear in the National Grange Journal of Proceedings, which described the growth in circulation and sophistication of the Grange's official paper. The National Grange Monthly succeeded the National Grange Official Organ in 1910, and it tripled in circulation over the next four years. In 1914, the committee report on the paper at the annual

⁵¹"Better Farming--Better Business--Better Living: The New Slogan of the Equity News," Equity News 6, no. 1 (10 May 1913): 1-2.

⁵²Charles S. Barrett, "Address of the President," in Minutes of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Salina, Kansas, 2-4 September 1913 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1913), 11.

meeting praised "the growing extent to which the National Grange Monthly is accepted as official spokesman of the Grange and the quotation of its statement of Grange policies and plans by the press of the United States."⁵³

The paper itself was no less modest about its accomplishments. "No one who reads the papers can fail to notice the liberal space which all the newspapers, even the influential city press, are giving today to the Grange news," wrote the National Grange Monthly's editors, who called it "one of the striking features of present newspaper conduct." Nothing was so helpful as free publicity, which was a sign of the "present day Grange influence and prestige."⁵⁴

As for the issue of rural credit, the paper claimed in 1914 that all sides recognized the importance of the Grange newspaper's role in the debate. "The subject is occupying large space in newspapers and magazines, and everywhere is mention made of the Grange as alert for the farmers' interests and as pressing hard their case at Washington." The significance, according to the Grange, was that the question had become not shall we reform rural credit,

⁵³"Report of the Managers of the National Grange Monthly," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-eighth Annual Session, Wilmington, Delaware, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1914), 118.

⁵⁴"A Sure Sign," National Grange Monthly 9, no. 10 (October 1912): 10.

but instead, what sort of system would be installed. It was a radical change in the public mind, remarked the editors, that there should be practical agreement that a new system was needed, when a few years earlier such a proposal for financial aid to farmers would have been met with instant ridicule. For the Grange, the change represented an education of public sentiment to a point of "sensible interest" in the farmers' welfare.⁵⁵

Rates and Terms for Credit

In matters of national policy and public opinion, the battleground of the press was clearly important to farm organizations. When public opinion was mobilized, the evidence of that mobilization would be reflected in the pages of the press, both rural and urban. Press coverage was an acknowledged indicator of the shifts in public opinion. Discussions of the rates and terms for rural credit, however, were surprisingly sparse in the farm-organization press during the earliest years of this survey. There were other concerns besides the rates and terms for credit. Some issues were deemed to be more pressing, such as road improvements or immigration restriction, while others were

⁵⁵"Great Progress," National Grange Monthly 11, no. 5 (May 1914): 10.

thought to be more politically viable than finance reform, particularly parcels post reform.⁵⁶

Farm-organization leaders offering finance proclamations faced the difficult task of overcoming the notion that farmers clung to discredited populist tendencies to espouse currency inflation. When the farm-organization press wrote about the rates and terms for credit prior to 1913, at least some writers retained ideological cues associated with the worst of the populist legacy. "To keep money scarce, high priced and under organized control," commented A. R. Carhart for Wisconsin Equity News in 1910, "has always been the policy of the manipulator, of whom the Jew Bankers are past masters."⁵⁷

When the idea of investigations of European cooperation leading to an avowedly nonpopulist rural credit reform emerged in the press during late 1911 and early 1912, the evidence is clear that original impetus did not come

⁵⁶"About National Legislation," 3. The four "Grange measures" existing in Congress in mid-1912 were: the "objectionable revision of the oleomargarine laws," the enactment of a parcels post law, the enactment of a vocational education law, and direct election of U.S. Senators. There was nothing about rural credits in this group declaration.

⁵⁷A. R. Carhart, "The People's Money," Wisconsin Equity News 3, no. 1 (10 May 1910): 4.

from the farm organizations. The farm-organization survey confirms earlier findings in other press categories (farm journals and the business press) that the points of origin for this particular rural credit reform strategy lay outside the farm-organization sector, even though the conditions facing farmers were the underlying cause for reform. In actuality, bankers and other businessmen, including leading farm-paper publishers, were the individuals responsible for promulgating European models of rural credit as an emerging issue in the press. These journalists and assorted other agrarian propagandists set the presses to printing an agenda for national legislation based on copying the models of self-help through cooperation prevalent in European agricultural finance.

