

## Langer and the Dirty

The turbulent, desperate 1930s required desperate solutions. A North Dakota governor provided controversial answers . . . but were they the right ones?

William Langer was born on a farm in Everest township near Casselton, Cass County, North Dakota on September 30, 1886. He attended a rural school during his elementary education and later graduated from Casselton High School.

Upon graduation from high school he proceeded to Grand Forks to study law at the University of North Dakota; he passed the state bar examination at the early age of 18 and received his L.L.B. in 1906.

**T**oo young to practice his profession, he enrolled as an undergraduate at Columbia University where he was president of his class and valedictorian. He was voted as the biggest politician, noisiest student, most popular, and the student most likely to succeed.

Having become eligible to practice law following his 21st birthday, he opened a law office at Mandan, North Dakota. He was elected State's Attorney for Morton County in 1914. It was in this position that he drew state-wide recognition.

He brought suit against the Northern Pacific Railway, the Standard Oil Company, the Occident Elevator Com-

pany, and several other large firms, which in his opinion, had not been paying their rightful share of taxes. He successfully prosecuted North Dakota railroads for a judgement amounting to \$1,250,000. The companies retained high-priced legal counsel led by Andrew J. Miller, who presided over Langer's first conspiracy trial some 20 years later.

The case had been brought before the North Dakota Supreme Court at a time when the Non-partisan League, a newly formed farmers' organization, was in the process of gaining control of the Republican party in the state. The League backed Langer for the Attorney General's office, to which he was elected in November 1916, and re-elected in 1918.

One of his immediate actions as Attorney General was a raid on the city of Minot. Langer swore in 40 extra deputies on the night of the raid. Langer, along with two assistants, forced their way into the Minot Telephone Exchange and kept it silent for 55 minutes while raiders arrested 156 persons on vice and liquor charges.

### Seeking Governorship

Following his second term as attorney general, Langer sought the governorship in 1920. Although he

obtained the nomination from the Republican party, he was defeated by Lynn J. Frazier who had the backing of the League. For the next 12 years Langer held no elective office, but occupied three appointive posts after Frazier became a United States Senator in 1923. In 1924, Langer served on the state committee in support of the Robert M. LaFollette-for-President campaign.

Meanwhile his law practice, which he had moved to Bismarck in 1916, flourished to such an extent that in the period between the stock market crash of 1929 and the election of 1932, Langer was in position to recognize the somewhat fading Non-partisan League.

**B**y 1932, the Non-partisan League was in a condition of disintegration. Without an able leader to guide it in its development, it split into factions and new personalities came into the foreground. The League entered a new era with the nomination of Langer over T.H.H. Thorsen after a deadlock of ballots at the convention. Langer was

# Thirties

By Eddie Kramer

First in a series

elected to the governorship in the fall of 1932.

Soon after becoming governor, Langer assumed the leadership of the Non-partisan League. During his administration, the state adopted many measures to aid the rural population. Langer had the foresight to know how the people would react to his measures in a state whose economy was dependent upon agriculture.

The 1930 census showed that North Dakota had a total population of 680,845. Of those, 567,539 persons were classified as being rural population.

By the time Langer assumed his duties as governor, North Dakota had reached the bottom of the depression. The new governor inherited \$40 million in state indebtedness, \$30 million of which had been accumulated by anti-League governors. Foreclosures on farms were rampant. There was \$25 million in unpaid taxes. Banks were closing throughout the state. Decisive action was needed to meet desperate conditions and Bill Langer moved dramatically to meet the challenge. 1

Langer, in his inaugural address, stated that the budget must be



William Langer—North Dakota Bar Association portrait.

# How could a governor survive who not only ignored the state constitution—but disregarded the federal constitution as well?

balanced and he meant just that. The legislature was under firm control of pro-Langerites. When the legislature failed to pare appropriations sufficiently, Governor Langer seized his red pencil and vetoed an additional sum of \$500,000 without the legislature's consent. This was not constitutional, but constitutional limitations did not mean much to him or to the desperate people of the state at that time. At any rate, no one objected to the further reduction, whether it was legal or not.

## Warring Against Power Companies

Prior to the 1933 administration the state had been paying from five to nine cents per kilowatt hour for power furnished to state buildings. Langer, following an investigation of the matter, decided that the rates were too high. He promptly approved an expenditure for construction of a state-owned power plant. The power companies capitulated and signed a ten-year lease to furnish the state power at one cent per kilowatt hour.

Langer not only ignored the state constitution, but disregarded the federal constitution as well. The pro-Langer legislature enacted into law a bill empowering the governor to declare an embargo on the state's produce whenever, in the governor's opinion, prices, became "confiscatory."

