

Fermenting the Grapes of Wrath

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FERMENTING THE GRAPES OF WRATH

First hand commentary on the lives of common people is not always available to the historian trying to recreate a part of the past. Without such evidence, it is difficult to understand the trials and tribulations which people meet in their everyday lives. But from time to time insights into the experience of ordinary people come to light. Such is the case with a letter from western Iowa found among the papers of the late Senator Harry Flood Byrd. Written in 1934 when the Great Depression was at its worst, it vividly portrays the lot of the middlewestern farmers who, after decades of scratching their livelihoods from the soil, found themselves confronted with economic forces over which they had no control.

The letter, from Mrs. N. G. Rogers of Missouri Valley, Iowa, is dated 28 May 1934 and is written with soft lead pencil on cheap ruled paper. The script is at places illegible and the grammar and syntax unpolished. Nevertheless, it is not the letter of an ignorant person; rather, it contains the opinions of an unsophisticated farmer's wife. She was a woman with the same hopes and fears that beset others of her region and circumstance in the 1930s, and as such it is a revealing social history document.

Missouri Valley, twenty-five miles north of Council Bluffs, is only a few miles east of the Missouri River. Like other towns in Harrison County — and, indeed, throughout the midwest — Missouri Valley was in the midst of the worst agricultural depression in American history. Each previous period of economic hardship had witnessed the ruination of countless farmers and untold human misery. Each in its train also brought rabble rousers and preachers of doom. More importantly, each was also

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accompanied by prophets of economic change, whose fortunes and proposals bloomed and withered as the winds of the plains brought bad times and good. The depression of the 1930s was no exception, and Missouri Valley was in the center of the fertile fields of agrarian radicalism. To the east in the 1880s had been the Greenbackers. To the west and south in the 1890s were the populists. To the west and north in the 'teens were the zealous members of the Nonpartisan League. Each in its turn blamed malevolent outside manipulators for the troubles that afflicted the American farmer. Each proposed revisions in the national economic system and direct intervention by the federal government to police the bankers, grain elevator operators, railroads, and speculators whom the agrarian radicals believed — not without some justification — to be the root cause of their problems.

Individual farmers had always bought in a sellers' market and sold in a buyers' market. As the nature of American agriculture changed during the nineteenth century and farmers produced more of their annual crops for the market and actually raised less of their household and personal necessities for themselves, they found that they were increasingly at the mercy of economic forces beyond their control. Raising, harvesting, and marketing cash crops such as wheat, corn, hogs, and cattle required massive capitalization, elaborate networks of railroads and highways, feed lots, grain elevators, and a plethora of financial institutions. When hard times hit, the farmers were left with debts, obligations, and dependence upon those institutions, and it was the producers' tendency to believe that they had been victimized by the economic apparatus created to serve them. "There are three great crops raised in Nebraska," the editor of the *Farmer's Alliance* wrote in 1890. "One is a crop of corn, one a crop of freight rates, and one a crop of interest. One is produced by farmers who by sweat and toil farm the land. The other two are produced by men who sit in their offices and behind their bank counters and farm the farmers."¹

Until the depression of the 1930s farmers had received very little assistance from the federal government. But during the Hundred Days of President Franklin D. Roosevelt — from 4 March through 16 June 1933 — Congress acted at last to take a direct hand in stimulating the nation's faltering economy. Among the many

unprecedented measures passed during that session of Congress was the Agricultural Adjustment Act, a complex piece of legislation to raise the prices farmers received for the commodities they produced by creating artificial shortages. Acreage allotments were instituted to reduce the quantity of certain crops that would go on the market. Thousands of little pigs were killed in order to raise the price of pork. And restrictions were placed upon the operations of individual farms and the institutions which served to finance them and process and transport their produce to consumer markets.

The administration of this innovative program was the province of the secretary of agriculture, an Iowa man and former Republican, Henry A. Wallace. The AAA, which was run by an able and imaginative staff, including Columbia University professor Rexford G. Tugwell, made little progress during the first year of its existence but seemed to offer hope for the future. It also created intense controversy. The idea of slaughtering pigs and plowing up grain when the nation was filled with hungry people repelled many. The interference with individual entrepreneurs which the provisions of the legislation necessitated struck to the very heart of the free enterprise ethic upon which American finance capitalism was supposedly bottomed.²

Among the most conspicuous of the early critics of the AAA was the freshman senator from Virginia, Harry F. Byrd. In the spring of 1934 Byrd emerged as one of the most conservative and consistent critics of the Roosevelt Administration. On the night of 28 May 1934 he took to the airwaves to launch his first full-scale assault on the liberalism of the New Deal. The ostensible cause for the speech was a proposal by Secretary Wallace that Congress amend the AAA to permit the secretary of agriculture and the administrators of the AAA to wield expanded powers to coerce farmers and businessmen into compliance with the policies decreed by the Department of Agriculture. Senator Byrd declared that to adopt the amendments would make Wallace the "Hitler of American agriculture" and would begin the destruction of the American economic system. He denounced the amendments as a gross infringement of the rights of the people. He also coupled his attack on the AAA with his opposition to the elevation of Tugwell

to the new post of under-secretary, a move Byrd thought would imperil the very existence of free enterprise in the United States. Indeed, Tugwell was an unabashed pragmatist and a persistent advocate of national economic planning. The senator did not intend to single out Tugwell, one of Roosevelt's brains trust, when he flailed away at the AAA, but he was clearly using the proposed amendments as a blunt instrument with which to kill the Tugwell nomination. And conversely, he used the Tugwell issue to damn the amendments which, as Byrd believed, had been written by the New York professor. Byrd was to fail in his first objective but succeed in his second.³

