

# John Miller Baer:

## Nonpartisan League Cartoonist and Congressman\*

text and captions  
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The sudden rise of the Nonpartisan League to power in North Dakota in 1915-1916 is an oft-told tale, but such a development was not totally surprising given the historical circumstances. Actually, in 1915 the entire country was astir with reform and protest movements. Woodrow Wilson was in the White House with his "New Freedom;" the American Federation of Labor had made substantial gains in the early 20th Century; farm movements such as the American Society of Equity were prospering in the Upper Midwest; and indeed the entire nation seemed to be ringing with demands for change.<sup>1</sup>



John Miller Baer

In North Dakota twin channels of reform activity had developed: the American Federation of Labor and the Socialist Party, often cooperating in urban areas, and the American (North Dakota) Society of Equity seeking support in rural areas for its cooperative marketing program. The election the conservative Louis B. Hanna as governor in 1914 precipitated the crisis that led many farmers to conclude that a more dynamic leadership was required. The reason for this was that subsequent to his election the measure passed by the 1913 legislature providing for a state-owned terminal elevator was repealed. Whether it was the stormy Equity convention of 1915 at Bismarck that caused farmers to look elsewhere for leadership, or state Representative

Treadwell Twitchell's supposed advice that farmers should "Go home and slop the hogs!" is a moot question. Stronger leadership was waiting in the wings and it moved front stage in 1915.<sup>2</sup>

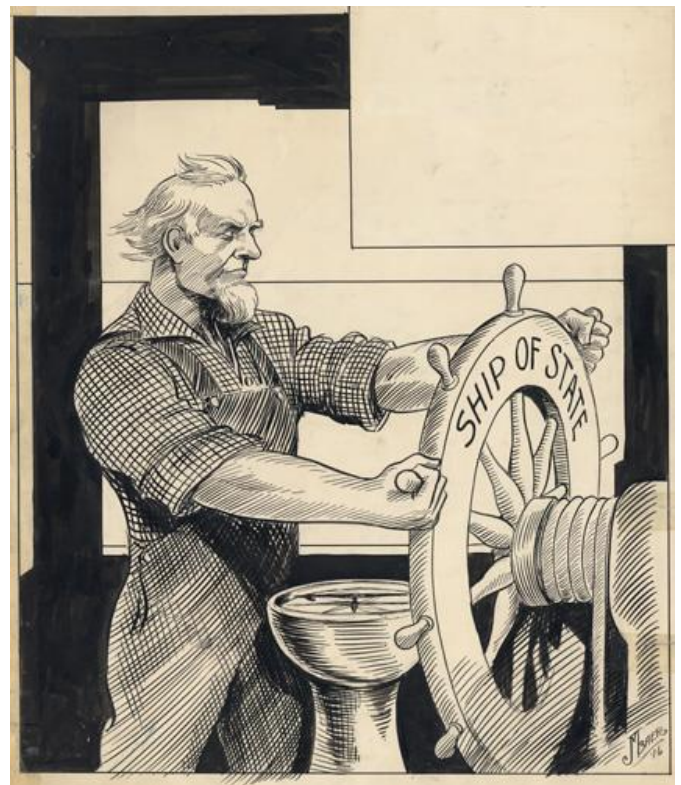
The events of 1915 and 1916 had about them the velocity of a whirlwind: The organization of the Nonpartisan League and its sweeping victory in the 1916 primaries and elections - the League capturing all branches of government

except the state Senate - made household-words of names such as Arthur C. Townley, William Lemke, and Lynn J. Frazier. Their method of gaining support combined speeches, Model T caravans, raising money in such a fashion that Townley acquired the nickname of "After Cash" Townley, and a hard hitting press led by the *Nonpartisan Leader*. The Nonpartisan League press has received fairly adequate historical coverage, but its usage of modern visual aids - in a word, cartoons - has not. One of their first rank cartoonists was John Miller Baer, a master artist in caricature of a political and economic nature.<sup>3</sup>

