

“READ AND BE CONVINCED:” THE IMAGE OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE IN ITS
CREATIVE PRODUCTION, THE EARLY HISTORIES, AND WIDER POPULAR CULTURE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By

John Edward Hest

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Program:
History

July 2018

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University
Graduate School

Title

“READ AND BE CONVINCED:” THE IMAGE OF THE
NONPARTISAN LEAGUE IN ITS CREATIVE PRODUCTION, THE
EARLY HISTORIES, AND WIDER POPULAR CULTURE

By

John Edward Hest

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota
State University’s regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Thomas Isern

Chair

Angela Smith

Mark Meister

Approved:

7/6/18

Date

Mark Harvey

Department Chair

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the image of the Nonpartisan League in several different contexts, arguing that the League carefully crafted their advocative political image and their opponents painted them as disloyal socialists. The Nonpartisan League was an agrarian radical political movement beginning in North Dakota in 1915, and both its proponents and opponents created powerful images of it. I first examine the creative output of two Leaguers, the poet Florence Borner and the cartoonist John Miller Baer. I then transition to four competing histories of the Nonpartisan League, published from 1920-21, by Herbert Gaston, Charles Edward Russell, William Langer, and Andrew Bruce, all of whom craft divergent images of the League dependent upon their vantage point. I close with a look at the image of the League within wider popular culture, examining *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis, the public statements of Theodore Roosevelt, and the 1978 film *Northern Lights*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iii

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1. “PROPAGANDA OF THIS SORT:” THE IMAGE OF THE
NONPARTISAN LEAGUE IN THEIR CREATIVE PRODUCTION 7

CHAPTER 2. “THE REAL AND FINAL HISTORY OF THE NONPARTISAN
LEAGUE CAN NOT BE WRITTEN IN THIS GENERATION...;” OR, WHO OWNS
THE HISTORY OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE?..... 32

CHAPTER 3. “ALIEN AGITATORS WHO THREATEN THE SECURITY OF OUR
INSTITUTIONS:” THE IMAGE OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE IN POPULAR
CULTURE AND MEDIA 62

CONCLUSION..... 83

BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 88

INTRODUCTION

“Would you like to hear the story
Of the farmers organizing?
How they beat the politicians,
How they overthrew Big Business,
And evolved a legislature,
By and thru and for the people,
Till the world looked on in wonder,
And the many grafters trembled;
For they knew the mighty movement
Soon would overspread the nation;
Reach the stronghold of their masters,
Sweeping them all into the discard;
Then rejoiced the common people,
For they knew it meant their freedom,
From the fetters that had bound them,
Like a slave chained to the galley.”¹

This poem, written by a North Dakotan farm woman in support of a political movement of which she was a part, shows but one image of the character of the Nonpartisan League, the early twentieth-century radical agrarian political movement which started in North Dakota. Depending upon one’s vantage point, that image can appear drastically different; by vantage point here, I do not mean just actual physical location or group membership or something like

¹ Florence Borner, *Modern Poems for Modern People*, (Bismarck, ND: Bismarck Tribune, State Printers, 1919), 141.

that, although those aspects all matter, but rather that combination of factors including biases, memory, motives, personality, ability, and more, which come together to form the individual perspective of one creator of one representation. The historian John Lewis Gaddis argues that there is power in this act of creating an image or representation. He writes, “That very act of representation, though, makes you feel large, because you yourself are in charge of the representation: it’s you who must make complexity comprehensible, first to yourself, then to others. And the power that resides in representation can be great indeed...”² In his book *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West*, historian Donald Wrobel reconciles the promotional literature encouraging settlement in the American west with hyperbolic and often untrue depictions of the land with the reminiscences of early white settlers in the same region.³ These boosters, hired by railroads and others with vested interests, created a representation of a place that did not exist and superimposed it on a place that did exist, to the everlasting frustration of the people that tried to make new lives there.

With this idea of the power of representation, the power of crafted images, firmly in mind, I would like to return to our North Dakotan poet and her image of the Nonpartisan League. Few things engender as many contradictory images of the same basic set of facts as politics; having said that, the Nonpartisan League serves as a particularly interesting case study in this idea of the highly dependent nature of representation. Depending upon the source, the Nonpartisan League was either a Bolshevistic plot to overthrow the United States and ensure Germany’s victory in World War I led by atheistic socialists (or possibly socialistic atheists) or

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.

³ Donald M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 1.

an unwavering and purely beneficent force for the good of the farmer and the worker led by towering figures who would never give up fighting for the little people.

Before examining those conflicting characterizations of the Nonpartisan League, it is important to place it into a broader historical context; after all, the idea of an agrarian political organization did not spring forth fully-formed from the mind of Arthur Townley, despite any claims otherwise from League propagandists. The long history of agrarian radicalism in the United States started in earnest after the Civil War with the organization of the Grange. Oliver Hudson Kelley, a Bostonian who farmed in Minnesota, and several others who worked with the United States Department of Agriculture decided to organize a fraternal organization which would unite Northern and Southern farmers and help them learn modern agricultural techniques, called the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, or the Grange for short.⁴ The Grange was initially apolitical, but it did bring farmers together in a way that was relatively novel in American history. Soon thereafter, in 1877, a group of farmers in northeastern Texas formed the Farmers' Alliance, largely as a response to the crop-lien system which kept tenant farmers in an inescapable cycle of debt.⁵ The Farmers' Alliance had similar self-improvement aims to the Grange, but also quickly became political and was a driving force in 1886-87 in beginning the movement that became Populism. The aim of the Populists, according to historian Lawrence Goodwyn, was to "free themselves of the ancient bonds of the credit system."⁶ From Populism came the Populist, or Peoples', Party in 1892. Goodwyn goes on to write of the Populists, though he could just as easily have been writing about the Nonpartisan League, "they

⁴ William D. Barns, "Oliver Hudson Kelley and the Genesis of the Grange: A Reappraisal," *Agricultural History* 41, no. 3 (July 1967): 229-230.

⁵ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 32-34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

thought that the mature corporate state would, unless restructured, erode the democratic promise of America.”⁷ The Peoples’ Party was a major force in elections from 1892-96, but, as historian Charles Postel argues, Democrats and Republicans alike, seeing the popularity of the Peoples’ Party, coopted many of their policies and “squeezed the life out of the Peoples’ party.”⁸ Also popular in North Dakota in the 1910s was an organization called the American Society of Equity, founded in Indiana in 1902, which fought for economic power for agrarians by holding back produce from market in order to set higher prices.⁹ It is from this tempest of disorganized farmers’ organizations that a group of North Dakotans created the Nonpartisan League in 1915.

Most of the early organizers of the Nonpartisan League came from the Socialist Party of North Dakota, which never achieved more than a handful of local elected offices in the state. As historian Michael Lansing argues, “Socialists in agricultural North Dakota struggled with the national party’s focus on urban wage workers and its reputation for radicalism.”¹⁰ Arthur LeSueur, the Socialist mayor of Minot, North Dakota, in 1912 rewrote the party platform to focus more on state ownership of elevators and banks as well as a state crop insurance program and less on collective farming.¹¹ Arthur Townley and Albert Bowen in 1914 formed a new organizing department of the Socialist Party which collected subscriptions to pay for organizers and organizers’ Fords; farmers joined the new department in droves, according to Lansing, “because it promised them action in face of political stalemate without the taint of full-fledged socialism.”¹² However, recognizing that the Socialist Party could never escape the taint of

⁷ Ibid., xiv.

⁸ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 275.

⁹ Michael J. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹² Ibid., 15.

Socialism, Bowen along with another Socialist organizer, Leon Durocher, decided to form a new organization.¹³

The state legislature's failure in 1915 to pass a referendum-backed terminal elevator bill proved the final blow to form this new organization, which they named the Nonpartisan League, in the hopes of attracting people of all parties to their platform. Bowen began recruiting for the League but recognized the need for a stronger public face and recruited Arthur Townley to be that public face on the condition that Townley get full credit for creating the League, despite Bowen's work.¹⁴ The basic planks of their platform were several. The first was the state ownership of terminal elevators, flour mills, and packinghouses, basically any industry which directly determined the agrarian livelihood. The next was the state inspection of grain and grain dockage, the practice in which elevator operators judged the quality of grain, often unfairly in order to pay farmers less for their produce. The third was a tax exemption for farmers on any improvements they made to their farm, the fourth was a system of state hail insurance, and the fifth was state-owned local banks operated at cost, providing ample credit at favorable terms to farmers.¹⁵ Lansing argues that the primary innovation of the League was intertwining economics and politics to the point where none could separate the two, and forcing agrarians to view political and economic power as two interconnected aspects of the same issue.¹⁶ The League spread throughout the Western and Midwestern United States and the western provinces of Canada, and achieved the bulk of its electoral and policy successes from 1916 to the mid-1920s, at which point it largely ceased to function as a national organization. Despite this, you would never know of the struggles of the League at any point in its history if you were to read only the

¹³ Ibid., 15-16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21-22.

League's papers and other materials, as their image of the League never tarnished with time. It is this sparkling depiction with which I would like to begin.

It makes sense to begin with the overwhelmingly positive images of the Nonpartisan League within the creative output of its own members and sympathizers, with a particular focus on poetry and the iconic political cartoons from *The Nonpartisan Leader*, the official newspaper of the League. Historian Dale Kramer wrote about agrarian radicalism, "Whenever American farmers leave their plows en masse and race threateningly after the regular politicians they are called wild jackasses, or worse. An agrarian tide is said to be rising, or a fire sweeping the prairies, or a farm rebellion in progress. Mixing of the burning and flowing and rebelling metaphors is hard to avoid."¹⁷ Thus it only makes sense to see how the wild jackasses craft their own image in response to this pernicious image created by others. Second, as an historian, the early historiography of the League fascinates me; four different writers published four extraordinarily different accounts of the League within two a two-year span of 1920-1921. I will dissect each book and profile each writer in an effort to better understand the dramatic variations in conclusions about the character of the League and its image within these histories. Finally, I will close with the image of the League in wider American popular culture, pulling together some highly variant contexts and perspectives including a novelist, a former president, a socialist organizer turned reluctant Leaguer turned League legacy guardian, and a pair of filmmakers to make my case about the dependent nature of representation and how vantage point is everything in the image that one sees and chooses to represent. The images you create, your understanding of a thing's character, and how you describe it, all depend entirely upon your vantage point.

¹⁷ Dale Kramer, *The Wild Jackasses: The American Farmer in Revolt*, (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1956), Preface.

CHAPTER 1. "PROPAGANDA OF THIS SORT:" THE IMAGE OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE IN THEIR CREATIVE PRODUCTION

In August of 1919, between advertisements for Batavia Tires and Plowman Tractors, an advertisement of a different kind appeared in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, the official newspaper of the League. The advertisement was for a book of poetry entitled *Modern Poems for Modern People*. The author, Florence Borner of Bismarck, North Dakota, was selling her book mail order for one dollar. She advertised it as containing "humorous, patriotic and miscellaneous selections. Also a large number of poems dedicated to the Nonpartisan League: four League songs and 'Modern Hiawatha,' a poem which tells the story of the League in the same lyrical form as Longfellow's famous poem." She claims that it is the "biggest bargain you ever got" and that it is "endorsed by leading Nonpartisans." Before the practical details of shipping and orders, Borner closes with the statement "Read and be convinced."¹⁸

The Nonpartisan Leader, in the beginning of a November 1919 profile of Borner in their "Farm Woman's Page," wrote that "When the Nonpartisan League was organized, it was inevitable that sooner or later it should find its voice."¹⁹ The headline of that profile hailed Borner as the "League Poet;" Borner's background cemented her place as the quasi-official poet of the Nonpartisan League. In a letter to *The Nonpartisan Leader*, Borner described herself modestly as "just a farmer's wife, no different than millions of other farmers' wives."²⁰ She claimed to be 28 years old in 1919 when she published her collection of poetry, although according to her sons and U.S. Census records, she was born in 1888 and so was understating her

¹⁸ "Notice: Modern Poems for Modern People," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), August 11, 1919. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-08-11/ed-1/seq-12/>.

¹⁹ "The 'League Poet:' North Dakota Farm Woman Is First to Give Voice to Movement in Verse," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 24, 1919. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-11-24/ed-1/seq-8/>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

age slightly. She lived with her farmer husband and their two sons on their farm near Arnold, ND, about ten miles north of Bismarck. Borner possessed no formal training in poetry but attempted nonetheless to memorialize in verse the struggle of North Dakota's farmers against the business interests and political machinations which they viewed as holding them back. Her poetry is similar to the politics practiced by the farmer-politicians supported by the League; they were passionate amateurs responding to forces outside their control, attempting to supplant the professional class of politicians or, in Borner's case, poets. Leaders of the League embraced Borner and her poetry, and she corresponded with Arthur C. Townley, Lynn Frazier, and "other League leaders."²¹

Florence Borner was born in 1888 in Basil, Ohio as Florence Ruby McElhiney. The 1900 Census lists Florence living with her father, Samuel, a traveling salesperson, her mother, Emma, and her younger sister, Nellie.²² According to her sons, Borner's parents died when she was a teenager and she moved to North Dakota at 18, answering an ad to be a housekeeper. There she met Richard Borner, who worked a variety of jobs including running a pool hall in Baldwin, ND, working as a laborer for the railroad, and farming.²³ Richard Borner and Florence McElhiney wed in 1908 and soon had two sons, Paul and Noel. The Borner family was never able to find much success farming. Over the course of their time in North Dakota, they rented at least two farms and owned one more, as well as brief stints living in the towns of Baldwin, ND, and Bismarck, ND. At the time of the 1920 Census, the Borners were renting a farm in Burnt Creek Township, Morton County, North Dakota, while the census taker listed Florence's occupation as

²¹ Ibid.

²² United States Census, Year: 1900; Census Place: Basil, Fairfield, Ohio; Page: 14; Enumeration District: 0016.

²³ "Telephone Conversation with Paul Borner, Carp Lake, Michigan, January 25, 1987," folder 7, box 11, Frances Wold Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.

“Originating Poetry.”²⁴ After a bad crop year in 1935 and with Florence suffering from asthma, which the family thought the harsh North Dakota climate exacerbated, the family packed up and moved to Carp Lake, Michigan in 1936.²⁵

Florence Borner’s writings are significant for several reasons. For one thing, eastern tastemakers have never considered North Dakota a cultural center of any sort on a global, national, or even regional level. For Borner to write poetry from the periphery, for the periphery, is an important act of rebellion in and of itself. Additionally, Borner’s activist writing helps frame the role of women within the Nonpartisan League, as well as its impact upon them. Historian Kim E. Nielson wrote about this topic, “In the context of the League, rural women fought to define gender-based political roles to their own liking.”²⁶ Prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in August of 1920, women were unable to vote. Borner instead exercised her political power in other ways, including writing biting poetry and songs on behalf of the Nonpartisan League with the clear intent of persuading a persuadable audience. In addition to her exhortation in the advertisement to “Read and be convinced,” Borner wrote in a remarkably candid letter to *The Nonpartisan Leader* that she was “publishing this book to help the League, as I am a firm believer in propaganda of this sort. Many persons are partial to verse and when it teaches a constructive lesson, it can be made instructive as well as interesting.”²⁷ Borner was explicit in her desire to create “propaganda” in support of the League, in advance of women’s suffrage. Borner was part of a movement creating an ecosystem and a space for women to begin exercising their political power and organizing

²⁴ United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: Burnt Creek, Burleigh, North Dakota; Roll: T625_1331; Page: 2B; Enumeration District: 67.

²⁵ “Telephone Conversation with Paul Borner,” Frances Wold Collection, SHSND.

²⁶ Kim E. Nielson, ““We all Leaguers by our house”: Women, Suffrage, and Red-Baiting in the National Nonpartisan League,” *Journal of Women’s History* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 32.

²⁷ “The ‘League Poet,’” *Nonpartisan Leader*, November 24, 1919.

themselves for the impending passage of women's suffrage. Borner wrote in the same letter that she believes "the fate of the League hangs in no small measure on the woman's vote...., and I believe it would be a good plan to organize the men and women at the same time."²⁸ Borner believed that women were a necessary part of the future of progressive politics in the United States, and so took conscious action to begin organizing and persuading them in preparation for the implementation of suffrage.

Preceding historical treatments of the Nonpartisan League had varying records on the connections between women and the League. Robert Morlan's 1955 *Political Prairie Fire*, the standard scholarly treatment of the League until the publication of Michael J. Lansing's *Insurgent Democracy* in 2015, contains no mention of women in the index and mentions the farm women who were intimately involved only in passing.²⁹ Lansing, on the other hand, argues that the Nonpartisan League "encouraged rural women to become deeply involved in electoral politics" and that "women made room for themselves" within the Nonpartisan League and the greater agrarian radical movement.³⁰ Lansing also writes briefly about the importance of pro-NPL poetry and songs in fostering a cohesive movement identity, without specifically mentioning Borner or her poetry and songs, writing, "Rural folk traditions long encouraged the rewriting of music and poetry to reflect contemporary concerns."³¹ Borner was part of a long line of agrarians who created their own entertainment to pass the time and also to express their grievances.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955).

³⁰ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, xi; 52.

³¹ Ibid., 159-60.

Borner does not limit *Modern Poems for Modern People* to her pro-League poetry, also including humor, patriotic, and miscellaneous sections. Of the poetry unrelated to the League, the patriotic section is particularly interesting as its mere existence seems to contradict the narrative of opponents of the League that the League was an unpatriotic, anti-American organization, fomented by radical Bolsheviks. Borner divided the Nonpartisan League-related material into three sections: poems, songs, and, to close, Borner's take on an epic poem; she adapted Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" to tell the story of the foundation of the League in epic form. Borner dedicates "Modern Hiawatha," as she calls it, to Arthur Townley, the President of the NPL.

"Modern Hiawatha" is the story of the founding of the Nonpartisan League and its clash with Big Business, or Big Biz for short. Big Biz was the personification of all the forces against which the Nonpartisan League proclaimed itself to stand. He was the usurious bankers, the cheating elevator owners, and the Minneapolis millers minting money at the expense of the agricultural production of Leaguers all rolled into one. Arthur Townley, the public face of the Nonpartisan League and the central figure in its foundation myth, appears as a simple flax farmer done in by "speculators" who "Put the finish to his farming."³² The poem takes poetic license to new heights, neglecting to mention Townley's background as a failed farmer in Colorado and an integral part of the organizing power of the North Dakota Socialist Party, not to mention the role of Albert Bowen, the actual creator of the Nonpartisan League.³³ After the failure of his farm, Townley receives a "vision" from on high: "a mighty League of farmers, Standing up for right and justice, In the interest of the people."³⁴ Townley takes his message on the road and quickly

³² Borner, *Modern Poems for Modern People*, 142.

³³ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 14-18.

³⁴ Borner, *Modern Poems for Modern People*, 143.

creates (seemingly singlehandedly) the exact association of farmers which he foresaw in his vision. Borner compares Townley to Moses, and writes that instead of leading his people out of Egypt into Canaan, Townley “Lead the people out of bondage, Unto economic freedom.”³⁵ The Nonpartisan League quickly came to the attention of Big Biz, though, who fought back by attempting to sow dissension among the ranks of the Nonpartisan League by discrediting Townley and pitting the urban working class against the farmers.³⁶ In the end, the Nonpartisan League vanquishes Big Biz, and promises a better future, free of undue corporate influence in agriculture.³⁷

The Nonpartisan League that Borner describes in “Modern Hiawatha” is a noble venture, fighting for the cause of the farmer. The farmers of the Nonpartisan League are, Borner writes, the successors of the pioneers who “reclaimed these verdant prairies, From their natural state of wildness, Made them blossom as a garden.”³⁸ Moving beyond the obvious point that Borner’s narrative fails to mention the many indigenous peoples who the white settlers dispossessed in their quest for farmland, Borner’s League members are a noble people, struggling to do the necessary work of growing food for a hungry world while Big Biz breathes greedily down their neck. She characterizes the League as a “fountain in the desert,” providing farmers with the necessary tools to organize themselves and harness their collective economic and political power.³⁹ To Borner, the battle between the League and Big Biz is much more than a simple political squabble in North Dakota, but rather a fight between good and evil, which the League will inevitably win due to the inherent justice of its cause.

³⁵ Ibid., 151.

³⁶ Ibid., 151.

³⁷ Ibid., 157-58.

