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Iowa's wolf in populist clothing: Norman Baker, 1925-1936

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IOWA'S WOLF IN POPULIST CLOTHING: NORMAN BAKER, 1925-1936

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirments for the Degree

Master of Arts

Eric Scott Juhnke

University of Northern Iowa

July 1994

ABSTRACT

During the depression years of the late 1920s and 1930s, Muscatine, Iowa's Norman Baker stood as both a powerful and controversial figure in rural eastern Iowa. Baker's successful business empire, which at its height included a radio station, mail order enterprise, newspaper, magazine, and a cancer quackery hospital, earned the Muscatine tycoon millions of dollars in revenue over the course of a decade. Despite this business success, Baker's brash personality, vituperative broadcasting style, and fraudulent medical claims were subjects of constant controversy.

Considering both Baker's suspect reputation and the poor agricultural conditions of the day, the question remains: How did Baker sustain his popularity and wealth in rural eastern Iowa for roughly decade? In my thesis I have attempted to answer this question by investigating Baker's manipulation of populist rhetoric to stir Iowa farmers' emotions and rally their support.

Much of my research into Baker's populist platform centered on his many writings, speeches, and broadcast transcripts. However, numerous secondary sources also helped to identify eastern Iowa's unsettled environment, which was particularly vulnerable to Baker's populist tactics. Deposits of Baker's tabloid magazine TNT: The

Naked Truth and newspaper the Midwest Free Press at Muscatine's Musser Art Museum and Musser Library were extremely helpful in the research process. Additionally, the AMA Archives in Chicago and the Hoover Presidential library in West Branch, Iowa, provided excellent collections on Baker. Use of personal interviews and investigation into the few existing historical works on Baker helped to round out my research.

Although dead as a movement by 1900, Populism left a lasting legacy in the rural Midwest. Themes of egalitarianism and democracy, as well as elements of anti-semitism, conspiratorial rhetoric, and anti-intellectualism continued to stir midwestern farmers emotions in the 1920s and 1930s as they had in the 1890s. Tapping into this Populist tradition, Baker achieved prosperity and notoriety by feasting on the economic frustration and bruised psyche of middle America. Like a wolf in sheep's clothing, Baker wrapped himself in the mantle of rural populism and fleeced Iowa farmers for profit and fame.

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This Study by: Eric Scott Juhnke

Entitled: "Iowa's Wolf in Populist Clothing: Norman Baker, 1925-36"

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On 8 May 1930 the population of Muscatine, Iowa, swelled to over twice its normal 17,000 residents. A swarm of people besieged the Mississippi river town to witness Norman Baker's sensational medical triumph. Months before Baker had electrified listeners of his radio station K-TNT (an acronym for "Know the Naked Truth") with the claim that the dreaded scourge of cancer was curable at his Baker Institute in Muscatine. At Baker's request, K-TNT listeners from as far away as Kansas City flocked to Muscatine for an open-air demonstration of his earthshaking medical breakthrough.

Those who expected a good show were not disappointed. During the course of the evening the charismatic Baker, clad in trademark white suit and lavender tie, directed awe-inspiring medical theatrics and a parade of stirring patient testimonials. For the finale, Baker's doctors reportedly removed the scalp and skull of patient Mandus Johnson, exposing what appeared to be his cancerous brain tissue to the astonished crowd. Before sending his new converts home, Baker lambasted the "medical trust" for discrediting his cancer cure in their quest to retain a prosperous monopoly

on all medical treatment. Undeterred by his critics, Baker assured the crowd he would stand pat against the evils of organized medicine and remain in the "fight for humanity to the finish."[1]

Five years before his open air extravaganza, Baker burst onto the Iowa scene as a controversial businessman and radio personality. His daily broadcasts over K-TNT interspersed direct advertising for a booming mail order business with fiery attacks against trusts, Wall Street interests, big business, and organized medicine. Revitalizing performance skills developed as a vaudeville magician in the early 1900s, Baker perfected colorful theatrics and a demagogic message to hypnotize many farmers who came to see him as a rural crusader and K-TNT as the mouthpiece of farm interests.

Despite the colorful nature of Muscatine's most notorious demagogue, few scholars have investigated Baker's historical significance in Iowa and the Midwest. Alvin Winston's The Throttle: A Fact Story of Norman Baker, of Injustices, Confiscation, and Suppression (1932) represented the first attempt to put the life of Muscatine's most

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[1]"32,000 See Cancer Cure Proved," TNT: The Naked Truth 2 (June 1930): 28, 43.

infamous citizen on paper.[2] Recruited by Baker to write the account, Winston glorified his subject as a humanitarian crusader "throttled" by the unprovoked persecution of his many enemies. Published by the Baker Company and advertised over K-TNT, The Throttle served as a six hundred page compendium of typical Baker propaganda. Although sensational, Winston's so called "authorized biography" provided both a useful insight into Baker's demagogic message, as well as an accurate chronology of Baker's life from 1882 through 1932.

Less favorable treatments of Baker's career followed his death in 1958. Warren Smith's "Norman Baker: King of the Quacks" summarized the story of Baker's controversial medical career. Although admitting Baker's numerous talents, Smith condemned the Muscatine demagogue as the "greatest medical fraud of all times."[3] Separating himself from Smith, G. Joseph Wolfe focused on Baker's broadcasting career in Iowa. Wolfe's article "Norman Baker and K-TNT" highlighted Baker's efforts to construct his radio station

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[2]Alvin Winston, The Throttle: A Fact Story of Norman Baker, of Injustices, Confiscation, and Suppression (Muscatine, IA: Baker Inc., 1933); Revised edition Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen: The Life Story of Norman Baker (Muscatine, IA: TNT Press, 1936).

[3]Warren B. Smith, "Norman Baker--King of the Quacks," The Iowan 17 (December-January 1958-59): 16.

and his abuse of the radio industry to attack his many enemies and peddle his cancer cures.[4]

Thomas Hofer's University of Wisconsin MA thesis entitled Norman Baker and American Broadcasting provided the most thorough account of Baker to date.[5] Although originally aimed as a study of Baker's broadcasting career, Hofer's 600 page work also included treatment of Baker's pre- and post-K-TNT years. Hofer portrayed Baker and K-TNT as important players in the formulation of early radio regulation. Baker's vituperative style behind the K-TNT mike pushed the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to formulate stricter standards for public broadcasting. Fueled by years of exhaustive research, Hofer ended up with an eclectic biography, with primary emphasis given to Baker's involvement with K-TNT. In addition to his many insights into K-TNT, Hofer included complete transcripts of many of Baker's radio broadcasts. Consequently, Hofer's work retained characteristics of both a secondary and primary source of Baker's radio career.

Although extremely helpful in revealing Baker's radio and quackery exploits, the works of Wolfe, Smith, and Hofer

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[4]G. Joseph Wolfe, "Norman Baker and KTNT," Journal of Broadcasting 12 (Fall 1968), 389-399.

[5]Thomas Hofer, "Norman Baker and American Broadcasting" (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1974).

neglected a wider context of Baker's Iowa career. More than a radio pioneer and medical charlatan, Baker provided a window to view the pervasiveness of rural frustration and populist appeal evident in Iowa during the 1920s and 1930s. Reviving the Populist spirit of the 1890s, Baker symbolized the new breed of 20th century populist agitators, who swept across the Midwest riling farmers with rolled up shirt sleeves and charged rhetoric.

Although the nature and contributions of the Populist Movement became subject to intense historical debate, most historians agreed that the decades of the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a rebirth of the old Populist spirit. Such noted Populist historians as John D. Hicks noted numerous similarities between 19th and 20th century populism. Hicks pointed out that both outbreaks of rural radicalism were precipitated by a period of agricultural expansion followed by a devastating period of agricultural depression.[6] Much as they had in the 1890s, farmers of the 1920s and 1930s rallied behind reformist programs and embraced radical language in hopes of reviving their economic troubles.

Don Kirschner continued Hicks's comparison between rural revolts by highlighting the conflict between rural and capitalistic urban society. As they had in the 1890s,

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[6]John D. Hicks, "Some Parallels with Populism in the Twentieth Century," Social Education 8 (November 1944), 297.

economic troubles plaguing the Midwest pushed farmers to lash out against "the wrath of eastern wealth."[7] However, Kirschner believed that rural America's "reservoir of ill-will" against urban society differed from the earlier resentment, "because it was not the capitalist's economic power that the farmer attacked as much as his way of life." He noted that "Increasingly [the farmer] removed the capitalist from his economic context and abstracted him to a kind of generalized symbol of indecency."[8]

William Leuchtenburg and Richard Hofstadter also recognized the primacy of urban vs. rural conflict in the resurgence of midwestern radicalization during the 1920s and 1930s. "The United states of the 1920s," noted Leuchtenburg in The Perils of Prosperity 1914-1932, "neared the end of a painful transition from a country reared in the rural village to a nation dominated by the great metropolis."[9] The conflict between city and countryside was long withstanding, but its intensity in the 1920s was unparalleled. The 1920 census recorded that for the first time fewer than half of America's population resided in

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[7]Don Kirschner, City and Country: Rural Responses to Urbanization in the 1920s (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1970), 23.

[8]Ibid., 24.

[9]William Leuchtenburg, The Perils of Prosperity: 1914-1932 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 225.

rural villages or farms. "It was the city that enjoyed the best of the new prosperity while the countryside lagged behind," chimed in Hofstadter in his controversial work The Age of Reform. "But, above all," he continued, "the city was the home of liquor and bootleggers, jazz and Sunday golf, wild parties and divorce." As it had in the 1890s, the blame fell upon "the immigrants, the Catholics, the Jews, . . . and the babylons of New York and Chicago."[10]

Baker's success in drawing in Iowa farmers' support hinged on his ability to tap into these rural frustrations and radical tendencies that had been building for decades. Although dead as a movement by 1900, Populism left a lasting legacy in the rural Midwest. Themes of egalitarianism and democracy, as well as elements of anti-semitism, conspiratorial rhetoric, and anti-intellectualism, continued to stir midwestern farmers emotions in the 1920s, as they had in the 1890s. While more of an urban phenomena, the Progressive movement between 1900-1920 reinforced rather than eroded Populist themes in rural America. Additionally, evidence of a growing rift between urban and rural America became more apparent in the 1920s. Displaying their unique brand of Populist-Progressive themes, farmers lashed out blindly against urban corruption and immorality perceived as

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[10]Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955), 294.

threatening the peace, power, and prosperity of the rural way of life.

The combination of Populist, Progressive, and rural vs. urban fervor paved the way for the emergence of the new radical populists of the 1920s and 1930s. "Such men," suggested historian Caroline Bird, "were the salt of the earth, standing with pitchfork in front of their farm, their faces set against progress, Jews, foreigners, Eastern Bankers, new fangled nonsense, and of course sin."[11] Echoing the career of his contemporary, Kansas politician, goat gland grafter, and radio station owner Dr. John R. Brinkley, Baker achieved prosperity and notoriety by feasting on the economic frustration and bruised psyche of middle America. Like a wolf in sheep's clothing, Baker wrapped himself in the mantle of rural populism and fleeced Iowa farmers for profit and fame.

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[11]Caroline Bird, The Invisible Scar (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966) 203.

CHAPTER 2

A RIPE ENVIRONMENT FOR POPULIST DEMAGOGUERY

For years historians have investigated the motivation behind radicalism and reform. Writing in the first two decades of the 20th century, Progressive historians, such as Vernon Parrington and John D. Hicks, viewed economics or class conflict as the moving force in American society. They argued that the economic disparity between the masses and the elite was a primary stimulant behind social and political reform. Outbreaks of radicalism and reform were beneficial to society because they strove to lessen the economic, political, and social inequality between classes.[12]

In contrast to Progressive works, Richard Hofstadter's The Age of Reform (1955) offered a less favorable interpretation of America's tradition of radicalism. Unlike progressive historians, Hofstadter distinguished between genuine and irrational impulses for radical reform. Hofstadter agreed that periods of serious economic depression sparked a variety of genuine reforms. However, he argued that, in times of general prosperity, such as the

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[12]See Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, vol. 3 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), 406-7; and John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 404-23.

1920s, psychological or status issues stimulated a variety of irrational pseudo-reforms. In short, Hofstadter suggested that economic impulses were genuine and beneficial, whereas status impulses were not.[13]

It is tempting to apply Hofstadter's formula to Norman Baker's radical appeal in Iowa during the mid-1920s. To the modern critic, Baker's success in peddling cancer quackery and outrageous conspiratorial rhetoric at the height of a decade of "roaring" prosperity appears irrational or illegitimate at best. However, to disregard Baker's widespread appeal as evidence of an unprovoked outburst of rural irrationality would be misleading. Baker's radical message tapped into genuine frustrations gripping Iowa farmers of the day. Both serious economic and cultural challenges had created a tinderbox ready to be lit in eastern Iowa by the mid 1920s, and Muscatine's radio personality/cancer quack was just the man to strike the match.