When the Wisconsin Equity News announced, in a late 1911 editorial headline, "Better Banking System Demanded by Farmers," what it actually did was reprint a speech by the prominent North Carolina banker Joseph G. Brown. The speech made it clear that initially it was country bankers who wanted to see a better system of lending to farmers. "There should be no

antagonism between these two classes," wrote Brown, since the banker had "long recognized the farmer as the backbone of the country."⁵⁸

Some of the editors of the farm-organization press at first interpreted the sudden interest of bankers in finances of farmers as a positive change. "The farmer is coming into his own," claimed the National Grange Monthly, and the signs were thought to be everywhere. "Press, pulpit, platform and people look to him today as never before." Specific evidence was "furnished in the step taken by the bankers at their last annual session [the 1911 meeting of the American Bankers' Association], when they entered upon a project for creating a system of farm finance for the benefit of ambitious and enterprising tillers of the United States soil." The movement among the bankers was described as the most significant undertaken in this country, deserving the "careful reading of every farmer in the United States."⁵⁹ Benevolence and self-interest, it was argued, had combined to produce reform-mindedness on

⁵⁸"Better Banking System Demanded by Farmers," Wisconsin Equity News 4, no. 15 (10 December 1911): 4. The editor wondered why LaFollete or some other progressive had not put up a good plan for currency reform. Farm-organization press-finance discussions were generally limited to currency reform, not a separate farm credit system, until the emergence of the looking-to-Europe policy network.

⁵⁹"Coming to His Own," National Grange Monthly 9, no. 4 (April 1912): 10.

the part of some bankers. In the farm-organization press, this was interpreted as an overdue and welcome response to farmers' demands, though only in early stages of the debate. There is no evidence, however, that rural credit reform, separate from currency reform, was a farm-organization demand at any point in either 1910 or 1911.

By the summer of 1912, nonetheless, the idea of looking to Europe was taking shape in the form of the privately sponsored Southern Commercial Congress commission to study conditions abroad.⁶⁰ At the same time, Ambassador to France Myron T. Herrick was collecting data from five European nations to prepare a preliminary report on the idea of designing an American rural credit system based on European experience with cooperation. There were, at this time, only a handful of knowledgeable scholars and agrarians experienced in the study of European-style rural cooperative credit. One, however, was Hector MacPherson, a professor of political economy at

⁶⁰"The personnel of the Commission represented almost every kind of business or interest in the country. There were bankers, merchants, railroad men, lawyers, doctors, insurance men, office holders, church workers, professors, politicians and farmers. The farmer members who had no pecuniary interest in anything other than farming were very scarce." See "Report of T. J. Brooks, Special Representative of the National Union on the Rural Credit Commission," in Minutes of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Salina, Kansas, 2-4 September 1913 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1913), 27.

Oregon Agricultural College and a regular contributor to Grange periodicals. In 1910, MacPherson completed what would become a well-known thesis on the cooperative credit associations of Quebec, Canada. On the subject of Europe's cooperative credit societies, MacPherson wrote for the National Grange Monthly: "There is probably no other single influence which has done so much for the world's tillers of the soil, not only economically, but also intellectually and morally, than have these cooperative banks." The effect of European rural credit associations upon their agricultural economies was, for MacPherson, akin to the effect of the steam engine upon manufacturing.⁶¹

When the National Grange developed and publicized a policy of its own on rural credit, it departed radically from the orientation of the American Commission to Europe. There was a new emphasis in the paper during late 1913 and 1914

upon the fact that the whole question of farm credits and money for agricultural loans will be settled, and without anymore expensive investigations or junkets to foreign lands, by simply making provision by law so that the millions now being drawn into deposit by the Postal Savings Banks can be loaned out direct to farmers.⁶²

⁶¹Hector MacPherson, "The Farmer in Cooperation," National Grange Monthly 9, no. 7 (July 1912): 9.

⁶²"Practical Farm Credit Plan," 12.

Uncle Sam, argued the Grange, simply had to establish a submarket rate of 4-4½% for farm mortgages and deal directly with farmers. In anticipation of objections against this form of paternalism, the writer asked whether it was also paternalistic to lend at 2% to bankers who then turn around and lend that money to farmers at 8-18%.⁶³ The National Grange Monthly reprinted an editorial from a leading urban daily (the Boston Journal) which noted farmers were paying 8½-10¾% for borrowed money and that it was "time for the government to come to the relief of the farmer."⁶⁴

As the matter came before Congress during late 1913 and early 1914, the Grange staked out its position in favor of government-subsidized farm credit by linking it to the growing need for food in the United States. Since farm credit reform primarily had to do with conservation of the land and the preservation of the American food supply, "the government of the nation should itself carry out this policy, and it cannot properly be delegated to private capital for general exploitation and private profit." Control over farm credit, argued the paper, had to be in the hands of farmers. Farm credit

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴"When a Farmer Borrows," National Grange Monthly 10, no. 10 (October 1913): 18.

