1996

The Farmers' Holiday Association in Eastern Iowa, 1932-1933

Joel Dinger
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pst

Part of the Unions Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pst/49

This Open Access Presidential Scholars Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Presidential Scholars Theses (1990 – 2006) by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
THE FARMERS' HOLIDAY ASSOCIATION
IN EASTERN IOWA, 1932-1933

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO
FULFILL THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARS BOARD OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

BY
JOEL DINGER

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
CEDAR FALLS, IOWA
APRIL, 1996
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ........................................... 1
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ............................... 2
  Farm Conditions During the 1920s
  From Farmers’ Union to Farmers’ Holiday Association
  The Farm Revolts of 1932-1933
THE FARMERS’ HOLIDAY ASSOCIATION IN EASTERN IOWA ... 12
  Previous Studies and Methodology
  FHA and Farm Revolt Activity in Eastern Iowa
ANALYSIS .............................................. 21
  Analysis
  Summary
BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................ 29
INTRODUCTION

The Farmer’s Holiday Association (FHA) was a short-lived phenomenon in Depression-era history. It arose out of the National Farmers Union, the most powerful farm organization of the immediate post-World War I era. While the main goal of the FHA was noble, cost of production guarantees were probably unattainable. Additionally, the method used try and attain this goal was questionable. Furthermore, the movement took on a life of its own. For the most part, most of the activities took place in western Iowa and eastern Nebraska, with significantly less activity taking place in eastern Iowa.

In this paper, the background conditions and major developments of the farm revolts of 1932-1933 will be examined. The paper will then go on to document the activities of the FHA in eastern Iowa as reported by the major daily paper of the region, the Cedar Rapids Gazette. Finally, an examination of possible reasons why the withholding movement did not take off in eastern Iowa will be made.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Farm Conditions During the 1920s

The Farmer’s Holiday Association can trace its roots back to the time period following World War I. Because of the war’s effects on Europe, there was an enormous increase in demand for agricultural products from the United States. To encourage farmers to raise their production, the government put price supports into effect. As a result, prices for agricultural products skyrocketed, especially for wheat and hogs. Farm income in the U.S. rose to an all-time high of $16.9 billion in 1919.¹ Prices were roughly twice their prewar average.²

Concurrent to this increased production, land values were rising. Much of the increase was attributed to rampant speculation, as only a 10 percent down payment would purchase a farm. Land prices rose almost 160% during World War I.³ High land prices combined with increased profits made farming as prosperous a venture as it had ever been. Many farmers tried to plant as much as they could, even to the point of tearing out fences in order to plant crops up the edge of the road.

The highly optimistic spirit of the immediate postwar period came crashing down quickly. As Europe recovered, the demand for farm commodities abroad diminished. Many countries imposed


³ ibid.
tariffs which made foreign trade difficult for Midwestern farmers. Canada and Argentina began to compete with the U.S., especially in the wheat market. Consumer demand for wheat and pork in the U.S. also diminished during the 1920s. Furthermore, government price supports were lifted in 1920.

All of these factors combined to create headaches for the farm community. Supply was high to begin with, and since so much land was in production, the situation was exacerbated. Prices plunged rapidly; by 1921, gross farm income had dropped to $8.9 billion.\(^4\) Land prices fell from an average of $57.36 an acre in 1920 to $35.40 in 1930.\(^5\)

The price issue was not the only concern facing farmers. Because credit was so easy to come by during the 1920s and land values were inflated, the average farmer debtor had a huge burden to carry. The average size of a new loan in Iowa was $11,080 in 1920, as compared to the national average of $4,270.\(^6\) Iowa had 1,763 banks in 1920, more than any other state.\(^7\) As prices fell, many of the smaller banks closed or began to foreclose upon loans.

In 1929, the markets crashed. Wheat prices dropped from $1.03 per bushel in 1929 to $0.67 in 1930, and down to $0.38 in 1932. Hog prices fell from $11.36 per head in 1931 to $6.14 in

\(^4\) Perkins, The AAA, 19.

\(^5\) Cedar Rapids Gazette, 6 June 1932, p. 6.

\(^6\) Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, 13.