³⁸ Ibid., 156.

³⁹ Ibid., 156.

Modern Poems for Modern People had some minor success among members of the Nonpartisan League, even outside of North Dakota. An ad for it appeared in *The Montana Nonpartisan*, published in Great Falls, Montana, in December 1919, seeking agents to sell the book in “all communities;” Borner even wrote that the book had “the endorsement of all League officials and every League member will want one of them.”⁴⁰ Additionally, *The Sisseton Weekly Standard* in South Dakota in January of 1920 included an excerpt of one of her poems and wrote that her book had “received wide attention” and that she was “well known in that state [North Dakota] for her poem supporting the cause of the organized farmers.”⁴¹ *Tractor Farming*, a nationally-circulated magazine run by International Harvester, published one of her non-political poems, “To a Pansy,” in July 1922.⁴²

On top of Borner’s self-promotion and the mentions in the local League-affiliated newspapers, the National Nonpartisan League explicitly endorsed, advertised, and sold Borner’s poetry. In June of 1919, *The Nonpartisan Leader* contained a blurb promoting the upcoming publication of Borner’s book, arguing, “A new and fundamental movement like that of the organized farmers of North Dakota demands new literary expression, and Mrs. Borner is one of the able writers beginning to supply this need.”⁴³ After the success of her book, in June 1920, *The Leader* advertised a reprinting of Borner’s epic “A Modern Hiawatha” sold by the NPL National Office. The paper praises Borner for “getting much poetic imagery and feeling into

⁴⁰ “Agents Wanted,” *The Montana Nonpartisan* (Great Falls, MT), December 20, 1919. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84036290/1919-12-20/ed-1/seq-3/>.

⁴¹ “Freedom,” *The Sisseton Weekly Standard* (Sisseton, SD), January 2, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99062049/1920-01-02/ed-1/seq-1/>.

⁴² “Dakota Poet’s Verse Printed,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), July 31, 1922. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1922-07-31/ed-1/seq-8/>.

⁴³ “To Publish League Verse,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 30, 1919. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-06-30/ed-1/seq-12/>.

what would appear to our opponents, at least, as a prosy subject.”⁴⁴ The North Dakota Nonpartisan League Women’s Auxiliary even gave away a copy of Borner’s book along with \$10 as first prize in a contest to coin a new slogan for the League Women’s Auxiliary; the winning entry was “We’ll Stick, Too,” a slight variation of a prominent slogan of the men’s League, “We’ll Stick.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, in their extensive 1919 profile of Borner, *The Leader* informed readers that *Modern Poems for Modern People* was, in fact, available for purchase from the National League office in St. Paul.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, despite her best efforts, Borner was a novice in publishing and went into debt to publish her volume, naively assuming that she would make money off the venture in the end; she was gravely mistaken and confided in a 1935 letter to Florence Davis, the State Librarian of North Dakota, that she had suffered a “heavy loss” on *Modern Poems for Modern People* and would not be paying to publish any more volumes.⁴⁷

Alongside her poetry, Borner wrote the occasional essay. *The Bismarck Tribune* published most of them, and they vary topically from reminiscences about a story told by her grandmother to short holiday-themed fiction to more serious journalistic essays about the political and economic issues facing North Dakota’s farmers. For Thanksgiving 1920, Borner wrote an essay recalling her grandmother’s memories of Thanksgiving in 1820, which she blended with her own wistful memories of Thanksgivings with her grandparents.⁴⁸ The next year, she wrote a horror story in celebration of Halloween, in which “Belzebub [sic], Prince of

⁴⁴ “League Poem Reprinted,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 7, 1920.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-06-07/ed-1/seq-9/>.

⁴⁵ “What the Organized Farmer is Doing: Short Notes About the Activities in League States,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 24, 1919. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-11-24/ed-1/seq-14/>.

⁴⁶ “The ‘League Poet,’” *Nonpartisan Leader*, November 24, 1919.

⁴⁷ Florence Borner to Florence Davis, 1935, folder 7, box 11, Frances Wold Manuscript Collection, 10680, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.

⁴⁸ Florence Borner. “Thanksgiving in 1820 as Told by my Grandmother,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 23, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-11-23/ed-1/seq-4/>.

Darkness” lures a young German woman to her doom.⁴⁹ For Thanksgiving 1922, Borner wrote a purportedly true story about a turkey “that went visiting,” which ends with the farmer declaring that the turkey “was too smart a bird to grace anybody’s table.”⁵⁰

Along with her more lighthearted writing, Borner wrote several earnest opinion essays in *The Bismarck Tribune* and *The Nonpartisan Leader*. She earned a platform for her opinion essays through her earlier success with poetry. In July 1920, *The Nonpartisan Leader* published on its Farm Woman’s Page an essay by Borner; in it, she exhorted readers to “Be a pusher, not a leaner!” Borner warns that indifference on the part of members of the working class “is a direct aid to the enemy,” meaning the moneyed “capitalist” class. Secondly, Borner writes, “women must be organized as their husbands are” with women’s suffrage looming. Borner gives advice for women to educate themselves politically and calls on them to be ambassadors for the NPL, inviting their neighbors to League meetings and ensuring voter turnout. Borner writes, “At no distant day husband and wife will walk together to the polls and there register their faith in the men who have served them and their disapproval of the boss-ridden, dollar-chasing bunch who are at present serving the interests.”⁵¹ This essay is striking. Borner is actively planning the best way to organize women upon the implementation of women’s suffrage and calls on other women to do the same. A few months later, *The Bismarck Tribune* published another essay by Borner in which she warned that without price controls for agricultural goods or some similarly drastic

⁴⁹ Florence Borner. “Ermantine’s Folly: A Hallowe’en Story,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), October 29, 1921. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1921-10-29/ed-1/seq-2/>.

⁵⁰ Florence Borner. “The Turky [sic] That Went Visiting (A True Story),” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 28, 1922. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1922-11-28/ed-1/seq-2/>.

⁵¹ Florence Borner. “Pushing or Leaning: Every Woman Must Make Choice, Says Well-Known North Dakota Writer,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), July 12, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-07-12/ed-1/seq-8/>.

action, farmers were going to quit en masse.⁵² Her warning seems prescient now, as the 1920s and 1930s were an era of rural people fleeing their farms or having them foreclosed upon and flocking to cities to become wage laborers.

A week after her pessimistic depiction of the prospects facing North Dakotan farmers, Borner wrote another essay entitled “The Farmer’s Grievance.” In it, she faces the question “Has the farmer a just grievance, or are his troubles largely imaginary?” She concludes that if so many farmers, long considered “the great conservative element of our population,” were complaining of their economic conditions, then indeed “something is ‘rotten in Denmark.’”⁵³ In November of 1920, *The Bismarck Tribune* published another of her essays in which she confronts the problem of children leaving the farm. She urges farm parents to instill a sense of ownership and partnership of the farm in their children and writes, “Show them that the farm offers them more than the city in the way of pure food and pure air and water, and, if they are willing to work, it also offers them a chance to make good with the best teachers on earth as their instructor—their father.”⁵⁴

Soon thereafter, Borner wrote another two essays. In the first, she argues for the professionalization of the business of farming and encourages farmers to take up standard business practices, particularly accounting, as well as diversifying into livestock along with their cash crops to help them meet their economic and political potential.⁵⁵ The second is a series of hopeful predictions about the upcoming new year, 1921; it was Borner’s hope that people could

⁵² Florence Borner. “Farmers Leave, Problem Will Become Serious: Will He Stick? Now, He’ll Just Quit, Says Woman Writer on Subject: A National Situation,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), October 14, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-10-14/ed-1/seq-8/>.

⁵³ Florence Borner, “The Farmer’s Grievance,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), October 21, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-10-21/ed-1/seq-4/>.

⁵⁴ Florence Borner, “Partnership on the Farm,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 3, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-11-03/ed-1/seq-7/>.

⁵⁵ Florence Borner, “The Business End of Farming,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 12, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-11-12/ed-1/seq-4/>.

“forget all of the hateful and disagreeable things of life” and come together in cooperation in the new year.⁵⁶

Along with her writing, Borner made a brief foray into the editorial side of the newspaper business. The November 16, 1922 edition of the League-aligned weekly *Enderlin Independent* in Enderlin, North Dakota, announced the hiring of a new editor of that paper, V. McGillvry, as well as the hiring of Florence Borner as an Associate Editor. McGillvry lauds Borner as “a gifted woman of literary fame” and “a brilliant writer.”⁵⁷ The next week, Borner launched a column entitled “Brighter Days,” in which she publishes some of her poetry as well as various aphorisms and short humorous sayings.⁵⁸ However, it does not appear that the Borners actually made the move to Enderlin in the eastern part of North Dakota, and Borner’s columns tapered off within a few months and she stopped appearing in the paper as the Associate Editor by September 1923.

One important thing to take away from her column in the *Enderlin Independent* as well as a few other places in her writing, is that Borner occasionally writes with a racial and cultural insensitivity that was commonplace for the time but can be surprising to the modern reader. In her February 1, 1923 column in the *Enderlin Independent*, for example, she writes, “When the Law refuses to act, the Klan steps in,” expressing support for the then-resurgent Ku Klux Klan, an explicitly white supremacist organization whose members were responsible for numerous acts of racist violence and terrorism throughout the United States.⁵⁹ Additionally, in a collection of her poetry which she donated to the State Historical Society of North Dakota prior to her 1936 departure from the state, there are several which contains stereotypical depictions of, among

⁵⁶ Florence Borner, “1921—The Year of Promise,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), December 31, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-12-31/ed-1/seq-4/>.

⁵⁷ “Greetings,” *Enderlin Independent* (Enderlin, ND), November 16, 1922.

⁵⁸ Florence Borner, “Brighter Days,” *Enderlin Independent* (Enderlin, ND), November 23, 1922.

⁵⁹ Florence Borner, “Brighter Days,” *Enderlin Independent* (Enderlin, ND), February 1, 1923.

others, American Indians, Arabs, and Chinese people. In her poem “China Boys,” she writes of two Chinese boys named “Ching Ah Lee” and “Ching Ah Lu” who were “odd as could be” and wore “funny clothing” called “kimonas,” by which she seems to be referring to kimonos, traditional Japanese not Chinese clothing. She also writes incredulously about their skill with “chop-sticks” and calls them “funny little boys.”⁶⁰

Despite all of Borner’s impassioned rhetoric about the importance of sticking it out on the farm and her many odes to the beauty of North Dakota and the prairies, the Borners did eventually leave for greener pastures. After their move to Michigan in 1936, Borner continued to write poetry. Her son Paul estimated that she wrote over 1000 poems in her lifetime and her daughter-in-law Iva complained that “she wore out her typewriter, and then she wore out mine.”⁶¹ Borner died in 1962 and is buried next to Richard, her husband of 54 years, in Oak Hill Cemetery in Evansville, Indiana.⁶²

The May 1, 1921 edition of *The Bismarck Tribune* published a reader letter from a “Miss E. Johnson.” In it, Johnson expressed her enjoyment of “the poems that Florence Borner writes and I wish you could put one in every day;” Johnson also expressed excitement that “a real live poet lives in Bismarck.”⁶³ This fan letter demonstrates the lasting significance of Borner’s writing. Florence Borner’s writing appeared not only in her book *Modern Poems for Modern People* but also in the pages of *The Nonpartisan Leader*, *The Bismarck Tribune*, *The Dakota Farmer* in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and *Capper’s Weekly* in Topeka, Kansas, as well as airing on radio stations in Bismarck, Mandan, and Fargo in North Dakota, Yankton in South Dakota,

⁶⁰ Florence Borner, “China Boys,” *Wooing Weather*, Florence Borner Manuscript Collection, 20129, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.

⁶¹ “Telephone Conversation—Mrs. Noel Borner, January 30, 1987—8:30 p.m.,” folder 7, box 11, Frances Wold Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.

⁶² “Telephone Conversation with Paul Borner,” Frances Wold Collection, SHSND.

⁶³ “Peoples’ Forum,” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), May 1, 1921.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1921-05-01/ed-1/seq-4/>.

Minneapolis in Minnesota, and Chicago in Illinois.⁶⁴ Borner's writing reminds the reader of the role of the Nonpartisan League as a vehicle for women to begin flexing political power in a way that they were not able to in the United States before this time. Additionally, the "League Poet" produced culture on behalf of and in conjunction with a group that was supposed to be composed of cultureless yokels. Borner's role as the unofficial poet laureate of the Nonpartisan League demonstrates both the burgeoning political power of women inside and outside of radical agrarianism as well as the existence of culture in a supposed cultural wasteland. Her powerful images of the League as a vehicle for the noble farmer to gain economic and political power have lasted and continue to inform the way present-day scholars understand the character of the Nonpartisan League.

Much more well-known than the poetry, songs, and essays of Florence Borner are the political cartoons of John Miller Baer. It is difficult to understate the influence of Baer's cartoons on League culture and the memory of the League. To this day, the striking art style and profuse but easy-to-understand use of allegory dominate much of the thinking about the League and its character. No piece of writing or discussion about the League is complete without some of Baer's images. From the very first issue of *The Nonpartisan Leader*, Baer's cartoons defined the rhetoric and character of the Nonpartisan League. His influence was such that he eventually served two terms in as the League-endorsed Congressman from North Dakota. It seems appropriate, having spent some time examining the image of the League as defined by the written culture of the League through the particular case of Florence Borner, to also examine the more well-known visual culture of the League through the images of John Miller Baer.

⁶⁴ Florence Borner, "An Appreciation," *Wooring Weather*, Florence Borner Collection, SHSND.

John Miller Baer the cartoonist was more accurately John Miller Baer VII. He was born in Black Creek, Wisconsin, which is north of Appleton and west of Green Bay. Baer attended Lawrence University in Appleton, graduating in 1909. At Lawrence, he illustrated for the yearbook and studied civil engineering. Upon graduation, he moved west to rural Beach, North Dakota, where Arthur Townley, the future public face of the Nonpartisan League, was farming at the same time. There Baer married into a family of flax farmers and began managing the farm and working on several civil engineering projects, including installing the publicly-owned water and sewer systems in Beach. He also got involved in local politics, working as a postmaster during the Wilson administration and becoming acquainted with Townley and other local radical political activists and Socialists.⁶⁵ After the foundation of the League in 1915 by his associates Townley and Albert Bowen, according to *The Nonpartisan Leader* in a 1917 profile, “Baer felt an itching to draw” and took his talents to Fargo to work for the *Leader* and the agrarian cause.⁶⁶ Baer’s creations during his time with *The Nonpartisan Leader*, including Hiram Rube, Big Biz, Crafty, and more, remain accessible representations of the League and potent political symbols.

The front page of the inaugural issue of the *Nonpartisan Leader* is striking; the headline reads “Fired!” and a Baer cartoon fills most of the rest of the page. It depicts a man in a simple suit and straw hat labeled “Nonpartisan League” grabbing by the shoulder a man with the name “Big Biz” on his top hat; Big Biz is puffing away on a cigar while crafting a wooden figure labeled “Legislator,” with other wooden figures labeled “Governor,” “Judge,” “Senator,” etc. in the background. The League man says to Big Biz, “You’re Fired! I’ll do this job myself!”⁶⁷ The

⁶⁵ Bill G. Reid, “John Miller Baer: Nonpartisan League Cartoonist and Congressman,” *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 5-6.

⁶⁶ “Baer for Congress!,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 7, 1917, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-06-07/ed-1/seq-7/>.

⁶⁷ “Fired!”, *The Nonpartisan Leader*, September 23, 1915. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-09-23/ed-1/seq-1/>.

cartoon indicates that from then on, that large business interests, “Big Biz,” would no longer monopolize political power in the state and that the farmers were going to upturn the status quo and gain more control over their own political destinies. It also indicates that no longer would the machine politicians anoint candidates against the will of the people, that rather the League would collectively select their own candidates from within their own ranks. Historian Bill G. Reid writes about Baer and his cartoons, “There was little subtlety in Baer’s cartoons... [but his] characters were etched out with bold simplicity.”⁶⁸ By creating these easily digestible visual representations of both the League member and his antithesis, Big Biz, Baer broke down the struggle of the Nonpartisan League into a fundamental battle between the good farmer and the evil other. Obviously, Baer painted with a broad brush here, but political cartooning is a medium known more for its occasionally questionable taste than for its restraint. By emphasizing the divisions between the agrarians and the others, Baer makes the League’s fight black and white rather than the complex political and economic power struggle that it more closely resembles. This is especially evident in the character of the League farmer, Hiram A. Rube, that Baer created in his cartoons.

Hiram A. Rube is Baer’s representation of the average League farmer. His name is supposed to sound like the phrase “I am a rube.” The name is Baer’s attempt at reappropriating and reclaiming the derogatory phrase “rube” from a label applied by urbanites and eastern elites to those perceived as ignorant yokels to a term of pride which emphasizes the centrality of the farm and the farmer in the history of the United States. There is some psychological and linguistic research which suggests that the usage of a derogatory term by a member of a targeted group can, in fact, serve to destigmatize the derogatory term and create a sense of solidarity

⁶⁸ Reid, “John Miller Baer: Nonpartisan League Cartoonist and Congressman,” *North Dakota History*: 8.

among members of that targeted group.⁶⁹ While the term “rube” carries nowhere near the baggage or impact of something like a racial slur might, it is still a significant moment in the Nonpartisan League’s efforts to subvert the traditional power structure which, as they understood it, placed agrarians at or near the bottom. Lansing in *Insurgent Democracy* writes, “Reclaiming a derogatory term, Baer crafted a symbol that represented League members’ political awakening.”⁷⁰

The character of Hiram Rube first appeared in a Baer cartoon from November 1915. A banker and an academic in cap and gown, Professor Dippe, show up at Rube’s farm to condescendingly teach the genial Rube how to farm. As they leave his farm, Rube turns to the reader and says, “Wal, ges hi am a rube, alrite. They tell me how ter farm but never heerd of bankers lettin’ a farmer tell them how to run their banks or how much interest to charge.”⁷¹ Baer here used colloquialism and the stereotypical language of a “rube” to convey Rube’s folksy wisdom that it is ludicrous for a banker to tell a farmer how to farm. Rube looks and sounds like an urban stereotype of a rural ignoramus but instead of a display of ignorance or foolishness, Rube subverts expectations with his canny insight and wry humor.

Rube’s appearance is also significant to note; he bears a striking resemblance to Uncle Sam. Lansing argues that this is no coincidence, writing, “Evoking Uncle Sam allowed the NPL to symbolically conflate the specific class interests of agrarians with the broader interests of the nation.”⁷² League farmers are supposed to identify with Rube, and by making him echo the

⁶⁹ Adam D. Galinsky, Cynthia S. Wang, Jennifer A. Whitson, Eric M. Anicich, Kurt Hugenberg, and Galen V. Bodenhausen, “The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Power and Self-Labeling,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 10 (October 2013): 2020-2029; Adam M. Croom, “Slurs,” *Language Sciences* 33, no. 3 (May 2011): 343-358.

⁷⁰ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 78.

⁷¹ John Miller Baer, “Hiram A. Rube Learns How to Farm,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 18, 1915. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-11-18/ed-1/seq-16/>.

⁷² Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 78.

American icon of Uncle Sam, Baer is cultivating a self-image where the farmers are uniquely American and, thus, have a patriotic duty to protect their own interests. Related to that, the connection between Hiram Rube and Uncle Sam is a rebuttal of the typical backlash to the organizing activities of the League, i.e. accusations of anti-American or otherwise seditious sentiments among the leaders and members of the Nonpartisan League. The evocation of Uncle Sam, the Stars and Stripes, and other patriotic symbols is a way for Baer to wrap the League in the flag and make it more difficult for their opponents to paint them as disloyal.

The connection between Baer's Hiram Rube and Uncle Sam is part of what the communications scholar Leslie G. Rude calls the "defensive rhetoric" of the Nonpartisan League. In his 1962 rhetorical analysis of the Nonpartisan League, particularly focusing on its actions in Minnesota, Rude breaks down the rhetoric of the League and its leaders into three categories: offensive rhetoric aimed at attacking the "status quo," offensive rhetoric promoting their platform of reforms, and defensive rhetoric asserting the loyalty and non-socialistic nature of the League.⁷³ Baer clearly meant the Hiram Rube/Uncle Sam character to serve as the representative of the average Nonpartisan League member and imply their loyalty to the United States. Although at this point in 1915, the opposition to the Nonpartisan League had not organized to any significant extent, Baer and the other leaders of the League could see it coming and engaged in crafting this form of preemptive defensive rhetoric as a bulwark against the attacks of their opponents soon to come.

