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Article Summary: Loup City, Nebraska, was a political tempest between the years of 1887 and 1891, with dissension over virtually every issue. The story of Loup City includes grasshoppers, drought, railroads, party-switching, bank failure, graft, arson, and even murder during this turbulent time. The author believes that the conservative versus reform factions in politics played out in many similar farming communities.

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Photographs / Images: Loup City, Nebraska about 1890

COURTHOUSE POLITICS, LOUP CITY, SHERMAN COUNTY, 1887-1891

by Jeremy W. Kilar

When Sherman County was organized in March, 1873, Loup City was a settlement of one store, "housed in a little log hut near Dead Horse Creek," and seven sod houses.¹ The assessor's tax list for 1873 indicated that 174 adults lived in the county. Cattlemen had dreamed of establishing ranches along the Loup River basin that ran on a northwest-southeast diagonal across the county. However, before a grazing economy was firmly established, additional settlers had entered the valley, forcing abandonment of the idea of full-scale ranching. Instead, conventional farming prevailed. Soon scattered wheat and corn fields blanketed the area.

Loup City was named the county seat in the first county referendum, April 4, 1873. Soon afterward a hotel and general store were built. The voters also approved \$5,000 in bonds and erected a courthouse, which unfortunately burned the day it was to be dedicated. Despite inauspicious beginnings, settlement continued, and by 1874 Loup City was a small, growing market town.

Slow, steady growth did not bring concomitant prosperity. In 1876 legal action against the county commissioners by the Burlington and Missouri Railroad had created a county debt of \$36,879. The B and M line, which owned one-third of the land in the county, claimed that the county had been organized illegally and refused to pay taxes. (The Burlington had not yet extended its lines to Loup City.) Further, an illegal tax levy in 1874 was set aside; and in June, 1875, the commissioners decreed that "since people can't pay taxes, the county will delay collection until after harvest."² Inability to pay was in great measure the result of a grasshopper invasion in 1874. The insects remained three days, devoured crops, and impoverished many settlers.

If, by 1876, some of the settlers were beginning to have second thoughts about their selection of homesteads in Sherman County, it took only a few additional months to convince many that the time was ripe for relocation. In the summer of 1876, a clash between the Sioux and Pawnee in northwestern Sherman County panicked some settlers. Moreover, that same summer the grasshoppers returned. They came in such numbers and devoured vegetation so completely that the insects resorted to eating the paint on buildings. Shortly thereafter a party of gold seekers enroute to the Black Hills stopped in Loup City. A number of local citizens "caught the fever" and joined the caravan.³ Mrs. Minnie Wall Johanson recalled that after the Indian scare and the grasshopper siege, Loup City's population shrank to seven families.⁴ There were vacant buildings on all corners, and the Rosseter Hotel stood empty. In the spring of 1878 the general store closed its doors and shuttered its windows. Settlers had to make the long journey to Kearney or Grand Island on the Union Pacific main line for supplies.

Just when it seemed that Loup City was about to expire, several events occurred to transform the struggling town. In the spring of 1878, the Burlington and Missouri Railroad settled its differences with the county and paid delinquent taxes. In March the railroad gave the county \$1,200 to rebuild the courthouse. Also as part of the tax settlement, the B and M agreed to step up its promotion of land sales. This show of public spirit was probably the result of fear that the town's collapse would depress the price of railroad land. Whatever the reason, availability of cheap land stimulated migration from the East. Advertising by the state of Nebraska, Sherman County, and the B and M Railroad brought hundreds of settlers into the county. Soon "every stage from Kearney was loaded with landseekers. The stage ran daily and business was thriving."⁵ Establishments were reopened and new ones built.

In 1879 and again in 1880, the population in Sherman County doubled.⁶ This rapid increase continued into the 1880s as immigrants, attracted by railroad lands, settled in the county. Loup City and the surrounding countryside was settled by four dominant ethnic groups: English, German, Polish, and Swedish. The Germans and the Swedes were primarily old settlers who moved from eastern settlements into central Nebraska. The B and M advertising campaign was aimed

especially at Poles. Old-country newspapers and Polish newspapers in this country boasted of Sherman County.⁷ Hundreds of "Polanders" came to the county via Chicago. English settlers were attracted by activities of the American Colonization Company, which for \$350 offered instruction in ranching and farming to prospective pioneers.⁸

With the large influx of people, all that Loup City lacked to insure growth was a railroad. In 1885 the county voted \$85,000 worth of bonds for the benefit of the Omaha and Republican Valley Railroad.⁹ A few months later an additional \$38,000 in 6 percent bonds was approved to aid construction; and in 1886, despite the already heavy burden of bond issues, Loup City gave \$2,000 as an inducement to the railroad company to build to that city. Finally, on May 31, 1886, the *Sherman County Times* announced that "the first regular railway train swept up to the landing." With the arrival of the Omaha and Republican Valley Railroad, nothing but the "unwisdom" of her citizens could prevent the rapid growth of Loup City.¹⁰

The *Times* warning was too late. "Unwise" citizens had emerged, and the ugly head of intense political factionalism appeared. The heavy financial burden placed on the county in the midst of the fervor to acquire a railroad, as well as the inability of the county commission to settle the substantial debt incurred in the earliest months of the county's existence, insured a difference of opinion which was to color politics in Sherman County for many years. Disagreement over county debts, post office appointments, and additional tax levies, all contributed to creation of two political factions within the dominant Republican Party.¹¹

The original dominant group in Sherman County came to be identified as that faction of the Republican Party called the "Railroad Gang." Obtaining control of local government in 1882, they apparently attempted honestly, if unsuccessfully, to solve the county's financial distress. Their allegiance was to the *Sherman County Times*, edited by O. B. (Skip) Willard, the first National Bank of Loup City, and the B and M Railroad. Initially, the Railroad Gang was elected as a reform element that promised to balance Sherman County's finances. Unsuccessful after several years, this group came under assault from another reform element within the Republican organization. By 1884 and 1885, when the Railroad Gang was first challenged at the

polls, they could be roughly identified as that faction representing the more conservative, urban, and established stock in Loup City and Sherman County.

