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Article Summary: The Farm Holiday movement arose in response to the price and mortgage emergency in the farm states in the 1930s. Farmers blockaded highways leading to markets and tried to halt foreclosure sales, demanding cost of production guarantees. New Deal promises of economic improvement brought an end to the movement.

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Photographs / Images: Farm Holiday Association march on the state capitol, February 16, 1933; Fred Kriege; pickets on highway to Omaha, September 1, 1932; deputies armed with night sticks lining highway, September 1, 1932; National Farm Holiday meeting, Des Moines, September 22, 1933: JF Kriege, South Sioux City; EM Samson, Valley; HC Parmenter, Yutan (Nebraska president); Frank J Klopping, Wayne; WF Gesch, Pender; Sherman Sandquist, Pender (World Herald photo)

THE FARM HOLIDAY MOVEMENT IN NEBRASKA

BY JOHN L. SHOVER

IN THE late summer of 1932 while a defeated bonus army retreated from the nation's capital and a depression-plagued administration contended for its political existence, a rebellious spirit stirred in the Missouri Valley of Nebraska and Iowa. To the old rhetoric of Populism was added a militant direct action reminiscent of long dead Daniel Shays. Farmers threw picket lines across highways to blockade markets or forcibly intervened to prevent foreclosure of farm mortgages. With corn marketing at ten cents a bushel and hogs at three dollars a hundred-weight, their purchasing power barely a third that of 1914, the farmers demanded a price equal to "cost of production plus a reasonable profit." They endeavored to halt all foreclosure sales at a time when fifty-seven percent of Nebraska farms were mortgaged, and the number of fore-

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closures and bankruptcies per one thousand farms was rising from twenty-two in 1931 to fifty-eight in 1933.¹

The Farm Holiday movement was a grass-roots uprising in time of frustration and rapid social change. The price and mortgage emergency underscored the fact that the midwestern farmer was losing his traditional independence and was ensnared in economic forces he could not control. As such accepted values of free enterprise economics as a just reward for labor and the automatic working of a benevolent economic system were shattered by desperate depression conditions some few farmers momentarily embraced extremist remedies, but the rank and file of participants in the Farm Holiday were concerned only with immediate goals such as raising prices in thirty days or stopping a forced sale today. The Farmers' Holiday was a spontaneous movement lacking effective organized leadership. Once the crop reduction program of the Agricultural Adjustment Act presented a viable alternative to radical action, even though that alternative was anathema to the leaders and accepted with misgivings by most farmers, neither the persuasion of the leaders nor the ideology they professed could rouse the intensity of the earlier movement.

A parallel exists between the Farm Holiday of the thirties and the Populist movement of the nineties. The economic emergencies that prompted the two movements were similar. In ideology, both portrayed the farmer as humble and down-trodden, oppressed by conspiring external forces symbolized by the satanic middleman or the Wall Street financier. Both embraced remedies which ostensibly would free the farmer from these external bonds and restore his traditional economic sovereignty, and both floundered when returning prosperity undercut their grass-roots support.

¹ Addison E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1936), 293-294; United States Department of Agriculture, Bulletin #354, "The Farm Real Estate Situation" (Washington, April, 1935), 31.

The farm strike, the initial phase of the Farm Holiday, began in Iowa and its center of activity was in the western counties of that state. However, it crossed the boundaries to affect Nebraska farmers whose circumstances were similar to their Iowa neighbors and who shipped products to the same markets. In Nebraska the Farm Holiday was for the most part concentrated in Douglas, Washington, Dakota, Thurston, and Dixon counties, all in the northeast corner of the state. It was basically a movement of corn-hog and cattle raising farmers; incidence of rebellious activity drops in counties with a cash-grain economy, and there is only negligible activity in wheat areas of Nebraska or adjoining states. In the Missouri River Valley counties of Iowa and Nebraska farm incomes were among the highest in the nation; family farming was the traditional pattern; plumbing, radios and automobiles were more common than in other farm regions. The Iowa counties where the farm strike centered had the highest gross income per acre in the state. The average land value per acre in the Nebraska counties with principal farm holiday activity was \$126.25 per acre, compared with the state average of \$50.58. Hogs, the principal product of the area, were considered a relatively stable commodity price-wise, yet the purchasing power of hogs (computed on the 1910-1914 index) had been 102.6 in 1926, it was 62.1 in 1931, and hit a low of 41.4 in 1932. Never in the history of American agriculture had hog prices declined so precipitately. In short, these were farmers who had a high level of expectation; in an unprecedented time of crisis they rebelled quickly.²

When the farmer surmised that his economic predicament was the result of impersonal market forces beyond

² Charles P. Loomis and J. Allen Beegle, *Rural Social Systems* (New York, 1950), 165-267; Lauren P. Soth, *Agricultural Economic Facts Basebook of Iowa* (Ames, 1936), 120; United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1932 (Washington, 1933), 784; William Allen White, "Farmer Takes His Holiday," *Saturday Evening Post*, CCV (November 26, 1932), 6-7; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *United States Census of Agriculture, 1925, The Northern States*, I (Washington, 1927), 1134-1147.

his control, he was in part correct, but the crisis of the thirties was also partly the result of the farmer's own land speculation a decade earlier. In the halcyon days of the World War the American farmer supplied a world market and prices climbed accordingly. Encouraged by abundant demand and high prices, land, equipment, and buildings were mortgaged to buy more and more farmland. The Iowa counties where the Farm Holiday had its strongest support were centers of a feverish land boom in the early twenties. At LeMars, Plymouth County land had been auctioned from the courthouse steps and banks had loaned as much as one thousand dollars on unsecured notes. Here in 1933, at the height of the anti-foreclosure fury, a judge pressing foreclosure actions narrowly escaped lynching.

As farm prices crept downward through the twenties unpaid debts increasingly troubled these farmers. The economic collapse in 1929 subjected banks and lending institutions to irresistible pressures and foreclosures multiplied. There were fewer forced sales in Nebraska than in adjacent states, but even so the number per 1000 farms increased from 21.8 in 1931 to 34.4 in 1932 and 58.2 in 1933.³

The idea of a farmers' marketing holiday was borrowed both from organized labor and from the bank holidays frequent in the midwest after 1929. The Farmers' Holiday Association itself was created at Des Moines in May, 1932, when an assembly of thirteen hundred, drawn largely from the Farmers' Union, pledged to initiate on July 4 a strike to terminate only when prices reached ninety-two cents per bushel of corn and \$11.25 per hundred weight for hogs.⁴

Milo Reno, chosen to head the association, was a long-time evangelist of farmer causes. He had served for nine years as president of the Iowa Farmers' Union and in 1932

³ United States Department of Agriculture, Bulletin #354, *loc. cit.*, 31; *New York Times*, November 16, 1933.