associations "should be composed of farmers and not by capitalists of high finance who have, heretofore, dominated agricultural credit and created the conditions which now demand relief." Any plan that failed to lower the rates of interest and terms of repayment would not meet agricultural needs. Grange leaders argued the government should issue bonds at 3½% and lend on farm mortgages at 4½%, with the profits to go to better roads (this was essentially the Bathrick proposal). They noted for good measure that the rural situation "must be improved by rural people and not by the professional uplifters."⁶⁵

The NFU Legislative Committee gave Congress much the same message:

We want to deal directly with the Government. We are tired of being exploited by the bankers and the money-lending sharks of this country . . . that may look a little bit like paternalism and all that, but as you know, things that looked very paternalistic a few years ago have got to be not so much these days.⁶⁶

When asked by a Congressman whether farmers could be organized into cooperative credit associations, as they were in Europe, the spokesman replied:

⁶⁵"Work of the National Grange," National Grange Monthly 11, no. 1 (January 1914): 3.

⁶⁶Congress, House, Statement of Mr. S. K. Hobbs, 191.

farmers are not as intelligent along the lines of finance as some people are, for the reason that they have not had any financial system whereby they might educate themselves along that line. Hence, in a cooperative association, the first time there was a steal made in it, the farmers would all be like a flock of sheep, they would run out and you could not get them to come back in again.⁶⁷

In summary, the farm-organization position on the rates and terms for rural credit during the period of the survey was characterized over time by relative indifference, sudden interest, and then disbelief and outrage at the course of events guided by elite champions of a for-profit, private system of cooperative farm mortgage. Once the drift of the European policy transplant became clear to farm organizations, the groups responded by setting their own agenda for reform. Less than two years after farm credit was off the legislative agenda of the National Grange and NFU, it had ascended to a position of great importance for both groups.

The National Grange Monthly editorialized in 1914 that some "system of properly financed agricultural development and extension is the present supreme need of the American farmer." Noting the financial interests and the clever politicians, the National Grange recognized an opportunity is to "stand firmly by the farmer's interests, protecting him against the wiles of clever

⁶⁷Ibid., 195.

schemers. . . . It is a great task, by all odds the greatest the Grange has ever faced."⁶⁸ With much the same newfound passion, the NFU Minutes also declared in 1914 "that the single greatest single problem now before American agriculturists is the establishment of a satisfactory system to provide short time loans as working capital for farmers, and long term mortgage credits for land purchase and permanent improvements."⁶⁹

Farm Profitability

The NFU remained relatively quiet on the subject of rural credits through the early part of the survey period, even though the organization made farm profitability one of the most salient issues in the editorial pages of its paper. President Barrett spoke regularly to local and state groups around the nation, and yearly to the national convention of the NFU, and the topic seldom strayed far from farm profitability. In 1909, he told the convention that marketing problems were the result of speculators who manipulated prices in

⁶⁸"A Great Issue," National Grange Monthly 11, no. 2 (February 1914): 10. Also consider the Grange's fear of "fake schemes and spoilsmen's projects," in "The Right Effort," National Grange Monthly 11, no. 3 (March 1914): 10.

⁶⁹"Report of the Committee on Rural Credits," 54.

ways ruinous to the farmer. Speculators were "[a]lways ready, always anxious, to take advantage of the man in debt, the man who has to sell whether he wants to or not."⁷⁰ In 1911, an NFU crop-marketing committee reported that the "farmers of the United States have no complete system of marketing their crops, but are forced to patronize a system operated by others . . . the present system of marketing is conducted exclusively by speculators, who extort for their services a greater toll than is paid in any other industry."⁷¹

Concern about the relationship between overproduction and farm profitability fueled both NFU and Equity efforts to lower production levels as a means to raise prices. "Generally speaking--plant fewer acres--is good advice," and it aptly summed up the editorial view represented in the Wisconsin Equity News. "We know that a large surplus of any crop insures an unprofitably low price. . . . *We must reduce our acreage and the supply.*"⁷² Plans for controlling supply, however, were not always popular with farmers

⁷⁰"Address of President Charles S. Barrett," Pacific Farmers Union 1, no. 35 (10 September 1909): 1, 8.

⁷¹"Report of the Committee on Crop Marketing," in Minutes of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Farmers Educational and Co-operative Union of America, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 3-5 September 1912 (Texarkana, [state]: Four States Press, 1912), 40-41.

⁷²"Plant Fewer Acres," Wisconsin Equity News 3, no. 22 (25 March 1911): 5.

or practical. Self-interest meant free-riders were a problem for any consensual agreements to reduce acreage. Furthermore, while the idea made sense to students of basic market relationships, such as those affecting supply, demand, and price, to many farmers the idea of growing short crops intentionally simply did not make sense. It was a plan, in short, requiring a great level of trust and cooperation between dispersed, often isolated farmers, who were long noted for their individualism.

