

The Douglas County Farm Holiday Association

Kim E. Nielsen

IN THE FALL of 1933, Konrad K. Solberg, Minnesota's lieutenant governor, told frustrated Douglas County farmers, "If you haven't got 50¢ for the [Farm Holiday] membership, steal one of your mortgaged pigs and sell it!" The depression of the 1930s was posing an unparalleled threat to American farmers. The constant struggles that farm families experienced with nature and with the market system had simultaneously reached a crisis point once more. Members of the National Farmers' Holiday Association (FHA), a movement founded in 1932 in Iowa, hoped to end the dec-

ades of struggle—struggle to increase control over the distribution of their goods, to make a living sufficient to feed their families, and to pass on their way of life to their children. At times these struggles transcended the frustrations of individual farm families to create political and social movements. The Farm Holiday was not

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the first. From the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry (the Grange), through the Farmers' Alliance, the American Society of Equity, and the Nonpartisan League (NPL), these movements have been highly democratic in nature and have demanded the attention of those in power.¹

The Farm Holiday was the most important farmers' organization of the Great Depression, yet historians, to date, understand little about it. Organized by Milo Reno of Iowa and Minnesotan John H. Bosch, the national group set the goal of uniting farmers in refusing to buy household and farm goods, sell commodities, or pay taxes until they received a fair rate—called cost of production—in return for their labor. Such direct-action tactics were new and, among the rural population, untried. But the group's values and personnel were intricately connected to past farm movements, making it simultaneously innovative and reflective. In the FHA a tactically unique, yet traditionally grounded, brand of farm activism emerged.²

It is in a case study that the dynamics of the movement become clear. Though the Douglas County chapter was not the most active, the most newsworthy, nor one of the first Holiday chapters, it does provide a window into the central processes of the FHA; both innovative and traditional elements appear in sharp relief. This local approach also provides an opportunity to

interpret how the so-called radicals of the Farm Holiday identified themselves and their goals within their own communities. How did farm activism evolve in Douglas County, an area of rich black dirt, a land luxuriously green in the summer and white in the winter? The people there are sometimes gruff, unknowing, and remote; the people, other times, have eyes wide open to someone needing advocacy. In the 1930s, many still spoke Norwegian better than they did English. Many were women. Some were good farmers, others managed the land poorly and would have failed under the best of circumstances. How, then, did an effective farm movement develop? By examining the ordinary, in addition to the extraordinary, historians can construct a more complete picture.

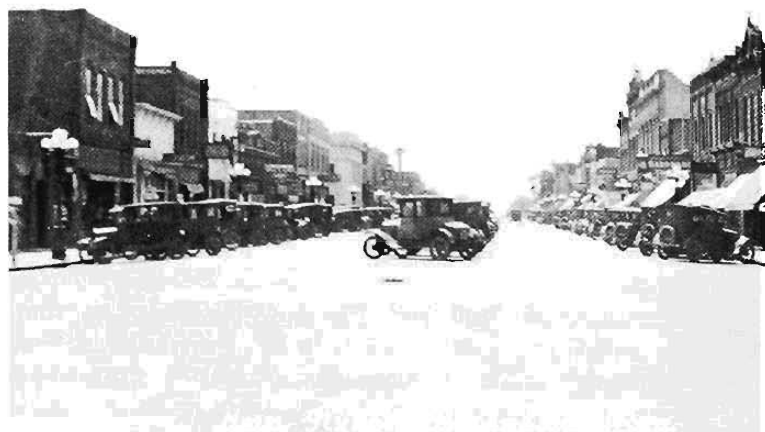
SKEPTICISM was the first reaction of the county newspaper, the *Alexandria Park Region Echo*, to the National Farmers' Holiday Association. While the newspaper obviously could not and did not convey the opinion of everyone in Douglas County, it was a barometer of public views. In the World War I era, for example, it had been the strong and persistent voice of the Nonpartisan League. The *Echo* first advised in August, 1932, that the Iowa Farm Holiday members' direct-action tactic of withholding goods from the market would not work and discouraged establishment of a local organization. Farmers, so the writer claimed, "haven't the training labor union men have had in that sort of tactics and they are scattered out over too much territory without the opportunity to 'rub elbows' and give each other confidence and stick-to-it-iveness, that labor has when it strikes."³

OPPOSITE: The idyllic imagery on these panels, carved by artists of the Federal Art Project for the Osakis Municipal Building in 1938, contrasted sharply with the experiences of many Douglas County farmers.

¹ *Park Region Echo* (Alexandria), Oct. 12, 1933, p. 9. The group and movement was often simply called the Farm Holiday or the Holiday. The Grange was founded by Oliver H. Kelley in 1867 to educate farmers. Grangers sought independence from monopoly capitalism, particularly as embodied by the railroads and grain elevators. Similarly, the late 19th-century and early 20th-century Farmers' Alliance and American Society of Equity promoted the idea of farmers' purchasing and marketing co-operatives as a means to sidestep the exploitive market system. The NPL, founded in 1915, called for state control of the economy to benefit both rural and urban producers. Much has been published on these movements; for a brief summary of the first three and an in-depth portrait of the last, see Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (Reprint ed., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985).