Baer, well known Nonpartisan League cartoonist, North Dakota Congressman and long-time cartoonist for Labor - the publication of the railroad unions - was born in 1886 on a farm at Black Creek, Outagamie County, Wisconsin, and was the seventh John M. Baer in direct descent, all born in America.<sup>4</sup> As his surname indicates, he was of German lineage. From his father, a veteran of the Union army, he absorbed many of the ideas and prejudices which were to influence him in later life. From the elder Baer he learned to be anti-monopolistic, proud of his American loyalty and anti-English in a time when twisting the "Lion's" tail was popular.<sup>5</sup>

Baer graduated from Lawrence University at Appleton, Wisconsin, in 1909 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. He had already acquired experience in illustration as an undergraduate by working on the college annual. Baer moved west in 1909 to Beach, Golden Valley County, North Dakota, and married Estella G. Kennedy, the daughter of J.R. Smith, otherwise known as "Flax King" Smith. Among his duties at Beach were the management and farming of 5,000 acres and civil engineering work. Baer's activities at Beach were extremely varied and included managing the public water system, serving as Secretary of the Commercial Club and acting as postmaster after President Woodrow Wilson appointed him to that post.<sup>6</sup>

A.C. Townley, one of the formative Nonpartisan League leaders, was farming at Beach during this period, and he was impressed both by Baer's liberal views and his cartooning ability. Townley subsequently persuaded Baer to resign in



**1916: The farmer is in command of the ship of state. Note how closely he resembles "Uncle Sam."**



1916: Symbolism. The pilgrim father (North Dakota farmer) and his bride (the state of North Dakota).

1916 as Beach's postmaster and cartoon full time, primarily for the *Nonpartisan Leader*, which was then operating in Fargo under the direction of noted Socialist intellectual Charles Edward Russell. Soon Baer's cartoons were a major asset to the Nonpartisan League's political activities.<sup>7</sup>

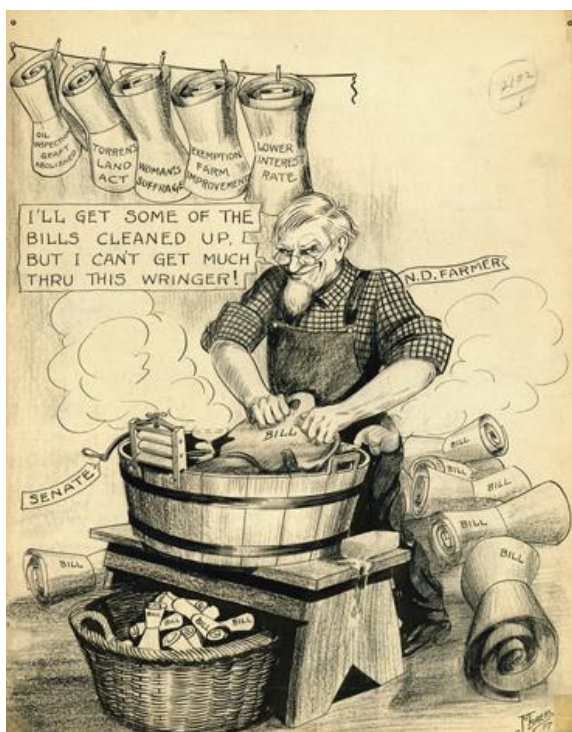
Baer's cartoons were the visual extension of the views and methodology of early-day Nonpartisan League leaders. Very early the League leadership extended its power through persuasive orators such as Townley. But speech making alone does not explain the success of the League in its early years. The League leaders, in the main, had been Socialist lecturers - they believed in a program of information and propaganda. This is not to say that they were Socialists. Townley had worked as an *organizer* for the Organization Department of the Socialist Party. There is a difference of opinion as to

whether Townley was also a member of the party.<sup>8</sup> Townley knew, too, that the farmers were discontented with "specific capitalistic enterprises," not capitalism itself. He could tap many sources of discontent without taking the risk of labeling himself as a socialist.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the League leaders hated the press as an extension of Big Business influence and, therefore, they founded their own. The League press consistently portrayed the farmer as a downtrodden, but worthy, member of society and Big Business as the source of farmer oppression. The League press intended to "shock and startle and stir up the reader" through both its columns and its visual materials.<sup>10</sup>

The views expressed in the cartoons may be interpreted in various ways. One opinion is that Baer and other Nonpartisan League leaders were romantic agrarians. In common with the French Physiocrats and the Jeffersonians of the early American Republic they believed in the



1917: A version of "Big Biz," the non-producer, taking from the producer.