\(^7\) ibid.
1932, and down to $4.21 in 1933. Other farm commodity prices fell in a similar manner.

The crash of 1929 put pressure on investors. When they had to call on their assets, they in turn put pressure on the farmer debtors. Many couldn’t survive. In 1931, 31.2 farms per 1000 were foreclosed upon in Iowa; by 1932 the number was 52.5. In 1933, 78.3 farms per 1000 were foreclosed upon in Iowa, the highest rate in our nation's history. Overall, the North Central region of the U.S. had the highest rate of foreclosures in the country. 6 percent of farms in Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota changed ownership through foreclosure or bankruptcy in 1932, and another 8 percent did so in 1933.

The 1920s and 1930s were not a field of dreams for farmers in Iowa. They were upset that their purchasing power was down as much as 67% from pre-World War I levels. They were frustrated that the prices they were receiving for their products was sinking fast, while the prices they paid at the market were unchanged.

From Farmers’ Union to Farmers’ Holiday Association

The stage was thus set for some type of farm protest movement. The roots of this insurgency movement came out of the

---

8 ibid., 12.


National Farmers’ Union. The Farmer’s Union was formed in 1902 in Texas as an organization of "dirt farmers", and spread rapidly north and eastward. It initially appealed to farmers because of its secret nature and low dues payments.

By the end of World War I, the Union’s power base had shifted from the South to the North, with the largest memberships in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa. At this time, the Union, along with all other farm organizations, pushed for and sponsored cooperatives as a means of controlling prices.

After 1929, the Union saw many changes. Two distinct factions had developed. The conservatives in the Union advocated a continued emphasis on cooperative marketing as a means of solving agriculture’s ills. A more radical faction led by John A. Simpson of Oklahoma and Milo Reno of Iowa advocated a more aggressive legislative program, calling for "cost of production" legislation, liberal credit and mortgage laws, and government issuance of non-interest-bearing bonds.11

Of these ideas, the "cost-of-production" would receive the most attention, and become the backbone of the farm protest movement. Simply stated, it was the concept that farmers were entitled to government aid which would cover the fixed and variable costs of production. This was a rather broad concept, and as Shover points out, "To compute cost of production, average expenses for producers of every commodity would be itemized and a

price determined for products consumed domestically that would return to the average operator his costs, labor, and a reasonable profit.\textsuperscript{12} To attain cost of production in 1932 a farmer would have had to received $0.92 per bushel for corn, $0.49 per bushel for oats, $0.11 a pound for hogs, and $2.17 per hundredweight for milk. Actual prices on the Omaha market at the time were $0.28 per bushel for corn, $0.16 per bushel for oats, $0.04 a pound for hogs, and $0.90 per hundredweight for milk.\textsuperscript{13}

As conditions on the farm worsened, the battle for control of the Farmers' Union continued. The national convention in November of 1930 elected Simpson to be president, thus ensuring a shift in policy towards radicalism. The other leader of this political offensive, Milo Reno, was to become central in the formation of the Farmer's Holiday Association.

Reno was born in Wapello County, Iowa, in 1866. He was an ordained Campbellite minister, which led to his skill in oratory. He was involved in rural protest movements for most of his life. As head of the Iowa Farmers' Union from 1921-1930, the organization grew to about 10,000 members.\textsuperscript{14} Despite Reno’s energy and devotion to his cause, a distinct lack of basic economic sense caused his ideas to be doomed from the start.

Shortly after Simpson came into power, Reno once again began


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette}, 23 August 1932, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{14} Shover, \textit{Cornbelt Rebellion}, 25-27.
to float an idea he first discussed in 1927: a general withholding movement of farm products in order to raise farm prices and force Congress to enact cost of production legislation. Momentum began to build towards some sort of action as it became evident that tensions were mounting on the farm. By 1932, sentiment for some sort of action was building, as the pages of the Iowa Union Farmer contained nothing but plans for a forthcoming withholding action. On 3 May, 2,000 Union members gathered in Des Moines to launch the Farmers’ Holiday Association nationally. Milo Reno was named president of the organization.

