

"Let Them Eat Their Gold": Olin and Emma Swenson and the National Farmers Holiday  
Association, 1931-1934

By

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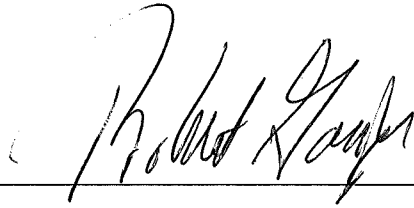
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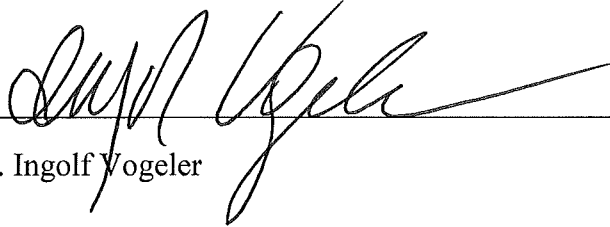
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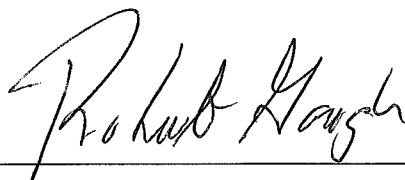
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Under the Supervision of Dr. Robert Gough

The contributions of Olin and Emma Swenson to the National Farmer's Holiday Association (NFHA), through the incorporation into the movement of the farmers of the state of Wisconsin, were significant. The National Farmer's Holiday Association was one of the most prominent and largest American agricultural organizations during the early 1930s. The impact that Olin and Emma Swenson had in bringing Milo Reno, President of the NFHA, to Wisconsin and the inception of the Wisconsin Division of the NFHA were critical to the achievement of uniting Wisconsin farmers with the NFHA. Furthermore, Olin and Emma Swenson began their activism in the local Rusk County Farmer's Union even before the NFHA exploded onto the scene, planting the seeds that would blossom into connecting with Milo Reno and the NFHA. Their efforts in behalf of farmers and other social justice movements continued after the demise of Reno and the NFHA.



Research Paper Adviser (Signature)



Date

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## I: Introduction

We can't continue longer now  
Upon our weary way---  
We're forced to halt upon life's trial  
And call a "holiday."  
Let's call a Farmers Holiday  
A Holiday let's hold---  
We'll eat our wheat and ham and eggs  
And let them eat their gold.<sup>1</sup>

This poem, written by an unknown poet, was published in the *Iowa Union Farmer* on March 9, 1932. It encapsulates the anger that many of America's farmers were feeling during the Great Depression. The "farmers holiday" was a sardonic reference to the bank holiday given to banks by the government in order to protect them from people scrambling to withdraw their money from their accounts. Farmers felt they deserved a similar holiday. Yet the problems farmers faced started much earlier than in the 1930s. During World War I, American farmers had seen an unprecedented amount of prosperity. Demand created by The Great War in Europe gave farmers a reason to produce more than they ever had. More land was tilled, and surpluses of goods began to rise. American farmers went in debt to satisfy the needs of their country during wartime. After the war ended, however, surplus food began running down prices. With food longer in such demand, American farmers had massive fields with little demand for the quantities of products they were producing.

As soon as the Great Depression began, the farmers' situation became even worse. Many had to accept foreclosure on their mortgages, sell their property, and attempt to find work in the cities. The government was reluctant to assist them. After a decade of struggle, farmers had had enough. Organizations began to spring up that united farmers and gave them a voice on the political scene. The National Farmers Holiday Association (NFHA) was one of the largest and

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<sup>1</sup> *Iowa Union Farmer*, March 9, 1932.

most demanding of these groups. Led by Milo Reno of Iowa, the NFHA took to the streets to protest and picket the roads of cities in order to have their demands met. The "cost of production," which meant getting their prices on the goods they sold, was the main objective of the organization. If businesses were unwilling to cooperate, the NFHA would call a strike and have farmers withhold their products by engaging in no buying and no selling.

In Wisconsin, the situation was the same. Originating in Outagamie County, the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool used violent picket lines to deny goods from going to markets. For two people, however, the NFHA was an opportunity to trumpet their peaceful causes on a larger scale. Olin and Emma Swenson, pictured on page 4, were already active in local Farmers Unions, and they jumped at the opportunity to join forces with farmers from other states. Their contribution to bringing Milo Reno to Wisconsin to speak to the farmers is too important for historians to ignore, as it ended with Wisconsin joining the NFHA. This paper will argue that the contributions of Olin and Emma Swenson were pivotal in bringing the NFHA to Wisconsin. Without their undying effort to save the farmer, the NFHA might never have included Wisconsin in its movement, thus weakening its influence when Milo Reno eventually visited President Franklin Roosevelt to get farm policies implemented into the New Deal.

I will first examine contributions to the field, most of which focus on the NFHA and its leader, Milo Reno. Following the historiographical work is a chapter on the NFHA. This chapter contextualizes the story of Olin and Emma Swenson. Although the Swensons are the primary focus of the paper, knowledge of the NFHA and its activities during the 1930s are important since the Swensons were not present for many of the strikes and pickets in other states. After learning about the NFHA itself, the story of Olin and Emma can be inserted into the larger narrative. Only then can one see how significant their efforts were over the years. In the

following chapters, Olin and Emma's story will be told. These chapters will show how they fit into the political movement scene during the 1930s.

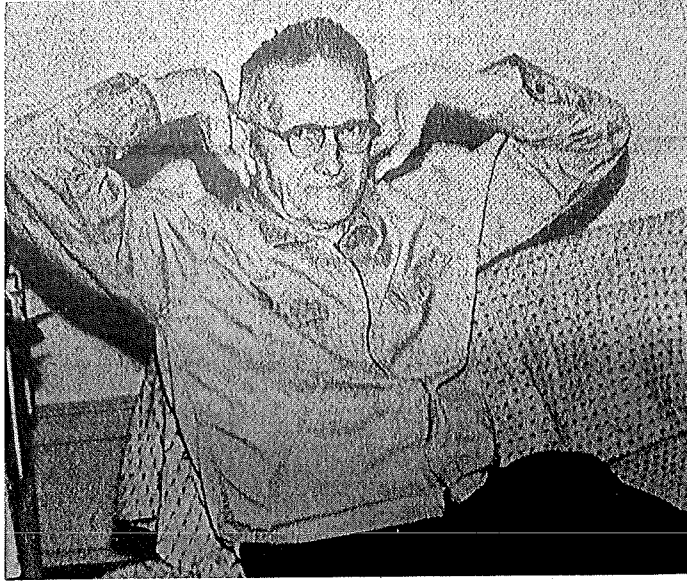
My work will make a contribution to the field by introducing two figures who made a reality out of the dream of having Wisconsin become a part of the NFHA. Olin and Emma Swenson both worked tirelessly within farmers unions, trumpeting their ideologies throughout the country. The individual efforts of Olin and Emma Swenson during the Holiday Movement should be investigated, and since no one has accepted this task, I find it is up to me to illuminate their contribution to rural farmers and their impact on Wisconsin's 20<sup>th</sup> century agricultural history. Too often are small town residents and local farmers left out of national history when it is local farmers making history by tilling the land and attending meetings for the NFHA. My work picks two of these farmers and shows how important their efforts were to the national Holiday movement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed timeline of Olin and Emma Swenson's activities during the NFHA movement, see page 36. A leadership chart of the NFHA is provided on page 17.

## Figure One: Photographs

Olin Swenson



Emma Swenson (*right*)



*Photographs courtesy of Special Collections & Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin--Eau Claire. Eau Claire, WI.*

## II: Historiography

Farming in the 1920s and 1930s was probably one of the most volatile and turbulent occupations of the time. It was during the height of World War I that American farmers saw their heyday, but they were not prepared for the loss of their foreign markets when the war ended and consumption dropped. Left with large surpluses of food goods, prices plummeted, giving way to a farmer's depression in 1921. The farmers suffered greatly through the rest of the decade, and the rest of the country joined this suffering after the stock market crash of 1929.

Farmers of the time, looking to find a way out of the depression, turned to their government and organized groups and unions to fight for their cause and give themselves a voice that could be heard. The largest and most popular of the groups was the National Farmers Holiday Association (NFHA). The NFHA started its rise to power in the Midwest with milk farmers striking to gain their cost of production. The strikes forced local governments to take action in order to appease the demands of its citizens who were farmers. After gaining government cooperation in Iowa, the NFHA spread to other states, including Minnesota, the Dakotas, and eventually Wisconsin. It was then, when the Association was recognized at a national level, that the president of the United States took notice. Milo Reno petitioned President Franklin D. Roosevelt for a solution that would benefit the nation's farmers and avoid further rural unrest and the possibility of a full scale farmer revolt. Although not directly meeting the NFHA's demands, President Roosevelt developed the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) in order to give temporary relief to farmers. After the President took action, the NFHA fell out of influence mostly because of financial weakness and a drop in membership. What the NFHA did accomplish was giving farmers a voice. The American farm embraced a tough way of living in order to feed themselves and the growing nation. The government finally realized the

importance of supporting the feeders of the American stomachs. People like Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace and President Roosevelt understood that the farm needed help through this tumultuous time.

This particular subject in history was written about frequently in the next fifty years. Most of the works fall into one of two categories. The first is that of overarching agricultural history that is organized chronologically. These works, although broad in their foci, provide the background for other works that are narrow in scope. The second category is focused on the farm associations that grew out of the rural unrest during the 1920s and 1930s. Many of these works revolve around the National Farmers Holiday Association, but others branch out to explore the other organized farm groups.

David Danbom contributes to the field with *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*.<sup>3</sup> Danbom is one of the nation's leading authorities on agricultural history, and the topics covered in his book are quite comprehensive and wide-ranging, yet does not generalize. Danbom's social history sets his work apart from many other authors within the field. Emphasis on women, minorities, rural values, and the lives of ordinary people who worked in agriculture makes the work quite engaging. Throughout the book, Danbom emphasizes the growing commercialization of agriculture and how that affected farm life. As agriculture became more commercialized, farm living changed, until by the late 20th century there was little or no difference between living on a successful commercial farm and living in an urban setting. The theme and role of technology changing farm life is discussed here. Danbom thinks it is safe to

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<sup>3</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

assume that the move from rural to urban settings as jobs shifted to factories was common, thus dismissing any chance for an agrarian revival.

Danbom is sympathetic towards farmers, and his work succeeds in being exactly what it intended to be, an excellent synthesis of past and present scholarship relating America's rural history. Although the time spectrum is quite broad, the years before and after the Depression years provide adequate background knowledge of the progression of American farmers since the earliest years of our nation's history, and because of this, the book is able to give a lot of the information about the causes of the farm crisis that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s by referring to the early farm strikes at that time. Many of the answers the book provides that answer the questions of the cause of the farming collapse revolve around the large demand for goods during the First World War, which pushed farmers to plant more. Many farmers saw prosperity during this time, leading to purchases of mechanized farm equipment that would allow farmers to plant more and keep up with demand. When the war ended, demand fell and the farmers had too many goods, thus causing a drop in prices.

*American Agriculture, 1899-1939; a Study of Output, Employment and Productivity* by Harold Barger and Hans H. Landsberg focuses on the American farm life in one of the most turbulent times in American agricultural history.<sup>4</sup> This work almost exclusively looks at quantitative data of what farmers were producing, when they were producing it, and who was producing the goods. Almost every page contains a graph or table of sorts, making it a helpful tool for economists and historians to look at to perceive the underlying patterns of the farmers' struggles. The first part describes some peculiarities of agricultural enterprise and furnishes a

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<sup>4</sup> Harold Barger and Hans H. Landsberg, *American Agriculture, 1899-1939; a Study of Output, Employment and Productivity* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1942).

definition of agricultural output. Part two contains an extended discussion of the size and composition of farm output. The factors which have influenced this size and composition from one period to another are treated in considerable detail, including the transition following the First World War. One will find the index of output and a summary of changes in its composition. It is especially interesting to read about the declining milk production, seeing as how Wisconsin was involved in many milk strikes during the early 1930s.