Baker's radical charge may have been less effective in Iowa if it had occurred at the height of the Populist Movement in the 1890s. Unlike most other midwestern states, Iowa escaped the brunt of the agricultural depression during the 1890s. While Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Kansas felt the

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[13]Hofstadter, 17-18.

sting of plummeting wheat prices, Iowa's corn and hog commodities remained relatively stable. Consequently, Iowa farmers proved more resistant to the radical Populism of the decade.[14] Although not immune to the emotion of Populist rhetoric, Iowans remained true to the Republican party at the polls. Of the two Populist presidential candidates of that decade, neither James Weaver, an Iowa native, in 1892 nor William Jennings Bryan in 1896 successfully courted Iowa's electoral votes.

At the height of Baker's popularity in the late 1920s, the placid tone of many Iowa farmers faded. Iowa's new political radicalism marked the change. Once in 1922 and again in 1926, Iowans sent the radical Smith Wildman Brookhart to the Senate. A political maverick and personal friend of Baker, Brookhart stormed Washington, demanding Congressional legislation on behalf of the farmer. The 1932 presidential election provided further indication of Iowans' frustration with the status quo. Franklin Roosevelt's victory over native son Herbert Hoover broke a seventy-six year string of Republican wins in Iowa.

Economic difficulties proved integral in stimulating Iowa's new radicalization. The so called "golden age" of

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[14]See Hermon Nixon, "The Economic Basis of the Populist Movement in Iowa," Iowa Journal of History and Politics 21 (July 1923): 373-396.

agriculture during the first two decades of the 20th century reached its zenith as the market expanded during World War I. By the 1920s the market had dried up and the boom was over. Prices dropped as costs of production increased, hinting of an approaching agricultural depression. Although Iowa farmers had proved resilient during the economic difficulties of the 1890s, this time they were not as fortunate. Plummeting prices, rising costs, and decreasing land value crippled Iowa farmers and increased their susceptibility to Baker's populist banner.

The bottom dropped out of Iowa's rural economy during the early 1920s. The collapse of the foreign market after the war had a pronounced effect on Iowa's hog industry. Pork exports fell from 24% of total production in 1919 to a minuscule 6% in 1926.[15] Corn production fared little better. In 1921 corn prices fell to the lowest yearly average in twenty years.[16] Land values felt the crunch as well. Between 1920 and 1925 alone, Iowa land depreciated by $2.5 billion. Overall, the 1920s saw Iowa farmers' gross income drop 30 to 50 percent.[17]

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[15]John Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1965), 7.

[16]Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture, 1921 (Des Moines: State of Iowa Press, 1922), 447.

[17]Kirschner, 2-3.

Rising taxes only added to the farmers' economic frustrations. As the largest property holders in the state, farmers traditionally carried the brunt of the property tax burden. Thus, as Iowa's rural population decreased during the 1920s, the tax burden for the remaining farmers increased. Between 1920 and 1926 one southern Iowa farmer saw his property taxes more than triple.[18]

The beginning of a national depression after 1929 only exacerbated the plight of Iowa farmers. The poor conditions of the early 1920s appeared pale in comparison. By the early 1930s Iowa farmers hit rock bottom. As before, overproduction continued to be a serious problem plaguing Iowa farmers. For example, in 1932 Iowa farmers produced one of the highest crop totals to date. However, due to the glutted market and low prices, the total gross income of the immense 1932 crop was one of the lowest in years. On many farms the total gross income in 1932 actually failed to equal the total taxes assessed against the land![19]

Beaten by years of hardship, many Iowa farmers plunged into debt. By 1931 indebtedness had become such a problem

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[18]Ibid., 5.

[19]Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture, 1936 (Des Moines: State of Iowa Press, 1937), 9.

that one out of every seven farmers had lost his land.[20] The economic plight of Iowa farmers in the 1920s and early 1930s was real. Although most stayed above subsistence level, for many the destruction of their livelihood loomed just around the corner.

As had Populists twenty years earlier, Iowa farmers led a charge on Washington demanding legislative aid to relieve their agricultural woes. Between 1920 and 1923 Iowa Senator L. J. Dickinson led an organization of farm state congressmen collectively known as the "farm bloc." Dickinson and his fellow colleagues served as the watchdogs of farm interests in Washington. By manipulating committee leadership, pushing legislation, and voting as a unified front, the farm bloc established a record that was "both aggressive and impressive."[21] In addition to achieving numerous legislative victories, the farm block effectively raised the consciousness of both the American public and Congress to the problems of the farmer.

Washington heard the cries of Iowans' frustration again when farmers lobbied for the McNary-Haugen bill in the late

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[20]George Mills, "Months of Unrest Explode into 'Cow War of '31," Des Moines Register, Munger Newspaper Clippings, Iowa State Historical Society, Iowa City, IA.

[21]Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West 1900-1939 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 341.

1920s. Originally presented to Congress by Iowa Representative Gilbert Haugen, the complex bill sought to stem the tide of dropping prices by implementing government-backed price supports for staple commodities. Although many farmers opposed such price fixing measures, most Iowans, including the radical farm leader Milo Reno, applauded Haugen's efforts. President Coolidge's two vetoes of McNary-Haugen bills in 1926 and 1928 intensified rural Iowans' frustrations with the eastern elite and the political status quo.

Cultural challenges pushed Iowa farmers towards the radical fringe as well. The 1920 census recorded that, for the first time in the nation's history, less than half of the population resided in rural villages or farms. Although the shift represented the culmination of a trend that had been building in America for decades, the 1920 census marked an age of transition. America had officially said goodbye to the country and hello to the city. The decade of the 1920s did not reverse the trend. Lured away by the excitement and opportunity of city life, droves of farmers traded in their overalls for the garb of urban society. America's love affair with the farm culture was dying.[22]

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[22]In 1910, 54.2 per cent of the country lived in villages under 2,500 inhabitants. By 1920 rural population had dropped to 48.6 per cent; by 1930 44 per cent. See Leuchtenburg, 225.

Not only was the majority of Americans rejecting rural residency, many repudiated rural values as well. Popular literary works of the day reflected urban America's revolt against the village culture. Renowned writer and literary critic H. L. Mencken led the attack in debunking America's sacrosanct agrarian image as myth. Throughout his scathing essay "The Husbandman," Mencken slandered midwestern farmers as unconscionably greedy, inherently lazy, and culturally backward.

Tired of the agrarian interests' disproportionate influence in Washington, Mencken made his opinion loud and clear. "Let the farmer . . . be damned forever more"[23] Mencken also denounced midwestern farmers for their misguided propensity to support prophets of deceit such as Baker. "There has never been a time, in good seasons or bad," suggested Mencken, "when the farmer's hands were not itching for more; there has never been a time when he was not ready to support any charlatan, however grotesque, who promised to get it for him."[24] Echoing Mencken's attack on rural culture were fellow writers Sinclair Lewis and Edgar Lee Masters.[25]

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[23]H. L. Mencken, Prejudices, Fourth Series (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), 46.

[24]Ibid., 47.

[25]Leuchtenburg, 225.

Just as writers were debunking the rural tradition, Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith threatened to bring the city culture directly into the White House in 1928. With his Tammany Hall background, Irish Catholic heritage, and pro-alcohol views, Smith inevitably stirred latent rural emotions and prejudices against urban society.[26] On the other hand, Smith's Republican challenger, Herbert Hoover, a modern capitalist himself, crossed over to the country vote by establishing the image of the Iowa farm boy "steeped in the traditions of rural America."[27] According to William Leuchtenburg, the ensuing campaign "reflected a deep antagonism between rural and urban America which went beyond any single issue."[28] As one Catholic Bishop explained, Smith's loss symbolized the rural repudiation "of the wet sidewalks of our cities."[29]

Although Iowa helped reject the "rum, romanism, and rebellion" of Smith's urban candidacy in 1928, the challenge of the urban capitalism and culture remained undeterred. The continuance of a rural depression in the midst of urban prosperity spurred Iowa farmers to lash out against the

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[26]"Prejudice Killed Smith in Cornbelt," New York Times, 18 November 1928, sec. 3, p. 5.

[27]Leuchtenburg, 238.

[28]Ibid., 237.

[29]Ibid., 236.

city, which was seen as the evil benefactor of agriculture's misery. The loss in rural population and the cultural criticisms of Mencken and others added additional fuel to the fire of farmer frustration. Economically devastated and culturally challenged many eastern Iowa farmers fell susceptible to the psychologically soothing message of radical populism. Baker gave many wounded farmers the populist message they longed to hear. In turn, these farmers helped make Baker a millionaire.

CHAPTER 3

RADIO POPULISM

In an age without television, fiber optics and fax machines, tools to enhance the careers of America's demagogues were limited at best. Radio in the 1920s and 1930s, more so than the printed word, offered the best medium for demagogic personalities to satisfy their cravings of power, fame, and profit. Radio allowed populist agitators, such as Norman Baker, to arouse listeners by taking their radical populist views directly into the living rooms of the American public. Captivated by the magic of radio and the excitement of the demagogic message, men, women, and children alike tuned in to the populist broadcasters, who seemed to best relate to the common peoples' problems and needs.

Simply stated, radio brought the masses and the populist demagogues together as they had never been before. The airwaves during the 1920s and 1930s were inundated with "fortunetellers, face lifters, painless dentists, tips on the horses, and a noisome collection of hate vendors, who scraped a living out of baiting the Jews and Wall Street."[30] Understandably, these early years of radio development

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[30]Gerald Carson, The Roguish World of Doctor Brinkley (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1960), 89.

witnessed a flowering of demagogic popularity throughout American society. Many of the era's most famous demagogic personalities, such as "Father" Charles Coughlin, Dr. John R. Brinkley, and Huey Long, utilized radio broadcasting to widen their base of support. As an aspiring radical demagogue himself, Baker too rushed to tap into the abundant opportunities in radio.

During the early 1920s, Baker began entertaining the idea of building and operating a radio station in Muscatine. While still in its adolescent stages of development, radio offered great financial rewards for those shrewd enough to take advantage of its advertising capabilities. Baker was nothing but shrewd. Prior to his radio interest, Baker had already reaped huge benefits from mass advertising in newspapers, magazines, and mail fliers. By the late 1910s, advertisements for his air Calliaphone, a portable organ instrument run on air pressure, grossed roughly $200,000 in a single year. Advertising again played a key role in the prosperity of Baker's Art Correspondence School. Although Baker admittedly "couldn't paint a lick," clever marketing raked in for the burgeoning Muscatine tycoon a reported $75,000 over a three years span.[31]

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[31]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 62-63.

His appetite whetted with advertising success, Baker's eyes lit up to the prospects of radio. Ready, willing, and financially able in 1924, Baker approached Muscatine's Chamber of Commerce with plans to build a radio station. In return for free utilities and taxes, Baker promised to "lift Muscatine from being a little burg lost in the Mississippi corn fields, to a city the whole world knows about."[32] Unaware of the type of notoriety Baker's radio station would eventually bring to Muscatine, the chamber consented, thus clearing the way for K-TNT.

Starting a small station on the banks of the Mississippi proved to be a difficult task. When Baker began efforts to construct his station in 1925, private magnate corporations were still in full control of the radio industry. Washington's regulatory agency, the Federal Radio Commission, was not established until 1927. Consequently, the corporate giants of communication were left to carve up the infant radio industry, with each company getting a piece of the pie.[33] The "Big Five" GE, RCA, Westinghouse, Western Electric, and At&T monopolized the radio industry by

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[32]Ibid., 72.

[33]Sean Dennis Cashman, America in the Twenties and Thirties: The Olympian Age of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 307-9.

controlling licensing for patent rights of vital radio equipment, such as transmitters and vacuum tubes.

Forced to comply with the radio pool's exuberant licensing fees, Baker's high hopes for a radio station changed to frustration and disgust. With transmitters, wiring hook-ups, transmitting tubes, and microphones all protected by magnate patent rights, Baker faced thousands of dollars in unforeseen expenses. Not one to give in easily, Baker escaped some of the costs by building his own operating equipment. He then traveled to the 1925 Radio Conference in Washington and berated the communication giants in person. Speaking before the conference audience, Baker likened the radio trust to "a giant octopus" which threatened an "end to freedom of the air."[34]

With the aid of a handful of midwestern congressmen who pleaded Baker's case in Washington, Muscatine's new station finally went into business on Thanksgiving Day 1925. Wanting a station name with recognition and flair, Baker secured call letters "K-TNT." The acronym served a dual purpose. The letters "K-TNT" suggested both the veracity of Baker's "Naked Truth" broadcasts as well as their dynamite explosiveness. K-TNT's impressive name suited its physical presence. Constructed in Spanish style architecture, the K-

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[34]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 81.