⁴ Howard W. Lawrence, "The Farmers Holiday Association in Iowa, 1932-1933." Unpublished thesis, M.A., The University of Iowa, 1952, 24-26.

headed the Union's life insurance company. Along with his executive duties, he often preached in rural pulpits and fiddled for country barn dances. He had supported the McNary-Haugen plan, but in the twenties he had several times suggested that if farm prices failed to improve, produce should be withheld from market until a fair return was obtained.⁵

A farmers' strike was declared in Polk County (Des Moines) on August 8, but the focal point quickly shifted to Sioux City where pickets appeared on the highways north of town three days later. The Holiday merged with a local battle of milk producers demanding a price higher than the present two cents a quart. By August 15, fifteen hundred pickets had virtually sealed the northern route to the Sioux City market. Maintaining a road blockade at the Woodbury-Plymouth County line, pickets leaped on running boards as farm trucks crept up hill in low gear or threw logs and threshing machine belts in the path of approaching vehicles. Save for occasional fisticuffs and a few broken windshields, there was little violence; most truckers simply turned back. One hundred special deputies were recruited to keep open the roads, but the Woodbury County sheriff did not prevent the stopping of vehicles or the using of persuasive techniques. On Thursday, August 18, hog receipts at Sioux City were half those of the preceding Thursday.⁶

As the selling holiday fanned out from Sioux City, the bridge linking Woodbury County with Dakota County, Nebraska, constituted the major gap in an increasingly solid barricade. To close the breach a Holiday Association was formed in Nebraska August 18. Vowing that "no farm produce of any nature whatsoever" would pass their lines, five hundred farmers marched from the courthouse at

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁶ Frank D. Dileva, "Iowa Farm Price Revolt," *Annals of Iowa*, XXXII (January, 1954), 175-176; *Sioux City Journal*, August 19, 1932.

Dakota City to take position on highways 20 and 77 leading toward Sioux City.⁷

The moving spirit in the Nebraska movement was J. Fred Kriege of South Sioux City who claimed that he "personally and alone, started the Farmers' Holiday movement actively in Nebraska."⁸ A graduate of University of North Dakota law school he had turned to farming for the love of it after practicing one year in Sioux City. His farm, located in Dakota County overlooking the Missouri River, carried a twelve thousand dollar mortgage. In August, 1932, Kriege told Bruce Catton, an N.E.A. staff writer: "You can go in debt \$2000 in one year to pay for the privilege of farming these days—and you work your head off besides."⁹ Kriege was a perennial crusader. He was active in Democratic party politics; he had led a campaign to reduce bridge tolls; and he had presented to Governor Bryan a plan to monetize farm commodities. Like Reno, he had lost faith in all established political methods, and sounding a note of desperation, he said to the gathering at Dakota City: "It is up to the farmers themselves . . . to go thru with this program, nobody else will help us. The zero hour has arrived lets get into action [*sic*]." He held sanguine hopes for the success of the Holiday and believed that farmers to achieve their ends would guard the roads all winter.¹⁰

Despite the optimism of Kriege or Reno there was little chance that the farm strike could long continue or materially affect farm prices. Two major handicaps militated against its success. First, there was a lack of discipline and second, the economic program of the Holiday was unsound.

⁷ *Des Moines Register*, August 18, 1932; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 18, 1932.

⁸ J. Fred Kriege to Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt, November 14, 1932, Kriege papers, private collection held by Kriege family, Hayward, California.

⁹ J. Fred Kriege to Hon. A. S. Goss, December 19, 1933, Kriege papers; *Indianapolis (Indiana) Times*, August 31, 1932.

¹⁰ MSS Speech to Farmers' Holiday Association of Dakota County, August 18, 1932 (?), Kriege papers.

The first problem was the lack of discipline and control. Although the leaders emphatically counselled against violence, there was no authority to govern thousands of pickets scattered over highways for over a hundred miles. When an agreement was reached in the Sioux City milk dispute some pickets still refused to allow dairy trucks to pass. Around Council Bluffs, where Pottowattomie and Harrison county farmers blockaded Omaha from the Iowa side of the river, county officials, less compliant than those in Woodbury County, informed Clinton Savery, organizer of the blockade, that he would be personally responsible for any violence or property damage. When Savery attempted to dissuade the pickets he was taunted with shouts of "sell-out!" "I have washed my hands of the entire mess. The strikers are beyond my control," he protested. On August 24 deputies in an automobile with tear gas cans mounted on the running boards ran a gauntlet of farmers armed with clubs and rocks. When forty-three were arrested, a sullen mob of five hundred, undaunted by machine guns in the hands of amateur deputies, swarmed over the courthouse lawn at Council Bluffs and threatened to storm the jail if the prisoners were not released by dusk. An eleventh hour parley and arranging of bail averted imminent bloodshed and tragedy.¹¹

With the disorder at Council Bluffs, Nebraska authorities grew fearful of an expanding blockade around Omaha. Outside the city about a thousand men—tenants, farm boys and city unemployed lacking shelter, food or money—set up an impromptu camp. Not only were they without leaders but one informed a reporter they were there because they had "too much leadership already." As at Sioux City, the farm produce blockade coalesced with an attempt of milk producers to gain recognition from the city's dairies for a producers cooperative marketing association and win higher prices for raw milk. Although the milk producers claimed to operate independently of the Farm Holiday,

¹¹ *Sioux City Journal*, August 23, August 26, 1932; *Des Moines Register*, August 20, August 25, 1932; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 25, 1932.

pickets halted dairy trucks and dumped milk at the city's outskirts. Governor Charles Bryan on August 24 commissioned additional deputies in all counties north of Omaha and insisting that "the whole thing has been stirred up by agitators from Iowa" ordered that all pickets from Iowa should be arrested for inciting to riot. On the nights of August 30, August 31 and September 1 there were pitched battles of deputies and pickets at the Omaha city limits. On September 1 a thousand spectators watched as forty deputies were pelted by logs and rocks while they conducted farm trucks through a line of one hundred fifty pickets on Dodge Street.¹²

In the last days of August, strikers and deputies clashed in Woodbury County, Iowa; fourteen pickets at Cherokee were injured by a shotgun blast; at Clinton, across the state, farmers again threatened to storm the county jail. As peaceful picketing rapidly turned to riot, an unsympathetic *New York Times* correspondent in Omaha asserted, "[the] national leadership blew up, frightened at the appearance of the ugly monster into which its innocent child had so unexpectedly grown."¹³

The second problem was the unsound economic foundation of the farm strike idea. There was no conceivable possibility that blockading a single market could reduce the over-all supply of agricultural produce sufficiently to increase the farmers' price. When receipts of grain and livestock dwindled to zero at the Sioux City market, there was an increase at neighboring markets. Indeed, prices for farm products dropped to a year's low while the farm strike was in progress. Even had the farm strike been temporarily successful, the withheld produce released like an opened flood-gate on the market at its conclusion, would have broken the bottom out of the farm price structure.

