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Farmer Rebels in Plymouth County, Iowa, 1932-1933

RODNEY D. KARR

THE FARMERS' HOLIDAY movement flared into rebellion at a time when agricultural prices plummeted to discouraging levels and farmers were threatened with the loss of their land. From August 1932 until April 1933, the Holiday movement achieved its greatest attention in the vicinity of Sioux City, Iowa. Immediately north of Sioux City, in Plymouth County, militant farmers brought recognition to agriculture's depression plight by boldly picketing highways and halting foreclosure sales. In April 1933, these rebellious farmers destroyed what had been a hopeful movement when they hauled a judge from his courtroom in LeMars and nearly lynched him on the outskirts of town.¹

A description of Iowa Holiday movement activists can provide important information about participants in direct-action

1. Midwestern farmer activism of the early 1930s claims a rich historiography. Frank D. Dileva, "Farm Revolts in Iowa" (M.A. thesis, Drake University, 1952) and Howard Wallace Lawrence, "The Farmers' Holiday Association in Iowa, 1932-33" (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1952) initiated historical scholarship of Iowa's Farm Holiday movement. Julius Korgan expanded this scholarly work in "Farmers' Picket the Depression" (PhD dissertation, American University, 1961). The best known work focusing on the Farmers' Holiday is John Shover's *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana, Illinois, 1965). A native Iowan, Lowell K. Dyson, provided further study with "The Farm Holiday Movement" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1968) and expanded his work on the subject in *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1982). More recently, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Iowa farmers' rebellion, a discussion unfolded in the fall 1983 issue of the *Annals of Iowa* concerning the level of organization and the presence of even informal leadership in that farm movement. See especially Joseph F. Wall, "The Iowa Farmer in Crisis, 1920-1936," pages 116-127 and the comment following by George Mills.

rural protest movements. On occasion 1000 to 1500 Plymouth County farmers picketed highways. One hundred to three hundred local farmers attended events of the most serious violence. Although their movement lacked extensive formal leadership, Plymouth County farmer rebels received national attention and provoked a countywide declaration of martial law in May 1933. These farmers, mostly concentrated in a restricted area of the county, resorted to bold measures in the face of financial ruin. They displayed special local characteristics while continuing a rich tradition of American agrarian activism.

Rebellious farmer activity in Plymouth County developed in two phases. In August and September 1932, farmers began a strike by withholding agricultural products from market. During the strike, picketers blocked highways, and in some instances strikers besieged legal officials and non-cooperating farmers. From January to April 1933, the rural protest entered an anti-foreclosure phase in which farmers moved to save one another from forced sales and evictions. During this second phase the rebellion's most serious violence erupted. The most extreme activism occurred in LeMars, Iowa, on April 27, 1933, when 250 angry farmers rushed the courtroom of District Judge Charles C. Bradley. Bradley was scheduled to hold hearings on an Iowa mortgage moratorium law and the farmers sought his support of the moratorium. When the judge refused to promise his cooperation, the farmers roughly escorted him from the bench and nearly lynched him at a country crossroads.²

Immediately after this violence, speculation mounted about participants in the rural uprising. Iowa Governor Clyde Hering proclaimed martial law in the county, declaring "Sioux City hoodlums were in the crowd that attacked the judge."³ Within a week of the courtroom incident, Park A. Findley, who as head of the Iowa Bureau of Investigation investigated the protest, claimed "red backing" existed in the local upheaval. Charges of Communist involvement had surfaced as early as the farm strike of the previous autumn. Despite the concerns about outside influences, however, available evidence sug-

2. *LeMars Globe-Post*, 1 May 1933.

3. *New York Times*, 29 April 1933, 1.

gests that the farm revolt in Plymouth County was a movement of and by local farmers.⁴

Arrests made during the farm strike of 1932 failed to turn up any outsiders. The first arrests for blockading highways in the Sioux City area occurred on September 13. The *Sioux City Journal* announced the arrest of five men on that date; all were farmers from the territory surrounding Sioux City. When officials attempted to clear the highways around Sioux City and made the first mass arrest of pickets, they detained ninety protesters in the Woodbury County jail in Sioux City. Of these ninety, a reporter discovered that "five were farm owners; twenty had owned farms and were now renters; twenty-five had always been renters; fifteen were farm boys living with their parents; seventeen were laborers long living in the community; and there were eight packing house employees."⁵