Part Three deals with employment and productivity. Of these, Barger and Landsberg review the history of technological changes in agriculture, and they consider the extent to which well-known innovations have actually been adopted in different farming areas. For the authors, some of the reasons why farmers got into financial troubles were that more of them had bought into new technologies in order to keep up with the expansion of farm land they were harvesting with the rise of demand for food goods during the First World War. Once the demand dropped, banks called in their loans, which the farmer was not prepared to pay.

Focused much more on the political scene in Wisconsin, Paul Glad's work *History of Wisconsin, Volume V: War, a New Era, and Depression 1914-1940* shows just how the state of Wisconsin was affected by national events during WWI and the interwar years.<sup>5</sup> Glad investigates the Great Depression in Wisconsin and its impact on rural and urban families in the state. The discussions of the state's political sphere are intriguing and engaging. During most of the early 20th century, the La Follette family was in control of Wisconsin politics. Using the rise of the Progressive movement as a springboard, Glad explores the relationships between the politicians, farm groups and labor groups through their sometimes uneasy alliances against the

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<sup>5</sup> Paul W Glad, *War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990).

large political parties in Wisconsin's history. This opposition was more targeted towards Republicans and big business, but once President Roosevelt took office, the resistance shifted to the Democrats. Glad's overview of the formation of the Farmer Labor Progressive Federation contains insight into the environment farmers faced after the collapse of the National Farmers Holiday Association. As one of the more comprehensive works of my collection, Glad is able to touch more on the post-NFHA history that was not handled by many historians at the middle of the century. Glad is very objective in his approach to this section of Wisconsin's history, making it a great source to follow for historians, as well as a strong volume within the series.

Since Glad concentrates on the Progressive movement gaining momentum in the state of Wisconsin, it is interesting to see how the union of labor and farmer groups worked out in the state. In Minnesota, the Farmer-Labor Union had already occurred, and it was a strong bond that instilled fear in the politicians of the day. This relates very well with Everett Luoma's work since its main sources are Farmer-Labor newspapers from the state of Minnesota, which will be discussed shortly. Yet history was a bit different in Wisconsin because with Wisconsin's sizeable population of German and Austrian ancestry--and with Wisconsin Progressives and Socialists generally opposed to American belligerency in WWI--the state experienced unusual tensions during 1917.<sup>6</sup> The tensions that occurred during the Great War (including the Progressive and Socialist opposition of the war) affected political alignments in the state. A lot of groups use the peacetime to their advantage. Glad writes about how prohibitionists and suffragists emphasized the nation's wartime emergency need in working for ratification of the 18th and 19th amendments to the United States Constitution. This political hotbed gave

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<sup>6</sup> Glad, 1.

members from the Communist Party the chance to gain footholds in the agrarian movements around the country, and the Farm Holiday was no exception to that pattern.

*Major Problems in American History, 1920-1945: Documents and Essays* is a collection of primary sources and secondary essays on topics, Gordon's work does almost exactly what Glad does, but on a much larger scale. His work does not solely focus on Wisconsin, but on the national timeline through the decades. Chapter nine focuses on the agricultural issues of the time, and of course the NFHA is one of the key elements. Taking a look at what Milo Reno had to say and having modern interpretations about it helps the reader think more in depth about the topic and its impact on the nation during this time. The works that Gordon selected for the chapter revolve around the tracing the economic landscape of rural America in the 1920s and 1930s. The authors of these documents vary from an ordinary farmer to farm leaders laying out the farmer's demands.<sup>7</sup> There are of course mentions of the AAA along with the terrible situation in the south with sharecropping.

*Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* by David Kennedy, visits two of the largest events in 20th century American history: the Great Depression and World War II. Kennedy brings up interesting points in regards to the relationship between Milo Reno and President Roosevelt, along with the relationship of the NFHA and the AAA. The NFHA's goal was to petition the president and support the farmer's cost of production, and if he refused, threatened a farmers strike on a national scale. Although the book has a lot in its title in regards to the American people, the writing on the rural aspects are limited, especially the involvement of the people (common family farmers). Most of the writing done by Kennedy

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<sup>7</sup> Colin Gordon, ed. *Major Problems in American History, 1920-1945: Documents and Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 247.

deals with the political side of the rural crisis, specifically with the development of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Kennedy briefly covers the interactions between Milo Reno and President Roosevelt. It was especially important to capture when President Roosevelt had Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace tell farmers to plow up cotton and slaughter piglets in order to curve the supply downwards. Kennedy refers to quotes by Lorena Hickok, who was charged with the duty of documenting the rural environment during the time. Her reports about the unpopularity of Secretary Wallace are presented by Kennedy.<sup>8</sup> Full of statistics, it is easy to see how Kennedy has captured the eye of 20th century American historians.

John Shover's *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* encompasses the entire history of the National Farmers Holiday Association. Starting from Daniel Shays and ending with Milo Reno, this book shows the struggle of the small family farmers against the weight of the nation, and how small farms were succumbing to more efficient farms along with the bleak economic crisis. The NFHA was one of the most aggressive agrarian upheavals of the century, which sparked a reaction from the federal government in the form of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Although focused on this organization, Shover does not discuss how the organization was run, specifically by its leader, Milo Reno. Shover depicts Reno as a man who:

looked to the past, not to the future, who talked too much, and became a demagogue... [Reno] was the last ideological radical to fight the farmers' battle with the old Populist principles of economic individualism and unqualified opposition to elitism in the form either of monopoly or bureaucracy.<sup>9</sup>

Shover believes that the introduction of the AAA made it impossible for Reno to generate enthusiasm for a program that represented nostalgia for the Populist movement.

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<sup>8</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 190.

<sup>9</sup> John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1965), 215.

Shover did interview a lot of the persons that are relevant to this paper. Among them are John Bosch, President of the NFHA after the death of Milo Reno; Dale Kramer, editor of the *Holiday News* under Reno and Bosch; and Harry Lux, orator of the Nebraska Division of the NFHA.<sup>10</sup> Shover focuses on an untouched topic of the movements during this time, which is the Farmers' National Committee for Action, a Communist front organization which attempted to infiltrate and control the Farmers Holiday Association. Many scholars have neglected this phase of rural history and the discontent it brought. The organization, led by Harold Ware, gained control in different counties and succeeded in parts of Nebraska in passing debt moratorium legislation.

For Shover, the basic fact for all rural protests was that farmers, unlike other small businessmen, offered their produce in a buyer's, not a seller's, market. The farmer was a speculator, taking his chance each year on a profitable return at harvest time. When the returns plummeted with a decrease in demand and soaring supply, the ordinarily apathetic farmer turned to voluntary associations, to government, and to direct action in order to right the situation. This was where the popularity of movements such as the NFHA comes into play. For Shover, the Farmers' Holiday was the most aggressive agrarian upheaval of the 20th century.<sup>11</sup> The actions and program of the Holiday Association, however, were often simplistic and aimed merely at the immediate remedy of adverse economic conditions.

Dale Kramer gives a unique look into the Farm Holiday Movement and its origins in *The Wild Jackasses*, a work that could be considered a primary as well as a secondary source, as the author wrote it almost immediately after the Holiday Movement.<sup>12</sup> Kramer admits that he was

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<sup>10</sup> Note that Dale Kramer was also the author of *The Wild Jackasses*, another work discussed in this paper.

<sup>11</sup> Shover, 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Dale Kramer, *The Wild Jackasses: The American Farmer in Revolt* (New York: Hastings House, 1956).

associated with Milo Reno in the years of 1935 and 1936, during which he was the editor of the *Farm Holiday News* and the *Iowa Union Farmer*. Kramer's office was around the corner from Reno's, and he frequently traveled with him through the Dakotas, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Although the days of the farm revolt were over during that time, Kramer interacted with many of the participants of it as they told their stories of the blockades. Kramer often spoke with Henry Teigen, who had become a Minnesota congressman. Kramer also spoke with George Griffith and other League organizers. In Minnesota, Kramer was also close with John Bosch, President of the Minnesota Division of the Holiday Association and eventual Vice President of the National Farmers Holiday Association.

Kramer's title "The Wild Jackasses" was the name given to the rebellious farmers during the 1930s. Whenever farmers left their plows en masse and harassed the regular politicians, the opposing politicians called them 'wild jackasses.' The Populist convention of 1892 is the origin of his story. It was here, Kramer claims, the seeds were planted for the later successes of farmers joining forces and setting out on their crusade against politicians. Moving on to the formation of farm movements in the 20th century, Kramer writes, "Emphasis has been laid on the stirring rise of the crusades and the accomplishments of the agrarian moments; the melancholy bickering of disintegration have mostly been omitted."<sup>13</sup> Although the farmers were more than willing and did actually strike, almost every revolt failed to attain its objectives. Many reasons were given, and most authors seem to center around the fact that most strikes spontaneously arose and just as spontaneously withered away.

Kramer's work is based on the author's experiences and interactions with the farm organization leaders of the times. For this reason, the book does not give the reader a great

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<sup>13</sup> Kramer, xi.

understanding of the political or economic conditions that spawned the farmer strikes in the Midwest, but instead focuses on the personalities involved within the strikes and farmer organizations. Characters such as Mary Ellen Lease, Ignatius Donnelly, "Sockless Jerry" Simpson, Tom Watson, "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, Arthur C. Townley, and Milo Reno are all referred to as the wild jackasses, specifically by the conservative presses at the time.

*The Farmer Takes a Holiday; the Story of the National Farmers' Holiday Association and the Farmers' Strike of 1932-1933* by Everett E. Luoma covers the subject of the NFHA and its activity during the early 1930s.<sup>14</sup> The NFHA began in Iowa during the strikes set up by the Iowa farmers' union. After its success, Milo Reno took the stage as the head figure within the organization, even if it was a position with little actual power. It was instead the farmers themselves who held the reigns of their own destinies, which is shown throughout this book. The argument Luoma puts forth is that, for the farmers, the trend of the economy was steadily eliminating the family farmer, and in order to escape that fate, farmers have to organize with urban workers in an independent political movement. Luoma argues that the farm movements should start from the grass roots, as the Farmers' Holiday did. Luoma argues that in order to have successful revolts of the farmer, farm leaders must focus on economic results and not causes of the farmer's problem. Shover disagrees with Luoma in this regard. Luoma believes that not focusing on the important economic factors was the cause of the NFHA's downfall, while Shover argues that Reno himself was the primary cause of the organization's downfall, rather than issues like financial factors, lack of participation and loyalty to the farmer's cause.

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<sup>14</sup> Everett E. Luoma. *The Farmer Takes a Holiday; the Story of the National Farmers' Holiday Association and the Farmers' Strike of 1932-1933* (New York: Exposition, 1967).