1917: The NPL is opposed in the Senate and the farmer finds it difficult to get much through the "wringer."

superiority of farming as compared to other forms of economic endeavor. Furthermore, they believed agriculture was the "basic" industry and, at least in North Dakota, farmers were the majority group. This led them to the assumption that farmers should have "proportional" representation in the government. In North Dakota that meant absolute control.<sup>11</sup>

Recent interpretations of Nonpartisan League philosophy, or ideology, have tended to be more complex. One contemporary view is that the Nonpartisan League leaders saw the world in moralistic, good and evil, terms. More precisely: "The Non-Partisan League saw the

world in Manichean terms, as an eternal struggle between God and the Devil... The Nonpartisan League was attempting to step out of history and into a pure future intimately related to a lost Garden of Eden..."<sup>12</sup> This viewpoint, essentially, places the Nonpartisan League leadership in a romantic-reactionary framework. In reality, though the League leaders were grappling with contemporary problems faced by North Dakota wheat farmers. If, as was true of Baer's cartoons, they advocated their political program through a "pattern of sacred and profane images," this did not place them in a reactionary frame of reference. Outside business interests did influence North Dakota politicians, and through attacks on the symbolic "Big Biz" and "Old Gang" politicians, Baer and others hoped to break the alliance between "Big Biz" and "Crafty" – the symbol for "Old Gang" politicians.<sup>13</sup>

One other interpretation of the Nonpartisan League and its leaders has been that the movement was fascist and that behind the facade of agrarian radical leaders lurked "proto-Hitlers and Mussolinis." It is easy to spot the apparent demagoguery at work. Townley, as an example, was a master showman who had shifted from capitalist-farmer to socialist organizer to founder of the Nonpartisan League.<sup>14</sup> Totalitarian tendencies aside, it is just possible that the Nonpartisan League leaders saw real problems and that they came up with proposals (sometimes unrealistic ones) to solve them.<sup>15</sup> The fascists interpretation has not been widely accepted among historians. As an example, Richard Hofstadter did not accept it.<sup>16</sup>

There was little subtlety in Baer's cartoons. He selected a few major themes and hammered away at them. "Big Biz" and "Crafty" became as well known as Baer's own character role, "Hiram Rube."<sup>17</sup> Baer probably adopted the role as "Hiram Rube" more or less to point out that it was all right to be "countrified." Baer's cartoon characters were etched out with bold simplicity. "Big Biz" and "Crafty" were overweight, dressed in the latest fashion, and obviously, to farm readers, untrustworthy. The farmer was portrayed as tall and lean, simply dressed, and bearing a striking resemblance to Uncle Sam and in some cases to a Pilgrim father. Sometimes a female character appeared and she closely resembled the Statue of Liberty.

The cartoon characters concerned themselves with key issues of the day. "Big Biz" and "Crafty" were invariably trying to block farmer control of state government, and the farmer character always opposed their schemes. The emphasis upon patriotism was increased in 1917 because Baer ran for Congress in that year with Nonpartisan League support and conservatives used the loyalty issue against the League. In summary, Baer's cartoons did utilize good guy vs. bad guy images, but it is debatable whether the conflict was placed on the level of God vs. Devil.

Ultimately, Baer's cartoons, and the Nonpartisan League press became involved in what can only be referred to as a war of propaganda with their opposition. That opposition was led by the *Red Flame* and its cartoonist Thomas H. Foley. The *Red Flame* was published by Carl Kositzky (State Auditor), possibly with support from Attorney-General William Langer. By 1919 Kositzky and Langer were estranged from the League and this placed the "war of propaganda" on the level of a family feud.<sup>18</sup> One recent authority has traced the bitterness of the Nonpartisan League/conservative struggle to the "world view" of the Leaguers.



1917: "Big Biz" crafty entangles new laws in bureaucratic red tape.

1917: NPL victories have given Uncle Sam, alias the farmer, an "Easter bonnet," i.e., political power.





1917: Here we have "Big Biz" and "Crafty" at their obese and most disgusting best (or should that be worst?).