TNT station stood majestically on a high bluff, known as K-TNT hill, which overlooked Muscatine to its west and the Mississippi to its east. From the comforts of these surroundings, Baker molded his image as a rural populist stirring farmers' emotions and securing support for his ideas and business enterprises. His daily broadcasts, which could be heard in the living rooms of roughly a million households by the early 1930s, interspersed direct advertising for a booming mail order business with fiery attacks against trusts, Wall Street interests, big business, and organized medicine.[35]

Bolstered by the firepower of K-TNT, Baker played the role of the populist trustbuster in continuing his battle against the communication giants. On behalf of small radio station owners everywhere, Baker waged a public war against the monster of monopoly which tainted the radio industry. From behind the mike, Baker lashed out against the "radio trust's" monopolistic practices, which he believed constituted a direct restraint of trade and a violation of the Sherman Anti Trust Law.[36]

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[35]Hofer, 633, citing "Statement of Facts, Grounds, for decision and order of the Commission on the License Renewal of K-TNT," June 1931, Federal Radio Commission, Record Group 173, Docket 967, National Archives, Washington D.C.

[36]Hofer, 571, citing Transcript of Norman Baker's radio address over K-TNT, 12 December 1925, Federal Radio Commission, Record Group 173, Docket 967, National Archives.

Revitalizing anti-trust emotions of years gone by, Baker suggested that monopolistic corruption happened in "cycles." The "electrical crowd" currently dominating the business sector was simply carrying on the tradition of the oil interest's monopoly years before. Time and again, Baker recounted his trials and tribulations in building K-TNT and pleaded that listeners write their congressmen to put an end to the radio industry's corrupt practices.[37]

Baker's trust busting efforts echoed sentiments within Congress and among the public at large. A 1927 article in The Nation supported many of Baker's claims and called for corrective measures, including legislation to break up the radio trust's "monopoly on the manufacture and sale of radio equipment."[38] Congress also recognized the need for regulation within the radio industry. After extensive debate in January 1927, Congress enacted the Radio Act later that year. The bill effectively broke up the radio combine and corrected many of Baker's concerns. The federal government's cleanup of the radio industry added credence to Baker's charges and strengthened his image as a genuine populist reformer.

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[37]Ibid.

[38]Mauritz A. Hallgren, "The Patriotic Radio Trust," The Nation 125 (20 July 1927): 55.

Thanks to the aid of a handful of midwestern congressmen, Baker and K-TNT carried a measure of political clout in Washington. In return for K-TNT's radio support, Iowa senator Smith Brookhart faithfully defended Baker and his "trust busting" endeavors in Washington. When in 1927 a Sioux City radio station applied for K-TNT's frequency on the grounds of "public service merit," Brookhart and Senators Nye of North Dakota and MacMasters of South Dakota approached the FRC in Baker's defense. Pleading before the committee Brookhart contended, "Baker voices the Iowa idea in politics . . . His programs are popular in the farming region and no good reason has been given by station KSCJ why they (KTNT) should be discontinued."[39] Evidently swayed by Baker's influential friends, the FRC decided in favor of K-TNT and its frequency remained secure.

Baker's crusade for freedom of the airwaves also catered to rural frustrations with urban society. After 1927 he denounced Federal Radio Commission (FRC) guidelines which allowed urban chain stations extra wattage power and frequency space. Such practices, he argued, drowned out smaller and more rural stations like K-TNT, forcing many out of business. In one broadcast, Baker announced that radio officials had ridiculed prospects of a station in "the wilds

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[39]New York Times, 2 November 1927, p. 23.

of Iowa." But in the tradition of the rural underdog, Baker ignored his urban critics and pronounced his determination to "make K-TNT the most popular station in the United States."[40] After all, Baker noted, "the small town [radio] programs were far superior to the large city program[s]." K-TNT fan mail reflected that the rural public was simply tired of the "monotonous" and "highbrow" attitude of the city stations.[41]

Baker's charismatic radio style contributed to the effectiveness of his populist message. Although Baker's formal education ended as a sophomore in high school, years as a vaudeville magician and mind reader honed speechmaking and performance skills beneficial to a radio career. According to former K-TNT announcer Adam Reinemund in a 1974 interview, Baker was a "dynamic and powerful speaker" in the model of Billy Graham.[42] Quick to learn the tricks of the trade, Baker mastered the art of good timing. Catering to his predominantly rural audience, Baker scheduled his daily talks over the dinner hour when farmers would be in from the fields. Starting at 6:00 p.m. Reinemund took to the mike

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[40]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 82.

[41]Hofer, 573, citing Transcript of Baker over K-TNT, 12 December 1925.

[42]Adam Reinemund, Interview by Stanley Yates, 7 December 1971, Norman Baker Collection, Musser Art Museum, Muscatine, IA.

and set the stage for Baker's talk. "I was a past master of building the great Norman Baker," said Reinemund. He urged listeners to remember all Baker was doing for them. "He's protecting you" and "saving you money." "I'd build him up," recalled Reinemund, "and at the proper moment, Norman would come in: 'Good evening my friends.' And then we'd go."[43]

Baker went to great lengths to encourage the idea that K-TNT championed farm interests. Baker officially dedicated his station to the "farmer, common laborer, and the general public."[44] He also engaged in contracts with numerous farm organizations, including the Iowa Farmers' Union, which endorsed K-TNT as their official station in return for advertisements and air time.[45] Time and again Baker reminded rural listeners that, unlike newspapers and competing stations, K-TNT promised to provide an uncensored medium for farm interests to say their piece.

By the late 1920s Baker's notoriety as a radical reformer and rural spokesman made K-TNT one of the most listened to radio stations in the Midwest. An increase in power from 500 watts in 1925 to 5,000 watts by 1927 widened K-TNT's recognition considerably. Baker boasted that in

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[43]Ibid.

[44]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 369.

[45]Reinemund Interview.

1927 alone K-TNT received roughly 150,000 fan letters. In January of 1928 it reportedly took three women two full days to read and sort one day of mail.[46]

More tangible evidence of the strength of Baker's appeal could be seen in the thousands of area listeners, who converged to picnic on K-TNT grounds during summer Sundays and holidays. Normal crowds of 5,000 to 10,000 ballooned to a reported 50,000 one Sunday following Baker's sensational open air demonstration.[47] "It was terrific," remembered Reinemund, "On a Sunday you couldn't fight your way through town--the crowds were so tremendous."[48] People swarmed from miles around to witness the Baker experience in person and soak in the carnival like atmosphere on K-TNT hill. When the crowds arrived Baker moved K-TNT's broadcasting equipment outside so he could interact with the people. When Baker was not talking, K-TNT's troop of comedians and musicians performed live on stage to the enjoyment of the audience and the listeners back home.

Although most visitors came from eastern Iowa, numerous K-TNT listeners from surrounding states attended the radio jubilee as well. Attesting to K-TNT's popularity "with the

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[46]Hofer, 172.

[47]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 89.

[48]Reinemund Interview.

farmers of the Middle West," Iowa City Republican leader Jerry Plum informed presidential candidate Herbert Hoover's staff member Charles Rawson in June 1928 that he had witnessed nine states represented at one of Baker's picnics.[49]

In return for their support, Baker allowed his political cronies to take advantage of the large K-TNT gatherings. Senator Brookhart frequently addressed the large Sunday crowds in an effort to drum up political support. In May 1930 Iowa Governor John Hammill joined the festivities on K-TNT hill. The opportunity to speak directly to over 30,000 Iowa voters proved simply too attractive to pass up.[50]

The possible economic windfall afforded by the large K-TNT crowds did not catch Baker off guard. Always an economic opportunist, Baker accommodated his visitors with a K-TNT chain store providing retail goods and souvenirs, a restaurant offering refreshments, and an oil station selling the cheapest gas in town. According to Reinemund, such

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[49]Jerry L. Plum to Charles A Rawlson, 19 June 1928, Secretary of Commerce Papers, Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

[50]Hofer, 286.

enterprises netted Baker $35,000 on an average summer Sunday.[51]

The continued support of thousands of visitors to the station throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s belied the fact that Baker and K-TNT were consistent topics of controversy. "Learn to love the constructive Radical," instructed Baker over K-TNT in 1925. However, as time passed, many began to question the constructive nature of Baker's radical tendencies. His daily broadcasts spewed brash language and personal invective in various directions. Frequent targets included local business competitors, unsympathetic newspapers, and all practitioners of conventional medicine.

Any person, organization, or business that crossed Baker's path proved fair game. "No one escapes his tongue," expressed one irritated listener.[52] For a time Baker even berated Muscatine's Parent Teacher Association as a communist order. Although Baker's rural appeal remained firm, such remarks sparked a flurry of letters of complaint to Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover and the FRC. Fed up with Baker's incessant tirades, one Muscatine resident

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[51]Reinemund Interview.

[52]Hofer, 141, citing Mrs. I. H. Schermer to Herbert Hoover, 28 February 1927, Secretary of Commerce Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.

pleaded to Hoover for "some kind of relief from our present affliction."[53]

Criticisms of K-TNT increased with the opening of Baker's cancer hospital in 1929. Baker's use of K-TNT to shamelessly promote his cancer curing claims raised the ire of state and national medical organizations. In April 1930 Dr. Morris Fishbein, editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association criticized the lack of FRC action against Baker and John R. Brinkley's radio stations,

> The Federal Radio Commission must be depended on by people in other states to spare them the possibility of hearing the obscene mouthings and pernicious promotions that are broadcast by the stations that these quacks dominate. If these authoritative bodies do not function for the good of the people, our government must find some system that will.[54]

Spurred by such comments the FRC began closing in on Baker and K-TNT.

After months of monitoring Baker's unorthodox broadcasting, the FRC felt it had sufficient grounds to deny K-TNT's forthcoming application for licensing renewal in the spring of 1931. Summing up his case against K-TNT, Elias Yost, chief examiner for the FRC, concluded, "Since the home is the principal listening post in the broad field of radio

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[53]Hofer, 129, citing Mrs. A. L. Branson to Herbert Hoover, 15 December 1926, Secretary of Commerce Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.

[54]"The Brinkley and Baker Quackeries," Journal of American Medical Association 94 (19 April 1930): 1242.

reception, nothing which tends to vulgarity, immorality, or indecency has any place in radio communications."[55] However, due to the excessive number of renewal cases before the commission K-TNT was allowed a thirty day extension pending FRC action.

Despite Baker's numerous appeals, in late spring of 1931 K-TNT's time ran out. On May 13 the FRC's final hearing refused K-TNT's license renewal on the grounds that the,

> . . . licensee of the station had utilized the same to make bitter attacks upon various individuals, companies, and associations with whom he had personal difference; that the station programs were composed largely of these attacks and direct selling and price quoting of licensee's merchandise as well as the exploitation of the medical theories and practices of licensee and his cancer hospital. The principal issue involved is that of the public interest, convenience, and necessity in view of the character of the station's operation.[56]

Not giving up, Baker petitioned the decision and received a temporary stay order. However, on June 12th the stay order was dissolved, forcing Baker and K-TNT off the air.

Before signing off Baker asked his faithful listeners to gather friends and relatives together for a farewell K-TNT address. Drawing from his populist repertoire, Baker recounted his longstanding battle against the radio and

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[55]Muscatine Journal (Muscatine, IA), 6 March 1931.

[56]Wolfe, 398.

medical conspiracies. "All that we have fought," Baker stressed,

> has been monopolization and trust, capitalistic groups and Wall Street, and unfair organizations they have organized with only one thing in mind, and that one thing is to grab the almighty dollar from the American people by compulsion or otherwise.[57]

Calling attention to his personal sacrifice to his rural listeners, Baker doubted that the public would ever again find an individual willing to "spend seven hard years working" on their behalf "let alone, [spend] one million dollars in the attempt to succeed."[58] Baker announced that the time had come for his listeners to reciprocate such efforts by writing their congressmen and continuing their subscription to Baker's latest media endeavor newspaper, the Midwest Free Press.

Irrevocably damaged by the closing of K-TNT, Baker never realized the popularity he found behind the mike. Although down, Baker was by no means out. He found alternative avenues to express his populist message and keep his cancer practice alive. "These are my parting words to you over K-TNT" ended Baker "but the fight is not over."[59]

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[57]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 369.

[58]Ibid., 370.

[59]Ibid., 383.

True to his word, Baker continued as a populist force in eastern Iowa.

From its inception in 1925 to its termination in 1931, K-TNT provided the necessary medium for Baker to utilize his radical populism as a tool to further his varied business interests. Baker's radio populism provided area farmers the appealing mix of rural values and modern technology.

Rural Iowans of the 1920s did not desire to return to the age of the yeoman farmer of the early 19th century. As had the rest of society, Iowa farmers joined the modern age and embraced technological achievements including automobiles, tractors, and the telephone. Radio was new and exciting. And, like everyone else, Iowa farmers acquired receivers and tuned in.

The fact that K-TNT was built in "the wilds of Iowa" encouraged farmers' support of Baker and his station. Through Baker and his modern technological mouthpiece, Iowa farmers could now lash back against Mencken, Wall Street, and big business which had seemingly placed rural culture and economy under siege. Albeit often vulgar, illogical, and unfounded, Baker's K-TNT broadcasts reassured damaged rural psyches. In return, eastern Iowa farmers made Baker a wealthy man.