Roland White in *Milo Reno, Farmers Union Pioneer* provides an in-depth biography of the president of the National Farmers Holiday Association.<sup>15</sup> Within the book, White introduces the reader to Reno at the beginning of his involvement in organizing a farm movement. The title calls Reno a pioneer, and for good reason. Reno became the American farmer's voice, a title not held by many other people. Although Reno belonged to the predecessor to the Farmers Union, the Farmers Alliance, he was not among the first to belong to the newer organization in Iowa, and Iowa was by no means the first state in the Farmers Union. The first half of the book deals with Reno's personal life and his rise to leadership in the national scene. Starting in 1926, White writes about his rise to power in the local movements within the state. The section concludes with the fall of the National Farmers Holiday Association, along with Reno's death. The second half is the text of speeches given by Reno on the radio during the Holiday movement. The topics of Reno's discussion range from economics to the New Deal. It seems a lot of the content included in this section deals with Reno's displeasure with the New Deal policy. This might have been because Roosevelt chose to ignore Reno and the NFHA's pleas to set up a system to give farmers their cost of production. The final chapter of the book talks about "Reno-isms," which are sections from his speeches on certain topics, ranging from inflation to membership loyalty to government currency, to name a few.<sup>16</sup>

Kennedy's narrative seems to go hand-in-hand with the struggles described in Roland White's work. White goes into detail about the relationship Milo Reno had with President Roosevelt, and of course with Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace. The farmers of the time did not like what Wallace was doing, feeling that they were going in the wrong direction in aiding farmers with mortgage relief and gaining their cost of production. White's work reflects

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<sup>15</sup> Roland A. White, *Milo Reno, Farmers Union Pioneer* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

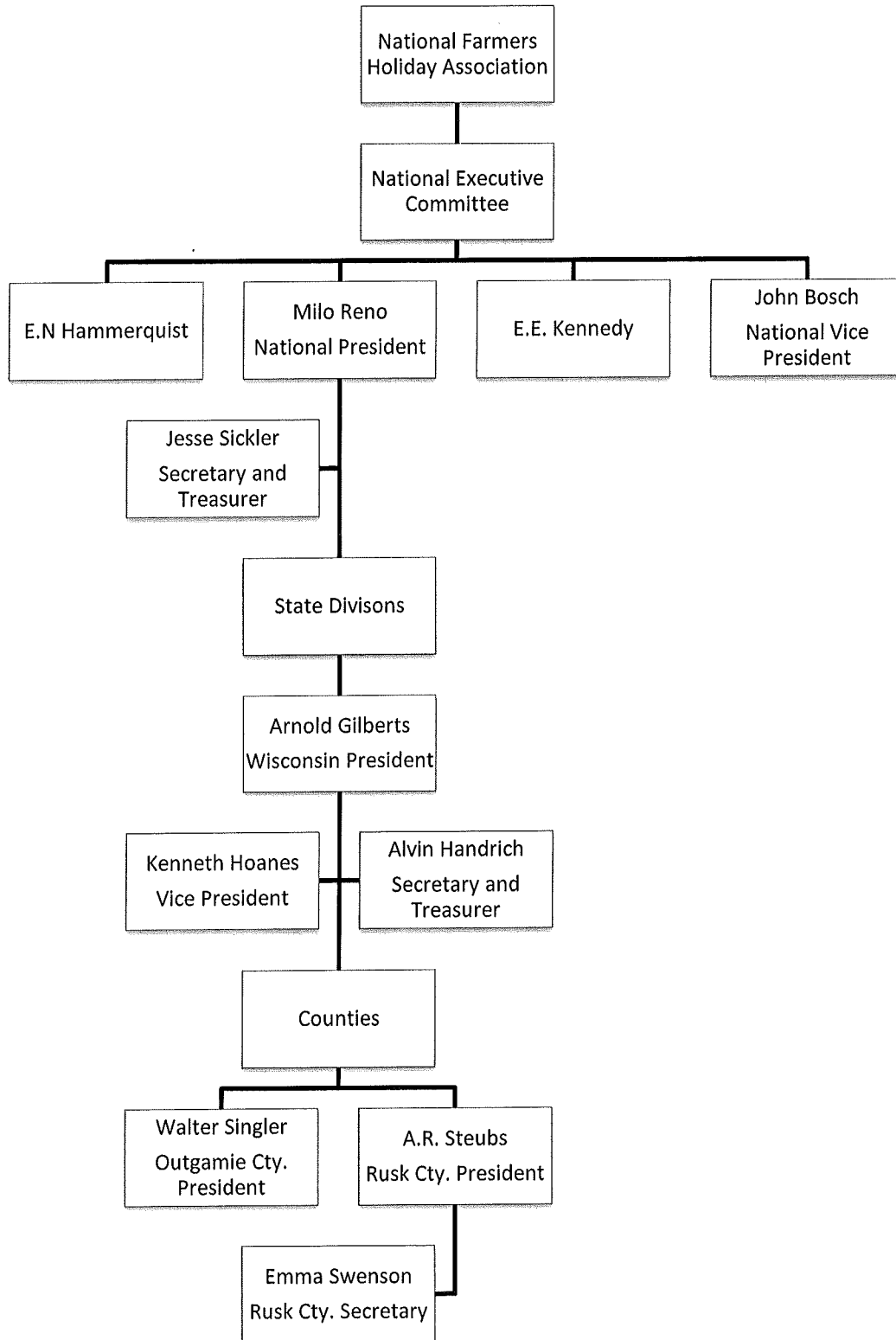
<sup>16</sup> White, 193.

this mindset, putting Kennedy and himself on the same page in terms of the interpretation of the political unrest occurring in the agrarian Midwest.

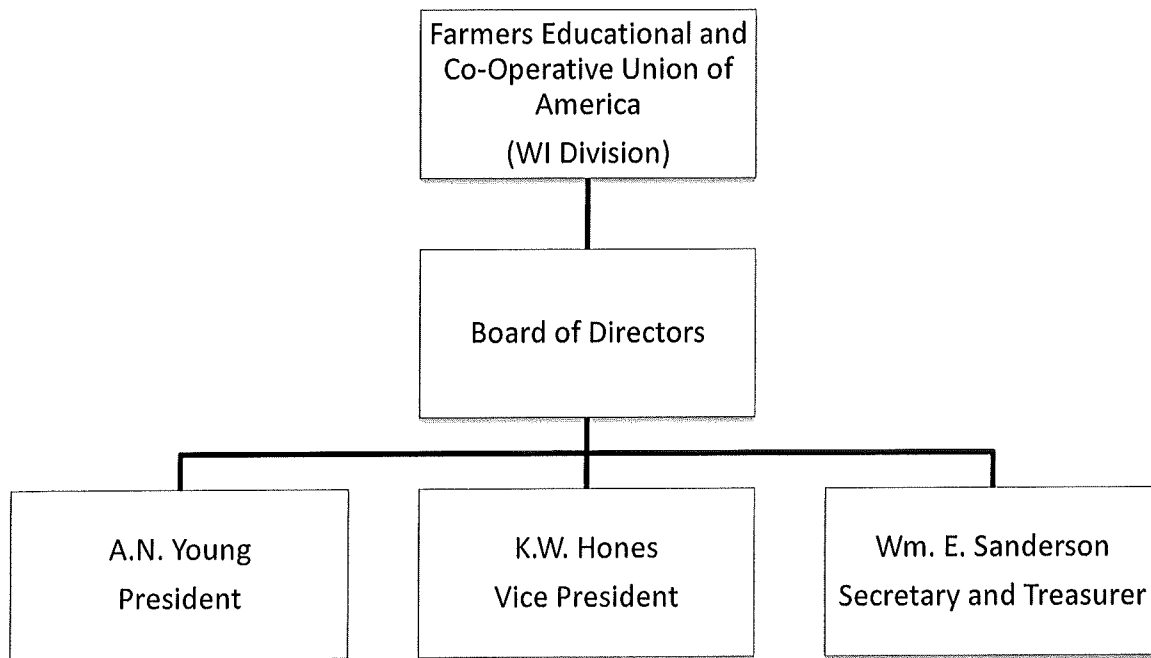
Most of the research behind Luoma's work originates not from secondary works that deal with the Farmers' Holiday, but with large newspapers of the time. These include the *Farmer-Labor Leader*, the *New York Times*, and the *Minneapolis Journal*. What was strange was that there was no reference to the Holiday's own newspaper, *Farm Holiday News*, in Luoma's work. There are many articles in the *Farmer-Labor Leader* that tie nicely in with Glad's work on the political sphere. In Glad's writing he talks often about the formation of the Famer-Labor Progressive Federation. Luoma might agree that this alliance was an acceptable solution to the union of farmers and laborers, since with the support of progressives in the state of Wisconsin, farmers would get noticed on the political scene, although later in the FLPF the farmers slowly started being ignored.

Much of the research of the field concentrates either on the NFHA or Milo Reno himself, leaving out some of the most important people: the local farmers actually going out to the streets to picket and withhold their products. The material on local farmer contributions is lacking, and this is where my paper fits in. I hope that my work can make a case for revealing the efforts of local farmers such as Olin and Emma Swenson by showing that their contributions to farm movements such as the NFHA were just as important as the efforts of the leaders. Expanding this list by writing about Olin and Emma Swenson as important farm activists in bringing the NFHA to Wisconsin will be an important aspect of this paper.

**Figure Two: Leaders of the Farm Holiday Movement**



**Figure Two: Leaders of the Farm Holiday Movement (cont'd)**



### III: The National Farmers Holiday Association (NFHA)

After the First World War concluded, farmers of the United States were in a precarious position. The situation that the farmer found himself in was best described by Senator Henrike Shipstead of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party from Minnesota in 1926:

Let us go back to the year 1919, the year the armistice was signed, and follow events leading up to the present time. During that year the American farmer was told that it would take the world 15 to 20 years to get back to a normal surplus of food; that the world would come to the United States to get its food; that it was the duty of the American farmer to increase production to feed the world. The cry was: 'Produce more! Produce more!' He was told that in order to produce more he must increase his facilities for production. He was told that if he did not have the capital to finance this increased production he should go to the bank and borrow the money. The farmers responded, they went heavily in debt, as they were urged to do.<sup>17</sup>

During wartime and immediately after the First World War, prices rose; they then plummeted harshly. Commodity prices remained low for the first half of the 1920s. Some crops, such as corn, rose in price, but even this crop earned only 95 percent of parity, since the price of the products farmers bought also inflated.<sup>18</sup> The First World War had also pushed the farmer into relying more heavily on the cash economy. As the demands for food surplus rose during the war, farmers planted more land, and with that came greater costs of maintenance. Tractors often replaced horses, and this efficiency gave farmers reason to buy more land. Instead of being able to breed their horses and feed them with their own crops, farmers had to buy tractors, along with the supplies to run them. Expenses from gasoline, oil, and spare parts were now requirements to do the work.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Luoma, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Lowell Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1986), 84. Parity is defined as the equivalence in value at a fixed ratio between moneys and goods. Below 100 percent parity would mean a loss, while over 100 percent parity would be a profit.

<sup>19</sup> Dyson, 84.

The push for agricultural relief at a national level started with the McNary-Haugen Farm Relief Bill, which was first introduced in 1924. Co-authored by Charles L. McNary (R-Oregon) and Gilbert N. Haugen (R-Iowa), a federal agency would be fashioned to sustain and look after domestic farm prices by attempting to maintain price levels that existed before the First World War. By purchasing surpluses and selling them overseas, the federal government would take losses that would be paid for through fees against farm producers. The bill was vetoed numerous times, and was never implemented. Although this would have helped wheat products, it would not have been especially helpful to dairy. These conditions would lead to protests, especially in Iowa during the Cow War.

The Holiday Movement began in Iowa, through a conflict that many call the Cow War. Normally a peaceful area for farmers, the Agricultural Depression of the 1920s changed the environment a great deal in Iowa, especially in Cedar County. What put most of the farmers in Iowa in 1931 was the testing of cows for tuberculosis. The state began requiring TB testing on cows in order to prevent contamination of milk and protect those who were drinking it from the disease. Most farmers did not have an issue with this, but the depression made it a struggle to fund these testing operations, plus the farmers themselves could no longer choose their own local veterinarians to do the testing.<sup>20</sup> Before the state regulated testing, attempts had been made in 1926 to enroll Cedar County under the Accredited Area plan, a group of farmers filed for an injunction, arguing that the law was unconstitutional. The injunction was upheld, requiring the government to review its testing policy. The revised law came in the form of the Compulsory Testing Law of 1929; which meant the state regulated the testing--which was mandatory.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> White, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Shover, 29.

Cedar County continued to delay testing. Livestock already saw a drop in selling price, and cows that contracted TB could not be sold at regular price. Cows condemned as a reactor had to be slaughtered, and even with partial compensation by the state and federal governments, the owner lost an average of \$130 on each animal, even more if it was a bull.<sup>22</sup> This caused many farmers to become paranoid that the meat factories and veterinarians were working in tandem; they believed that the veterinarian would make a false prognosis on the animal, which could then be bought by meat factories at a largely discounted rate.<sup>23</sup> Farmers believed the tests to be unreliable, and that they were not being properly compensated for the cows lost to testing.