From the beginning, the FHA and the National Farmer’s Union were intimately linked by policy. In a way, the FHA was the "strong-arm" of the National Farmer’s Union. Unfortunately for Reno, an efficient chain of command was not established, and he did not have a great presence as a leader. This was to create confusion from the start of the revolts.

The Farm Revolts of 1932-1933

The withholding strike was initially slated to begin on 4 July and last for 30 days. However, organizational plans were not in place, and the strike was delayed indefinitely. Additionally, prices actually had increased throughout June. When prices again began to slump in late July, plans for the

---


16 Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion, 37.
Holiday to commence on 15 August were set. In the confusion that characterized the leadership of the FHA, however, the strike commenced at Sioux City on August 8, and the leadership was forced to announce two days later that the strike was underway.

As Shover states, "The farm strike that began at Sioux City...was a different movement from that planned by the Farmers' Holiday Association. In all the preceding buildup there had been no mention of picketing, yet at the very inception of the withholding movement farmers in Woodbury and Plymouth counties patrolled highways and threatened noncooperating farmers who tried to market their produce." Even from day one, it became obvious that the Farmers' Holiday was two movements. One was the formal organization which planned a peaceful withholding movement to bring pressure for cost of production legislation. The other was a spontaneous social movement which was triggered into action by the Holiday but was looking for immediate remedies instead.

The activities which took place in regards to the strike in the western portion of Iowa and eastern Nebraska are well-documented, and this paper will not go into great detail here. The majority of the activity and violence associated with the

17 Shover, "Farmers' Holiday Strike", 198.
18 ibid., 199.
farm revolts of 1932-1933 took place in the northwest corner of the state. The strike involved mainly dairy farmers at first, although other farm products became involved later. Of all farm products, a milk strike had the largest chance of being effective. Milk is highly perishable, and thus the "milk shed" was of a small radius around a creamery. Producer numbers were small, and could be controlled much more easily with a withholding movement than with most other farm products. Indeed, the milk dispute in Sioux City was settled after ten days when distributors agreed to compromise on a price increase. Other major problems erupted in Council Bluffs, Cherokee, and Clinton.

After almost a month of violence and chaos, a truce was declared on 1 September. The withholding movement had been a failure, even in the areas of highest activity. Only at Sioux City had receipts of livestock decreased. What Reno had failed to realize was that blockading only a few markets would not reduce supply sufficiently enough to raise prices. All agricultural products would have to be withheld to make the movement effective. Farmers could not afford to participate in an embargo which deprived them of all income. In essence, the formal withholding movement was doomed from the start.

The FHA changed focus in 1933, turning towards the halting of foreclosures through so-called "penny auctions", where farmers would come to foreclosure auctions, discourage any legitimate bidders, and then buy items for one penny. The farmers would then give the merchandise back the farmer being foreclosed upon.
In all actuality, the FHA probably had its greatest success in this function, as an estimated 140 foreclosure sales were halted in this manner.\textsuperscript{20}

Towards the end of 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was in the middle of instituting his New Deal agricultural program. Millions of hogs had been destroyed earlier in the year as part of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, and millions of acres of corn plowed under in an attempt to reduce supply, and thus prices.\textsuperscript{21} As no immediate effects were seen by farmers, agitation ran high once again. Once again, a farm strike was called for, but this time, even Reno himself called for militant action to obtain cost of production.

By this time, though, support for the Farmers’ Holiday had diminished. Reno was asking more out of this strike with less support from farmers. Some scattered acts of violence were observed throughout the latter portion of 1933, with most of the activity centered on northwest Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{22} However, when the first corn loans were received (see discussion

\textsuperscript{20} Shover, "Farmers’ Holiday Strike", 196.


in Chapter 3), most of the revolts ended.