Hiram Rube is, at his core, meant to be relatable to the struggling farmers of North Dakota even more so than a rhetorical device to defend the League. Their struggle is his struggle. In one cartoon from May 1916, we see the progression of Rube over thirty years from fresh-

⁷³ Leslie Gene Rude, "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement," (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, 1962), 142, 166.

faced, hopeful young farmer in 1886 to the aged radical Uncle Sam in 1916. In the first panel, a youthful Rube takes out a mortgage on his farm to pay for some horses, which he then mortgages to pay for some machinery, which he then mortgages to pay for a new barn, and he finally mortgages his crop to pay the interest on all these mortgages he had to take out to stay afloat.⁷⁴ This spiral of deepening debt with seemingly no way out and little to no reward or support from their government while simultaneously the farmers see the bankers, millers, railroad men, and the rest of the middle men living comfortably with no worries about money would have resonated deeply with members and potential members of the League. Rube was Baer and the leadership of the League's attempt through a visual medium to communicate to their supporters that they understood the struggles of the farmers of North Dakota firsthand and were committed to their cause of reform. On the other hand, Baer designed Will B. Crafty and Big Biz to demonstrate the League's understanding of their opponents.

Will B. Crafty first appeared in the January 20, 1916 edition of *The Nonpartisan Leader*. There is an account, jokingly bylined N.P. Dictograph, which purports to be of a meeting between Crafty, the leader of the North Dakota political machine, and his various henchmen, including Dodger and "Slipry." Although this story is not illustrated, the writer crafts a vivid portrait of the cigar-chewing Crafty, describing his "large stomach and...double chin," as well as his unshaven face, "ratlike eyes," and "Roman nose."⁷⁵ "Roman nose" may have been an anti-Semitic dog whistle, although it is impossible to be certain about that, and Baer's visual interpretation of Crafty seems to belie that, even if that was the intent of the author or authors

⁷⁴ John Miller Baer, "Hiram Rube Reflects on His Experiences in North Dakota," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 11, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-05-11/ed-1/seq-4/>.

⁷⁵ N.P. Dictograph, "The Big Boss Takes a Hand in the Political Game: The Big Boss Arouses the Workers from Their Fit of Despond and Sends Them Forth to Control the Farmer Vote by the Usual and Well Known Political Underground Methods," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), January 20, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-01-20/ed-1/seq-2/>.

behind the pseudonymous “N.P. Dictograph.”⁷⁶ Stories of this nature, purported to be transcriptions of meetings of the leaders of the opposition political machine, make frequent appearances in the *Leader*, but Baer’s illustrated take on Crafty first appears in the April 6, 1916 edition of the *Leader*. In it, Crafty appears as a short, fat, bald man labeled “Old Political Nominee” running for his life from Hiram Rube, labeled “N. Dak Farmer Candidate,” down a street marked “Election Ave.” The cartoon carries the headline “Out of the Way, and Let Somebody Run That Can Run.”⁷⁷ Later in the 1916 primary campaign, during which the League achieved the zenith of its political success, Baer drew a remarkable series of drawings depicting Crafty becoming progressively unhappier as it becomes clear that the League is going to rout the establishment candidates in the primaries. Crafty’s cigar droops lower and lower and his smoke changes from a dollar sign to a question mark to an exclamation mark to a cent sign, illustrating his discontent with the results of a primary that saw League members significantly diminish the power of his old guard coalition.⁷⁸ In another cartoon a couple of weeks later, Baer depicts Crafty as an organ grinder with his dancing monkeys, which include the “Corrupt News,” the Good Government League, and other opposition organizations, dancing to a tune of Crafty’s predictions of “Hard Times,” “Low Prices,” and “Calamity!”⁷⁹ Crafty did not work alone, however, and here is where his co-conspirator in the plot against North Dakotan farmers, Big Biz, makes his appearance.

⁷⁶ Sara Lipton, “The Invention of the Jewish Nose,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 14, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/11/14/invention-jewish-nose/>.

⁷⁷ John Miller Baer, “Out of the Way, and Let Somebody Run That Can Run,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), April 6, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-04-06/ed-1/seq-10/>.

⁷⁸ John Miller Baer, “Hurrah! Crafty’s Worried Now,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 8, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-06-08/ed-1/seq-8/>.

⁷⁹ John Miller Baer, “Signor Crafty and His Trained Monks in the Big Free Serenade,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 22, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-06-22/ed-1/seq-9/>.

Alongside the image of Hiram Rube, the average Nonpartisan League member/farmer, the most recognizable of John Baer's creations is Big Biz. Big Biz was a familiar boogeyman to League members by the time Baer created his version of him. As discussed above, the first issue of *The Nonpartisan Leader* included Baer's representation of Big Biz, a cigar-puffing overweight man in a suit and top hat, not dissimilar from his depiction of Crafty. The collective might and dedication of League members and leaders always foils Big Biz's plots against the farmers. In one Baer cartoon from May of 1916, during the primary fight, Rube and Big Biz prepare to square off in a boxing ring, with the five League-endorsed candidates for office as Rube's fist and Big Biz looking fearful of the farmer but being egged on by Crafty.⁸⁰ The next week, Rube and Big Biz face each other in checkers with Rube smiling confidently as he has a clear advantage with his capture of "Labor & Local Businessmen's Votes" while Big Biz scratches his head and sweats while trying to figure out his next move.⁸¹ Soon thereafter, Big Biz grumbles over his broken political machine which Baer depicts as if the state of North Dakota was a threshing machine. Big Biz knows the culprit of the sabotage though, complaining that "the farmers threw a pitchfork into 'er."⁸² A key part of Big Biz's ability to maintain his power is his control over the press. In one cartoon from April 1916, "Press Dummy" and "Corrupt News" appear on Big Biz's lap as ventriloquist dummies, and the headline argues that "The Voice of Big Business Speaks Through Old Gang Newspapers."⁸³ This is not the only time that Baer or the League would spar with unfriendly newspapers though.

⁸⁰ John Miller Baer, "The Primary Fight: Big Biz vs. the 'Big Five,' alias the Farmer," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 18, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-05-18/ed-1/seq-7/>.

⁸¹ John Miller Baer, "Your Move," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 25, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-05-25/ed-1/seq-3/>.

⁸² John Miller Baer, "What's Wrong with the Separator?," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 15, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-06-15/ed-1/seq-3/>.

⁸³ John Miller Baer, "The Ventriloquist: The Voice of Big Business Speaks Through Old Gang Newspapers," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), April 27, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-04-27/ed-1/seq-3/>.

Part of the reason Baer decided to work for the *Nonpartisan Leader* was his concern about the “gang press,” which is how the Nonpartisan League referred to essentially all of the newspapers owned by anyone other than the League. Already in the first issue of *The Nonpartisan Leader*, the League sneeringly referred to the “gang press” as maligning the men behind the organization’s founding.⁸⁴ An unsigned cartoon, apparently drawn by Baer, appeared in the *Leader* in November 1917. In it, an opposition reporter crows that farmers are overpaid for their milk and argues that “It’s true because I say so!” In the man’s pocket is a bundle of cash supplied by the “monopoly milk distributors of the big cities,” arguing for a quid pro quo relationship between the press and the League’s hated middle men.⁸⁵ Although the League’s claims of extreme bias against them in the press were certainly somewhat overblown, and arguably detrimental to the development of a free and adversarial press in North Dakota, there is no doubt that the establishment press, the Bismarck political machine, and the major business players enjoyed a cozy relationship which may have made the press’s adversarial role more difficult to execute. There were several prominent newspapers which fought actively against the work of the Nonpartisan League.

Two of the most vociferous opponents of the League were the *Grand Forks Herald* and the *Fargo Courier-News*. However, the negative coverage of these newspapers may have had an effect other than their intent to quash support for the League. The *Leader* covered a League rally headlined by Arthur Townley in Hillsboro, North Dakota, located in Traill County between Fargo and Grand Forks in the eastern part of the state. When Townley asked the crowd what effect the nearby opposition papers were having on the success of the League in Hillsboro, one

⁸⁴ “These Are the Men Who Back the Big League,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), September 23, 1915, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-09-23/ed-1/seq-3/>.

⁸⁵ John Miller Baer [?], “Of Course It Must Be True,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 15, 1917, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-11-15/ed-1/seq-7/>.

farmer answered, “You bet these Gang papers are having influence on the farmers. They are cementing the League together so solidly that it will never be blasted apart in this campaign, at least. The farmers will stick, all right. The Gang press is helping them to stick. It’s forcing them to stick.”⁸⁶ While the reporting of the *Leader* here should be understood within the context of a politically-motivated and sympathetic newspaper reporting on a political rally of their own stripe, the negative rhetoric and unrestrained hysteria of the anti-League papers may well have hurt the cause of the state’s business interests which were behind the papers by alienating those farmers who could have stopped the spread of the League.

There were several unflattering symbols that League cartoonists used to portray the gang press, kept press, or whatever other phrase du jour that the League rhetoricians used to cut down unfriendly press. In an article in the second edition of *The Nonpartisan Leader* in September 1915, the League responded to the negative press coverage around the first issue of the *Leader* by referring to the opposition press as scavengers scrounging from “the leavings around the pig troughs of Big Biz.”⁸⁷ A November 1917 cartoon by William C. Morris shows a beaming reporter in a dress, heels, wig, and jewelry beaming while typing “The Nonpartisan League is a traitor to the country” as Big Biz hovers over, arm around the reporter’s shoulders while proffering a stack of cash; the headline reads “Big Business and His Stenographer.”⁸⁸ The League in this case uses the symbols of womanhood as a way to degrade the opposition press and reinforce their lesser status. In another cartoon from March 1918, in the midst of Arthur Townley’s legal troubles in Minnesota caused by overzealous pro-war small town law

⁸⁶ “Picnics Prove Motto is True: League Ticket Will Sweep State, Say Farmers Who Attend Campaign Rallies,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 22, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-06-22/ed-1/seq-7/>.

⁸⁷ “We Told You So,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), September 30, 1915, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-09-30/ed-1/seq-6/>.

⁸⁸ William C. Morris, “Big Business and His Stenographer,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 1, 1917, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-11-01/ed-1/seq-3/>.

enforcement and judges, Hiram Rube glowers while reading a headline announcing Townley's arrest as Big Biz, Will B. Crafty, and a dog on a leash wearing a name tag that reads "Kept Press" peer around a corner to watch.⁸⁹ So, among the symbols used to portray the kept press are ventriloquist dummies, hogs, female subordinates, and dogs.

Sometimes the League eschewed the symbolism and portrayed the men behind the opposition papers themselves. In one cartoon from September 1917, Hiram Rube solemnly constructs breastworks against the forces lined up against the farmers, represented as recently-invented tanks then in use on European battlefields, and labeled most particularly "Low Price of Wheat." Represented much smaller and chipping away at the League's defenses in the guise of helping are Jerry Bacon, the editor of the *Grand Forks Herald*, Norman Black, proprietor of the *Fargo Forum*, and Treadwell Twitchell, the state legislator from Fargo who allegedly told farmers to stay out of politics and "go home and slop the hogs."⁹⁰ Twitchell's brother later claimed that Twitchell, a farmer/legislator himself, in fact joked to a group of his rural constituents it was "time for us farmers to get out and slop the hogs," including himself in that group; Townley, in a 1948 interview with the historian Robert Morlan, said that he did not know whether or not the story was true or the context of Twitchell's words but that "he knew a good slogan when it came to hand."⁹¹ In this case though, the reader can see the men behind the "kept press" working to undermine the organizing of the Nonpartisan League alongside an opposing legislator; despite that, their efforts are clearly meant to be futile due to the overwhelming size difference between those men and Rube, the farmer, who towers over them.

⁸⁹ William C. Morris, "The League Farmer – 'I Know Whose Work This Is,'" *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), March 18, 1918, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-03-18/ed-1/seq-12/>.

⁹⁰ "Oh! See The Farmers' Friends Helping Him Dig Defenses," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), September 6, 1917, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-09-06/ed-1/seq-11/>.

⁹¹ Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 21.

The writers of the *Leader* were so accustomed to a dismissive or even openly hostile mainstream press that when Arthur Townley's 1917 visit to Washington and New York received positive press from eastern publications, it was a major news story back home. The *Leader* published a number of excerpts from the *New York Tribune*, *New York World*, *New York American*, *New York Evening Mail*, and other papers. Most notably, the *Evening Mail* called Townley "Lincolnesque" in a remarkably favorable profile and carried several of NPL cartoonist William Morris's portraits of League leaders.⁹² The *Leader* did note that the only "discordant note" was the skepticism of *The New York Times*, which called the organization "pro-German" and "disloyal," a serious accusation in the midst of World War I, citing the German-sounding name of Carl Beck, a Scandinavian-American New York union leader who helped arrange Townley's visit.⁹³ So, despite the feeling that the League was starting to break through some of the negative perceptions cultivated in no small part by the opposition papers, the League was unable to fully escape the negative image cultivated by the opposition press that dogged them throughout their existence.

In 1917, the League forayed into national politics for the first time to endorse Baer for Congress. After his election to Congress on a crest of League support, Baer continued to contribute the occasional cartoon to the *Leader*, including the hyper-patriotic "By the Dawn's Early Light" from May 1918. In it, Hiram Rube sows seeds of "Democracy" pulled from a bag of "Liberty Seeds" against a sky of the Stars & Stripes while in the foreground, a crow labeled "Old Gang" follows him stealing seeds.⁹⁴ In an editorial related to the less-than-subtle cartoon by

⁹² "The East Learns the Truth: A Review of the Newspaper Articles Concerning the Visit to New York and Washington of President Townley of the National Nonpartisan League," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), December 17, 1917, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-12-17/ed-1/seq-4/>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ John Miller Baer, "By the Dawn's Early Light," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 20, 1918, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-05-20/ed-1/seq-1/>.

the congressman, the *Leader* writes, “Baer has a way of telling more in one picture than the rest of us can tell in a volume.”⁹⁵

Although he lost reelection to Congress in 1920, Baer continued to work as a professional cartoonist, including creating a 1931 cartoon in which farmers and laborers throw down their cards and demand a “New Deal!”; Baer sent the cartoon to Roosevelt and seems to be the person behind that famous phrase.⁹⁶ Although Baer died in 1970 in Washington, D.C., his cartoons persist as a record of the vibrant visual culture of the Nonpartisan League. Between Rube, Crafty, Big Biz, and the rest of his characters, Baer created a visual representation of the League and its opponents which remain a colorful and evocative record of the Nonpartisan League to this day. The League as depicted in Baer’s cartoons is a unifying force for good, fighting to bring farmers together against the pernicious actions of Big Biz, Crafty, and their ilk. Through the work of Florence Borner, John Miller Baer, and other creatives, the League was able to consciously craft an image of itself as the savior of the farmer, an unblemished force for good fighting against the unvarnished evil of big business interests, machine politicians, and the opposition press. However, historians and writers will never be content allowing the subjects of history to have the last word on themselves. Even while the movement of the Nonpartisan League was still in full swing, there were writers and participants in the struggle who began writing and publishing histories of the League in attempts to seize control of the helm of posterity. The stories of this battle for the history of the Nonpartisan League and who gets to define the image and character of the League, not to mention who owns the history of the Nonpartisan League, will serve as the basis for the next chapter.

⁹⁵ “The Sower and the Old Black Crow,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 20, 1918, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-05-20/ed-1/seq-6/>.

⁹⁶ Travis Earl Nygard, “Seeds of Agribusiness: Grant Wood and the Visual Culture of Grain Farming, 1862–1957” (PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2009, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 3400492), 103-104.

CHAPTER 2. “THE REAL AND FINAL HISTORY OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE CAN NOT BE WRITTEN IN THIS GENERATION...;” OR, WHO OWNS THE HISTORY OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE?

Historian Eric Foner in his book *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* wrestles with that titular question. He ends his preface by writing, “Who owns history? Everyone and no one—which is why the study of the past is a constantly evolving, never-ending journey of discovery.”⁹⁷ Although Foner is primarily a historian of Reconstruction and American slavery, his observations on the nature of historical ownership and the elusiveness of concrete historical images still hold true in the case of the history of the Nonpartisan League.

By 1921, there were at least four histories written and published by both boosters and skeptics of the League which purported to tell the true story of the Nonpartisan League. These include *The Nonpartisan League* by Herbert E. Gaston, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League: A Chapter in American Evolution* by Charles Edward Russell, *The Nonpartisan League: Its Birth, Activities, and Leaders* by William Langer, and *Non-partisan League* by Andrew A. Bruce. Since all four of these histories had the same essential subject matter, one would assume at least somewhat parallel narratives. But, in a remarkable example of the impact of an individual author’s interpretation in historical writing, and the significance of their vantage point on their created imagery, the four histories could not be more different in their interpretations and analyses of the same basic set of facts. Gaston and Russell, who were both involved in the League in some capacity, write sympathetic histories that paint the League in glowing terms as unparalleled vehicles for the political empowerment of farmers; Langer and Bruce, a formerly League-endorsed politician who had a falling out with League leadership and a former Chief

⁹⁷ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), xix.

Justice of the North Dakota Supreme Court, respectively, wrote scathing portraits of the League as an organization of generally well-intentioned farmers hijacked by ne'er-do-wells and Socialists like Arthur Townley who hoodwinked the farmers into supporting the state ownership of industries and made the League a vehicle for the delivery of international socialism. In this chapter, we will explore these dueling histories and the contemporaneous historical debate over who gets to write the history of the Nonpartisan League. As such, we will be reading them as primary sources of thoughts and feelings about the image and character of the Nonpartisan League in the manner of an historiographical essay, rather than as the straight-up historical treatments which the authors generally intended them to be.

To provide some historical context for the publication of these four histories, in 1921, the Nonpartisan League's future looked dim. The League's refusal to get involved in national politics on a large scale, the blossoming rural economic crisis of the 1920s, and accusations of mismanagement and ill intent on the part of League leadership all contributed to its disadvantageous situation. In October 1921, League opponents in North Dakota successfully recalled League-affiliated Governor Lynn Frazier, Attorney General William Lemke, and Commissioner of Agriculture John Hagan in a statewide referendum. Less than a week later, Arthur Townley began a ninety-day jail sentence in Jackson, Minnesota, for fomenting "disloyalty" during World War I.⁹⁸

In the midst of these events, Herbert E. Gaston published his book *The Nonpartisan League*, a history of the Nonpartisan League. Gaston, a native Oregonian, was a newspaper reporter working at the *Spokane Chronicle* in Washington state when Townley convinced him and his colleague D.C. Coates to move to North Dakota and work for the League. Townley's

⁹⁸ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 238-239.

intention was to create a League-owned newspaper which could combat what he saw as the biases of the other newspapers of North Dakota, and so brought in experienced editors and reporters from New York, Washington state, and elsewhere around the United States, including Gaston. Gaston was for a brief time the editor of *The Nonpartisan Leader* and then the *Fargo Courier-News* after the League's purchase of that newspaper. While at the *Leader*, Gaston published articles touting North Dakota's reserves of lignite coal as an engine for future prosperity, advertising North Dakota's patriotism as demonstrated by the League's victories in the 1918 primaries, and urging cooperation with merchants in Grand Forks looking to cooperate with the League's program.⁹⁹ In late 1919, Gaston moved to Minneapolis to work as the founding editor of the farmer/labor-owned *Minnesota Daily Star*, which is also when he completed his book.¹⁰⁰

As an editor of the League's official newspaper, Gaston witnessed first-hand most of the heyday of the League from the inside, making him knowledgeable about the League's inner workings but also enamored with its ideology. To his credit, Gaston acknowledges his biases in his preface. He argues that while all previous scholarship on the League "has been written from a standpoint of sneering cynicism or sneering hostility," he writes of his own "sympathetic standpoint" so that "the reader may be on his guard, if he wishes, and detach himself from the

⁹⁹ Herbert E. Gaston, "North Dakota's Sleeping Giant: Lignite, Wonder Mineral, Has Been Despised Because of Its Very Richness in Elements of Power," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), August 23, 1917, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-08-23/ed-1/seq-4/>; Herbert E. Gaston, "A Triumph of Right and Democracy: North Dakota, Staunch in Its Loyalty, Could Not Have Been True to American Traditions if It Had Voted Against the League," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), July 15, 1918, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-07-15/ed-1/seq-4/>; Herbert E. Gaston, "Where Merchants and Farmers Agree: The Story of How the Grand Forks Commercial Club Is Co-Operating to Realize Farmers' Program," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), February 2, 1920, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-02-02/ed-1/seq-1/>.