After a few years of testing, in 1931 Iowa farmers had had enough. Farmers from around the state traveled to Des Moines by train in order to see the law changed. The farmers met with Milo Reno, then working for the Iowa Farmers Union. Reno claimed that the farmers were in the right, and should march on the capitol to see their demands met.<sup>24</sup> The farmers' pleas fell on deaf ears, as the legislature refused to change the law. Angered by the result, the cattle farmers decided to take matters into their own hands. As testing continued, farmers began resisting the veterinarians. Farmers would turn testers away, mostly with simple harassment. Eventually, state law officials were ordered to accompany the veterinarians to complete their testing. Iowa farmers responded by gathering large crowds of people to carry the officials off of the land.

Governor Dan Turner of Iowa was running out of options. In August 1931, he recruited about 80 more deputies to enforce the tuberculin testing. The farmers caught wind of the recruitment, and assembled nearly 500 farmers. The deputies attempted to disperse the crowd using tear gas, but the farmers would not back down. In fact, they turned and fought the police

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Choate, *Disputed Ground: Farm Groups That Opposed the New Deal Agricultural Program* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 43.

<sup>23</sup> White, 50.

<sup>24</sup> White, 59.

force, causing them to retreat. That was the final straw for Governor Turner.<sup>25</sup> After this incident, the National Guard was called out to quell the uprising. This finally proved effective, and resistance against the tuberculin testing quieted. The herds were tested, and a few of the opposition were put in jail for conspiring to violate the Iowa tubercular law. The Iowa Farmers Union used the Cow War to direct disgruntled farmers into joining their ranks. In 1932 alone, the Farmers Union claimed 9,600 new members.

Feeling the impact of the national Depression in 1931, more farmers could not keep up with the cost of paying off their mortgages, and many were forced to go into foreclosure. Luckily for them, the other neighboring farmers utilized certain tactics to return the land and its goods to the unfortunate farmer. Penny sales were fairly common throughout the depression years. In order for the penny sale to be successful, farmers would purposely flood the auction houses when the land would go up for sale. With most of the farmers in on the deal, when the land came up for bidding, farmers would bid only a few cents. Following that bid, no other farmer would raise the prices, thus selling the land for dirt cheap.<sup>26</sup> If bidding proved unsuccessful, officials could be physically restrained so they could not call the auction. John Bosch sat on a marshal for an hour so he could not call an auction.<sup>27</sup> Others used scare tactics to get people to think twice about bidding. Some farmers would hang ropes over tree branches outside the auction houses. Others would use their wives to distract the bidders. One woman took off the pants of the auctioneer and locked him in the barn and left him.<sup>28</sup>

By 1931, compared to pre-World War I, farm prices were plummeting with no end in sight. Hogs were being sold for three cents a pound, cattle for five cents, and corn for 10 cents

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<sup>25</sup> Shover, 32.

<sup>26</sup> White, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Dyson, 88.

<sup>28</sup> Choate, 46.

per bushel.<sup>29</sup> It seemed as though the striking bug had finally bitten the farmer. Following a long chain of strikers ranging from railroad workers to coal miners, the farmers were losing patience with their situation. Surveys were taken showed that not only farmers were stretched, but their wives were as well. Most farm wives worked 12 to 13 hours a day, helping with the milking, and even helping take care of the livestock. Only 26 percent had gas or electric lights, and only 24 percent had running water.<sup>30</sup> Some people were sympathetic towards farmers. Senator Arthur Capper of Kansas recognized that "I am afraid that we too often forget or overlook the very fundamental part that the farmer plays not only in business but in our very existence...A strike in the coal mines paralyzes business; but a strike by the farmers would utterly destroy business because it would destroy life itself."<sup>31</sup> Others shared the same viewpoint. One writer claimed that the farmer "has the strangle hold on business if he pleases to use it. The farmer does not want to use his power in that way. America did not want to go to war but was driven into it."<sup>32</sup> The farmers were looking for answers, and a local Iowa Farmers Union leader would be the one to rally the American farmer under one banner. That man was Milo Reno.

Milo Reno, born in Iowa in 1866, joined the Iowa Farmers Union in 1918. By 1921 he had risen up the ranks from secretary-treasurer to president. A green-backer and an inflationist, he believed that only with an expanded currency could the economy pay cost of productions prices to farmers.<sup>33</sup> Reno first proposed his resolution to the Corn Belt Committee in 1927 that "If we cannot obtain justice by legislation, the time will have arrived when no other course

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<sup>29</sup>Choate, 28.

<sup>30</sup>White, 66.

<sup>31</sup>Cited in White, 66.

<sup>32</sup>Cited in White, 66.

<sup>33</sup>Shover, 26.

remains that organized refusal to deliver the products of the farm at less than production costs."<sup>34</sup> This mission would come to fruition years later in the formation of the Farmer Holiday Association.

Both Milo Reno and John Bosch of Minnesota shared the idea that whenever commodity prices fell below the level of cost of production, farmers should strike and withhold their produce from market. This was echoed by John Chalmers, president of the Boone County Farmers Union. The farmers in the area agreed that they should "stay at home--buy nothing--sell nothing." This was the first organized action by farmers by means of withholding products. The idea of withholding products seemed popular among the farmers, especially those who opposed the Farm Bureau, which thought strikes and pickets were too radical. The withholding movement was primarily political in purpose, designed to apply pressure for cost of production laws and other legislation favorable to farmers. All the ideas and people came to a zenith at a meeting on May 3rd, 1932 at the state fair-grounds in Des Moines. It was at this meeting that the Farmers Holiday Association was born. Reno was elected President, and Bosch would eventually serve as Vice President. Partnered with the Farmers Union, speakers like John Simpson, President of the Farmers Union, attacked the Republicans and asked farmers to begin recruiting their friends and family to join the movement.<sup>35</sup>

Many pickets that were set up in Iowa were not ordered by Reno nor Bosch, but arose spontaneously out of the areas where the farmers' aggression and eagerness had boiled over. Now that a large organization had been set up, it was time to channel the pickets into an organized strike movement which took place on August 8th. Reno wrote about the picketing in

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<sup>34</sup> Cited in Shover, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Choate, 47.

Sioux City: "I have not favored, at any time in our farm strike movement, picketing, because of the danger of loss of life and property, although I do feel that the action of the boys on the picket line has done more to focus the attention of the powers that be to the real facts of the situation than any other thing."<sup>36</sup> One such group took the picketing very seriously. The dairy farmers in Sioux City had appealed to its distributors for a price raise. At the time, milk was bought from the farmers at two cents per quart and sold to consumers for eight cents per quart. When the distributors rejected the price restructuring, the dairy farmers organized into the Sioux Milk Producers Association. Almost immediately, roads into Sioux City were blocked by the dairy farmers. Nearly all trucks attempting to enter the city with food goods were turned back, especially those with milk. The farmers did allow certain trucks to enter, and those were the trucks that carried milk to hospitals and orphanages. The pickets used various methods to block the trucks, including using logs and hay bales to barricade the roads.<sup>37</sup>

This method of picketing was taken to the extreme by the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool. A bit more violent in focus, the WCMP was the leading militant farm organization in Wisconsin. In the fall of 1932, many Wisconsin farmers saw the popularity of the NFHA in Iowa and Minnesota, and wanted to join the movement as well. The initial meeting in Marshfield Wisconsin, set up and attended by both Olin and Emma Swenson, drew a crowd of over 5,000 farmers.<sup>38</sup> The meeting saw the official beginning of Wisconsin as a member of the NFHA. Arnold Gilberts of Dunn County would be elected president of the Wisconsin Division.<sup>39</sup> After this meeting, a relationship developed between Outagamie County Farmers

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<sup>36</sup> Cited in Shover, 48.

<sup>37</sup> Shover, 49.

<sup>38</sup> Olin Swenson letter, "Olin Swenson Papers," (microfilm) 1932, Area Research Center, William D. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>39</sup> Minutes, "Arnold Gilberts Papers." 1930-1934, Area Research Center, William D. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI.

Union President Walter Singler and Milo Reno. Reno pleaded with the new Milk Pool to wait to strike on a national level, a plea that did not sit well with the Milk Pool leaders. Singler complained to Reno, stating that waiting "is costing the farmers in the state of Wisconsin about \$60,000 a day now."<sup>40</sup> The message was very clear when President Franklin D. Roosevelt entered office. "Farmers by uniting can turn this nation upside down... We must prove that it is not money, not gold, but food that is essential... Farmers of this country must bond together without regard to political party to take what we have and get what we want."<sup>41</sup> The newly elected president of the Wisconsin Division of the NFHA, Gilberts echoed the message of the Milk Pool. "We will solve our problems with bayonets, and I do not mean maybe."<sup>42</sup>

The main milk strikes in Wisconsin took place during 1933, starting on February 15th.<sup>43</sup> Strategies utilized by the Milk Pool included milk dumping and picket lines, but more extreme measures were taken as well. Kerosene was used to taint milk products, making them unsellable. Some creameries were bombed and burned. A few strikers perished throughout this movement through accidental weapon discharges and trauma from being struck in the head. Although the protestors were aligned with the NFHA, their alliance was somewhat uneasy. Reno thought that their methods were too extreme, and would give the NFHA a bad reputation. On the other side, Singler was fed up with the slow political process that the NFHA employed to have its demands met. Singler wanted action, and his organization saw more than it may have cared to.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cited in Shover, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Glad, 412.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Glad, 413.

<sup>43</sup> Emily Rock, "Bombs, Shotguns, and Gas Grenades: Outagamie County and the 1933 Milk Strikes," *Voyageur* 30, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 2014): 32-38.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes, "Wisconsin Coop Milk Pool Records," 1933, Area Research Center, William D. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI.

In an attempt to restore order after the first milk strikes on February 15th, Wisconsin Governor Albert Schmedeman called together representatives from both parties. After convening, and the WCMP joined the NFHA as a united front. Strikes were welcomed by the WCMP when organized. Gilberts proclaimed, "We have used up all of our resources, beginning, pleading and praying for legislation. Now we are through...The legislation proposed at Washington, with all due respect to the president, is not proposed by agriculture."<sup>45</sup> The alliance would constantly be strained by Reno's decisions to call off strikes prematurely. The WCMP felt betrayed by Reno whenever a strike was called off, causing a deeper and deeper rift to form between the organizations, although the pressure the NHFA and the WCMP applied when united for farmer's rights was great.

Some farmers did not agree with the methods that the Holiday farmers were using to get their point across. Some farmers attempted to plow their trucks through picket lines. Others sent additional people on the trucks armed with shotguns to get their trucks through pickets. As the resistance escalated, so did the picket lines. Planks of wood studded with spikes were the new standard in picket lines, and were devastatingly effective.<sup>46</sup> The picket lines were now spreading to other areas of the country, including Council Bluffs, Yankton and Omaha. Many farmers went to jail for their actions. In Council Bluffs, 60 men were arrested and jailed, and tear gas was fired on the pickets, who included women and children.

When news of the farmers' arrest was heard by other farmers, they reacted in a wave of force. Nearly 3,000 farmers flooded in to Council Bluffs to protest the alleged crimes committed against the women and children by the deputies of the city. Eventually the farmers were set free

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<sup>45</sup> Glad, 415.

<sup>46</sup> Choate, 50.

by a farmer offering his land for bail. Strikes and pickets continued to become violent. In Cushing, Iowa, deputies and farmers fought each other when trucks were being escorted along the roads. It was claimed that the farmers used pipes and sticks to strike the deputies. In Cherokee, Iowa, shots were fired at farmers by the deputies, with fourteen farmers wounded. In James, Iowa, deputies were turned away using stones and bricks by nearly 1,000 strikers.<sup>47</sup>

The effects of the strike gave the governors no choice but to call a meeting to discuss a means for preventing farm produce from reaching the markets until the farmers got their price. As a result, Reno called a truce in the strike until the governors of the NFHA states could work something out. Reno was also worried about the amount of violence that was being born between truck drivers and the picketers. At this meeting, Reno proposed a number of moratoriums, state enforced embargoes, and credit bills. The governors ultimately did nothing, and the strike loomed large again. On August 29th, eleven police officers were injured in a strike near Cushing, Iowa. The governors met on September 9th to discuss the problem.<sup>48</sup> Eventually the strike was disbanded and the roads opened again, much to the relief of Governor Turner of Iowa. Reno disbanded the strikes because he feared for the safety of the farmers that were not involved in the strikes. The strikes were becoming too violent for Reno, and violence was not a part of his plan.