North Dakota produces some 85 percent of all the durum wheat grown in the United States—a fact which gives it a practical monopoly on the product. But an uncontrolled monopoly is as ineffective as none at all. It was this situation that Langer set about remedying under his embargo powers. The milling and grain interests, which had chuckled at the farmers' unconstitutional law and predicted that it would never be invoked, were startled when Langer abruptly ordered the cessation of all wheat shipments from the state.

## Price Of Wheat Jumps

The price of wheat on the Minneapolis Exchange jumped five cents the day the embargo was announced and another five cents the following day. The grain and milling companies

brought legal proceedings against the state, but the process of law is slow while the rules of supply and demand are rapid. The effect had been gained. The price of North Dakota wheat had risen from 49 cents a bushel to a price of 72 cents a bushel in five weeks. At this point the Governor lifted the embargo.

The Literary Digest had this to say about the wheat embargo:

However little grain and produce markets may be affected by the North Dakota wheat embargo . . . these moves have been successful in their principal objective. That, of course, is to impress Washington and the rest of the country . . . Governor Langer's declaration of an embargo on spring wheat became first page news all over the country. He called the farmer the forgotten man of the NRA.

Whether or not Langer's embargo had an effect on the New Deal legislation is not important. The important fact was that the people of North Dakota believed that Langer had brought them higher wheat prices. They did not care how this had been accomplished. They realized that Langer had defied the federal government, but results had been attained.

**P**erhaps the most important decision of the first Langer administration was the issuance of the moratorium proclamations to protect farmers, as well as small business.

Despite bitter criticism and heavy pressure from certain groups the governor called a halt to farm foreclosures and evictions, thus keeping thousands of honest, but unlucky, farmers from being dispossessed for the crime of poverty. His action . . . was supplemented by the calling out of the National Guard to enforce the edicts. "The big business interests know," declared Langer, "that as long as I am Governor, until we have good crops and fair prices, the moratoria are going to remain in effect, even though I have to keep calling out National Guardsmen three times a day . . . As Governor

I am not going to permit eviction or oppression of debtors, whether they be farmers or small businessmen; and if the only way the big business interests figure they can get rid of the moratoria is to remove me, they are right. I knew the penalty that would be inflicted when I declared the moratoria and I am fully prepared to pay it."

The effect of the moratorium issued on April 17, 1933, and its removal in 1934 and 1935 kept many farm families from losing their farms and enabled them to pay off their indebtedness soon afterward. Although it was not completely successful, few North Dakotans became party to the clan of Okies produced in other areas of the country.

## Repercussions

The progress that Langer had attained in domestic affairs was not accomplished without some repercussions, and these began to appear in early 1934. The enemies that he had made in his twenty years of politics joined forces and were out to get him. These forces included the following: the railroads, whose taxes had doubled through the efforts of Langer; the grain syndicates, whose profit-margin had been upset by the grain embargo; the power companies who had to lower their rates; the money-lenders who could not foreclose on mortgages because of the moratorium; the New Dealers, whose programs and policies had been criticized by Langer because he felt that not enough was being done to aid the people of our country in time of emergency; the daily newspapers, whose prestige was waning as Langer proved them wrong; and factions within the Non-partisan League who wanted to dominate the party and use state appointments to build a political machine.

Due to the lack of a channel to present his views in print, Langer was determined to revive *The Leader*, a weekly news publication of the Non-partisan League which had ceased operations in 1932.

League finances did not exist. During normal periods, farmers gladly paid \$16 a year for League membership which included a subscription to *The Leader*. Langer had already loaned \$22,000 to the League and was



Governor William Langer and Mrs. Langer at studio desk. Photo taken in 1934.

not in position to finance the revival of the newspaper.

Langer and the League council decided to ask for financial contributions from the men and women who had secured employment in the state administration by virtue of the League victory in 1932.

Past administrations had brazenly demanded that state government employees 'kick in' with a percentage of their salaries as campaign funds. Even stenographers were forced to pay as high as 15 percent of their annual wage to their bosses. The contributions were an outright donation, a

tax levied . . . with threat of job 'amputation' if the state employee dared to refuse to contribute.

The opposition had also levied a straight ten percent tax on the office holder if their candidate was successful. These types of raising finances were not condoned by Bill Langer.

#### Felony Charges Faced

Langer devised a method of raising finances that would be painless for all concerned. His plan was wholeheartedly approved by the League council. Employees who owed their positions to the League were solicited to pledge to buy subscriptions to the League paper, *The Leader*, equal to

five percent of their annual salary. Each subscription would be worth a dollar.