Listening to Byrd's radio broadcast in Missouri Valley, Iowa, Mrs. Rogers detected several themes that coincided with her own thinking about the plight of the midwestern farmers. Not only is her letter extremely rich in detailed information about life on the plains during the depression, but it also contains illuminating passages which place the agrarian radicalism of the 1930s in better perspective. Her dissatisfaction with the New Deal was clearly a result of its not having produced tangible improvements in the twelve months since the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. But the farmers of Harrison County, as those elsewhere, disliked the inquiries and interference of government agents whose task of raising farm prices could only be accomplished if they could gather accurate information and impose limits upon production. Already Iowa farmers had resisted state animal health inspectors who came onto their farms and ordered the killing of diseased milkcows.⁴ Federal agents coming on the heels of the state agents was too much. Mrs. Rogers and others resented their presence and thought of them not as friends come in time of need but as pests and "snoopers" representing malevolent "eastern" capital interests. The paranoia and distrust of Wall Street which had helped to ignite the populist prairie fires of the 1890s smouldered again as the farmers of Iowa braced for the assault by new outsiders.

Suspicion grown lush in hard times and ripened by the arrogance of bureaucrats produced a crop of bitterness and hatred. Had farm prices taken a dramatic turn for the better in 1933 perhaps the harvest of rural unrest in 1934 would have been a lean one. (That

was to prove to be the case when the drought of 1934 reduced farm production and in effect performed the work of the AAA. In 1935 midwestern agrarian protest was much less evident than in 1934.) But prices remained low in 1934. From the perspective of the farmers the causes of the agricultural depression had not been touched, and the introduction of new headaches in the form of federal agents and bothersome federal regulations did not seem likely to remedy the situation.

Instead, as Mrs. Rogers' letter indicates, farmers in Iowa and the surrounding states were proposing their own panacea in the guise of a federal guarantee to each farmer of a price equal to the costs of production plus a "reasonable" profit. The scheme was conservative in its essence and left each farmer his own absolute boss. The plan was to regulate commodity prices to insure high farm incomes, which it was hoped would alleviate the farmers' subservience to shippers and processors. The most conspicuous advocates of the cost-plus-profit idea were John Simpson of Oklahoma, president of the National Farmer's Union, and Milo Reno, sixty-seven year-old president of the Iowa Farmer's Union and founder of the Farmer's Holiday Association. Simpson and Reno boldly proposed that the farmers strike — take a holiday — until the government would enact cost-plus-profit legislation.

If the plan was conservative in its objective, it was clearly a radical one in two respects. First it advocated direct federal control of peace-time commodity prices. Second its goal was to be reached through outright coercion. Moreover — and this is a point its supporters failed to recognize — setting the prices would require even more stringent government controls over businesses and farmers. The degree of federal intrusion into the economic life of the nation would undoubtedly have been greater under the Farmer's Holiday plan than under the AAA.

Mrs. Rogers' letter reveals these contradictions in thinking. She bridled at the thought of government intervention and was beset by all the legendary rural phobia. She confused Byrd's reference to Hitler with Stalin's Five Year Plans. And she had no clear idea of the ramifications of the program she supported.

The letter is printed below in full. The punctuation marks and letters within brackets are supplied for purposes of clarity. The

original is in the Harry Flood Byrd Papers, Manuscripts Department, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. It is printed with the permission of Senator Harry F. Byrd, Jr.

Missouri Valley, Iowa
May 28 — 1934

Senator Harry F. Bird
Washington D.C.

Dear Senator and I believe I may say friend — I sat by our radio turning the dial trying to find something worth listening to when you were announced to talk on the liscensing law for the A.A.A. If that kind of laws are what the congress is staying to enact they had better be on the way home and *never* return to Washington. God help the farmer, what are things coming to. Cant any one open their eyes when they get down to Congress? I've heard 50 men say within the last week that they'd shoot every son of bitch of a snooper that came on their place. I'm just quoting their words. Just as sure as theres a God in heaven you congressman are fixing for blood to flow as water out here in I[ow]a, yes and Mr. Senator I'm going to stand right by my husband and use a gun. to. I've been to two conventions within the last mo[nth]. where delegates were present from far and near, delegates from mass[achusetts]. to Calif[ornia]. bitter why I cant tell you how people feel out here.⁵ A mass meeting was held in the park at our county seat last Sun[day]. There were a thousand farmers there[.] The purpose was relief for our starving livestock. Doesnt matter if we have anything to eat a farmer is of no consideration, just here to raise food for the big boys for nothing and not use his brain to think, just let those scoundrels Wallace and Tugwell tell him where to [*word illegible*] to the necessaries of life. We have had it very dry here this is 4 out of 5 years. Not a bit of garden, Ive carried water 20 & 30 pails of water in one afternoon trying to plant some seed so it would grow hoping and praying it would rain. I'm so hungry for garden. We have had two showers since winter. No snow all winter, dirt not wet down 4 in[ches] last year nor this. That good hard earned money we spent for grass seed all gone when we needed it so badly to buy something to cover our hides. Oats trying to head out about six in[ches]. high wheat so short you cant cut it heading and no wheat in the heads. I dont care if we dont raise a bushel of grain,