¹⁰⁰ "Herbert Gaston, Former Treasury Official, Dies: Had Distinguished Career in Newspaper Work, Service With Federal Government," *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1956, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/380922803/>.

author's viewpoint." However, he does write that he made "a conscientious effort to make a faithful report of facts of essential interest."¹⁰¹

Knowing that Gaston's book would paint the League in a sympathetic light at a time when they desperately needed good press, the League promoted it, along with Russell's book published at about the same time. In the April 26, 1920 edition of *The Nonpartisan Leader*, the League's byline-lacking book reviewer writes, "Every Leaguer, friend of the League and student of political and economic questions should have both these books." They go on to write that while "the real and final history of the Nonpartisan league can not be written in this generation," Gaston's account "will be one of the books and among the few current writings that will furnish impartial, first-hand facts for the future historians who will tell this great story in permanent form for posterity."¹⁰² Additionally, the August 23, 1920 edition of the *Leader* contained an advertisement for Gaston and Russell's books, offering them at wholesale prices to readers of their newspaper.¹⁰³

Gaston's account, while certainly not living up to the *Leader's* lofty promises of utter impartiality, sympathizes with the League while only at times devolving into sycophantic or overly partisan. He writes of the farmers who "have been mercilessly exploited" and recounts farmers' stories "of the swindling of the unsuspecting countryman out of his land and the work of years" by "bankers or lawyers or other townsmen;" he argues that the creation of the Nonpartisan League was a natural outgrowth of "The wrath of a helpless victim," i.e. the oft-abused farmers of North Dakota who were at the mercy of the various profiteers and middle

¹⁰¹ Herbert E. Gaston, *The Nonpartisan League*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), iii-iv.

¹⁰² "Nonpartisan League Histories Written: Charles Edward Russell, Herbert E. Gaston and O. M. Thomason Tell of Struggle of Organized Farmers," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), April 26, 1920, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-04-26/ed-1/seq-10/>.

¹⁰³ "An offer that can not last," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), August 23, 1920, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-08-23/ed-1/seq-16/>.

men.¹⁰⁴ Gaston emphasizes the cooperative efforts of the American Society of Equity as well as the work of a group of professors at the nascent North Dakota Agricultural College, especially farmer-turned-university president John Worst and chemistry professor Edwin F. Ladd, in drawing attention to injustices in grain grading and marketing as well as suggesting state ownership of elevators.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the most egregious slip in Gaston's veneer of impartiality is his discussion of Arthur Townley.

Gaston lionizes Townley, writing of his youth in a tone usually reserved for propagandistic depictions of dictators or religious depictions of saints. Gaston writes that "Townley himself knew that he was destined for leadership" and calls him "A true adventurer, a crusader in spirit."¹⁰⁶ Gaston essentially places the entirety of the credit for the creation of the League at the feet of Townley, largely glossing over the contributions of the other organizers from the Socialist party, and especially Albert E. Bowen, the creator of the League who shrewdly hired Townley as its public face.¹⁰⁷ In Gaston's view, Townley willed the League into being, writing, "Townley had written the program on a piece of paper. He named himself president..."¹⁰⁸ Gaston includes voluminous quotations from Townley's many speeches, and they are treated as though they are wisdom from on high. After one brief piece of wisdom from Townley about candidate selection for the upcoming precinct caucuses, Gaston attributes it with the phrase, "So wrote Townley, in his 'Call to Patriotic Action' published in the *Leader* of February 10, 1916," with a rhetorical style that would be more appropriate for the phrase "Thus saith the Lord."¹⁰⁹ Gaston also gives entirely too much credit to coming up with the idea of

¹⁰⁴ Gaston, *Nonpartisan League*, 15-18.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 19-31.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

¹⁰⁷ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 18-19.

¹⁰⁸ Gaston, *Nonpartisan League*, 58.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

having all the novice League-endorsed state legislators who arrived in Bismarck in 1916 meet in secret caucus before considering legislation on the floor of the legislature, writing, “Townley...played another of the cards which so frequently he has been found to have up his sleeve or concealed elsewhere about him.”¹¹⁰

The way Gaston describes Townley almost makes Townley seem like the conniving, omniscient puppet-master wielding total control of North Dakota’s farmers that the League’s opposition made him out to be. By giving so much credit to Townley and building him up to this legendary figure, Gaston was self-defeating in his goal of writing an accurate history of the League by playing up Townley as a leader of men while downplaying the agency of the thousands of farmers who came together to form the body of the League. Additionally, in his discussion of the defection of William Langer and Carl Kositzky, the League-endorsed attorney general and state auditor of North Dakota, respectively, Gaston reports Townley’s accusations against the two men of colluding with the anti-League Independent Voters Association without giving any clue as to the motivations of Langer and Kositzky.¹¹¹ Gaston actually closes the book by comparing the many enemies of the League to some biblical villains, “the Pharisees and the money changers in the temple” while making a thinly-veiled allusion to Townley as the Christlike figure in that metaphor writing that “...the true prophets are fairly certain to be stoned;” he also writes that “If we search diligently among the outcasts we may perchance find a real leader who may pass on his great idea or his great spirit before we crucify him...”¹¹² Townley looms large in Gaston’s imagination within the mythos of the Nonpartisan League.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 132.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 295-296.

¹¹² Ibid., 324-325.

One of the stranger aspects of Gaston's account is the fact that he takes himself completely out of the story of the League, despite his leading role with the League's various newspaper ventures. When Townley recruited both Gaston and D.C. Coates to come from Spokane, Washington, Gaston writes only of Coates joining "Townley's staff of advisers" and spends a page and a half going over Coates' resume without mentioning himself.¹¹³ Furthermore, when the League purchases the *Fargo Courier-News* and converts it from a virulently anti-League outlet to a pro-League paper, Gaston writes that it "was being edited by the former editor of the *Nonpartisan Leader*" and "came stoutly to the defense of Townley's plans." That unnamed "former editor of the *Nonpartisan Leader*" is, in fact, Gaston himself, in a strange twist of third-person passive voice.¹¹⁴

For the historian, Gaston's insight into the inner machinations and strategies of the League is invaluable. For instance, Gaston's candor in his concerns about the transferability of a political movement that was undeniably successful in North Dakota are informative; he writes:

It was not quite so easy to convince the farmers of other states that what was a panacea in North Dakota was good medicine elsewhere...Should Kansas and South Dakota and Iowa, birthplaces of Populism, incubators of government control of railroads, direct legislation and assaults upon entrenched privilege, take lessons from the state that had been Alex McKenzie's own empire?¹¹⁵

Gaston's also provides valuable insight on the League's political strategy about the pacifism of League members and Westerners in general in the lead up to and after the outbreak of World War I. He writes that while "The sentiment of North Dakota and of practically all states

¹¹³ Ibid., 110-111.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 133; "Herbert Gaston, Former Treasury Official, Dies," *LA Times*, December 9, 1956, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/380922803/>.

¹¹⁵ Gaston, *Nonpartisan League*, 161.

west of the Mississippi was decidedly pacifistic[,] ...the League was neither for war nor against it. It sought to pursue its political way without attention to so troublesome a subject.”¹¹⁶ He also asks the question of whether or not the League had “room for a campaign of protest against profiteering, for a demand that the load of war should be more equitably born...And could the League survive, carrying such a message of protest!”¹¹⁷ Gaston recognizes that, in fact, this message of protest undoubtedly harmed the League, arguing that it “gave the opposition much material on which to work.”¹¹⁸ He includes the infamous anti-war speech given by Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin to the League’s 1917 national meeting in St. Paul as one of those blunders which harmed the League so grievously, writing, “it furnished the grounds on which to build up a pseudo-patriotic campaign aimed at the suppression and extermination of the League in all of the states, except North Dakota, in which it was operating.”¹¹⁹

Gaston makes bold, and largely inaccurate, predictions about the future of the League. He writes that economic and political conditions in the West are such that “What they are seeking to do in North Dakota will be sought in many states.”¹²⁰ He goes, writing, “The progress that the League has made in North Dakota may easily be duplicated in other states...” while admitting that “no such rapid strides have yet been made.”¹²¹ Perhaps Gaston’s best encapsulation of the character of the Nonpartisan League as he saw it comes in his final chapter when he writes:

...the sincerity and honesty of the purposes of the men in charge of the League movement can scarcely be disputed. Their aim plainly has been to free the market from abuses, to liberate the state from thralldom to great market and financial centers, to

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 174.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 177.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 188.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 208-211, 217.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 319.

¹²¹ Ibid., 322.

stimulate agriculture, to make rural life more agreeable and socially endurable, to make it easier to acquire and to retain home ownership and productive independence and to conserve as far as possible the wealth and production of the state for the people who live in it.¹²²

In Gaston's view, the League was a powerful engine for the economic and political empowerment and independence of American farmers and laborers. Its leaders were generally above reproach, especially the nigh-infallible Townley. Despite Gaston's rosy view, the Nonpartisan League was largely a non-factor within a handful of years. Gaston's colleague Charles Edward Russell took a similarly optimistic view of the League and its future.

In the very first issue of *The Nonpartisan Leader* in September 1915 appeared a scathing opinion piece about the untrustworthiness of the corporate news media, referring in the headline to "tainted news." The writer warns that "Privilege in America lies in press control" and argues that "Every variety of false issue will be raised to fool you." He urges the farmer to come together and take advantage of the power at their disposal—and do not let their good prospects "be spoiled through any bunco games of a controlled press."¹²³ The writer of this piece is Charles Edward Russell, the author of a second history of the Nonpartisan League, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*. Russell's fierce attacks on the press came after Townley invited him to come North Dakota and be a part of this new movement of farmers. Russell was a prominent Socialist from New York, who had in 1912 ran unsuccessfully for Governor of New York and in 1914 for the U.S. Senate on the Socialist party ticket.¹²⁴ Townley thought Russell, along with

¹²² Ibid., 322-323.

¹²³ Charles Edward Russell, "The Power of Tainted News," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), September 23, 1915, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-09-23/ed-1/seq-7/>.

¹²⁴ "Socialists Expect War to Help Them," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1914, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/20495378>.

H.D. Behrens and Joseph Gilbert, two other prominent Socialists, could help the League with their organizing experience and rhetorical abilities.¹²⁵ For the next several years, Russell contributed fiery opinion pieces to the *Leader* as well as continuing to write for other radical newspapers throughout the country until publishing his book in 1920.

In the same book review/advertisement in *The Nonpartisan Leader* from April 1920 that touted Gaston's book, they promoted Russell's book. Knowing that there would be some asking questions about the utility of two books about essentially the same topic, the writer of the piece helpfully delineated the two. They argue that while Gaston's book focused more on a straightforward narrative of the history of the League to that point, Russell delved more deeply into the underlying "political and economic conditions existing in the Northwest, particularly North Dakota, prior to the organization of the League." The anonymous reviewer also writes that despite the seemingly dry subject matter, Russell is no "musty college professor" and that Russell's prose "has a style which enables him to handle ordinarily difficult economic questions with a breezy and interesting effect that probably can not be equaled by any other present-day writer..."¹²⁶ With the full support and endorsement of the Nonpartisan League leadership behind him, it is fair to assume going into the book that Russell paints the League in a flattering and uncritical light.

As the reviewer in the *Leader* suggested, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League* starts with an overview of the economic circumstances that made the formation of the Nonpartisan League necessary. Russell opens with an anecdote illustrating his basic argument; a group of farmers dined at a restaurant in Washington, D.C. After they got their bill, which was \$11.95, "exclusive

¹²⁵ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 31.

¹²⁶ "Nonpartisan League Histories Written," *Nonpartisan Leader*, April 26, 1920, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-04-26/ed-1/seq-10/>.

of gratuities...They made a total of all the items they had entered as they went along, showing what the producer had netted from this. It was 84 cents.”¹²⁷ Russell argues for the unfairness of a system by which middle men including wholesalers, retailers, transporters, bankers, millers, and the like swindled both producers and consumers by paying producers too little and charging consumers too much. He writes, “Feeling more and more the sting of this wrong, it was inevitable that [the producer] should revolt against it.”¹²⁸ Russell cheers on the farmers in their fight against the powers that be, comparing them to “Jack the Giant-killer” and “Ulysses defying a new race of cyclops” as well as making them “as chivalric as those that went up the slopes of Bunker Hill.”¹²⁹ To illustrate his account, Russell includes numerous anecdotal examples about farmers losing their farms, banks circumventing the law to charge exorbitant interest, and giant, vertically-integrated corporations which owned elevators, railroads, and wholesalers to ensure they received the lion’s share of any profit. He cites congressional testimony, elevator records, photographs, and a litany of other sources to back up many of his claims. Russell castigates the middle-men, writing they performed “no other service to society than what might be involved in making three marks with a lead pencil.”¹³⁰

After spending roughly two-thirds of the book laying out the political and economic conditions that, in his mind, predestined the Nonpartisan League, Russell finally gets to the creation of the League itself and, of course, Arthur Townley. Unlike in Gaston’s account, Albert Bowen, the actual founder of the League, does make an appearance but Russell relegates Bowen to “a friend of [Townley’s] who shared his views.”¹³¹ Townley still looms large in Russell’s

¹²⁷ Charles Edward Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League: A Chapter in American Evolution*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1920), 1-2.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

narrative though; Russell describes a bankrupt Townley prowling North Dakota on foot and talking over his observations about the unfairness of the economic and political status quo in the state with other farmers. During Townley's travels, "As he walked and talked a new agrarian movement took shape in his mind."¹³² So, like in Gaston's account, there is a bit of a paradox here. Somehow the Nonpartisan League is both the singular creation of the visionary genius Arthur Townley and the natural outpouring of the collective grievances of the wronged farmers of North Dakota. Both Russell and Gaston root their accounts in the great man theory of history, which places most of the onus of historical events on exceptional individuals, e.g. Arthur Townley and the creation of the Nonpartisan League, rather than acknowledging the agency of others in shaping events, in this case the thousands of other farmers fed up with their lots in life who contributed money, time, and more to make the League successful. Russell's Townley cuts a heroic figure. Some of the other descriptors of Townley include "a born leader," "an unusual gift for organization," and his "unusual powers of persuasion."¹³³

After rushing through the founding of the League, Russell recounts their first victories in the 1916 elections and the swift and vicious response from the forces of the establishment. He writes, "You would have thought that North Dakota had been invaded by a band of furious, ravaging, uncouth savages bent upon the uprooting of civilization itself." Russell thinks this response ludicrous, arguing, "A majority of the people, American citizens, purposed to exercise their constitutional right to govern, and at the bare idea the foundations seemed to rock."¹³⁴ Russell also makes the case that the League-dominated state legislature had no parallel in its effectiveness, writing, "There had never been a legislature in the history of the United States that

¹³² Ibid., 196.

¹³³ Ibid., 201-202.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 215.

in an equal space of time enacted an equal number of betterment measures.”¹³⁵ While Russell is clearly hyperbolizing here, historian Michael Lansing actually agrees that despite some bumps in the road, League-endorsed legislators were surprisingly effective in their first session, especially considering their inexperience, citing their creation of a state grain-grading system, state bank deposit insurance, a state highway commission, and new regulations on railroads as well as instituting limited women’s suffrage.¹³⁶

Despite the League’s legislative successes in North Dakota, Russell next turns to “the use of the war situation...to embarrass, to check, or to ruin the movement.” Russell acknowledges that the League’s response to the outbreak of World War I was one of their “grave errors.”¹³⁷ They did not pay enough attention to the war and continued their tirades against the entrenched interests against which they were campaigning; these speeches “were twisted and distorted into something that could bear the suspicion of inferential sedition” by the enemies of the League.¹³⁸ Like in Gaston’s account, Russell cites Senator La Follette’s speech to the League convention in St. Paul as a major blow to the continued success of the League. Curiously, though, Russell does not mention La Follette by name; he instead includes several long passages from speeches by Arthur Townley and letters from George Creel of the Committee on Public Information, which was the government agency responsible for wartime propaganda, and a respected judge which Russell no doubt thought proved the patriotism of the League.¹³⁹ In addition to the League’s poor handling of the outbreak of the war, Russell cites poor vetting of their nominees for elected office. Again, without naming names, Russell acknowledges that the schism formed by North

¹³⁵ Ibid., 229.

¹³⁶ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 40-41.

¹³⁷ Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*, 231.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 236.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 239-242.

Dakota's Attorney General William Langer, Secretary of State Thomas Hall, and State Auditor Carl Kositzky; all three had won by running on the League platform but renounced the League after a series of scandals.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, he says that the efforts of the League's opponents in distributing official-looking notices stating that the state was going to repossess all farm lands and that the owners needed to vacate immediately to "foreign-born and ill-informed farmers in remote regions of the state" provoked outrage and fear.¹⁴¹

Russell closes his portrait of the League by writing that "In the face of these and many other obstacles, fighting incessantly for its life, the League continued to make progress, to extend itself steadily and to enroll new members."¹⁴² He argues that while "The forces opposed to this movement...may yet succeed in wrecking it," "...the mark [the Nonpartisan League] has set will never be removed."¹⁴³ In Russell's mind, the League embodied the continuous and ever-present struggle against "the injustice that poisons mortal existence."¹⁴⁴ It was not just a minor political movement in the sparsely-inhabited corners of a backwater state in the middle of flyover country; the League represented something much bigger and more important. Russell viewed the League as a major moment in the organization of farmers, wage-earners, and other disempowered peoples under the system of capitalism which Russell loathed. His hope was that this represented some new dawn of democratic power; the next pair of writers, William Langer and Andrew A. Bruce, could not have disagreed more.

William Langer's political fortunes were already rising before the Nonpartisan League came into the picture. The grandson of German immigrants, Langer grew up on a farm in rural

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 281; Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 198-99.

¹⁴¹ Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*, 286-87.

¹⁴² Ibid., 322.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 324-25.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 325.

Cass County, North Dakota. After completing his schooling at Columbia University and the University of North Dakota Law School, Langer worked briefly as an assistant state's attorney in Morton County, North Dakota, before winning election to the office of state's attorney for Morton County at twenty-eight.¹⁴⁵ While serving in that role, he cracked down on illegal saloons and pushed compulsory school attendance; these actions gained him enough prominence that he decided to run for attorney general of North Dakota in 1916. Wanting to shore up support in the Republican primary, Langer enlisted the help of his college roommate and friend, William Lemke, who at the time was working for the Nonpartisan League with Arthur Townley.

Unlike many of the other leaders of the Nonpartisan League, Langer came not from the Socialist Party of North Dakota but rather from the Progressive wing of the Republican Party. This meant that while Langer was on board for all of the anti-monopolistic aspects of the League's platform, he was always a little wary of the state ownership portions of the platform. Regardless of ideological differences, Langer won the endorsement of the League and the election, and then won both again in 1918.¹⁴⁶ However, a disagreement over the election of the state superintendent of public instruction as well as Langer's concerns about some of the enterprises of the League more tangential to their original platform caused him to publicly split from the League in 1919. In 1920, he ran in the Republican primary against the League-endorsed incumbent, Governor Lynn Frazier and lost.¹⁴⁷ Although Langer later reconciled with the League in the latter part of the 1920s, it is this context of his primary loss to Frazier, newly unemployed status, and philosophical if not fundamental disagreements with League leadership that a deeply-

¹⁴⁵ Glenn H. Smith, "William Langer and the Art of Personal Politics," in *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, ed. Thomas W. Howard (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 123-127.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 129-131.

embittered and defensive Langer published his history of the Nonpartisan League, *The Nonpartisan League: Its Birth, Activities and Leaders*.

