



A COUNTRY EDITOR IN POLITICS

*Hjalmar Petersen,
Minnesota Governor*

Steven J. Keillor

ONE of the most turbulent periods in Minnesota's political history was the 1930s, a time dominated by the Farmer-Labor party and its popular leader, Floyd B. Olson. And one of that era's more controversial figures was Hjalmar Petersen, governor for a brief, four-month term

¹J. Lawrence McLeod to Hjalmar Petersen, January 5, 1938, and Tom Davis, "The Unmasking of Hjalmar Petersen," transcript of radio address, May 25, 1938, p. 1, both in Hjalmar Petersen Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul. Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence is in the Petersen Papers.

The most recent scholarly treatment of the period is Milard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, 1979); on the Petersen-Benson controversy, see p. 205, 211-220, 225-227, 229-232. See also Arthur Naftalin, "A History of the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota," Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1948; this thesis was written before many of the personal papers, including those of Petersen, became available.

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following Olson's death in August of 1936. Petersen's political enemies blamed him for the Farmer-Labor party's decline, which began in 1938 with a bitter primary battle between Petersen and the incumbent Farmer-Labor governor, Elmer A. Benson. During that primary, a supporter called Petersen "the Moses of Minnesota"; an opponent referred to him as "a man who will go down in history side by side with Judas Iscariot and Benedict Arnold."¹

A close look at the origins and progress of Petersen's political career reveals that he was none of the above. He was, instead, the quintessential country editor in politics. Hjalmar Petersen received his political education in the newspaper office. His position as an editor and publisher helped him to win a seat in the Minnesota legislature. His ability to generate publicity won him statewide notice and the lieutenant governorship, from which he rose to be governor. Finally, his attempts to regain that office disclosed the pitfalls of an editorial approach to party politics.

Country editors campaigning for public office were commonplace in the progressive era of Minnesota politics; most typically, the editor was also the publisher of a small-town newspaper. Minnesota's popular progressive governor, the Democrat John A. Johnson (1905-09), was

editor and part owner of the *St. Peter Herald* and president of the Minnesota Editors' and Publishers' Association in 1893. Minnesota's three-term governor of the 1920s, the Republican Theodore Christianson (1925–31), started out politically as the progressive editor of the *Dawson Sentinel*. Hjalmar Petersen's political roots were also in small-town progressivism, but he carried the editorial approach to politics to its highest level.²

Petersen's lifelong career in the printing and publishing business began around 11 o'clock on the morning of May 17, 1904, in the southwestern Minnesota town of Tyler. Young Hjalmar was walking uptown to buy meat for the noon meal at the boardinghouse his mother ran. Herbert Sykes, the editor of the *Tyler Journal*, stopped him and asked the 14-year-old youth what he was going to do during the coming summer. Hjalmar replied that he was planning to help his violin teacher paint houses. The editor advised him to learn a trade instead and invited him to work at the *Journal* office. He began that afternoon.³

Hjalmar Petersen was born on January 2, 1890, in Eskildstrup, Denmark, to Lauritz and Anna K. H. Petersen, who were small shopkeepers on the island of Fyn. Shortly after his birth, his parents emigrated to America. After a short stay in Chicago, they moved in the early 1890s to the Tyler area when the arrival of

returning with the dinner meat, was located only a block from the Danebod church and folk school, the center of Danish immigrant culture in western Minnesota. The newspaper office which he entered that afternoon was to be his window on the outside world. It was also to be his classroom. His formal education ended that May, after he had completed the seventh grade.⁴

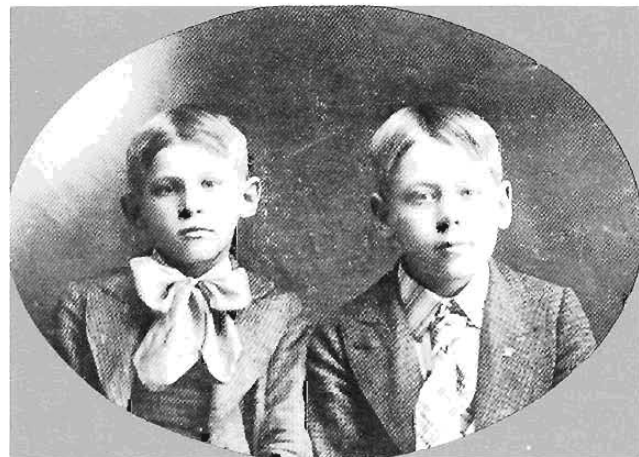
From Tyler, Petersen moved on to newspaper offices in the Danish-American communities of Lake Benton in western Minnesota and Irene and Viborg in eastern South Dakota. From 1908 on he worked six years at a large printing company in Milwaukee. After marrying Rigmor Wosgaard, a young woman from Withee, one of Wisconsin's Danish towns, he moved to Askov, another Grundtvigian colony, in Pine County. There he established his own newspaper, the *Askov American*, an English-language paper with occasional Danish-language items. The first issue came out on September 17, 1914, just as World War I was beginning. Other than that, it was a good year to start a rural weekly paper — it was the peak date for the weekly newspaper in the United States, and there were several years of farm prosperity to come.⁵

²Johnson's 1904 Republican opponent, former state auditor Robert C. Dunn, was editor of the *Princeton Union*; Johnson's chief political advisor was former lieutenant governor Frank A. Day, editor of the *Fairmont Sentinel*. For an analysis of the role of the small town and its journalists in the progressive era, see Carl H. Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota, 1899–1918*, 18, 22–25, 188 (St. Paul, 1971). See also Winifred G. Helmes, *John A. Johnson, The People's Governor: A Political Biography*, 26, 45 (Minneapolis, 1949).

³Notes for speech given at Askov High School, Petersen Papers; interview with Medora Petersen, April 20, 1978, tape in possession of Arol Hansen, Askov; interview with Medora Petersen, May 19, 1981, notes in author's possession.