There was a competing and at times complementary solution to problems with farm profitability, however, and that was the pervasive idea that farmers must simply become better businessmen. Good bookkeeping on a farm during this period was considered an exception to the rule that farmers, remarkably, kept little or no record of their transactions related to production, distributing, and marketing. One editor of a twice-a-week publication (the Spokesman-Review) had his 1910 address at a wheat convention reprinted in the Pacific Farmers Union. "The new Country Life Movement," said E. A. Smith, "classes the farmer with the manufacturer, calls upon him for the same bookkeeping, for the same hard thinking over the cost of production, over the

elimination of waste, over the utilizing of bi-products, over marketing the same hard thinking that is done in the so-called business world."⁷³

Thinking like a businessman during the 1910s posed a number of paradoxes for farmers reared on traditional rural agrarian antipathies toward the businessmen who seemed always to get the better of farmers in economic and political matters. The obvious dilemma, one posed repeatedly by cooperative champion J. L. Coulter, was to find out exactly which form of business organization would ensure farm profitability.⁷⁴ At the Wisconsin Equity News, editors concluded in 1913 that farmers "can not be classed with or as business men so long as they are so backward in financing the business end of their business."⁷⁵

Cost of Living

⁷³E. A. Smith, "The New Country Life Movement," Pacific Farmers Union 2, no. 5 (4 February 1910): 1, 8.

⁷⁴John L. Coulter, "What Form of Business Organization Is Best in Agriculture?," Wisconsin Equity News 3, no. 6 (25 July 1910): 6. See also John Lee Coulter, Co-operation Among Farmers: The Keystone of Rural Prosperity (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1911).

⁷⁵"Is the Farmer a Business Man?," Equity News 6, no. 9 (10 September 1913): 136.

As the other surveys made clear, steadily rising food prices, starting in 1897, contributed to a concerted, urban-based argument about the existence of an agricultural problem manifest in the pervasive concern about the high cost of living.⁷⁶ While there was generally partisan disagreement about the more fundamental causes, all the major political parties in 1912 agreed to the extent that each included a prominent plank addressing the issue. Democrats proclaimed the high cost of living a serious problem in every American home, attributing the main cause to high tariffs and commercial conspiracies established under the Republicans. The Republican platform also called the high cost of living a matter of national concern. Offering no positive statement of the cause, Republicans did assert the cause was not the protective tariff, and in turn endorsed a general scientific inquiry into the types of abuses thought to unnaturally raise the price of food.⁷⁷

Progressives, meanwhile, identified multiple local, national and worldwide causes, considered both artificial and natural, which fueled the

⁷⁶Walden Allan Curtis, "What Is the Matter with Farming?," The Independent 67, no. 3187 (30 December 1909): 1484-88; Arthur W. Page, "The High Cost of Living," 12770-72. For a skeptical view about agriculture's role in the high cost of living, see the gold-production explanation offered by Holt, 441-48.

⁷⁷Johnson and Porter, 168-93.

steady increase in the cost of living. The "Cost of Living" plank touched specifically on "poor methods of raising crops and bad business methods in marketing crops." Another part of the Progressive platform sounded central themes made familiar by Roosevelt's Country Life Commission. The "Country Life" plank called attention to an inextricable link between the fate of the rural and urban populations:

The development and prosperity of country life are as important to the people who live in the cities as they are to the farmers. Increase of prosperity on the farm will favorably affect the cost of living, and promote the interest of all who dwell in the country, and all who depend on its products for clothing, shelter and food. We pledge our party to foster the development of agricultural credit and cooperation, the teaching of agriculture in schools, agricultural college extension, the use of mechanical power on the farm, and to re-establish the Country Life Commission, thus directly promoting the welfare of the farmers, and bringing the benefits of better farming, better business and better living within their reach.⁷⁸

The trope "cost of living," not surprisingly, also received considerable attention in the farm-organization press. National Master Bachelder told the 1910 meeting of the National Grange that the high cost of living was "attracting world-wide attention," and the cause was the extravagant means used in the distribution of farm products. The existing system, he argued, did

⁷⁸Ibid., 177-78.

not return to farmers "a fair share of the price consumers pay."⁷⁹ In that same year, the Legislative Committee of the National Grange reported the cost of living, "particularly of foodstuffs," was in fact "the most widely discussed question of the day."⁸⁰

At the Pacific Farmers Union, editors reprinted an article from Wallaces' Farmer that noted farmers also paid high costs, just the same, or at times even worse, than those dealt to the hungry urban masses. Reduce the cost of living for farmers, demanded the editors at Wallaces' Farmer, because it is the farmers who buy expensive fence wire only to watch it quickly go to rust. A partisan realignment of Congress was thought to offer little well-grounded hope for improvement in that dilemma. "Placing the democrats in power does not end the struggle. It will be discovered in the next six months that there is a standpat faction among the democrats that is just as averse to reducing the cost of living to the farmer as the most reactionary of the republicans."⁸¹

⁷⁹Bachelor, "Worthy Master's Annual Address" (1910), 11.