From a practical standpoint, a farmer could not long participate in an embargo that deprived him of all income.

¹² *Omaha World-Herald*, August 24, August 30, August 31, September 1, 1932; *New York Times*, August 24, 1932.

¹³ September 4, 1932.

There was livestock to be fed; there were families to be maintained. To keep marketable hogs and cattle on the farm meant added costs. Eventually the farmer had to sell at any price. Pressure of this sort led Farm Holiday leaders to announce on August 30 that the barricades would be relaxed sufficiently to allow hard-pressed farmers to market products. It was clear that an embargo of long duration could not be maintained.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the farm strike served one important purpose—it gave unrivaled publicity to the plight of the depression-plagued farmer. Governors and legislators of the farm states, quite aware on which side their political bread was buttered, could not fail to heed. Governor Warren Green of South Dakota supported the farmers' plea for cost of production and hinted that he might invoke legal sanction for an orderly farm embargo. The Farmer-Labor governor of Minnesota, Floyd B. Olson, would have gone so far as to proclaim martial law to support the strikers. On the other hand, while Governor Dan Turner of Iowa ventured no active support, neither did he attempt to deter the strikers. He spurned requests that the national guard be dispatched to the troubled areas. At Green's suggestion the governors agreed to meet in Sioux City on September 9 to hear appeals of the Holiday leaders and perhaps agree on a program of common action. As a corollary, the summoning of the conference provided the leaders of the farm strike a rationale for the abandonment of a movement that was already crumbling.¹⁵

The most outspoken dissident among farm belt governors was Charles W. Bryan of Nebraska. Despite his long associations with farmer causes, the brother of the "Great Commoner" could see nothing but "hard feelings and some bloodshed" resulting from the Farm Holiday. Governor Bryan insisted that the farm problem was national in scope and could not be assuaged by local picketing and farmers' strikes. The real enemy, he argued, was "the powers in

¹⁴ *Sioux City Journal*, August 31, 1932.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, August 28, September 1, 1932.

Washington" and the remedy was "the repeal of legislation which caused this condition and not temporizing with the effects." "For one set of farmers to attack and assault another class of farmers on the public highway can only cause loss to all concerned and can only lead to anarchy and rebellion," he stated on September 1. As for the governors' conference, he declared that "the people of this nation have suffered more as a result of surveys and conferences than any other alibis they have been afflicted with." He did not attend the Sioux City meeting.¹⁶

Milo Reno, Fred Kriege, and other Holiday spokesmen proposed to the four governors and five representatives attending the conference¹⁷ a four point program: (1) State mortgage moratoriums putting a temporary stop to all foreclosure proceedings. (2) A special session of Congress to enact the Frazier Bill (providing for federal refinancing of farm mortgages through issuing of fiat money). (3) Voluntary action by farmers to withhold goods from market. (4) Most important and most controversial, a demand for state enforced embargoes against the sale of farm products at less than cost of production. The governors expressed little sympathy for the far-reaching requests of the Holiday leaders. There was no legal precedent to allow a state to ban completely a creditor's proceedings against his debtor. The embargo proposal would have compelled by force of law all farmers, regardless of their sympathy for the withholding movement, to keep produce at home. "When you insist on an embargo on farm products and picketing of roads, you ask the impossible," Governor Turner declared.¹⁸

The upshot of the governors' conference, therefore, was a series of tame recommendations to President Hoover including such time worn panaceas as tariff protection for

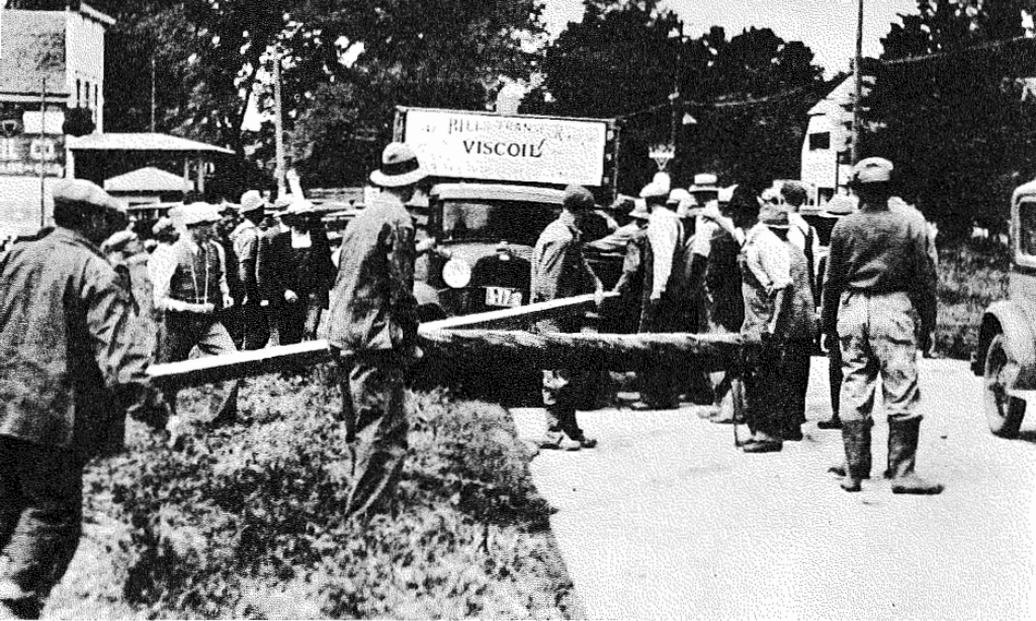
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, August 28, September 2, 1932. The legislation to which Governor Bryan referred was the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929.

¹⁷ Present at the conference were Governors Turner of Iowa, Green of South Dakota, Olson of Minnesota and Shafer of North Dakota. Also in attendance were representatives of the governors of Nebraska, Ohio, Wisconsin, Wyoming and Oklahoma.