Langer opens his book with an introductory section justifying his decision to write a book about the Nonpartisan League, in the wake of the books by both Gaston and Russell. He immediately dismisses both as mere propagandists writing to make the Nonpartisan League look better rather than trying to do any true accounting of the movement and does so with gratuitous all-caps. Of Russell, Langer writes that he was “one of the leading radical Socialists of the country,” which is a pretty fair characterization of Russell, who was a former Socialist candidate for governor of New York and mayor of New York City as well as a writer of numerous radical essays for prominent publications, but Langer means it as a way of severely undermining Russell’s credibility. He also is sure to point out testimony from Arthur Townley’s bankruptcy trial wherein Townley mentioned that Russell “WAS EMPLOYED TO START THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE” (emphasis Langer’s).¹⁴⁸ Langer is also no fan of Gaston. He writes of Gaston’s affiliation with David C. Coates, who helped found the IWW in North Dakota, and states conspiratorially that Gaston is “at present editing newspapers and spreading propaganda for this outfit,” meaning the Nonpartisan League.¹⁴⁹ Langer also argues that Gaston and Russell’s books “are a fair sample of the propaganda with which the United States has been flooded these last years—unreliable, one-sided, unfair and designed to prejudice the minds of the readers;” Langer goes on to criticize their portrayal of Arthur Townley and other League leaders as “saviors, heroes, of god-like visage and almost divine inspiration,” which is similar to the criticism I had for Gaston and Russell.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ William Langer, *The Nonpartisan League: Its Birth, Activities and Leaders*, (Mandan, ND: Morton County Farmers Press, 1920), 3.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

As a former prominent member of the League, Langer believes that his insight uniquely qualifies him to account what he views as the problems of the Nonpartisan League. He writes that while he absolutely believes in many of the initial reforms promised by the League, he distrusts the “Socialists at the head of it” and wants to “get real tax paying farmers” in charge of it.¹⁵¹ Langer argues that while the country desperately needs progressive reforms, he distrusts “those men who in the name of reform make capital of present economic ills, and by lying, sneaking, black-brained, insidious propaganda arouse the farmers.” Langer is so confident in the veracity of his account that he prints the full text of the so-called “anti-liars act” which he argues criminalizes anti-League speech by state officials, punishable by a year in prison.¹⁵² I want to emphasize the sheer chutzpah of this act; Langer dares his former friend William Lemke, appointed as an assistant attorney general of North Dakota, to arrest him as a liar or to prove the accuracy of Langer’s criticisms by failing to arrest him. With the gauntlet thus decisively thrown down, Langer dives into his account of the Nonpartisan League.

Langer credits most of the intellectual foundations of the League’s platforms to one man: George S. Loftus. Loftus, the former campaign manager for Robert La Follette’s 1912 presidential campaign, worked in North Dakota on behalf of the Equity Cooperative Exchange. According to historian Michael Lansing, the Equity Cooperative Exchange “represented democratically controlled, mutually organized, collaborative self-help in order to ensure private economic benefit for individual farmers in a competitive marketplace. It embodied a moral economy as well as an economic enterprise.”¹⁵³ Loftus articulated a fairer capitalism that appealed to Langer more deeply than, in Langer’s view, the more socialism-tainted ideas of

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵² Ibid., 5-8.

¹⁵³ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 9.

Townley, Bowen, and the others of the League. Langer argues Loftus's case as a positive force causing the farmers' revolt as well as the work of the "self-opinionated, egotistical, blow-hard" speaker of the North Dakota House of Representatives, Treadwell Twitchell, as a negative driving force. In Langer's view, "North Dakota would never have been selected for this experiment in Socialism," the Nonpartisan League, if only Twitchell would have just upheld the two statewide referendum votes in favor of a state-owned terminal elevator.¹⁵⁴ This line of thought is intriguing, because Langer seems to be suggesting that if the state would have just built the terminal elevator like the voters wanted, then the Nonpartisan League would not have been necessary and perhaps a form of cooperative capitalism could have instead served to upend the money-grubbing middlemen which concerned the progressive Langer.

While Langer titled the book *The Nonpartisan League: Its Birth, Activities and Leaders*, perhaps a more accurate title is *The Nonpartisan League's Leaders Are Socialists and Should Under No Circumstances Be Trusted*. In Chapter 3, entitled "Are the Leaders Socialists?," Langer answers that question with a resounding, all-caps YES. After a few pages of complaints about the League leaders' slippery way of diverting all criticism of them onto the membership of the Nonpartisan League, Langer launches into a bullet-pointed list, responding to the grammatically-questionable question, "What is the connection between Townley and his outfit of the Socialist party of the United States?" To answer, Langer outlines the litany of connections between various prominent figures in the Nonpartisan League and the Socialist Parties of North Dakota and the United States.¹⁵⁵ To be fair, though, none of these people ever made any serious effort to hide their former connections to the Socialist Party; it was well known that "Bowen and

¹⁵⁴ Langer, *The Nonpartisan League*, 11-16.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 26-33.

Townley refused to be chained by socialist ideology,” as Michael Lansing puts it.¹⁵⁶ The very act of creating the Nonpartisan League outside of the party structure of the Socialist Party of North Dakota ensured the continuing animosity of those left behind within the Party until its eventual dissolution. Nevertheless, Langer trumpets the myriad connections between League organizers and socialism as though he cracked some hidden socialist conspiracy, when in fact he pointed out the obvious; the platform of the Nonpartisan League was, after all, essentially a more practical and publicly palatable version of the kind of state ownership for which the Socialists argued.

After laying out the grand Socialist conspiracy, Langer dissects the rampant corruption he sees in government appointments and salaries. One of the worst offenses, in his view, is the power of the commissioner of immigration to send recruiters to other states and “BRING THESE MEN BACK TO NORTH DAKOTA NEAR ELECTION TIME AS THEY DID LAST JUNE” (emphasis Langer’s). Langer again references the anti-liar rule, thundering, “Come on Frazier, come on Townley, the Courts are open. Arrest me if it isn’t true!”¹⁵⁷ Langer argues here that the League is setting up a political machine to replace the Alexander McKenzie machine they only recently toppled. He goes on to address some of the ways in which he feels the League wronged him personally; he places his grievances in context by spending several pages, in a chapter entitled “Crucifying Honest Opposition,” ticking off men who the League wronged in some way despite their support of it and its platform.¹⁵⁸ When he reaches himself, he lists some names he claims the “socialists [sic] leaders” called him, including “a fool, a coward, a tool of big business, a solicitor of slush funds, a drunkard, a free lover, pro-German, a slacker, and a user of state money for private purposes.” One of his main grievances is a lack of appreciation for his

¹⁵⁶ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 26.

¹⁵⁷ Langer, *The Nonpartisan League*, 45.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-55.

work in Washington, D.C., lobbying successfully for some loan relief for North Dakota farmers; he asks and answers, “BUT WERE THE SOCIALIST LEADERS GRATEFUL? No.”¹⁵⁹

Langer’s next bone to pick is what he views as the rampant corruption and cronyism present in the banks started by the League. He has particular concerns about the Bank of North Dakota, quoting the entirety of the legislation which created it, and then writing, “THE SOCIALISTS, NOT THE FARMERS OF NORTH DAKOTA ARE IN CONTROL.”¹⁶⁰ He complains bitterly of the inexperienced League loyalists chosen to run the bank, writing, “this WHOLE THING IS ROTTEN TO THE CORE.”¹⁶¹ Langer also has grave concerns about the secret caucus, wherein League-endorsed legislators meet to agree how they will vote on legislation; in Langer’s mind, the poor, “retiring” farmer of North Dakota is, in that situation, hoodwinked by the “loud mouthed” former Socialist Party organizers, especially Townley. He writes of Townley, “WHEN FACE TO FACE WITH THESE MEN, TOWNLEY FAWNS, CAJOLES, FLATTERS AND CONFIDES IN THEM. BEHIND THEIR BACKS HE RIDICULES, DEGRADES, HOLDS UP TO CONTEMPT AND DESPISES.”¹⁶² Langer goes further, arguing that League leaders, especially his former friend Lemke, are secretly colluding with the deposed political boss Alexander McKenzie, writing that Lemke is “in the secret recesses...at Bismarck mak[ing] ‘deals’ while gayly eating their food and drinking their drinks! Oh how McKenzie must hate him.”¹⁶³ It is safe to assume that this last bit is sarcasm. Langer closes with an extended call to action, arguing that it is the patriotic duty of the farmers of North Dakota to cast out the Socialist deceivers and take up the mantle of self-governance. Langer

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 90-98.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁶² Ibid., 120-121.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 177.

argues for an empowered populace taking full advantage of their democratic prerogatives in his envisioned tongue-in-cheek “DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT.” He reinforces that idea in his closing, fleshing out his idea of this proletariat, writing:

A PROLETARIAT THAT HAS RESPECT FOR BRAIN, FOR ENERGY, FOR INDUSTRY, FOR BRAWN, FOR LABOR, BUT WHICH WILL NOT TOLERATE SENSELESS, RELENTLESS, REMORSELESS AGITATION OF SOULESS, UNSCRUPULOUS, ATHEISTIC SOCIALISTS.¹⁶⁴

Langer’s account of the Nonpartisan League reeks of bitterness and unconcealed, bubbling rage. It is less history or any kind of recollection than it is part list of personal grievances, part anti-socialist manifesto, part all-caps conspiracy theorist screed. The book reads more like an extended campaign speech or the closing arguments of a prosecutor than any kind of coherent story. Langer leans into the fiery campaign rhetoric despite the fact that he is not, at the book’s release in October 1920, actually running for any elected office after losing the May Republican primary for governor to Lynn Frazier.¹⁶⁵ Langer loses the thread quite often with his criticisms of the League, despite their occasional validity, especially about the cult of personality around and domineering leadership of Arthur Townley. Unfortunately, his meanderings throughout the various issues he has with the League drown out any thoughtful criticism or insight. His book stands in sharp contrast to the decidedly pro-League biases of Gaston and Russell, swinging to the absolute polar opposite direction. If, as Langer paints Gaston and Russell’s books in his introduction, they are “unreliable, one-sided, unfair and designed to

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 240.

¹⁶⁵ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 220.

prejudice the minds of the readers,” then it is only fair to say the same of Langer and the Nonpartisan League he describes.¹⁶⁶

The Nonpartisan League, in Langer’s view, was an organization with noble goals and a well-intentioned rank-and-file membership that a few self-aggrandizing Socialists with ulterior motives corrupted and twisted into something unrecognizable to Langer. This despite the fact that all these Socialists that Langer rails so vociferously against were the founders of the League, without whom it would not exist. It seems paradoxical that Townley, Bowen, and the rest corrupted something that they, in fact, created and led from the first. Additionally, socialist thought provides the roots for the fundamental tenets of the League’s platform of state ownership of industries essential to the agrarian’s economic fortunes, so it is unclear why the presence of socialists within their ranks so vexes Langer. One can suspect that there were one of two things motivating Langer in writing this book; either his schism with the League so traumatized him as to cause him to lash out unthinkingly or, more likely, for the shrewd politician Langer, he had some future elected office in mind and wanted to begin sharpening his knives in preparation for the inevitable future political battles. If the latter is the case, then all the red-baiting and socialist name-calling throughout seems more calculated than genuine. At any rate, Langer was not the only skeptic of the League to publish an account of it. No less than the former Chief Justice of the North Dakota Supreme Court Andrew A. Bruce joined him in that club.

Andrew A. Bruce was born in India to Scottish parents; his father was a general in the British Army stationed in India. He grew up in England and after his parents died when he was 15, he immigrated to the United States. He worked on a farm for a few years in Minnesota before going to the University of Wisconsin for law school. After law school, Bruce worked briefly for

¹⁶⁶ Langer, *The Nonpartisan League*, 4.

a railroad company in Wisconsin and for the state of Illinois before becoming a law professor at his alma mater in 1898. In 1902, he moved to North Dakota to become the University of North Dakota's law school dean.¹⁶⁷ In 1911, Governor John Burke, a Democrat, appointed him to North Dakota's Supreme Court and in 1916 became Chief Justice of that court. In 1918, he retired from the court and moved to teach law at the University of Minnesota, which is where he found himself when writing his account of the Nonpartisan League, creatively titled *The Nonpartisan League*.¹⁶⁸

Bruce wastes no time making known his feelings of the Nonpartisan League; in the first page of the first chapter he refers to the League as “a disease which, like the measles, must be allowed to run its course.”¹⁶⁹ But Bruce actually thinks that the situation is worse than that; he argues that the League is “a political movement which was promoted at first for the gratification of personal ambition and the attainment of personal ends, but which was soon captured by the American socialist hierarchy who are now seeking to make it the entering wedge for the attainment of a socialist America.”¹⁷⁰ Bruce sees the League as no less than the beachhead of a socialistic plot to overthrow the American capitalistic economic system and institute state socialism. He writes that the League movement's “ultimate object, besides bettering the political and financial fortunes of its leaders, shall be the destruction of the middleman, the industrial entrepreneur and the so-called capitalistic classes, and even the destruction of private ownership in land itself.”¹⁷¹ Bruce argues that the League is just one more step towards state socialism, writing that while it “started with an attempt to control the price and the marketing of grain[,]...it

¹⁶⁷ “Andrew A. Bruce Justice of the Supreme Court 1911-1918,” North Dakota Supreme Court, accessed April 15, 2018. <http://www.ndcourts.gov/court/bios/bruce.htm>.

¹⁶⁸ “Andrew Bruce, N. U. Professor of Law, Dead: Dakota Supreme Court's Ex-Chief Justice,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 1934, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/354951877>.

¹⁶⁹ Andrew A. Bruce, *The Nonpartisan League*, (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 1.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

has been turned by a socialist leadership into a movement for state socialism in all things except in farm land.”¹⁷² There are a couple of issues with Bruce’s image of the League here; for one, characterizing the attempts by the League to shift more of the agricultural profits from the middlemen to the producers and institute regulations for fairness in marketing as an attempt at completely controlling prices and marketing is a stretch. Additionally, to call the League’s platform state socialism is just inaccurate. They advocated for state ownership in just a handful of industries that they argued directly affected the public interest, including a terminal elevator, state mill, and the state bank. Bruce’s imagination runs wild here, seeing hidden socialists in every farmhouse.

The League’s fledgling attempts to combine the farmers’ interests with those of other laborers especially concern Bruce. He writes, “The political union between the farmer and the laboring-man is an impossible union and cannot long continue...Every rise in the price of wheat, however, or the price of food, raises the price which the laboring-man pays.”¹⁷³ While Bruce hyperbolizes a bit here, he is at least partially correct; farmers were and are in a unique economic position where they are producers whose livelihoods are subject to the whims of others and nebulous market forces and, at the same time, managers who hire and set wages for farm laborers. Farmers, especially tenant farmers who rely almost entirely on long lines of credit, are, in a sense, simultaneously the proletariat and the petite bourgeoisie, to use Marx’s terms, and there is a natural friction there. Later, Bruce speculates as to the origin of this idea, writing, “The suggestion could have come only from a desire of the League’s socialist hierarchy to bring about

¹⁷² Ibid., 5-7.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 12.

an era of sovietism and to obtain the votes and support of the radical laboring classes no matter what the consequences might be to orderly government.”¹⁷⁴

Bruce goes on to examine the causes of the agrarian revolt in North Dakota. He believes that the common understanding of easterners that “the revolution in North Dakota is due to the illusions of illiteracy or that it is the protest of destitution or of want” is facetious.¹⁷⁵ He argues, instead, that “in spite of its natural wealth, its magnificent possibilities, and its sturdy and intelligent people, North Dakota is economically speaking but a province and perhaps for this reason, the revolution.”¹⁷⁶ By this, Bruce refers to the McKenzie political machine which dominated North Dakota politics in the early part of the twentieth-century and made North Dakota largely a peripheral state of the center in Minneapolis/St. Paul. He writes, “At all times North Dakota has been economically dependent on the East, and for many years its real seat of government was at the city of St. Paul in the state of Minnesota, rather than its own capital at Bismarck.” In Bruce’s eyes, though, the Nonpartisan League that usurped McKenzie offers a worse alternative. He writes “that the Non-partisan movement of to-day has built up an autocracy of its own which is more autocratic by far than any dictatorship which is has sought to supplant.”¹⁷⁷ And, worse yet, control of North Dakota still lay in St. Paul as the Nonpartisan League moved their headquarters there from Fargo after they expanded into Minnesota.

Bruce credits most of the impetus for the creation of the Nonpartisan League to what he calls “The Revolution of 1906.” By this, he refers to an incident he also calls the “Looting of Alaska” in which Alexander McKenzie swindled some Scandinavian-American prospectors in Nome, Alaska, and spent a few months in federal prison before receiving a pardon from

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 144.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 23.

President William McKinley.¹⁷⁸ Bruce argues that this obscure incident caused the Scandinavian-Americans to lose faith in the Republican Party despite the fact that “Historically the Norseman was closely identified with the Republican party.” He goes on to write that the Scandinavian “had lost his moorings and his faith, he was ready for anything new,” making the time ripe for Townley, Bowen, and the rest of their Socialist conspirators to swoop in and take advantage of the volatile situation.¹⁷⁹

Bruce argues that the founders of the Nonpartisan League were dyed-in-the-wool socialists and took advantage of circumstances in North Dakota to advance their nefarious socialistic agenda. He focuses particularly on the North Dakota legislature’s failure to pass a terminal elevator bill in the 1915 session, despite repeated popular referendums which expressed broad public support of such an idea. Bruce writes that “the abandonment of the measure furnished a fitting pretext for a revolution...”¹⁸⁰ Bruce criticized the League on the grounds “that from the beginning its leadership has been composed of consistent socialists.” Similar to Langer’s approach, Bruce spends much of his chapter on the leadership of the League outlining all the various ways they were connected to the Socialist Party and other socialists. He thinks especially poorly of Townley, writing that his story “is the old, old story, and shows with little variation the old, old evolution—poverty, a...dream of wealth; failure, a dream of a socialist state, and then a dream of kingship.”¹⁸¹ Bruce’s special scorn also includes Albert Bowen; he admits that neither of them particularly enriched themselves though. He writes of the two, almost

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 28-31; Andrea R.C. Helms and Mary Childers Mangusso, “The Nome Gold Conspiracy,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (January 1982): 10-19.

¹⁷⁹ Bruce, *Nonpartisan League*, 32.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 59.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 60.

admiringly, “They have been lovers of power rather than vulgar looters, and in politics it is the lover of power who is always the most effective.”¹⁸²

Revealingly, Bruce scoffs at the implementation of the primary system which made the League’s rapid success possible. He writes that the primary system came from voters who “fatuously believed that the only cure for the ills of democracy was more democracy.”¹⁸³ Bruce argues that it is the height of hypocrisy for the League to leverage the primary system while within the League’s governance there is autocracy not democracy. He cites a pamphlet written by League leader Walter Thomas Mills, who admits plainly, “It is impossible to fight the political machines...except by the building of a machine with which to fight them. The League came into existence to fight a battle, and battles can be fought only with someone in command. Townley is in command.”¹⁸⁴ In Mills’ view, a movement without a democratic structure with the end goal of achieving greater democracy is defensible; in Bruce’s view it is unconscionable duplicity for the League to advocate democracy externally without implementing democratic principles internally. Both views have their respective merits, and this is certainly something over which reasonable people can disagree.

In Bruce’s view, the Nonpartisan League membership “perhaps are economically sound and are certainly morally pure and are certainly patriotic” but their leaders are a cabal of international socialists who want to undermine all American values.¹⁸⁵ Weirdly, Bruce seems fixated on sexual morality as a particularly besieged American value by the godless international socialists also known as the leaders of the Nonpartisan League. He argues, with several dramatic leaps of logic:

¹⁸² Ibid., 70.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 75.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 112.

To the international socialist our American morality is abhorrent...The socialists are opposed to the word 'morality' because...it includes sexual morality, and sexual morality brings with it the home and the home instinct and where there is the home there also is 'patriotism.' The international socialist does not recognize the word 'patriotism' and knows no country and no flag.¹⁸⁶

Sexual morality issues aside, Bruce also argues that all accusations of disloyalty made against the Nonpartisan League leaders during World War I are true, characterizing them as "among the country's most prominent political profiteers."¹⁸⁷ He thinks the legacy of the League's leaders "will be that they have sought to destroy the faith and comradeship of America."¹⁸⁸

Perhaps the most unique aspect of Bruce's account is his rosy view of pre-League North Dakota. In this, he clashes with his fellow League skeptic William Langer who was, at his core, a Progressive and well aware of the problems farmers faced. Bruce writes, "It was but natural that the capitalists of these [eastern] cities should sooner or later seek to attain a share in the government of a state in which they had so heavily invested, and to assume some measure of control over its economic policies."¹⁸⁹ Bruce shrugs his shoulders at the machinations of the McKenzie machine and its eastern connections, in direct conflict with the authors of the other three histories examined in this chapter. His representation of the situation paints the farmers as little more than whiners, grouching about a situation which was not actually that bad.