The strike did not obtain the demand by farmers for the cost of production. Instead, as a separate measure of success, the plight of farmers was brought to the forefront of national attention. Once the new administration came to power, most of the farmers looked to President Franklin D. Roosevelt for answers. As the anniversary meeting of the Farm Holiday approached,

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<sup>47</sup> Choate, 50.

<sup>48</sup> Choate, 51.

it seemed that the new president had put the NFHA on the back burner. The NFHA approved a strike at its meeting on May 3rd, 1933. Just days later, it was reported that the cost of production feature was removed from the agriculture bill as it was being considered in the joint committees of Congress. Reno lamented that, "this is certainly the last straw necessary to convince the farmer that the program of the future is to reduce him to absolute serfdom."<sup>49</sup>

The signing of the Agricultural Adjustment Act into law on May 12th, 1933, just one day before the nationwide strike was to occur was a saving grace for the Roosevelt administration. The AAA's purpose was to be flexible. Secretary Henry Wallace said:

The continuous change in economic situations makes any inflexible solution certain to be found unsuitable or ineffective after a comparatively short time... Congress must enact legislation granting broad and flexible powers to the administration. It must trust for a solution of the present emergency to the exercise of sound discretion by the Chief Executive and those who carry out his program.<sup>50</sup>

Another fundamental aspect of the AAA was the acreage-limitation program. Under the act, several commodities, including corn, cotton, hogs, milk, rice, tobacco, and wheat, were limited in the amount planted or produced. The way it worked was that a farmer might remove half of his acres from production. If this plan was approved by a county committee, allocations from the AAA went to the committee and eventually to the farmer. A rental agreement was signed by the farmer and the farmer would be paid per acre to not plant crops. The acreage limitation was designed to raise farm incomes in different ways. One way was that it provided direct cash payments to farmers. Granted, this program was completely voluntary, so one could enter it based on their own volition. In fact, the program was not designed to be permanent. The

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<sup>49</sup> Choate, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Murray R. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States: 1790-1950 ; a Study of Their Origins and Development* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1953), 283.

farmers hoped that by limiting their production, market prices would equal or pass parity price, thus eliminating the need for the program all together. Once this happened, the program could be scrapped.<sup>51</sup>

The adoption of the AAA made Reno nervous about carrying out the rest of the strike. At the time, he was in Saint Paul, Minnesota with the other Farm Holiday leaders. That evening, Reno sent out telegrams to the various states, saying "In view of Roosevelt's farm statement, at Governor Olson's request and leaders' advice, the executive committee declare a truce and suspension of the National Holiday called for Saturday, May 13th, to a later date, date to be determined on the effectiveness of federal legislation."<sup>52</sup> It seemed as though Reno was willing to give the new President a chance at winning over the farmers of the country. After all, President Roosevelt made promises to the farmers during his campaign years. Reno explained that, "[Roosevelt] reaffirmed these pledges to the American farmer [sic]. He is entitled to sufficient time to demonstrate, first if his program is workable and second, if the law has passed will be carried out in [that] spirit."<sup>53</sup> What also made Reno and the farmers happy was President Roosevelt's decision to remove the country from the gold standard, a decision that made President Hoover look even worse since Hoover would not abandon the gold standard. The Wheeler Bill attempted to do just that, and was included in the code of the NFHA. Eventually by acts of Congress in 1933, the domestic economy was taken off the gold standard.

However, after the "wait and see" period, it was becoming clear to Reno that the AAA was not working as well as the Holiday Association hoped. Farmers became restless once again, claiming that Reno should not have called off the strike just a day after the AAA was signed into

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<sup>51</sup> Danbom, 210.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Choate, 60.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Choate, 60.

law. One farmer in Duluth wrote to Reno, pleading "Please call a national milk strike before we starve to death. We have been waiting for Secretary Wallace. But we believe he is paid off and going to sleep on the job."<sup>54</sup> Reno understood the frustration vented by the farmers. It seemed as though this new administration was almost the same stubborn group that supported Hoover and his unwillingness to implement an agricultural relief program. Almost everyone from the Holiday Association to the Farmers Union were treated as though they were not welcome and were undesirable by the federal government. Being in the same boat, it made it easy to call a joint meeting between the National Board of the Holiday Association and the official board of the Farmers Union.

Because they were being ignored on Capitol Hill, the farmers stood united behind Reno. At this point, around September 1933, Reno only needed to have said the word and farmers across the country would be ready and willing to strike. Reno sent a telegram to President Roosevelt urging him to stabilize farm prices based on production costs. Once again, the pleas fell on deaf ears. The telegram passed by the president, and when passed on to Secretary Wallace for an answer, none came. Frustrated with the appointment of Secretary Wallace, who seemed to do nothing right, Reno had petitions circulated to have Wallace removed from office. The plan was to get enough signatures from the different farm organization and personally deliver the message to President Roosevelt himself.<sup>55</sup>

As the time for the national board meeting of the Farm Holiday Association drew closer, Reno put together a plan to issue an ultimatum to President Roosevelt to persuade him to consider farmers as a part of the same group that fell under the National Industrial Recovery Act

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<sup>54</sup> Choate, 61.

<sup>55</sup> Choate, 62.

(NIRA). The purpose of this act was to eliminate bad competition between businesses by bringing industry, labor and government together to create rules of set prices. It was intended to reduce bad competition and to help workers by setting minimum wages and maximum weekly hours, as well as minimum prices at which products could be sold. Essentially, any business that did not belong to this movement was usually boycotted in favor of the NRA-sponsored program, which was strictly voluntary. The farmers wanted to participate in this Act because of the price fixation that was being done by businesses in industries. Left out of this act, Reno and the Holiday Association began pushing to be included.<sup>56</sup>

At the NFHA meeting, Reno and the other farm leaders presented the code they had been working on for some time. This proposed agricultural code called for a guarantee of the cost of production for agricultural products, a maximum work day of hours, setting of minimum wages, collective bargaining, prohibitions against child labor, and the licensing of buyers of farm commodities. The legislation within the code they hoped to pass included the Swank-Thomas Bill, which would regulate marketing of farm crops; the Frazier Bill which allowed farmers to refinance their mortgages at a low fixed rate; the Wheeler Bill which monetized silver; and the Patman Bill which would issue government treasury notes to veterans. From the outside, it looked like the farmers' own version of the NIRA. This code was to be presented to President Roosevelt, and if he failed to comply, the farmers would once again withhold all farm products.<sup>57</sup> The committee appointed to deliver the code consisted of John Bosch, national vice-president of the Holiday Association, E.E. Kennedy, national secretary of the Farmers Union, and Harry Parmenter, state president of the Nebraska division of the Holiday Association.

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<sup>56</sup> Benedict, 285.

<sup>57</sup> Choate, 64.

Since President Roosevelt was out of his office during their visit, their attention and presentation instead rested on Agricultural Secretary Henry Wallace. Bosch reported that "there was a great deal of discussion with Wallace." It seemed Wallace was okay with giving a minimum price for farm products along with the stopping the destruction of food. The decision to destroy some six million pigs fell to Secretary Wallace. In order to prevent the hogs from saturating the market, Wallace persuaded farmers to slaughter the large amount of pigs, along with plowing up around 10 million acres of cotton that had already been planted that spring. Many farmers saw this event as criminal. Reno agreed, saying "Pig infanticide were not acts of idealism in any same society...To destroy a standing crop goes against the soundest instincts of human nature...For the government to destroy food and reduce crops is wicked."<sup>58</sup> Another leader was quoted saying, "That we should have idle and hungry and ill-clad millions on the one hand, and so much food and wool and cotton upon the other that we do not know what to do with it, this is an utterly idiotic situation, and one which makes a laughing stock of our genius as a people." The fact of the matter was that Wallace was not seen as a savior to many farmers.<sup>59</sup>

The meetings with the higher powers made little progress. The one thing that could be taken away from the meeting was a promise from President Roosevelt to prevent foreclosures and loss of property of farmers, with which Reno was pleased. Reno said, "While our demands were not acted upon...they were considered in a friendly spirit, and the right of the farmer to come under the NRA with a code providing cost of production was conceded by the President and the heads of the Department of Agriculture and the NRA."<sup>60</sup> After deliberating with his cabinet on October 20th 1933, President Roosevelt settled on loaning the farmers money to buy

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<sup>58</sup> Cited in Kennedy, 205.

<sup>59</sup> Kennedy, 205.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Choate, 66.

seeds for planting. This was not enough to satisfy Reno or the disgruntled farmers who were once again itching for a strike based on the inactions of the AAA and President Roosevelt. The following day, Reno called for a strike and asked the other regional farm leaders if they favored striking. Almost all the states reported being for striking. Writing about the failed attempt in Washington, Reno contradicted himself, admitted that "this came as no surprise to me. Secretary Wallace has been opposed to the Farmers Union and the Holiday program and obstructed it in every way possible."<sup>61</sup> In the end, the strikes were proving to be ineffective. Reno would become frustrated with President Roosevelt and Secretary Wallace, and ultimately turned his back on them once he realized his plan would not be implemented. Reno exclaimed in October of 1933, "The people of this country are today BEING NAILED TO THE CROSS by politicians and Labor Union Officials, and there is no one going to suffer more than this FOOLISH NRA-AAA PROGRAM than the farmer himself."<sup>62</sup>

The united front of the NFHA was becoming broken. There was a disconnect between the Holiday Association board and the local farmers. Some farmers did not even realize strikes were occurring. If one town was striking while surrounding towns were not, the strikes and pickets were substantially weaker. The calling off of strikes by officials such as Reno also contributed a great deal of confusion among farmers. One farmer in Wisconsin wrote to Reno, stating "Confusion reigns relative to strike in Wisconsin... We are pressed for actual status of strike and must have word direct from you. Papers are filled with propaganda."<sup>63</sup>

People were not simply confused, though. Funds for running such as large organization were completely depleted. Trips to give speeches were costly; just keeping the *Farm Holiday*