² Books on the FHA include John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); Lowell K. Dyson, *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); and David L. Nass, ed., *Holiday: Minnesotans Remember the Farmers' Holiday Association* (Marshall: Southwest State University Plains Press, 1984).

³ *Park Region Echo*, Aug. 11, 1932, p. 2.



Several incidents soon increased local receptiveness to the Farm Holiday. Picketing farmers in Iowa blockaded the highways and stopped milk deliveries to Sioux City and, by August 20 when the strike was settled, forced an 80 percent increase in price. Such success impressed Douglas County farm families. So, too, did the endorsement of the Farm Holiday by Minnesota Governor Floyd B. Olson, whom Douglas County voters had enthusiastically backed. Olson had declared, "I am in sympathy with the strike." R. A. Trovatten, the state's agriculture, dairy, and food commissioner, was clearly in sympathy with the movement: "Surely, if the farmers unite for their common interests, they could control the food of the nation and assure themselves a reasonable profit . . . Such an organization would become the most powerful in the world—for people must eat." In addition, the Farmer-Labor Association, the political network of local clubs, labor unions, and farmers' co-operatives within the Farmer-Labor party, also endorsed the Farm Holiday. (The Farmer-Labor Association had active members in Douglas County, and some of the same men eventually led both it and the Farm Holiday Association.) Such endorsements gave the movement vastly increased local credibility, but the FHA could not have succeeded with outside support alone. Inside the county, the terrible effects of drought, monetary strife, and the loss of land, along with the efforts of able organizers and leaders, propelled farmers toward joining.⁴

"Several hundred farmers" did step forward to organize themselves at the first meeting of the Douglas County Farm Holiday Association, called by a local Farmer-Labor party official, in early October, 1932. Those present heard Hemming S. Nelson, the Minnesota Holiday vice-president and a former state legislator from Kandiyohi County, declare: "The farmers are organizing to save themselves and their homes and the packers [packing industry, which opposed the FHA] or anyone else can no more stop the movement than they can stop the sun from rising." The new members collected dues and elected a county president, Henry F. Proehl. A temporary chair for each township was given the responsibility to call a township meeting to elect a permanent chair. This individual would then appoint five "helpers." The six leaders of each township would be charged with enrolling farmers and supervising the members' pledge to withhold produce from the market—to strike—until farmers received cost of production. Cost of production was a new concept, introduced by economists and aggressively supported by Milo Reno and John Bosch, president and vice-president of the national Holiday organization. It was, simply enough, the cost to a farmer of producing a marketable crop. Theoretically, this amount was determined by an analysis of interest rates on land and

equipment, the depreciation of buildings and machinery, and the price of seed and fertilizer. In reality, however, cost of production was whatever it took for farm families to get by. And in June of 1932, for example, with gross farm income half of what it had been the previous year, getting by was much more difficult than earlier. Corn, which cost 92 cents a bushel to produce, sold for 10 cents.⁵

DUE TO PERSONALITY conflicts within the leadership and community, the Douglas County Farm Holiday floundered at first. Days after the organizational meeting, Proehl resigned, setting the movement back several weeks. Eventually John A. Urness of Urness township was elected county president. His family had been one of the first to settle in the area, and the town-



JOHN A.
URNESS,
about 1933

ship in which he lived was named after his father. John Urness was a landholder of average acreage, well grounded in the community, a former Nonpartisan League activist and one-term state legislator (1919–21), who was respected by his neighbors.⁶

At their next "well attended meeting" in early 1933, Holiday members drafted a resolution demanding a farm foreclosure moratorium. Such a bill had already

⁴ *Park Region Echo*, Aug. 25, 1932, p. 1, Sept. 15, 1932, p. 8; Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 47.

⁵ *Park Region Echo*, Oct. 6, 1932, p. 1; Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 72; Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 28, 38–39.

⁶ [Douglas County Historical Society], *Douglas County, Album of the Ages* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., [1979]), 529–530; *Douglas, Todd County Directory* (Appleton, Wis.: North Star Publishing, [1944]), 25; Constant Larson, ed., *History of Douglas and Grant Counties, Minnesota* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen, 1916), 2:582–583; *Minnesota Legislative Manual*, 1919, p. 793. Although Proehl resigned his leadership position, he remained an active member of the FHA.

