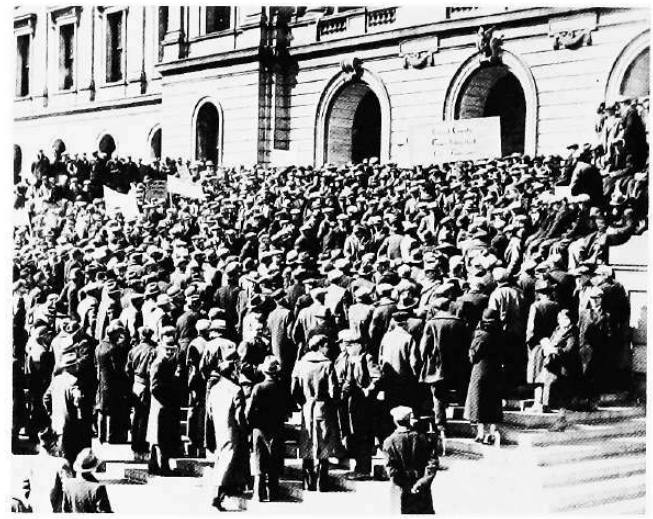
An Interview from the Oral History Collection of the Southwest Minnesota Historical Center



Recollections of Rural Revolt

Edited by David L. Nass

DURING the nineteenth century, when historians like Leopold von Ranke developed the thesis that everything a historian says must be documented by written records, oral history fell into disuse and disfavor. The oral tradition — the oldest method of recording human events and transmitting culture — was no longer considered "scientific enough." Modern university-trained scholars spurned song, story, and legend, turning instead to the verifiable record provided by the government documents, the personal diaries, the correspondence, and the newspapers of an increasingly literate era.

Not until the 1950s, when Allan Nevins, professor of history at Columbia University, revived the use of oral history in the form of tape-recorded interviews, did the spoken word come once more to be taken seriously. Even Mr. Nevins, with his professional stature, received criticism. Historians were slow to begin using interviews as primary sources. However, the Columbia Oral History Project grew, and historians began to realize the potential of the oral tradition they had neglected since the nineteenth century.

Today, oral history is a well-established and respected field, with a national organization and recognized professional standards. Tapes form an increasingly valuable part of the collections of major libraries and archives. Thanks to the telephone, the jet airplane, and the ever-increasing pace of daily life, many reflections, decisions, and communications which were once preserved in the pages of diaries and letters are now lost. Among the most eagerly sought-after holdings of the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson presidential libraries are interviews (many still restricted) with cabinet members and other major advisers which shed light on face-to-face decision-making and on attitudes of key people toward policy issues. But it is even more in the realm of daily life and in recording the activities and thoughts of ordinary people that oral history has come into its own. Not only is it often the one source available; the interview provides a freedom and spontaneity of expression that catches the feeling and the immediacy of experience in a way that more formal records cannot do.

In the summer of 1972, H. Warren Gardner and David L. Nass, both professors of history at Southwest State University in Marshall, conducted an oral history project in Nobles County financed by the school. The project was an attempt to obtain through interviews the firsthand impressions and recollections of the men and women who had experienced the Great Depression of the 1930s. Lew Hudson, regional editor of

TOP: THE FARMERS' Holiday Association led this march on the State Capitol on March 22, 1933. Thousands of farmers converged to protest economic conditions and demand relief through legislation.

Mr. Nass is associate professor of history and director of the Southwest Minnesota Historical Center at Marshall.

the *Worthington Globe*, supplied the names of some potential interviewees. These people suggested other names, and gradually the list grew.

This initial effort was extended after 1972, when the Minnesota Historical Society received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to expand its system of regional research centers.[1] The Southwest Center, aided by National Endowment funds and guided by the Historical Society, enlarged its oral history program and employed student interns. It now has over 100 taped interviews which have been transcribed into written form. Most of them deal with rural life between 1920 and the present. A major emphasis has been on interviewing the "plain people" of the area to try to discover what life was like for the farmer, the housewife, the electrician, or the schoolteacher.

These interviews are used by students of Minnesota history, politics, rural sociology, literature, art, and other subjects. Excerpts from the tape collection have also been featured in a series of programs for educational radio sponsored by the Southwest Minnesota Historical Center. The future promises even greater use of taped interviews, both as research sources and in mass media presentations dealing with rural Minnesota.