¹⁸ *Sioux City Journal*, September 10, September 11, 1932.



Fred Kriege

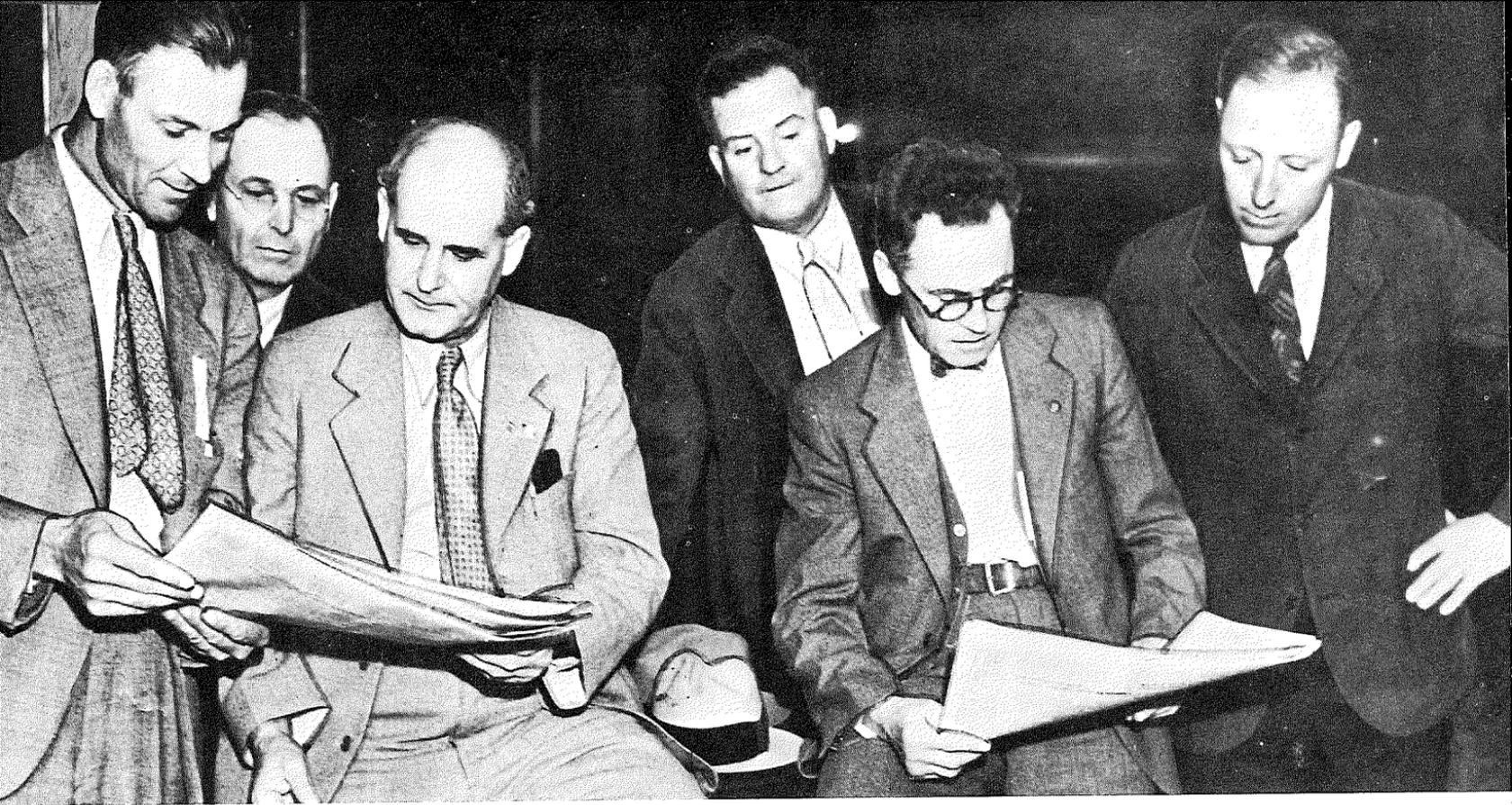


Above—Pickets on Highway to Omaha, September 1, 1932

Below—Deputies Armed with Night Sticks Line Highway,
September 1, 1932

(Photos Courtesy Omaha World Herald)





At National Farm Holiday Meeting, Des Moines, September 22, 1933. From Left: J. F. Kriege, South Sioux City; E. M. Samson, Valley; H. C. Parmenter, Yutan (Nebraska President); Frank J. Klopping, Wayne; W. F. Gesch, Pender; Sherman Sandquist, Pender.

farmers, currency expansion, and a request that federal and private agencies desist from foreclosures. Although there was little in the governors' memorial which bore resemblance to Farm Holiday Association demands, Reno stated that he was "on the whole" satisfied with the conference, but was disappointed by the lack of an embargo. This satisfaction was not shared by all Holiday members. A week later a convention of the Nebraska Farm Holiday Association resolved: ". . . we consider the governors' conference at Sioux City a dismal failure, and we call upon the farmers, farm workers, and those dependent on Nebraska farming to join in the struggle for immediate action."¹⁹

The days following the governors' conference were a time of confusion and ambiguity for the Farm Holiday movement. Some pickets, defying the truce order, remained on the highways. At South Sioux City they refused to abandon their posts and informed Kriege that victory for the strike was near. These strikers incited the ire of law enforcement officials. One hundred of them brawled with deputies north of Sioux City on September 8 and again on September 15. Meanwhile, the leaders hastily evolved a plan less dangerous than blockading highways to maintain the momentum of the movement. An embargo "beginning at the farm gate" was to be inaugurated September 20—no grain or livestock would be marketed for thirty days. The agitation, however, had passed high tide. There were crops to be harvested. Cold weather drove wildcat pickets from the roads. By November all was quiet on Iowa and Nebraska highways.²⁰

At the height of the farm strike in Nebraska, two major markets, Sioux City and Omaha, had been subjected to blockade. Farm holiday activity had been reported in eleven northeastern counties: Douglas, Washington, Dakota, Thurston, Dixon, Cass, Cedar, Colfax, Sarpy, Saun-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, September 16, September 24, 1932.