⁸⁰"Report of the Legislative Committee" (1910), 15.

⁸¹"Cost of Living to the Farmer," Pacific Farmers Union 3, no. 11 (31 March 1911): 4, 6. See also "The Cost of Living to the Farmer," Pacific Farmers Union 3, no. 18 (19 May 1911): 4-5.

A national debate about the cost of living went on for years. Blame for the problem was distributed liberally, but a consensus seemed to exist that the farmers, in part through some of their own failings, suffered the worst of it. Farm organizations complained bitterly about the coverage given to the cost of living in other print press sources, such as farm journals, the business press, and the urban dailies in particular. Farmers assumed all the risks associated with agriculture and worked tirelessly, argued the Wisconsin Equity News, yet there remained the constant danger of overproduction, among many other perils to the farmers' profits. In line with the other farm organizations, Equity's leaders charged the cost of distribution was "the feature of the problem of high prices which must present itself to the consumer for treatment."⁸² Pennsylvania State Grange Master W. T. Creasy remarked that the high cost of living was "largely due to a lack of co-operation between producers and the consumers . . . [thus] by an apathetic consideration of legislation, the general public is blamable for existing economic conditions."⁸³

⁸²"Farmers Not to Blame for High Cost of Living," Wisconsin Equity News 4, no. 4 (25 June 1911): 3.

⁸³"Why Living Cost Is High," National Grange Monthly 9, no. 1 (January 1912): 2.

At the 1912 meeting of the National Grange, the Overseer reported that village and city citizens were indeed having much to say about the high cost of living and farmers were unfairly receiving most of the blame. L. H. Healy maintained, however, that

the tendency of the American family is to live upon a false standard; because the family with an income of \$750 tries to imitate the family with an income of \$1,500 and they the family with \$10,000, and they the family which travels in its own private car and has a steam yacht of its own; because this feeling of dissatisfaction and unrest is general is no reason why the blame should be placed upon the farmer.⁸⁴

The following year, at the 1913 annual meeting, the "Report of the Committee on Agriculture" also found inordinate blame was being put upon farmers about the high cost of living. The report asked:

Is it any wonder that our Wall Street friends and other trade conspirators are living in celestial anticipation of large and still larger rewards for attending to our business that they claim divine Providence has entrusted in their keeping? The angelic choristers are creating large combinations, fixing our laws of trade, fixing our currency laws, fixing the farmer to keep plugging away to produce increased crops and decrease *our* dollar.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Healy, "Worthy Overseer's Report" (1912), 18.

⁸⁵"Report of the Committee on Agriculture," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-seventh Annual Session, Manchester, New Hampshire, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1913), 179.

Relations Between Classes

As was the case in both the farm-journal and business-press surveys (Chapters IV and VI), the issue focus that was coded "relations between classes" in the farm-organization press was one of the most salient during this period. For all the reasons laid out in the preceding chapters, farm organizations found themselves in an environment where the public voices on behalf of agriculture were increasingly diverse. State and national government agencies, academic institutions and publications, multiplying journalistic outlets, and a growing business-sponsored agrarian philanthropy all vied for attention in the agenda-setting environment created by the reliance upon the print press.

In 1907, L. C. Bateman asserted the paradoxical position of the farmer in national policy debates. On the one hand, the Grange could be considered "the most powerful organization in the country," while the average farmer was "fully the peer in intelligence and scope of capacity of the business or professional man." According to Bateman, this was a result of the moral uplift induced by organizations such as the Grange. "On the other hand," he continued, "it is equally undisputed that in all matters pertaining to

governmental, State or municipal leadership their influence has been practically nothing." Farmers were compelled to pay whatever the merchant and professional man decided to charge, and they were forced to receive whatever they may offer for the products of the farm. "There is no equity in such a system, but for this condition no one is more to blame than the farmer himself."⁸⁶ Recognition of this paradox appeared frequently in the Grange press alongside the assertion that agriculture was, nevertheless, the wellspring of all productive activity in the United States.⁸⁷

Near the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, in the year of the report of the Country Life Commission (1909), it became commonplace for urban agrarians to make their views about farmers public. Oftentimes, these public statements made their way into farm-organization reprints and editorials. One such reprinted address was a welcome to the Farmers Union meeting in Pullman, Washington, by B. F. Pullman, chairman of the Pullman Commercial Club. His statement was emblematic of the state of class relations in this period:

⁸⁶L. C. Bateman, "The Farmer Must Lead," National Grange Official Organ 1, no. 2 (13 November 1907): 3-4.