ONE OF THE major topics upon which new material has been uncovered by the oral history program is the Farmers' Holiday Association. This was a radical protest movement which drew widespread support in the Upper Midwest during the agricultural crisis of the early 1930s. An outgrowth of the Farmers Union, the association became the vehicle for farmers willing to use direct, and in some cases illegal, action to save themselves and hundreds of other rural people from financial catastrophe. Although it has been the subject of at least one major book, its activities in southern Minnesota have remained little known, and its story has not appeared in the traditional histories of the state.[2]

When John H. Bosch, a former officer of the Farmers' Holiday Association, heard about the oral history project, he contacted the Southwest Center. Mr. Bosch has been active in agrarian reform throughout most of his life. He was born on December 4, 1898, the eleventh child among fourteen youngsters. The family lived near Prinsburg in Kandiyohi County. His father was an active Populist, and political discussions were a part of the everyday life of the household. Family members still recall the time a visitor asked three-year-old John his name and he replied, "I am a Populist." As a young man he joined the Kandiyohi Farmers Union and shortly afterward became county chairman and a member of the board of the Farmers Union Co-operative Oil Association. Later he served as vice-president of the Farmers Union Live Stock Commission Company in South St. Paul.

The interview from which excerpts are presented below took place on August 21, 1972, at Mr. Bosch's home in Minneapolis. It was conducted by Professors Gardner and Nass, Arthur L. Finnell, former history major at the school and now associate director of the Southwest Center, and Daniel L. Setterberg, a former employee in the college library. As with all events and facts recalled after a period of forty-odd years, there is much that is hazy and inaccurate, yet the words carry a powerful impression of the tension and desperation that hung over the farm belt in the early 1930s. They reflect the emotions of the time, and they suggest better than a volume of statistics why many thoughtful people feared that violent revolution was imminent.

Interviewer. Will you tell us a little bit about the origins and motivations of the holiday organization, Mr. Bosch?

Mr. Bosch. Well, if this is agreeable, I'll try to start as the thing started, with my relationship to the Farm Holiday Association. . If you incur a debt, when, say, corn is 80 cents a bushel, and you try to pay for it when it is 2 cents a bushel, it doesn't make any difference how hard you work, you can't do it. This was the situation that existed through almost all of the most productive agricultural area[s] in the United States [in the 1930s]. Some thirteen states in the upper part of the United States produce approximately 90 per cent of the [nation's] total food supply. And farmers were losing their farms — in some counties as high as 90 per cent of the farmers had already lost their farms. And you're probably familiar with what they call the quantity theory of money — the value of money and credit relative to the business to be transacted determine[s] the relationship. If you've got $100 to measure the value of 100 bushels of wheat, it's a dollar to the bushel. If you've got $10 it's ten bushels to the dollar and so on. If people get into debt on the basis of an inflated currency and inflated credit and then are compelled to pay when these have been withdrawn, they can't pay. Well, my father was a very good friend of Hemming [S.] Nel-

[1] See James E. Fogerty, "Minnesota Regional Research Centers," in *Minnesota History*, 44:30–32 (Spring, 1974).

[2] See John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana and London, 1965). Theodore C. Blegen, in his *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis, 1963) barely mentions the movement (see p. 524). It is dealt with at greater length in a booklet of readings on the state's political history published recently by the Minnesota Historical Society. See Rhoda R. Gilman, *Minnesota: Political Maverick*, 48–50 (*Minnesota Politics and Government: A History Resource Unit*, St. Paul, 1975).

son, who was vice-president of the Farmers Union of the state of Minnesota. And at my father's request, I joined the Farmers Union. I became active in the Lake Elizabeth Township unit and later became the county president of the Farmers Union.

Interviewer. When did your first association with that begin? What year?

Mr. Bosch. Well, that would have been about 1930.

Interviewer. This would have been in the Willmar area?