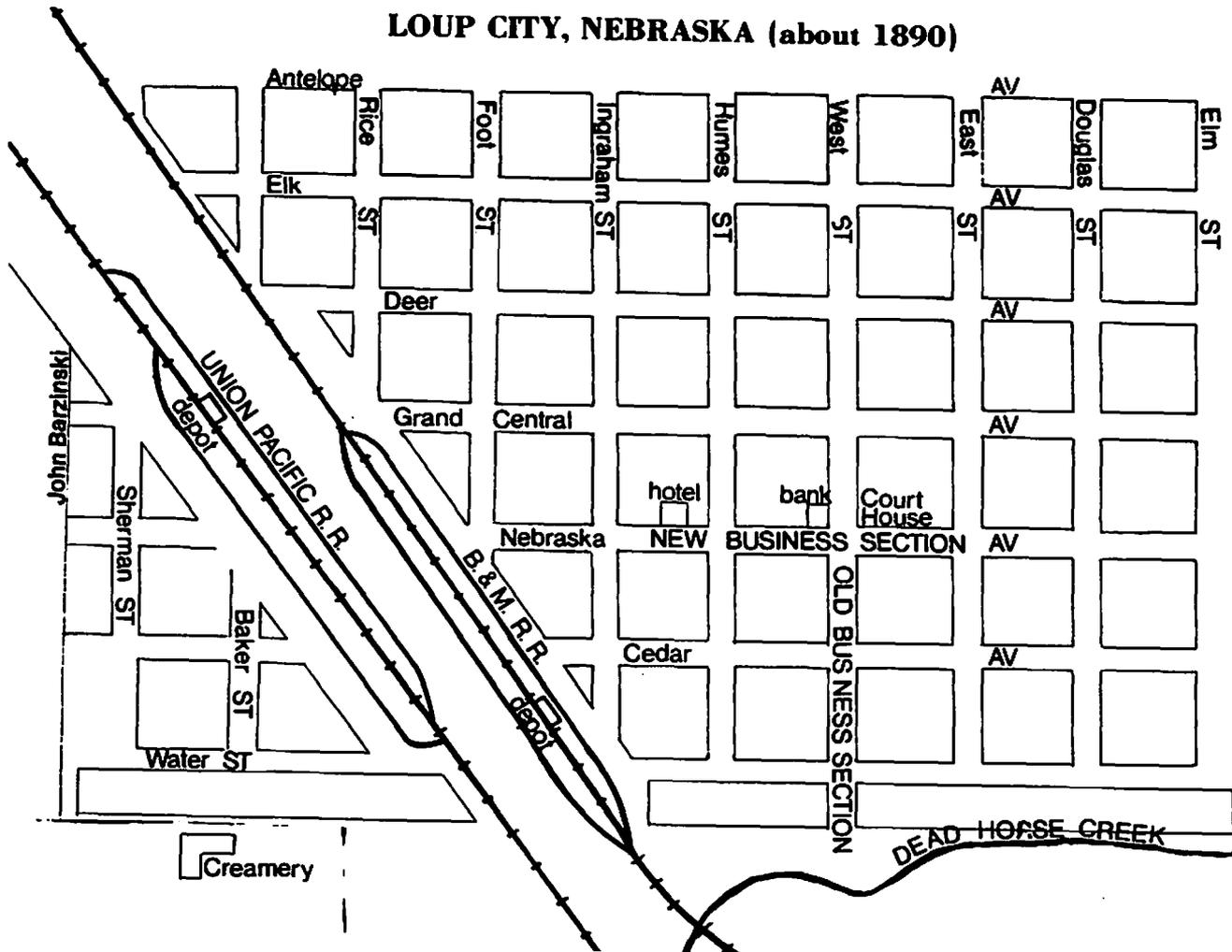
After political success in 1884-1885, the opposition came to be referred to as the "Courthouse Gang." Bent on "reform," the courthouse faction, which opposed excessive railroad bonding and advocated frugality,¹² claimed its support from laborers and farmers. In 1885 the Courthouse Gang, desiring a mouthpiece, purchased the *Loup City Northwestern* and hired Burton L. Richardson, a young Vermonter, to edit it. The new owners were Joel R. Scott, R. J. and T. S. Nightingale, lawyers; and J. Woods Smith, a real estate dealer. The courthouse faction, also identified with the Sherman County Bank, was incorporated in Loup City in 1884 by Edward E. Whaley and Milton A. Theiss.¹³

The Courthouse Gang made its first inroads toward ousting the Railroad Gang, which controlled county government in 1884, when T. S. Nightingale was elected county attorney. In 1885, the courthouse candidates captured control of all important county offices: James K. Pearson became county treasurer; W. H. Morris, county clerk; J. S. Pedler, sheriff; and Walter Moon, county judge. As the new reform group celebrated its victory, Loup City was about to undergo additional change.

In late May, 1886, when the Omaha and Republican Valley Railroad completed construction to Loup City, an uproarious welcoming celebration lasted four days. Loup City, according to the *Times*, "now entered upon a career of prosperity unknown and unrivaled except by a very few . . . cities."¹⁴ The completion of the road hastened the activities of the Burlington and Missouri, which entered the city 18 months later.

