

# FIGHTING FOR A FUTURE

## FARM WOMEN OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE

Karen Starr

RESTING from her labor, a lone woman is silhouetted against a sky that dominates the land. In a winter-dark room, a woman bends over her sewing. On the porch of a white frame house, a woman stands squinting against the sun, one hand smoothing her apron, the other on the screen door.

Our images of midwestern farm women are visual. Their words and stories, like those of many women, have almost been lost to memory. Despite the efforts to uncover such "lost" history, the record of rural women still remains for the most part buried in the past. This is

<sup>1</sup>For recent pioneering works on rural women, see, for example, Glenda Riley, *Frontierswoman: The Iowa Experience* (Ames, 1981); Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington, Ind., 1982); and Sherry Thomas, *We Didn't Have Much, But We Sure Had Plenty* (Garden City, N.Y., 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Dorothy St. Arnold, "Family Reminiscence," part 3, p. [11], in division of archives and manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).

partly due to a general dilemma facing historians of a people too busy or unlettered to have left written clues about the pattern of their existence. But in the case of rural people, such invisibility to history is also a result of the geography of country life and the home-centered nature of farm work. Whatever the cause of the relative silence of country women, their lost words are important to us today. The majority of midwesterners' foremothers are from the land, and their story is part of our history.<sup>1</sup>

Life on the farms of the midwestern plains in the first two decades of the 20th century was not easy. "Nobody knows what hard work is until they've lived on a farm," wrote one woman, describing her grandmother Mary Waters. "Gram had to go out in the fields to help Gramp. She drove a team of five horses on the binder, and in the fall she helped Gramp with the fall plowing."<sup>2</sup> Farm women such as Mary Waters tended to remain unnoticed unless some happening of unusual significance called them to our attention. At the beginning of the 20th century, as the contours of American society

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moved from an agricultural to an industrial and urban economy, such an event occurred. The Nonpartisan League (NPL), one form of agrarian populism, emerged to voice the concern of farmers throughout the country.

Certain structural elements — a state-wide newspaper with a regularly featured page for women readers, a network of women's clubs, and a common political goal — provide present-day historians with a view of farm women unique in its clarity. Bonded together in a common cause, these women used the league's communication channel to speak to one another and develop their political ideas; in so doing, they left a permanent record of their activity that offers a lens through which to view them.

In 1915, even though they had recovered somewhat from the agricultural depression of the 1880s and 1890s, midwestern farmers suffered at the hands of the financial, grain, and railroad interests centered in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. They struggled against the injustices of dishonest or inaccurate grain grading (low grades received considerably lower prices), disproportionate interest rates from big-city banks, and outrageously inflated transportation costs. Large monopolies reaped the profits from newly developed markets to which the small farmer had no access. The agricultural frontier had closed, and the city had begun to replace the farm as the stage on which the "American Dream" was being enacted.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time that the farm family felt the pressure of economic hardship, it was experiencing the effect of dramatic social change that had begun in the previous century. Members of rural families who had envisioned a continuing legacy of family business saw sons and daughters move to the city. Women expressed concern that the city would make their daughters "a prey of vice" and would lure their sons from the farm "to the steel mill, the coal mine, the lumber camp."<sup>4</sup>

Out of such unrest the Nonpartisan League was founded. Angry farmers on the plains of North Dakota banded together in 1915 to protest the injustices that threatened their existence. In the league, with its demand for redress of economic wrongs and a reaffirmation of agrarian life style, they heard the voice of the populist tradition of rural protest long established in North Dakota. Much of the league's program for reform came from the Socialist party, then more strongly organized in North Dakota than in any other agricultural state. Drawing from the Socialist program, the league platform called for state ownership of grain elevators and mills, state inspection of grain and dockage, state-run rural credit banks, and hail insurance. But despite the established strength of the Socialists in North Dakota and their contribution of ideological content and talented personnel, the NPL could not have won mass support without the organizational skill of Arthur C. Townley.

