

The Giant Slumbers- Part II: The Progressive Grange

By: Jim Bauermeister

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This is Part 2 of Jim Bauermeister's examination of the Grange Movement in Washington.

The Washington State Grange grudgingly supported the first World War. Although the organization had for many years been against war, State Master C.B. Kegley urged the Patrons to give President Wilson their support as "he must be privy to some sources of information which we are denied."

Kegley was a skilled politician, an effective leader and a far-sighted idealist. He served as the State Master for twelve years and the Grange had come to depend upon his leadership. His death in 1917 left a gap at a crucial point in the organization's history. Kegley's successor, William Bouck, though every bit as progressive as Kegley, could not inspire the unity and confidence that the late master had.

During the war the Grange's avowed radicalism became increasingly suspect to business conservatives. The 1917 state session was cut short when the Walla Walla school board reneged on their lease and evicted the Grangers from the school buildings. The Grange leadership scoured the city for another meeting place but were warned that a "borne guard" of "forty boys with Winchesters" was prepared to escort the Patrons out of town.

Bouck was later arrested for making a seditious speech in Aberdeen and though exonerated, his radicalism did not set well with the National Order, which had become increasingly conservative over the years. In 1921 a National Grange tribunal blackballed Bouck and while awaiting the decision of an appeal of his ouster, Bouck suddenly bolted and formed his own short-lived organization, the Washington State Progressive Grange. Bouck had become increasingly bitter and intractable as the Progressive Movement that had shaped state politics for two decades came apart. The old progressive leadership was dying off and the voters seemed to be tired of activism and idealism.

Bouck's defection left the regular state Grange in chaos. A quarter of the membership left with Bouck and the treasury was depleted by expensive lawsuits over the use of the Grange name.

At the 1922 State Session acting Master Fred Nelson recanted many of the policy statements made in past Master's addresses by Bouck. Albert S. Goss, head of the Grange Wholesale Cooperative, was elected Master. Goss was more moderate than Bouck both politically and rhetorically. He kept the organization alive through the 1920s and helped heal the wounds caused by the split in the organization.

The Grange was very cognizant of its radical reputation and tried its best to assure conservatives they were now a respectable organization. The State Grange became a member of the Chamber of Commerce and toned down its demands for nationalization and regulation of American businesses and industries. The Great Depression ended the Grange's complacency. Once again the progressives in the order dominated the state sessions. They called for nationalization of the

banking system and at one point the State Master suggested their cooperative system should replace capitalism in the United States. In 1930, the Grange sponsored a successful initiative which created the mechanism to organize public utility districts. This was the beginning of a thirty year battle between private and public power advocates. The 1930s were bad years for Washington farmers and they turned to the Grange for relief. New Granges were established throughout the state and many Grange supply cooperatives were organized. The State Grange had helped organize affiliated milling, marketing, printing, insurance, and wholesale cooperatives.



REVOLUTION IN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

World War II necessitated some sweeping changes in American Agriculture. The civilian labor shortage and wartime demand for food products caused farmers to substitute technology for labor on the farm. Strong crop prices also brought a higher standard of living and increased expectations to farm families.

This revolution in American Agriculture accelerated after the war. The postwar era was characterized by widespread reliance on borrowed capital; agricultural chemicals; mechanization; and crop specialization. Yet the most substantive changes in American agriculture have not been so visible.

At some point the national rhetoric reduced farming to a simple economic endeavor. The social and cultural aspects of farming were barely considered. * Revisionist historian Richard Hofstadter revised the history of the populist and progressive eras and convinced most academics that Jefferson's agrarian society had always been a myth. Hofstadter argued that American farmers had always been capitalistic entrepreneurs propelled primarily by profit motivation.

Hofstadter's dubious thesis (which even a casual study of the state Grange refutes) provided policy makers with the intellectual justification for chaotic and ineffectual farm and rural programs which failed to save millions of family farms or end rural poverty. In 1950 there were over five million farms in America; by 1974, less than two-and-a-half million farms were left.

Modern America had little use for the family farm. Production of farm products outstripped demand and depressed prices at a time when production costs kept going up. Farmland transfers almost skipped an entire generation. Farming was no longer generally regarded as an important way of life.

These "modern" attitudes toward agriculture made the Grange obsolete. The Patrons of Husbandry was founded to instill a sense of pride and self-worth in the family farm. The organization was based on the precept of agrarian democracy. Its whole purpose was to improve the lives and husbandry of its members. It emphasized such virtues as optimism, moderation, thrift, honesty and community. It disparaged materialism, excess and exploitation.