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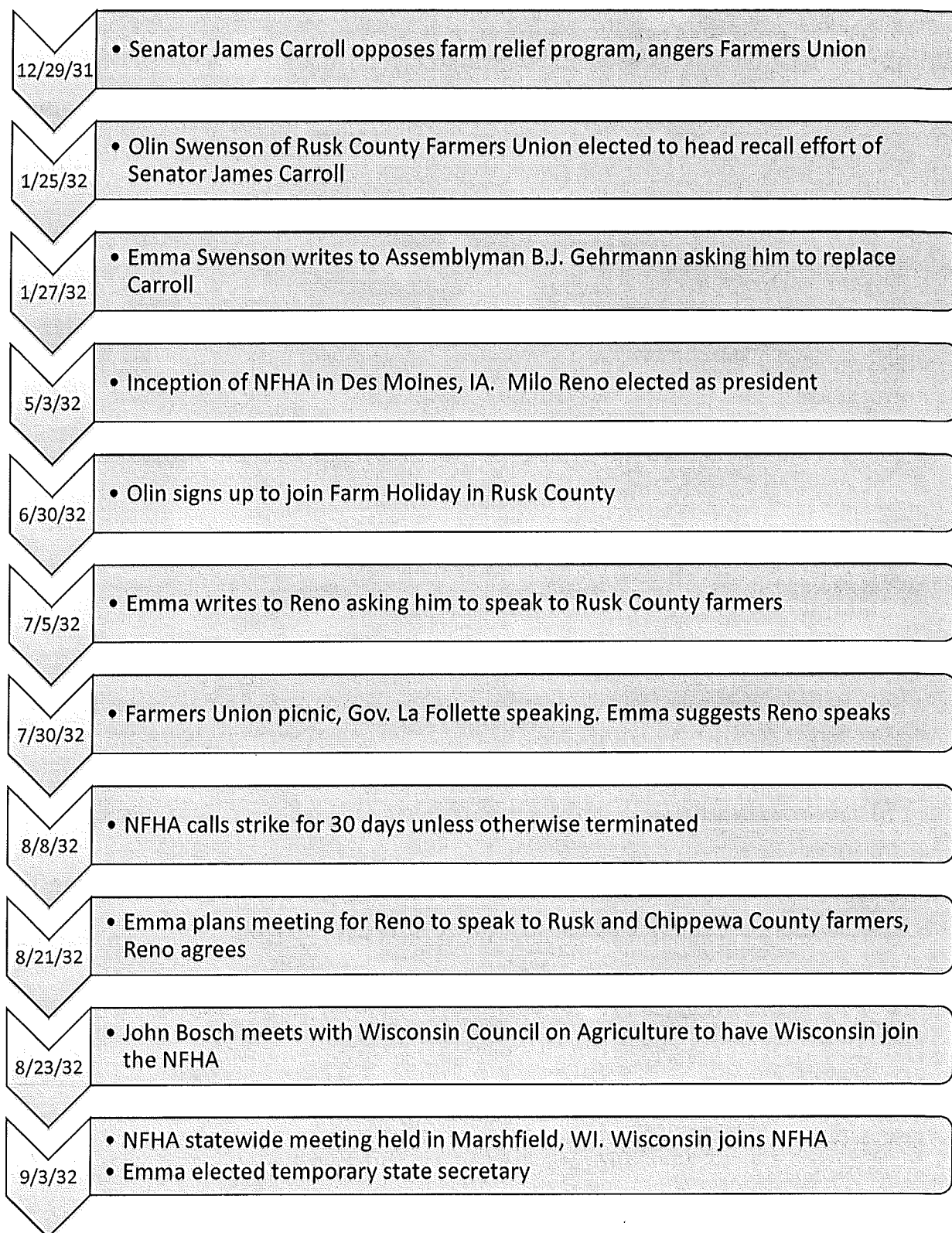
<sup>61</sup> Choate, 69.

<sup>62</sup> Glad, 418.

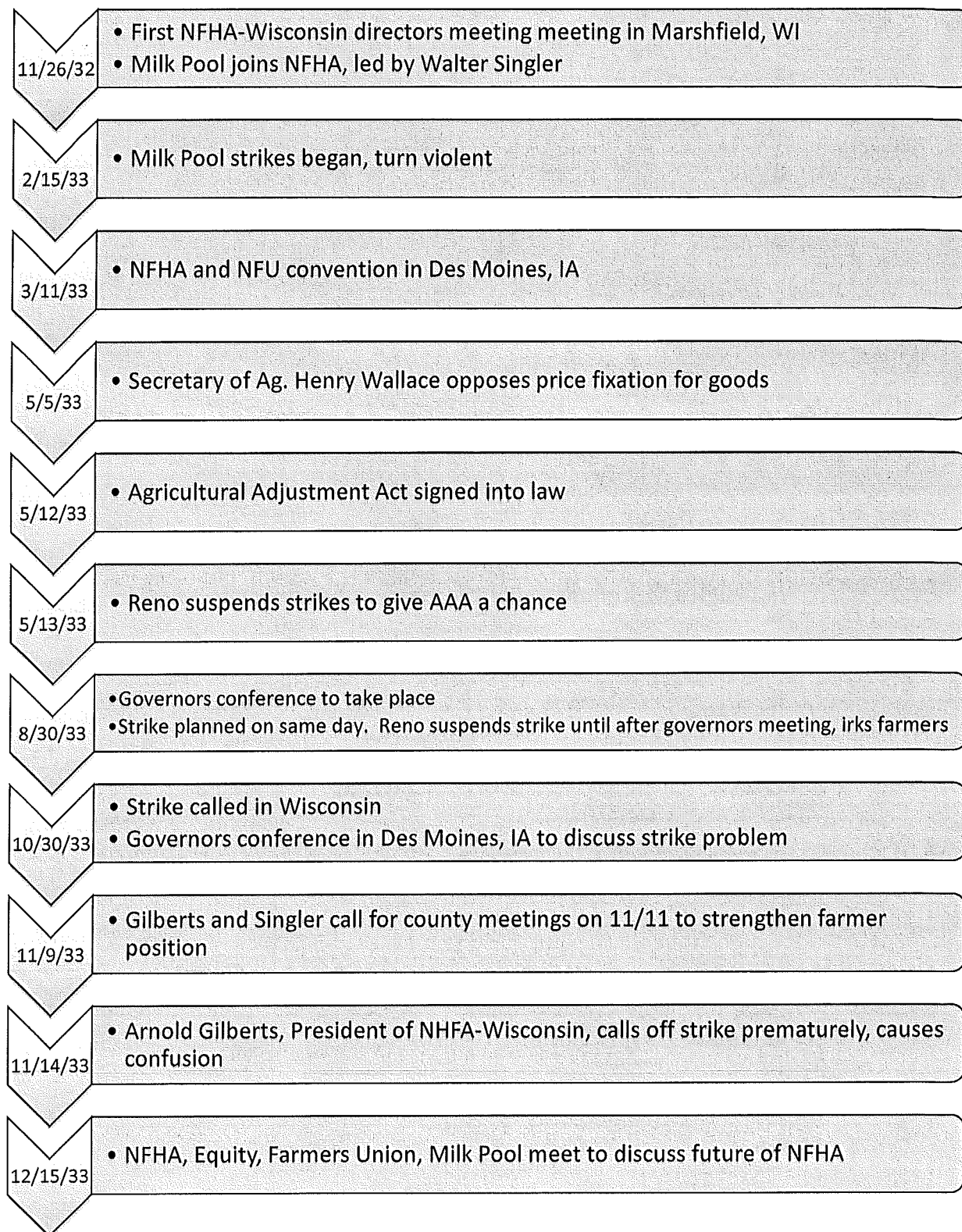
<sup>63</sup> Choate, 68.

*News* running became difficult. Most of the farmers did not have the money to continue supporting the organization, and throughout the years that did not change. Many official representatives had to start paying for their expenses out of their own pockets. Without the donations coming in from the farmers, the NFHA was crumbling.

Overshadowed by the AAA, the NFHA fizzled out. The knockout punch for the organization came in 1936 with the death of its leader, Milo Reno. The group did not succeed in its goal to get the farmer's cost of production. What it did accomplish was bring the farmer's plight to the national foreground through an organization on a scale never seen by the world. No American farm organization would ever to grow to be as large, influential, or exciting as did the NFHA.

**Figure Three: Timeline**

**Figure Three: Timeline (cont'd)**



#### IV: Olin and Emma Swenson

On December 2 1888, a couple in Hollandale Wisconsin welcomed a new son to their family, Olin Swenson. His parents, John Swenson and Anna Ballerud, lived on a farm with a family of six. The members of the Swenson family were typical farmers in Hollandale; they lived on a livestock farm, and along with children, and tended to the fields on a daily basis. John Swenson was not only a farmer, but also worked as a schoolteacher. Politically a progressive, John realized the importance of education among all members of his family. In this spirit, he made sure his son, Olin, would get an education. When Olin was old enough, he attended Platteville Normal School. It was there that Olin studied economics, and would be exposed to writings on socialism. The socialist economic structure appealed to Olin, and it was through his interest in the economic structure that he became enveloped in the political world.<sup>64</sup>

At the age of 18, Olin wanted to further his involvement in the socialist movement in Wisconsin. That year Olin attended a socialist meeting in Madison. It was at this meeting Olin officially joined the Socialist Party, and he would take its ideologies back home with him. Finally, in 1913, Olin would go out on his own and make a name for himself. He moved to Holcombe in Chippewa County, and there he had his own herd that he worked to sell cream and other dairy goods. Olin was an influence on his neighbors, as local children would go over to his house in order to spend time with Olin. Olin also acted as an agitator in the months leading up to the First World War. Olin's reputation as a socialist, and thus anti-war, were renowned in Holcombe. During the war, buying liberty bonds was seen as an expression of one's patriotism, and many people jumped on the bandwagon to support American allies in Europe. Olin did not

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<sup>64</sup> Olin Swenson Interview, May 1975, Friends of Olin and Emma Swenson Collection, Area Research Center, William D. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI.

want anything to do with the war and thus refused to purchase the bonds offered to him. For this reason, many people called him a pro-German and un-American.<sup>65</sup>

Even through his unpopularity, Olin stuck to his convictions and carried on with his dreams. In Holcombe, just after he arrived, Olin organized a local socialist party that would rally farmers and other laborers to the song of socialism. It was a small organization, with dues only being ten cents a month. Unfortunately for him, the war changed a lot of people's mentalities. Socialism was losing out to nationalism after the war started. Many of the state socialists decided to put their push for political reform on hold as the nation entered the Great War, laying down their socialist voices and picking up a nationalist voice. For Olin, this was unacceptable, and he was disappointed that the Socialist Party disbanded in order to fight the War in Europe, a war that Olin did not support.<sup>66</sup>

Olin's fight against this wartime patriotism would not end there. In Holcombe, patriotic meetings were common to rally workers under the banner of the American war machine on the home front. At one such meeting, a campaign began that would put Holcombe in place to further support the war in its factories and fields. Bob Zimmerman, nominated as mayor of Holcombe, was a man ready to support the troops across the Atlantic Ocean. When it came time to vote, which in this case was a public 'yes or no,' Olin was almost alone in his opposition to Zimmerman. The crowd became judgmental and angry with Olin and the naysayers, who would not unite with the rest of the crowd to bring Zimmerman into power. After the meeting, nationalists in the crowd made the naysayers kiss the American flag in order to show their allegiance to the United States. Anyone who refused was seen as a pro-German, and therefore an

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<sup>65</sup> Olin Swenson Interview, May 1975, Friends of Olin and Emma Swenson Collection.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

enemy to the state. When it came to Olin, his friends who attended with him stood up for him, and told the men not to lay a hand on him. They described Olin as more American than anyone at the meeting. With the defense from friends, the crowd disbanded and Olin was left unharmed, without having to "show his allegiance."<sup>67</sup>

As the war passed, people began to revert back to their former political allegiances. The socialists returned to their posts and began pushing for political change in the states. Olin, remaining vigilant to the socialists, continued his political endeavors. In 1920, Olin traveled to Chicago to sharpen his ideologies, as socialism had a strong foothold in that area. It was there that Olin handed out literature to workers in order to promote his political party. That same year, Olin voted for Eugene Debs on the presidential ticket. Even though Debs ran for president from prison that year, Olin called himself a disciple of Debs, and always supported his cause. In fact, Olin had one of Debs' famous quotes hanging from his wall in his home: "While there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." Debs inspired Olin, never ceasing to rest until he championed his causes.<sup>68</sup>

Olin not only supported the socialist cause by working in the background of the political scene, but also was a candidate himself. During the 1922 election for the United States House of Representatives, Olin was on the ballot as a socialist candidate. Olin ran against Republican James A. Frear in Wisconsin's 10<sup>th</sup> district. After the election, Olin never heard from the State what his vote count was. So Olin traveled to Madison to check his vote count, which happened

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<sup>67</sup> Olin Swenson Interview, May 1975, Friends of Olin and Emma Swenson Collection.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

to be 444 votes out of more than 30,000.<sup>69</sup> This was a small amount, but any amount added fuel to his fire.