In Plymouth County as in Woodbury, officials arrested no "outside agitators." The first arrests followed the near-lynching of Judge Bradley and local press coverage reported all thirty-eight arrested as county residents.⁶ Unfortunately, Plymouth County court records are missing for pertinent cases: the criminal court files of Morris Cope, Ed Casper, Martin Rosburg, and Dick Popken, all significant figures in the incident, are missing. Most of the arrests occurred while Plymouth County was under martial law; therefore, the Iowa National Guard was in charge of all arrests during a two-week period. Two previous scholars of the farm rebellion, John Shover and Lowell Dyson, were unable to locate National Guard records of this incident. Newspaper reports provide the best available arrest evidence. Of the thirty-eight persons arrested in Plymouth County, all were farm owners, farm renters, or farm hands.⁷

As well as individuals arrested in Woodbury and Plymouth counties, the majority of participants in the local Farm Holiday

4. *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, 2 May, 16 September 1933.

5. *Sioux City Journal*, 14 September 1932; Mary Heaton Vorse, "Rebellion in the Corn Belt," *Harper's*, December 1932, 4.

6. *LeMars Globe-Post*, 1, 4, 29 May; 13, 20 July 1933; *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, 12 May and 1 June 1933; *Sioux City Journal*, 1, 3, 11 May 1933.

7. Plymouth County Criminal Court Records, Cases 782 A, 789 A, 791 A, and 792 A, Court House, LeMars, Iowa; Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 121; *LeMars Globe-Post*, 1, 4, 29 May; 13, 20 July 1933; *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, 12 May and 1 June 1933; and *Sioux City Journal*, 1, 3, 11 May 1933.

movement from August 1932 to May 1933 were local farmers. An interesting pattern emerges from local newspaper coverage of the farm strike, the anti-foreclosure campaign, and the assault on Judge Bradley. Newspaper reports of organizational meetings, leaders, committee members, incidents of farm activism, and arrests, reveal sixty different names in some way associated with the Plymouth County farmers' rebellion. Fifty-six of the sixty were Plymouth County farmers or farm workers and three were farmers from neighboring counties.⁸ Only one person actively involved or associated with the rebellion appeared to be an outsider: "Mother" Ella Reeve Bloor, reportedly from Sioux City and formerly from North Dakota. Ironically, Bloor's position as a prominent figure in the Communist party escaped the attention of local newspapers.⁹

THE FARM REVOLT in Plymouth County was distinctly a minority movement. On most occasions only 10 to 12 percent of the area farmers could be counted at meetings or at protest activities. Newspapers specifically named only 2 to 3 percent. Rarely does an activist movement attract large numbers of participants, so the mere physical assembly of large groups of from 200 to 1,500 farmers to strike, to protest, and to stop sales, indicates the strength of the Farm Holiday movement in the county. Moreover, the number of Plymouth County participants is significant in comparison to other areas of farmer activism. John Shover found that Plymouth County was unsurpassed in numbers of farmers actively involved in rebellion incidents. Shover has also noted that Plymouth ranked second in frequency of incidents of farmer activism.¹⁰ Even though a minority of the county's farmers participated in the agrarian movement, they did so with notoriety and an effectiveness that place Plymouth County in the center of the 1930s farm rebellion.

8. *LeMars Globe-Post*, August and September 1932 and January, February, April, and May 1933; and *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, August and September 1932, and January and May 1933.

9. *LeMars Globe-Post*, 9 January 1933; John L. Shover, "The Communist Party and the Midwest Farm Crisis of 1933," *Journal of American History* 51 (September 1964), 255; Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 107-109. Bloor, along with Harold Ware and Lement Harris, provided the nucleus of a Communist effort to lead the farm revolt.

10. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 3-46.

Farmer Rebels

The 1934 *Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory* provides a reasonably accurate geographic distribution of farmer activists. Of the fifty-six Plymouth County names in press reports during the rebellion, fifty-two can be located. The majority of rebellious farmers lived in the southeastern section of the county, thirty-two in the six southeastern townships of the county, with Stanton and Henry townships accounting for eighteen. Of the thirty-eight farmers *arrested* in Plymouth County, thirty-five can be located in the 1934 *Atlas*. Seventeen arrested farmers resided in the southeastern townships of the county, eleven in Stanton and Henry townships. Such heavy concentration in one area suggests special circumstances in that portion of the county.¹¹

Twelve convictions resulted from the investigation and trials of those involved in Bradley's assault. Three protesters were given minor contempt citations and nine were convicted on various assault charges. Once again this extremely activist element resided in the southeastern section of the county. Five of the convicted men lived in Stanton, Lincoln, or Union townships.