Townley, judging the league would be effective only if it were centrally integrated into mainstream politics, aimed to elect candidates rather than just raise issues. To accomplish this, the group had to attract a broad and well-organized constituency.<sup>5</sup>

Townley knew elections were won in the precincts, so he emphasized a sound local structure. Under his plan, a trained organizer would come into a particular locality, sign up farmers as league members, and before he left, recruit a local liaison or "booster," who became a permanent contact with NPL leadership.<sup>6</sup>

The league was not, strictly speaking, a third-party movement. It would run (or endorse) individuals known to support its principles as Republican candidates in Republican areas, Democratic candidates in Democratic districts. It used the two-party system to elect its own and enact its platform by organizing constituents within the precinct unit.

Using Townley's plan, league-endorsed candidates won in the 1916 Republican primary election. This vital victory opened the door to the mass support that in 1918 gave the NPL control of both houses of the North Dakota legislature as well as the governor's seat. Encouraged by its success, the league movement spread to other parts of the country. As it moved to neighboring Minnesota, more than rebellious farmers were necessary to secure victory — a coalition of farmers, miners from the iron ranges in the north, and laborers from the industrial Twin Cities was needed. The league responded to this challenge by creating, in addition to the Farmers' Nonpartisan League, the Working People's Nonpartisan League in Minnesota. By 1921 the league had branches in 16 states.

Although NPL history is often recounted in the masculine pronoun, farm women were involved in its activities from the very beginning. This is not surprising since all members of the farm family — men, women, and children — contributed to the economic viability of the farm enterprise as working partners. In addition to the domestic duties of production and processing of household commodities, women did such farm labor as plant-

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<sup>3</sup>For a general discussion of agrarian discontent, see Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922*, 6-18, 26 (Minneapolis, 1955).

<sup>4</sup>Women's Nonpartisan Clubs, *Minnesota: The Problems of Her People and Why the Farmers and the Workers Have Organized for Political Action*, 15 (Minneapolis, 1920).

<sup>5</sup>Morlan; *Political Prairie Fire*, 23; Henry G. Teigan to J. C. Hogan, January 30, 1917, National Nonpartisan League Papers, MHS. Socialists initially resisted this dilution of their party's purity and ignored Townley's efforts; later they supported the league; see, for example, Le Sueur to Teigan, January 16, April 9, 1915, and Teigan to Le Sueur, April 4, 1915, in Arthur Le Sueur Papers, MHS.

<sup>6</sup>Here and two paragraphs below, see Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 25, 33, 75.

ing and harvesting and were often responsible for marketing farm products. One observer described the life of the hard-working farm wife as "a woman who has 'raised' six children, and boarded the farm hands herself, even in threshing, and 'never had help except two weeks when a baby come'; and who has 'minded' the chickens and the calves, the churning and cooking and washing and ironing and scrubbing and sweeping and sewing and canning and gardening and sausage making and dish-washing and darning that goes on endlessly on prairie farms . . . till the weary days make a lifetime."<sup>7</sup>

League correspondence and documents, however, exhibit a traditional attitude toward women's role despite their shared investment in the economic consequences of farming. For example, it was league policy that "The wife of every League member is also a member of the League, entitled to equal voting privileges with her husband at all League meetings. She is entitled to participate in all League caucuses and to vote, and it is her duty to do so."<sup>8</sup> Women were received as members of the organization but only in terms of their relationship to men.

Henry G. Teigan, executive secretary of the league from 1916 to 1923, observed a meeting near Kimball Prairie in Meeker County and found, "The attentiveness

and the interest shown, not only by the men, but by the women and young folks, was nothing short of wonderful." Their involvement reminded Teigan of "an old time revival meeting. That only difference was that at this meeting there was no evidence of feverish excitement, but real intellectual earnestness."<sup>9</sup> His words, suggesting surprise at the intellectual earnestness of the women present, indicate how little was actually expected of them.