CHAPTER 4

CANCER QUACKERY POPULISM

Well before K-TNT went off the air in 1931, Baker's crusade against organized medicine had become the center piece of his populist persona. Although K-TNT catapulted Baker to center stage in the rural Midwest, his cancer hospital attracted new levels of fame and controversy. Baker felt comfortable in the sensationalism of cancer quackery. The thrill of shocking crowds, challenging the status quo, and making money stroked his insatiable ego. In return, Baker utilized conspiratorial, anti-semitic, and anti-intellectual rhetoric to stroke the bruised psyche of many rural eastern Iowans. Feeding off each other, Baker's sensational attacks against organized medicine heated up as rural frustrations worsened.

Although undoubtedly extreme, Baker's defiance of organized medical thinking was not altogether outrageous for the day. The so called "golden age of quackery" at the turn of the 20th century had long since passed by the mid 1920s.[60] Improved medical education, patent medicine restrictions, and clean food and drug legislation stemmed

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[60]Stewart H. Holbrook, The Golden Age of Quackery, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1959), 3-13.

the rising tide of quackery on the American scene.[61] Despite such progress, the memories of back-country healers and their traveling medicine shows did not die easily in the rural Midwest. Largely isolated from the knowledge of medical education and the reaches of medical regulation, many rural Americans continued to believe in quackery and pseudo-medicines which were roundly rejected in the modern urban world. In many areas of the rural Midwest the old adage "when sickness comes judgement flies out of the window" continued to hold true.[62]

Ironically, the technological achievement of radio developed during the first decades of the twentieth century, contributed to a rebirth of quackery in the 1920s and 1930s. Instead of serving as an educational mouthpiece, ending rural America's medical ignorance, radio offered a medium for enterprising charlatans to carry their quackery to new heights. Uncensored and largely unregulated, the new radio quacks freely peddled their various wonder drugs directly into the living rooms of thousands of American households. The prospects for reeling in new suckers had never been so good. The modern age of quackery was born.

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[61]James G. Burrow, AMA Voice of American Medicine, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), 107-126.

[62]Carson, 7.

Baker was by no means the first to exploit the opportunities of radio quackery. As he would repeatedly throughout his career, Baker's medical exploits followed the lead of Dr. John R. Brinkley of Milford, Kansas. Beginning in 1923 Brinkley combined old time religion with advertisements of his sexual rejuvenating goat gland operation over radio station KFKB (Brinkley's acronym for "Kansas Folks Know Best.") Radio mail order medicine sales and advertisements for his goat grafting operation helped make Brinkley a millionaire during the 1920s and 1930s. More than anyone else, "it was Brinkley who demonstrated that radio had more pulling power than even the experts had imagined," wrote the quack doctor's biographer Gerald Carson.[63]

Although it is difficult to gauge Brinkley's direct influence on Baker's radio quackery, their relationship cannot be overlooked. By 1929 Brinkley's notoriety as the Midwest's most famous radio doctor could not have escaped Baker's inquisitive attention. Furthermore, evidence suggests that Baker and Brinkley were in correspondence early in Baker's career.[64] Although the two were never close friends, Baker made numerous references to Brinkley

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[63]Ibid., 93.

[64]Hofer, 376.

throughout his cancer quackery career. Baker recognized that Brinkley and he were trailblazers of the same mold. Understandably, K-TNT, TNT, and the Midwest Free Press frequently highlighted Brinkley's troubles with the FRC and the AMA as testimony of a radio and medical conspiracy.

Following Brinkley's lead, Baker jumped into the radio quackery game. As early as 1927, Baker began offering his unique brand of unconventional medicine and home remedies over K-TNT. For treating lockjaw Baker prescribed "heat[ing] common turpentine and put it on the sore, that's all there is to it."[65] "The way to cure appendicitis," Baker suggested in another broadcast, "is with a hot onion poultice. Rub the abdomen downward; if the appendix is kinked, it will straighten out."[66]

The danger of aluminum poisoning was a frequent topic on Baker's health program. He warned K-TNT listeners to avoid use of aluminum utensils, canned products, and water pipes. "Throw all aluminum ware out of the kitchen," Baker urged over K-TNT one night, "I don't care what you paid for

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[65]Wolfe, 396.

[66]"Thousands Cured by Cancer Promise," Quad-City Times (Davenport-Betendorff, IA) 17 April 1977, Baker Newspaper Clippings, Musser Art Museum, Muscatine, IA.

it, throw it away."[67] Baker advertised his fight against aluminum ware as another battle against the money trusts. He argued that President Coolidge's Secretary of Treasury Andrew Mellon had a financial interest in ensuring government ambivalence towards curbing aluminum manufacturing. Baker even accused Mellon of threatening income tax audits on his many enterprises in retaliation for K-TNT's outspoken criticism of aluminum ware.[68]

In the summer of 1929 Baker and the editing staff of TNT searched for a sensational story that would boost magazine sales.[69] The result was a story investigating the cancer curing claims of the Charles Ozias Cancer Clinic of Kansas City, Missouri. TNT selected five cancer patients to test the Ozias treatment. After reportedly witnessing miraculous results in the progress of the test patients, TNT headlined the story "Cancer is Conquered."[70] Not only did Baker attest to the veracity of the sensational claim, he advertised the opening of his own cancer hospital, which utilized a perfected form of Ozias injection method for

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[67]Hofer, 638, citing Federal Radio Commission, "Statement of Facts, Grounds for Decision on Reapplication of Norman Baker (Station KTNT)," June 1931.

[68]Winston, 125.

[69]Ibid., 128.

[70]"Cancer is Conquered," TNT: Know the Naked Truth 1 (December 1929) cover.

internal cancer and the Harry Hoxey powder treatment for external cancer cases.[71]

On November 27, 1929, the Baker Institute began operation in a renovated mansion in downtown Muscatine. Although known for its "secret and special exclusive" cancer curing formulas, the Institute welcomed sufferers of a variety of other illnesses, from constipation to hemorrhoids. The hospital provided roughly ninety-five beds and a staff of chiropractors and diploma mill M.D.s, dubiously advertised as "masters of their chosen profession."[72]

With the aid of mass advertising through K-TNT, TNT, and the addition of a daily newspaper the Midwest Free Press, Baker's cancer practice boomed. Following two open air demonstrations in May 1930, the Baker Institute overflowed with new patients, some from Canada, who crowded the steps each morning clinging to the hope of Baker's promises. Much to patients' dismay, $10 introductory

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[71]Like Baker, Harry Hoxey was a notorious cancer quack with operations in Illinois, New Jersey, West Virginia, and Texas until he landed in jail in 1941. In late 1929 Hoxey briefly joined Baker's hospital staff as one of its leading cancer specialists. Hoxey's secret cure, an escharotic powder with arsenic as its base, became the staple treatment for external cancer sufferers at the Baker Institute.

[72]Baker Institute "Information and Data" flier, 6 January 1931, Norman Baker Collection, Archives and Historical Health Fraud Collection, American Medical Association, Chicago.

examinations invariably revealed the worst case diagnoses--cancer. With treatment charges as high as $1000 per patient, the Institute's income soared in excess of $75,000 for the single month of June 1930.[73]

As the Institute's clientele increased, concerned citizens, unsatisfied patients, and health officials began a letter campaign alerting the American Medical Association of Baker's operation. Beginning in the spring of 1930, the AMA responded. Following their own investigation, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) and the AMA's popular health magazine Hygeia published a series of articles exposing Baker's "lies, viciousness, and quackery."[74]

In one article, the AMA's Bureau of Investigation reported of one Baker patient whose intelligence "saved himself considerable suffering and disfigurement."[75] An Iowa farmer worried over a lesion on his chin had traveled to the Baker hospital to check if he had cancer. As was usually the case, Baker's doctors informed the farmer that he indeed had cancer and that treatment would cost $250 plus

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[73]Muscatine Journal, 10 February 1932.

[74]"Broadcasting Bunk," Journal of the American Medical Association 94 (12 April 1930): 1147.

[75]"A Baker Institute 'Diagnosis': A Case of Alleged Cancer That Did Not Complete the Treatment," Journal of the American Association 95 (26 July 1930): 285.

$60 a week for the necessary four to six weeks of hospital care. After a week of treatment, the farmer sought a second opinion. He left Muscatine and checked in at the College of Medicine at the University of Iowa. There, staff dermatologists quickly diagnosed that the farmer's lesion was not cancer, but actually ringworm of the beard, a common ailment frequently known as Barber's Itch. After a charge of $49 and twelve days of treatment, the farmer was released.[76]

The AMA revealed further evidence exposing Baker's quackery. Its investigations discovered that many former Institute patients reportedly cured were actually still sick or in some cases dead. In one damning article the JAMA revealed that all five of Baker's original test patients were dead, although K-TNT and TNT continued to advertise these cases as "success stories."[77] The JAMA revealed that, in another case, Baker had pronounced a patient successfully cured, when the man actually left the Institute without improvement. Listening to K-TNT while at home on his deathbed, Mr. McL--- of Saskatchewan, Canada, heard Baker

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[76]Ibid.

[77]"Norman Baker vs. The American Medical Association," Journal of the American Medical Association 98 (19 March 1932): 1012-1014.

fabricate that Mrs. McL--- had written, assuring that her husband "was getting along fine."[78]

Instead of folding against such criticism, Baker fought back waving the bloody shirt of rural populism. Refuting charges of quackery, Baker portrayed himself as a heroic crusader for humanity. As he had in defense of K-TNT, Baker utilized anti-trust sentiment to defend his cancer practice. Why was the AMA intent on suppressing a cancer cure? To Baker the answer was obvious---money. He figured that organized medicine realized greater financial rewards in treatments rather than cures. Baker estimated that AMA doctors profited $180,000 annually from cancer sufferers in charges for needless operations, radium treatments and x-rays. Consequently, physicians' negative reaction towards Baker's cure was understandable since the loss of this money would "flatten out their purses considerably."[79] Do not forget "M.D. stands for 'More Dough,'" Baker frequently reminded his audience.[80]

From its headquarters in downtown Chicago, the AMA stood at the center point of what Baker claimed was a

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[78]Ibid., 1014.

[79]Norman Baker, "Norman Baker's Page," TNT: Know the Naked Truth 2 (June 1930): 5.

[80]Hofer, 635, citing Federal Radio Commission, "Statement of Facts," June 1931.

powerful and influential "medical trust." Like an octopus, the AMA stretched its tentacles dominating health matters in every state, county, and town.[81] Each agency of organized medicine played a role in the vast conspiracy against the masses. The AMA's Council of Education brainwashed children into looking upon every orthodox doctor "as a god."[82] In return for a pay-off the Pure Food and Drug Association assured the AMA's stamp of approval for every food product. The Council of Health Information spread false propaganda advocating the AMA's "useless" treatment and drugs. Baker even accused school nurses of collusion for needlessly frightening children and parents into accepting various dangerous vaccinations.

Writing in 1932, Baker's hired biographer Alvin Winston outlined the corrupt relationship between the AMA and politics. Continuing Baker's sinister portrayal of organized medicine, Winston suggested that the AMA's council of politics intimidated timid politicians "to jump at the crack of its whip" and become obedient to their mandate."[83] In cementing their influence, Winston claimed that the AMA's bribery of government officials assured favorable health

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[81]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 197.

[82]Ibid., 226.

[83]Ibid., 230.

legislation and arranged millions of dollars in appropriations for worthless medical research.

A series of TNT articles provided further ammunition to the government-AMA conspiracy claim. Playing on rural fears of big-government, one article, entitled "The Medical Trust Exposed," charged that the rampant bureaucratization of government allowed for the creation of various associations, bureaus, and commissions "administered strictly on the principles of graft."[84] Unchecked by central control, these agencies reportedly preyed on successful business through citations and pay offs. While no business was safe under such a system, Baker argued that the sting of bureaucratic graft hit the medical profession the hardest. TNT fingered the FRC as a key player in the federal government's graft in the health field. The FRC sanctioned all radio stations, which broadcast health talks without the AMA's approval. Such policy, TNT pointed out, forced stations such as K-TNT which wanted to retain their licenses, to make pay offs of $5000 to $25,000. In this way the FRC's coffers stayed full and the AMA's domination of health information remained complete.[85]

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[84]"The Medical Trust Exposed: What's Behind Attempt to Destroy KTNT?---Monopolies and Bureaus, Collusion and Graft," TNT: The Naked Truth 2 (November 1930): 25.

[85]Ibid.

Although extreme, Baker's attacks against the authority of the AMA echoed concerns already prevalent among many Americans. As early as 1910 the National League of Medical Freedom (NLMF), made up of quacks, non-AMA physicians, and food and drug industry executives, began a concerted effort to discourage the establishment of a national department of health and to discredit the medical authority of the AMA. Many of the attacks centered on then JAMA editor Dr. George H. Simmons. In an effort to sway public opinion against Simmons and the AMA, the NLMF hired detectives to search out potentially scandalous information about Simmon's past. The sensational findings were combined with bitter and vicious attacks against the AMA and published widely in newspapers and magazines across the country.[86] Baker's biography and the magazine TNT actually reprinted the NLMF's claims and findings in the early 1930s.[87]

Of even more importance to the public's acceptance of Baker's AMA-bashing was the 1929 publication of John Spivak's stinging expose of the AMA entitled The Medical Trust Unmasked. Spivak's work portrayed the AMA as a

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[86]Morris Fishbein, A History of the American Medical Association 1847 to 1947 (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1969), 260-1.