Leading debates and meetings around the area, Olin was a very active representative for the party. He met many people during the 1920s, and none were as important as Emma Bartz. Emma, a native of the Chippewa Valley, met Olin at one of the local farmers union social gatherings. Her first impression was amicable, but she never expected to marry Olin. The two wed on April 20, 1924. The union strengthened their loyalties to one another, and through that, to their own socialist ideals. On the couple's honeymoon in St. Paul Minnesota, they noticed a sign stating that Debs would be speaking at the armory in St. Paul. They could not resist, and the couple attended the speech.<sup>70</sup> As Olin was involved in the socialist movements, Emma would eventually make a name for herself in the farmers movement, and not simply through Olin. Rare as it was for a woman during this time, Emma created her own identity in the movement. Even marriage could not deny Olin a chance to listen to his teacher and idol, Eugene Debs.

Olin continued to support other politicians that could help the country, including those in the Progressive Party. In Wisconsin, the La Follette family held power and trumpeted the cause of Progressives. Before Olin was influenced by the ideology of socialism, he supported Bob La Follette, Sr.<sup>71</sup> If a socialist candidate was not on the ballot, Olin would give his support to the Progressives. It is worth noting, however, that many persons confused his socialist leanings and attributed it to communism. Olin was never involved with the Communist Party, many members of which were targets of the Espionage Act of 1917.

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<sup>69</sup> Wisconsin. *The State of Wisconsin Blue Book*. Madison, Wis: Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau, 1923, p. 574.

<sup>70</sup> Reminiscence of Olin Swenson Relating to Eugene Debs, April 17, 1978, Friends of Olin and Emma Swenson Collection, Area Research Center, William D. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Since many farmers lost their farms or simply could not get a decent wage during the Depression, many went to the cities to find work. When the farmers were hired, businesses were able to pay them less than they paid typical laborers because the farmers did not have a workers' union. Olin recognized this as unethical, and he began organizing and participating in the strikes. Eventually, the strikes were so big that the sheriff stepped in. Olin was taken to jail for 10 days for being a strike leader. Instead of keeping quiet, Olin continued to protest while he remained in jail. Later that year, Olin rounded up attorneys for his trial and faced a judge in court. The court deemed that a sentence of six months in prison would be adequate, a sentence that shocked Olin when he heard it. Luckily for him, the sentence was suspended. In jail, Olin was not a nuisance. In fact, Olin was honored in jail for standing up for the little man in order to get a fair wage in the factories for his fellow farmers.<sup>72</sup>

Most of Olin and Emma Swenson's activities began with their involvement in the local farmers union. The Swensons were both members of the Rusk County Farmers Union. In the beginning of 1932 in Ladysmith, WI, they evolved from a small town couple to indispensable tools in the fight for farmers cost of production. The Farmers Union saw members from the Birch Creek Flambeau Local Farmers Union, of which Olin was president, and from the Sunny Blue Hill Local of American Society of Equity. On January 25, 1932, the Rusk County Farmers Union was fighting a political battle over the election of Senator James Henry Carroll.<sup>73</sup> Senator Carroll was a Republican and a banker, a combination that did not sit well with the local farmers union. Furthermore, in December of 1931, the Farmers Union publicly refused to support any

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<sup>72</sup> Olin Swenson Interview, May 1975, Friends of Olin and Emma Swenson Collection.

<sup>73</sup> Rusk County Farmers Union minutes, January 25, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm), Area Research Center, William D. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI.

newspaper that opposed Governor Phillip La Follette's relief program.<sup>74</sup> Senator Carroll opposed the program, which was the main reason the Farmers Union wanted him recalled. Olin also wanted the socialization of health care to remedy its cost. The Farmers Union nominated Olin, "as a committee of one" to take charge of the recall work. Olin set out to remove Senator Carroll from power. The local Farmers Union targeted Assemblyman B.J. Gehrman of Mellon to take Carroll's place, with Gehrman being an officer of the American Society of Equity.<sup>75</sup> It was also during this time that Emma was elected as secretary for the Farmers Union. Although the recall effort was unsuccessful, Carroll would lose to Gehrman in the 1932 election.

Following this meeting, local newspapers wrote about the farmers union and their desire to recall Senator Carroll. On January 27, 1932 Emma wrote a letter to Assemblyman B.J. Gehrman asking if he would accept the nomination that was put forth by the local farmers union.<sup>76</sup> At first, Gehrman was reluctant to accept the position, but eventually accepted the nomination. The relationship between Gehrman and the Swensons would continue into the NFHA era. As Emma wrote to Gehrman, on February 8th, Olin wrote a letter to C.C. Dearhammer, of the Sunny Blue Hill Local of the American Society of Equity.<sup>77</sup> Both men were dedicated to the cause of the farmer, and Dearhammer served the farmers just as Olin and Emma did.

As the Depression worsened, so did the conditions of the farmers. Many were struggling to sell their goods, and the winter months were especially straining on the locals. Politicians frequently wrote to the newspaper that people needed to stock up for the winter. In Chippewa Falls' case, on April 19th Mayor W.F. Crane publicly pled with the people to help themselves

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<sup>74</sup> Rusk County Farmers Union proclamation, December 29, 1931. Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>75</sup> Wisconsin. *The State of Wisconsin Blue Book*. Madison, Wis: The Bureau, 1933, p. 219.

<sup>76</sup> Rusk County Farmers Union correspondence, January 27, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Olin Swenson to C.C. Dearhammer, February 8, 1932. Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

and not expect to get any help from the government. In the *Herald Telegram*, Crane wrote that the taxes in the area could not be relied on for employment relief. Therefore, his solution was a rutabaga and cabbage diet during the winter months. Crane suggested that driftwood should be used instead to save money for the farmers who could not afford or supply their own wood for fires.<sup>78</sup>

Olin wrote his own response to this article on April 30. Olin replied that he was skeptical of the mayor's plan. Olin thought the end result of the mayor's plan would result in food raids and an "every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost" mentality.<sup>79</sup> Instead, Olin suggested to the mayor that additional food items should be added to this rutabaga and cabbage diet, including milk, cheese, and meat. Additionally, to solve the unemployment problem in the area, Olin suggested to "rent" unemployed or delinquent workers to work the farms needed for extra supplies.<sup>80</sup> The article was met with praise from others who saw the insight in hiring the unemployed to tend to the farms.

On May 13, Iver Bergstrom, the figure in the area who ran the Poor Farm, wrote to Olin that he agreed with his plan. Bergstrom stated that there were many men who could work the farms. The poor farms during this day were nearly all over capacity with farmers who had lost their land and had nowhere to work.<sup>81</sup> The beauty of the plan, Bergstrom wrote, was that it was not a handout, which many farmers and working men did not want. Handouts were damaging to their pride in being able to provide for their families. Instead, it allowed working men to perform honest work and earn their keep, a win-win for both parties. In response to this on May 29th, Olin wrote a personal letter to Bergstrom. Olin stated that the conditions were getting

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<sup>78</sup> *Herald Telegram* clipping, April 19, 1932. Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Olin Swenson to W.F. Crane, January 27, 1932. Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Olin Swenson to W.F. Crane, January 27, 1932. Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Iver Bergstrom to Olin Swenson, May 13, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

worse in the area. Many farmers struggled to stay afloat, which had forced farmers into the factories, where they were exploited for cheap labor. Olin blamed Henry Ford and held him accountable for exploiting laborers for their price, although many were not directly working for Ford.<sup>82</sup> Olin made the argument that if people like Ford got their price, why not farmers in Rusk County? In order for a change of this magnitude to occur, a change in the politicians and who was running the government must occur, Olin thought.

Just after Olin wrote this letter, he began taking more notice of the NFHA. During this time, the NFHA was strong in the surrounding states of Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. Wisconsin was not yet involved in the Holiday movement, but the Farmers Union saw a need for political pressure in order to meet the needs of the farmer. This fueled Olin's desire to get Wisconsin into the NFHA. In June of 1932, recruitment of farm holiday interest began in Wisconsin. The Rusk County Farmers Union began gathering signatures of its members to join the Farm Holiday. Among the signatures was Olin Swenson's.<sup>83</sup> As soon as the Rusk County Farmers Union wanted to get involved, its focus shifted to organizing strikes. At the end of the month, on June 30th, strike meetings were organized in Sheldon, Weyerhauser, Ladysmith, and Glen Flora.

Now that support and interest in the NFHA was piqued, it was time to communicate with the NFHA directly in order to build relations for their landing in Wisconsin. On July 5, Emma Swenson wrote a letter to the president of the NFHA, Milo Reno. In the letter, Emma asked if Reno would address the questions that many farmers had regarding the NFHA and its goals. Emma's goal was to get Reno to come to Rusk County and possibly recruit more people to join

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<sup>82</sup> Letter from Olin Swenson to Iver Bergstrom, May 29, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>83</sup> Rusk County Farmers Union correspondence, June 30, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

the movement, or help the undecided farmers who do not know if the NFHA was the way to give the farmers a united voice. Emma admitted in the letter to Reno that the Farmers Union in Rusk County was not all that popular, but there was interest in the Equity group. Rusk County was unique in that the Equity assisted the Farmers Union. Emma believed the organization “must remain non-partisan.”<sup>84</sup>

Reno replied, agreeing with her and attempting to set up a meeting date that would draw in a crowd. The only issue was that Reno was too busy to go the meeting himself, and therefore, gave John Bosch, Executive Secretary of the NFHA, the go-ahead to travel in his place. Emma knew that Governor Philip La Follette was to speak at the Farmers Union picnic, so in order to piggyback off of the audience that would be present for that meeting, she suggested that Reno come to Wisconsin after the picnic, which was held on July 30.<sup>85</sup> The date discussed ended up being August 21, 1932 in Ladysmith. In order to make the meeting more convenient, Reno proposed to Emma to combine the Chippewa meeting and the Rusk County meeting into one. Emma posted an ad in the paper that called all the farmers in the area to attend a meeting in order to get the word around. Even people such as B.J. Gehrman would have been in attendance, if he was not already booked for another speech elsewhere. Gehrman expressed his support for the meeting in a letter to Emma even though he would be absent.<sup>86</sup> Around the same time, on August 1st, the NFHA made a proclamation that urged to all participating states and counties to put a strike advertisement in their local papers, starting on August 8. Although not official members of the NFHA yet, Wisconsin farmers, including many in the Rusk County Farmers Union, joined the strike movement. After the successful speech by Reno, the seeds for the

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<sup>84</sup> Letter from Emma Swenson to Milo Reno, July 5, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Emma Swenson to Milo Reno, July 28, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>86</sup> Letter from B.J. Gehrman to Emma Swenson, August 15, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

Holiday were planted. Just a few days after the NFHA visited Wisconsin, on August 23, 1932, John Bosch spoke to the Wisconsin Council of Agriculture. It was decided by popular vote in the meeting that Wisconsin could join the NFHA as a state division.<sup>87</sup> To gather the full support and gauge the popularity of this move, on September 3, it was decided that a statewide meeting be held in Marshfield, Wisconsin.

After this meeting, Emma Swenson was elected as temporary state secretary, to serve with others as transitional officers for Wisconsin. Yet a problem arose from a rift between the local Farmers Union and the State Farmers Union that almost proved disastrous. Before the mass meeting that would include the Wisconsin Council on Agriculture, a temporary state organization was set up by Wisconsin without the support of the NFHA. At the same time, without knowledge of this temporary organization, John Bosch secured endorsement of the Wisconsin Council on Agriculture to sponsor the mass meeting in order to set up a NFHA-endorsed Wisconsin state division.<sup>88</sup> His ignorance about the temporary organization was apparent when Reno expressed his interest in Wisconsin becoming a NFHA State to Emma in a letter dating August 23. If the NFHA could acquire Wisconsin, almost all of the Midwest farm states would be part of the organization.

All of the progress that was made almost came to an abrupt end. Just after the meeting between Bosch and the Wisconsin Council on Agriculture and before the statewide meeting in Marshfield, Emma claimed in a letter that the state Farmers Union undermined the temporary officers, and that A.N. Young, President of the Farmers Union, withheld the information that a temporary state organization was formed with elected officials from Reno until after the meeting.