The coming of the rail lines also changed the location of the Loup City business section, originally centered around the courthouse square and south toward Dead Horse Creek. Now the main business section ran west along Nebraska Avenue from the courthouse to the railroad depot. Some buildings were moved and new ones built on this street.¹⁵ John Barzinski, the B and M land agent for Nebraska, owned several tracts of land near the railroad's yard and station, and the line was run through this property. The relocation of the business section along Nebraska Avenue apparently was a result of the railroad

LOUP CITY, NEBRASKA (about 1890)



grade through Barzinski's land west of town. While there is no evidence that relocation financially benefitted any group owning lots on Nebraska Avenue, it nonetheless aided Barzinski, the B and M line, and indirectly, the railroad faction.

The Railroad Gang benefitted from its stand in support of the B and M Railroad, which granted them special privileges. Hence, State Senator William H. Conger, who was supported by the Railroad Gang, came to be the Burlington's local land and coal agent; and the *Times* received advertising for its espousal of the railroad. Meanwhile, the newly elected courthouse "reform" faction, in spite of the railroad boom of 1886, could reduce the county debt only by one-half (to \$50,000) in a year of "unknown and unrivaled" prosperity.¹⁶

The voters expressed growing dissatisfaction with the Courthouse Gang in the fall of 1886 by replacing County Attorney T. S. Nightingale with Railroad Gang candidate C. H. E. Heath. In addition, the courthouse faction lost one seat on the county board of commissioners. The elections had followed a bitter campaign, and animosities carried over into county government procedure.¹⁷ The next several months witnessed a political struggle that was to culminate in tragedy.

In January, 1887, John Hogue, George H. Scott, and E. L. Goff, courthouse members of the county commission, refused to accept the bond of the recently elected Railroad Gang commissioner, E. C. Gallaway. Only after a favorable ruling by Heath, the new county attorney, was Gallaway seated. The Courthouse Gang, subverted in their initial scheme, now turned their wrath upon Heath. After the commissioners' first meeting Editor Richardson of the *Northwestern* accused Heath of failing to repay to the county treasurer \$40 he had appropriated while justice of the peace. Richardson filed suit against Heath and petitioned the board to repudiate acceptance of the attorney's bond until he made restitution.¹⁸ The board, unable to agree, suspended consideration until the state attorney could deliver an opinion. In February the attorney general ruled in favor of Heath.¹⁹ In late January the courthouse members achieved some satisfaction in their attempts to muzzle opposition, when the board reduced the salary of the Railroad Gang's county superintendent of schools from \$5 to the fixed minimum of \$3.50 per day.²⁰



Loup City business district, about 1890.

In the April village election, both factions nominated slates for the Loup City board of trustees. All the candidates of the Railroad Gang (People's ticket) were elected by significant majorities over the Courthouse Gang (Citizen's ticket). The defeat only intensified hostilities that had been smoldering since the Courthouse Gang's defeat in November. This time their vengeance was directed at Editor O. B. Willard of the *Sherman County Times*. A concise account of their scheme was later published in the *Times*:

Last Tuesday a man by the name of Noble walked over to the court house along with Willard to vote at the county [village] election. Noble's vote was challenged, and he swore that it was legal. A few minutes later Noble came back and wanted to withdraw his vote for he had made a mistake. It then occurred to the chronic office seeker . . . [J. R.] Scott, that now was a chance to vent some of his spleen against the editor of this paper. He had the drunken man [Noble] arrested . . . and bound over. Then he takes him by the hand and leads him over to the attorney's office and has him file a complaint against O. B. Willard for using undue influence to get him to vote. The trial came on Friday and a nice little expense of \$100 to the county. O. B. Willard was acquitted, Noble's evidence being sufficient. The strongest evidence against Willard was that of the editor of the *Northwestern*, who said he saw Noble walking with Willard.²¹

Richardson embarrassed Willard by publishing details of the trial in the *Northwestern*, and hoped the articles would be copied throughout the state press "with a view toward disgracing and casting a stigma on the name of Mr. Willard among his political friends."²²

After the April elections the rivalry degenerated into name-calling carried on publicly in the Loup City newspapers. On May 26 Willard published a ribald article, "About Hyenas," that assailed the character of Richardson:

According to Webster's dictionary a hyena is a "carniverous mammel allied to the dog. Its habits are nocturnal and it generally feeds upon carrion." Those of our readers who have not seen an engraving in Webster's of this animal, can see a live one by calling at the *Northwestern* office. The "grinning" hyena is the foulest beast that roams the prairie. He has not energy enough to make a living for himself, but lives on the offals left by more energetic beasts of prey, as this human grinning hyena lives on the scraps thrown to him by the Sherman county bank, Nightingale, Scott and others of the same worm nest, who use him as their tool, to enable them to hold on to the funds of Sherman county, to be loaned at 8 per cent a month for the benefit of those walking vultures. Any man who works for Sherman county is detested and abused by this brood of hades, who look on the farmers as merely servants to toil for . . . these harpies of modern times.

The following day in retaliation, Richardson released in the *Northwestern* a poem maligning the character of the Willards:

OH "CONSISTENCY THOU ART A JEWEL"

Oh! for poetic talent, a gift for making rhymes,
Such as graced the empty columns of the *Sherman County Times*.

We read and smiled and wondered how with such language terse
One mind could frame such glowing thoughts, and form them into verse.

His "Random bits" he (she) slings abroad, in that inspired rhyme,
Nor seems to know that thing is dead called *Sherman County Times*.

In metre long and short and square, he tried to make it known
That others have such grievous faults, forgetful of his own.

Does the *Times*, dear *Times!* remember of a scene just four years now,
Very secretly enacted, but the people all know how?

A young man got in trouble with a ----- well he hung his lip
And pondered, would I better "Wed" or a second time to "Skip."

But that young man was brought to time, and made to "Wed" you bet,
And though four years have passed away the people don't forget.

Now *Times*, dear *Times!* when you your spite and venom try to throw
Don't use mud balls least they rebound and coming back, hit you.

—Guess Who It Is."