²⁰ Dileva, *loc. cit.*, 199-200; *Sioux City Journal*, September 3, 1932.

ders and Wayne. In addition meetings had been held in Cumings, Dodge, Madison, Pierce, and Burt counties.²¹ This grass-roots protest, the most forceful demonstration of agrarian discontent in the twentieth century, had for a brief moment focused national attention upon the desperate condition of the midwestern farmer, but it had not contributed to an amelioration of that condition. The withholding action had not reduced the number of hogs marketed at Iowa stockyards and a declining price trend beginning in July, 1932 was not offset.²²

In an attempt to capture this vagrant impulse of farm protest for more clearly defined purposes, sixteen hundred Nebraska farmers convened at Fremont on September 16 to formally organize a state Holiday Association. The platform adopted there summarizes the major demands of the movement:

We demand cost of production for farm products, plus an amount which will insure us a decent standard of living.

We demand a moratorium on mortgages and interest for poor farmers until the prices they receive are adequate to insure them their share of the good things of life.

We demand the cancellation of feed and seed loans made by the government.

We demand that the heavily mortgaged land of the poor farmers be exempt from taxes, this exemption to take effect before December 1.

We demand a moratorium on rents until prices of farm products equal the cost of production plus an amount for decent living.

We demand there be no eviction.

We demand increased prices to farmers come not from higher prices to city consumers but from profits of the middleman and the money interests.

We support a call for a national emergency farm relief conference at Washington when Congress convenes December 1.

²¹ *Sioux City Journal*, August 25, 1932; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 15-September 8, 1932, *passim*.

²² The number of hogs marketed in Iowa was 750,525 in July, 1932; 804,335 in August, 787,352 in September, 806,035 in October. Computed on the 1910-1914 base the index numbers for Iowa hog prices were July, 58; August, 53; September, 49; October, 41; November, 38; December, 33. *Soth, Agricultural Economics Facts Basebook of Iowa*, 16.

Harry C. Parmenter of Yutan, vice-president of the Nebraska Farmers' Union, was elected president, A. O. Rosenberg of Newman Grove, vice-president; F. C. Crocker of Lincoln, secretary, and J. Fred Kriege, who had organized the first blockade at Dakota City, was named one of the state's representatives to the national board of directors.²³

Despite the failure of the marketing strike, there remained one area where direct action by the newly formed organization could achieve concrete results—preventing the sale of foreclosed farm property. Masses of milling farmers or a noose dangling threateningly from the haymow silenced prospective bidders when mortgaged property was sold at auction.

Nebraska was a principal center of activity in this "penny auction" movement which began late in August, 1932 when three hundred farmers, called together by Andrew Dahlsten, former chairman of the Non-Partisan League of Nebraska, and Harry Lux, of Lincoln, met in Madison County. Learning of a scheduled foreclosure sale at Elgin, Antelope County, a committee was chosen to contact the owner who was a young widow and the auctioneer. The latter agreed to accept a single bid. On October 6 farmers from forty counties were present at the sale. All offered items: chickens, cattle or horses sold for five cents each and there were no opposing bids. The total proceeds of the sale were \$5.35; the mortgagor, the receiver for the Elgin State Bank, reluctantly accepted the settlement. A few days later at Petersburg fifteen hundred farmers limited a chattel foreclosure sale to \$7.10. At Newman Grove, seventy-five men, identifying themselves as the "red army" of the Nebraska Farm Holiday Association dragged from a garage two trucks a sales company had reclaimed from a delinquent farmer and returned them to the purchaser.²⁴

²³ *Sioux City Journal*, September 16, 1932.

²⁴ Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska*, 294-295; Leif Dahl, "Nebraska Farmers in Action," *New Republic*, LXXIII (January 18, 1933), 165-166; Harry Lux, "The Farm Holiday Story," *U.S. Farm News* (Des Moines, Iowa), XXXVII (May-June, 1959), 2-4.

The agrarian crisis of the thirties was so acute and the foreclosure resistance was so little guided by the state Holiday organization that the situation was ideal for exploitation by opportunistic political groups. Shortly after the Petersburg sale Lux and Dahlsten were approached at the latter's Madison County farm by Robert Hall and Harold Ware of the Communist Party. Out of this meeting emerged a branch of the Farm Holiday association known as the "Madison County Plan" that was closely linked with a determined Communist offensive in American agriculture.

Although Harry Lux twenty-five years later recalled that the Communist contact with the anti-foreclosure resistance came only after the Petersburg sale in October, the resolutions adopted and the officers elected at the convention in Fremont in September indicate that the radical influence that would rend the Nebraska Farm Holiday throughout its entire existence, was already present. The first two planks of the Fremont platform were demands Milo Reno had been making, but the reference to "poor farmers" as a distinct class, the blanket declaration against all evictions, and the final plank endorsing the forthcoming Washington farm relief conference bore the earmarks of the radical group. Parmenter and Crocker, the president and secretary respectively, were strong Reno supporters, but Vice-President Anton Rosenberg was one of the leaders of the Madison County faction.²⁵

The Communist Party had only recently developed an interest in the protests of the property-owning farmers of the midwest. The first reports of the farm strike in the *Daily Worker* were coupled with attacks upon Milo Reno and other Farm Holiday leaders and admonitions to the striking farmers to elect their own governing committees and continue their struggles over the heads of the "mis-leaders."²⁶ When farmers assembled in Sioux City at the

²⁵ Harry Lux, *loc. cit.*; the *Daily Worker* (New York), September 21, 1932 claimed that the radical group completely captured the Fremont convention.

²⁶ *Daily Worker*, September 3, 1932.

time of the governors' conference Mother Ella Reeve Bloor, a veteran party agitator, presided at a small gathering which issued a call for a National Farm Emergency Relief Conference to meet in Washington on December 1. It was toward this forthcoming conference that the Communists directed their principal efforts among farmers in the autumn of 1932.²⁷

The two hundred-fifty delegates at the Washington conference adopted a series of militant demands which included outright cash relief to poor farmers, direct government sale of farm products to consumers, a demand for easier farm credit, and a complete moratorium on taxes, rents and mortgage payments for all farmers. Harry Lux and Jess Green of Nebraska played a prominent part in the proceedings and Rosenberg was elected president of the Farmers' National Committee for Action founded at the convention.²⁸ The *Daily Worker* gave extensive and laudatory coverage to the conference and such Communist stalwarts as Mother Bloor and her son Harold Ware were active participants.

Returning from Washington, the Madison County leaders swung into vigorous action to organize the growing anti-foreclosure sentiment in Nebraska. By January they estimated that two to three farmer "committees of action" were being formed nightly and that six thousand members had been recruited from central and eastern Nebraska.²⁹ All the opposition to foreclosures was not under the domination of this group; for example in Dakota County Fred Kriege was organizer of a county arbitration board which

²⁷ Ella Reeve Bloor, *We Are Many* (New York, 1940), 235-236.