*FHA SUPPORTERS march
from the Capitol,
March 22, 1933.*



been enacted in Wisconsin, and Minnesota farmers were lobbying their legislators for similar protection. Along with their resolution, Douglas County activists sent their congressional representatives a letter urging the inclusion of hogs and dairy products, a major part of the county economy, in a pending commodities allotment bill.⁷

On March 18 John Bosch, who was also president of the Minnesota Farm Holiday, visited Douglas County. At the Nelson town hall, he encouraged the approximately 75 farmers present to hold fast in their efforts and to attend a rally in St. Paul the following week. No doubt he hoped that a view of the larger Farm Holiday movement would instill additional energy into the fledgling local movement.⁸

A "large delegation" from Douglas County did attend, joining thousands of others at the March 22, 1933, rally at the Capitol in St. Paul. This gathering was an important step for the Farmers' Holiday Association, demonstrating its solid presence in the state.

⁷ *Park Region Echo*, Feb. 23, 1933, p. 1. The discussion here and below relies wholly on newspaper reports; neither minutes of meetings nor oral history materials are available.

⁸ Here and below, see *Park Region Echo*, Mar. 23, 1933, p. 1; Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 86.

⁹ Here and below, see *Park Region Echo*, May 4, 1933, p. 1, 2. For more on the Plymouth County violence, see Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 117–119.

Governor Olson himself addressed the rally and proclaimed that the Farm Holiday was "awakening the people of the United States." As a show of strength, it was a big success and, no doubt, further woke the delegation from Douglas County to the strength of solidarity via the Farm Holiday.

On April 29 Bosch returned to Douglas County, where he found the hall filled with men and women. Speaking to "the largest crowd which has attended a Farmers' Holiday meeting" in the county, he detailed FHA successes in preventing foreclosures and in working toward peaceful, legislative answers to farmers' problems. On April 18 Governor Olson had signed into law the 1933 mortgage moratorium bill put forward by the Farm Holiday. Bosch used this example to encourage the crowd to become more active in the movement, particularly in political action, where farmers had already proven successful. "Any government," he explained, "any time, is as oppressive as the people will submit to."⁹

Bosch was interrogated thoroughly about recent Farm Holiday violence in Plymouth County, Iowa. A group of farmers there supposedly attempted to lynch a judge who was in the process of hearing a foreclosure case, initiated to test the constitutionality of Iowa's mortgage moratorium law. Doubtless, many in Douglas County questioned such violence, but they also understood the urgency the protesters felt regard-

ing the mortgage moratorium law. Bosch apparently eased their fears, for the *Park Region Echo* editorialized in support of the Farm Holiday and its Iowa members: "While mob rule is the most vicious thing that can happen to any community, we cannot believe that it is true (as most people say) that those farmers did their cause more harm than good. . . . only a fool will claim that the spirit of revolt shown by Midwest farmers has hurt their cause. . . . They [the Iowa farmers] may go on losing their homes by the thousands, as they have these past few years. But the spirit of revolt they showed is far more likely to get good results for agriculture in general than to make its condition worse. . . . And what, after all, are the sufferings of the judge compared to the suffering of the hundreds of thousands of people that band of Iowa farmers were [f]ighting for—in a misguided way, if you will, but nevertheless with the general good of farmers everywhere in their minds."

This was a dramatic shift of tone for the newspaper and the people of Douglas County. Though they had expressed tacit support, most were reticent and had showed great skepticism regarding the Farm Holiday. By the spring of 1933, however, the strength and potential of the movement had begun to be recognized. So, too, had the hard times transcended the circumstances of individual farmers, unquestionably affecting all of them. Douglas County was one of 16 counties in the state, for example, chosen to receive drought relief. Still, local farmers were allocated only 38 percent of the aid they requested. There was seemingly no place to get sustenance for families and livestock.¹⁰

Two Douglas County delegates, Henry Proehl and E. L. McCutcheon, attended the Farm Holiday state convention at Montevideo in early May, 1933. Resolutions were passed demanding the removal of Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace for his failure to support cost of production legislation in Congress. Of more immediate importance, however, was the vote to begin a farm commodities strike on May 15, to last until the goal of cost of production plus a reasonable profit had been reached.¹¹

National media coverage of the proposed strike was extensive. At the stormy National Farm Holiday convention that had preceded the one in Minnesota, delegates had voted for it, despite the protests of Milo Reno, the national president. After the convention, Reno tried desperately to gain the assistance of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Governor Olson in calling off the strike. Meanwhile, Congress passed a farm assistance bill that helped some farmers but lacked the cost of production plan demanded by the Farm Holiday. A strike seemed imminent. Just before it was scheduled to begin, Reno called it off, giving the excuse that he had received assurances from Olson that a na-

tional mortgage moratorium would pass Congress. Olson, of course, had no such authority.¹²

"Quite a number" of local residents gathered at the Holiday meeting at the *Park Region Echo* hall on May 13. The meeting had been called in order for the Douglas County farmers to vote on joining the strike efforts. Instead of a vote, however, it was announced that Reno had canceled the action. The movement stumbled. The deflated energy of a canceled strike, combined with slowly rising corn prices and the farmers' busiest work season, caused the summer of 1933 to be a quiet time for farm activists both nationally and in Douglas County. When the movement re-awakened, it would put forward a new tactic.¹³