Before accepting that view, one should be reminded that the League opponents included disaffected Leaguers as well as the well-structured Independent Voters Association, organized in 1918, and that most IVA'ers were careful not to be associated with the *Red Flame*. Confronted by an opposition with "an instinct for the jugular' vein," Leaguers necessarily took off their gloves.<sup>19</sup>

Baer's entrance into politics came about after the death of Congressman Henry T. Helgeson of the first district.<sup>20</sup> Since NPL attorney William Lemke was the logical choice for the race, Baer's selection created some surprise. But Lemke and A.C. Townley persuaded a League meeting to endorse Baer.<sup>21</sup> Baer already had a satisfactory relationship with Townley when he moved to Fargo, and he had soon established

rapport with Lemke. As Baer and Lemke became acquainted, they found they had many things in common. They held similar views on domestic and foreign issues and they were from similar backgrounds. Both were of German descent and both their fathers had indoctrinated their sons in favor of the Union and against Great Britain.<sup>22</sup>

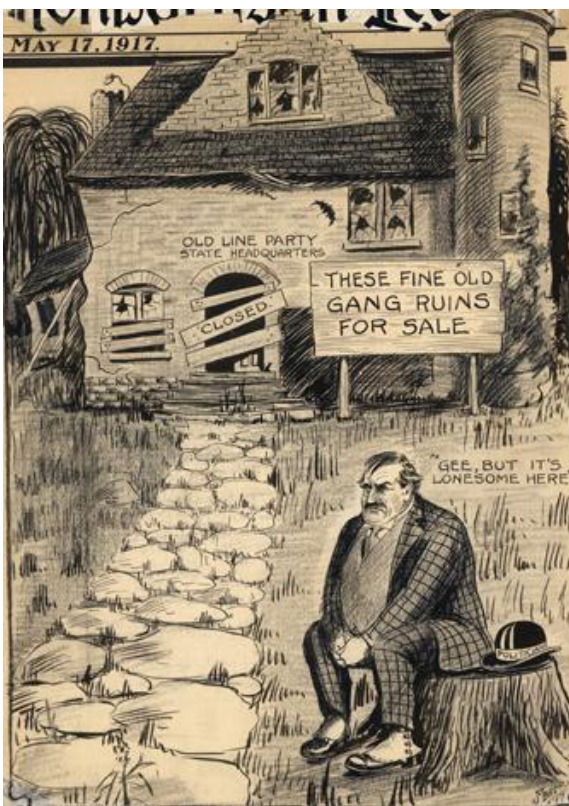
Baer did not expect the nomination and could only speculate as to why he received it. He thought that his "ideas on domestic and foreign policies were in harmony with Lemke's and the idea of sending a cartoonist to Congress amused Townley."<sup>23</sup> The idea must have amused Baer, too, because years later he declared: "I caricatured my way into Congress and then – cartooned my out."<sup>24</sup> Baer's nomination stirred up resentment and bitterness as well as the surprise mentioned earlier. Letters to Lemke assailed Baer as a Socialist, Democrat and cartoonist for *Jim Jam Jems*, Sam Clark's controversial, muckraking publication.<sup>25</sup> More important, this was the first election in which the loyalty issue played a major role. Baer's German ancestry and his

1917: The farmer, alias Uncle Sam, feeds spring tonic, H. B. No. 44, to an unhappy opposition.



newness to the state and district made him an available target. Lemke, from a similar background, did not foresee how effectively the League's opponents would utilize the loyalty issue.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of handicaps, though, Baer developed into an effective campaigner. At first he relied upon his cartoons, but soon he was out on the campaign trail. Fighting back at charges of League socialism, Baer stated that services suggested for farmers by the League were no more socialistic than many services already rendered as a matter of course to urban residents.<sup>27</sup> Baer also faced the opposition of both the *Fargo Forum* and the *Grand Forks Herald*. Overcoming the odds, Baer won a clear majority over his opponents Olger B. Burtness, a progressive Republican, and George A. Bangs, a Democrat.<sup>28</sup>