The subscriptions became the property of the person who had purchased them and they could be re-sold to anyone that would buy them. The employee would keep the money that he had received through the resale of the subscriptions. Through this method, the employee would not only raise money to finance *The Leader*, but also would increase the circulation of the paper.

There was nothing surreptitious about the League finance plan. It was published in the League's paper, *The Leader*,



# The "old guard" conspired to ruin Langer politically in the next election. All hell broke loose! Could Langer win the first round of the fight?

and it was a frank and open financing measure, one of the few political campaign-fund solicitations that was completely above-board and honest. Hundreds of employees who chose not to buy the subscriptions remained 'un-purged' in their positions. 6

It was this venture that became the basis for felony charges filed against Bill Langer and some of his associates. The "old guard," the conservative wing of the Non-partisan League, and the political enemies of Langer conspired to defeat him in the coming election and ruin him politically.

A rift had occurred between Langer and the executive committee of the Non-partisan League early in 1932 because Langer refused to allow John Nystal, executive committee chairman, to distribute all state patronage positions. While Langer was engaged in his battles throughout his first administration, the executive committee stealthily sought to undermine the governor's influence.

Normally, the state Non-partisan League convention met in January of the convention year, but the executive committee was reluctant to set a date for the convention in 1934. They openly stated that they would not support Bill Langer on the party ticket. County conventions had met and had elected a large majority of pro-Langerites to the state convention. Due to pressure from the county level, they consented to hold the state convention in Valley City, North Dakota, on March 6, 1934.

## Political Problems Mount

Langer's political woes seemed to come to a climax as the state convention date drew near. On March 1, 1934, five days before the convention, Harry Hopkins dismissed Langer as the titular head of the relief administration in North Dakota. Hopkins based his dismissal on charges that Langer had accepted political contributions from employees working in the state relief offices.

The timing of the dismissal seemed to coincide with the efforts made by the rest of Langer's political enemies that had made no secret of the fact that they were out to get him. The New Dealers did not even give Langer an opportunity to deny or explain the charges against him.

The opposition daily newspaper re-

sponded to the dismissal with a wild paean of abuse that violated any code of ethics of journalism. Langer was accused of stealing and taking money by extortion from poor relief applicants, struggling state employees, and old ladies. Again, the coincidence of the state convention, only a few days away, seemed to be the ulterior motive as a last desperate plot to influence the convention delegates to stop Langer from obtaining the gubernatorial nomination.

**T**he charges appeared to be unfounded and seemed purely political. It was shown that Langer had had absolutely nothing to do with the administration of the relief program in North Dakota in more than a year. He had turned the entire relief program over to a committee of five citizens, constituting the State Emergency Relief Committee. The person named to succeed Langer as relief administrator, Judge A.M. Christianson, was one of the men on the committee appointed by Langer.

Attention was focused on convention hall. North Dakota citizens were awaiting reaction of the delegates to the recent developments concerning Langer. The delegates responded to the question with an overwhelming endorsement of Bill Langer for governor. One hundred thirty-five delegates were in attendance and 135 votes were counted in Langer's favor. The people had not forsaken their champion.

## Vote Of Confidence

Langer had expected some support of people, but this vindication was more than he had anticipated. He replied to the vote of confidence with the following statement:

I consider your endorsement at this time the greatest honor that has come to me . . . I pledge you, if elected, I will continue the government of this state in the interests of the common people the same as I have done for the past two years. The door to the governor's office has always been open to poor people since I became governor, and it will remain open as long as I am

governor. 7

Bill Langer had won the first round of the fight, but there was more to come. The defeated alliance of bankers, railway tycoons, grain trusters, power barons, and old guard politicians had more plans for Bill Langer. This had just been the beginning of their efforts to smear him. ■

To be continued  
in next month's  
issue of PRAIRIES Magazine

## Appendix

1 Lloyd B. Omdahl, *Insurgents (Brainerd, Minnesota: Lakeland Color Press, 1961) p.19.*

2 Bruce Nelson, *Land of the Dakotahs (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1946), p. 309.*

3 "Rural Strikes Speeding Farm Relief in Washington," *The Literary Digest*, 116:8, November 4, 1933.

4 Nelson, op. cit., p. 310.

5 John M. Holzworth, *The Fighting Governor, The Story of William Langer and the State of North Dakota (Chicago: The Pointer Press, 1938), p. 52.*

6 I bid., pp. 53-54.

7 I bid., p. 61.