Upon reading the paper, Willard, who had threatened to kill Richardson if the *Northwestern* published the poem, walked to the A. L. Bennet barbershop, where Richardson sat in a chair. Demanding a retraction, the *Times* editor struck Richardson with a plate used in printing. First grasping Richardson, "a small man, quiet and unobtrusive,"²⁴ around the neck, Willard then was alleged to have reached toward his hip

pocket. Richardson "drew a weapon he was carrying, shot Willard, who staggered to the door, and shot a second time."²⁵ Willard collapsed on the sidewalk. He was carried across the street to the drugstore where he died. Richardson was arrested and taken to the Valley County jail at Ord, about 30 miles to the north, to protect him from threatened violence.

During the three months between the shooting and the trial of Richardson, partisans on both sides were active. "Intimidation of witnesses was carried on to such an extent that one was given a ticket to Iowa and told to stay away until the trial was over."²⁶ Nevertheless, once the trial began it was conducted with a "fairness that was hardly to be expected from the intense feelings which existed on both sides."²⁷ Statements by Mrs. Willard identifying the lead plate with which her husband struck Richardson and the testimony of a customer in the barbershop at the time of the shooting confirmed that Willard had first struck Richardson.²⁸ Furthermore, it could not be proved during the trial that Willard had not carried a gun. When after several days of testimony the jury retired, the general belief was that Richardson had acted in self-defense. The acquittal of Richardson in August, 1887, brought renewed hope to the citizens of Loup City that the tragic lessons of the summer would not go unheeded.²⁹

After the death of her husband, Mrs. Willard assumed the editorship of the *Times*. Throughout the summer she continued attacking the Courthouse Gang, apparently thinking it would discredit her enemies and bring about Richardson's conviction.³⁰ However, once the trial ended, Mrs. Willard sought reconciliation. Sharing the sentiment of an admonishment printed in the *Omaha Republican*, she advocated that "the people should look the facts square in the face and profit by their bitter experience. Cover over the ashes of the dead past and begin anew. Renew old relations, business and social. One home has been made desolate; the life of a young man wrecked. Let it end with that."³¹ Despite the new editor's good intentions, her attempts at conciliation lasted approximately two weeks.

At the Republican county convention on September 15, 1887, in Loup City, party harmony was not achieved. Notwithstanding that Courthouse Gang member Sheriff Pedler was the Republican central committee chairman, the Railroad

Gang ruled the meeting and nominated their candidates for county offices.³² Disappointed members of the courthouse faction bolted the Republican convention and formed a "Farmers and Taxpayers" ticket. The underdog Democrats, playing a minor role in county politics, eagerly accepted several of the Farmers and Taxpayers nominees, including county clerk Morris, who for some reason was left off the Courthouse Gang ticket.³³ Sherman County prepared itself for an all-too-familiar political battle.

In the campaign of 1887 Mrs. Willard of the *Times* aimed propaganda at those who had bolted the Republican ticket. In attempting to woo farmers from the Farmers and Taxpayers ticket, she released information demonstrating that the Courthouse Gang had secretly gained control of leased school lands. On October 20 the *Times* accused Sheriff Pedler and Judge Moon of exorbitantly spending county funds. Generally, *Times* attacks centered upon the "extravagant and reckless expenditures" of the "courthouse rascals"; however, religious and ethnic biases were also exploited. The *Times* accused the Farmers and Taxpayers nominee for clerk, M. T. Carlton, of masquerading "as a Catholic, [who] counts his beads, crosses himself, and tells of the success of his *Gazeta Polska* when among the Polish voters."³⁴ Judge Moon was alleged to have had his name inserted on a list of contributors who had donated to the Catholic school fund. On November 3 the *Times* released the following letter from Martin Ryan, chairman of the Catholic fund:

I, Martin Ryan hereby state that when I asked Walter Moon, now a candidate for county judge . . . for a subscription to assist in building a Catholic school in Loup City, he stated to me that his conscience would not allow him to give any money for a Catholic purpose, and that he was astonished how a number of persons who had subscribed could conscientiously do so. If Mr. Carlton showed any list with Moon's name on it, the name has been inserted since it left my hands. Mr Moon gave no money for the school committee. I should not write this had not my name been used to prove what was certainly not true.

—Martin Ryan

In spite of the opposition of the *Times*, the split in the Republican Party, and the tragic events of the summer, the Farmers and Taxpayers candidates for county treasurer, county clerk, surveyor, and coroner won re-election. Only Judge Moon, perhaps because of his alienation of the Catholic vote, failed to regain his seat. The results, when contrasted with the defeat of the Courthouse Gang in the village election of April, 1887, indicated that faction relied upon rural support for

victory. The Catholic voters—frequently called Polish rural dwellers—were allied with the courthouse faction.³⁵ On the other hand Upper Loup Township, which included Loup City, elected several Railroad Gang members to the township offices.

Following the election, the bitterness generated in the campaigns continued unabated in Loup City. On December 8 the *Times* advocated that the farmers get together with interested Railroad Gang businessmen and build a creamery in the city. At a meeting called by businessmen, the still bitter farmers refused to pledge financial support for the creamery.³⁶ Nevertheless, Loup City entrepreneurs sold stock in the venture, and by March of 1888 the creamery had become a reality.³⁷ Toward the end of 1887 when fire destroyed the law office of J. R. Scott and the store of H. J. Shupp, both influential members of the courthouse group, arson by political enemies was suspected. A reward of \$500 offered for information leading to the conviction of an arsonist was never claimed.³⁸

The spring 1888 election was a repetition of that of the previous year. In the village contest both sides nominated slates, and again the Courthouse Gang was unable to rally sufficient support in Loup City.³⁹ In June, anticipating the fall elections, the *Times* announced the formation of a Republican Club. "The time has come," explained the publication, "when the Republicans must organize so . . . that politics will be more nearly on a party basis in the county."⁴⁰ Both factions made efforts toward conciliation, and until September's nominating convention the Republicans presented a united front.