Yet, despite this somewhat disparaging attitude toward women's contribution to the political endeavor, their presence was accepted, and women used that shared platform of league activity in a variety of ways. Some contributed passively by staying home to take on an increased burden of chores as the men left the farms to do league organizing; others involved themselves more directly; and a few, such as Susie W. Stageberg, Myrtle A. Cain, and Marian Wharton Le Sueur, became important leaders within the league, devoting themselves primarily to political work and running for various state offices.<sup>10</sup>

From its inception, some of the NPL's strongest leaders came from the Socialist party in which women had played relatively active political roles. It was out of this tradition that Marian Le Sueur emerged. She met her husband and political co-worker, Arthur Le Sueur (who was to become the league's national secretary), at People's College in Fort Scott, Kansas, where he headed the law department. She led the English department there and wrote a book on English for workers that Eugene Debs described as "a revolutionary textbook." Out of response to this book grew the idea for the Little Blue Books that workers and farmers could carry in their pocket.<sup>11</sup>

The Le Sueurs moved to St. Paul in 1917 specifically to work for the league; Arthur served as its legal counsel, and Marian (who wrote one of the principal speeches delivered at the well-reported 1918 league meeting in St. Paul addressed by Robert M. La Follette, Sr.) became the national education director of the organization. As such, she designed and managed the correspondence

<sup>7</sup> Beulah Amidon Ratliff, "The Cream Lady," in *New Republic*, October 26, 1921, p. 242.

<sup>8</sup> *Nonpartisan Leader* (St. Paul), January 5, 1920, p. 7. This weekly paper was published first in Fargo, later in St. Paul; after October, 1921, the name changed to *National Leader*.

<sup>9</sup> Notes, [April 26, 1918?], in Henry G. Teigan Papers, MHS.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter, eds., *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, 262, 341 (St. Paul, 1977); Meridel Le Sueur, *Crusaders*, 59, 74 (New York, 1955).

<sup>11</sup> Here and below, see Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920*, 308-310 (Urbana, Ill., 1981). On the Le Sueurs, here and below, see Le Sueur, *Crusaders*, 49; James M. Youngdale, *Third Party Footprints: An Anthology from Writings and Speeches of Midwest Radicals*, 338, 339 (Minneapolis, 1966). On the La Follette speech see, for example, Carl H. Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota, 1899-1918*, 149-152 (St. Paul, 1971).

*WOMEN and men of a North Dakota Nonpartisan League club posed for this group photograph in 1917*





course to train organizers and taught classes for them. The effectiveness of her method was key to the success of the league's decentralized organization. For a time she and Arthur co-edited the league newspaper, and Marian remained an active lifelong spokeswoman for NPL ideals.

THE GREAT MAJORITY of farm women, however, involved in NPL work functioned at the local level and rarely came to power within the league's inner circles. Available evidence indicates, for example, that women often arranged the numerous rallies, picnics, and other meetings that formed the backbone of the grassroots organization.<sup>12</sup>

The women learned from the political style of the men. They understood the value of organizing well. One wrote: "The fathers have banded together as the Farmers' Nonpartisan League of North Dakota to make it a better place for their sons to live in, and why can not the mothers band together as an organization to clean up the social life of our state?" "Organize," urged another, pointing out that "Before the farmers were organized they were powerless. Dakota men are the beginners of a movement that is likely to attract the attention of the whole world. We [women] can get together and organize as they have done. We are strong only when united. Individually, we can do nothing."<sup>13</sup>

Women demonstrated their commitment to the league in a multitude of humble ways. The "Cream Lady," for example, was a farm woman who lived the life of everyday hard work that the majority of league women lived. She brought her product to town every day and sold it impartially to firstcomers. One day, the story goes, one of her regular customers denigrated her league membership. From that day on, she refused to sell her cream to the antagonistic, antileague woman, but instead went out of her way to bring that portion to a league supporter.<sup>14</sup> She was but one example of the women who expressed in the pages of the *Nonpartisan Leader* the new sense of power league affiliation gave them.