BY THE FALL of 1933 Douglas County farmers found their situations little improved. Members of the local Holiday Association prepared for their first penny auction, a direct-action technique they developed to block farm foreclosures. The concept was simple. Farm families gathered in large numbers at a foreclosure sale and quietly but confidently informed any prospective buyers that they were not to bid. This message was reinforced by the presence of many large men. When items came up on the auction block, only designated bidders were allowed to speak. Cars, tractors, and livestock were purchased for sums ranging from about 10 cents to 50 cents. At the end of the auction, all the goods were returned to the original owner. That year, penny auctions were widespread throughout the Midwest.¹⁴

Arthur F. Sharp, a farmer from Carlos, had been foreclosed upon by the Carlos Bank, and the upcoming sale of his property was announced in the *Echo*. The Douglas County Farm Holiday, along with Sharp, hoped to use this opportunity to stage a successful penny auction. As a large crowd gathered to begin the auction on Saturday, September 23, however, a surprise announcement was made. The previous day Joseph B. Hove, president of the Carlos Bank, and George Herberger, a landowner and landlord with extremely large holdings from nearby Osakis, had met with Sharp to negotiate a settlement and consequently avoid the penny auction. That evening, at a meeting of the county Farm Holiday chapter that was called to plan strategy for the next day's auction, Sharp took the stand and announced that the sale was off.¹⁵

¹⁰ *Park Region Echo*, Nov. 2, 1933, p. 1, Dec. 7, 1933, p. 1.

¹¹ *Park Region Echo*, May 11, 1933, p. 1.

¹² Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 126–129; Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 110–112.

¹³ *Park Region Echo*, May 11, 18, 1933, both p. 1.

¹⁴ Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 79–81; Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 102.

¹⁵ Here and below, see *Park Region Echo*, Sept. 21, 1933, second sec., p. 4, Sept. 28, 1933, p. 1, 2.



PROTESTORS gathered at a foreclosure sale in Madison, Lac Qui Parle County, in January, 1933

What was to be a protest turned into a victory rally. "Speaking with a great deal of feeling," Sharp repeated his story to the people who gathered at his farm the next day. After explaining that Herberger and Hove had offered a "very fair settlement," he thanked everyone involved, climbed down from the podium, and stood on the land that was still his. A representative from the Montevideo chapter, which had organized several successful penny auctions, encouraged the crowd to remain steadfast to the goals of the Farm Holiday: "You people think you are sitting pretty if you own a farm. But when your neighbors have lost their farms and have gone away, there will be a bigger burden on you. Save on some unimportant things and contribute 50¢ to the Holiday movement. I can assure you it is a good investment." A "large number" of new members signed up, and a sizable collection was taken to send to John Bosch. As usual, there were resolutions criticizing Secretary of Agriculture Wallace and demanding cost of production.

This was a complex "victory," an analysis of which yields better understanding of the dynamics of the FHA movement and its rural environment. Joseph Hove and George Herberger benefited from the negotiated settlement, which insured that the mortgagor would at least receive some money; it was in their financial interest to settle. In addition, the negotiated settlement caused less tension within the community than would a penny auction, while it also bore out the legitimacy of the farmers' mortgage debts. Banks and landlords had far

AUCTION!

I will sell at the Arthur Sharp farm, one mile northeast of Carlos, the following personal property, on—

Sat., Sept. 23

SALE STARTS AT 1:00 O'CLOCK P. M.

14 Head of Livestock

4 Horses

One Bay Gelding, 4 yrs. old; one bay horse, 15 years old; one bay horse, 16 years old; one bay mare, 13 years old.

7 Cows

THESE ARE GOOD GRADE GUERNSEY HEIFERS, 1 yr. old.

FARM MACHINERY

One Van Brunt Grain Drill; one Deering grain binder; one Deering corn binder; one Deering hay rake; one Minnesota mower; one P.A. corn planter; one Eureka potato planter; one Asgrow potato digger; one 6 roll Appleton corn shredder; one Titan tractor and three bottom 14-in. plows; one truck wagon; one wagon and box, complete; one International manure spreader; one Martin feed grinder and elevator; 1 Emerson gang plow, 14-in. bottom; one 8 shovel International Corn Cultivator.

TERMS—All sums of \$10 and under, cash. On sums over \$10 time will be given on good bankable paper, acceptable to the clerk, bearing interest at 8%. No property to be removed until settlement is made. If terms are desired, make arrangements with the clerk before the sale.

Arthur Sharp, Owner

J. W. LUND, Auctioneer

First State Bank of Carlos, Clerk

more to gain from a settlement than from a confrontational penny auction.

Yet farmers also viewed the settlement as a victory. A foreclosure had been stopped, and one of their neighboring families had been able to keep its farm. Movement participants did not intend to challenge the banking and marketing systems within which they operated. First and foremost, these women and men wanted to feed their families. Farmers generally felt that the debts they owed were legitimate and that they were obliged to pay them back. In the Farm Holiday movement, participants sought these traditional goals with innovative methods. A principal argument in favor of the cost of production plan was that it would give farmers a living income, sufficient to survive and pay off their debts.