⁴Johanne Strandvold, "Recollections," 4–9, typed manuscript in possession of Phyllis Petersen Morgensen, Askov; interview of Hjalmar Petersen by Russell W. Fridley and Lucile M. Kane, May 28, 1963, p. 17, MHS; Olga Strandvold Opfell, *Prairie Princess*, 7, 10, 20 (Askov, 1971); land contract, June 15, 1891, Lincoln County Recorder's Office, Ivanhoe; Thomas P. Christensen, "Danish Settlement in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 8:376 (December, 1927); Ann Regan, "The Danes," in June Drenning Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, 282 (St. Paul, 1981); Enok Mortensen, *Seventy-five Years at Danebod*, 7, (Tyler, 1961). Petersen's school attendance and performance record in the 7th grade is in "Journal," 100, 101, Superintendent of School's office, Tyler; his name does not appear in the 8th-grade records.

⁵Petersen to Jorgen Lyndgaard, March 29, 1933, to Lauritz J. Petersen, August 12, 1933, to J. D. Christensen, January 18, 1935, and notes for speech at Askov High School; *Askov American*, September 17, 1914, p. 1. In 1914 there were 14,500 weekly newspapers in the United States, a number that decreased to 9,522 by 1930; John Tebbel, *The Compact History of the American Newspaper*, 251, 258 (New York, 1963). On Rigmor Petersen, see *Askov American*, September 4, 1930, p. 1.



ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD Hjalmar Petersen (right) with his brother and future business partner, Svend

many Danish immigrants was turning that part of Lincoln County into a little Denmark on the prairie. The founders of this colony were followers of Danish Bishop N. F. S. Grundtvig; their organized, collective efforts to preserve their Danish language and culture set them apart from other Danish immigrant groups. Thus, Petersen was raised in a community committed to avoiding assimilation. The Petersen home, to which he was

IT TOOK some independence of mind to move to a colony opposed to speedy Americanization, establish a newspaper, and name it the *American*. In his first editorial, "Birth of an American," Petersen assured his readers that "the word American has a very broad meaning" which included the foreign born, "and it is the earnest hope and desire of the editor that this newspaper shall stand for just what the word implies." He dedicated his newspaper to that "spirit which is shown by every real American — always ready to listen to the argument or opinion of others."⁶

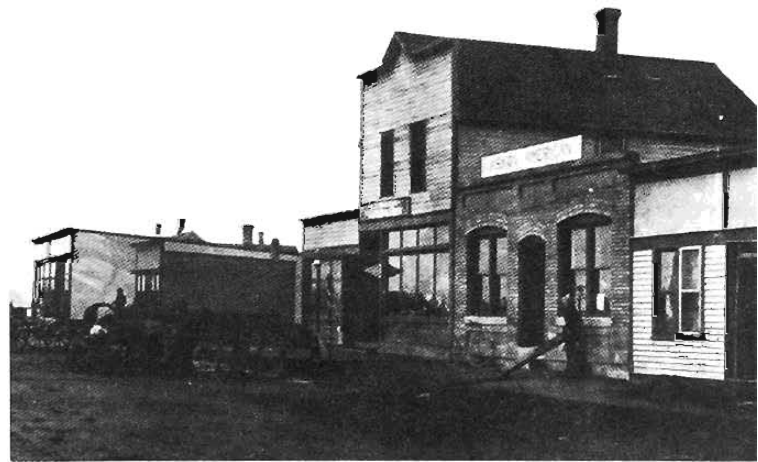
With United States entry into World War I in April of 1917 came increasing pressure on immigrant groups to demonstrate their loyalty to America. The meaning of the word "American" narrowed and not "every real American" was willing to listen to contrav opinions. Given virtually unlimited powers, the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety ordered the registration of all aliens in the state, spied on immigrant groups, investigated the use of German in the state's schools, and established a censorship unit to which foreign-language papers had to send translations of each issue.⁷

During this period Petersen's newspaper stood for the narrower definition of Americanism, as promulgated by the Commission of Public Safety. In 1917, Askov's Danish immigrants decided to celebrate the June 5th national Danish holiday "as an American patriotic day, with a good American speaker." Petersen editorially endorsed this decision, although he added that a speech in Danish "for the benefit of the older folks who may not understand English well will not lessen our patriotism one particle." He supported the repressive activities of the Commission of Public Safety and its local units. He censured Wisconsin Senator Robert M. "Fighting Bob" La Follette, Sr., for "opposing the war plan." He expressed shock and dismay when Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., the Nonpartisan League candidate for governor in

the 1918 Republican primary, received 36 votes in Partridge Township (which included Askov).

Petersen expanded his newspaper's coverage and circulation to the non-Danish small towns of northern Pine County during the war years. After the arrival in 1916 of his mechanically skilled brother Svend and a new Lino-graph typesetting machine, Petersen, who was without mechanical aptitude, specialized in writing copy and soliciting advertising. The following year brought a greater reliance on local stories and articles; the *Askov American* proudly announced that it was switching to "All Home Print" and ending its use of "ready print" or "patent insides," which were preprinted pages of national and regional news and advertising sold to local newspapers by such firms as the Western Newspaper Union in Minneapolis. Petersen interested himself in national, state, and county politics in order to furnish the editorials and articles needed to keep the promise of "All Home Print."⁸

In the Republican decade of the 1920s, Petersen found his editorial voice as he trusted more in his own instincts and worried less about sounding like an immigrant. His Grundtvigian heritage was a liberalism that had been forged in struggles against a repressive, conservative regime in Denmark in the late 19th century. (In 1912 he had cast his first vote for the Socialist candi-



THE ORIGINAL plant of the *Askov American*, about 1915; the Petersens lived in the back rooms of the building during their first years in Askov.

date for mayor of Milwaukee.) Despite his support of the Commission of Public Safety, he did not subscribe to the conservative Republicanism that had captured the party in Minnesota during the war years. While he still wanted his newspaper to stand for American political values, he focused less on simple, patriotic rhetoric and more on the progressive values of good government, openness in

⁶*Askov American*, September 17, 1914, p. 1.

⁷Here and below, see Hildegard Binder Johnson, "The Germans," in Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota*, 176; *Askov American*, May 24, September 13, 27, 1917, all p. 4, and June 20, 1918, p. 4. On the reaction of the Danish-American press to censorship and the Americanization crusade of World War I, see Marion T. Marzoff, *The Danish-Language Press in America*, 139-146 (New York, 1979).