The collective and personal initiative felt by farm women may well have resulted from the new-found sense of group identity the league provided. Geographically dispersed, often isolated from other women, farm women in the Middle West saw a good opportunity through the league to make contact with one another and create a social network. The NPL newspaper played a key role in unifying the scattered league membership. Accompanying each paid-up NPL membership, it served to sustain members' enthusiasm between elections, to instruct members at times of action, and to provide an over-all picture of the league movement. It contained specific instructions on which candidates to support and locations of polling places, as well as more



*THIS lace doily, crocheted with the NPL motto, was made by a Montana league woman and presented to North Dakota governor, Lynn Frazier, after his election in 1918.*

general items of news or social interest. And in the later years of the league the paper served as a voice to combat the tide of bitter opposition to the organization.<sup>15</sup>

In the pages of the *Leader*, women carved a space for themselves within the NPL. The letters and articles were interspersed with references to farm life, and the woman's page of the paper sponsored contests such as "What League Means to Me"; the best new ideas for entertainment in a rural setting; and ways to combat loneliness and isolation on the farm. And the women wrote of the league's relevance to their lives. One Montana reader, for example, asked: "Why discuss household problems in the *Leader*? Every farm paper and woman's magazine does that. Why not have our paper unique? Let us discuss women in politics and her problems there." And she suggested subjects for discussion: "What do they say of women who are interested in public matter in your neighborhood? Is your husband interested enough to go and vote? Mine wasn't for a long time; he doesn't care much now." Another woman re-

<sup>12</sup> On women's participation in numerous activities see, for example, programs, notices, and correspondence in the Teigan Papers.

<sup>13</sup> *Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo), June 15, p. 15, September 14, p. 14, both 1916, and September 13, 1917, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Ratliff, in *New Republic*, October 26, 1921, p. 240-242.

<sup>15</sup> Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 36-40.

joiced: "How good it is to find a friend with a common point of view in a common meeting place in the Nonpartisan League!"<sup>16</sup>

The *Leader* also provided new images of women. In its pages, women of the prairie saw news and pictures of women from all over the world: a Canadian suffragist, an aviator appearing at the North Dakota State Fair, and Russian, French, and English women involved in non-traditional work for the war effort.<sup>17</sup>

The network that was revealed in the pages of the *Leader* took tangible form in the women's NPL clubs. A women's auxiliary to the Nonpartisan League was started in 1919; by January 5, 1920, North Dakota had 62 women's clubs that had grown up "almost spontaneous-

<sup>16</sup> *Leader*, November 22, 1917, p. 10, January 12, 1920, p. 7. The title varied from "A Page for Farm Women," to "Department for Home Managers," and "A Page of Interest to Women and Household."

<sup>17</sup> *Leader*, October 14, 1915, p. 7, and April 6, p. 4, July 6, p. 11, September 7, p. 14 — all 1916.

<sup>18</sup> *Leader*, January 5, 1920, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Women's Nonpartisan Clubs, membership file, in National Nonpartisan League Papers: *Minnesota: The Problems of Her People*, 2, *Leader*, March 30, p. 22, July 27, p. 15, both 1916. See also Women's Nonpartisan Clubs, convention programs, 1924-25, in Susie W. Stageberg Papers, 1881-1961, MHS. On the league's decline, see Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 343-345.

<sup>20</sup> St. Arnold, "Family Reminiscence," part 3, p. [8].

THIS CARTOON by W. C. Morris stressed the importance of the women's auxiliary as NPL partners.



ly" and boasted over 1,255 members. Total membership in the auxiliary at that time, including other states, was 1,532. A year later Minnesota claimed nearly 50 clubs. In 1920, with the approval of the general membership, the National Federation of League Women was formed with its own officers, finances, and headquarters in St. Paul. The federation's mandate was to continue the work of the North Dakota auxiliary and add a national focus. When five or more women in any locality came together, they could organize a club. The women's clubs appear to have been politicized groups that drew on a long tradition of church-related women's organizations.<sup>18</sup>

The clubs, strongest in rural areas, continued to serve a social function after the league itself had declined. The pages of the *Leader* reflected how club activity provided NPL women another way to communicate and to break through some of the isolation the midwestern prairie geography imposed. One woman envisioned using meetings as a forum for women's issues: "The best way would be for us women to go right ahead and have our meetings and vote on any subject we were interested in. I think it would be fine to have a woman's court and let women take care of women in jail if necessary.