[87]See "The Medical Trust Exposed," TNT: The Naked Truth 2 (June 1930): 12-16; and Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 192-207.

sinister organization, devoid of any degree of moral scruples and bent on total domination of the medical field.[88] Not only did Spivak popularize criticism against the AMA, he also provided further backing for Baker's defense of his cancer practice. Material presented over K-TNT and in TNT attacking the AMA's code of ethics, malpractice insurance coverage, and cost splitting practices suggested Baker was well versed in the arguments presented in Spivak's work.

After roundly vilifying the all encompassing reach of the medical conspiracy, Baker shrewdly cast himself in the role of the common folks martyr. K-TNT speeches, TNT editorials, and Midwest Free Press articles frequently made note of Baker's numerous personal sacrifices in his fight for humanity. Stories stressed the incredible time, money, and energy Baker committed to the battle. Not only did Baker forfeit a settled life style battling the medical octopus, reminded TNT writers, he also placed his own life at risk. Baker was quick to point out that forces of corruption and deceit were always a threat to silence his humanitarian crusade through violent means. In a much ballyhooed incident in April 1930, Baker reportedly braved a

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[88]John L. Spivak, The Medical Trust Unmasked (New York: Louis S. Siegfried, 1929).

gunfight with two thugs bent on sabotaging K-TNT with dynamite.[89]

One of Baker's most celebrated episodes of martyrdom occurred in 1937 when he served a day in the Muscatine jail for practicing medicine without a license. Quick to harness the publicity of the event, Baker arranged a stoic photo of himself behind bars. The jail house picture, accompanied with the caption "I served one day for you," made its way into Baker's numerous pamphlets and publications. In one pamphlet Baker explained that his conviction was "just another step in my continuous seven years of persecution" for fighting the medical trust. "This fight is for you!" reminded Baker.[90]

Much of Baker's attack on the medical trust played to rural insecurities towards the urban educated elite. Why couldn't a layman like Norman Baker discover a cure for cancer, asked one believer? After all, he continued, even with "years of medical education," M.D.s "still didn't know

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[89]The AMA belittled the incident sarcastically reporting that "the police were unable to find tangible clues . . . or any witnesses . . . which would corroborate this lurid incident." See "The Baker Ballyhoo: More Melodrama--The Plot Thickens," Journal of the American Medical Association 94 (26 April 1930): 1340-41.

[90]The Baker Hospital, Where Sick Folks Get Well (Eureka Springs, AK: Norman Baker Inc., 1938), 2.

a positive cure for the common ordinary cold."[91] "That is my aim," Baker professed one night over K-TNT, "to bring humanity down to a point where you will not trust your life, body, and soul to some man just because he has studied for four years in a university . . . "[92]

Consistent with the mold of populist agitator, Baker's verbal assaults against the AMA contained an element of anti-semitism.[93] Baker adopted anti-semitic rhetoric in slandering Dr. Morris Fishbein, a leading critic of the Baker Institute. In one K-TNT broadcast Baker smeared Fishbein as "the Jewish dominator of the medical trust of America."[94] A week later Baker insinuated that Fishbein's animosity towards the cancer cure resulted from his "Jewish

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[91]L. A. Loos to Walter Newton, 20 January 1932, Walter Newton Collection, Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

[92]Hofer, 292, citing Transcript of Norman Baker over K-TNT, 23 July 1930, Federal Radio Commission, Record Group 173, Docket 967, Washington, D.C.

[93]Ironically, Baker attributed a Jewish woman with saving his life as a young man and opening his eyes to the ignorance of established medicine. The woman reportedly nursed young Norman back from a life threatening fever by serving her patient a bowl of ice cream. Baker's biographer summarized the incident, "It wasn't the medical profession that saved him, this time: it was the Jewish landlady's dish of ice cream." See Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 39.

[94]Transcript of Baker over K-TNT, 15 March 1930, Norman Baker Collection, Archives and Historical Health Fraud Collections, American Medical Association Archives, Chicago.

tendency [to] get mad at . . . anything they can't get a dime out of."[95]

Dr. Fishbein was only one of many health and government officials whose criticisms elicited a tirade of slanderous innuendo and blistering language from the mouth of Baker. State health and government officials who crossed Baker's path received particular condemnation. From his radio pulpit K-TNT, Baker slandered Iowa's Director of Health Investigation Herman Carlson as a philanderer, "lower than a rattle snake" and "worse than a yellow dog."[96] After State Attorney General Milton Fletcher refused an invitation to investigate the cancer hospital, Baker smeared the state's highest lawman as "one of the biggest cowards that ever drew breath in the state of Iowa."[97]

Baker's ridicule and condemnation of preventive medicine also played an important role in his effort to break the public's trust in organized medical authority. By the early decades of the 20th century, most Iowa farmers recognized vaccinations as a necessary step in protecting

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[95]Transcript of Baker over K-TNT, 22 March 1930, American Medical Association Archives, Chicago.

[96]Hofer, 85, citing Transcript of Baker over K-TNT, 6 May 1930, Record Group 273, Docket 967, Washington, D.C.

[97]Hofer, 630, citing Federal Radio Commission, "Statement of Facts," June 1931.

livestock from various diseases.[98] Similarly, widespread use of preventive medicine in public schools and urban occupations quickly familiarized non-farming families with the vaccination process as well.

Despite the growing acceptance of preventive medicine, many rural Iowans remained wary. Understandably, isolated farmers, who already harbored prejudices against industrial technology, questioned the viability of new and often imperfect medical advances. Those who trusted Baker's words found even more reason for skepticism. Invoking horrific images of pedophiliac physicians, Baker asked K-TNT listeners why doctors vaccinated young children in the leg rather than the arm. "Is it because they like to feel the legs of these innocent little girls?" suggested Baker. "Is it not a fact," he continued, "that many of these men use their profession as an excuse to fondle and gaze upon the nude parts of innocent children."[99]

In 1932 Baker's public fight against organized medical authority reached its climax. Following the JAMA's stinging exposes of the Baker's Cancer Institute, Baker filed a $500,000 libel suit against the AMA for damages to his

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[98]Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture, 1929 (Des Moines: State Press of Iowa, 1930), 131-152.

[99]Hofer, 230, citing Sworn affidavit of I. A. Howe, 2 August 1930, Federal Radio Commission, Record Group 173, Docket 967, Washington, D.C.

reputation and business. The AMA's campaign against Baker had cut deeply into the Institute's financial status. Following the AMA articles the Institute's revenue dropped from its height of $75,232 in the month of June to only $7,008 in January 1932.[100] In early March 1932 Baker had his day in court in Davenport, Iowa. The trial, which actually lasted a full month, attracted both local and national publicity. As the colorful story of the trial unfolded, critics, believers, and curiosity seekers followed along in the newspapers. Public interest in the trial intensified when Baker was found to be carrying a concealed .38 automatic pistol during the courtroom proceedings.

The trial proved disastrous for Baker. His usual tactics of emotional propaganda, general fallacies, and sensational claims which had proved successful over K-TNT and in TNT were not acceptable in the courtroom. Utilizing both investigative findings and a series of former patient and employee testimony, AMA lawyers presented damning evidence of Baker's quackery. In addition to charges already established, the AMA brought out evidence that Baker's secret injection formula was nothing more than a combination of clover, corn silk, watermelon seed, and

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[100]"Norman Baker vs. the American Medical Association," Journal of the American Medical Association, 98 (19 March 1932): 1012.

water.[101] Furthermore, expert testimony denounced Baker's famous "skull removal" demonstration of May 1930 as a hoax. AMA doctors contended that the patient never had cancer, as Baker professed, but suffered instead from osteomyelitis, an inflammation of the outer skull. "What the gaping crowd saw at the 'demonstration' was not the man's brain," explained the JAMA, "but the medullary portion" of the man's skull.[102]

Upon cross examination AMA lawyers exposed the medical ignorance of Baker's alleged "cancer experts." In the course of supporting Baker's secret treatments, two of the four experts offered particularly outrageous conclusions regarding the cause of cancer. E. M. Perdue, M.D., of Kansas City, Missouri, testified that cancer cells differed from normal cells in that they contained more water. Consequently, tumors could be cured by simply "deaquafying" the cancerous tissue. Another Baker expert J. W. Seip, M.D. of Erie, Pennsylvania, suggested that cancer resulted from eating white bread instead of bran. Remember "the whiter the bread the sooner you are dead" offered Seip.[103]

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[101]Deposition of Maude Randall, Norman Baker v. the American Medical Association, American Medical Association, Norman Baker Collection, Archives and Health Fraud Collection, Chicago.

[102]"Norman Baker vs. The American Medical Association," Journal of the American Medical Association, 98 (19 March 1932): 1014.

[103]Ibid., 115-16.

In the end, the evidence exposing Baker's quackery was overwhelming. During final arguments the AMA's chief counsel Mr. Dutcher declared, "We called Baker a quack and we are not here to apologize for it."[104] The jury, made up primarily of local farmers, agreed that an apology was not in order. After a few hours of deliberation they returned a verdict in favor of the AMA. The accusation that Baker was a quack had held up in court.

The immediate impact of the courtroom loss proved costly to the reputation and financial success of the Institute. Battered but not beaten, Baker did not skip a beat in turning his loss into an advantage by incorporating it into his populist program. Once again Baker assumed the role of the common folks' martyr, persecuted by the hands of the medical trust conspiracy. Baker charged that the medical octopus had wielded its influence in obtaining a biased judge and bribing the jury.[105] The AMA had too much at stake to play fairly, wrote Winston:

> Baker's victory . . . would have established that the American Medical Association and its membership were the quacks and fakers; operations, X-ray treatments, radium treatments for cancer, with their enormous doctor's fees, would have passed into oblivion--as they must, soon enough; Baker's cure would have become the standard, to the saving of millions of dollars of the money of patients, and endless agonies and human lives

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[104]Ibid., 116.

[105]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 407-8.

> now callously sacrificed upon the alter of medical greed. With reason the medical octopus stood ready to spend an unlimited sum, to prevent these things from happening.[106]

The battle had been costly, but Baker's populist fight carried on.

As he had with K-TNT, Baker proved a master in blending his cancer quackery with his populist image. By playing on fears of a conspiracy of trusts, intellectuals and Jews, Baker garnered a measure of support for his "humanitarian" efforts. He was a maverick willing to do what many eastern Iowa farmers could not--look government, organized medicine, and the urban elite straight in the eye and say "go to hell."[107] Genuine or not, many eastern Iowans admired Baker's style. Thousands continued to believe in the medical theatrics of their rebel hero. Cancer quackery populism served Baker well.

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[106]Ibid., 409.

[107]Smith, 16.

CHAPTER 5

THE PERFECT POPULIST DRAMA: THE CEDAR COUNTY COW WAR OF 1931

During the summer of 1931, Baker's unconventional medical views found a receptive audience in a contingent of farmers in Cedar County Iowa. When state veterinarians attempted to enforce a state-wide law of mandatory bovine tuberculosis testing, they stirred up more than the cattle. In Cedar County, which bordered Muscatine County to the North, farmers warmed to Baker's populist rhetoric and took up pitchforks, 2 X 4's, and rubber hoses in protest against perceived injustice and oppression. The conflict, which culminated with the mobilization of the state militia in late September, became known as the Cedar County Cow War.

Most historians correctly placed the Cow War uprising within the context of the rash of Iowa farmer revolts during the Depression. No doubt the rebellious spirit arousing Iowa farmers in the Cow War, the Sioux City Milk Strike of 1932, and the Farmers' Holiday movement of 1932-33 were related responses to the poor economic conditions of the day. However, such thinking that the Cow War was "merely [another] form of expression of resentment against low prices and the depression" neglected Norman Baker's

important role in the conflict.[108] The fact that the Cedar County Cow War erupted in Baker's backyard reflected more than mere coincidence. The combination of economic tension, medical uncertainty, and perceived oppression surrounding the tuberculin testing created an issue uniquely suited for Baker's demagogic agitation. Recognizing the opportunity at hand, he rushed to offer his services as the resisting farmers' ideological leader and prophet. The Cedar County Cow War set the stage for the unraveling of Baker's perfect populist drama.

There is no doubt that the economic depression overwhelming Iowa farmers created a tinderbox susceptible to the sparks of radical populism and agitation that Baker provided. But for farmers of Cedar County the worsening economy after 1926 was particularly hard to accept. Even President Hoover, a county native, proved ineffective in alleviating the farmers' plight through political action. Cedar County's former favorite son now became a target of local resentment and frustration. Economic tensions exacerbated in the summer of 1931 when two struggling banks closed their doors in Tipton, the county seat.