The Grange hardly resisted the changes occurring in rural America. As with most social change,

the damage was done before the victims were aware of the process. Rural Americans were the people left behind and too many became socially and politically static.

The Grange reflected these attitudes. In the early 1950's the State Master lamented the rapid decline in the number of farms, but by the late '50's he was justifying the demise by explaining that the farms lost were not viable commercial farms. The Grange supported policies which had an adverse effect on rural America and failed to initiate and support programs which would have preserved the family farm and rural communities.

THE GRANGE TODAY

The Grange has done little in the last twenty years to help the small farmer, even though many of its members are small or part-time farmers. It has assumed no leadership in establishing direct markets or in advocating enforcement of the 1902 Reclamation Act. The organization has not recognized that its strength could lie with a constituency of small growers whose special needs have been ignored by the major farm organizations.

The Grange-sponsored initiative to limit irrigation water permits issued by the state (Initiative 59, which passed in 1977) was more of an effort to limit corporate farming than a measure to create new farming opportunities. The Grange has not been sympathetic to the problems of people who want to become farmers but can not afford the high capital investment for land and equipment. Like most farm groups, Grange policy is directed toward the established farmer, rather than the aspiring farmer.

The Grange has come to represent the farmer as a special interest rather than farming as an activity in the general interest. The Grange has shown little concern for the health and safety of rural people who are exposed to large doses of potentially harmful agricultural chemicals. It has an almost blind allegiance to the myriad farm chemicals and is frequently used as an apologist for the chemical industry. Grange policy states that land-use planning should be done at the local level, yet few Granges have become involved in local land use processes. Nor has it expended much effort in promoting or supporting state or federal policies to encourage preservation of agricultural land.

The Grange has done little organizing of cooperatives in recent years. The organization was apathetic toward legislation which created a federal bank for consumer cooperatives. The Grange Wholesale Cooperative merged with the Farmers Union Central Exchange (CENEX) in the early 1970s and is now part of one of the nation's largest farm co-ops. While this size allows CENEX to diversify into activities such as manufacturing and oil exploration and refining, there is less accountability to farmer members and a tendency among the management to think of the cooperative as just another corporation.

The public utility districts created by the Grange have gotten out of hand. The PUDs and the Federal government dammed all the major rivers in the region. This cheap hydro power encouraged the location of energy intensive industry in the Northwest that eroded the political base of the farmers. Once the major dam sites were exploited, the PUDs turned to nuclear power. The PUDs have been supported in all their exploits by the state Grange which has failed to recognize the environmental, economic and social hazards of nuclear energy. While the Grange is supporting unrestrained energy development, grass roots farmers organizations are opposing high voltage transmission lines and some Grays Harbor Grangers are going to jail in an effort to stop the public utilities from destroying the Elma community with two nuclear plants. The Grange has become more attuned to the interests of the utilities than the needs of its members and has provided little in the way of responsible energy leadership.

Although the organization claims over 70,000 dues paying members, participation in Grange activities is but a fraction of that total. Many Granges which list several hundred members attract less than two dozen to their regular meetings. Many members join the organization to share in the benefits of the Grange Insurance Association. Others join because of what the organization once was and are repelled by the lack of energy, enthusiasm and direction at the meetings. A friend who faithfully participates in local Grange activities tells his neighbors that they need a lot

of vision to see the potential of the organization.

VISION

The Grange has lost its vision. It does not represent or project its original purposes. The organization can not seem to decide what its purpose is. It has not been an unabashed advocate of agricultural industrialization as has the Farm Bureau Federation, but neither has it been committed to challenging the forces which have decimated rural America since World War II.

An editorial cartoon in the Vancouver, Washington Columbian showed the Grange as a sleeping giant who roused himself to pass Initiative 59. But the giant is asleep again and lethargic is the most apt adjective to describe the state organization.

The Grange could become a dynamic, progressive force in Washington if it would recognize its natural constituencies and get back to Grange basics. The Grange needs new blood and new leadership. People who have gone back to the countryside need to share their vision, and through a process of cooperation add their energy and ideas to restoring and reviving the Patrons of Husbandry to a position of progressive advocacy for the family farm and rural America.

*The Age of Reform, Richard Hofstadter. Alfred A Knopf, NY. 1955.

Hofstadter's revisionist history has done more to destroy American agriculture than any other book.

Jim Bauermeister worked as a researcher-writer for the Washington State Grange for a year and a half and is currently writing a book on the agricultural history of Franklin County, Washington.