Let women take care of women and men take care of men is my motion."<sup>19</sup>

MARY WATERS, the hard-working Gram who participated in NPL affairs



Farm women also had increased reason to leave their home towns to attend conventions and other league meetings, where such leaders as Le Sueur, Stageberg, and Kate Richards O'Hare appeared. Dorothy St. Arnold, for example, described her grandmother Mary Waters' trip to "a convention at Jamestown. [where she] read a report on the work the women in their district had been doing. Gram sat at the speaker's table. . . . She was afraid she was going to be nervous and lose her voice, but everyone was so nice she got over that."<sup>20</sup>

The women in leadership positions within the league

may well have been responsible for the strong emphasis placed on suffrage as a league issue. Strongly supported by the NPL, suffrage provided a cause around which rural women could act politically in their own behalf. Numerous articles backing the 19th Amendment describe suffrage work in states outside the league's area of influence, as well as abroad, and offered diverse images of women in the struggle for voting rights. Women discussed suffrage on the woman's page of the *Leader*: "I feel that the women who are 'against suffrage' are to be compared with the farmer who is against the Nonpartisan League," wrote one. Another woman stated: "The law has tied women, hand and foot and sealed their mouths and there is no other way for them than to get their rights, — that is, the right to vote and help to make the laws." In this populist movement that so valued citizen participation, farm women were fighting for equal status.<sup>21</sup>

Women did more than acquire forms of political action appropriate to their situation. In the course of their NPL interaction, they came to expand their image of the farm family to a world view. They understood politics as Lawrence Goodwyn described it: as a cultural struggle to understand human nature and create humane models of social relationships. But where NPL men organized to save the family farm, women worked to save the farm family. Rising divorce rates, for example, which in Minnesota tripled in the 30 years after 1900, cast a shadow over future family stability. The new middle-class family of the cities de-emphasized women's role as economic contributor and devalued the hard labor from which farm women derived both pride and power.<sup>22</sup>

For rural women, economics, politics, and the home were intimately interconnected. They saw themselves as mothers, wives, and daughters of the league — cleaning up the state to make it a better place for their children to live. "Our safety and happiness lies not in some chance of escape from the common lot, but in making the common lot honorable and productive at all times of the minimum for civilized family life." The future these women wanted was one that valued humble labor. "None of us can leave our children anything to compare with equal opportunity. The great mass of the next generation must do about the same work their fathers are now doing — raising grain, livestock, fruits and vegetables."<sup>23</sup>

The Nonpartisan League women articulated a social vision that combined family values of co-operation, responsibility, and continuity with populist values of self-reliance and democracy. And they saw themselves as equal participants in a commonwealth that resembled their own households more than corporate offices. One group of women declared that they could give "hundreds of illustrations of how profoundly government is altered in the interests of the plain people when the plain



VOICING its support for equal voting rights, the Nonpartisan *Leader* featured this cover on March 15, 1920.

people actually take their proper place in representative government."

The urban ideal that was fast coming to influence other parts of the country offered little improvement to the lot of the midwestern farm woman in 1915. And the NPL, articulating as it did a populist social vision, offered women an avenue by which to resist changes that threatened to remove them from a powerful position at the center of the farm family.<sup>24</sup>

WITH conditions ripe for women to achieve the goals they initially sought in the NPL, why did they not succeed? To answer this question one must reconsider a primary reason farm women became involved in league activities. They were attracted to the league because its

<sup>21</sup> *Leader*, August 17, September 7, 1916, both p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, xiii–xvii (New York, 1978). See also William O'Neill, *Divorce in the Progressive Era*, 252 (New Haven, Conn., 1968); United States Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstracts*, 1890, 54, 1911, 84, 1930, 92, 1941, 7 (Washington, D.C., 1890, 1912, 1930, 1941). The rural population in Minnesota dropped over a 50-year period from two-thirds to one-half of the total population.

<sup>23</sup> Here and below, see *Minnesota: The Problems of Her People*, 14, 15.