In the fall of 1886, Sherman County was to elect a state representative and a county attorney. Two years previously the Courthouse Gang had suffered its initial setback when Nightingale was defeated for county attorney by Heath. In the fall of 1888, however, in order to avoid factional rancor, the *Times* called for "new men. . . . The people are getting tired of bitterness. Try this method [of nominating new men] and see if it does not work to the betterment of our welfare as a county."⁴¹ Mrs. Willard supported a candidate from neighboring Litchfield for representative. Ignoring the plea of the *Times*, however, the courthouse faction captured control of the committee on rules at the county convention. With the help of Senator Conger, who shed his Railroad Gang allegiance, they nominated J. R. Scott for county attorney.⁴²

The *Times* reported: "Ye gods! Has Sherman County no better material?" and refused to list Scott's name on the Republican ticket or to endorse the work of the convention. Unable to form a counter movement, the Railroad Gang attacked the courthouse Republicans. Scott was branded a "monster" who had started the political warfare that had resulted in violence. On several occasions the *Times* announced the names of prominent Loup City citizens who would not vote for the Republicans. In spite of the attacks, Scott was elected, and again the courthouse faction carried the day. Yet, as events were to prove, the victory in 1888 was the last triumph for the Courthouse Gang. New forces would soon reshape county government.⁴³

First, Mrs. Willard relinquished the editorship of the *Times* and entrusted it to E. A. Brown and Harrie R. Grow.⁴⁴ The Sherman County Bank of Loup City then failed.⁴⁵ The Courthouse Gang's ally not only held the county's assets but the investments of many Sherman County farmers. Soon thereafter the financially troubled Loup City roller mills were in the hands of the sheriff. Businesses were forced to close, and many successful pioneers lost their savings.⁴⁶

At the first meeting of the board of commissioners in 1889, Treasurer Pearson was asked to resign after failing to produce \$16,000 entrusted to him and the Sherman County Bank. He refused. In a divided session the board ousted Pearson and replaced him with A. J. Fairburn, an old-line Railroad Gang member from Loup City. Pearson was given time to make an assignment of his real estate in order to raise the \$16,000. However, accusing his political enemies of poisoning the minds of his bondsmen, Pearson claimed that he was unable to raise the necessary sum.⁴⁷ The commissioners sued Pearson and the Sherman County Bank for the misappropriated funds.

The *Times*, eager to make political hay out of the courthouse faction's dilemma, accused the bank of fraud, contending the money "has been stolen by those connected with the bank."⁴⁸ The reasons it failed were never thoroughly investigated. It appeared that Pearson had lent considerable sums of the county's money for investment in the building of the roller mills. Also, some of the trouble may have been due to careless bookkeeping on the part of the treasurer.⁴⁹ Ideally, as the *Times* emphasized, the county's money should have been equally

divided among the three banks in the county instead of being concentrated in the courthouse faction's facility.³⁰

All this irregularity had the effect of alienating the farmers from the Courthouse Gang Republicans. It was reported that in Litchfield a mob, intent on punishing bank officials, was restrained by "cool headed citizens."³¹ The courthouse faction further estranged their supporters by protesting the innocence of Pearson and the Sherman County Bank. Sheriff Pedler, as a resident taxpayer, filed a protest at the commissioners' meeting against the suit launched against the bank. Scott supported Pearson so vocally that his own seating as county attorney was delayed.³² It became obvious to many that political changes were imminent. In fact, in the April village elections of 1889, the railroad and courthouse tickets were filed, but there were also three additional slates in the contest, and no ticket was able to gain a clear majority.³³

The bank's failure placed the farmer in a perplexing if not advantageous position. Detached from the Courthouse Gang, the farm vote was now eagerly sought by the Railroad Gang and Democrats alike. The *Times* likewise began to look more favorably upon the farmers' situation.³⁴ However, the farmers, reluctant to become allied to either faction, began to affiliate with the new Farmers' Alliance movement in the county. In March, 1889, David Kay moved the *Farmers' Advocate* from North Loup, Valley County, to Loup City, intending to publish it under the Democratic aegis, but apparently never got it into production.³⁵ In April the *Times* acknowledged that the Farmers' Alliance was expanding throughout Sherman County, and in May admitted that "the Alliance nearby was growing rapidly." By mid-summer it predicted that "as near as we can tell there will be three candidates in the field this fall for each office."³⁶

The growth of the Alliance cannot be totally explained by the collapse of the Sherman County Bank and rural disillusionment with the Courthouse Republicans. There were signs as early as 1887 of economic depression. The *Times* noted: "Loup City real estate business is declining. Every man has a quarter section in each ear and a corner lot in each eye. All will sell cheap."³⁷ The building of the railroads in Sherman and adjacent counties in 1887-1888 made it easier for the farmers to ship and receive products from other stations.³⁸ No longer was the long drive

into Loup City necessary. Notwithstanding the convenience of railroads, farmers also became disillusioned by their exorbitant rates, and the old pro-railroad Republicans appeared discredited. In 1889 farm and cattle prices continued to be low. The failure of the Sherman County Bank and fall of the trusted courthouse clique further disillusioned the farmers.

The November elections of 1889 illustrated the upheaval Sherman County had witnessed the previous year. Former party and factional divisions all but disappeared. The Farmers' Alliance, avoiding the often used Populist designation,⁵⁹ united with day laborers and ran as the Labor Party. The Democrats, absorbing some members of the courthouse faction, co-nominated several Labor Party candidates; and the regular Republican Party, while acquiring some farm support, was once again largely in control of the Railroad Gang.