Russell, Gaston, Langer, and Bruce wrote their four histories of the Nonpartisan League within a two-year window and yet drew drastically different conclusions about the League from the same basic set of facts and crafted highly divergent images of the League. To Russell and

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 152-155.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 275.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 25.

Gaston, dedicated Leaguers and fighters for the radical cause writ large, the League represented their best hope for meaningful changes to the economic and political status quo in the western and midwestern United States and Townley represented a larger than life figure who would fight to his dying breath for the agrarian cause. To Langer, the League, while he initially agreed with the platform and empathized deeply with what he viewed as the legitimate concerns of North Dakotan farmers, was beyond help. The same men who created it over time corrupted it and thus Langer felt an obligation to speak out against them and their socialism, despite his belief in most of its progressive message. To Bruce, the League represented the first stage of an international socialistic invasion of the United States and while he mouthed some lukewarm support for the agrarians' concerns, he viewed the League as a fundamental threat and its leaders as anti-American, immoral, and atheistic.

These four books showcase how much the image of the Nonpartisan League can differ depending upon the vantage points of the authors. If, as Eric Foner argued in *Who Owns History?*, no one truly owns history, that begs the question: how is the public to know what is true and what is not? For example, a review of Bruce's polemical history of the League appears in the *Evening Star* newspaper of Washington, D.C., on August 21, 1921. The reviewer praised both Bruce and the book, writing, "Every intelligent citizen should study this exhaustive and fair-dealing exposition...Its writer is in a position to know the truth of this matter."¹⁹⁰ This despite Bruce's deeply partisan analysis which devolves frequently into international socialism-induced hysterics. While today there are arguably more stringent academic standards for histories and easier access to immediate fact-checking at one's fingertips via the Internet, that still leaves the

¹⁹⁰ "Reviews of New Books," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 21, 1921, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1921-08-21/ed-1/seq-37/>.

question of how the public and popular culture understood and depicted the Nonpartisan League, both during their heyday as well as in posterity.

CHAPTER 3. “ALIEN AGITATORS WHO THREATEN THE SECURITY OF OUR
INSTITUTIONS:” THE IMAGE OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE IN POPULAR
CULTURE AND MEDIA

Beginning in 1917, contemporaneously to the spread of the Nonpartisan League across the upper Midwest and West, a traveler of a different kind undertook a reconnaissance mission in Minnesota. A relatively unknown novelist and low-level publishing house employee and his wife arrived in Minnesota and settled into a rented house on picturesque Summit Avenue in St. Paul, near the location of railroad tycoon James J. Hill’s sprawling mansion and the brand new towering dome of the Cathedral of St. Paul. He was there doing research for his next novel, his sixth. For it, he had decided to go back to basics and return to his Minnesotan roots; Lewis grew up in the small town of Sauk Centre in central Minnesota. In St. Paul, he scandalized locals by hosting a number of luminaries from the radical Nonpartisan League. Chastised by his neighbors’ response, he and his wife left for a Cape Cod vacation before returning to a new house in Minneapolis, only to have the same thing happen again. Annoyed by the gossipy nature of the Twin Cities socialites, the couple moved to Mankato in 1919 and were able to attend Nonpartisan League meetings and ingratiate himself into the organization and the life of the small town, a part of his research, without raising any eyebrows. The novelist, of course, was Sinclair Lewis and his wife Grace, and the novel he was beginning work on was his first commercially- and critically-successful one, *Main Street*.¹⁹¹

Main Street was so successful in part because of the simplicity and relatability of its small-town setting. Though it was set in Lewis’s home state of Minnesota, it still felt familiar even to those who were from similar places in locales further afield. *Main Street* held up the

¹⁹¹ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 181-2.

familiar image of the idyllic village with its perfect little cast of characters, and then smashed those stereotypes to infinitesimal pieces. Lewis wrote in his biography for his Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930 that “One of the most treasured American myths had been that all American villages were peculiarly noble and happy, and here an American attacked that myth. Some hundreds of thousands read the book with the same masochistic pleasure that one has in sucking an aching tooth.”¹⁹² Carol Kennicott’s chronic case of the Village Virus, as Lewis calls the spiritual sickness that afflicts those residents unhappy with small-town life and its sparsity and want to escape, is readily familiar to those who are actually from the Gopher Prairies of the world. Her rude awakening when she realizes that the wonderland described to her by her newlywed husband, Will Kennicott, is understandable to those conned into partnering with someone from one of the Gopher Prairies of the world. Her first thought of Gopher Prairie is, “Only to the eyes of a Kennicott was it exceptional.”¹⁹³ As it specifically related to the Nonpartisan League, Lewis in *Main Street* harshly criticizes the narrow-mindedness and brusque hostility of the non-farmer residents of those unexceptional Gopher Prairies towards the Nonpartisan League and its members.

Lewis sympathized greatly with the Nonpartisan League and its goals. Though he himself was the son of a small-town doctor and not any kind of farmer, the cause of the agrarian radicals resonated deeply with him. Michael Lansing argues that “Lewis embraced the farmers of the Nonpartisan League because in his mind they embodied the best of lower-middle-class ideology—accumulation without concentration...”¹⁹⁴ To that end, the Nonpartisan League, while on the surface not a significant part of the novel *Main Street*, in fact shows up at a critical

¹⁹² Sinclair Lewis, “Sinclair Lewis – Biographical,” The Nobel Foundation, 1930, https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1930/lewis-bio.html.

¹⁹³ Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, (New York: Signet Classics, 2008), 42.

¹⁹⁴ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 183.

juncture and Lewis portrays the League sympathetically, or perhaps more accurately the skeptical townsfolk unsympathetically.

Although Lewis litters *Main Street* with occasional references to the Nonpartisan League, the first significant mention is as part of a sermon delivered by the hypothetically civic-minded Reverend Edmund Zitterel, entitled “America, Face Your Problems!” Carol comes into church “civic and neighborly and commendable,” interested in the topic of the upcoming sermon.

Reverend Zitterel quickly launches into a castigation of:

...these self-conceited fellows that are always trying to stir up trouble [and] deceive you with the belief that there's anything to all these smart-aleck movements to let the unions and the Farmers' Nonpartisan League kill all our initiative and enterprise by fixing wages and prices. There isn't any movement that amounts to a whoop without it's got a moral background. And let me tell you that...folks are fussing about what they call 'economics' and 'socialism' and 'science' and a lot of things that are nothing in the world but a disguise for atheism...¹⁹⁵

To Carol's utter dismay and then boredom, Zitterel's reactionary political display lasts only briefly before he abruptly pivots into the real danger to America in his mainline Protestant eyes: Mormons.¹⁹⁶ Despite the inarguably strange turn Zitterel's sermon took, his surprise mention of the Nonpartisan League in a place of worship actually makes some sense since, as Lewis writes, in Gopher Prairie, the church was still “the strongest of the forces compelling respectability.”¹⁹⁷ Nothing is more respectable than looking down upon those atheistic, socialistic farmers of the Nonpartisan League.

¹⁹⁵ Lewis, *Main Street*, 348-349.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 349-350.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 348.

Lewis saves perhaps his most biting satire for those Gopher Prairie townsfolk who turn profits during World War I by taking advantage of the high commodities prices. He writes, “The town was booming, as a result of the war price of wheat. The wheat money did not remain in the pockets of the farmers; the towns existed to take care of all that.”¹⁹⁸ Besides the usual tactics of the League’s old adversary, the ever-greedy middleman, in this case the people of Gopher Prairie piled on by engaging in farm land speculation, driving up land prices. In Lewis’s phrase, “...the townsmen invited themselves to the feast—millers, real-estate men, lawyers, merchants, and Dr. Will Kennicott. They bought land at a hundred and fifty, sold it next day at a hundred and seventy, and bought again. In three months Kennicott made seven thousand dollars...”¹⁹⁹ Carol seems to be the only one uncomfortable with this situation besides the farmers themselves; the frenzy of land speculation and the infusion of war profiteering dollars into the town leads to a furious booster campaign, of which Carol opines that “she could...endure a shabby but modest town; the town shabby and ego-maniac she could not endure.”²⁰⁰

That Carol’s husband and the other leading men of the town see no problems with this practice of farm land speculation speaks to some of the issues that the Nonpartisan League was trying to redress. It is especially ironic considering that many of those same men consider the Leaguers to be nothing more than “Alien Agitators Who Threaten the Security of Our Institutions” who are fundamentally disloyal and anti-American while at the same time profiting off the increased wartime demand for wheat by buying and selling land to inflate prices.²⁰¹ These men seem to intentionally misunderstand the purposes of the Nonpartisan League as to enrich the farmers and overturn the established order of things rather than arguing for a more equitable

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 433.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 433.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 437.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 434.

economic system. One particular loudmouth, James Blausser who had recently arrived in Gopher Prairie to speculate in farm land, argues, “this Farmers’ Nonpartisan League and the whole bunch of socialists are right in the same category...for all knockers of prosperity and the rights of property!”²⁰² The disagreement here between Carol and Will Kennicott over the absurd boosterism of Gopher Prairie, funded courtesy of the struggling local farmers, actually precipitates their split.

Since, according to Will Kennicott and the rest of the Gopher Prairie boosters, the town achieved a pinnacle of beauty after these new land speculation dollars started flowing, Carol thought “that her work was over, and she could go.”²⁰³ The last straw here is when she overhears some of the local men discussing a recent incident involving a Nonpartisan League speaker. A local sheriff forbade a League organizer from coming to speak in his county, and when the League man defied him, the sheriff led “a mob of a hundred business men...[who] had taken the organizer from his hotel, ridden him on a fence-rail, put him on a freight train, and warned him not to return.”²⁰⁴ Mob violence of this sort and bans on unapproved political activity afflicted League organizers across many of the places where they organized; to list just a few examples, a gunman seized a League speaker in Stafford, Kansas in 1919, a group of American Legion members threatened to lynch a League organizer in Monroe, South Dakota, also in 1919, and in 1920, a mob of three hundred attacked with fists and clubs League organizers Walter Thomas Mills and Milton Amos before corralling them and pelting them with eggs. The two men nearly died during the night, and the unfriendly governor of Kansas, the anti-League newspaper editor of the *Wichita Beacon* Henry Allen, granted them no relief.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Ibid., 435.

²⁰³ Ibid., 438.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 439.

²⁰⁵ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 206-207.

The men of Gopher Prairie react to this act of mob violence with unabashed glee and when one of the men says, “they ought to have lynched him!”, the others heartily agree, including Carol’s husband Will.²⁰⁶ This causes Carol to storm out of the general store and causes the argument that prompts Carol to leave Gopher Prairie. Carol and Will go back and forth over the fate of the League organizer. Will argues, “All these organizers...and a whole lot of the German and Squarehead farmers themselves, they're seditious as the devil—disloyal, non-patriotic, pro-German pacifists, that’s what they are!” When Carol asks if the organizer said anything pro-German, Will says, failing to see the irony, “Not on your life! They didn’t give him a chance!” When Carol questions the legality of a sheriff leading an extralegal mob, Will rebuts, “Whenever it comes right down to a question of defending Americanism and our constitutional rights, it’s justifiable to set aside ordinary procedure.” Carol bites back by asking him what editorial he cribbed that from, before accusing, “You don’t oppose this organizer because you think he’s seditious but because you’re afraid that the farmers he is organizing will deprive you townsmen of the money you make out of mortgages and wheat and shops.” Will interrupts her, saying that “I’m not going to stand my own wife being seditious...we’re going to take these fellows, and if they ain’t patriotic, we’re going to make them be patriotic.” This argument causes Carol to leave Will for two years before the town inevitably sucks her back into the inescapable, hum-drum morass of Gopher Prairie.²⁰⁷

Lewis’s sympathy does not limit his sympathy of the Nonpartisan League cause to his ridicule of anti-League sentiments in *Main Street*. He actually convinced his friend Alfred Harcourt of the New York publishing house Harcourt, Brace, and Howe to publish a book on the Nonpartisan League and enlisted Herbert Gaston to write it; thus, it is due to Lewis’s efforts that

²⁰⁶ Lewis, *Main Street*, 438-39.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 439-442.

I am able to dissect Gaston's *The Nonpartisan League* in the previous chapter. After convincing Harcourt, Lewis requested only a free copy of the book; this seems fair considering that without his efforts, Harcourt would never have published Gaston's book.²⁰⁸

In Lewis's image of it, the Nonpartisan League was a sympathetic force, fighting for necessary societal changes which would dramatically improve the lives of farmers, and the small-town business owners whose livelihood depended upon exploiting the farmer's labor were a hypocritical and conservative force for the status quo. Although Lewis's novel is one of the most prominent popular cultural depictions of the Nonpartisan League, obviously public sentiment was not universally in favor of it. There were plenty of national figures who absolutely opposed the League based on their understanding of it and its character. One of the most prominent and outspoken was a former Progressive Republican president, Spanish-American War veteran, and part-time North Dakotan: Theodore Roosevelt.

On July 21, 1918, the *Kansas City Star* published an editorial lightly titled "Murder, Treason and Parlor Anarchy." In it, former president Theodore Roosevelt railed against "some well meaning silly people" who "excuse criminality on the ground that it is due to social conditions." By this, he is referring especially to politicians who cozy up to radical labor elements like the International Workers of the World. Roosevelt lumps in the Nonpartisan League with the IWW, urging, "farmers whose resentment of wrongdoing is keenest should repudiate the Nonpartisan League, just as long as it submits to such leadership as that of most of the men who are at present at its head and just so long as it stands for covert disloyalty." Roosevelt does acknowledge some sympathy for the underlying agrarian cause and "that great numbers of honest and loyal farmers of high character have joined the league;" he even writes,

²⁰⁸ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 182-183.

“There are any number of men like myself who will join with the farmers in any sane and patriotic movement to remedy these conditions...” However, Roosevelt absolutely refuses to work with the leadership of the Nonpartisan League, stating that they “are tainted with disloyalty,” and says that loyal farmers’ higher loyalty should be with the United States and not “any labor union or farmers’ league.”²⁰⁹

Following up this editorial, Roosevelt spoke out against the Nonpartisan League during a series of speeches he gave in the fall of 1918 in support of Republican candidates and the Liberty war bond drive throughout the western and midwestern United States. As part of this tour, and at the behest of local Republican leaders, Roosevelt visited the strongholds of the League, including Bismarck, North Dakota, Fargo, North Dakota, Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, and Minneapolis, Minnesota.²¹⁰ Perhaps knowing that the opposition to the League by the former candidate for president under the Progressive Party banner would surprise many, Roosevelt explained how he formed his opinion on the League. Roosevelt said, in his speech at Billings, Montana, as reported in a local newspaper, “There are real and grave causes for complaint among the farmers here in the northwest” and laid out some of his concerns about wheat prices and freight rates. Roosevelt argued in favor of state control of terminal elevators and flour mills but also stated forcefully that “To introduce state socialism as a relief for these conditions would result in nothing but widespread damage.” Roosevelt went on to say, “When the Nonpartisan League first appeared I was inclined to welcome it, and it was with real reluctance” that he decided its leadership was too dangerous to support. The nail in the coffin, in Roosevelt’s view,

²⁰⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, “Murder, Treason and Parlor Anarchy,” *Kansas City Star* (Kansas City, MO), July 21, 1918. Reprinted as “Theodore Roosevelt Says Parlor Anarchist, Pitying Crime, Is Peril to Nation: Call Murder and Treason by Their Right Names, He Urges, Denouncing I. W. W. and Their Sympathizers,” *The Salt Lake Herald-Republican* (Salt Lake City, UT), July 22, 1918, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/287847603>.

²¹⁰ James F. Vivian, “The Last Round-up: Theodore Roosevelt Confronts the Nonpartisan League, October 1918,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 43-44.

was Senator La Follette's infamous anti-war speech to the Nonpartisan League convention in Minneapolis. That speech led him to believe that the League's leadership "were trying to do what Lenine [sic] and Trotzky [sic] have done to Russia." Roosevelt closes his remarks on the Nonpartisan League damning them by association, arguing, "There is not a German abroad, or a pro-German at home, who does not wish success to the Nonpartisan League..."²¹¹

Although Roosevelt's words and anti-League stance almost certainly disappointed the leaders of the Nonpartisan League, they were not about to take it lying down. A little over a week after Roosevelt's speech in Billings, the editors of *The Nonpartisan Leader* fired back. They printed a cartoon which depicted Roosevelt's gaping mouth as the speaker for a phonograph labeled "Roosevelt Phoney Graft;" choosing the record is a conniving-looking man labeled "Special Interests." The cartoon appeared under a headline reading "Roosevelt Exposure Causes Sensation." By this, they were referring to some documents of dubious origins which purported to show that special interest politicians were manipulating Roosevelt into speaking out against the League. Under these accusations, the *Leader* printed a number of articles from newspapers friendly to the League. *The Capitol Times* of Madison, Wisconsin, opined, "Theodore Roosevelt is still playing the role of betraying the progressive movement. He betrayed the progressive movement in 1912. He unscrupulously ditched the progressives in 1916. He is evidently getting ready to do the same thing in 1920... With all his grandiloquent trumpery and noise about being progressive we have always felt that Roosevelt was a reactionary at heart."

²¹¹ "Non Partisan League Threatens Country With Ills Similar to Those of Bolshevism," *The Glasgow Courier* (Glasgow, MT), October 11, 1918, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/351814333>.

Other papers pointed out Roosevelt's wealth, accused him of planning a 1920 presidential run, said he was "lacking in intellectual charity," and relegated him "to a bygone era."²¹²

After comparing Roosevelt to a phonograph with someone else selecting the records in October 1918, in November the *Leader* turned to a new metaphor and a new cartoon. In it, they showed a caricature of Roosevelt, with his roughrider hat and bandana, signature pince-nez glasses, and bushy moustache, biting painfully into a piece of solid granite labeled "Nonpartisan League." The explanatory paragraph below argues that despite Roosevelt's trip "West to chew up the League...the western farmers who signed up with their brother farmers to fight for better conditions are as hard as granite."²¹³ In this instance though, the League underestimated Roosevelt's influence; he was a former president, after all, and still held tremendous influence in most circles, including some surprising ones.

In early 1918, amidst the swirling charges of disloyalty that surrounded the Nonpartisan League and a wartime crackdown on political dissidence, the federal Bureau of Investigation kept close tabs on League organizers and meetings under pressure from influential business groups and opposition politicians. That was not the only federal attention that the League was under though, as the US Post Office removed *The Nonpartisan Leader* from circulation. However, the Wilson administration quickly reversed the Post Office's decision and seemed generally supportive of the League. They sent Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Carl Vrooman to speak at a loyalty rally the League hosted in Minneapolis in November 1917; later that month, they invited Arthur Townley to Washington to meet with George Creel, the head of the

²¹² "Roosevelt Exposure Causes Sensation: Unassailable Evidence That the Anti-Farmer Interests were using Roosevelt, the Liberty Loan and Loyalty for Base Ends Is Hard Blow for Gang," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), October 28, 1918, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-10-28/ed-1/seq-4/>.

²¹³ William C. Morris, "Biting On League Granite," *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 25, 1918, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-11-25/ed-1/seq-3/>.

government's wartime propaganda agency, as well as President Wilson and Herbert Hoover, then running the wartime food agency, to discuss the League's participation in the government's propaganda efforts among the nation's farmers. In early 1918, George Creel suggested League-hosted events with Committee on Public Information speakers, although Wilson nixed the program under pressure from anti-League Republicans. After those same Republicans convinced Theodore Roosevelt to speak out against the League while raising money for the war effort, Wilson felt he had no choice and remained officially neutral on the issue of the Nonpartisan League. Roosevelt, for his part, did not understand Wilson's outreach to the Nonpartisan League and, according to the historian James F. Vivian, "believed that the NPL was a subversive group intentionally attempting to manipulate established parties for radical and possibly ulterior motives."²¹⁴ Overzealous anti-League local officials and others attempting to throttle the League saw the Wilson administration's silence on the issue as a tacit mark of approval.²¹⁵ In this case, by choosing to remain silent and not actively intervening among those muzzling the speech and activities of the League, they actually chose to side against the League.