⁸⁷Bachelder, "American Agriculture Leads," 5-6.

Looking toward the town from the farmers' point of view I can plainly see that the business man is an absolute necessity for the farmers' convenience and for his most rapid advancement. Looking toward the country from the view of the business man located in a town surrounded by an agricultural community like this, I can just as plainly see that the farmer is absolutely necessary for the existence of the business man. . . . Notwithstanding the fact that the interests of the farmer and the business man are identical and inseparable, there seems to have crept into the atmosphere a feeling of dissatisfaction with each other.⁸⁸

By 1909, farm organizations had to come to terms with the increasingly influential views of reformers such as James J. Hill who were active in the urban-agrarian policy network. The NFU paper was open-minded about the new prominence of the railroad entrepreneur. "To a great extent," editorialized the Pacific Farmers Union, "we agree with Mr. Hill." Calling him the foremost railroad official in the United States, and noting that for many years he had been actively concerned with agriculture, the paper declared him to be a key player in waking up the bankers of the country to the "collapse of business of all kinds in the not too distant future unless the farmers were more thoroughly educated in their business."⁸⁹

⁸⁸"A Merchant's Views," Pacific Farmers Union 1, no. 13 (26 March 1909): 3.

⁸⁹"J. J. Hill's Predictions," Pacific Farmers Union 1, no. 37 (1 October 1909): 2. A widely discussed article by Hill in The World's Work was

In 1910, NFU president C. S. Barrett commented that America watches and waits anxiously upon the farmer:

The newspapers bristle with counsel to him. Politicians, publicists and students enthuse and agonize over him from rostrum and forum and legislative hall. It can be stated in one sentence, that the finger of the nation is pointing today but one direction--and that is at the figure of the man behind the plow, to whom they are looking to redeem them from a sky-scraping cost of living, and, in a way, from a menace of unrest that broods like a pall over many of our cities.⁹⁰

Farm-organization newspapers were among those that carried a stream of advice for the farmers, even when the source was decidedly urban in nature. For example, an editor at the Wisconsin Equity News noted that one of the most widely quoted addresses from the 1910 annual meeting of the National Farmers Union was that of the railroad agrarian B. F. Yoakum. The paper labeled Yoakum a businessman of recognized standing, and suggested the talk itself contained much good material. Apparently there was no need to

reprinted on the cover of the Pacific Farmers Union in the November 5, 1909 issue. See "Future of Agriculture," Pacific Farmers Union 1, no. 42 (5 November 1909): 1.

⁹⁰Barrett, "The National Field," 1. Consider also Charles S. Barrett's remarks in "The National Field: Farm and City," Pacific Farmers Union 3, no. 29 (4 August 1911): 1-2. He addressed editors, publicists, statesmen, and politicians concerned about "farm uplift" with a message that bringing "town and country together" was indeed a worthy goal.

question his motives. Since Yoakum seemed to be earnest, the paper concluded farmers could profit by the lessons and reforms he suggested: break with dog-eat-dog practices and speculation, play fair, and protect producers and consumers from the trusts. "Cooperation," reminded the editors, "is the master spirit of the age." The Yoakum speech stated that cooperation was in fact a word often used and misused, and yet it was the case that railroads and the farmers had genuine cause for cooperation. Toward that end, he argued, "let us eliminate the men who talk radical ideas," and rely instead on the landowning class that can best "protect the country from extreme radicalism."⁹¹

The farm-organization survey revealed the extent to which farmers' representatives had to recast their relations with traditional urban competitors and enemies during this period. While the transition was not always smooth, or desirable from certain rural standpoints, the demographic trends in the early

⁹¹B. F. Yoakum, "From the Farm to the Table," Wisconsin Equity News 3, no. 2 (25 May 1910): 2-3, 6-7. See also the speech as it was reported in "The National Field," Pacific Farmers Union 2, no. 26 (28 July 1910): 1. In a manner characteristic of the period, Yoakum stated, "Every banker, and every merchant in every community should aid the farmers with the greatest profit and in helping increase the supply and demand by cheapening the cost to the consumer."

twentieth century made this shift in strategy appear inevitable. In 1911, the National Grange Legislative Committee made precisely this case:

The rapid increase in the population in our cities and our towns, as compared with that of the country districts, shows that the balance of political power is no longer in the hands of the farmers, as they are outnumbered two to one by the residents of the cities. . . . It is therefore necessary that so far as practicable the Grange should co-operate with the people of the towns and cities in all such matters that are to their mutual advantage, as it is only through such co-operation that legislation in the interest of all the people can be secured.⁹²

Not only were the swelling ranks of urban voters changing the electoral geography, the writing and wisdom of vocal urban agrarians appeared nationally in diverse forms of print press, thereby extending and changing the landscape of legislative reform. As noted in Chapter III, foremost in this regard was the James J. Hill-inspired school of thought, which held that urban agrarians had the knowledge, responsibility, and power to uplift the farmers. Low farm productivity, according to conventional urban thought, imperiled the nation's low-cost food supply.