It is pertinent to note the affiliations taken by members of the Courthouse Gang whose terms of office ended: Judge Moon ran again on the Labor ticket; Sheriff Pedler threw his support to the Democratic Party; Raymond, the county surveyor, was nominated jointly by the Republicans and Labor Party. Other office seekers likewise switched allegiance: E. H. Kittell, who two years previously was a Railroad Gang Republican, secured the nomination for county clerk from the Democrats; and J. Phil Jaeger, previously an unaligned Republican, was nominated for county treasurer by the Democrats. The citizens of Rockville Township, confused and bewildered, nominated their own ticket, "ignoring all parties and politics."⁶⁰

The election results were perplexing. Those candidates running with the support of two parties, either Labor and Democrats or Labor and Republicans, were elected. The Republican candidates for treasurer and judge won, while the Democratic candidate for sheriff, supported by old Courthouse Gang members, was successful. The Labor candidates, running without support of either the Republicans or Democrats, fared a poor third.⁶¹ Citizens seemed unwilling to entrust their affairs completely to an inexperienced coalition. The political upheaval of 1889 created a situation in which, as the *Times* aptly stated, "any man running for office in Sherman County can depend on nothing but his own vote."⁶²

Political developments within Loup City and Sherman County in 1890 were colored by three significant developments:

agitation for prohibition of intoxicants, drouth and depression, and growth of the Farmers' Alliance. Support for prohibition spread in 1890 when it became apparent a state prohibition amendment would be submitted to the people in the fall. In February, 1890, a widely attended convention in Loup City launched a prohibition movement.⁶³ At first the *Times*, remaining somewhat impartial, granted space in its columns to both the "wets" and the prohibitionists. Aware of the growing popularity of temperance and of the new subscribers a militant appeal might attract, the paper announced in July: "Now and forever the *Times* is a prohibition organ." In September an Anti-Prohibition Business Men's Association, unattached to any political faction, was organized to conduct a campaign against the amendment.⁶⁴

No single event contributed more to the astonishing growth of the Farmers' Alliance in Nebraska than the drouth and the poverty that accompanied it. In March the citizens of Loup City, unaware of their own impending disaster, raised \$43 in cash and thousands of pounds of corn, wheat, and potatoes to assist impoverished Cheyenne County in the Panhandle. In Sherman County the first hint of drouth was given in May when the *Times* pleaded for rain. The summer continued hot and dry. By August the farmers were selling cattle because of the scarcity of pasture or grain. The *Times* warned farmers against selling livestock, believing that contrary to predictions, there would "be plenty of corn and cattle will be higher next year." However, criticizing rural "calamity howling," the editors said: "Farmers have no reason to complain if they can raise good crops 10 years out of 11. The only trouble is they go into debt and do not allow for one year's failure."⁶⁵

By the end of the summer it was obvious that the people of Sherman County would be in for a hard winter. On August 21 the paper admitted it was "too dry for corn," and suggested that the county board postpone delinquent tax sales in order to prevent land being taken from farmers. Acknowledging "that the coming year is going to be a hard one financially," it suggested "it would be a good idea for the churches of this place to 'bunch up' and instead of starving three ministers, try and support one respectably."

During this period, the *Times* began alignment with the emerging Farmers' Alliance. In March, 1890, it supported the

Alliance plan for government ownership of railroads and in April predicted that "either the trusts go or the Republican party must go." By spring the publication had begun a weekly Alliance column and had reduced its subscription price in order to attract the farmers. Without mention of the Republican Party, it restated its editorial policies: "The *Times* continues to be, as it always has been, the farmers' friend."⁶⁶

At their June county conventions, the Republicans, Democrats, and Alliance men, somewhat realigned, all nominated candidates for state representative and county attorney. The Democrats nominated former railroad Republican C. H. E. Heath, for county attorney and Albert Dickerson, who later declined, for representative. A week later the Alliance delegates, calling themselves Independents, nominated Dickerson for representative, and a schoolteacher, Emerson A. Smith of Litchfield, for county attorney. The Republican convention nominated Railroad Gang member, A. J. Fairburn, for representative and the old-line courthouse faction member, J. R. Scott, for county attorney. The *Times*, which two years earlier would not list Scott's name on the Republican ticket, now sought support for an urban Republican coalition by announcing that "J. R. Scott has made the best prosecuting attorney Sherman County ever had."⁶⁷

Virtually ignoring the Democrats, the *Times* aimed its attacks at Independent nominees. Dickerson and Smith were in one breath accused of being inexperienced and unqualified and branded in another as chronic office seekers.⁶⁸ The Alliance and the farmers were likewise subjected to bitter attacks.⁶⁹ In October the Fairplay and Prairie Dale Alliance chapters of Sherman County passed resolutions binding all members to discontinue their subscriptions to the *Times*.⁷⁰

The political realignment which began two years earlier continued. The elections for governor and county offices demonstrated that Loup City was the only Republican stronghold left in Sherman County. Out of 13 townships in the county, all except Loup City Township gave majorities to the Independent candidates. J. R. Scott, securing for the first time the Loup City vote, was nevertheless defeated for reelection as attorney by E. A. Smith. Obviously, as the *Times* reported, there was a rural-urban split as the normally Republican farmers voted for Independents.⁷¹ Prohibition was defeated.

Those townships possessing urban settlements, as well as entirely rural townships where many Polish and German settlers lived, united to defeat the amendment by 200 votes. When it came to banning liquor, the large immigrant population transcended the rural-urban dichotomy to vote against prohibition.⁷² The November campaign put an end to many old alignments but brought no tranquility. New animosities arose: The past campaign has been the cause of no little ill feeling. It made many who were fast friends sworn enemies to each other; it has made members of the same church cold and distant to one another; and even caused considerable quarreling in many homes among parents and children.⁷³

In December the now conciliatory *Times* in reevaluating the fall election, admitted that "the Alliance has come to stay, and if by its means times can be improved and better laws enacted, we heartily wish it success."⁷⁴ On January 9, 1891, the *Times* announced itself Independent in politics and "an earnest advocate" of the laboring and farming classes. Expounding upon their sudden conversion, the editors explained:

We will state that for the past two years we were only renters and laboring under a written contract; it being a Republican paper and we in sympathy with the party, things went along very pleasantly for awhile, until the Farmers' Alliance and other labor organizations began to become interested in politics and presented their views on government that had not been widely spread before, which drew out attention, and gave us food for thought, which we talked over and investigated as far as means at hand would permit; and unconsciously we began to endorse and assimilate them until they have become part of our political creed. The time of our lease expired on the last day of December, since that time we have purchased the paper and outfit, and are now at liberty to follow the dictates of our own free will.