Mr. Bosch. Yes, the Willmar area. And meeting with these people and discussing things about it and having some concept of history and economics and so forth — my father was well informed in this field — I put together an idea for Kandiyohi County. . . . You can do without cars, you can do without lots of things, but you can't do without food. And the ability to control the flow of whatever you have to sell to the market, within general economic conditions, will determine the price. This is axiomatic in economics. So I put together an idea, four things that we would do. And if we did not get them we would then strike; we would then refuse to sell anything. One was an immediate holiday of [farm mortgage] foreclosures. Another was [obtaining] cost of production for farm products. One of them was the abolition of the Federal Reserve System, which was in the main responsible for these fluctuations in monies and credits and the tremendous variation in prices. And the fourth one was that in the event of another war, all profits deriving from war production would be taxed 100 per cent. I presented this to the Lake Elizabeth meeting, and they voted that I be permitted to present it to the county meeting, Kandiyohi County, which I did. Kandiyohi voted to send me to the next state convention of the Minnesota Farmers Union and present it there. I presented it to the state convention [in 1931] and I'll tell you, it took the house down. Really! They voted 100 per cent that I present this same program to the national convention which was held in Oklahoma City. So I got to be . . the secretary of the resolutions committee. And one of the things I then presented was a resolution in connection with . our four demands, or if this was not done within a reasonable length of time, we then would call a farm strike. Well, while they were for it, they were at the same time afraid. The Farmers Union had become (and this is good) quite heavily involved in co-operatives — business of various kinds — and they were afraid if they became involved in this, that legally, these co-operatives might be involved in it also. So instead of getting the endorsement of the national Farmers Union at their convention, they did pass a resolution to call a convention for the express purpose of building an organization.[3] Well, this convention was called in Des Moines [in May, 1932], and there were representatives from pretty well all over the country. Milo Reno was elected president of the national Farm Holiday Association. This name was selected because we did have the bank holiday, and we wanted a farm holiday. And the program I had set up became the program. Well, Milo Reno was quite well known because he had been president of the Farmers Union in Iowa for quite awhile and I was relatively new. .[4] What would have happened if everything had gone according to schedule, I don't know. But what did happen was that . . . knowing that this meeting was being held and that we were probably going to call a farm strike, there were half a dozen areas that called strikes of their own — just blocked the highway and not related to anything. Somebody, maybe he wanted the publicity . . . or maybe his reasons were entirely honorable and good, but anyhow there were a half a dozen or more of these. There was one around Omaha. There was one around Sioux City and different places all over.

Interviewer. Was there one at Worthington at this stage?[5]

Mr. Bosch. That was different. It wasn't in the nature of — Marshall had one where they had quite a rumpus.[6] As far as Worthington was concerned if there was one, it was not of enough consequence that I recall it. But here something develops which would be difficult to foresee. A farmer, by the nature of his occupation, is an individual. His farm is different than somebody else's farm — the nature of the soil, the amount of rain he gets or doesn't get, the size of his family, the sex of his family, the age of his family, his inclination. Does he feed cattle or does he raise grain? And the date he has to pay doesn't fit with

---

[3] The national Farmers Union convention of 1931 rejected a motion calling for a farm strike. The union was engaged in business operations it feared might suffer if it undertook direct action in its own name. Therefore the Farmers' Holiday Association was created on May 3, 1932, as a separate body. Although the association was not officially connected with the union, it enjoyed the support of Farmers Union members. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 34–37.

[4] John Bosch was elected vice-president. See Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 38.

[5] The Farmers' Holiday Association had set September 20, 1932, as the date for a strike. The Nobles County Holiday Association jumped the gun by a few days and blockaded highways around Worthington. Although Mr. Bosch cannot recall the exact dates, his comments below reveal the difficulties state leaders had in controlling local units.

[6] On November 10, 1933, a crowd of farm strikers estimated at 1,100 shut down the Swift and Company plant in Marshall. In the course of activities the sheriff's car and the local fire truck were damaged. See accounts in the *New York Times*, November 11, 1933, and the *Marshall Messenger*, November 10, 1933.

everybody else's date. To try to fit these all together is an extremely difficult thing. And not only is that difficult, you began to set up terrific conflicts between the different groups. So what should have been your support becomes your opposition. We tried it [a strike], then we called it off because it was spasmodic, intermittent; we called it off and set another date where we were all supposed to do it together. . . . Now here in Minnesota we were doing a pretty good job. There was doggone little flowing to South St. Paul or anywhere else.

Interviewer. Who was helping you here in Minnesota? You were the main driver?