⁸Interview with Phyllis Morgensen, August 31, 1981, notes in author's possession; Hjalmar Petersen, "History of Askov American Weekly Rural Newspaper," May 29, 1950, in Pine County Historical Society Museum, Askov; *Askov American*, June 7, 1917, p. 1; Bernard A. Weisberger, *The American Newspaperman*, 147 (Chicago, 1961); Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 Years*, 589 (New York, 1941). On the Petersen brothers' success with the linograph, see the Linograph Company's promotional magazine, *The Slug*, December, 1920, p. 1, 3, 4, 5.

government, and nonpartisanship. In 1924, he praised Senator La Follette, the Progressive party candidate for president. That same year, he defended Floyd B. Olson, the Farmer-Labor candidate for governor, against charges that Olson advocated government ownership of the railroads. Increasingly pragmatic, Petersen disclaimed any support for government ownership but contended that the threat of it was useful "to keep private business in good behavior."⁹

Although moving closer to Farmer-Laborism, Petersen still valued nonpartisanship. He insisted he was "not a member of any party, because I am the editor of an independent newspaper if for no other reason." To recent Farmer-Labor convert Ernest Lundeen he wrote, "there is one thing that I like about you and many other progressives, and that is that you speak right out in open court. This attitude of some of the real old stand-patters and conservatives: 'Just leave it to us — we will arrange affairs, all the rest of you have to do is to smile and be happy' is something that goes right against my grains." It went against his grain as an editor who believed in openness in politics and government.¹⁰

Thus, the editor learning about politics became the editor commenting on politics and, then, the editor running for office. Petersen gave these reasons for seeking the office of state representative for the 56th district in 1926: "I desired election and hoped to be of benefit to my people in the legislature and give them something more through the columns of the American as well as the other county newspapers." His principal campaign promise was to write for all the county newspapers a

weekly letter reporting on the legislative session. He seemed to be trying to convince the voters to elect him their reporter — as much as their representative — in St. Paul.

He failed in his attempt to transfer unchanged into politics the informational role of an editor. After his narrow, 46-vote loss in 1926, he changed the substance of his political appeal from this promise of information to standard progressive issues, but he kept and further refined a political style centering on the use of his editorial skills.¹¹

As a small-town editor and publisher, Petersen possessed assets that could be turned to political advantage, and he learned to do so. During legislative campaigns, he expanded business letters written to subscribers, contributors, and advertisers to include a paragraph or two about his political activities. His fieldman, J. A. Vye, traveled around the county signing up advertisers and subscribers — and also doing political work for Petersen. The editor allowed the list of subscribers to be used as a mailing list for political literature. The *Askov American*

⁹Interview with Medora Petersen, July 20, 1981, notes in author's possession; Petersen to Edward J. Prochaska, January 23, 1931; Chrislock, *Progressive Era*, 181; *Askov American*, September 25, October 2, 1924, both p. 4. On Grundtvigians in late 19th-century politics, see W. Glyn Jones, *Denmark*, 76, 81–83 (London, 1970).

¹⁰Here and below, see Petersen to L. W. Martin, June 21, 1926, and to Ernest Lundeen, September 25, 1926; *Askov American*, October 14, p. 4, October 28, p. 1, November 4, p. 4, all 1926; Minnesota, *Legislative Manual*, 1927, p. 359.

¹¹*Askov American*, November 11, 1926, p. 1.



COUNTRY EDITOR
PETERSEN stands between his father, Lauritz (left), and his brother Svend, with the staff at the printing plant built in 1926.



FLOYD B. OLSON in 1932

¹²Petersen to H. E. Schafer, May 14, 1926, to C. A. Babcock, May 21, 1926, to C. S. Pulling, July 9, 1926, to W. H. Stage and to R. J. Shute, both January 23, 1928, to Elsie Pemberton, September 25, 1926, to Prochaska, February 21, 1928; Prochaska to Petersen, February 21, 1928, J. A. Vyc to Petersen, September 16, 1926, *Askov American*, September 25, October 9, 16, 1930, all p. 1, 4.

¹³Here and below, see Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 110; Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire. The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922*, 62, 85 (Minneapolis, 1955); Petersen to Teigan, October 9, 1926, and to Prochaska, October 6, 1930; Teigan to J. S. Jungers and to Petersen, both October 23, 1928, Teigan to Petersen, October 3, 1930; *Pine Poker* (Pine City), January 9, March 27, 1930, both p. 1; *Pine County Courier* (Sandstone), April 17, October 23, 1930, both p. 4; *Legislative Manual*, 1929, p. 381.

¹⁴"Pine County Wants a New Deal," newspaper clipping in Petersen Papers; Petersen to Georg Strandvold, October 23, 1930, to Viggo A. Hansen, October 17, 1930; Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 88-91, 136-139; *Askov American*, November 8, 1928, September 4, 1930, both p. 1; *Legislative Manual*, 1931, p. 378.

carried his front-page articles on campaign issues as well as his editorials. Many candidates might use their business contacts and resources in a campaign; a newspaper owner simply has more than most.¹²

Although Petersen's political independence limited his Farmer-Labor support in 1926, fellow newspaperman Henry G. Teigan took an active interest in Petersen's legislative campaigns. Teigan, then a leader in Minnesota's Farmer-Labor party and the editor of a labor paper, the *Minnesota Union Advocate*, had started his political career in North Dakota, where he had been state chairman of the Socialist party, editor of the *Iconoclast* (the Socialist party newspaper in Minot), and executive secretary of the Nonpartisan League. In the 1928 campaign Teigan wrote a public letter blasting Petersen's opponent, Joseph E. Therrien of Pine City, as being "unworthy of further support by the Progressives and Farmer-Laborites of Pine county." In addition, Teigan arranged for a special edition of the *Farmer-Labor Leader* sharply criticizing Therrien's record to be sent into the southern part of Pine County, Therrien's political base. This aid from the party press helped to offset the editorial support local newspapers were giving the incumbent.¹³

After a second loss in 1928, Petersen intensified his efforts. His tactical use of publicity culminated in a four-page, political "newspaper" that was mailed to every boxholder in the county a week before the 1930 election. As for Therrien, the poor, outpublicized opponent, Petersen described him as "standing in the court house every day and shaking hands with those who come in to pay their taxes, meeting perhaps from 20 to 30 people each day."