Perhaps the key to the Plymouth County rebellion, centered as it was in the southeastern portion of the county, can be found in the landholding status of participating farmers. Shover found, through thirty-five personal interviews, that survivors of the farm uprising were almost unanimous in their belief that the movement was one of property holders.¹² Plymouth County land-ownership records, however, call for some revision of Shover's interpretation. The majority of the farmers involved in the movement were not owners. Only thirteen of these fifty-six farmers owned land in 1933, among them the official leaders of the local Holiday association. C. J. Schultz, president of the Plymouth County Farmers' Association, held the largest amount of land, claiming 266 acres. The thirteen property-

11. *LeMars Globe-Post*, August and September 1932, January and May 1933, 13, 20 July 1933; and 1934 *Plymouth County Atlas and Farm Directory* (Sioux City, 1934), 1-25. The *Atlas and Farm Directory* provides data for the year 1933. *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, 12 May, 1 June 1933; and *Sioux City Journal*, 1, 3, 11 May 1933.

12. Shover, "Communist Party and Farm Crisis," 248-249. Shover traveled the area of the farm rebellion in 1961 and located and interviewed survivors.

holding farm activists averaged 230 acres at a time when a typical farm in the county was only 190 acres. Nine of the thirteen property holders resided in the southeastern townships of the county; seven maintained their land in Stanton and Henry townships. Shover's contention of a property-holder's rebellion does not fit the evidence from Plymouth County. The small element of property-owning farmers may have provided important leadership in the local revolt, however.¹³

Of the forty-three non-property holders involved in some way in the rebellion, thirty-nine can be located in the 1934 *Atlas*. These farmers again concentrated in the southeastern part of the county. Non-propertied farmers were certainly affected by the depression but were not threatened with loss of land. Sixteen of the non-propertied class farmed with or for their parents. These farmers normally could have expected to inherit their parents' property at some future date. In Plymouth County in the 1930s, this situation presented special circumstances that contributed to some of the most serious violence of the agrarian rebellion.¹⁴

Two previous studies of the farm revolt concluded that the average age of participating farmers exceeded forty. Frank Dileva found that the farmers in many scattered incidents of the Iowa rebellion averaged 42.5 years of age. Shover determined, through a questionnaire distributed in the early 1960s to former Holiday participants, that their average age during the rebellion was 43.5 years.¹⁵ But a somewhat younger average age emerges from the list of fifty-six Plymouth County activists. Newspapers reported ages for sixteen of the identified men and the average of these ages was 34. With the ages of less than one-third of the actively involved farmers available, conclusions must obviously be tentative. Nevertheless, the fact that the average age for Plymouth County farmers seemingly

13. *Atlas and Farm Directory*, 1-25; Iowa State Department of Agriculture, *Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1933, 222.

14. *Ibid.*; *LeMars Globe-Post*, August and September 1932, and January, February, April, and May 1933; *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, August and September 1932 and January and May 1933.

15. Dileva, "Farm Revolts In Iowa," 108; Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 17. Thirty-four former Holiday members responded to Shover's questionnaire.

differs by as much as eight to nine years from earlier studies may be meaningful. With parents twenty-five to thirty years older, farmers in line for parental land may have inherited the land or assumed general management of a farm by age forty-two or forty-three. A farmer at age thirty-four, working with his parents on a farm, however, was liable to find his parents still actively involved in the operation. Thus, the relatively young rebellious farmers in Plymouth County found themselves propertyless and threatened, not by the loss of their own land, but by the loss of a family farm which might someday be theirs. For more than one-fourth of the identified farmer activists in Plymouth County, this potential loss posed real danger.¹⁶

Farmers endangered by potential loss of family land in a small section of the county established an interesting combination of circumstances. In a restricted area of the county, important elements of the farm rebellion merged. Influential propertied farmers such as C. J. Schultz possessed leadership talents. In the same area, an element of relatively young, unpropertied farmers, who stood to inherit family farms, were concentrated. Set against these human features, the southeastern part of the county experienced the most severe impact from the depressed agricultural conditions of 1930 to 1933. In this environment, propertied leaders, would-be land holders, and unpropertied farmers, all threatened with the loss of their livelihood, combined to mold the 1932-33 agricultural rebellion in Plymouth County.