The fact that hostilities ended so rapidly after the government began its aid programs to farmers points out a glaring fact: the farm revolts of 1932-1933 as seen by most of the farmers who participated in them were directed at getting some sort of help, not at gaining cost of production guarantees or any other legislative agenda, as Milo Reno believed. The stated activities of the FHA were not what drove the farmers to action, and Reno went to the grave in 1936 feeling his efforts had been in vain. In actuality, though, the farm revolts had accomplished what most farmers had wanted all along.
Previous Studies and Methodology

Much of the previous literature about the Farmers’ Holiday Association has focused on its activities in western Iowa and eastern Nebraska. However, to the author’s knowledge, no documentation of the activities of the FHA and the farm revolt in the eastern part of the state has been done. While the activities which occurred in eastern Iowa may not be as important as those which occurred elsewhere, for historical purposes they need to be documented. In addition, the fact that the movement was not as successful in the eastern portion of the state leads to the question of why. This study set out to document events of the Farmers’ Holiday Association in eastern Iowa, and examine some possible reasons why movement was less popular.

Because the focus area of the study was the eastern part of Iowa, I wanted to choose a source that would cover the greatest part of the region and be counted on to report FHA activities as completely as possible. I chose the Cedar Rapids Gazette as the main source for my research. The paper had a circulation area which covered the entire eastern third of the state, and had a reputation for complete reporting of events.

Each issue from April 1, 1932 through December 31, 1933 was analyzed, and any reference to the Farmers’ Holiday Association or the farm revolts was noted. No statistics were figured; rather the emphasis was on documentation.

---

23 See note 19 and bibliography for details.
FHA and Farm Revolt Activities in Eastern Iowa, 1932-1933

The first mention of the FHA came on April 28, 1932, as the Farm Union called a "Holiday" meeting in Des Moines for 3 May. One day earlier, a Holiday meeting at Walker in northern Linn County attracted 100 farmers. On 2 May, a survey of Farm Bureau members in Cedar County found that 60 percent did not favor a farmers strike. Further articles through the month of May reported on the activities of the FHA in organizing a possible strike.

By early summer of 1932, some organization was underway in Eastern Iowa. Organizational meetings took place in Walker on 4 June and in Center Point on 7 June. Other efforts took place at Atkins in Benton County, Anamosa in Jones County, Earlville in Delaware County, What Cheer in Keokuk County, and Hawkeye in Fayette County. Milo Reno spoke to a crowd of 250 at Monticello in Jones County on 19 June. A crowd estimated at 3,000 attended a "Farm Holiday Picnic" in What Cheer on 4 July. The 10 July Gazette reported Farmers’ Holiday

25 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 2 May 1932, p. 9.
26 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 4 May 1932, p.11; 12 May 1932, p. 10.
28 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 20 June 1932, p. 10.
29 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 6 July 1932, p. 11.
Association organizations in 14 townships in Linn County.\textsuperscript{30}

News of the planned Holiday faded a bit during the latter half of July, with the exception of an article quoting Jesse D. Sickler, the secretary of the Iowa FHA, on what exactly "cost of production" really meant.\textsuperscript{31} On 1 August, the Farm Price Index was reported to have jumped 5 points over the past month. Ironically, this was just a day after Milo Reno announced that the Holiday would commence on 15 August and last for 30 days.\textsuperscript{32}

Further meetings took place during the first weeks of August. A more important one took place on 6 August at Vinton. Glenn Miller, the head of the Iowa Farmers Union, addressed a crowd of more than 100 farmers, and urged them to fight for the right to withhold farm products.\textsuperscript{33}

When the farm strike of 1932 commenced on August 8 in Sioux City, it was reported that there had been "nary a ripple" in the flow of farm products in eastern Iowa. More importantly, hog receipts in Cedar and Clinton Counties, areas thought to have high concentrations of FHA activity, actually had higher receipts.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette}, 10 July 1932, p. 7.
  \item \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette}, 20 July 1932, p. 10.
  \item \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette}, 31 July 1932, p. 7; 1 August 1932. p. 8.
  \item \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette}, 7 August 1932, p. 7.
  \item \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette}, 8 August 1932, p. 22; for further information on previous hostilities in Cedar County, see Frank D. Dileva, "Frantic Farmers Fight Law," \textit{Annals of Iowa} 32 (October 1953): 81-109.
\end{itemize}
As the milk strike continued to heat up in western Iowa, activity in eastern Iowa remained scattered through the middle portion of August. The market in What Cheer reported very little in the way of produce coming in during the second week of August. However, the creamery reported no change in receipts. Stanwood in Cedar County reported just one less load of hogs to due to the Holiday. The creamery in Traer (Tama County) reported that only five of its 600 customers were participating in the withholding movement. While organizational meetings continued in other locations such as Grinnell and Malcom in Poweshiek County, and Clutier in Tama County, no violent actions related to the Holiday were reported.\textsuperscript{35}