Mr. Bosch. Well, as far as the program was concerned and the things that were accomplished, at least 50 per cent of the paid-up membership of the national Farm Holiday Association came from Minnesota. All the rest of the United States had less than half. So we were supporting what everybody else was or wasn't trying to do. And this became a factor a little bit later, too. Well, we were making progress. We met Governor Floyd [B.] Olson who was 100 per cent in favor of what we were trying to do. We were very, very close personal friends. . . . So Floyd Olson did everything and anything he could, as did Bill [William L.] Langer of North Dakota. But none of the rest of the governors had the guts. . . . It didn't take long to see that we were getting nowhere with it [a strike], much as we ought to have. . Well, there was a Farmers Union meeting in Lake Elizabeth Township, and a man came to this meeting. . He was a widower and he had moved from one county to another, and he had a chattel mortgage. He didn't know that a chattel mortgage provided that if he did move from one county to another without the consent of the mortgage holder, they could foreclose. And this is what they were doing. Well, I said to the people there, this just isn't fair. And in this township, we won't let it happen. So I said, I'll get up real early and I will drive to where this man [the mortgage holder] lives — he was a banker — and try to talk him out of it. But just in case I can't, go up and down and cross over, go another six miles, cover four townships, and ask every farmer to be there. And if they insist on selling it, we'll buy it for pennies and give it back. Well, I got to him, all right, but I couldn't move him. So here comes the sheriff, . . six feet four, a big, powerful fellow, and the fellow that held the mortgage. Here was the whole community, everyone standing there with pitchforks. They had nooses hanging through the branches of the trees; they [the sheriff and mortgage holder] took one look and began to leave.

Interviewer. Which county?

Mr. Bosch. This was in Kandiyohi County, in Lake Elizabeth Township. So he [the mortgage holder] stopped at a bank in Willmar and he sold the mortgage to them. So we stopped this. I had talked all this over with Governor Floyd Olson and I had an arrangement with him that as far as the sheriff was concerned, that if the sheriff would call him, say there was a probability of trouble, then he would relieve the sheriff, would then protect his bondholders. Well, it wasn't too long after that, again in Lake Elizabeth Township, they were foreclosing [on a real estate mortgage]. And I suppose I had a thousand farmers in Willmar on that day, and I told . . the sheriff what Floyd Olson had said: if he called him, he [the sheriff] would be relieved of responsibility. [The sheriff] said, "Well, it doesn't make any difference how I sympathize, I've sworn to uphold the law and I've got to do it." I had made arrangements with eight powerful men, one was a brother of mine. two men for each arm and two men for each leg. And when the hour came to try the sale and I couldn't convince him to call the governor, and he said, "Well, gentlemen," and the next second he was flat on his back on the floor. And he stayed there. We decided that he would stay there until we said he would have to leave town; he asked if he could join. So we did give him [the sheriff] an honorary membership.

Interviewer. If I could just interrupt you here for a question on your technique — did you actually stop these sales or did you carry them on then with the penny auction kind of tactics?[7]

Mr. Bosch. We did both. If we felt there was good publicity in having a penny sale, well, I'll tell you, the news got out and a lot of people that were thinking of foreclosures thought, well, this is no good. We've got the bank holiday and son of a gun, there's going to be a foreclosure holiday. And so we pretty well had it stopped all though the state of Minnesota, although the farther you went south, this is a relatively richer area, and we were less powerful there.

Interviewer. There was more activity around Kandiyohi County?.

Mr. Bosch. Kandiyohi County, Chippewa County, Yellow Medicine County, actually Lac qui Parle, those counties. . .Somewhere along here I was going to mention the names. But the backbone of the thing — Harry Haugland, Berle Porter . C. A. Winslow, and George Windingstad, the Smalgaards, and, oh,

[7] In a penny auction, the friends and neighbors of an owner whose farm was being auctioned off following foreclosure of the mortgage would bid nominal sums — a total of $5.35 or $1.90, for example — preventing any bona fide sale by the implicit threat of violence. They would then give the owner back his property.

there were probably about a dozen. Just terrific, terrific fellows.[8]