Despite the poor economic outlook, most Iowa farmers supported bovine tuberculin testing as a modern step in

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[108]Frank Dileva, "Frantic Farmers Fight Law," Annals of Iowa, 32 (October 1953): 108.

prevention of a threatening disease. Since tuberculosis was incurable once contracted, efforts at prevention, including the testing of cattle, were stepped up. It was clear that cattle were carriers of tuberculosis, and medical evidence strongly suggested that the disease could pass from animals to humans. Doctors estimated that between 25% and 30% of all tuberculosis found in children under five years of age was contracted from infected cattle.[109] By the 1920s individual states began enacting bovine tests as part of a national program towards the eradication of tuberculosis.

Testing involved injecting tuberculin in a fold of skin directly underneath each cow's tail. Diseased cattle showed swelling under the tail within seventy-two hours after the injection. Veterinarians simply returned three days later and checked each cow for swelling. In a similar test of the day, small children received a tuberculin shot in their forearm. Reddening of the skin around the point of injection indicated the child carried the disease.[110]

After testing, the state confiscated cattle identified as reactors. Owners of infected cattle received state

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[109]"Brochure Lists 30 Questions and Answers Which Explain Bovine T.B.," Des Moines Register, Munger Newspaper Clippings, Special Collections, State Historical Society, Iowa City.

[110]"Experts Call Cow Test Safe," Des Moines Register, 13 April 1931, p. 2.

compensation of one-third the difference between the salvage value and the appraised value of each animal. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recompensed another one-third of the difference, leaving the farmer a loss of the remaining one-third.[111] Condemned cattle were slaughtered under federal inspection. Portions of the carcass uninfected by the disease were butchered for human consumption. Otherwise, condemned cattle were either destroyed or used for making soap.

With a 1931 population of 2,754,819 dairy and beef producing cattle in Iowa, veterinarians faced a momentous task.[112] Prior to 1929 testing progress had been slow in Iowa due to farmers' resistance and a lack of funding, but the passage of a mandatory state-wide test law in the Iowa legislature that year showed the state's new commitment to the project. Echoing this stiffened approach, the 1931 Code of Iowa provided strict guidelines for bovine testing.[113] By April 1931 veterinarians had peacefully completed testing in fifty-four of Iowa's ninety-nine counties. In spite of

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[111]An infected cow appraised at $100 and salvaged for $10 left the owner a loss of $30 after state and national compensation.

[112]Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture, 1931 (Des Moines: State of Iowa Press, 1932), 72.

[113]The Code of Iowa 1931 (Des Moines: State of Iowa Press, 1931), 379-82.

this progress, a defiant coalition of Cedar County farmers slowed the veterinarians' campaign.

As state veterinarians began serving test notices in Cedar County in the spring of 1931, anti-test farmers rallied behind residents Jacob Lenker, head of the county Farmers' Protective Association (FPA), and Paul Moore, FPA secretary and active member of the Iowa farmers' Union (IFU). A crowd of jeering farmers prevented Dr. A. H. Joehnk from testing the herd of Cedar County farmer E. C. Mitchell. In another attempt at the William Butterbrodt farm, Lenker and a mob of supporters turned away county officials and state veterinarians. When Attorney General Oral Swift urged compliance, Lenker retorted, "No, the cattle will never be tested." Informed by Swift that the test was the law of the state and was to be enforced, Lenker responded, "If George Washington had not been an outlaw we would still be under English rule."[114]

Similar incidents occurred at other Cedar County farms where veterinarians attempted to enforce the compulsory test. Resisters organized a telephone system which alerted sympathetic farmers to gather an immediate crowd at any

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[114]Peter Malcolm, Veterinarian, Deposition for State of Iowa v. Paul Moore and J. W. Lenker, November 1931, Cedar County Courthouse, Tipton, IA.

county farm veterinarians targeted for testing.[115] Consequently, testing efforts were stymied by organized mobs of angry farmers, many of whom came equipped with pitchforks and axes at the urging of anti-test leaders. As continued testing proved impossible, state and county officials pleaded with Governor Dan Turner to mobilize the state militia. Rumors that Turner would comply with the veterinarians' request did not discourage defiant anti-test leader Moore, who remarked, "It does not make any difference how big an army they bring in; we can get plenty of men to take care of them."[116]

Veterinarians' efforts in Cedar County continued to face intense resistance throughout the summer of 1931. But the final blow, which prompted the Governor to mobilize the state militia, occurred on September 21, when state veterinarians, accompanied by sixty-three deputized officers, attempted to administer the tuberculin test to the herd of resistance leader Lenker. As the officials' procession of cars entered Lenker's yard, a large crowd of farmers surged forward with clubs, gas pipes, rubber hoses, pitchforks, stones, and other implements, and yelled at the

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[115]Donald Stout of Tipton, IA, interview by author, 27 March 1992, Tipton, tape recording.

[116]Foster Maxon, Sheriff of Cedar County, Deposition for State of Iowa v. Paul Moore and J. W. Lenker, November 1931, Cedar County Courthouse, Tipton, IA.

interlopers like "wild men."[117] The officer in charge reported, "The crowd assaulted our men, broke the windows in the officers cars and cut their tires with knives." As the veterinarians retreated, one witness claimed to overhear Moore address the mob, "Farmers, I held you back this time, but the next time I won't have anything to say; kill them if you can."[118] Hearing of the event while in Washington, D.C., Governor Turner cut short a meeting with President Hoover and rushed back to Iowa. That same day Turner ordered the state militia to squelch the rebellion and enforce mandatory tuberculin testing in Cedar County.

Rumors spread that the officer in charge, Brigadier General Park A. Findley, wished to form a posse to march into Muscatine and "horse whip" Baker for his role in the conspiracy to defy the state testing law.[119] Unshaken, Baker remained defiant and Baker egged on Findley.[120] Although Findley's posse never materialized; the General had correctly recognized Baker as a chief instigator in

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[117]Joe Newell, Investigator, Deposition for State of Iowa v. Paul Moore and J.W. Lenker, November 1931, Cedar County Courthouse, Tipton, IA.

[118]Donald Bolton, Farmer's son, Deposition for State of Iowa v. Paul Moore and J.W. Lenker, November 1931, Cedar County Courthouse, Tipton, IA.

[119]"Times of Trouble: The Cow War," 18 The Iowan (April-May 1959): 35.

[120]Midwest Free Press, 8 October 1931.

precipitating the resistant farmers' militancy. From early winter 1931 through the mobilization of the state militia in September, Baker actively campaigned, counseled, and contributed on behalf of the resisting farmers cause. Such influence helped stir farmers' emotions and channel them into aggressive and violent behavior.

Baker was a natural ally to the anti-test farmers. Iowa's mandatory test law fit nicely into his "octopus" metaphor of institutionalized conspiracy destroying the common farmer. Through his speeches and editorials Baker worked to establish a kinship with anti-test farmers by connecting their struggle against the government and ISDA with his own troubles with the AMA. "In many ways the situation here is closely analogous to that at Tipton," suggested a Midwest Free Press editorial in late July. Both Baker and the anti-test farmers were victims of the persecution of the medical trust.[121] Speaking before a crowd of farmers, Baker noted that,

> Just as the doctors refuse to tell the truth to the farmers, because they fear loosing [sic] the almighty dollar, they refuse to admit the poisoning of aluminum--and scientists report that its use causes cancer--because the more cancer cases they get, the more dollars pour into their pockets.[122]

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[121]Ibid., 28 July 1931.

[122]Ibid., 15 September 1931.

Once the anti-test movement accepted Baker's ideology, each Cedar County barnyard became a battleground for Baker in his fight against organized medicine and its practices.

Baker had an economic stake in aiding the farmers cause as well. By encouraging suspicions of conventional tuberculin testing, Baker hoped to instill confidence in his unconventional cancer cures. In the wake of the *JAMA's* damaging exposes of the Baker Institute, doubts about the reliability of any aspect of professional medicine aided the hospital's flagging business. Baker also depended on the support of nearby farmers in keeping his many other business enterprises afloat. Area farmers, including many from Cedar County, purchased Baker's mail order products and comprised the bulk of customers at K-TNT Sunday and holiday picnics. Additionally, the Iowa Farmers' Union's (IFU) firm support of the anti-test resisters further solidified Baker's participation in their cause. Since 1927 Baker had contracted K-TNT as the official station of the Iowa Farmers' Union. For an annual fee of $10,000, Baker offered the IFU weekly air time and his personal solicitation for their organization and programs.[123] Not only would Baker's support of Iowa's mandatory test law have gone against his

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[123]Reinemund Interview.

populist nature, it would have undercut his self-interest as well.

Until its closing in mid June 1931, K-TNT served as a vital medium for dissemination of anti-test sentiment. Throughout the spring and early summer, Baker shared his radio mike with anti-test leaders who spoke out against the injustices of the mandatory test law. The farmers claimed that the tuberculin test was unreliable and caused healthy pregnant cows to abort. However, the most flagrant attacks against the testing procedure came from the mouth of Baker himself. Already on record in his criticism of immunization and vaccination, Baker readily adapted his populist firepower against the tuberculin test. His frequent K-TNT broadcasts ridiculed the testing procedure and lambasted all who supported it. Baker's broadcasts "bait[ed] farmers, challenging them to take up pitchforks and any other weapons and throw the veterinarians off the farms," remembered former Governor Dan Turner years later.[124]

After the closing of K-TNT, Baker's newspaper the Midwest Free Press, which reached a circulation of over 10,000 by June 1931, took over the anti-test banner. A series of articles and editorials, many penned by Baker, attacked the reliability of the testing method. The

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[124]"Times of Trouble: The Cow War," 32.

physicians" as the real contagions of tuberculosis germs to young children.[128]

Consistent with Baker's conspiratorial ideology, Midwest Free Press articles suggested that the test law was actually an underhanded deal between state government officials and crooked meat packers in search of ways to acquire cheap beef. Reviving memories of Upton Sinclair's 1906 muckraking novel The Jungle, such charges aggravated old grievances against the injustices of the meatpacking industry. One Cedar County farm boy wondered why veterinarians, "wouldn't take the poor ones [cows]," but always "took the good ones." The alleged "diseased" cows, he believed, ended up in packing plants butchered as normal beef.[129] Playing on such fears, one Midwest Free Press investigative article was suggestively subtitled "How Tuberculized Cattle Are Slaughtered and Sold for Meat as Part of the Outrageous Graft Doctors, Officials, Dealers, and the Packing Interests."[130] Reviewing the "Cow War conspiracy," Baker's hired biographer reported that "two stock-holders or directors of large Chicago packing companies held official positions in the Iowa Department of

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[128]Ibid., 16 August 1931.

[129]Raymond Kroemer of Lowdon, IA, interview by author, 27 March 1992, tape recording.

[130]Midwest Free Press, 27 September 1931.

Agriculture." These men, Winston continued, "force[d] through the compulsory law, in order to accomplish the purchase of farmers' cattle at condemned prices."[131]

The heightened emotions surrounding the Cow War controversy opened the door for Baker's stinging attack against Democratic Governor Dan Turner. Continuing on the conspiracy theme, a Midwest Free Press editorial claimed that Turner had offered a secret bargain to Lenker, promising a clean bill of health for his cattle if the farmer would comply peacefully to testing. "Which is the worst" asked the writer, "for honest citizens to resist a bad law . . . or state officials bargaining off the law like fish on a sales counter."[132] "It is time to call a halt," suggested Baker,

> Organized medics, packers, and trusts are controlling Iowa . . . and the governor has shown his ignorance and incompetency about medical things and health of cattle, therefore the public has a right to ask "IS HE [Turner] COMPETENT TO REMAIN IN OFFICE?"[133]

Baker predicted if Turner continued running the state like a "racket" there would be "a clean-up in the next election such as Iowa has never experienced before."[134]

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[131]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 392-3

[132]Midwest Free Press, 24 September 1931.

[133]Ibid., 23 September 1931.

[134]Ibid., 24 September 1931.

Baker claimed he was finalizing a more accurate milk test that did not endanger cattle or entail any, "graft, losses, and danger to public health."[135] The farmers "want their cows' milk tested for T.B.," suggested Baker, "not a cow tail squirting vet coming around with some junk serum that is a bunch of nonsense."[136] He argued that the only excuse state officials offered for not using the milk test was that it was too expensive.[137] Actually this was not the case. The Iowa Department of Agriculture had long since explained to the general public that such a milk test was inaccurate since the tubercle bacilli and pus cells would often heal over in the milk, becoming undetectable for several weeks.[138]

True to form, Baker could not resist exploiting the Cow War controversy to increase the circulation revenue for the Midwest Free Press. As he had with K-TNT, Baker advertised his newspaper as the one genuine friend of the farmers. Other Iowa newspapers were traitors for "intentionally publishing misrepresentations about the affairs at Tipton,"

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[135]Midwest Free Press, 27 September 1931.

[136]Ibid., 8 April 1931.

[137]Ibid.