Collective action in defense of members of their own community proved popular. The membership and activity multiplied. At a "packed" meeting in mid-October, farmers from "almost every township in the county" gathered to hear of three successfully negotiated settlements that had taken place during the last week. As the astute local newspaper noted, "The meeting Saturday night showed that considerable more interest is being taken in the Farm Holiday movement since it began to take practical action in local foreclosure affairs."¹⁶

During this time, local activists also took increased interest in Farm Holiday activities outside the county. In conjunction with a letter from John Bosch to all Holiday members, outlining the association's position in favor of a forthcoming strike, the *Park Region Echo* noted that 70 Douglas County members had participated in a rally in Long Prairie, Todd County. Some months later, 20 Holiday members went to the nearby

town of Glenwood, in Pope County, to assist in mediating a settlement at a farm foreclosure. Activists there had requested the assistance of the "Douglas County veterans."¹⁷

IN EARLY NOVEMBER, 1933, Douglas County farmers again prepared for a strike, to withhold commodities from the market. Five from their ranks had attended a state FHA meeting at the Minneapolis Lumber Exchange, at which the membership voted to strike within the week. Farm Holiday leaders and members were angry that the cost of production plan had once more failed in Congress. Milo Reno backed this strike wholeheartedly and urged farmers, "We have been patient and long suffering. We have been made a political football for jingo politicians, who are controlled by the money-lords of Wall Street . . . We were promised a new deal . . . Instead, we have received the same old stacked deck and so far as the Agricultural Act is concerned, the same dealers . . . refuse to accept the many nostrums, the quack remedies of the brain trust."¹⁸

In Douglas County strike preparations were in full swing by November 2. A 33-member committee, representing every township, formed to oversee the strike. Arrangements were also made to supply necessary farm goods to the poor and sick. The county FHA forwarded a list of resolutions to Governor Olson, who was in

¹⁶ *Park Region Echo*, Oct. 19, 1933, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Park Region Echo*, Oct. 26, 1933, p. 2; Mar. 15, 1934, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Park Region Echo*, Nov. 2, 1933, p. 1; Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 116–117; Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 155, 162–166. County leader John Urness, George Hanson, August Anderson, Fred J. Foslien, and C. H. T. Jensen attended the meeting.



SAM PRESTON'S
farm, Douglas
County, in the 1930s

Iowa at the October 30 conference of governors of farm states, emphasizing that "this cannot continue much longer. It will mean destruction to the agricultural states." Local farmers were ready to commit themselves.¹⁹

This strike was quite different from the one planned in the spring of 1933. In early November, farmers had goods to withhold from the market, for the crops had just been harvested; in May, few farmers had had anything to withhold. Locally, Farm Holiday members had finished a summer of successful activism, which had instilled confidence in them. Nationally, this strike was supported by Milo Reno, whose voice made a decisive difference because of his visibility in the media. Farmers also had reason to be discouraged with their political efforts—Congress had repeatedly and soundly defeated cost of production bills. Legislative efforts at change had seemingly failed; farmers could see few alternatives. The proposed direct action seemed to be a possibility.

Yet in Iowa and Minnesota rumors abounded regarding the status of the strike, which left considerable confusion in Douglas County. At a meeting on November 6, farmers enthusiastically voted to continue. For the next week "a number of farmers in the county" were on "a 100 per cent strike"; exceptions were the few local turkey growers, for even members of the movement wanted their Thanksgiving turkeys.²⁰

Because dairy farming was a large part of the Douglas County economy, the strike committee had hoped for the co-operation of local creameries and requested that creameries make it a policy to stop receiving shipments. Within a week, however, the two main facilities in Alexandria decided not to honor the Farm Holiday requests.

This severely crippled local strike efforts. More than 250 farmers met on November 11 and argued bitterly



GARFIELD CREAMERY, one of twelve in the county

over whether to continue the strike. Representatives of all 12 county creameries voted to stay open and receive shipments; shipping associations, consequently, vowed to make deliveries. Many farmers then argued that without the co-operation of the creameries and shippers the strike could not succeed, and they should give up. Dairy farmers further argued that the creameries' decision was justified. The removal of butter from the market, they feared, would turn consumers permanently to oleomargarine. One faction urged that, rather than strike, farmers should strengthen the Holiday organization, enroll more members, and put greater pressure upon Congress in its January session. Opponents argued that all other avenues for change had failed; striking was all that was left. In the end, the conciliators won. The Douglas County farmers voted not to continue the strike.²¹

The creameries had not been the only complication, for early on the national strike was confounded by other external factors. Midwestern governors and politicians nationwide, fearful of the impending strike, had pressured Secretary Wallace to act. Wallace did—and effectively put an end to the strike by announcing a national corn loan program. Under this program farmers received 30 cents to 35 cents per bushel for corn stored under seal—about ten cents above the market price. Within three days the strike was essentially stopped, and within a month farmers were receiving their first checks from Washington.²²