²⁸ *Daily Worker*, February 24, 1933.

²⁹ Dahl, *loc. cit.*; Lement Harris, "The Spirit of Revolt," *Current History*, XXXVIII (July, 1933), 426. The Madison County Plan had a good press. Leif Dahl, organizer of the farmers' march on Lincoln, claimed Madison County as his residence and served later as assistant executive secretary of the Farmers' National Committee for Action. Lement "Lem" Harris was the executive secretary of the F.N.C.A.

acted as an unofficial court of equity in settling rent and mortgage disputes.³⁰

The major energy of the radical group, however, was directed to a dramatic march on the state capital scheduled for February 15. The marchers would demand of the legislature adoption of a stringent antireforeclosure law and the program of the Farmers' National Committee for Action. One particularly belligerent leader estimated that the demonstrators would number two hundred and fifty thousand and if the state legislature failed to take action they would tear down the state capitol. As the plans of the radicals neared fruition, leaders of the National Farm Holiday organization in Nebraska grew fearful of the untoward direction the movement was taking. Early in February, F. C. Crocker, the secretary, wrote Milo Reno: "This will be the battle of my lifetime this week. It is and has been Communism pitted against Reno in Nebraska."³¹ The *Daily Worker* of February 11 declared: "Harry Parmenter, state president of the Association and F. C. Crocker, secretary, have been doing everything within their power (with the aid of the capitalistic newspapers) to break up this march and thus make it possible for the bankers and their politicians to go ahead, unhampered, in making laws that will enable them to have an excuse to continue their campaign of robbing the farmers." Shortly before the day of the demonstration, Crocker circulated a mimeographed flyer to the Holiday membership:

Communism works in mysterious ways. In the Nebraska Farm Holiday Association, COMMUNISTIC agitators advocate no membership dues for State and National Org. work. . . . Communism has built up a prejudice against State and National Holiday Officers Communists have circulated their literature Communists have shown their moving pictures. . . . Their Agents are with us They deny their identity [*sic*] They are now publishing a paper for the Nebraska Farmers Communistic money

³⁰ J. Fred Kriege to Hon. A. S. Goss, December 19, 1933. Kriege papers.

³¹ F. C. Crocker to Milo Reno, February (?), 1933. Milo Reno papers, private collection held by U. S. Farmers Organization, Des Moines, Iowa.

from the Five Year Plan of Russia is being used to Communize the World Is Russian money being used in Nebraska at this time?³²

To checkmate further the extremists' demands, Crocker met on February 14 with Tom Allen, acting as governor in the absence of Charles Bryan, and together they made arrangements to have introduced in the legislature a moratorium law based on that of Iowa.³³

The highly vaunted march of February 15 fell short of the sanguine hopes of the radical leaders. Some three thousand farmers marched in the streets of Lincoln bearing signs "Wives and Children Have the First Mortgage" and listened to speeches by Lux and other leaders from the steps of the capitol building.

Even without the drama of the demonstration at Lincoln the opposition to foreclosures was already having results. On January 30, Governor Bryan appointed a conciliation commission which would attempt to mediate between debtors and lending institutions. Harry Parmenter was one of the original members. The court of the ninth district whose jurisdiction extended over most of northeastern Nebraska announced a mortgage moratorium of indefinite duration.³⁴ Many eastern insurance companies suspended foreclosure actions and on March 2 the Nebraska legislature provided for a two year moratorium on mortgage foreclosures. By April, particularly in eastern Nebraska, farm foreclosures had ceased.³⁵

The militant phase of this successful anti-foreclosure drive was almost entirely the work of the radical group. Most of the "penny auctions" in Nebraska centered in Madison and neighboring counties: Antelope, Platte, Boone, Stanton and Cedar. Harry Lux was the organizer of the

³² Copy in Reno papers.

³³ Crocker to Reno, February 19, 1933. Reno papers.

³⁴ Knox, Antelope, Pierce, Madison, Wayne, Stanton and Cumings counties.

³⁵ Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska*, 195-296; *New York Times*, January 15, 1933; Dahl, "Class War in the Corn Belt," *New Republic*, LXXV (May 17, 1933), 12-13.

protest at a sale in Wilber, Saline County, in which he and seventeen others were arrested. Other sales were halted by farmer action in Washington, Hamilton and Knox counties.

The split between the two factions left a permanent scar on the Nebraska Farm Holiday Association. The national never succeeded in organizing within the state a consolidated movement such as functioned in Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin or the Dakotas. The Madison County unit lingered for several years with meager numbers, sending representatives to the various conferences sponsored by the Farmers' National Committee for Action. In January, 1934, Milo Reno was asked by a reporter to comment on the claim of the Communists that they had organized the Nebraska Farm Holiday Association of 25,000 members. He replied, "Those communists formed a rump association in Madison County, Nebraska, but it didn't amount to a damn. And it didn't have anything to do with us."³⁶

Meanwhile, the advent of a new national administration with a vigorous legislative program that seemed to offer hope to Iowa and Nebraska farmers redirected the attention of the agrarian protestants of the midwest. The two states had reversed their traditional Republican political allegiance to return resounding majorities for Roosevelt. Farm Holiday members had good reason to support the new administration. The agricultural plank of the Democratic Party platform had concluded with the intriguing promise: "Enactment of every constitutional measure that will aid the farmer to receive for basic farm commodities prices in excess of cost." An Iowan, Henry A. Wallace, who had been associated with Milo Reno in support of the McNary-Haugen plan, was named Secretary of Agriculture.³⁷

But the legislative mills grind slowly for the anxious agitator. There was in Washington distressing talk of "domestic allotment," a plan—anathema to cost of produc-

³⁶ *New York Sun*, January 3, 1934, clipping in Reno collection, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City.