⁹²"Report of the Legislative Committee," in Journal of Proceedings of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry: Forty-fifth Annual Session, Columbus, Ohio, ed. Secretary C. M. Freeman (Springfield, OH: Springfield Publishing, 1911), 138.

Did rural agrarians balk at Hill, and his followers in the National Soil Fertility League (NSFL), when they tried to reform farm practices?

Apparently not, if we take the farm-organization press and leadership to be representative of rural public opinion. After the second annual meeting of the NSFL, the Wisconsin Equity News, the most radical of three papers surveyed, reported signs of "progress along the line of stimulating interest in and securing legislation for the improvement of American soil resources and farm conditions." The paper stated the object of the businessman's group was to promote scientific farming, chiefly through the drafting of the Lever farm extension bill. The paper also reported NSFL fears of the impending food shortages, but did so without any reference to long-standing Equity wariness about increasing production to lower the cost of living.⁹³

Members of the Equity movement, however, did not entirely embrace the new class relations forming on the rural-urban front. Every farm

⁹³"Second Annual Meeting of the National Soil Fertility League," Wisconsin Equity News 5, no. 9 (10 September 1912): 6. In early 1912, NSFL ran a four-page advertising supplement in the paper. It plainly stated the group's purpose: "The increasing of the average yield per acre, the building up of soil fertility, insuring permanent agriculture and an ample food supply, are of supreme importance." See National Soil Fertility League, 1. See also the article by NSFL President Howard H. Gross, "The Farmer and the Rest of Us," Equity News 6, no. 4 (25 June 1913): 64.

organization represented a mix of progressive and traditional viewpoints. This was particularly true on matters of business practices and political economy. Some unrepentant populist tendencies appeared along with the new cooperative attitude toward urban reformers. Equity readers were routinely made aware that they lived in the midst of a price-setting war with identifiable, usually urban, enemies. In pursuit of a more egalitarian distribution of wealth, the American Society of Equity had been founded on the idea that urban speculators and gamblers unfairly set the price for food in the machinations of the grain trade.

In Wisconsin in 1911, where progressive forms of cooperation among farmers were proving to be successful, the farmer's enemies were seen as omnipresent: "Boards of Trade live, thrive, prosper and perpetuate themselves by daily fluctuations, manipulations and deception of the unwary, as to the prospects or conditions supposed to affect quantity and thereby price--anciently called `supply and demand.'"⁹⁴ By late 1912, with the era of urban uplift movements well underway, the headline to one article read, "Farming the Farmers," and it described how politicians, bankers, and railroad officials

⁹⁴"Equity's Most Pertinent and Persistent Enemies," Wisconsin Equity News 4, no. 11 (25 October 1911): 4.

thrived on the overproduction of cereal crops, while farmers knew from personal experience that when they raised larger crops the price for staples declined.⁹⁵

Farmers who read the farm-organization press were therefore exposed to a mixed message about the legitimacy of urban agrarians.⁹⁶ To be sure, there were influential farm-organization writers who admitted that the interest of powerful actors in their plight could be beneficial. Still, there was lingering suspicion that, as one NFU article subheading put it, "Farmers' Problems Are Not Understood by City Men." In this confrontational piece, Peter Radford, a lecturer for the NFU, wrote, "I feel sure I shall voice the sentiment of the Union and of the 12,000,000 men who follow the plows of the nation." That sentiment was that despite the genuine goodwill expressed through urban uplift efforts, "those who scheme seldom plow." For Radford, the urban reformers could not fully understand the problems facing a farmer. He remarked:

⁹⁵"Farming the Farmers," Wisconsin Equity News 5, no. 15 (10 December 1912): 6.

⁹⁶Noting the interest of the Kansas bankers in better farming and demonstration experts, one farm organization claimed to be mystified why "all this should be told to a bankers' association." See "How the Bankers Love the Farmers!," National Grange Monthly 10, no. 10 (October 1913): 3.