This particular day in Montevideo they were foreclosing in federal court. A U.S. marshal was there, and I bet I had about 10,000 farmers there. We had developed tactics, techniques, and so on. I told him that I felt that if he would let me talk to him, that I could convince him that he should not proceed with the sale. "Well," he said, "it doesn't make any difference how much I agree with you, I must proceed with the sale." Well, out in the hall where you couldn't identify somebody, somebody would holler, "Let the son of a bitch out here and we'll cut a hole in the ice and push him down twice and pull him up once." Somebody else would say, "Let's tie him up with one hind leg behind the car and haul him back to St. Paul," and this type of thing, and he was white as a sheet. Well, it's a fact — we never hurt anybody. Finally, he called the U.S. district attorney, and I asked him if I could talk, and I said, "Now, you can be awfully brave, but there's going to be no sale. If you call it off, fine, but if you want us to manhandle him, if we have to, we have to. But there's going to be no sale." So, they called it off. Well, not long after that I got a call from Floyd Olson, "John, I'd like to see you." So, I came in and he said, "John, I had a call from the president. He thinks you're doing a tremendous job, but you can't buck the federal government." Well, I said, "Floyd, we did." And he said, "You're going to spend the rest of your life in the pen." And I said, "Now, Floyd, up to now we've hurt no one. You can put me in the pen, but if it takes 10,000, if it takes 100,000, if it takes I don't know how many, I'm not going to stay there. If you want a civil war, if that's what you're aiming for, that's the way to get it." "Well," he said, "what do you want me to do?" I said, "Call the president." Which he did, so here was the president [Franklin D. Roosevelt] in Washington, Floyd Olson was on one phone, and I was on the other, and the president told me, "Mr. Bosch, I can't tell you how much I admire what you're doing" — I don't remember his exact words, but something like that — "but you can't buck the United States government." But again, I said, "Mr. President, we did." And he said, "I don't want you to spend the rest of your life in the penitentiary." I told him the same thing I told Floyd Olson — up to now no one has been hurt, but we are stopping them, we will continue to stop them, and we'll do whatever we have to do to stop them. So, then, he said, "What do you want me to do?" And I said, "There are three things we offer anyone who wants to foreclose: One, we'll give you the deed but you give back a mortgage to the farmer for the amount he's got in it and you farm for awhile and see how you like it. Two, . you will accept the number of dollars that are equal to the amount that would be purchased by the number of bushels at the time they borrowed. If you borrow money when corn is 80 cents a bushel and you try to pay for it when it is 2 cents a bushel, it doesn't make any difference how you try, you can't.

Interviewer. So scale the debt down accordingly?

Mr. Bosch. Right! Or, leave it all in the Federal Land Bank and if the Federal Land Bank offered them some kind of a compromise, or otherwise, tell them to go to hell. That's what we did. . And we called Henry [A.] Wallace [secretary of agriculture] and Henry Wallace said the Federal Land Bank called him and called the thing off. . . . And not long after that, we got through Congress the federal debt conciliation commission act. . It provided that any debtor and/or creditor could appeal to the commissioners, who were recommended by the governors and appointed by the president.[9] And in this area, I picked them, the governors approved them and they were sent on to the president. But you could appeal to the debt conciliation commissioner and he could listen to the story, and he could set aside the terms of the mortgage on whatever basis he felt would be reasonably equitable. And if a person would say, "Well, I can't pay a thousand dollars, but I can pay ninety — these are the reasons why. And that is all I can pay." Bang [hits the table], that's what it was. Well, it is not an exaggeration to say that through what we did — the national Farm Holiday Association bringing about the mortgage moratorium in North Dakota and Minnesota and the debt conciliation commission act — I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we probably saved hundreds of thousands or millions of homes and farms from foreclosure.

---

[8] These were some of the other leaders of the association. Haugland, who was from Montevideo, was head of the Tri-County Holiday Association, which included Yellow Medicine, Lac qui Parle, and Chippewa counties. Porter was also from Montevideo; the others were from Dawson.

[9] On February 23, 1933, Minnesota Governor Olson proclaimed a temporary moratorium upon farm mortgage foreclosures. Before the expiration of this emergency moratorium on May 1, the Minnesota legislature had passed an act giving relief to debtors and extending the redemption period on past due mortgages for two years. Meanwhile the seventy-third Congress was struggling with the national farm emergency, adopting in May, 1933, the Agricultural Adjustment Act and in June the Farm Credit Act, which among other things created a Farm Credit Administration to facilitate the extension of short-term and intermediate credit to agriculture. To speed up the process of debt negotiation, the FCA suggested that governors appoint special conciliation committees to bring debtors and creditors together. In June, 1934, the Frazier-Lemke Act amended the federal bankruptcy law to allow further concessions to debt-ridden farmers. *Farmer-Labor Leader*, February 28, 1933 Minnesota, *Laws*, 1933, p. 514–22; United States, *Statutes at Large*, 48:257, 1289; Louis M. Hacker, *A Short History of the New Deal*, 29–40, 133 (New York, 1934); Schuyler C. Wallace, *The New Deal in Action*, 99 (New York and London, 1934).

Minnesota Historical Society

Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, contact us.

www.mnhs.org/mnhistory