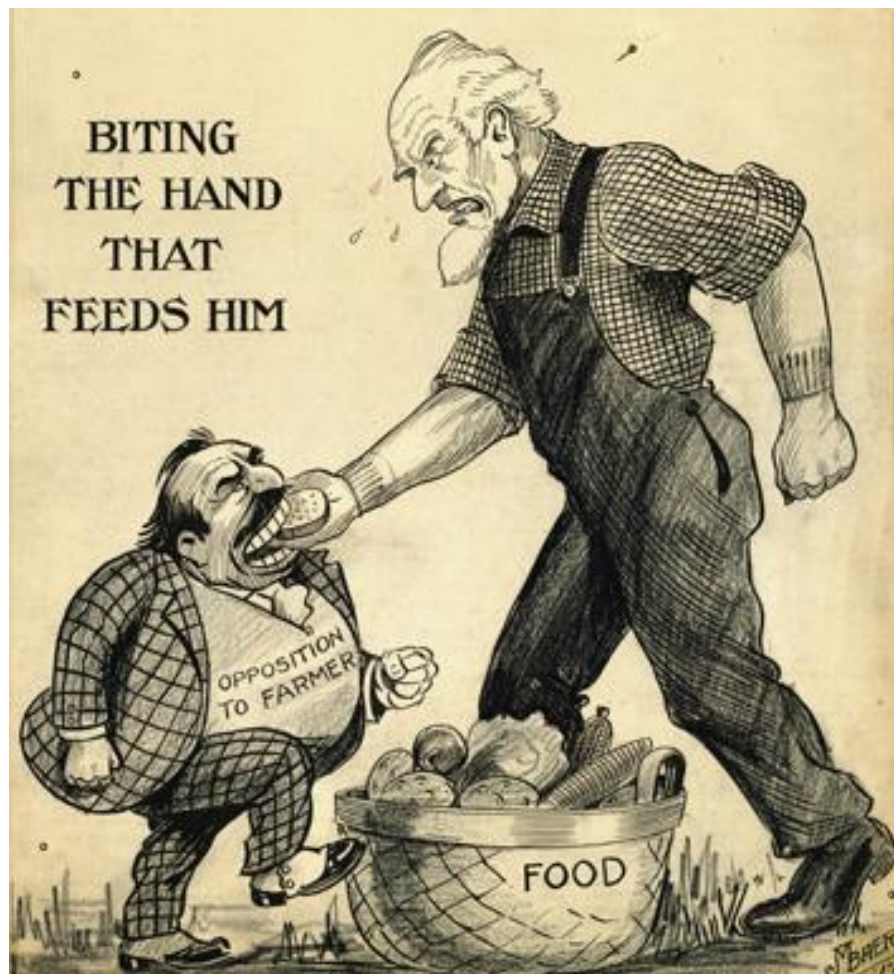
1917: An unhappy "Old Gang" politician laments the loss of power to the farmers and the NPL.

Baer's record in Congress was not particularly radical. As an example of this, he voted against seating Victor Berger, the Socialist member from Wisconsin.<sup>29</sup> He found, though, that being elected did not still the loyalty issue. The accusations of disloyalty, first flung in North Dakota, were now echoed in the eastern press. The *Boston Transcript* accused him of being "the representative of a foreign influence in our Congress."<sup>30</sup> Baer actively defended his loyalty in his initial press release and public statement after his election.<sup>31</sup> Probably Baer's most controversial act as Congressman was his appointment of David H. McArthur as his secretary. McArthur had been the Democratic candidate for governor in 1916 and this gave the Republicans an opportunity to charge that Baer had been allied with the Democrats all along.<sup>32</sup>

As a part of the nationwide conservative sweep in 1920, and also because League voting strength was reduced by that time, Baer was defeated in that year's June primary by his old opponent Olger B. Burtness. Leaving behind his political phase, Baer went to work cartooning for *Labor*, the publication of the railroad unions. For 50 years Baer would caricature the great and the near great. Franklin Delano Roosevelt once asked: "What is the latest caricature you've done of me, John?" On one occasion the conservative Warren G. Harding questioned Mrs. Baer: "How on earth do you get along with such a culprit as this?" Baer has been credited with coining

the slogan "New Deal," having sent a cartoon with those key words to F.D.R. in 1932. It has been said that one of his cartoons, "The Appropriation Pie," gave an initial impetus to naval disarmament in the 1920s.<sup>33</sup>