³⁷ Roland A. White, *Milo Reno* (Iowa City, 1941), 86.

tion zealots—which would limit the farmer's output in place of guaranteeing his price. The Frazier-Lemke Bill, providing for federal refinancing of farm mortgages at one and one-half percent plus an annual one and one-half percent payment on principal, had long been slumbering in Congressional processes. The earlier farm strike had won the attention of state governments; perhaps a revival of direct action would stimulate a national administration. The fifteen hundred delegates attending the National Farm Holiday convention in March believed so, for they made bold threats of a nationwide strike to begin May 13 if "legislative justice" had not been accorded by that time. In a radical mood that harked back to Populism, they demanded not only the Frazier-Lemke Bill and a federal guarantee of cost of production, but complete state and federal mortgage moratoriums, federal operation of the banking and credit system, currency inflation, and an income tax graduated to confiscate all great wealth accumulations.³⁸ Reno, less impatient than the membership, counseled delay; farm prices were creeping upward; passage of a new federal farm bill was imminent. In March, Congress had created a Farm Credit Administration and granted it power to refinance farm mortgages, float "rescue loans" to underpin second mortgages, and develop techniques to persuade creditors to make reasonable adjustments. On May 12, one day before the scheduled strike, the Agricultural Adjustment Act passed Congress. Reno, in St. Paul, hastily conferred with Governor Floyd B. Olson, the warmest political friend of the Holiday, and persuaded him to make public his conviction that the Roosevelt administration was doing something for the farmer and that the strike should be delayed to await results. Reno conveyed the advice to his followers by radio and the May strike was postponed.³⁹

³⁸ Lawrence, "The Farmers Holiday Association in Iowa," 70-71; *New York Times*, May 4, 1933.

³⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1959), 45; George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (Minneapolis, 1951), 153.

After a short-lived recovery, farm prices sagged, but most important it became clear that the new administration was unsympathetic to cost of production price guarantees. The parity formula pegged farm prices to relative purchasing power during the base years 1910-1914, and in sharp contrast to the panaceas of the Farm Holiday leaders, attacked the farm surplus through curtailing production rather than attempting to provide a market for all the farmer could produce. The irate leaders quickly surmised that their principal enemy within the administration, the chief advocate of domestic allotment, was Secretary of Agriculture Wallace. Studies of the New Deal make clear that Roosevelt and most of his advisors were as devoted as the most avid farm rebel to achieving farm recovery and maintaining in the process the integrity of the small family farm. The Holiday leaders demanded more—any recovery plan should in no way limit the farmer's right to determine what he produced and how much. Government should require that processors pay a price for farm produce that squared with the farmer's own idea of equity.

By autumn, the Holiday leadership was in full-blown rebellion against the New Deal agricultural program and they were vainly attempting to whip up the grass-roots sentiment that had sustained the movement the preceding year. When Secretary Wallace announced on October 8 the details of his corn-hog program,⁴⁰ Milo Reno condemned it as a "brazen attempt to bribe the farmer to surrender the little independence he has left." But Reno's call for a renewed strike brought only seventy-five pickets to their old stations north of Sioux City and only a few northeastern Nebraska farmers responded. Law enforcement officials quickly quashed rash acts of violence.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Farmers who reduced swine production to seventy-five percent of their last two years average would be paid five dollars per hog on the remaining twenty-five percent balance and thirty cents per bushel would be paid on the twenty percent of corn acreage kept out of production.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, October 22, October 29, 1933.

A delegation of midwestern governors, responding to Farm Holiday pressures carried demands for cost of production guarantees directly to Washington. They were sharply rebuffed by the President and the Secretary of Agriculture. Back in the corn-belt, Reno called for a "major offensive" in the farm strike and declared that "the responsibility for whatever happens in the future will rest squarely on the shoulders of the administration and Secretary Wallace in particular."⁴² Reno's pleas that farmers should refuse payment proffered them under the A.A.A. corn loan program⁴³ were ignored or defied. The local paper at LeMars, Iowa, which once had supported the Holiday, expressed what seemed to be the attitude of most Iowa and Nebraska farmers: "We don't care if Milo Reno does say you shouldn't touch any of that money. When you get a chance to get Uncle Sam's check for anywhere from \$300 to \$1000, and even more, there's something wrong with you if you don't take it."⁴⁴ A growing conviction that the administration had concern for the farmers' welfare and the slow improvement in farm prices had driven pickets from the highways—they would never return.

In the weeks and months to come, Milo Reno's disillusion expanded to encompass not only the A.A.A., but the entire New Deal. Henry Wallace he described as "the worst enemy the farmer has ever had in an official position," the A.A.A. was the child of "brain-busters" allied with the United States Chamber of Commerce; the New Deal was an attempt to "Russianize" America.⁴⁵ A supporter of Father Coughlin and the Townsend old age pen-

⁴² Mayer, *Floyd B. Olson*, 153-154; Russell Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa* (Boston, 1947), 360-361; *New York Times*, November 5, November 11, 1933.

⁴³ A farmer was loaned 45c per bushel for corn sealed on his premises. The loan could be repaid at 4% interest, but if the market price at the time of sale was less than 45c the corn could be forfeited. If the market price was higher the farmer could repay the loan, retaining the profit.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *New York Times*, November 17, 1933.

⁴⁵ Dale Kramer, *The Wild Jackasses, The American Farmer in Revolt* (New York, 1956), 244; Milo Reno, speeches of May 13, 1934, December 30, 1934, February 10, 1935, quoted in Roland White, *Milo Reno*, 186, 127, 162; *New York Times*, May 4, 1934.

sion plan, Reno before his death was vainly trying to forge anti New Deal groups into a third party coalition and he looked with favor on Huey Long as a potential standard bearer.⁴⁶

In Nebraska, Fred Kriege's thinking paralleled that of Reno. Like Reno, he had been an ardent Roosevelt supporter in 1932; he outlined to the president-elect on November 14, 1932, a complex and disjointed plan for establishing a new monetary system using stored farm crops as security. Minimum farm prices paid in the new currency would be fixed by law. His proposal was reminiscent of the sub-treasury system of the Farmers' Alliance fifty years before. Although lacking official encouragement, throughout 1933 Kriege bombarded the President with lengthy defenses of his plan. With words suggestive of the Populist crusaders of the nineties he condemned "ruthless, unscrupulous, unchristian middlemen," reproached all bankers as "present day money-lenders . . . desecrating the economic temple," and damned the Hoover administration: "under the Golden Calf banner of this foreign conceived plutocratic vessel, its Unholy Diabolic Crew has laid waste to our bountiful, fair, and once prosperous country. . . ." The only acknowledgments were curt official notes stating that the suggestions had been received. Nonetheless, Kriege became convinced that parts of his plan had been bodily incorporated in the new Commodity Credit Corporation, for which he had been given no recognition. As it became apparent that the New Deal fell short of cost of production guarantees or the total fiscal overhaul he demanded, he became disillusioned. In one of his proposals to the President he had concluded: "The National Administration has made a good start" In his own hand he later appended the words: "for the bankers."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Reno, speech of February 10, 1935, quoted in White, *Milo Reno*, 138; *New York Times*, April 9, 1935.