In 1930 Petersen campaigned on the same state-wide issues such as iron ore taxation used by the Farmer-Labor gubernatorial candidate, Floyd B. Olson. Then Hennepin County county attorney, Olson had lost the 1924 governor's race to Theodore Christianson, but his personal magnetism, the deepening depression, and plunging farm prices swept him to victory in 1930. Meeting with similar success, Hjalmar Petersen was elected state representative by a margin of almost 1,500 votes out of a total of 6,500 cast. His political triumph was marred, however, by personal tragedy; his wife Rigmor died of pregnancy complications in the midst of the 1930 campaign, and the baby was stillborn.¹⁴

THE NEWLY ELECTED state representative began to shift his publicity skills from the local to the state-wide scene. During the 1931 legislative session, he mailed his promised weekly legislative letter to about 25 newspapers in east central Minnesota. Circulation of the letter increased markedly in 1933 following a conversation between Petersen and Governor Olson's personal secretary, Vince Day. At the time, conservative state repre-

sentative Rufus W. Hitchcock (publisher of the *Hibbing Daily Tribune*) was widely distributing his legislative letter, which was highly critical of Olson's program. Day suggested that Petersen offer his proadministration letter to more newspapers and apparently gave him a list of possibilities. For the remainder of the 1933 legislative session Petersen's "Weekly Review of the Minnesota Legislature" was mailed to about 130 newspapers free of charge. Olson received more favorable press coverage, while Petersen's by-line appeared in newspapers all around the state.¹⁵

Additional prominence came with Petersen's role as chief author and House floor leader for the state income tax bill in the 1933 session. His name was mentioned frequently in the Twin Cities' dailies during the debates over Minnesota's first income tax law. As chairman of the House Committee on Taxes and Tax Laws and a prime force behind passage of the act, Petersen controlled the procedural progress of the bill through the House of Representatives. In later years he would look back on his role in passage of the income tax as his greatest service to the state of Minnesota.¹⁶

His performance in the legislature did not go unnoticed. In a memo sent to Olson just before the 1934 Farmer-Labor state convention, Day recommended Petersen for the lieutenant governor slot on the ticket. Day described Petersen as "a straight-thinking man, the editor of a very progressive newspaper," a man who was "well-liked and respected by all." Endorsed at the convention and elected at the polls in November of 1934, Lieutenant Governor-elect Hjalmar Petersen seemed to have a good chance to become the party's choice to succeed Olson if Olson made his widely anticipated move to the United States Senate in 1936. In a postelection memo to Olson, Day called Petersen "by reason of his experience and integrity, the best available candidate in the Party to succeed you as Governor."¹⁷

It was a time of personal happiness and growth — as well as political success — for Hjalmar Petersen. On June 28, 1934, during his campaign for lieutenant governor, he married Medora Belle Grandprey, a University of Minnesota graduate assistant in child development. The wedding was scheduled for a Thursday because the bridegroom was busy publishing his weekly paper on Wednesday. His new wife seems to have had a modernizing influence on his personal habits; his customary nightshirt was soon replaced with a pair of up-to-date pajamas. She was also avidly interested in politics and a considerable help on the campaign trail.¹⁸

HAVING COME so far, the country editor next turned his energy to campaigning for the governorship. Helped by advance work from a network of rural editors and state legislators, Lieutenant Governor Petersen toured northwestern Minnesota in late September and early



MEDORA and Hjalmar Petersen on their wedding day

October of 1935. He spoke before Rotary groups, commercial clubs, and civic associations, as well as Farmer-Labor audiences. Encouraged by good coverage in the local press, he reported, "sentiment is good for me in north western Minnesota." Yet five months later, when estimating his delegate strength for the upcoming 1936 Farmer-Labor state convention, Petersen counted only

¹⁵ Petersen to C. W. Babcock, April 21, 1931, to E. A. Tasker, November 14, 1932, to Vince Day, January 28, 1933, to W. B. Brown, February 10, 1933, to A. T. Forsberg, April 3, 1933, Fred Jesness to Petersen, January 14, 1933. An almost complete file of Petersen's legislative letters is in the MHS library.

¹⁶ *Minneapolis Journal*, January 19, p. 1, February 13, p. 15, February 14, p. 4, February 16, p. 13, March 14, p. 9, all 1933; *St. Paul Dispatch*, January 19, p. 1, February 11, p. 1, February 14, p. 15, all 1933; interview with Medora Petersen, August, 1973, [4, 5], tape on file in Central Minnesota Historical Center (CMHC), St. Cloud.

¹⁷ Memoranda, Vince Day to Floyd B. Olson, [March, 1934?], November 22, 1934, Vince Day Papers, MHS.

¹⁸ Certificate of Marriage, June 28, 1934, Petersen Papers, interviews with Medora Petersen, October 11, 1982, and Evelyn Petersen Metzger, June 7, 1983, notes in author's possession.