THE INDIVIDUAL BIOGRAPHY of one Plymouth county farmer may be illustrative of the nature of those who rose in rebellion. Morris Cope was a successful, thirty-five-year-old farmer, seriously threatened by the depression. He was a member of the Farmers' Holiday Association, but he operated independently and left an indelible mark on the rebellion. Throughout the unrest, Cope appeared at significant events although he held no official position among the farmers. He apparently was the

16. *LeMars Globe-Post*, August and September 1932, and January, February, April, and May 1933; and *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, August and September 1932, and January and May 1933; *Atlas and Farm Directory*, 1-25.

chief organizer in an attempt to blockade Plymouth County roads during the 1932 strike. Later, at a crossroads meeting on August 30, 1932, Cope and others were shot at for their organizing efforts. In January 1933, during the anti-foreclosure movement, Cope agitated for a march on the state capitol. On April 27, 1933, prior to the assault on Judge Bradley, Cope led a group of Plymouth County farmers to nearby Primghar, Iowa, and attempted to stop a foreclosure sale. In a fight with local sheriff's deputies at that location Cope suffered head injuries which later required medical attention. On the same day, he also reportedly led the attack on Judge Bradley in LeMars. After the assault on the judge, he avoided arrest for over two months. A local doctor later revealed that he had treated Cope's head injury, after which Cope fled to South Dakota with another suspect. He eventually surrendered and was convicted on assault charges based on testimony that he had indeed led the attack on Bradley. His sentence of one year in the state penitentiary, paroled to the county jail, was the harshest sentence awarded for illegal protest actions in Plymouth County.¹⁷

Cope had been successful as a farmer. He lived and farmed in Union Township in southeastern Plymouth County, near the town of Kingsley. He owned only eighty acres of land but farmed across the road from his father and younger brother. Cope was primarily a hog producer and apparently an ingenious operator: he invented a hog house door which received a patent in July 1933. Following the Bradley assault, a reporter from the *Omaha World-Herald* visited Cope's father. The reporter found that Jacob Cope had farmed in the same

17. *Sioux City Journal*, 31 August 1932, 4, 11 May 1933; *LeMars Globe-Post*, 2 January 1933, 20 July 1933; *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, 9 June 1933, 21 July 1933. A search of Plymouth County Sheriff's Department records revealed two pieces of information of interest in the Cope case. First, on June 12, 1934, Sheriff Ralph Rippey requested a reduction to time served in Cope's sentence which was to run until August 1934. Second, a letter written on May 8, 1933, from C. W. McNaughton, state agent in charge of Plymouth County investigations, to Park A. Findley, head of the Iowa Bureau of Criminal Investigations, suggests a protective attitude about local tenant farmers, and some informal leadership on Cope's behalf. Cope wrote a letter threatening a Colorado tenant planning to move to Plymouth County. In later trial testimony, five witnesses acknowledged that the letter, signed by the Farmers' Holiday Association, was the work of Cope. Plymouth County Sheriff Department Criminal Files, File Number 105 and 106, LeMars, Iowa.

location for twenty-five years as one of northwest Iowa's most prosperous farmers. The Cope farmstead featured a large eighteen-room house. Until just prior to the local uprising, Jacob Cope had held 550 acres of excellent farm land. On January 9, 1932, however, he had 510 acres of mortgaged land foreclosed. By the planting season of 1932, he owned only forty acres of farmland because he could not meet mortgage and tax payments. Moreover, Cope was embittered because he had acquired his land immediately after World War I and felt the debts he had incurred were honest debts. By 1933, those debts had rendered him a poor and downcast man. The father hoped to leave his 550 acres unencumbered to his sons, but by 1932 and 1933 there was little left for inheritance. The father had seen much of a life's work lost in a few months; the son had seen his hopes for the future wiped out by depression conditions.¹⁸

With this background, Morris Cope embarked on desperate actions in 1933. Wallace Short, a one-time mayor of Sioux City, a former Iowa legislator, a minister, and publisher of the local labor newspaper, the *Unionist and Public Forum*, sympathized and worked with the farm activists. Commenting on the agricultural rebellion and hard times, Short argued that "at such times men turn their backs on the question of what is legal, and act with energy and conviction on their sense of what is right."¹⁹ Certainly Morris Cope was one of the most energetic of the rural insurgents of the 1930s. His case was, if not representative, surely indicative of the desperation of activist farmer rebels in Plymouth County.

18. *Atlas and Farm Directory*, 18-19; *LeMars Semi-Weekly Sentinel*, 4 July 1933; *Omaha World-Herald*, 1 May 1933, 2; "Plymouth County Transfer of Lands," Book Number 5, Court House, LeMars, Iowa, 6; James R. Parker, "The Farm Holiday Movement In Northwest Iowa," unpublished manuscript, Iowa State Historical Department, Des Moines, 38.

19. Mrs. Wallace Short, *Just One American* (Sioux City, 1943), 153.

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