Roosevelt's death in January 1919 ended the simmering conflict between him and the Nonpartisan League. Roosevelt died on January 6, and most of the papers' late editions announced his death and celebrated his legacy. The front page of *The Bismarck Tribune* eulogized Roosevelt, stating, "He lived earnestly and we believe sincerely. He made his mistakes, but they were the mistakes of a strong-willed, courageous, independent leader...His memory will be cherished for his genuine Americanism, his unswerving loyalty and his devotion to the public weal."²¹⁶ The *Pratt Daily Tribune* in Pratt, Kansas, called him "Intensely patriotic, a

²¹⁴ Vivian, "The Last Round-up," 48.

²¹⁵ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 115-118.

²¹⁶ "Theodore Roosevelt Dead," *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), January 6, 1919, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1919-01-06/ed-1/seq-1/>.

natural crusader, uncompromising in his convictions, and imbued with an undaunted spirit of pure and unadulterated Americanism...”²¹⁷ The *Star-Gazette* of Elmira, New York, argued, “Roosevelt accomplished achievements which historians will rank high in the international and industrial progress of the country.”²¹⁸ I include these various remembrances of the recently-passed Roosevelt only to make a point about the unusual response of *The Nonpartisan Leader* to his death.

The Nonpartisan Leader made no reference to Roosevelt’s death in either the January 6th or January 13th editions of the paper. The only reference to Roosevelt in the January 13th edition was as an answer to a puzzle previously published in the November 18 edition of the *Leader*.²¹⁹ That puzzle was a paper jigsaw puzzle which the *Leader* designed for children to cut out and put together the pieces in order to identify the “Well-Paid League-Hater” depicted. The *Leader* implored children to assemble the picture on a piece of paper, write a 25-word description of whomever it represents, and mail it in to the *Leader*. The paper would then select the best picture and description and print it in a future issue.²²⁰ They did not in fact print the picture or description in the January 13, 1919 edition of the *Leader* that I saw, merely announcing the winners; however, 30,000 of the 200,000 copies of the January 13, 1919 *Leader* did apparently contain the picture and description, as well as an additional attack on Roosevelt. In the January 20, 1919 edition of the *Leader*, the editor apologized to those 30,000 subscribers who received the anti- Roosevelt version and Roosevelt’s friends and family, writing, “while the colonel may

²¹⁷ “Col. Theodore Roosevelt is Dead,” *Pratt Daily Tribune* (Pratt, KS), January 6, 1919, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/366804333>.

²¹⁸ “Former President Roosevelt Dead,” *Star-Gazette* (Elmira, NY), January 6, 1919, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/276311448>.

²¹⁹ “To the Boys and Girls,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), January 13, 1919, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-01-13/ed-1/seq-16/>.

²²⁰ “Well-Paid League-Hater—Puzzle by Foss,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 18, 1918, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-11-18/ed-1/seq-9/>.

have merited what we said about him in his lifetime, we certainly have no desire to add unnecessarily to the pain his friends must feel at this time.” The paper was already in press when news of Roosevelt’s death broke, and the *Leader* was not able to fix every copy. As comeuppance, the *Leader* praised Roosevelt for “the courage of his convictions” and characterized him “as one of the greatest Americans of his time.” Washing their hands of the matter, the *Leader* closed by laying the mantle of judgment at the feet of “The future historian [who] will decide what praise or blame the colonel merited in his public life. Today friend and foe regret his untimely and unexpected death. All will feel a deep sympathy for his family.”²²¹

The *Leader*’s half-hearted posthumous praise of him aside, Roosevelt sympathized with the plight of the American farmer and advocated for state ownership of some few industries while being deeply mistrustful of League leadership. In this way, he was similar to William Langer in his understanding for the farmer but not for the socialists who, in their view, were truly in command of the League. Although he never was in command of the League, Henry Martinson was exactly the kind of ardent, unabashed socialist who would have scared silly Roosevelt, Langer, Bruce, and the rest. And although he was not a public figure in his early years, Martinson later came to prominence in several different arenas; additionally, his unique opinions and evolving perspective on the League are worth exploring.

Henry Martinson was born in 1883 in Minneapolis to Norwegian immigrant parents and grew up in the small town of Sacred Heart, Minnesota. He described Sacred Heart as politically active and uniformly Progressive Republican, writing that “advancing his progressive ideas was the main occupation of the...storekeeper; selling groceries was secondary.”²²² Planning on

²²¹ “Why It Was Printed,” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), January 20, 1919, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-01-20/ed-1/seq-2/>.

²²² Henry Martinson, *Village Commune Barefoot Boy*, (New York: Vantage Press, 1976), 48.

following in his parents' footsteps of homesteading and farming, Martinson went to the University of Minnesota and graduated with a degree in agriculture in 1905, before moving northwest to a claim near Crosby, North Dakota, in the far northwestern corner of the state. He was able to scrape together the money to build a shack but could not find credit to buy farm machinery and gave up on his claim. Martinson moved to Minot, North Dakota, and made a living painting houses; at least in part due to his frustration with his experience in attempting and failing to get credit to run his farm as well as the general political climate in western North Dakota at the time, Martinson joined the Socialist Party of North Dakota. As he puts it in his memoir, *Comes the Revolution*, "People with freak ideas...came to Minot because it was a new frontier town and, they supposed, tolerant toward new ideas."²²³ Over time, Martinson became more active and gained prominence in the Party, becoming the editor of their newspaper, *The Iconoclast*, and beginning work as an organizer. All these factors meant that he was in the right place at the right time to go to work for the Nonpartisan League as an organizer.²²⁴ This was not a natural transition however as Martinson was initially deeply skeptical of the League.

Although most of the early leaders of the Nonpartisan League were active members of the Socialist Party of North Dakota, Martinson dragged his feet about making the transition from Socialist to Leaguer. Martinson edited *The Iconoclast* and became the final executive secretary of the Socialist Party of North Dakota at the time when the League was on the upswing and the Socialists were on the outs. Partially out of loyalty, partially out of ideology, and partially out of skepticism about the League, Martinson avoided joining up for as long as he could. But eventually the dues stopped coming in and Martinson had no choice but to fold the Socialist

²²³ Henry Martinson, "Comes the Revolution: A Personal Memoir of the Socialist Movement in North Dakota," *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1969): 41.

²²⁴ "Martinson devoted his life to N.D. NPL," *The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead* (Fargo, ND), August 26, 2006, <https://www.inforum.com/news/2800116-martinson-devoted-his-life-nd-npl>.

Party. As he puts it, the League were “opportunists” but “I was broke and needed the work.”²²⁵ Not exactly a deep commitment to the cause of the Nonpartisan League or the makings of a particularly good folk song. Martinson basically shrugged his shoulders and figured it was a better cause than no cause at all. As he explained in an interview published in the *North Dakota History* journal, “The farmers could understand that they were being exploited by the grain gamblers and big business. But they couldn’t understand Karl Marx.”²²⁶ In this case, his pragmatism trumped his by-the-book socialist dogma.

Despite his initial reluctance, the League welcomed him with open arms; they were expanding rapidly and desperate for experienced organizers. Martinson wrote in his memoir, “Practically every foot-loose socialist was given a job as organizer with the Nonpartisan League...”²²⁷ His old Socialist Party comrade Henry Teigan was the one who brought Martinson on board at long last. Teigan was the secretary of the Nonpartisan League for a significant portion of its lifespan. Martinson recounted that Teigan “welcomed me very thoroughly, put me to work, gave me a Ford car, a copy of Wilson’s *New Freedom*, and a Liberty Bond. ‘Here you go,’ he says, ‘go down and organize.’”²²⁸ And go down and organize he did. In his memoir, he described a fantastic scene in a small town that had forbade organizing by the League; there was a literal soapbox, and as soon as one League organizer would get up on it to speak, the local constabulary would arrest them, only for a different organizer to immediately replace the arrestee and pick up where they left off.²²⁹

²²⁵ Henry Martinson, “Some Memoirs of a Nonpartisan League Organizer,” *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1973): 22.

²²⁶ Robert Carlson, “An Interview with Henry R. Martinson,” *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 43, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 20.

²²⁷ Martinson, “Comes the Revolution,” *North Dakota History*: 108.

²²⁸ “Interview with Henry R. Martinson,” *North Dakota History*: 20.

²²⁹ Martinson, “Comes the Revolution,” *North Dakota History*: 88-89.

After the dissolution of the Nonpartisan League as a national entity, Martinson drifted to the labor side of organizing, eventually serving as North Dakota's deputy commissioner of agriculture and labor from 1937 to 1965. After leaving government service, he moved to Fargo and worked with several unions until well into his nineties. Additionally, he wrote a prodigious amount about his life, politics, and labor history, as well as several books of poetry; in 1975, North Dakota named him poet laureate.²³⁰ The fact that Martinson outlived just about all of his contemporaries put him in the unique position of being able to share the story of the Nonpartisan League with a new generation of progressives in the 1970s thirsting for some history of unfamiliar radical activism in familiar places.

One common theme of many social political movements is laying claim to a legacy of some similar earlier movement. Although at the time the Nonpartisan League was active many in the public considered it with suspicion, time tends to smooth rough edges; an able and active storyteller helps expedite this process and shape the narrative to one that is relevant to the target audience. Michael Lansing puts it a bit more abstractly, writing, "Shaped by ever-changing political contexts, the League's legacies morph to meet the needs of new generations."²³¹ Credit where credit is due, though, Henry Martinson doubtless had something to do with the legacies of the League morphing to meet the needs of activists in the 1970s.

In 1975, two members of a San Francisco-based Marxist film collective turned up in North Dakota on purpose and not due to any navigational miscues. The filmmakers were John Hanson and Rob Nilsson and the collective was Cine Manifest. Despite starting out with seemingly three strikes against them in the eyes of suspicious North Dakotans—San Francisco,

²³⁰ "North Dakota Pioneer Politician Dies," *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 21, 1981, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/346295457/>.

²³¹ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 273.

Marxist, film collective—Hanson and Nilsson wanted to make a film about that unique aspect of North Dakotan political history, the Nonpartisan League. Due to their genuine interest in the history and the area as well as some tenuous local connections, the pair quickly gained the support of locals and soon their independent film project earned funding from the North Dakota Humanities Council.²³² Hanson and Nilsson wanted their film to be more than just a simple period political history piece though.

In an interview with Amanda Spake of *Mother Jones* magazine from January of 1979, Hanson and Nilsson laid out their vision for the film. Hanson argues that farmers needed to move past “stop-gap measures” and instead seize “grassroots political power,” in the same way that the farmers of the Nonpartisan League did sixty years earlier. Hanson admits that he hopes “this film might inspire people” since “The problems for farmers in 1916, the problems today and the problems for people like us, trying to make independent political films, are really very similar.”²³³ Their hope that the story of *Northern Lights*, the eventual product of Hanson and Nilsson’s efforts, of the Nonpartisan League and the people on the ground could inspire a fresh wave of action dovetails neatly with the image of the Nonpartisan League that Henry Martinson crafts in his story.

In the film *Northern Lights*, Henry Martinson plays the character of Henry Martinson, a slightly fictionalized version of himself. Hanson and Nilsson use Martinson as a framing device for their narrative. The spry ninety-four-year-old begins the film puttering around his house, doing some pushups, and eventually sitting down at his typewriter and thinking about his long past days as an organizer for the Nonpartisan League and especially his friend and fellow

²³² Ibid., 269-270.

²³³ Amanda Spake, “Prairie Homecoming: Crosby, North Dakota, Has Its First World Premiere,” *Mother Jones* 4, no. 1 (January 1979): 51.

organizer Ray Sorenson. But the story Martinson tells here is not wholly accurate of his own time with the League. As discussed above, Martinson was the one who turned out the lights for the last time in the Socialist Party of North Dakota headquarters and joined up with the Nonpartisan League for the paycheck and the Ford more than anything. Martinson chooses here, in the context of the film, to gloss over all that and carefully construct an image of his time in the League which served Hanson and Nilsson's intent to inspire even if it was not perfectly reflective of reality. As Michael Lansing puts it, "Martinson embodied—and perpetuated—a romantic vision of the past...Like so many others, Martinson remembered what he wanted to when ruminating on the Nonpartisan League experience."²³⁴ Inarguably, the fascinating old man Martinson was the surprise hit of the movie, delighting audiences, and earning plaudits from *The New York Times'* film critic Vincent Canby who writes, "What one remembers best of all is Henry Martinson, whose memory is our periscope on the past."²³⁵ This idea, that Martinson is a completely reliable "periscope on the past," is a pervasive one. As one of the only living Nonpartisan League organizers at the time, there was really no one to challenge him on any of the facts of the matter; he was able to singlehandedly dictate the image and history of the League which appeared in *Northern Lights*. Whether Martinson made a conscious choice here to emphasize the positive aspects of the League while downplaying the bad side is impossible to say for certain. But Hanson and Nilsson certainly make the most of him in telling the inspirational, call-to-action story they wanted to create.

Northern Lights' plot is straightforward enough. Martinson as the narrator introduces Ray Sorenson, a discontented farmer who becomes convinced of the message of the Nonpartisan

²³⁴ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 271.

²³⁵ Vincent Canby, "Film: 'Northern Lights,' Story of Early Labor Wars," *The New York Times*, September 26, 1979.

League and soon becomes an organizer for them, working on recruiting his neighbors. His political work is not without consequence though as the local elevator operator refuses to buy his grain, forcing him to work full-time as an organizer. At the same time, his love interest, Inga Olsness, and her family face foreclosure and the loss of their farm due to problems with the threshing and low grain prices. After they lose their family farm, Inga moves away to Minot to work in her uncle's store and help keep her family afloat. This means that Ray and Inga see much less of each other. Eventually, Ray's work with the League causes conflict with Inga and the two part for good. The film closes on a happier note, though, showcasing the League's first electoral victories in the 1916 North Dakota primaries.²³⁶ The Nonpartisan League depicted in *Northern Lights* is a force for good, helping bring farmers together to take collective action against the nigh impossible odds that they face, including greedy bankers, severe weather, and crooked elevator operators. This fits in with Hanson and Nilsson's hope to make a film that would inspire and provide a model for collective action among oppressed classes and working peoples who were unaware of some of the positive aspects and finer details of their nation's rich labor history. Hanson and Nilsson sought to create a usable past that could help build a future more in line with their aspirations, and the Nonpartisan League as described by Henry Martinson fit the bill perfectly.

Part of the filmmakers' plan to craft their film to fit this inspirational, aspirational image of the Nonpartisan League was their distribution model. Essentially, they wanted to copy the model of the League, beginning in independent theaters in small towns in North Dakota and over time expanding to larger markets and more prominence. This model did not work particularly well until an editor at *Mother Jones* heard about a film holding its world premiere in tiny Crosby,

²³⁶ *Northern Lights*, directed by John Hanson and Rob Nilsson (1978; San Francisco, CA: Cine Manifest), digital.

North Dakota, and came to investigate. The publicity generated by the *Mother Jones* article was enough to bump *Northern Lights* from something of a regional hit with openings in Minneapolis and Chicago to an internationally-recognized film. Hanson credited the *Mother Jones* article with an invitation to the Belgrade Film Festival in then-Yugoslavia as well as their Seattle and Los Angeles openings. Additionally, the film festival at Cannes accepted their film at about the same time, and they wound up winning the top prize, the 1979 Camera d'Or.²³⁷ Hanson and Nilsson's hopeful portrait of a disempowered group seizing political power amidst a bleak economic and literal landscape resonated deeply with 1970s festival audiences as well as audiences throughout North Dakota; *Northern Lights* actually outdrew *Star Wars* at some theaters in North Dakota, an especially heady feat given the fact that *Star Wars* smashed many box office records.²³⁸ Rob Nilsson, in a 1979 interview with *Film Quarterly*, argues that "you have to evolve your own language, your own forms, for the time that you live in."²³⁹ Clearly the language that Hanson and Nilsson created worked for the time in which they lived.

Between Sinclair Lewis's satirical undercutting of the opponents of the Nonpartisan League and their hypocritical profiteering in *Main Street*, Theodore Roosevelt's anti-League speechmaking and editorial writing, Henry Martinson's initial reluctance turned careful boosterism, and John Hanson and Rob Nilsson's sober yet ultimately hopeful story in *Northern Lights*, there exist several wildly different images of the Nonpartisan League. Lewis's contemporaneous image of the League depicts a necessary movement for farmers and a larger share of the profits of their agricultural products. At the same time, Roosevelt viewed the farmers

²³⁷ John Hanson, "'It's a Nice Little Movie, But It Isn't Commercial:' The Theatrical Self-Distribution of *Northern Lights*" last modified September 13, 2013, *Filmmaker Magazine*. <https://filmmakermagazine.com/76108-its-a-nice-little-movie-but-it-isnt-commercial-the-theatrical-self-distribution-of-northern-lights/#.WzCuRKdKiUl>.

²³⁸ Spake, "Prairie Homecoming," *Mother Jones*: 56.

²³⁹ John Hanson, Michael Dempsey, and Rob Nilsson, "*Northern Lights*: An Interview with John Hanson and Rob Nilsson," *Film Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 10.

of the Nonpartisan League with genuine concern and sympathy but saw the corrupting influence of League leaders as unfixable. Henry Martinson dragged his feet on joining the League as an organizer due to his doctrinaire socialism and viewed it as a middle-of-the-road organization that did not come near enough to socialism to address class imbalances; however, in his later years, he softened and used the history of the League to cement the role of socialism and agrarian radicalism within the pantheon of significant historical political movements. In the 1970s, John Hanson and Rob Nilsson carefully crafted an image of the Nonpartisan League, based in part on the aged Martinson's story and with his support, which could inspire collective action on the part of the laboring classes, including but not limited to farmers. With all these vying images and understandings of the League it can be difficult to judge the veracity of any of these claims and the actual character of the League.

CONCLUSION

The Nonpartisan League understood the importance of seizing the narrative, of carefully crafting an image, both for the present and the future, and did their level best to ensure that posterity cast them in a positive light, and that they had potent symbols with which to fight back against the slings and arrows of the establishment in their own time. The poetry of Florence Borner along with the cartoons of John Miller Baer, the histories of Herbert E. Gaston and Charles Edward Russell, and the promotion of the charismatic Arthur Townley over the policy-minded Albert Bowen all speak to League members' understanding of the necessity of consciously crafting a political image that placed them in the best possible position to effectively advocate for their cause and define the historical memory of the League. Their opponents and detractors including the jilted sometime-Leaguer William Langer and the resolutely skeptical Andrew A. Bruce, noted progressive and occasional North Dakotan Theodore Roosevelt, and the townspeople of Gopher Prairie in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* recognized these efforts and worked tirelessly and furiously to rebut them with counter-propaganda. This led to a tangled historical record and a legacy that historians sifting through the confused morass of data about the Nonpartisan League largely define.

In the Introduction, I quoted the historian Dale Kramer, who said that opponents of agrarian radicals occasionally characterized them as “wild jackasses,” among other various dismissive monikers and metaphors. Kramer goes on to write, “The hoofprints of the wild jackasses are on our democracy, and its configuration is the better for them.”²⁴⁰ In parsing the different images of the Nonpartisan League created by its proponents and its opponents in an

²⁴⁰ Kramer, *The Wild Jackasses*, Preface.

attempt to gain a better understanding of its character, there are some concrete conclusions to draw about the character of the League.

Firstly, there are several areas where no matter how hard *The Nonpartisan Leader* spun them, the League was never going to come out looking good. Its vicious response to any criticism, no matter how valid, and its vitriolic attacks on outside journalists and observers should worry any advocate of a free, adversarial press as an irreplaceable part of a healthy democracy. The League's often-anti-democratic internal governance structure which placed much of the decision-making power in the hands of Arthur Townley and a few other leaders at the expense of the League's farmer-members smacks of hypocrisy at best, or ulterior motives of self-aggrandizement on the part of League leaders at worst. Yet despite the level of control League leaders had over the organization, their strategic vision was often head-scratching or missing entirely and some of their ventures misguided. Having said that, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the principal legacies of the Nonpartisan League far outweigh its organizational failings.