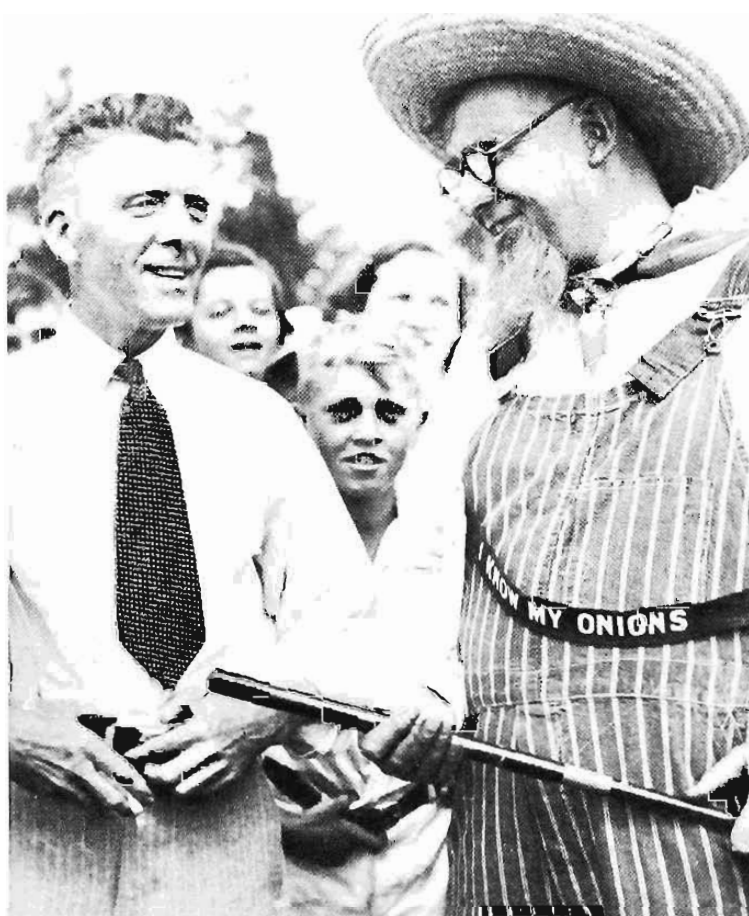
8 of that area's 39 delegates as probable supporters — and only 2 of the 39 supported him later at the convention. Speaking before civic groups and garnering favorable publicity in rural, general-circulation newspapers were not effective means of winning support from prospective party convention delegates, who did not look to their local newspapers as their chief sources of information on party matters.¹⁹

These methods were especially ineffective in the face of an intensive publicity campaign for Elmer Benson in the party newspaper, the *Minnesota Leader*, which was edited by Petersen's former ally, Teigan. Throughout 1935 the *Minnesota Leader* ran front-page articles on Benson's activities at the banking department and on the speaker's circuit. When the banking commissioner requested a \$640.98 refund of alleged interest overcharges from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, it was page-one news in the *Leader*. And when a banking department attorney, Thomas Latimer, was elected mayor of Minneapolis, the *Leader* carried a front-page photograph of Benson bidding his former employee farewell. Strategically placed on the wall behind (and between) the two men was a picture of Floyd B. Olson. The message was unmistakable: Benson was loyal to Olson. The *Leader's* coverage of Benson's speeches was designed to increase his attractiveness to various segments of the Farmer-Labor party. One front-page article on Benson's speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention stressed his record as a war veteran; another reported a Benson speech before the Independent Banker's Association, emphasizing his criticism of bankers (some rank-and-file Farmer-Laborites suspected that Benson was a tool of the bankers because of his position as commissioner). While it was promoting Benson, the *Minnesota Leader* virtually ignored Petersen's activities. Finally, late in the year, it printed several of Petersen's articles and editorials after complaints of unfairness had been made to the editor.²⁰

Benson's chief handicap in the struggle to succeed Olson was that he did not hold an important elective office. This difficulty was removed when Olson appointed him to fill the unexpired term of Senator

Thomas D. Schall, who died unexpectedly on December 21, 1935. Several historians, including his biographer, have concluded that Olson's hand was forced by "a simple conspiracy," a plot to announce the Benson appointment in the December 28, 1935, issue of the *Minnesota Leader* — when, in fact, Olson had either made no decision or had decided to appoint someone other than Benson. The conspiracy account is based on oral interviews, including one with Herman Aufderheide (Olson's personal secretary at the time), and on contemporary reporting by *Minneapolis Journal* columnist Charles B. Cheney. "As the tale goes," Cheney reported on March 10, Olson arrived at his office the morning of December 27 only to discover "an advance copy of the *Minnesota Leader*, announcing the Benson appointment." Cheney added, "The Governor, it is said, 'blew up,' and there were some fireworks, but he was told that the paper was on its way to subscribers, and he finally issued his statement naming Mr. Benson as the new senator." It should be noted, however, that the *Minneapolis Journal* was a

ON THE CAMPAIGN trail Henry Teigan (left) woos a prospective voter in 1936.



¹⁹ Petersen to Senator E. L. Tungseth, to Representative J. O. Melby, and to editor Charles R. Scheers, all October 8, 1935; Petersen to Senator Richard Rice and editors W. E. Dahlquist, W. T. Noonan, and John A. Whaley, all October 9, 1935; Petersen to Prochaska, to Vye, and to Ed Pohrte, all October 10, 1935; Checklist, undated but clearly March, 1936. Petersen Papers. See also note 24, below.

²⁰ *Minnesota Leader*, June 22, July 20, August 10, October 5, 1935, all p. 1; V. N. Johnson to Petersen, January 1, 1936. For Farmer-Labor criticism of the *Leader's* pro-Benson campaign, see O. W. Behrens to Teigan, July 14, 1935, and V. N. Johnson to Teigan, July 25, 1935, Henry G. Teigan Papers, MHS; Knud Wefald to Andrew Trovaton, January 21, 1936, Knud Wefald Papers, MHS.

Republican newspaper and that Cheney seemed to admit that his account was based on hearsay evidence.²¹

A close look at that issue of the *Leader*, nevertheless, lends credence to the conspiracy account. The headlines sound more like a veiled threat than an accomplished fact: "Olson Declines Senate Seat, to Name Benson .

/ Follows Mandate of Party / Governor to Comply With Unanimous Request Of State Committees That F-L Banking Commissioner, World War Veteran And Bonus Advocate, Succeed Schall." With curious logic, the article avers that the choice of Benson was "virtually assured" when Olson announced that he would not resign to take the Senate seat himself, but would instead choose "a Farmer-Laborite and an outstanding Liberal." There must have been more than one "outstanding Liberal" in the Farmer-Labor party.²²

Debate over the conspiracy account should not obscure the fact that, in Petersen's own words, Benson had the "inside track" in the race to succeed Olson even before the Senate appointment. Without Schall's death or the Benson appointment, very probably the Benson forces still would have won the endorsement battle and the ensuing Petersen-Benson split in the Farmer-Labor party still would have occurred.²³

Conspiracy or no conspiracy, the Benson appointment was strongly criticized by Hjalmar Petersen. He assailed Olson's choice of a man who had never held elective office: "it is not the American ideal of having a man appointed to the highest position within the gift of the voters of a state and then start to go down; the American democratic system is to go forward and upward, step by step, as the advancement is merited." Concerning Olson's failure to consult with his lieutenant governor before making the Senate appointment, Petersen wrote, "Some day he may not look upon his running mates as so much excess baggage." Petersen charged that "some of the state job holders who feel that they are more secure in their jobs with Benson in the governorship" had engineered the appointment in order to guarantee a gubernatorial endorsement for Benson.