Active picketing did come to eastern Iowa in the latter part of August. Black Hawk County saw some of the most violent activity. On 16 August, a small group of Holiday sympathizers threatened to shut down the Parsons Creamery near Waterloo. The sheriffs were called in and the crowd was dispersed.\textsuperscript{36} A week later, 25 pickets were arrested at a creamery near Cedar Falls. Active picketing continued in Black Hawk County until 30 August.\textsuperscript{37} Any possibility for a milk strike in Cedar Rapids was averted on 29 August, as the price paid to farmers for milk was

\textsuperscript{35} Cedar Rapids Gazette, 10 August 1932, p. 8; 12 August 1932, p. 20; 13 August 1932, p. 3; 14 August 1932, p. 7; 15 August 1932, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{36} Cedar Rapids Gazette, 17 August 1932, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{37} Cedar Rapids Gazette, 24 August 1932, p. 1; 30 August 1932, p. 1.
raised from $1.40 to $2.00 per pound.

Cedar County also saw Holiday-related activities, with 100 pickets centered in the rural area around Tipton. These farmers began their pickets at 8:00 a.m. on 29 August. A clash later that day between the pickets and deputies resulted in 11 injuries and caused the strike to be called off.\textsuperscript{38} Other trouble developed in Clinton County. As many as 500 holiday supporters established a blockade just west of Clinton which resulted in 5 arrests on 31 August. This uprising also was short-lived due to the quick release of the prisoners and the ending of the general withholding movement on 1 September.

Reports continued about the violence in the vicinity of Sioux City, while tensions appeared to calm down in eastern Iowa. Scattered Holiday meetings took place, but no large-scale protest movements were reported. In fact, farmers got some good news, as farm product prices continued to rise slightly, and the largest corn crop in Iowa's history was being projected.\textsuperscript{39}

Deeper into the month of September, very little Holiday activity was reported in eastern Iowa. Again, scattered pockets of organization were reported (Marengo, Iowa City), but no withholding of produce was reported in eastern Iowa. Meanwhile, other parts of the country were being threatened with farm strikes of their own.

\textsuperscript{38} Cedar Rapids Gazette, 29 August 1932, p. 1; 30 August 1932, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{39} Cedar Rapids Gazette, 9 September 1932, p. 13; 10 September 1932, p. 5.
Gradually, news of the elections of 1932 replaced the activities of the Farmers' Holiday Association out of the newspaper. Any violent activities associated with the farm revolts were occurring elsewhere, especially in Minnesota. News of the FHA did not appear again until the fall of 1933. The 19 September Gazette reported that the FHA was to hold a convention with 2,500 to 3,000 members expected to attend. Milo Reno was pushing hard for cost of production assurances in the National Recovery Administration (NRA) Code being proposed. Additionally, the FHA was looking for guarantees of a mortgage refinancing bill and the payment of soldier's bonuses. Without these pledges, Reno promised a new strike.

By October, things again were beginning to heat up. Although the directors of the FHA decided to indefinitely delay a general strike on farm produce, President Roosevelt was getting concerned. The 20 October Gazette carried the headline "Roosevelt to Act At Once to Halt Farm Strike". On that same day, the Hardin County United Farmers Organization, a radical offshoot of the Farmers' Holiday Association, called for an embargo on all livestock and grain until higher prices were attained.

---

40 *Cedar Rapids Gazette,* 12 October 1932, p. 1.

41 *Cedar Rapids Gazette,* 19 September 1933, p. 1, 12; 23 September 1933, p. 3.

42 *Cedar Rapids Gazette,* 20 October 1933, p. 1.