<sup>24</sup> George E. Mowry and Blaine E. Brownell, *The Urban Nation, 1920–1960*, 3 (New York, 1967). For discussions of changes occurring in American society during the time of the league's greatest influence, see David W. Noble, *The Progressive Mind, 1890–1917* (Chicago, 1970); Margaret Gibbons Wilson, *The American Woman in Transition: The Urban Influence, 1870–1920* (Westport, Conn., 1979).





FATHERS, MOTHERS, WHAT DO YOU THINK OF IT?



ANTI-NPL cartoons such as these that appeared in the Red Flame sought to undermine the confidence that auxiliary women had in the league.



philosophy reaffirmed a family-farm life style that was increasingly threatened by growing urbanization.

Many of the league's supporters and some of its language were of a radical bent. The war effort and the loyalist purge that followed provided an opportunity for the conservative forces that opposed the NPL to renew their attack. Using emotionally charged arguments that preyed upon contemporary prejudices and fears, opponents accused league members of being pro-German anarchists, members of the Industrial Workers of the World, and "friends of International Bolshevism." In Minnesota a repressive Commission of Public Safety focused attacks on the league's criticism of the war and on its lack of conformity to the commission's rigidly defined brand of patriotism.<sup>25</sup>

By labeling the NPL as antifamily, as supporters of free love, and as unpatriotic, antileague forces struck at a particular vulnerability of farm wives and daughters. For instance, the *Red Flame*, a lurid antileague periodical, repeatedly caricatured women under league rule as vulnerable to lawless attacks by vaguely foreign-looking men; it also pictured free love being taught in the schools, and singled out Socialist leaders such as O'Hare ("Red Flag Kate") and Signe Lund for vehement attacks and sexual slurs.<sup>26</sup>

By 1924 the NPL had ceased to exist as a national organization, although its influence was still felt in some states — notably North Dakota and Minnesota. Among the factors that played a role in its decline, the "Red Scare" was one that sapped the support of league women in a particular way. In the face of increasing attacks on the NPL's values, women found it more and more difficult to view the league as an ally in support of those traditional family values that they sought to maintain.<sup>27</sup>

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that involvement with the league did not have an effect on rural women. For many, the NPL provided access to a public arena where they learned to apply new organiza-

tional skills they had learned to political goals. The presence of women affiliated with the league in later groups such as the Farmers' Union in North Dakota and the Farmer-Labor party in Minnesota suggests that the NPL laid a foundation for organizational involvement that lived on long after the parent group's demise.

The league experience in the Middle West at the turn of the century was an experiment that allowed women to band together within a larger movement of economic reform. Despite initial limiting expectations, they developed political skills and, using the forums available to them, articulated a brand of populism based on co-operation and egalitarianism. The historical moment was unique and passed quickly, but it left us with an image of united response by a group of women struggling together for a common cause.

<sup>25</sup> Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 267; Carol Jenson, "Loyalty as a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 43:46 (Summer, 1972); *Red Flame*, December, 1919, p. 39; Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, *Report*, 32 (St. Paul, 1919).

<sup>26</sup> James N. Tittmore and A. A. Vissers, *The Non-partisan League vs. The Home*, 67 (Milwaukee, 1921) and issues of the *Red Flame*, throughout. On the NPL's appeal to ethnic groups such as German Americans and Scandinavians see, for example, Chrislock, *Progressive Era*, 179–181. The ethnic identity of women is, of course, frequently obscured by married names.

<sup>27</sup> For examples of later organizations influenced by the league here and below see, Charles and Joyce Conrad, *50 Years, North Dakota Farmers Union* (n.p., 1976); Arthur E. Naftalin, "History of the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota," Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1948; Paul S. Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association: Minnesota's Party Within a Party," in *Minnesota History*, 38:301–309 (September, 1963).

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on p. 259 (left) and 260 are from the *Nonpartisan Leader*, November 3, 1919, p. 11, and March 15, 1920, p. 1; those on p. 261 are from the *Red Flame*, November, 1919, p. 6, January, 1920, p. 26, and February, 1920, p. 6. All other photographs are in the MHS audio-visual library.







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