The corn and other crop loan programs signaled the imminent end of the Douglas County Farm Holiday Association. The winter of 1933–34 was a harsh one but was softened significantly by the arrival of government checks and assistance. In March, 1934, for example, the federal government appropriated \$40 million for emergency loans of \$25 to \$250 for destitute farmers who qualified. Instead of granting farmers' demands,

¹⁹ Fred J. Foslien to Floyd B. Olson, Oct. 28, 1933, attached to resolutions by Committee on Resolutions of the Farmers Holiday Association of Douglas County, Governors' Records, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; *Park Region Echo*, Nov. 2, 9, 1933, both p. 1. Among the strike committee members were: Victor Alstead, August Clark, Otto Clark, C. H. Cooper, Herbert Engstrand, Alfred K. Foslien, Fred Foslien, Robert Froemming, Vernon Granlund, Emil Gulbranson, Hedwin Hokanson, C.H. T. Jensen, John A. Johnson, Anton Kust, Ole Langhaug, Frank Lehn, Emil Leonard, Gust Mattson, Henry Messman, I. Ohma, Theodore Reichmann, Anton Schneiderhan, William Shea, Palmer Spilseth, John Thorpe, Hermann Timm, John Urness, Andrew Walstead, John J. Wilken, and Fred Wittnebel.

²⁰ Here and below, see *Park Region Echo*, Nov. 2, Nov. 9, 1933, both p. 1.

²¹ *Park Region Echo*, Nov. 16, 1933, p. 1.

²² Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 116–117; Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 159–160.

the government gave them short-term relief, which undermined the immediate sense of crisis. The long-term patterns of debt and market isolation had not been halted. Throughout the winter, the Douglas County Farm Holiday remained largely inactive. By the end of 1934, it had ceased to exist altogether.²³

WE CAN BETTER understand the involvement of Douglas County farmers in the FHA when we view it from the perspective of other agrarian protests. Unlike most Holiday locals, the Douglas County Farm Holiday had no connection to the Farmers' Union, another national organization with state and local chapters. But Douglas County residents did have intricate connections to two other farmers' organizations: the Nonpartisan League and the Farmer-Labor Association.²⁴

The Nonpartisan League had been extremely active in the county before the 1920s, and its strength had drawn vehement opposition. The goal of gaining political clout through participation in the newly implemented direct-primary system appealed to farmers. Many local families participated in the League, learning both the sacrifices and advantages of activism. Of the known local Farm Holiday members, the names of 32 percent were found on the NPL membership rolls. Of that number, nearly one-third had been local League leaders.²⁵