Petersen was further embittered when Olson failed to secure two endorsements for the office of governor at the 1936 Farmer-Labor state convention. This move would have left it to Farmer-Labor voters to decide between the two at the June primary election. Petersen understood Olson to have promised his support for such a move. It is unclear whether Olson withheld it or just failed to prevail on this issue. Either way, Petersen felt that Olson had reneged on his promise. The 1936 convention's only roll-call vote on the gubernatorial endorsement came on a Petersen motion that the convention endorse two candidates for each office and, thus, let the primary decide. Senator Benson was unanimously endorsed for governor on March 28, 1936. To help restore party unity, Petersen was endorsed for a seat on

the Railroad and Warehouse Commission (the forerunner of the Public Utilities Commission).²⁴

Benson faced a primary challenge from former senator and congressman, Magnus Johnson, who was in the twilight of a long political career. In words that perhaps reflected his own political priorities as much as Johnson's defects, Petersen dismissed Johnson's candidacy: "Imagine that old duffer who sits around and spends hours visiting with non-consequential fellows, talks up and down for hours where it never gets into print, cannot write an article of his own, yes, imagine him taking up any battle." Benson easily defeated Johnson in the primary.²⁵

THROUGHOUT that summer of 1936, Governor Olson's health was deteriorating rapidly. Mayo Clinic doctors had diagnosed incurable cancer in late December of 1935, but had not told Olson. Though he was the party's endorsed senatorial candidate, he was able to do little campaigning. Hjalmar Petersen publicly controlled his feelings of anger and resentment for several months. He spoke at the testimonial dinner for Senator-designate Benson on January 2, 1936. He seconded the nomination of Benson for governor at the 1936 convention after his own defeat became apparent. Finally, on August 12, 1936, he wrote Olson a resentful letter in which he claimed that, if he had fought it out at the convention, "the eyes of many would have been opened and it is very possible that the esteem in which you are held by many might have been lessened considerably, and certainly Elmer could have been made to look like thirty cents." He asked Olson to "square the account" by resigning from both the governorship and the Senate candidacy, so that Benson would be the Senate candidate while Petersen ran for governor. Olson never replied. He died

²¹ Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 212, 213; George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 285 (Minneapolis, 1951); Naftalin, "History of the Farmer-Labor Party," 299-302. For the case against the conspiracy story, see Hyman Berman, "Political Antisemitism in Minnesota during the Great Depression," in *Jewish Social Studies*, 38:250n (Summer-Fall, 1976). Neither Mayer, Naftalin, nor Gieske cite manuscript sources to confirm the conspiracy account.

²² *Minnesota Leader*, December 28, 1935, p. 1.

²³ Here and below, see Petersen to Reverend and Mrs. P. H. Pedersen, October 15, 1935, January 6, 1936, to Lauritz J. Petersen, November 4, 1935, to Charles B. Cheney, December 24, 1935, and to Fern Olson, February 26, 1936. Olson had a different running mate in each of his gubernatorial campaigns: Henry Arens in 1930 and K. K. Solberg in 1932. See Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 130, 138, 160, 190.

²⁴ Petersen to Dr. J. Lawrence McLeod, February 10, 1936, to Floyd B. Olson, August 12, 1936. Proceedings of 1936 Convention, 63, 114-117, Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota (FLA) Papers, 1918-48, MHS.

²⁵ Petersen to Vivian S. Thorp, July 31, 1936; Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 225.

ten days later of pancreatic cancer at a Rochester hospital. Petersen vented his feelings at the worst possible moment, in a manner most damaging to his future standing in a party that came to revere the memory of Floyd B. Olson. The letter would be used against him in future campaigns.²⁶

Governor Hjalmar Petersen's four-month term as Olson's successor (the shortest gubernatorial term in Minnesota history) was characterized by continued battles with the Benson faction. Petersen wanted to be more than a caretaker governor; the Benson group

²⁶ Berman, in *Jewish Social Studies*, 38:253; Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 213, 219, 225; Petersen to M. E. Isherwood, January 4, 1936, to Floyd Olson, August 12, 1936; Proceedings of 1936 Convention, 61-63, FLA Papers. On use of the August 12 letter against Petersen, see J. L. McLeod to Petersen, February 3, 1938; Davis, "The Unmasking of Hjalmar Petersen," 3; E. E. Farnham, *Is Hjalmar Sincere? Here Is the Answer*, reprint of an editorial in the *Madison (Minn.) Independent*, May 13, 1938 — all in Petersen Papers.

²⁷ Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 236; Petersen to Hilda Humpfner, January 25, 1937, and to Reuben Wenberg, July 1, 1937; untitled memorandum, 5 p., [1937?], and "Conservation Commission of Five," undated memorandum, both in Petersen Papers.

wanted all substantive decisions delayed until their man took over. Petersen was first asked to put off any major personnel changes until after the November election, so as to avoid damage to the party's electoral chances. After Benson's landslide victory in November, Petersen was asked to hold off until Benson returned from a ten-day trip to Washington, D.C. Finally, Petersen acted. Shortly after taking office, he had been approached by several members of the Conservation Commission and urged to dismiss E. V. Willard, head of that department. In mid-December, he tried to get the commission to act. Although Petersen requested him to attend, Benson avoided a commission meeting held to consider Willard's case. Similar pressure was placed upon commission members to avoid attending the meeting. When Petersen ordered them to attend, a motion to make the meeting official failed on a 3-to-2 vote. Six months later the Benson administration removed Willard. Except for judicial appointments which could not be reversed, Petersen was hamstrung because his enemies in state government knew his time would soon be up.²⁷