[138]"Facts You will Want to Know About Bovine Tuberculosis," Des Moines Register, 14 April 1931, p. 8.

warned Baker. In retribution, he encouraged farmers to cancel their subscriptions to all other newspapers.[139]

In addition to broadcasting and editorializing, Baker played a hands-on role in the Cow War controversy. Throughout the spring and summer of 1931, Lenker, a close friend of Baker, and other anti-test leaders regularly conferred with the Muscatine demagogue on plans of action. In an interview given years later, Cedar County's 1931 auditor Grant White recalled the impact of Baker's influence on Lenker during the Cow War turmoil. "Lenker was a conservative and not a talker. He prevented a lot of bloodshed," remembered White. "His one fault was that Norman Baker made him feel he was George Washington sent to lead his people."[140]

When not inspiring the anti-test leadership, Baker spread his influence around the Cedar County countryside in person. Baker stumped the county in his eye catching lavender convertible, honoring numerous speaking engagements on behalf of the test resisters. Baker also participated in at least one of the many barnyard rebellions which violently turned away testing veterinarians that summer. He was among the throng of farmers who assaulted a force of veterinarians

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[139]Midwest Free Press, 23 September 1931.

[140]"Times of Trouble," 33.

attempting to test the herd of Lenker. As the officials fled Lenker's farm in panic, Baker even snapped a picture of frightened chief veterinarian, Dr. Peter Malcolm, sitting in his vandalized car surrounded by a mob of unruly farmers.[141]

As could be expected, Baker's depiction of the skirmish in Lenker's barnyard in the Midwest Free Press differed significantly from the account given by state officials and veterinarians. He reported that the farmers had asked the officials to keep out. However, instead of complying, the officials lurched forward, forcing a confrontation. Stirring farmers' patriotic emotions, Baker claimed that the officials then shot tear gas bombs, one of which paralyzed a "WAR VETERAN."[142]

Even with Baker's agitation, the farmers' resistance crumbled when state militia troops, which eventually totaled nearly 2000, began arriving in Cedar County on September 23. Despite their earlier bravado, resistant farmers were powerless against the armed soldiers who accompanied the veterinarians to each farm. The necessary testing proceeded without incident and, after two weeks of supervision, the militia dispersed. By November 1931 the Cedar County Cow

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[141]Peter Malcolm Deposition.

[142]Midwest Free Press, 23 September 1931.

War was over, but at the estimated expense of over $100,000 for the taxpayers of Iowa.[143]

Baker had lost another battle in his crusade against the medical trust. However, his effectiveness in riling farmers' emotions and encouraging organized resistance against authority suggested that his populist appeal in rural eastern Iowa remained high. Baker was a key factor in escalating the turmoil over tuberculin testing. Although efforts towards bovine tuberculin testing received mild protest throughout the state, violence erupted most notably in areas where Baker's popularity was strongest.

The Cow War controversy tightened the bond between Baker and area farmers. Although earlier charges of radio trusts and medical conspiracies had stirred many farmers' emotions, the more relevant issue of mandatory tuberculin testing helped bring Baker's populist message home. After the closing of K-TNT, Cow War populism sustained Baker's popularity and pushed his radicalism to new heights. Encouraged by farmers' outrage at Governor Turner's role in the Cow War controversy, Baker harnessed his populist thunder for his own try at political office.

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[143]"Let Them Pay the Fiddler," Cedar Rapids Gazette and Republican, 5 November 1931, Munger Newspaper Clippings, State Historical Society, Iowa City.

CHAPTER 6

BAKER AND POPULIST POLITICS

During the mid 1930s, Baker was one of many radical demagogues on the national front. Left and right wing extremists such as California's Upton Sinclair and Francis Townsend and Michigan's Father Charles Coughlin inspired millions with spirited rhetoric full of biting political criticism and programs for economic relief. As the national depression lingered, America's bevy of firebrands channeled their power directly at government officials and programs. Occasionally, the most successful demagogues became bona fide political candidates. In 1934 Sinclair lost a close race for the California governorship. A year later, Louisiana's demagogic Senator Huey Long's attracted an estimated 4,000,000 voters for the upcoming 1936 presidential campaign.[144] In seeking office, both Sinclair and Long drew on the old Populist campaign, and according to historian Caroline Bird "their followers were American as corn."[145]

Like Sinclair and Long, Baker became inspired by the lure of political office in the 1930s. In light of the

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[144]Edward N. Kearny, Mavericks in American Politics (Madison: Mimir Publishers Inc., 1976), 155.

[145]Bird, 203.

acceptance of demagoguery on the national political scene, Baker's populist message seemed well suited to Iowa politics. As he stumped Iowa counties during the Cow War uprising, crowds of farmers applauded his attacks on Governor Turner and President Hoover. After years of economic hardship Iowans wanted change. By uniting his populist message with a political campaign, Baker hoped to ride the wave of farmer frustration and land himself a powerful position in Iowa government.

Although Baker had repeatedly brushed aside supporters' pleas that he run for office during the 1920s, following the Cow War crisis of 1931 Baker changed his tune. Encouraged by crowds of cheering farmers, Muscatine's notorious cancer quack became the town's gubernatorial candidate. Baker brandished his populist arsenal in unsuccessful bids for the office of Governor in 1932 and Senator in 1936.

In many respects, Baker's long awaited bid for political office was a last ditch effort to revive his fading popularity and influence in Iowa. The FRC's termination of K-TNT in June 1931 had crippled Baker's mail order industry and stifled the chief means of publicity for the Baker Institute. Furthermore, the after-shock of the JAMA's stinging exposes and Baker's embarrassing courtroom loss against the AMA in March 1932 slowed the Baker Institute's business to a trickle. Such conditions, noted

the Cedar Rapids Gazette and Republican, "forced Baker to turn to other fields than exploitation of cancer victims and the sale of peanuts via radio. So he has put himself forward as the champion of farmers . . . and all others who feel oppressed . . ."[146] Baker turned to politics as a way to return to prominence.

As he had before, Baker looked to the career of Kansas's notorious charlatan Dr. John Brinkley for inspiration. In 1930 the goat gland-grafting doctor had shocked the Midwest with his stunning showing in Kansas's gubernatorial race. With his name not even on the official ballot, Brinkley received a stunning 183,278 write-in votes, not including 20,000 votes in Oklahoma, where he was not even a candidate! Had an estimated 10,000 to 50,000 write-in votes not been rejected for incorrect spelling of the doctor's name, Brinkley may have defeated the winner Democrat Harry Woodring who polled only 217,428 votes.[147] For Baker, Brinkley's near victory signaled a ray of hope. After years of government interference and sanctions, Brinkley showed that populist demagogues could conceivably take the reigns of political power for themselves. Recognizing the opportunity, Baker "the populist radio

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[146]Hofer, 169, citing Cedar Rapids Gazette and Republican, 13 September 1931.

[147]Carson, 166.

crusader and cancer messiah" became Baker "the populist politician."

Despite his controversial image, Baker was, in many respects, an attractive candidate for the radical fringe of rural eastern Iowa. More than a mere showman, Baker possessed useful political skills, including impressive speaking talents, an appealing folksy personality, and proven charismatic flair. More importantly, in an atmosphere of economic and cultural crisis, Baker satisfied the radical cravings of many rural eastern Iowans. A long time rebel and professed victim of the government's conspiracy against the common man, Baker projected empathy for the farmers' plight and promised to rock the status quo.

Although inexperienced as a political candidate, Baker was by no means green to the political process. Time and again K-TNT's clout helped Baker ensure congressional action in times of need. In return for a politician's support, Baker offered favorable media coverage over K-TNT and later in the Midwest Free Press, and TNT. Baker even proposed constructing a high-power shortwave station in Washington for his senator friends. It was Baker's plan to have K-TNT pick up the senators' broadcasts out of Washington and relay their programs throughout the Midwest. Although the idea

never progressed past its planning stages, such efforts helped Baker gain future political favors.[148]

Iowa's fiery Republican Senator Smith Brookhart traded favors with Baker throughout the 1920s.[149] On numerous occasions Brookhart came to K-TNT's defense. The Senator was instrumental in overcoming roadblocks in licensing the station in 1925.[150] Again in 1927, Brookhart helped ward off a challenge to K-TNT's frequency by speaking on behalf of Baker in front of the FRC.[151] In return, Baker celebrated the Senator over K-TNT, in TNT, and in the Midwest Free Press. In addition, Brookhart was always welcome to speak to the crowds of potential Iowa voters on K-TNT grounds during summer Sundays and holidays. Although Baker and Brookhart's symbiotic relationship worked smoothly during the 1920s, the closing of K-TNT in June 1931 soured their harmonious alliance. Critical of Brookhart's half-hearted efforts to save K-TNT, Baker turned on his former friend and abandoned all support.[152]

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[148]Wolfe, 392-93.

[149]Like Baker, Brookhart embraced numerous populist arguments. See Ray S. Johnston, "Smith Wildman Brookhart: Iowa's Last Populist" (MA thesis, University of Northern Iowa, 1964), 209-211.

[150]Winston, Doctors, Dynamiters, and Gunmen, 84-85.

[151]Wolfe, 392.

[152]Midwest Free Press, 30 August 1931.

During the late 1920s K-TNT's political clout helped solidify an unlikely relationship between Baker and presidential hopeful Herbert Hoover. Years later Baker would emerge as a fervent critic of Hoover's presidency. However, in 1928 and 1929 Baker had obvious personal interests in supporting Hoover. Most importantly, Baker sought presidential backing for his cancer operation. Baker also recognized that, as Secretary of Commerce under the Calvin Coolidge Administration, Hoover represented Washington's chief force in radio regulation. In the event of Hoover's election, Baker hoped the President would reorganize the Commerce Department and dissolve the FRC, with which Baker was constantly at odds. "I am in hopes that the Federal Radio Commission will be entirely abolished," Baker wrote Hoover in 1929, following the election.[153]

Although Baker's request likely received little consideration, Hoover was indebted for K-TNT's unwavering support during the fall campaign. In an interview given months before his death in 1958, Baker bragged that, "Hoover and his campaign managers gave me credit for carrying the Midwest for him . . . "[154] Although there was no such

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[153]Norman Baker to Herbert Hoover, 24 January 1929, General Correspondence, Campaign and Transition, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

[154]Smith, 16.

record supporting Baker's claim, Hoover was appreciative of K-TNT's aggressive efforts on behalf of his candidacy.

Hoover's presidential challenger, Democratic Governor Al Smith of New York represented the perfect foil for Baker's populist message. Playing on common midwestern prejudices against Smith, Baker's broadcasts over K-TNT maligned the Democratic candidate's Catholicism, Irish-immigrant heritage, and Tammany Hall connection.[155] Such remarks hastened a sharp telegram from the Democratic party's radio advertising agency,

> MANY COMPLAINTS RECEIVED DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE RE INTOLERANT RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA EMANATING FROM YOUR STATION AGAINST SMITH REPETITION OF SUCH SUBJECT MATTER GROUND FOR CANCELLATION REMAINING FARM NETWORK PROGRAMS[156]

Not intimidated, Baker proudly sent candidate Hoover a copy of the telegram, which the radio operator considered a compliment "to the force and power of KTNT." "Bedamned as far as I am concerned," Baker assured Hoover, "because no

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[155]See "Prejudice Killed Smith in Cornbelt," New York Times 18 November 1928, sec. 3, p. 5; Reporting on the midwestern attitude toward Smith, a Times editorial correspondent wrote, "They knew little of Al Smith beyond the fact that he was a Catholic and a child of Tammany, but that was enough."

[156]Scott Howe Bowen, Inc. to Norman Baker, 25 October 1928, General Correspondence, Campaign and Transition, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

one is going to bluff me into the silencing of my station for a few dollars advertising."[157]

Baker also advised Hoover how to further enhance the Republican party's use of the radio during the campaign. He informed Hoover that the Democratic party had already reserved numerous dates in October for a campaign drive via the major chain hookup stations. "This leaves them [the Democratic party] with a terribly fixed campaign and a hard drive on the Mid-west farmer" warned Baker. "From my experience in propaganda," he continued, "I suggest that by all means the Republican committee arrange a hookup of the stations for at least Nov. 2nd., 3rd., 4th., and 5th., and get in the last shot which is the most effective." By securing the final times slots before the November 6th election, Baker assured Hoover that the Republicans could, "tear down all that has been built up from before."[158] The night before Hoover's election victory Baker sent a congratulatory telegram to the future president which

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[157]Norman Baker to Herbert Hoover, 25 October 1928, General Correspondence, Campaign and Transition, Hoover Presidential Library.

[158]Norman Baker to Herbert Hoover, 8 October 1928, General Correspondence, Campaign and Transition, Hoover Presidential Library.

promised a "last hour drive" to assure a strong Republican turnout in the Midwest.[159]

Baker's campaign efforts did not go unnoticed by Hoover. Responding to Baker's telegram on November 7th, the President-elect wrote "I am grateful for your kind message and I wish to take this occasion to express my renewed appreciation of the support which you have given us." Despite such acknowledgement, Hoover diplomatically hedged on promising radio reform, but invited Baker's further opinions on the subject.[160] Hoover did reciprocate Baker's loyalty in 1930 by participating in a publicity stunt whereby the President pressed a golden telegraph key in Washington which started presses in Muscatine for the first issue of the Midwest Free Press. The front page photo of Hoover pressing the key commemorated the act and helped start the Midwest Free Press off with a bang.