In the meantime the farmers were forced to consider a more immediate challenge than political ambitions. As the winter set in, the drouth began to take its toll. By January relief meetings became necessary. At one gathering two-thirds of those assembled said they could not get grain.⁷⁵ On January 18, 1891, the county commissioners petitioned the Legislature:

The desolation and drought of last summer, also of hail in parts of our country, are upon us, and the want of food, fuel, clothing, and seed rises up and are widespread and being unforeseen no provision has been made and no funds are available to meet our pressing needs. The reports come from every town, of families without money or credit to buy fuel, food, clothing or seed, and we find no provision in the law whereby we can reach their cause. . . .

We therefore urge upon your body that at the earliest possible moment, such action may be taken by the Legislature of Nebraska, as will enable us to meet by a careful and wise use of what ever means may be opened to you, to supply our unforeseen and unusual wants, and that the cry of the poor may not be heard in vain.⁷⁶

Although the State Relief Commission shipped a carload of coal and other provisions, the county clerk was informed that

“no grain will be shipped for feed and probably none for seed.” In February lack of business forced the *Times* to reduce its size from eight to four pages.” The situation remained critical throughout the winter and spring. When rain finally did arrive, it came in such torrents that the seed in many places was washed out. The unpredictability of the elements and the absence of public relief discouraged the farmer. It also reaffirmed his determination to emphasize his plight at the polls in November.

The fall elections of 1891 completed the political revolution which had begun in 1888. The Democratic Party, all but nonexistent, could gather only six delegates to attend its county convention. It nominated candidates for school superintendent and sheriff, but the latter refused to run. The Republican convention, controlled by citizens from Loup City, created the semblance of a fusion ticket by nominating in addition to its own slate, the Democratic candidate for superintendent. “Fusion” in their own party and factionalism in the Independent movement created some optimism among Republicans.”

Weeks previous to the Democratic and Republican conventions, the Independents had met in Loup City and nominated a full slate for county offices. Unable in 1889 to capture any office without Democratic or Republican co-nominations, the Independents were now determined to succeed alone. While absorbing some powerful Democrats, including the Nightingale brothers, the Independents presented an almost entirely new slate of candidates. However, friction developed over the qualifications of the new men when the *Times*, now official Independent spokesman, refused to support the nominee for county treasurer, D. A. Jackson, as unqualified:

Our reason for not supporting Mr. Jackson is not all street talk. . . . We have in our possession a copy of a letter written by him, the original we have handled and read, consisting of 123 words in which are 18 errors. Such simple words as fall, told, few, etc., were spelled faul, toll, fiew, etc., and such an expression as “I was Borneed” capped the climax of a letter that a 10-year-old school boy would be ashamed of. As for his ability to count money we have no evidence that he can count more than fifteen.”

Throughout the campaign, despite warnings from Alliance leaders, the *Times* remained firm in its beliefs and would not support Jackson for treasurer.

When the election returns were tabulated, Jackson and the entire Independent ticket were swept to victory. Only Loup City failed to support the Independent nominees. The victories of the previous year, coupled with the present triumph, guaranteed

complete county control to the farmer. Years of political cliques, intense rivalries, bitterness, and bloodshed had ended. The toilers and producers of Sherman County were finally "fully aroused to the dignity and importance of their calling."⁸⁰

What can be learned from the events in Loup City from 1887 to 1891? The experiences described strongly suggest that political conflict was the norm—the inevitable format for decision-making on the Midwestern farm frontier. Powerful economic and political cliques clashed for control. Strife assumed such major proportions in Loup City that even a sophisticated northeastern editor was drawn into the bitterness and violence it produced. Both editors engaged in factionalism that arose as much out of personal animosity as from more justifiable discord over public funds, control of county government, and crop disaster.

As a result, the farmer longed desperately for dependable political leadership. While indeed concerned with economic and natural disorder, farmers finally cast aside urban cliques and turned to the Farmers' Alliance in search of honest, representative representation.

The struggle in Sherman County assumes significance as it abstracts the lives of frontier townspeople. It enables us to vividly share the life experiences of common folk on the farm frontier. Moreover, the study reaffirms the view that Loup City was a complex society, which, even when surveyed in depth, challenges those seeking to generalize significantly about 19th-century Midwestern towns.

NOTES

1. Meroe J. Owens, *A Brief History of Sherman County* (Norfolk, Nebraska: *The Norfolk Daily News*, 1952), 14, 19. The essential nature of the small midwestern town in 19th century America has been characterized in: Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1954); Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929); and *Middletown in Transition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937); Page Smith, *As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1966); Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society: Class, Power and Religion in a Rural Community* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 1790-1830 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959). The "politics of factionalism" as central to midwestern towns, has been documented in Robert R. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1968); and James S. Coleman, *Community Conflict* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1957).

2. Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 188-189.