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<sup>87</sup> Letter from John Bosch to Emma Swenson, August 23, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>88</sup> Letter from John Bosch to Emma Swenson, August 26, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

Emma partially blamed the Farmers Union for the mix-up, as she wrote to Secretary William E. Sanderson of the Farmers Union. Emma reluctantly agreed to relinquish temporary officer power in the name of cooperation, as fighting amongst one another did not help their cause in the long run.<sup>89</sup> Sanderson replied to her message stating that the Wisconsin Division of the NFHA was presented to the Wisconsin Council on Agriculture before the temporary state officials were elected, and that there was no foul play on the part of the state Farmers Union to create a breach between the groups.<sup>90</sup>

The statewide meeting in Marshfield was a success for the Wisconsin Farm Holiday supporters. Milo Reno rallied the farmers in the state to join the NFHA and add another state in its push for agricultural policies to hit the federal level. Wisconsin officially joined the ranks of the NFHA with Arnold Gilberts as the state division President. As the organization moved forward, large scale strikes were organized in order to pressure politicians to act. It seemed as if everyone was on board to follow through with the strike effort. With the strikes taking effect, Wisconsin held its first state directors meeting in Marshfield, on November 26. It was also there that the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool joined the NFHA.<sup>91</sup> Although these farmers wanted more action than what was being taken by the NFHA, they recognized the power and influence that the NFHA held.

The farmers of Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Nebraska saw a much more united front entering 1933. A national convention including both the NFHA and the National Farmers Union was held in Des Moines, Iowa on March 3. Emma continued her correspondence with many farm leaders and political sympathizers. Olin continued his advocacy

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<sup>89</sup> Letter from Emma Swenson to William Sanderson, August 31, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>90</sup> Letter from William Sanderson to Emma Swenson, September 2, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>91</sup> Wisconsin Division NFHA correspondence, November 26, 1932, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

for changing the politicians who continued to help the farmers. Calling for a new election of judges, Olin pushed for the election of Judge Glenn P. Turner, a man sympathetic to Olin's cause. B.J. Gehrmann, now a senator and the president of the Equity group, wrote to Emma about the strike in Wisconsin. Although the motivation was there, Gehrmann wanted a program that would take care of products that were being withheld.<sup>92</sup> Just days before this correspondence, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace issued a statement that the strikes were actually a bad idea and opposed any fix of prices for farm goods.<sup>93</sup>

Farmers did not have to wait long for a program, as the Agricultural Adjustment Act was signed into law on May 12. Members of the NFHA used a "wait and see" policy in the coming months to gauge the success of the AAA and whether or not to start striking again. Just four days after the governor's conference in May, the State Executive Board of the NFHA in Wisconsin decided that the strike should resume. Reports from the Wisconsin Poultry Improvement Association reported eggs were above the cost of production; thus they were removed from the list of goods to withhold.<sup>94</sup> Encouraged with successes such as these, the farmers were happy to see some progress, after years of organizing just to take action. Days later on August 9, President Gilberts and Walter Singler called for county meetings to strengthen the farmers' position, which would take place on the August 13.<sup>95</sup> A brief period of peace would follow.

After some time, in October the strikes began once more. A large strike in Wisconsin was announced to take place on October 30, 1933. Unfortunately for the strike, a governor's conference was to take place on the same day in order to negotiate with the NFHA for a peaceful

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<sup>92</sup> Letter from B.J. Gehrmann to Emma Swenson, May 11, 1933, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>93</sup> Newspaper clipping, May 5, 1933, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>94</sup> Correspondence, November 3, 1933, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>95</sup> Correspondence, November 9, 1933, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

resolution to their problems.<sup>96</sup> For this reason, Milo Reno delayed the strike until after the meeting had taken place. This did not sit well with many of the members of the NFHA, who stated that Reno himself should not have the power to call off the strike. Although irked by Reno's poor timing and the governor's meeting, most farmers forgave this offense.

The leadership gave its commands to the local farmers and it seemed that the NFHA would succeed. Just as Reno decided to hold off the strike until a later date, Gilberts proclaimed a stop to striking the day after the county meetings took place. Wisconsin farmers felt betrayed and did not understand why they were not striking.<sup>97</sup> Letters rolled in to Gilberts' office explaining their discontent of the order. Some farmers had not been told properly about when to strike. Other farmers disobeyed the order and continued their county strikes. Some farmers explained that striking efforts in the area were not united, and while one county may be on strike, surrounding ones were not, making the strikes futile. In short, a disorganized front and disconnects between the leadership and its followers weakened the NFHA's foundations and proved costly, despite the efforts of Olin and Emma Swenson.

Were the Swensons successful in their undertaking to bring the NFHA to Wisconsin? The short answer is yes. Their position from before the NFHA took off as a national organization allowed them to be involved directly with Reno and his group when the NFHA took off from Iowa. The correspondence between Emma Swenson and many of the higher powers within the Farmers Union showed that her position was recognized as a significant one by Reno and Bosch. Emma wrote directly to Reno to get him to speak to the farmers in early July, not far from when the incidents in Iowa had occurred and Reno formed the Farmers Holiday

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<sup>96</sup> Correspondence, October 30, 1933, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

<sup>97</sup> Correspondence, November 14, 1933, Olin Swenson Papers (microfilm).

Association. Also, when Reno could not attend certain meetings and delegated John Bosch to take his place, Emma was the one whom which Bosch corresponded with. She took care of most of the business.

When it came time to set up a state wide meeting to attempt to include Wisconsin in the NFHA, Emma was informed of the details of Reno's travel and gave him option for lodging. From the beginning, Emma served as the secretary in the various farmers unions. Emma was one of the first communicators with the Farmers Holiday Association and because she was a woman; this was unique. Most of the positions in the Holiday movement and in the Farmers Unions were held by men. Yet Emma did not seem to get any different treatment from the people she worked with. Emma was very stern with her language and pushed hard to get her point across without being offensive, something that stands as a testament to her passion. It was also clear that Emma acted alone in her choices to support the farm holiday and its ideals. Olin was involved, of course, but it was not simply Emma following what her husband was doing. She truly believed and acted on her own will.

Although Olin Swenson did not hold an official title when the Farm Holiday came to Wisconsin, he remained active in organizing strike efforts. Yet as the times changed, he recognized who could help his cause the most, even if they were not pure socialists. This was especially important when President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office. Although Roosevelt was a Democrat, Olin recognized that the president really noticed how poorly the country was doing and vowed to do something about it. Where Emma held the secretary positions, Olin took to the streets and voting booths to reform the political scene. Olin realized the power of newspapers and consistently used them to publicize his opinions on political matters. A large fan of organized discourse, Olin set up various debates in local high schools to discuss the political

matters of his age. Olin also actively helped the farmers by creating a cooperative creamery on his land. His actions showed the locals the power of cooperatives and that there were other ways of getting by besides being mindless beings within the capitalist system.

To combat this attitude, Olin organized a welfare committee and developed a food surplus program, which gave the opportunity for other farmers to work and provide their goods to local farmers in need. Committees were organized so the people could travel to the capital in order to speak with Governor Phillip La Follette about relief for farmers. Olin's "radical" outlook had ostracized him from La Follette, and thus the other farmers prevented him from participating in the committee. Instead of traveling to Madison in 1938, Olin took to the streets and went on strike with city laboring farmers to get fair wages for those who working in the cities. He received Works Progress Administration (WPA) relief at the sum of \$44 per month.

Through the Great Depression era, the socialists were not particularly strong. For these reasons, once President Roosevelt's reelection in 1936 came around, Olin supported the incumbent. Even though Roosevelt put down the NFHA through the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Olin, like many other farmers, had faith that the AAA would do some good since Roosevelt promised to help the American farmer. This shows some of Olin's character as being loyal to the cause and not just an organization.

## V: Epilogue

Undiscouraged by the Holiday movement's failure and collapse, the Swensons' story does not end with the end of the NFHA. Their fight started before the NFHA came to be and would continue into the next decades. Although supportive of President Roosevelt for his second term, Olin was not supportive of his decision to enter into World War II. Olin would hold onto his anti-war ideology throughout his life, also protesting against the Vietnam War. He actively supported Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential campaign because of his opposition to the war in Vietnam. Olin remained active in the Socialist Party throughout his life as well. Olin was not active enough to be targeted by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. However, since Olin was a socialist, he was still frightened of Senator McCarthy and his anti-communist tactics. Olin remained active in the Socialist Party by serving as a nominee for presidential elector for the party.

The Swensons were also approached by groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and unsurprisingly turned them down on their offers to join their ranks. The Swensons supported the formation of the Group Health Cooperative in the area and were involved with Northern Thunder to protest the construction of a nuclear plant in Durand in 1972. Olin and Emma Swenson continued their legacy of supporting their local community through the formation of the surplus food program in Chippewa Falls in the 1960s. Olin Swenson died on October 27, 1980 at the age of 91, followed by Emma Swenson's death on January 21, 1982 at the age of 93.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Newspaper clipping, Friends of Olin and Emma Swenson Collection.

## VI: Conclusion

What were the Swenson's contributions to the NFHA? Both Olin and Emma supported what the NFHA was attempting to do: give farmers their price of production. In the end, it is not completely certain if the strikes did anything to improve the farmers' condition. The NFHA did not end up accomplishing its goals of the farmers getting their price, but this did not daunt the Swensons. The strikes that were organized by the NFHA sometimes did more harm than good when they turned violent, and as a whole did not seem to accomplish much in the name of stabilizing their cost of production, especially for the farmers. Times were hard, and funds ran dry. Many people did not have the means to donate their money to the NFHA, especially during the Depression.

Through it all, the Swensons were not discouraged. When the Agricultural Adjustment Act was signed into law in 1933, desperate farmers were happy to receive government subsidies not to plant on part of their land and to kill off excess livestock. As support for the AAA rose, the NFHA popularity took a hit. Eventually, many farmers of the Holiday movement felt that the program was not working well, and strikes were planned to protest its inefficiency. Time, however, was not on the NFHA's side. The NFHA existed well into 1936, but by that time, it was just a skeleton of its former self. With AAA popularity on the rise, organization instability due Milo Reno's death, and lack of funding, the NFHA crumbled. The important thing to note is that Olin and Emma Swenson did not give up the fight for farmers' rights and for equality. The couple stayed loyal to their ideals and did not jump ship when the going got rough. Each person participated in the movement in their own way. Emma was more involved in the bureaucratic elements, while Olin acted in the front lines, not only by attempting to change the policies, but by changing the nation.

After what Olin and Emma Swenson contributed throughout the years, it seems that the success of the Holiday movement coming to Wisconsin went through Holcombe and Ladysmith where Olin and Emma Swenson lived. This was no mere coincidence. The Rusk County Farmers Union was on the forefront of farm organizations in Wisconsin. It was vocal about what it wanted and found the NFHA to be the answer to their problems. It was the influence of the Swensons that made the organization that way. Without the couple's life dedication of fighting for farmers' rights and getting their cost of production, the NFHA may have died out long before the AAA ever came to fruition.

From the Swenson's correspondence, it seemed as if no one else had taken the initiative to contact the NFHA in order to get Wisconsin on board. Wisconsin's coming on board brought groups like the Wisconsin Council on Agriculture and the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool into the action. Although quite unstable at times, the alliance between the Milk Pool and the NFHA gave the press an organization on which to focus, even though sometimes it was not good publicity as many of the strike pickets turned violent. The collaboration of such groups increased the power of farmers, and gave them a voice, a voice that had been silent for many years in the national political scene. This protest would lead to President Franklin Roosevelt's decision to form the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, with Secretary Wallace in charge of fixing the farm problem. This sequence of events started with a couple from Holcombe and Ladysmith. Olin and Emma Swenson's push for Wisconsin to join the Holiday movement was one of great accomplishment. Olin and Emma were a part of this movement before the NFHA began during their time in the Rusk County Farmers Union, and continued through the organization's eventual demise. Staying true to their ideals, the fight for farmers and socialism would not end in the 1930s for the couple.

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