K-TNT's campaign contribution also helped Baker secure a meeting with Hoover to discuss his cancer treatment in September 1930. During their brief meeting, Baker recounted his battles with the medical trust and urged the President

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[159]Norman Baker to Herbert Hoover, 5 November 1928, General Correspondence, Campaign and Transition, Hoover Presidential Library.

[160]Herbert Hoover to Norman Baker, 28 January 1929, General Correspondence, Campaign and Transition, Hoover Presidential Library.

to investigate his cancer cure. Baker asked the President's approval of a plan allowing the Baker Institute to treat twenty-five World War I veterans suffering from cancer. He offered to send treatment records and photographs of results directly to Washington for Hoover's personal evaluation. Presumably, the President was aware of the publicity risk in backing Baker's sensational proposal, for Hoover reportedly responded, "Give me some time to investigate this," before ushering his visitor out the door.[161]

Much to Baker's chagrin President Hoover neither abolished the FRC nor adopted his proposal to treat war veterans. Additionally, the President ignored Baker's stirring pleas to reinstate K-TNT after it was forced off the air in June 1931. Writing in September 1931, Baker warned Hoover that K-TNT was vital to Hoover's campaign against Franklin D. Roosevelt. "I say without fear of contradiction," expressed Baker, that reinstating K-TNT "will be the greatest stroke that you can make" to pacify the growing resentment against the Republican party in the Midwest. "The handwriting is on the wall," he continued, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."[162] Evidently unimpressed, Hoover did nothing.

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[161]Winston, Doctors Dynamiters and Gunmen, 322.

[162]Norman Baker to Herbert Hoover, Presidential Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.

Spurned by Hoover and the Republican party, Baker began organizing his own political base in Iowa. In the summer of 1930, Baker formed an interest group action committee known as the People's Protective Association (PPA). In 1931 the Midwest Free Press published Baker's seven point platform for the PPA. Included among the Association's goals were typical populist concerns for "less taxation, fewer state commissions, lower freight rates, and a cleanup of some state institutions." [163] Despite the lofty platform, Baker's PPA neglected any concrete programs for realizing the proposed goals.

The attractive platform belied the fact that the PPA was merely a tool for Baker to use in his fight against the AMA. Baker regularly solicited for the PPA over K-TNT, in TNT, and in the Midwest Free Press. "We want everyone to join the People's Protective Association," urged Baker in one broadcast over K-TNT,

> It is everything the name implies. A protective association to fight for the public. To be on the lookout. You haven't got time in your own home; doing your farm work and housework--you haven't got time to read all the bills . . . leave that to the association. . . Whether you have got a home or not you have got the tentacles of that giant octopus wrapped around your neck, and don't forget it . . . [164]

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[163]Midwest Free Press, 1 September 1931.

[164]Hofer, 265, citing Transcript of Norman Baker over K-TNT, 3 May 1930, Federal Radio Commission, Record Group 173, Docket 967, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Those swayed by Baker's plea to join the PPA paid nominal membership dues, which Baker later confiscated to help fund legal fees and printing costs for the Baker Institute's numerous promotional pamphlets. Although the association never became a major force, Baker's stirring appeals recruited 500 members and a treasury of roughly $2000 by October 1930.[165]

Encouraged by the limited success of the PPA, the groundswell of enthusiasm during the Cow War uprising, and the general unrest over the worsening agricultural conditions, Baker began testing Iowa's political waters in earnest during mid summer of 1931. Broadening his image as medical rebel and radio maverick, Baker worked hard to incorporate Iowa farmers' economic concerns into his standard populist message. Speeches, originally tailored as attacks against the medical and radio trusts, were expanded to address various political and economic issues important to area farmers. Speaking at "Baker Day" in Winfield, Baker assured cheering crowds that despite his personal struggle against continual persecution, "he was never too busy to aid the farmer."[166]

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[165]Hofer, 633, citing Federal Radio Commission, "Statement of Facts," June 1931.

[166]Midwest Free Press, 3 September 1931.

As other radical demagogues of the 1930s, Baker offered listeners a guaranteed panacea to both aid farmers and end the national depression. The so called "Baker Plan," an accumulation of borrowed ideas, proposed the simple action of uniting farmers under one political organization. Speaking before a homecoming crowd of 8,000 in Abingdon, Iowa, Baker warned farmers they would continue an existence as "tools of Wall Street and big business" if they remained "a house divided against itself."[167] He envisioned a united farm union acting as an agricultural cooperative "advocated by the Government" yet "without Government connection," which would control prices ensuring farmers cost of production plus a reasonable commercial profit.[168] Rather than incorporating his plan through an existing farm organization, Baker helped establish the United Farm Federation of America (UFFA), which was christened in Des Moines in early January 1932. Despite the early enthusiasm reflected in the Midwest Free Press, UFFA membership never reached a significant proportion of Iowa farmers.[169]

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[167]Midwest Free Press, 30 August 1931.

[168]Winston, The Throttle: The Fact Story of Norman Baker, 559.

[169]After its first month of existence, the UFFA had only thirteen due paying members; See Hofer, 372.

Conveniently, many of Baker's proposals to renew farm prosperity also reaped prosperity for himself. In speech after speech, Baker correlated agricultural improvement with the success of his own business enterprises. He warned that selfish Wall Street interests would fight against his economic solutions by denying farmers a public voice. With K-TNT already beaten by the "trust" interests, Baker urged farmers to increase Midwest Free Press circulation in order to establish "a powerful medium which would give the farmer a voice in national as well as state politics."[170] By late 1931 Baker began plans to build a 100,000 watt radio station south of the Mexican border. Again, he implored farmers to keep their political voice alive by helping fund the project.

While in Mexico developing his new radio station in June 1932, Baker officially announced his candidacy for the Iowa Governorship. His campaign on the Farm-Labor ticket was doomed from the start. Due to his late entry in the race, Baker had already missed the summer primary. Consequently, his name did not even appear on the final November election ballot. Furthermore, Baker's reputation had taken a beating after his courtroom loss to the AMA in March 1931. As the November election neared, Iowa's major

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[170]Midwest Free Press, 16 August 1931.

newspapers completely ignored Baker's campaign. Some smaller papers were even less kind. One skeptical article in the Manchester Press noted that before his Farm-Labor campaign, "Baker's interest in the farmer was limited to how much he could sell him."[171]

Possibly to avoid an arrest warrant for practicing medicine without a license, Baker waged his entire campaign via his new radio station XENT in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. With XENT still under construction in the months preceding the election, Baker devised ingenious methods to spread his message directly to Iowa voters. Always the entertainer, he sent four campaign trucks rolling through Iowa counties, donning colorful banners with the message "Vote for Baker and Clean up the State Grafters" and blaring recorded speeches and carnival music through loudspeakers.[172] Despite such efforts, Baker garnered barely 5,000 votes in the November election including only 556 from Muscatine County.[173] Shrugging off the crushing defeat, Baker expressed satisfaction with the loss of incumbent Democratic Governor Dan Turner.

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[171]Manchester Press (Manchester, IA) 1 October 1932.

[172]Hofer, 448.

[173]Midwest Free Press, 10 November 1932.

After a three year hiatus in Mexico, Baker returned to Iowa to throw his hat into the 1936 Senatorial race as a Republican candidate. In contrast to his half-hearted gubernatorial campaign, Baker stumped for the Senate in person. From town to town, he presented his usual attacks against the AMA and FRC, interspersed with simplistic ideas for economic relief. Adopting reform ideas from other political demagogues, Baker advocated pensions for the elderly and the construction of an interstate highway system to put Americans back to work.[174] Two days before the June primary, Baker staged another medical show, complete with patient testimonials and fiery political speeches. Perhaps aided by the acceptance of demagogues such as Townsend and "Father" Charles Coughlin on the national front, Baker managed over 28,000 votes in a losing effort in the June primary.[175]

Baker's unsuccessful bids for political office suggested the limits of his populist appeal. Restricted by the reach of K-TNT, the tenacious pursuit of his critics, and the controversial nature of his own populist program, Baker never secured the broad base of support necessary to

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[174]Hofer, 494-5; and Max Churchill ed., "The Man in Purple," Muscatine, IA: 1994. Slides.

[175]Lester Drennen, ed., State of Iowa Official Register 1937-38 (Des Moines: State of Iowa Press, 1938), 196-97.

ensure a significant political impact in Iowa. Furthermore, Baker was never a professional politician. Despite shrewd attempts to stir audience's emotions, most farmers recognized that Baker's fight against radio and medical monopolies was not vital to their economic and cultural existence. Although crowds applauded Baker's radical message wherever he spoke, few Iowans outside his stronghold in the eastern portion of the state considered the controversial cancer quack a viable political candidate. More of an amusement than a serious contender, Baker received more attention for his bullet proof lavender roadster than the window dressing economic proposals he espoused.[176]

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[176]Midwest Free Press, 21 August 1931.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Baker's political defeat in 1936 marked the end of his influence in Iowa. Continually harassed by Iowa health authorities, Baker replanted his struggling cancer operation to a former posh resort on the hill tops overlooking Eureka Springs, Arkansas. However, Baker's new cancer haven in the Ozarks proved short lived. In 1940 his shady business ventures finally did him in. At the urging of the AMA, the United States government finally charged and convicted Baker of conducting fraudulent advertising through the mail and sentenced him to four years in prison. After serving three years of the sentence in Leavenworth, Baker faded into obscurity, living his remaining years off the coast of Florida in a boat formerly owned by railroad baron Jay Gould.

Although Baker lived until 1958, his populist appeal in Iowa died years before. The ending of the national depression and the outbreak of World War II altered the environment necessary for Baker's populism to thrive. In the mid 1930s one Time reporter observed that Roosevelt's New Deal programs, "were descending on the land in a gentle pervasive rain, dampening the prairie fire of the farmers'

anger."[177] As the severity of Iowa farmers' cultural and economic frustration lifted, so did the spell of Baker's populist message. In its place remained only a bitter memory of the misery and ill will Baker's brash invective and cancer quackery inflicted. In the end, hired pall bearers lowered Baker's casket into the ground near K-TNT hill where twenty-five years earlier thousands had flocked to hear him speak. Less than twenty five onlookers attended his funeral ceremony.

In retrospect, Baker's populist demagoguery realized mixed results. While colorful theatrics and radical rhetoric helped Baker rake in an estimated $250,000 per year during his prime, the reach and longevity of his populist appeal were greatly limited.[178] Although he succeeded in inspiring the support of a portion of regional farmers, Baker's failure to influence powerful forces outside the rural cornbelt insured his quick demise. Attacks against Jews, big business, conventional medicine, big government, and urban society may have inflamed the emotions of many eastern Iowa farmers, but it did little to secure Baker's relationship with politicians in Washington and Des Moines.

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[177]"Millions of Bullfrogs," Time 20 (20 November 1933): 16.

[178]George Mills, Rogues and Heroes from Iowa's Amazing Past (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1972), 108.

Once Baker was rejected by Hoover, the FRC, and the courts, his populist foothold disintegrated.

In many respects Baker symbolized the modern decadence and ruthless capitalism Iowa farmers resented. Newspaper editors were quick to point out that Baker was more urban than rural. Baker's fancy suits, expensive cars, and opulent jewelry suggested he was an outsider to the rural world. Although little evidence of Iowa farmers' discussion of Baker's urban connection exist, it is worth noting that many UFFA members were disturbed when Baker accepted the post as the Association's lifetime secretary. After all, members noted that the UFFA was created for "farmers only" and that Baker was not nor had ever been a farmer.[179]

Questions of Baker's credibility also hindered Iowan's acceptance of his populist message. With his salesman mentality and hot temper, Baker struggled to maintain an image of the benevolent and ingenuous reformer. Most Iowans saw through his populist screen and recognized Baker for the hustler he was. A newspaper reporter spoke for many Iowans when he denounced Baker as a "populist firebrand who does not hesitate to arouse the basest passions of men in order

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[179]Hofer, 372.

to further his ambition."[180] Baker's populism fooled only a few and even then it did not last.

Despite its fleeting nature, Baker's populist appeal in Iowa cannot be ignored. More than simply Iowa's "King of Quacks," Baker reflected the unique and unsettled environment gripping rural Iowa in the 1920s and 1930s.[181] As they had in the 1890s, genuine economic and cultural tensions threatened Iowa farmers and hastened their acceptance of populist rhetoric, whether constructive or not. Seeking scapegoats, many eastern Iowa farmers eagerly turned their resentment toward the old suspects of urban-industrial society. The time was ripe in eastern Iowa for a demagogic prophet of deceit to prosper and Baker made the most of the moment.

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[180]Manchester Press, 1 October 1931.

[181]Smith, 16.

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