Hjalmar Petersen left the governor's office on January 5, 1937, to begin a six-year term as Railroad and Warehouse commissioner, the post he had won in the

GOVERNOR PETERSEN, meeting with fellow newsmen before a New York speech in October, 1936



November election. But Governor Benson was no sooner inaugurated than Petersen, from his new quarters in the State Office Building, was seeking a political path back to the west wing of the state capitol across the street. The 1936 Farmer-Labor victory could not end the Petersen-Benson split in the party; it was deeply rooted in differing perspectives on politics. Petersen's editorial-page politics contrasted sharply with the party-solidarity politics of the Benson faction.²⁸

As the editor and publisher of a small-town newspaper, Petersen had studied politics in order to comment on it in his editorials. General-circulation newspapers claim not to editorialize about specific policies for the stated reason that they will benefit a given political party. Editorials are usually couched in terms of the public interest, good government, fair and open procedures, and common-sense solutions without regard to partisan advantage. A Danish immigrant who was Americanized as well as politicized in the newspaper office, Petersen cherished these editorial-page ideals; to him, they were the principles of true Americanism and not just progressive pieties. Small-town and county politics did not expose him to the rough-and-tumble political wars that convinced others such ideals were impractical, unattainable, and usually ignored by the other side.

In a 1932 *Askov American* editorial discussing the traditional independence of the farm vote, Petersen had written, "The farmer by his vote shows that he regards the Farmer-Labor party as the independent party — the one that represents the cause of the masses." By the phrase "independent party" Petersen seems to have meant a party that was unbossed, open, democratic, and responsive to its rank-and-file members — that is, a party ready to pursue the public interest rather than special or even partisan interests. To Farmer-Labor party regulars and Benson backers, the phrase "independent party" must have seemed a political oxymoron.²⁹

Many of the leaders in the Benson group had learned their politics in the tumultuous years of the Farmer-Labor party and its predecessor, the Nonpartisan League, when both were new to Minnesota. They had learned to value party solidarity in the midst of a hostile political environment replete with Republican red-baiting and antiradical propaganda. They did not shrink from adopting public policies that benefited the party; the Olson administration had been dominated increasingly by those who sought to use the political patronage available to the governor as a means of strengthening the Farmer-Labor party.³⁰

Henry Teigan, Petersen's former ally, was one such Benson backer. Teigan had served as personal secretary to Senator Magnus Johnson, as well as editor of the *Minnesota Union Advocate*, state senator, Congressman, and editor of the *Minnesota Leader*. For almost 30 years (long before Petersen's political loyalties finally settled

on the Farmer-Labor party), Teigan had been a loyal publicist and spokesman for the party and its predecessors. He had been in the thick of the fight when the Nonpartisan League captured North Dakota in 1916, when the league was vilified as a traitorous group by conservative Minnesota Republicans in 1917 and 1918, and when Senator Johnson was defeated by Republican red-baiting in 1924. It is hardly surprising, then, that when Petersen and his supporters accused a party "brain trust" of engineering the endorsement of Benson, Teigan perceived this criticism as giving aid and comfort to the enemy and so characterized it in several *Leader* editorials. It was a violation of the principle of party solidarity.³¹

Because of this emphasis on party solidarity, the Benson-Petersen split did not begin as a battle of rival ideologies, but rather as a conflict over the amount of rank-and-file participation and dissent to be allowed within the party. The conflict was set off by the attempt of Farmer-Labor state employees, through their control of the *Minnesota Leader* and their influence in the party, to determine the choice of Olson's successor. Patronage appointees, whose jobs depended on the governor, simply could not afford to wait while a candidate slowly emerged. They had too much at stake. They had to push their candidate even at the risk of offending the regular party members, who were sometimes sensitive about being dictated to. Ironically, a patronage policy aimed at strengthening the Farmer-Labor party by appointing its members to state jobs boomeranged to promote a party split when the state employees aggressively promoted Benson before a consensus had formed. And criticism of this promotion was deemed an attack on party solidarity long before anyone had won party endorsement.³²

²⁸ *Minnesota Leader*, November 7, 1936, p. 1; Petersen to McLeod, April 26, 1937, and McLeod to Petersen, May 13, 1937; "Statement on the Civil Service Controversy by Former Governor Hjalmar Petersen, now Chairman of the Railroad and Warehouse Commission," March 13, 1937, Petersen Papers.

²⁹ *Askov American*, November 3, 1932, p. 6.

³⁰ On these political wars see, for example, Chrislock, *Progressive Era*, 145–157, 161–171, 185, 192; Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 10–14, 21–31, 37–44, 56–59, 86–94. On the increasing role of political patronage in the Olson administration, see Mayer, *Floyd B. Olson*, 166; Naftalin, "History of the Farmer-Labor Party," 256; Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 177, 182, 192, 208.

³¹ Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, 206, 227, 229; *Minnesota Leader*, August 3, November 9, 1935, both p. 4.

³² For descriptions of the right and left wings of the Farmer-Labor party, see Chrislock, *Progressive Era*, 196, 198; Berman, in *Jewish Social Studies*, 38:250; Gieske, *Farmer-Laborism*, vii, 79. The *Leader* depended financially on a sustaining fund, made up from more-or-less voluntary contributions by state employees; throughout 1935 the paper's editorial policy was determined by a state employee-dominated news-



GOVERNOR ELMER
BENSON, giving his inaugural
message in 1937 as his
predecessor (second from left)
looks on

FACED with this stress on solidarity, Petersen changed tactics when he challenged Benson again in 1938. He realized that it was useless to expect the 1938 party convention to reject an incumbent Farmer-Labor governor;

paper committee that shifted its meetings from local hotels to the State Capitol cafe. For more on their influence with the *Leader* and the F-L association, see Newspaper Committee, Minutes, in FLA Papers; "Sustaining Fund," in Meeting of Fourteen, 1-5, [October? 1935?] in Irwin C. Strout Papers, MHS; Farmer-Labor Association, *A Statement of Facts*, [January, 1937?], Petersen Papers; *Minnesota Leader*, January 19, 26, 1935, both p. 1; Paul S. Holbo, "The Farmer-Labor Association: Minnesota's Party Within a Party," in *Minnesota History*, 38:306-308 (September, 1963)

³³Petersen's 1938 campaign plans never included an attempt to contest the nomination at the convention; see Petersen to McLeod, October 4, 1937; and "Memorandum (Confidential) In re: Outline for Proposed Campaign Organization for Hjalmar Petersen Campaign," undated, Petersen Papers. On open primary elections, see Clarence J. Hein, "The Adoption of Minnesota's Direct Primary Law," in *Minnesota History*, 35:341 (December, 1957).