Setting aside the policy platform of the League entirely, there are several remarkable, undoubtedly positive developments for which the League can claim direct or partial responsibility. The Nonpartisan League fostered renewed citizen involvement in the democracy of the United States on a major scale, both in mobilizing in favor of its proposals and against them. It asked fundamental questions about the equitability of an economic and political system that advantaged some over others and devalued labor at the expense of capital. Additionally, the League's categorically innovative approach to electoral politics and its partial rejection of the necessity of the two-party system still appeal today in an era of seemingly intractable partisan divisions. Michael Lansing argues "that the League illustrates the limits of our contemporary

political imagination...Our everyday political language puts limits on what we can see and imagine.”²⁴¹ The Nonpartisan League, while a fraction of a blip in the grand scheme of global history, pushes us to remember that major improvements are attainable and that more is possible than cynics would have us believe. While the League was certainly not a uniform force for positive change, its overarching legacy remains a stronger, more robust democracy, nation, and polity wherein voters are engaged, politicians accountable to the will of the people, and large corporate interests kept out of the business of politics. Having said that, in many senses the League lost the battle for historical memory, especially in their home state.

University of North Dakota historian Elwyn B. Robinson published his definitive synthetic history of North Dakota, *History of North Dakota*, in 1966. His description of the Nonpartisan League best summarizes the historical memory of the League in the mid-twentieth-century and lingering to this day. His image of the League is “a blend of socialism and high-pressure salesmanship,” which “was but another chapter in North Dakota’s revolt against its dependent, exploited status.”²⁴² He argues that while “No North Dakotan doubted the reality of the grievances attacked by the League,” in the end, “the great socialist experiment was a failure.”²⁴³ Additionally, in the official curriculum prepared by the State Historical Society of North Dakota for the state’s North Dakota Studies course for eighth-graders, the League does not earn a positive portrayal. The curriculum describes the League’s founding as some “angry men” from the American Society for Equity, a largely nonpolitical predecessor to the League, who decided to create a politically-oriented farmers’ group. It emphasizes the connection of the League to socialism and socialists, seemingly as an implicit critique. Their summation of the

²⁴¹ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 275.

²⁴² Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 332, 327.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 337, 351.

League is that “The Nonpartisan League changed state politics between 1915 and 1922. The changes were both good and bad for North Dakota,” without enumerating what exactly the “good and bad” changes were. The curriculum focuses heavily on Townley and spends a significant amount of ink on Townley’s post-League spiral into harebrained get-rich-quick schemes and McCarthyism, despite an utter lack of connection between those things and the work of the League and League members. It includes the claim that “In the 1950s, Townley came to believe that North Dakota’s state-owned bank and mill could not be operated as efficiently as privately owned businesses,” which is a clear as day rebuke of the platform and policy achievements of the League without the need to come out and say it. Finally, the curriculum downplays the potent symbol of Hiram Rube, the wise and capable League farmer, and instead elevates the rather silly symbol of the goat, which was a minor character of the League’s cartoons and papers, their response to the Democratic donkey and the Republican elephant.²⁴⁴

The League lost the battle for public image and for historical memory despite the essential nature of their movement and its relevance to today. When John Hanson and Rob Nilsson decided to create *Northern Lights* in the 1970s, they saw parallels between the struggles of the quasi-socialist League and the Marxist political struggles of their time. Looking at the Nonpartisan League through a modern lens, there are evident parallels between the League’s struggle to end corporate control over government and the economy and their desperate attempts to regain civic agency within a system controlled by corporate interests and today’s climate. We face income inequality on a scale that rivals if not surpasses the Gilded Age inequalities that helped spur the creation of the League. We face a political system that, in the wake of *Citizens*

²⁴⁴ “Lesson 4: Alliances And Conflicts, Topic 7: Nonpartisan League And The IVA, SECTION 2: ORIGINS OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE,” State Historical Society of North Dakota, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.ndstudies.gov/gr8/content/unit-iii-waves-development-1861-1920/lesson-4-alliances-and-conflicts/topic-7-nonpartisan-league-and-iva/section-2-origins-nonpartisan-league>.

United v. FEC, allows corporate control over our political system and our politicians in a way that uncannily resembles the McKenzie corporate-controlled political machine in pre-League North Dakota. Additionally, League organizers' use of nascent technology, especially Model T Fords and other early automobiles, easily compares to modern grassroots political campaigns' leveraging of social media platforms, email, and newly-ubiquitous cell phones, especially Barack Obama's innovative 2008 campaign for president.²⁴⁵ The League's successful efforts at utilizing the democratic process to achieve policy goals that helped average citizens and not large corporate interests should absolutely inspire modern activists. Admittedly, the audience has morphed; today's sprawling agribusiness corporations controlling tens of thousands of acres and working hard to seize the few acres controlled by smaller family farmers would be both unrecognizable to League members and antithetical to their core values. The League's battle for power, specifically the power for economic and political self-determination, and their battle to define their own advocative public image evokes, and should inform, the work of the political activists and organizers of today.

²⁴⁵ For an overview of the Obama campaign's use of technological innovations see: Chuck Todd, *How Barack Obama Won: A State-by-State Guide to the Historic 2008 Presidential Election*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “Agents Wanted.” *The Montana Nonpartisan* (Great Falls, MT), December 20, 1919.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84036290/1919-12-20/ed-1/seq-3/>.
- “An offer that can not last.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), August 23, 1920.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-08-23/ed-1/seq-16/>.
- “Andrew A. Bruce Justice of the Supreme Court 1911-1918.” North Dakota Supreme Court.
Accessed April 15, 2018. <http://www.ndcourts.gov/court/bios/bruce.htm>.
- “Andrew Bruce, N. U. Professor of Law, Dead: Dakota Supreme Court’s Ex-Chief Justice.”
Chicago Tribune, December 7, 1934. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/354951877>.
- “Baer for Congress!” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 7, 1917.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-06-07/ed-1/seq-7/>.
- Baer, John Miller. “By the Dawn’s Early Light.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 20, 1918. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-05-20/ed-1/seq-1/>.
- Baer, John Miller. “Hiram A. Rube Learns How to Farm.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 18, 1915. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-11-18/ed-1/seq-16/>.
- Baer, John Miller. “Hiram Rube Reflects on His Experiences in North Dakota.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 11, 1916.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-05-11/ed-1/seq-4/>.
- Baer, John Miller. “Hurrah! Crafty’s Worried Now.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 8, 1916. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-06-08/ed-1/seq-8/>.

- Baer, John Miller [?]. "Of Course It Must Be True." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 15, 1917. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-11-15/ed-1/seq-7/>.
- Baer, John Miller. "Out of the Way, and Let Somebody Run That Can Run." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), April 6, 1916. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-04-06/ed-1/seq-10/>.
- Baer, John Miller. "Signor Crafty and His Trained Monks in the Big Free Serenade." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 22, 1916. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-06-22/ed-1/seq-9/>.
- Baer, John Miller. "The Primary Fight: Big Biz vs. the 'Big Five,' alias the Farmer." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 18, 1916. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-05-18/ed-1/seq-7/>.
- Baer, John Miller. "The Ventriloquist: The Voice of Big Business Speaks Through Old Gang Newspapers." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), April 27, 1916. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-04-27/ed-1/seq-3/>.
- Baer, John Miller. "What's Wrong with the Separator?" *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 15, 1916. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-06-15/ed-1/seq-3/>.
- Baer, John Miller. "Your Move." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 25, 1916. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-05-25/ed-1/seq-3/>.
- Barns, William D. "Oliver Hudson Kelley and the Genesis of the Grange: A Reappraisal." *Agricultural History* 41, no. 3 (July 1967): 229-242.

- Borner, Florence. "1921—The Year of Promise." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), December 31, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-12-31/ed-1/seq-4/>.
- Borner, Florence. "Brighter Days," *Enderlin Independent* (Enderlin, ND), November 23, 1922.
- Borner, Florence. "Brighter Days." *Enderlin Independent* (Enderlin, ND), February 1, 1923.
- Borner, Florence. *Wooing Weather*. Florence Borner Manuscript Collection, 20129, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.
- Borner, Florence. "Ermantine's Folly: A Hallowe'en Story." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), October 29, 1921. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1921-10-29/ed-1/seq-2/>.
- Borner, Florence. "Farmers Leave, Problem Will Become Serious: Will He Stick? Now, He'll Just Quit, Says Woman Writer on Subject: A National Situation." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), October 14, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-10-14/ed-1/seq-8/>.
- Borner, Florence. *Modern Poems for Modern People*. Bismarck, ND: Bismarck Tribune, State Printers, 1919.
- Borner, Florence. "Partnership on the Farm." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 3, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-11-03/ed-1/seq-7/>.
- Borner, Florence. "Pushing or Leaning: Every Woman Must Make Choice, Says Well-Known North Dakota Writer." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), July 12, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-07-12/ed-1/seq-8/>.

- Borner, Florence. "Thanksgiving in 1820 as Told by my Grandmother." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 23, 1920.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-11-23/ed-1/seq-4/>.
- Borner, Florence. "The Business End of Farming." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 12, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-11-12/ed-1/seq-4/>.
- Borner, Florence. "The Farmer's Grievance." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), October 21, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1920-10-21/ed-1/seq-4/>.
- Borner, Florence. "The Turky [sic] That Went Visiting (A True Story)." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 28, 1922.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1922-11-28/ed-1/seq-2/>.
- Bruce, Andrew A. *The Nonpartisan League*. New York: Macmillan, 1921.
- Canby, Vincent. "Film: 'Northern Lights,' Story of Early Labor Wars." *The New York Times*, September 26, 1979.
- Carlson, Robert. "An Interview with Henry R. Martinson." *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 43, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 5-100.
- "Col. Theodore Roosevelt is Dead." *Pratt Daily Tribune* (Pratt, KS), January 6, 1919.
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/366804333>.
- Croom, Adam M. "Slurs." *Language Sciences* 33, no. 3 (May 2011): 343-358.
- "Dakota Poet's Verse Printed." *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), July 31, 1922.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1922-07-31/ed-1/seq-8/>.
- Dictograph, N.P. "The Big Boss Takes a Hand in the Political Game: The Big Boss Arouses the Workers from Their Fit of Despond and Sends Them Forth to Control the Farmer Vote

- by the Usual and Well Known Political Underground Methods.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), January 20, 1916.
- <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-01-20/ed-1/seq-2/>.
- “Fired!” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, September 23, 1915.
- <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-09-23/ed-1/seq-1/>.
- Florence Borner to Florence Davis, 1935. Folder 7, Box 11, Frances Wold Manuscript Collection, 10680, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.
- Foner, Eric. *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2002.
- “Former President Roosevelt Dead.” *Star-Gazette* (Elmira, NY), January 6, 1919.
- <https://www.newspapers.com/image/276311448>.
- “Freedom.” *The Sisseton Weekly Standard* (Sisseton, SD), January 2, 1920.
- <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99062049/1920-01-02/ed-1/seq-1/>.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Galinsky, Adam D., Wang, Cynthia S., Whitson, Jennifer A., Anicich, Eric M., Hugenberg, Kurt, and Galen V. Bodenhausen. “The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Power and Self-Labeling.” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 10 (October 2013): 2020-2029.
- Gaston, Herbert E. “A Triumph of Right and Democracy: North Dakota, Staunch in Its Loyalty, Could Not Have Been True to American Traditions if It Had Voted Against the League.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), July 15, 1918.
- <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-07-15/ed-1/seq-4/>.

- Gaston, Herbert E. "North Dakota's Sleeping Giant: Lignite, Wonder Mineral, Has Been Despised Because of Its Very Richness in Elements of Power." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), August 23, 1917.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-08-23/ed-1/seq-4/>.
- Gaston, Herbert E. *The Nonpartisan League*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920.
- Gaston, Herbert E. "Where Merchants and Farmers Agree: The Story of How the Grand Forks Commercial Club Is Co-Operating to Realize Farmers' Program." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), February 2, 1920.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-02-02/ed-1/seq-1/>.
- Goodwyn, Lawrence. *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- "Greetings." *Enderlin Independent* (Enderlin, ND), November 16, 1922.
- Hanson, John, Dempsey, Michael, and Rob Nilsson. "Northern Lights: An Interview with John Hanson and Rob Nilsson." *Film Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 2-10.
- Hanson, John. "'It's a Nice Little Movie, But It Isn't Commercial:' The Theatrical Self-Distribution of *Northern Lights*" last modified September 13, 2013. *Filmmaker Magazine*. <https://filmmakermagazine.com/76108-its-a-nice-little-movie-but-it-isnt-commercial-the-theatrical-self-distribution-of-northern-lights/#.WzCuRKdKiUl>.
- Hanson, John and Rob Nilsson, dirs. *Northern Lights*. 1978; San Francisco, CA: Cine Manifest. Digital.
- Helms, Andrea R.C. and Mary Childers Mangusso. "The Nome Gold Conspiracy." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (January 1982): 10-19.

“Herbert Gaston, Former Treasury Official, Dies: Had Distinguished Career in Newspaper Work, Service With Federal Government.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1956.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/380922803/>.

Kramer, Dale. *The Wild Jackasses: The American Farmer in Revolt*. New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1956.

Langer, William. *The Nonpartisan League: Its Birth, Activities and Leaders*. Mandan, ND: Morton County Farmers Press, 1920.

Lansing, Michael J. *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

“League Poem Reprinted.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 7, 1920.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-06-07/ed-1/seq-9/>.

“Lesson 4: Alliances And Conflicts, Topic 7: Nonpartisan League And The IVA, SECTION 2: ORIGINS OF THE NONPARTISAN LEAGUE.” State Historical Society of North Dakota. Accessed July 2, 2018. <https://www.ndstudies.gov/gr8/content/unit-iii-waves-development-1861-1920/lesson-4-alliances-and-conflicts/topic-7-nonpartisan-league-and-iva/section-2-origins-nonpartisan-league>.

Lewis, Sinclair. *Main Street*. New York: Signet Classics, 2008. Originally published New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920.

Lewis, Sinclair. “Sinclair Lewis – Biographical.” The Nobel Foundation. 1930.

https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1930/lewis-bio.html.

Lipton, Sara. “The Invention of the Jewish Nose.” *The New York Review of Books*. November 14, 2014. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/11/14/invention-jewish-nose/>.

- “Martinson devoted his life to N.D. NPL.” *The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead* (Fargo, ND), August 26, 2006. <https://www.inforum.com/news/2800116-martinson-devoted-his-life-nd-npl>.
- Martinson, Henry. “Comes the Revolution: A Personal Memoir of the Socialist Movement in North Dakota.” *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1969): 40-109.
- Martinson, Henry. “Some Memoirs of a Nonpartisan League Organizer.” *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1973): 20-33.
- Martinson, Henry. *Village Commune Barefoot Boy*. New York: Vantage Press, 1976.
- Morlan, Robert L. *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955.
- Morris, William C. “Big Business and His Stenographer.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 1, 1917. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-11-01/ed-1/seq-3/>.
- Morris, William C. “Biting On League Granite.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 25, 1918. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-11-25/ed-1/seq-3/>.
- Morris, William C. “The League Farmer – ‘I Know Whose Work This Is.’” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), March 18, 1918. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-03-18/ed-1/seq-12/>.
- Nielson, Kim E. “‘We all Leaguers by our house’: Women, Suffrage, and Red-Baiting in the National Nonpartisan League.” *Journal of Women’s History* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 31-50.

“Non Partisan League Threatens Country With Ills Similar to Those of Bolshevism.” *The Glasgow Courier* (Glasgow, MT), October 11, 1918.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/351814333>.

“Nonpartisan League Histories Written: Charles Edward Russell, Herbert E. Gaston and O. M. Thomason Tell of Struggle of Organized Farmers.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), April 26, 1920. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1920-04-26/ed-1/seq-10/>.

“North Dakota Pioneer Politician Dies.” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), November 21, 1981. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/346295457/>.

“Notice: Modern Poems for Modern People.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), August 11, 1919. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-08-11/ed-1/seq-12/>.

Nygaard, Travis Earl. “Seeds of Agribusiness: Grant Wood and the Visual Culture of Grain Farming, 1862–1957.” PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2009. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 3400492.

“Oh! See The Farmers’ Friends Helping Him Dig Defenses.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), September 6, 1917. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-09-06/ed-1/seq-11/>.

“Peoples’ Forum.” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), May 1, 1921.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1921-05-01/ed-1/seq-4/>.

“Picnics Prove Motto is True: League Ticket Will Sweep State, Say Farmers Who Attend Campaign Rallies.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 22, 1916.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1916-06-22/ed-1/seq-7/>.

Postel, Charles. *The Populist Vision*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Reid, Bill G. "John Miller Baer: Nonpartisan League Cartoonist and Congressman." *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 4-13.

"Reviews of New Books." *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 21, 1921.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1921-08-21/ed-1/seq-37/>.

Robinson, Elwyn B. *History of North Dakota*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1966.

"Roosevelt Exposure Causes Sensation: Unassailable Evidence That the Anti-Farmer Interests were using Roosevelt, the Liberty Loan and Loyalty for Base Ends Is Hard Blow for Gang." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), October 28, 1918.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-10-28/ed-1/seq-4/>.

Roosevelt, Theodore. "Murder, Treason and Parlor Anarchy." *Kansas City Star* (Kansas City, MO), July 21, 1918. Reprinted as "Theodore Roosevelt Says Parlor Anarchist, Pitying Crime, Is Peril to Nation: Call Murder and Treason by Their Right Names, He Urges, Denouncing I. W. W. and Their Sympathizers." *The Salt Lake Herald-Republican* (Salt Lake City, UT), July 22, 1918. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/287847603>.

Rude, Leslie Gene. "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Movement." PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, 1962.

Russell, Charles Edward. "The Power of Tainted News." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), September 23, 1915. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-09-23/ed-1/seq-7/>.

Russell, Charles Edward. *The Story of the Nonpartisan League: A Chapter in American Evolution*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1920.

Smith, Glenn H. "William Langer and the Art of Personal Politics." In *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, edited by Thomas W. Howard, 123-150. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1981.

"Socialists Expect War to Help Them." *The New York Times*, October 25, 1914.

<https://www.NEWSPAPERS.com/image/20495378>.

Spake, Amanda. "Prairie Homecoming: Crosby, North Dakota, Has Its First World Premiere."

Mother Jones 4, no. 1 (January 1979): 44-56.

"Telephone Conversation—Mrs. Noel Borner, January 30, 1987—8:30 p.m." Folder 7, Box 11,

Frances Wold Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota,

Bismarck, ND.

"Telephone Conversation with Paul Borner, Carp Lake, Michigan, January 25, 1987." Folder 7,

Box 11, Frances Wold Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota,

Bismarck, ND.

"The East Learns the Truth: A Review of the Newspaper Articles Concerning the Visit to New

York and Washington of President Townley of the National Nonpartisan League." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), December 17, 1917.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1917-12-17/ed-1/seq-4/>.

"The 'League Poet:' North Dakota Farm Woman Is First to Give Voice to Movement in Verse."

The Nonpartisan Leader (Fargo, ND), November 24, 1919.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-11-24/ed-1/seq-8/>.

"The Sower and the Old Black Crow." *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), May 20, 1918.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-05-20/ed-1/seq-6/>.

“Theodore Roosevelt Dead.” *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), January 6, 1919.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1919-01-06/ed-1/seq-1/>.

“These Are the Men Who Back the Big League.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND),
September 23, 1915. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-09-23/ed-1/seq-3/>.

“To Publish League Verse.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), June 30, 1919.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-06-30/ed-1/seq-12/>.

“To the Boys and Girls.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), January 13, 1919.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-01-13/ed-1/seq-16/>.

Todd, Chuck. *How Barack Obama Won: A State-by-State Guide to the Historic 2008 Presidential Election*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009.

United States Census, Year: 1900; Census Place: Basil, Fairfield, Ohio; Page: 14; Enumeration District: 0016.

United States Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: Burnt Creek, Burleigh, North Dakota; Roll: T625_1331; Page: 2B; Enumeration District: 67.

Vivian, James F. “The Last Round-up: Theodore Roosevelt Confronts the Nonpartisan League, October 1918.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 37-48.

“We Told You So.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), September 30, 1915.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1915-09-30/ed-1/seq-6/>.

“Well-Paid League-Hater—Puzzle by Foss.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 18, 1918. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1918-11-18/ed-1/seq-9/>.

“What the Organized Farmer is Doing: Short Notes About the Activities in League States.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), November 24, 1919.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-11-24/ed-1/seq-14/>.

“Why It Was Printed.” *The Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo, ND), January 20, 1919.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89074443/1919-01-20/ed-1/seq-2/>.

Wrobel, David M. *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002.