⁴⁷ J. Fred Kriege to Franklin D. Roosevelt, November 14, 1932; Kriege, unpublished MSS, "An Indictment of the Money Changers and the Middle-west Commodity Orderly Marketing System for Permanent Farm and National Prosperity," August 4, 1933, Kriege papers.

Kriege had remained outside the bitter factional strife in the disjointed Nebraska Holiday movement. Although both he and Milo Reno were voluminous letter-writers they did not correspond. However Kriege was in contact with the national movement through Emil Loriks, the president of the South Dakota Farmers Holiday. He was in no way tempted by the Madison County radicals. Neither was he persuaded in May, 1933 to cast his lot with the Modern 76ers, another extremist group of quite different vintage which sought also to seize upon the same well-spring of discontent. Lester Barlow of Stamford, Connecticut, the founder of this group, was an almost legendary figure who had fought with Pancho Villa, invented a depth bomb used by the navy in the World War and later enjoyed a considerable reputation as a munitions expert. Barlow, a crusader who sought to liberate capitalism from the dictatorship of "high finance", had met Kriege when he campaigned for Roosevelt in Sioux City in 1932.⁴⁸ In a letter of May 1, 1933 Barlow wrote Kriege that after correspondence and conversations with the new President,⁴⁹ he had concluded that Roosevelt was an "irresponsible lightweight, a political adventurer and opportunist." The Modern 76ers were already organizing in northwest Iowa and now Barlow urged Kriege to lend his efforts to a fantastic plan: Unless within a year, the productive citizens would organize themselves into a powerful military structure, the nation would "go down" to rioting and bloodshed. As a military expert, Barlow offered to place himself at the head of a citizen's army with headquarters at Sioux City. Once 25,000 were so organized, Barlow would submit a program to the President: eliminate all millionaires; institute government ownership of all public services including insurance companies; operate all industries through the citizens'

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, May 6, August 13, 1932; August 28, 1940; March 26, 1955. Lester Barlow, *What Would Lincoln Do?* (Stamford, Connecticut), 1931, *passim*.

⁴⁹ Barlow had talked at least once with Roosevelt between election and inauguration day. M. A. LeHand to Lester Barlow, December 2, 1932, Roosevelt collection, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

army until "a new order may be established," reorganize completely the structure of representative government; eliminate the stock market; and arrange for international disarmament. Should the President fail to acquiesce in such a program, which to Barlow's way of thinking he had promised in the 1932 campaign, the citizen's army would carry out his promises for him.⁵⁰

Kriege was not persuaded to carry discontent to the extremes advocated by Barlow, but in a social environment ripe for panaceas, there were other havens for the disappointed. By the end of 1933, Fred Kriege had cast his lot with the opponents of the New Deal; he joined the picket lines in November and a year later resigned from the Democratic party. He was among the host attracted to a compelling Sunday afternoon radio voice from Royal Oak, Michigan, pleading for inflation and scorning the heavy-handed control of international financiers. Kriege complimented Rev. Charles Coughlin for his "flaying of isms and personalities . . . even the President for straying from true democratic principles," and added: "Your views and methods not only clicked with my beliefs but also with my ideas of fighting for convictions." Voicing his disappointment and frustrations he wrote:

The farmers necessary reserve commodity production [Kriege's plan] should be recognized as a blessing of God and as a basis for stabilizing his credits instead of a curse and a destroyer of the credit value of all of his commodity production, as held in the past and still held by the high finance soviet hybrid [*sic*] school of thought—parroted by Henry Wallace, Tugwell and their strip of Real Red Rad-

⁵⁰ Barlow's movement eventually coalesced—and faded—with the Huey Long movement. Lester Barlow to the writer, October 19, 1961. In an interview with the writer on January 4, 1962, Mr. Lester Barlow pointed out that the letter to Fred Kriege of May 1, 1933 was written at a time when he believed there was serious danger of a military dictatorship in the United States. His plan was designed to provide a strong, organized defense against such an eventuality. Any reforms he advocated were to be carried out by ballot, not by force. Mr. Barlow remains basically in sympathy with the program he advocated in 1933, except in place of government ownership of public services he would now favor a cooperative system and rather than eliminate the stock market he would forbid all marginal buying.

icals. The president cannot escape responsibility for their policies, he appointed them and is upholding their actions.⁵¹

Yet Kriege, like Reno, was a prophet without a cause. The vast majority of farmers cooperating in the domestic allotment program and the meager two percent of Nebraska votes returned for William Lemke,⁵² the only candidate in 1936 who in any way approximated Farm Holiday objectives, testified to just how completely the incipient protest had been quelled. The promise of amelioration, by the New Deal, of the economic crisis into which these ordinarily stable farmers had fallen in 1932 had undercut the Farm Holiday movement.

The Farmers' Holiday at its peak in the fall and winter of 1932 was a spontaneous uprising against intangible enemies, an impassioned movement of strongly individualistic men oppressed by circumstances they could not understand or control. Coordinated leadership was absent, and once the underlying grass-roots sentiment was stilled, all the force of the radical, or the demagogue, could not raise it. When farmers blockaded highways or obstructed legal proceedings they were radicals, but radicals in method alone. "Cost of production" or the program of the Farmers' National Committee for Action as principles were unimportant so long as there was money to meet the next mortgage payment. Men who halted trucks or threatened county courthouses were willing, even enthusiastic, to embrace an economic remedy at total variance with that of their leaders.

In its ideology as proclaimed by Reno or Kriege the Farm Holiday was deep-rooted in traditional thinking. In an age of commercial agriculture the leaders of the movement conjured up the Jeffersonian dream of the independent, virtuous yeoman beset by powerful and immoral enemies. Like the great prophets of the nineties their legates in the thirties saw at the center of the farmer's problem a

⁵¹ Kriege to Thomas Ashford, October 7, 1935; Kriege to Rev. Charles E. Coughlin, February 10, 1935, Kriege papers.

⁵² *The World Almanac and Book of Facts for 1958* (New York, 1958), 598.

sinister conspiracy of brokers and middlemen. They too substituted a simple symptomatic remedy for critical analysis of causes. Thus, cost of production was a still-born descendant of free silver. Like the Populists they overlooked the speculative machinations through which in so large a measure the farmer had woven his own fate. They spurned solutions which in any way compromised the traditional individualism and self government of those chosen of God who labored in the earth. And like the Populists they misguaged the sentiment of their followers in failing to perceive that those temporarily fallen from economic grace sought not a panacea to solve all their problems but only an immediate amelioration of their condition.