43 ibid., p. 17.
By 22 October, a general farm strike had been declared in six states of the Upper Midwest. Little effect was seen initially in eastern Iowa. In fact, in the 10-day period leading up to this second strike, corn prices rose 13 cents, up to 35 cents per bushel. That was 3 and 1/2 times more per bushel than in October of 1932.44

By this time, the Farmers' Holiday Association was beginning to lose what little control remained. A splinter group known as the Farmers' National Committee For Action was calling for active pickets starting 15 November. At the same time, an "anti-Holiday" group known as the Farmers Move Against the Strike was gaining ground. This organization was beginning to take members away from the FHA. As Milo Reno began losing control, his actions became more and more desperate. He told his followers to be prepared to "throw the strike into full gear" if Roosevelt rejected his cost of production idea.45

While violence erupted again in the vicinity of Sioux City on November 5, talks were underway in Cedar Rapids between the milk producers and distributors to avoid any sort of trouble.46 Eventually, another agreement was reached to keep the price of milk up at the Cedar Rapids Creamery.

Several incidents did occur in eastern Iowa during the

46 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 7 November 1933, p. 1.
middle part of November. On 10 November, a former Waterloo policeman fired several revolver shots over the heads of picketers near Denver in order to disperse the crowd. 47

Even scarier incidents occurred in Cedar and Clinton Counties. On 14 November, over 100 farm pickets stopped a truck driver carrying a truckload of poultry to Chicago outside of Clinton. The driver was escorted back to Clarence. 48 On the 16th, nearly 100 deputies were called out to disperse a crowd of over 100 pickets, resulting in 13 arrests. This action followed the actions of the mob a day earlier, when trucks were stopped, had their tires punctured, and were pelted with bricks. Fortunately, no serious injuries occurred. 49

Later on 16 November, a warehouse owned by the Toronto Creamery burned to the ground. Three local FHA activists were later tried and convicted of setting fire to the building. On the 20th, a Milwaukee Railroad bridge between Wheatland and Big Rock burned. 50

However, just as suddenly as tempers had flared, the tensions calmed down, this time for good. Partially responsible for the easing of tensions was the formation of so-called "Law and Order Leagues" all around Cedar and Clinton Counties. Over

47 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 11 November 1933, p. 1.
48 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 14 November 1933, p. 1.
49 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 17 November 1933, p. 2.
50 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 20 November 1933, p. 1.
100 farmers formed such a group in the vicinity of Bennett.\textsuperscript{51} However, the largest reason hostilities ended was the corn loan. On 24 November, the first corn loan was received in Iowa. Under the program, farmers received money in order to put their corn into a crib, which was sealed. This loan was to be repaid at 4 percent interest, but if the farmer defaulted, all he lost was the cribbed corn, which was unsalable. If the price of corn rose significantly, the farmer could then sell the corn and repay the government loan while keeping the difference in profit.\textsuperscript{52}

Almost instantly, farmers attitudes changed, as for the first time they saw the possibility for economic relief which could be obtained within twenty-four hours of application.\textsuperscript{53} Further legislation followed, as the Iowa legislature enacted a moratorium on foreclosures. The creation of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to ensure bank deposits truly signaled the end of the farm revolt in eastern, and indeed all of Iowa.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51} Cedar Rapids Gazette, 22 November 1933, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{52} For a detailed explanation, see Frank D. DiLeva, "Attempt to Hang an Iowa Judge," Annals of Iowa 32 (July 1954): 361.

\textsuperscript{53} ibid, 362.

\textsuperscript{54} ibid., 364.
ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Analysis

It is obvious that the activities of the Farmers' Holiday Association in eastern Iowa were sporadic and scattered in nature, especially when compared to what took place in western Iowa, eastern Nebraska, and even Wisconsin and Minnesota. What are some possible reasons why this episode of farm revolts did not affect this region, while at the same time the movement was so active in surrounding areas?

One factor to consider is the weather. 1932 saw nearly average rainfall across the state, with the glaring exception of very dry Plymouth and Woodbury Counties on the western edge of Iowa. Eastern Iowa precipitation ranged from 25-40 inches, with the driest totals centered on the counties of Jones and Iowa. Maybe even more importantly, the eastern portion of the state was spared from the worst of the severe weather during the year. A major hailstorm caused $1,000,000 damage to crops, buildings, and other properties in a line from Plymouth to Sac County. Many corn crops in the vicinity of LeMars and Cherokee were stripped bare and considered a total loss. Not coincidentally, these two communities were centers in the farm Holiday movement.