It is perhaps one of the ironies of fate that commissions, boards and special investigators--ofttimes more romantic than practical--sent out by government organizations or philanthropists, invariably conclude that the farmer is incompetent. Then there are the agricultural adventurers that frighten us with prophecies of hunger, mischievous statisticians that argue the decadence of American agriculture, and the theorists with their cure-alls; all of them deploring the incapacity of the farmer.⁹⁷

This period in agrarian history was clearly marked by some ambivalence on the part of organized farmers in relation to the other classes. Helping hands were not always welcome at field level, yet there was some hope for a genuine alliance. Papers such as the Wisconsin Equity News could not avoid mention of the growing interest of business in agriculture, and the desire of uplifters to "help" farmers. The prominent role played by business in directing agricultural extension was, in some eyes, not really help, but rather it was an attempt to dictate practices to the farmers. This extended beyond mere

⁹⁷Peter Radford, "The National Field," Pacific Farmers Union 5, no. 49 (19 December 1913): 1, 8. One equity writer noted the need for an agriculturist to go to the city and train the urban population, thereby displacing the wasteful "Captains of Industry" who were seen to be natural resource despots. See C. B. Whitnall, "Why Not a City Life Conference," Equity News 6, no. 5 (10 July 1913): 65-66.

dictation of field-level farm practices into the realm of guiding agrarian legislative policy.⁹⁸

The 1915 presidential address by C. S. Barrett to the NFU convention captures the status of rural-urban class relations and is worth quoting at length. Barrett devoted subheadings to "Outside Help" and "Conferences." On the prospect for assistance across class lines, he wrote:

We may not count upon much help from other classes to help us market our stuff at a better price, or to help us get some of the needed legislation we are asking for. While in every class there be good and thoughtful men who are in sympathy with us, it yet remains true that the rank and file of nearly every other class regard the farmers as hewers of wood and drawers of water for their benefit, and as a lot of discontented grumblers who are dissatisfied with abundant crops.⁹⁹

When the speech turned to the many public forums and conferences on the subject of rural uplift, the report was cynical about the cumulative effects:

I have attended multitudinous conferences, ostensibly called in the interest of the farmers. . . . Politicians took a hand and fathered some, then bankers and business bodies butted in and called some. [*sic*] then federal officials, not to be left out of the marathon race. . . . I went wearily, doubtfully and the least bit hopefully. In each case I returned with my weariness increased, my doubt strengthened, my hopefulness destroyed. . . . It would

⁹⁸J. F. Larson, "The Uplift of the Farmers," Equity News 7, no. 13 (1 November 1914): 579.

⁹⁹Barrett, "Address of the President" (1915), 12.

not be just to accuse these men of a lack of sincerity, but I will show you the two underlying causes of failure. The desire to pose in the limelight as statesmen, as public-spirited men, as philanthropists, is one reason, and I submit that this playing with us to secure publicity is not fair. But there is a greater cause for these failures. It is the utter inability of these men to put themselves in the other man's place, to see with the other man's eyes, to grasp the other man's problems from the angles of physical and mental contact.¹⁰⁰

There were few farm-organization figures with greater prestige, access to the halls of power, or experience in early twentieth-century rural interest group formation, than C. S. Barrett. Farm-organization journalists looked to the speeches, such as the one just cited, and the writings of leaders like Barrett, and the Grange's T. C. Atkeson, when they reported on the status of farm sentiment.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 15-16.

Conclusion

Rural public opinion about legislation, at least in this era, and particularly in this press, was essentially a patchwork of top-down policy pronouncements disseminated through as many print outlets as possible. Farm organizations and their newspapers looked to the print press as a primary channel of policy influence and democratic discourse. Leaders of the farm organizations gave voice to otherwise amorphous rural views, and the repetition of the leadership positions provided actors at various points in the policy process with an accessible indicator of rural sentiment.

As was the case in the other surveys, the issue of rates and terms for credit and the prospect for rural credit reform existed in a complex discursive nexus. The movement of public opinion leading up to the FFLA of 1916 was couched in a larger debate about the status of agriculture in an industrial economy. Farm organizations used their own newspapers to focus on, and contribute to, the growth and influence of their groups, and the articulation of their agenda. This involved a constant restatement of the reasons why farm organization, hitherto considered less than adequate, needed to be improved.

Farm organizations sought to keep members in touch with their leaders' views. The papers placed a strong emphasis on finding, establishing, and

retaining good leaders at every level of organization. This was important in the struggle for key goals, such as securing greater farm profitability and dispensing with threats from farmers' enemies. Each of these goals was perceived to be dependent on greater farm-organization unity, which in turn relied on effective use of the print press.

During this period, farm organizations contributed to a unique stream of agricultural journalism. The print press was highly valued as a conveyor of ideas and collective opinions. It was a key asset for leaders conducting outreach. A newspaper was considered an important indication of national organization status. As a means to the end of economic improvement, the farm-organization press left behind a significant public record of activity directed along those lines. Leaders clearly believed they could use the press to mobilize broader social groups which were seen as constitutive of public opinion. The press was considered a policy tool, one that could be operationalized through agenda-setting techniques in support of a more democratic society.