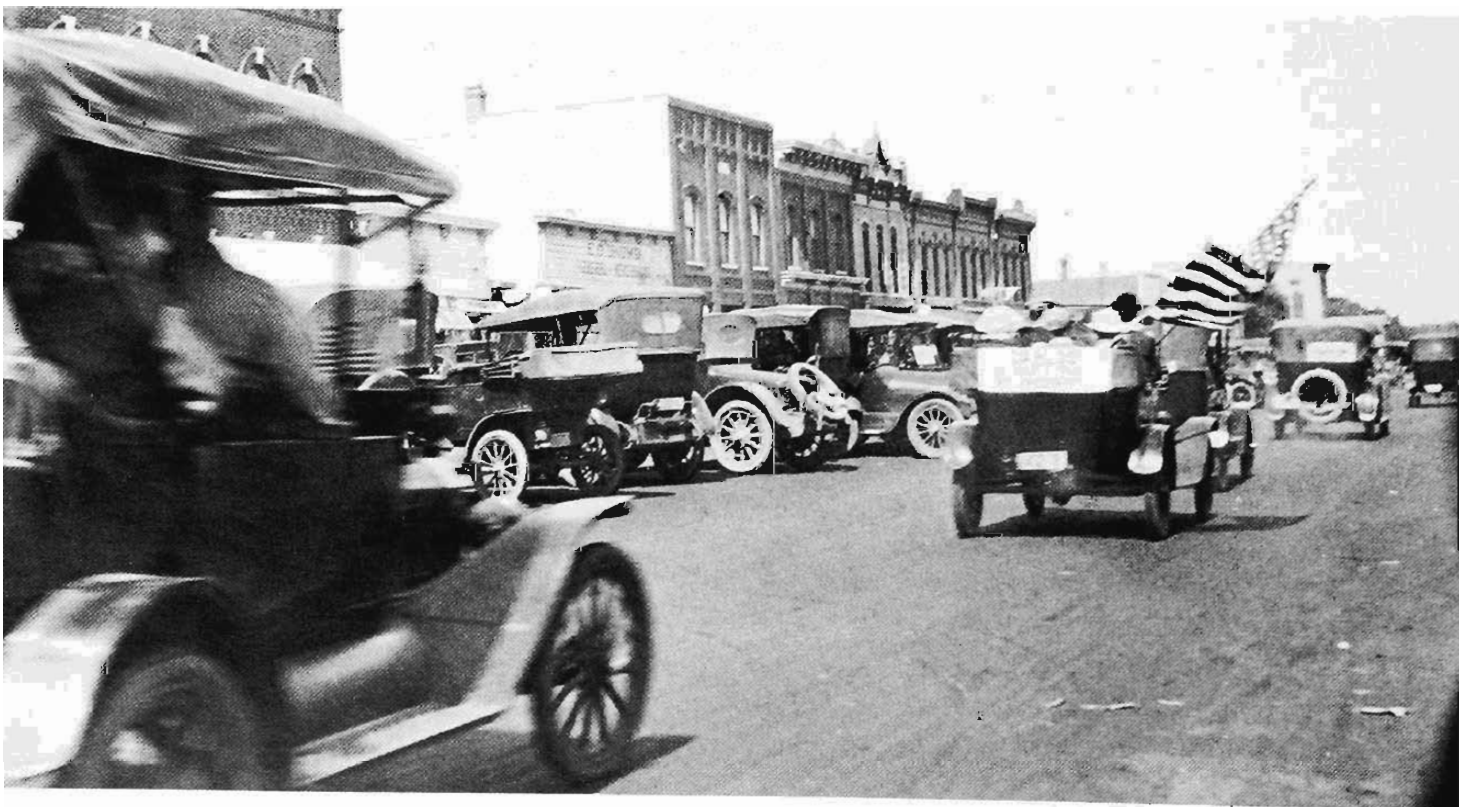
The high percentage of Nonpartisan Leaguers in the FHA provides insight into the identity of Holiday members. It is clear that the Douglas County FHA was grounded in the region's history and tradition of farm activism. It was not a movement of transplanted agitators, as opponents often accused. Furthermore, the high number of Leaguers is evidence that the majority of Holiday members were landowners. Farmers who had been in Douglas County since NPL days would generally be older, well established in the community, and landowners. Many of the people who were both

²³ *Park Region Echo*, Mar. 15, 1934, p. 1, Sept. 27, 1934, p. 1, the last mention of the Douglas County FHA chapter or its activities.

²⁴ Founded in 1902, the Farmers' Union had evolved into an association, not without radical activists, that managed a regional network of co-operative grain terminal elevators. It can be considered a parent group of the national Farm Holiday. Milo Reno was also head of the Iowa Union, and John Bosch led the Farmers' Union chapter in Kandiyohi County. On the two groups, see Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion*, 20–27, 34–38.

²⁵ All Farm Holiday member names were culled from local newspaper accounts. League membership information was found in the Nonpartisan League manuscript collection at the Minnesota Historical Society. Here *leader* means someone who was a League Booster member, an individual who helped the League recruiter gain the trust of local farmers.

SUPPORTERS streaming into Alexandria for a rally of the Nonpartisan League, September 3, 1918



Leaguers and Farm Holiday members lived on the same land during both periods, a further indication of ownership.²⁶

In addition to the historical link to the Nonpartisan League, the Douglas County Farm Holiday had active connections to the Farmer-Labor Association. This organization, which grew out of the farmer-labor alliance that had developed during the time of the Nonpartisan League, was essentially an arm of the Farmer-Labor party. It had successfully sponsored many elected officials by the time the Holiday took hold in the region.

Douglas County was resolutely Farmer-Labor. From 1922, when that party presented Henrik Shipstead as its first candidate for a national office, until 1940, the county overwhelmingly voted Farmer-Labor. In 1930, when Floyd B. Olson ran for governor with the slogan "Throw the rascals out," he won by a two-to-one margin in Douglas County.²⁷

Shortly before the meeting at which the county chapter was formed, the *Park Region Echo* explained the relationship between Farm Holiday supporters and the county Farmer-Labor Association: "While the Holiday Association is not a political party organization, and farmers of all political beliefs are joining it everywhere, the organization meeting in Douglas County was called by a Farmer-Labor party official because most of the farmers in this county belong to that party, and all of the Farmer-Labor state candidates have endorsed the movement."²⁸

The leadership and most of the membership of the Farmer-Labor Association and the Farm Holiday movement overlapped extensively in Douglas County.