3. *Ibid.*, 230-231, Owens lists 12 residents of Loup City who left for the Black Hills.
4. *Ibid.*, 174.
5. *Ibid.*, 231.
6. Population statistics for the three years: 1878, 594; 1879, 1,120; 1880, 2,061. See Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 256.
7. The Poles coming to Nebraska often settled in Sherman and adjoining Howard County. The B and M land holdings were especially large in central Nebraska; and the ambitious advertising campaign of the railroad land agent in St. Paul, John Barzynski, attracted many of that nationality. See Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 104-105. Barzynski had been the editor of a Polish daily in Chicago previous to the establishment of his agency. See Meroe Owens, "John Barzynski, Land Agent," *Nebraska History*, 36 (June, 1955), 81-91.
8. The American Colonization Company, represented in Loup City by C. H. E. Heath, brought young Englishmen to the Midwest where for \$350 they were instructed in ranching and farming and were provided for by a local farmer. See Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 106.
9. The Omaha and Republican Valley Railroad was a branch line of the Union Pacific.
10. *Sherman County Daily Times* (Loup City), June 4, 1886, quoted in *Nebraska Record*, November, 1915.
11. The background of the political contest is unavoidably vague. Copies of the *Sherman County Times*, are non-existent before January, 1887. Only from out-state newspaper sources and Owens, *History of Sherman County*, can the background be pieced together. See *Omaha Republican*, May 29, 1887; *Grand Island Independent*, June 23, 1887; *Daily Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), May 30, 1887; and Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 190, 199, 201, 222.
12. Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), 638.
13. The Democratic Party at this time was essentially a minor faction in Sherman County politics. Unable to achieve any important victories throughout the 1880s, it remained a third party vying with the two factions within the Republican Party.
14. *Sherman County Times*, June 4, 1886, quoted in *Nebraska Record*, November, 1915.
15. Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 44. See map, 34.
16. County indebtedness in 1884 was \$112,000; in 1886, \$50,000. See Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 191.
17. *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, May 31, 1887.
18. *Sherman County Times*, January 20; February 17, 24, 1887.
19. *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, May 31, 1887; *Sherman County Times*, April 28, 1887.
20. *Sherman County Times*, January 20, 1887. The county treasurer, sheriff, clerk, and surveyor, continued to receive \$5.00 per day.
21. *Ibid.*, April 7, 1887.
22. *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, May 31, 1887.
23. The last issue of the *Times* before Willard's death is so extensively mutilated that the attack upon Richardson is illegible. *Sherman County Times*, May 26, 1887. However, both editorial exchanges may be found in the *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, May 31, 1887 and the *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 30, 1887.
24. *Grand Island Independent*, May 30, 1887.
25. Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 200.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Omaha Republican*, August 26, 1887.
28. *Omaha Daily Herald*, August 25, 1887.
29. Soon after his acquittal, Richardson departed Loup City for Colorado. See Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 201.

30. *Sherman County Times*, July 7, 21, and August 18, 25, 1887.
31. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1887.
32. *Ibid.*, September 29, 1887.
33. *Ibid.*, October 27, November 3, 1887.
34. *Ibid.*, October 20, 27, 1887.
35. The official election returns for November, 1887 and 1888, have been clipped from the *Times* editions of those years. The conclusions above were drawn from statistics available in the March 15, 1888, edition of the *Sherman County Times* and from Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 104, 119, 133, 223. The first Catholic Church in Sherman County (1878-1879) was located in a rural Polish settlement 20 miles east of Loup City.
36. *Ibid.*, December 22, 1887.
37. *Ibid.*, March 22, 1888.
38. *Sherman County Times*, February 16, 1888. Shupp, like Scott, was a prominent member of the Courthouse Gang in Loup City.
39. *Sherman County Times*, March 2, 9, April 5, 1888.
40. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1889.
41. *Ibid.*, July 26, 1888.
42. *Ibid.*, August 10, 1888. Conger became incensed at the *Times* and straight Republicans in the spring of 1888 because of their refusal to support his choice for delegate to the Republican National Convention. See *Sherman County Times*, September 27, 1888.
43. *Sherman County Times*, August 16, September 27, and October 4, 1888.
44. *Ibid.*, December 6, 1888.
45. *Ibid.*, January 10, 1889.
46. Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 175, 183.
47. *Sherman County Times*, January 3, 10, 1889.
48. *Ibid.*, January 10, 1889.
49. Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 190.
50. *Sherman County Times*, January 10, 31, 1889.
51. *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 7, 1889.
52. *Sherman County Times*, January 10, 17, 1889.
53. *Ibid.*, April 4, 1889.
54. *Ibid.*, April 11, 1889.
55. *Ibid.*, March 14, 1889.
56. *Ibid.*, April 18; May 1; and August 15, 1889.
57. *Ibid.*, April 14, 1887.
58. Simultaneous with the arrival of the Omaha and Republican Valley line in Loup City, the Grand Island and Wyoming Central built across southwest Sherman County. See Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 44.
59. The Courthouse faction of the Republican Party had, at times, placed this designation at the top of its ticket. See *Sherman County Times*, September 12, 1889.
60. *Sherman County Times*, October 10, 17, 24; November 7, 1889.
61. *Ibid.*, November 7, 1889.
62. *Ibid.*, November 14, 1889.
63. *Ibid.*, February 6, 1890.
64. *Ibid.*, July 3, 10, 1890.
65. *Ibid.*, March 20, 29, 1890.
66. *Ibid.*, March 20, April 24, and May 1, 1890.
67. *Ibid.*, July 23, 31, 1890.
68. *Ibid.*, July 31, August 14, 1890.
69. *Ibid.*, September 18, October 24, 1890.
70. *Ibid.*, October 31, 1890.
71. *Ibid.*, November 7, 1890.

72. *Ibid.*, The final vote was 508 for, and 704 against.
73. *Times*, November 7, 1890.
74. *Ibid.*, December 5, 1890.
75. Owens, *History of Sherman County*, 175.
76. *Sherman County Times-Independent*, February 6, 1891.
77. *Ibid.*, February 17, 27, 1891.
78. *Ibid.*, September 11, 18, 1891.
79. *Ibid.*, October 2, 16, 1891.
80. *Ibid.*, November 6, 13, 1891.