1933 saw near normal rainfall again in the east, with yearly totals ranging from 25-35 inches. However, western Iowa saw a significant drought which affected corn yields significantly.

Woodbury, Monona, Crawford, and Harrison were the driest counties, each with less than 17 inches of precipitation for the year. To make matters worse, western Iowa suffered through record-breaking heat in June and July. Once again, eastern Iowa was spared the brunt of the severe weather, with a significant hail event striking the northwest quadrant on 19 June.56

While one cannot cite weather conditions as the only factor, it is obvious that eastern Iowa had a much more favorable climate than the rest of the state through the main period of farm insurgency. Farmers who didn’t have to worry about their crops probably weren’t as concerned with low prices. At least they had some sort of crop to harvest despite the price.

Another variable involved the incidence of farm foreclosures. Woodbury, easily the site of more Holiday activity than any other county, had three times more foreclosure suits pending than any other Iowa county. With the exception of Black Hawk County, no other eastern Iowa counties had an excessive number of foreclosures.57 This led reporter Bruce Bliven to write in the New Republic that "it’s where the farmers had something a few years ago and have had it suddenly taken away, that the agitators find a responsive audience."58


57 Des Moines Register, 15 July 1934.

58 Bruce Bliven, "Milo Reno and His Farmers," New Republic 77 (November 29, 1933): 64.
Yet another factor to be considered deals with political leanings. Eastern Iowa was considered the most conservative portion of the state, politically speaking. By looking at the county-by-county breakdowns of presidential election votes for 1920-1932, it is obvious that the two most conservative counties in the state were Linn (Cedar Rapids) and Polk (Des Moines). Even in the election of 1932, in which Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated Republican and favorite son Herbert Hoover, Linn and Polk counties decided for Hoover, bucking the trend of the rest of the state (Black Hawk, Story, and Warren were the only other counties to cast a majority of votes for Hoover).\(^{59}\)

An article in the Gazette of 23 October confirms this. Hoover won a straw poll among eastern Iowa readers of the paper. As the article states, "Cedar Rapids is in the center of one of the most conservative sections of Iowa, at least under normal circumstances, and the section in predominantly Republican."\(^{60}\) Repeated editorials in the Gazette in the weeks leading up to the election endorsed Hoover.

Other editorials in the Gazette were highly critical of the Farmers' Holiday Association. On August 6th, 1932, an editorial entitled "Stay At Home - Sell Nothing" stated that the strike would be interesting to watch, but that the prospects for success didn't seem bright. It stated that the strike could only work if


\(^{60}\) Cedar Rapids Gazette, 23 October 1932, p. 1.
it was conducted on a large scale, which wasn't likely. Evidently, that fact was lost on everyone but Reno and the diehard members of the FHA. An editorial the next day raised the question of why the strike had been delayed until buying power was so low that the probability of success for the strike was greatly reduced.

After the strike had been in progress for a couple of weeks, the Gazette conceded that attention had been raised, but not prices. Yes, the strike had garnered attention, "but after that, farmers have no specific remedy for their problems." A plan should have been formulated which everybody agreed upon before arousing the sentiment of the public, which has to pay for the relief. Later in the month of August, the paper commended dairy interests in Cedar Rapids for averting a milk strike.

Editorial opinion became even more negative in September, especially in reference to Milo Reno. The paper questioned the action of the pickets in ignoring an order by Reno to stop, saying it would "preclude any possibility that the movement will achieve constructive results". Reno was accused of being a professional organizer profiting from the farmer's distress. The editorial went on say that the forces of protest were too loosely

61 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 6 August 1932, p. 4.
62 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 7 August 1932, p. 7.
63 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 20 August 1932, p. 4.
64 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 23 August 1932, p. 8.
65 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 31 August 1932, p. 6.
bonded that the movement would never succeed in withholding a sufficient amount of produce to effect an improvement in general price levels. The paper even went so far as to suggest an alternative to the Holiday. It argued that restaurants should increase the portions served in order to get rid of agricultural surpluses.