³⁴"Editorials," [January, 1938?], a handwritten list in the Petersen Papers; Minnesota, *Legislative Manual*, 1939, p. 443-456; *Mankato Free Press*, September 28, 1938, p. 10; *Austin Daily Herald*, January 18, 1938, p. 4; *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, January 19, 1938, p. 4; *Springfield Advance-Press*, January 20, 1938, p. 4; *Renville Star Farmer*, January 20, 1938, p. 2; *Red Lake Falls Gazette*, January 20, 1938, p. 4; *Itasca Iron News*, January 27, 1938, p. 2; *Blooming Prairie Times*, June 9, 1938, p. 10; *Hennepin County Review*, June 9, 1938, p. 10.

therefore, he bypassed the convention and took his challenge directly to the June primary. This election was more suited to Petersen's campaign style of reaching the public through favorable publicity in general-circulation newspapers. His editorial-page politics attained its logical culmination in a primary campaign perceived by its supporters as a courageous crusade to defeat an entrenched, partisan regime by appealing to voters across party lines with the issues of good government, civil service reform, and an end to alleged Communist influence in state government.³³

Petersen's campaign played well on the state's editorial pages. He won the editorial support of daily and weekly newspapers all across Minnesota. Following his opening campaign speech of January 17, 1938, Petersen prepared a list of the editorial responses: of 21 "very favorable" editorials, 13 appeared in Republican or Republican-leaning newspapers, while only 5 appeared in independent papers, 3 in Democratic papers, and none in Farmer-Labor papers. After the campaign ended, the *Mankato Free Press* praised Petersen for upholding the "principles of civil service, of efficient and economical government, of repudiation of the 'bosses' and respect for the needs and demands of the majority of laboring, producing citizens"; the *Free Press* added that Petersen had lifted those principles "above the level of personal issues, even above the level of party issues to a high plane of sound principle."³⁴

Editorial-page politics lost by 16,000 votes. Petersen

carried rural Minnesota, including 51 of the 87 counties, but lost the election in the Twin Cities and in St. Louis County. What one historian has called "the most bitter Minnesota primary election in the twentieth century" left Farmer-Labor party solidarity in shambles. Much of Petersen's support went to Harold E. Stassen, the young Republican nominee. Stassen handily defeated Benson in November, began the house cleaning in state government that the press demanded, and thereby captured the good government issue for his party. Thus, Petersen's 1938 campaign against party rival Benson only succeeded in creating for him a new nemesis in the rival party. In 1940 and 1942, Petersen won Farmer-Labor endorsement to run against Stassen. Both elections resulted in Stassen victories.³⁵

The 1938 primary and general elections revealed weaknesses in the strategies of both Petersen and Benson. Without a well-organized personal following to enable him to fight in the trenches for control of the party, Petersen temporarily abandoned the Farmer-Labor organization to others, took off across party lines to pick up supporters where he could find them, and found them to be exceedingly fickle, ready to follow a new leader, Stassen. He came back to lead a party significantly weaker for the experience. The Benson forces discovered that a well-organized, sincerely liberal candidate could not win in the face of an unprecedented drumbeat of editorial-page criticism, aroused in part by too great — or too obvious — adherence to party loyalty in state government. The lesson of 1938 was that both press support and party solidarity were essential if Farmer-Laborism were to win in the absence of a great leader such as Floyd B. Olson. The next politician to challenge the Benson forces — this time for control of the newly created Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) party — would have the organizational strength to win control of the party machinery and the persuasive ability to gain press support. That leader was Hubert H. Humphrey and the year was 1948.³⁶

By that time Petersen had temporarily dropped out of politics. He came back in 1954 to regain his seat on the Railroad and Warehouse Commission and served there until his retirement in 1967. Throughout this period, he

continued to write the editorials for the *Askov American*. In 1958 he unsuccessfully opposed Eugene J. McCarthy for the Senate nomination in the DFL primary. Hjalmar Petersen died of a heart attack while visiting friends in Columbus, Ohio, on March 29, 1968.³⁷

Petersen was a firm believer in the right to use the primary to challenge an entrenched political machine — or just to give the voters a choice. There were three factors that probably account for his failure to win Farmer-Labor endorsement as Olson's successor, and all three are closely linked to his role as editor and the very use of publicity that brought him to political prominence. First, Petersen's tactic of generating publicity in general-circulation newspapers proved inadequate to securing party backing. Secondly, his opponents effectively used the party newspaper to build up the candidacy of Elmer A. Benson. Finally, Petersen's education in the editor's chair gave him a political perspective that differed sharply from that of the party leaders who had learned their politics as loyal workers in the ranks of the Farmer-Labor party and its predecessor, the Nonpartisan League. Failure to win party endorsement in 1936 led to a primary campaign two years later that further polished Petersen's editorial-page politics but damaged the Farmer-Labor party. Although he did not attain the position of acknowledged party leader that Vince Day had once predicted for him, the country editor with a seventh-grade education had come a long way.

³⁵ *Legislative Manual*, 1939, p. 208, 1941, p. 222, 227, 1943, p. 268, 273.

³⁶ For an account of the Humphrey-Benson battle in the late 1940s, see C. Theodore Mitau, "The Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party Schism of 1948," in *Minnesota History*, 34:189–194 (Spring, 1955).

³⁷ Here and below, see Medora Petersen interview, August, 1973, [12–14], CHMC; Hjalmar Petersen interview, May 28, 1963; *Minneapolis Star*, March 29, April 1, 1968, both p. 1.

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