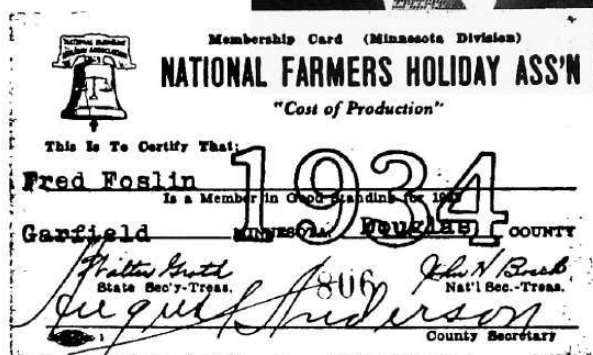
²⁶ Members' names were checked against tax records and in *Standard Atlas of Douglas County, Minnesota* (Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle and Co., 1912) and *Douglas County Plat Book* (n.p. [1940?]), copy in MHS map library. See also individual farmers in *Douglas County, Album of the Ages*; *Douglas, Todd County Directory*; and Larson, ed., *History of Douglas and Grant Counties*, 2:582-583, 639-640.

²⁷ Bruce M. White et al., comps., *Minnesota Votes: Election Returns by County for Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and Governors, 1857-1977* (St. Paul: MHS, 1977), 36-46, 191.

²⁸ *Park Region Echo*, Sept. 29, 1932, p. 1.

²⁹ *Park Region Echo*, Sept. 21, 1933, p. 1. On Foslien, see W. F. Toensing, *Minnesota Congressmen, Legislators, and other Elected State Officials: An Annotated Check List, 1849-1971* (St. Paul: MHS, 1971), 39. It is interesting to note that, after farming for a few years, Foslien attended business college and eventually managed a shipping association; *Douglas County, Album of the Ages*, 46. Information on other individuals was found by reading through the *Park Region Echo*; White et al., *Minnesota Votes*; *Douglas County, Album of the Ages*; [Douglas County Historical Society], *This Was Our Livelihood*, vols. 1 and 2 (Alexandria: The Society, 1983, 1985); and *Douglas, Todd County Directory*.

FRED J. FOSLIEN,
1935



Local FHA president John Urness once announced a meeting of the "Farmer-Labor Holiday Ass'n." Holiday member Fred J. Foslien was a member of the 1932 platform committee of the Farmer-Labor party; he served in the Minnesota House of Representatives from 1933 to 1935 and in the Senate from 1935 to 1939 and reported the progress of farm legislation in a weekly column in the *Park Region Echo*. Other men, such as Selmer Wooliscroft, Clifford Hove, Otto Larson, Ole Langhaug, and John A. Johnson, were officers in both organizations. Clearly, the Farm Holiday and the Farmer-Labor Association worked together in Douglas County.²⁹

On national and state levels the alliance between the two organizations proved fruitful to both. The Farmer-Labor legislators and governors carried forth the Farm Holiday political agenda and lent an air of legitimacy to the movement. The Farm Holiday participants provided the votes to keep the Farmer-Laborites in office and kept political pressure on the more conservative members of Congress, which was essential for the passage of Farm Holiday/Farmer-Labor legislation.

LIKE OTHER farmers' movements, the Farm Holiday soon disappeared from Douglas County. Its demise, however, was not necessarily due to ineffectiveness. Instead, the Farm Holiday waned largely because of gov-

ernment aid programs. Ultimately, this aid assisted farmers who were most stable and failed those who were faltering. Farmers at the lowest economic level had already lost their land and had generally moved away before the FHA movement began. The farmers still holding on but most needing help, however, lost a great deal. Though the prospect of government aid renewed their hopes, the programs did not rescue them. Rather, they divided those most needy from the leaders of the movement. A majority of the relief went to larger farmers, who were a minority of the population. By co-opting those better off, federal programs drew the energy from the Farm Holiday movement. The leaders of the Douglas County chapter, the area's older and more established farmers, received aid and no longer felt the need to involve themselves in the Farm Holiday. They believed that the simultaneous economic and ecological emergencies of the mid-1930s had proved temporary and that better times were on the way.

It is a sad footnote to the story of the Douglas County Farm Holiday to note that in 1944, approximately ten years after the victory rally at his farm, Arthur Sharp was renting land near Carlos. For many farmers, like Sharp, the Farm Holiday movement and government relief merely postponed the inevitable. Though most farmers ceased to protest, the pattern of

debt continued and escalated. The questions, the rallies, the attempts at change stopped, but unfair practices in the market system continued. The New Deal had returned things to the state of previous years.

This outcome, however, may have been all that many in the Farm Holiday movement sought. As the concept of negotiated settlements and the story of the Douglas County Farm Holiday illustrate, most members did not originally intend to challenge the marketing system. The introduction of government aid allowed a group of influential and highly visible farmers to emerge from the Great Depression without choosing to examine the causes of their hardships. Once the crisis of survival passed, farmers had little use for the radical social reconstruction—or even the milder social reform—that would have brought an easier long-term survival. It is in this respect, most of all, that the Douglas County Farm Holiday, despite its new direct-action tactics, remained true to the tradition of past farmers' movements.

THE PHOTOGRAPH on p. 271 is from the Alexandria Area Chamber of Commerce; those on p. 276 and 277 are from the Douglas County Historical Society; the card on p. 279 is in the West Central Minnesota Historical Center, University of Minnesota, Morris. All other illustrations are from the MHS collections.



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