By September of 1933, editorial opinion of Reno had not changed. "Reno thinks he is the only one who knows what to do about the farm problem." "Reno covets power...and feels that violence is a means of achieving personal power." An October 21 editorial stated that conditions in the region were not good, but were better than in some other sections of the state. The paper endorsed the Agricultural Adjustment Act, asserting that under the AAA option, farmers could receive a cash "bonus", and prices for hogs and corn might go up. Under Reno's plan, everything was a gamble, and no cash was in store for the immediate future.

Favorable weather, a highly conservative political base, and scathing editorials in the major daily paper of eastern Iowa certainly can be seen as contributing factors to the lack of activity in eastern Iowa. In addition, the general farm

---

66 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 4 September 1932, p. 6.
67 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 11 September 1932, p. 6.
68 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 6 September 1933, p. 6.
69 ibid.
70 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 21 October 1933, p. 4.
community in eastern Iowa was not behind a strike.

The Gazette ran a series of interviews with farmers throughout eastern Iowa in the months leading up the election of 1932. The anthology was known as "What's What Out on the Acres". More often than not, the subject of the Farmers' Holiday came up during the course of the interview.

Overwhelmingly, the attitude of the farmers was against any sort of withholding movement. Even from inception, many eastern Iowa farmers were not in favor. E.L. Stewart of Washington called the Farmers' Holiday, "...as big a piece of foolishness as ever has been suggested." 71 Many farmers felt that the movement could not stick together because of the independent nature of farmers. 72 Omar Yoder of Sharon Center stated that "Farmers are too scattered, too diversified, and not enough think alike." 73 Another farmer felt that the strike would be ineffective unless the Grange and Farm Bureau joined. 74

Other concerns were focused on how farmers who were already going through difficult times could survive a farm strike. "What about those who can't meet their obligations today?" said one

71 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 6 May 1932, p. 13.
72 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 17 May 1932, p. 11; 12 September 1932, p. 10.
74 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 27 September 1932, p. 11.
farmer; others expressed similar sentiments. Others stated that they would join the strike if everyone else did, but they doubted that would happen. Many farmers realized that the idea of holding produce off the market to raise prices wouldn't work, and could cause more harm than good. Ed McMillan maintained that the strike could call attention to the plight of the farmer, but not accomplish much more than that. For a few farmers, the concern seemed to be more on tax reform than on higher prices.

Summary

The Farmers' Holiday Association-sponsored strikes of 1932 and 1933 saw very little activity in eastern Iowa, despite extensive activities in the western portion of the state. Weather conditions, the political structure of the region, and unfavorable press coverage of the FHA and Milo Reno all are possible reasons for the relative lack of activity in eastern Iowa. Public opinion towards the farm strikes was negative,

---

75 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 15 July 1932, p. 13; 18 July 1932, p. 8; 20 July 1932, p. 10; 26 August 1932, p. 20; 1 September 1932, p. 14; 7 September 1932, p. 8; 23 September 1932, p. 13.

76 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 19 July 1932, p. 10; 27 July 1932, p. 12.

77 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 22 July 1932, p. 22; 9 August 1932, p. 12; 8 September 1932, p. 8; 27 September 1932, Section 2, p. 8; 18 October 1932, p. 13.

78 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 13 October 1932, p. 12.

79 Cedar Rapids Gazette, 27 September 1932, Section 2, p. 8; 24 October 1932, p. 10.
especially among farmers. All of these factors were likely responsible for the relative quiet which existed in eastern Iowa, while farm revolts were going on all around them.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Primary Sources

Newspapers

Cedar Rapids Gazette
Des Moines Register
The New York Times

Public Documents


II. Secondary Sources

Unpublished Materials


Books


Articles

"Milo Reno and His Farmers." ibid. (29 December 1933): 63-65.

"The Case For and Against the Farm Bill." Literary Digest (1 April 1933): 6.


"Rural Strikes Spreading Farm Relief in Washington." Literary Digest (4 November 1933): 8.


Vorse, Mary H. "Rebellion in the Cornbelt." Harper's 166 (December 1932): 1-10.