Baer's role in the history of the Nonpartisan League was an important one. His cartooning fitted well into the pattern of "shocking and startling" the readers. But one should bear in mind that he was actively recruited by A.C. Townley, not only for his cartooning ability, but also because he held liberal political views. In addition to his early acquaintance with Townley, Baer developed a good working relationship with William Lemke. His nomination, and election, to the Congress stemmed from these relationships. Baer's tenure in Congress, in effect one and one-half terms, was not spectacular and not particularly noteworthy. But then, that is the usual role for a freshman member. In addition, Baer was forced to expend a lot of energy over the loyalty issue. While he was not a Lemke or a Townley, Baer was in the upper echelon of Nonpartisan League leaders. Many honors and awards came to John Miller Baer during his long life. He died in Washington, D.C., February 18, 1970.<sup>34</sup>



1917: According to NPL ideology, the farmer was the basic and most important "producer" of wealth. In this Baer drawing, he is bitten while trying to feed and ungrateful opposition.



\*The cartoon illustrations are reproduced from original line drawings located at the North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies.

<sup>1</sup>Theodore Saloutus, "The Rise of the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, 1915-1917", *Agricultural History*, XX(January, 1946), 43-44 Hereinafter cited as Saloutus, "Nonpartisan League."

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, 44-45.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, 48-53.

<sup>4</sup>*Nonpartisan Leader*, June 7, 1917; U.S. Congress: *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1174-1971* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 538; and Thomas Hall, Secretary of State, *Legislative Manual, 1919* (Bismarck, North Dakota; Bismarck Tribune Co., 1919), 556. Hereinafter cited as *Biographical Directory of the American Congress* and *Legislative Manual*.

<sup>5</sup>John M. Baer, Sr., to William Lemke, March 22, 1917, Lemke Papers, Orin G. Libby Collection, University of North Dakota. Hereinafter cited as Lemke papers.

<sup>6</sup>*Nonpartisan Leader*, June 7, 1917; *Fargo Forum*, February 23, 1970; and *Biographical Directory of the American Congress*. 538.

<sup>7</sup>Edward C. Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966) 340. Hereinafter cited as Robinson, *North Dakota*.

<sup>8</sup>Saloutus, "Nonpartisan League," 48.

<sup>9</sup>Dale Baum, "The New Day in North Dakota: The Nonpartisan League and the Politics of Negative Revolution," *North Dakota History*, 40-2 (Spring, 1973), 6. Hereinafter cited as Baum, "The New Day in North Dakota."

<sup>10</sup>John M. Gillette, "The North Dakota Harvest of the Nonpartisan League," *Survey*, XLI(March 1, 1919), 758-759.

<sup>11</sup>Saloutus, "Nonpartisan League," 49

<sup>12</sup>Baum, "The New Day in North Dakota," 5.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*, 6, for the "pattern of sacred and profane images."

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, 5. Baum surveys, but "does not accept the fascist thesis." Robert L Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 38. Hereinafter cited as Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*.

<sup>15</sup>Baum "The New Day in North Dakota," 5.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, and Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

<sup>17</sup>Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 38. The "Hiram Rube" statement is the writer's.

<sup>18</sup>See the publication *Red Flame*, recently reprinted by Norman L. Larson of Lowe & Larson Printing, Inc., Minot, North Dakota, 1975. Also Robinson, *North Dakota*, 345-346.

<sup>19</sup>See Baum, "The New Day in North Dakota" for the "world view" interpretation and Bob Cory, "Tumbling Prairies," Minot (N.D.) *Daily News*, November 15, 1975, for the jugular vein.

<sup>20</sup>Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 129.

<sup>21</sup>Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel*, 70, and Carl Nelson to William Lemke, June 4, 1917, Lemke Papers.

<sup>22</sup>Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel*, 71.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>24</sup>*Fargo Forum*, July 31, 1966.

<sup>25</sup>Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel*, 72.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid*, 72-73.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, 72.

<sup>28</sup>Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 133.

<sup>29</sup>Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel*, 75.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid*, and Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 133.

<sup>31</sup>Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 136.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid*, 133.

<sup>33</sup>*Fargo Forum*, June 31, 1966 and October 13, 1969.

<sup>34</sup>*Biographical Directory of the American Congress*, 538.