reduce, reduce[.] its all we hear, *parity* price, *bare* (subsistence) *existence* farmers[.] it all makes you so mad all you here is cursing Wallace and Tugwell and their insane scheme. And to think congressmen let him be put in as under Sec[retary]. all for "patronage[.]" What wont some, some — I was going to say *men* but they are not men I'll say *shysters* — do for money. Make one part of people crawl on their bellies for the favored few[.] You know when I was a student I thot Congressman & Reps. were some sort of — well I thot every one was good and believed in "live and let live" like I did. I can see just how crooked some can get just as soon as they get in office. Al Capone is more honest. This may sound terrible to [*word illegible*] but its the thoughts of 99 out of 100. My husband and I (I'm 58 & he is 60 years) spent 30 years paying for this place, 157½ a[cre]s to save our souls we cant live and pay the taxes. It wasnt worth the sacrifice, pinching and saving we did get it. I told the treasurer when I paid the taxes this spring (I had to go for my husband was sick [*word illegible*] with typhoid) I'de see every body in hell before we'd mortgage it to get money to pay the taxes. We sold every foot of stock that was salable except milk cows & horses, to scrape enough to pay them. Heifers we wanted to keep, tod all winter and some hogs, all you could get in a big truck all for \$1.73. Mortgage foreclosures going nearly on 60 for June[.] the men know[.] You can ask for the federal loan but you dont get it. The Press all controlled, they dont let much of that get in the papers[.] I personally know a woman asking for \$2500 on 100 a good place of 100 acres[.] no other mortgage on anything she had, she applied 8 months ago, well they just told her she cant have it just work. O the "New Deal" is turning out the rottenest deal we ever had. I wish this was presidential election — what an awakening the Dem[ocrats]. would get.⁶ Brush the money changers around with a "feather duster", that wont hurt them. Didn't they hurry down to fish when Roosevelt did.⁷ They sure had a biz there.

Plenty farmers are getting their stomachs full of the corn and hog contracts & when the real contract comes back in the Stove it goes. The cry now is the farmer has lied when he made out his application. We learned years ago when the snoopers are around trying to find out how much corn you have how many pigs you have

so they can fix the price well they dont find out the real figgers on the crop. Why tell all your business, the other fellow dont. Did we sign any of Tugwells crazy scheme not much. Will we help put our agriculture in slavery as in Russia. *No*. Nine out of ten Senators are yes on every damnable scheme to make slaves of us. Can count every Senator & Rep. on my fingers that is worth two whoops in hell and I was more than glad to find one more Senator that had some brains[.] So you should [be] added to my list of good ones. I thank you for coming out and saying what you did to-night. Can I get a copy of your to-nights talk. I would like one. My husband wants to read it to a Holiday meeting. You know they tell you the holliday is dead, well 10,000 heard Chas. E. Coughlin talk at Des Moines some 3000 were delegates.⁸ The papers would not publish that. Did the President get a hearty applause, he did not. He lacks a long way being as popular as he was or as the press makes out[.] "popular" never got us anything we have found out. Farmers did not want your dole. What we want is cost and reasonable profit as other businesses get. Not until we get that will things move off[.] We and thousands of others never took any of it, and we are not going to[.] Did Wallace kill pigs on his farm. No, he did not. That hibred seed corn business — well it got to be owned by his wife — He has learned how to do since he heard the big bankers. Let some other members of the family take it. His agents went out and told people, "just plant my hibred seed and you'll have as much corn as if you took none out of production." They sold 17,000 bu[shels]. men from Des Moines tell us. Wallace got the reception when he came to Des Moines to speak last winter that Hoover did. They had to use the patent clappers of the radio station so there would be some applause.⁹ O yes the county agents were there. In Iowa the county agents are Wallace bird dogs. They do his dirty work and we taxpayers are forced to pay every one of the scoundrels \$3,000 per year, what for — well they are the men clear out on the end of the political string, all strings lead East, many centering in the U.S. chamber of Commerce and that is another bunch we farmers feel are shysters[.] *but how they know what ails the common people* as far as working slaves of US. They know exactly what ails us but could John Simpson tell what would help us & congress listen. He knew a horse from a jackass. They may as well say

N.R.A.¹⁰ has been a flop as is A.A.A. They both have failed and now own up. Prices to consumers are as high as they can get. They'd be no higher if we got cost of production so we could buy something we need, too. We wash rags not clothes. My husband has had two suits of clothes since 1918 and they both did not cost \$40. *I hope they will last long enough to be burried in[.] I can use a dollar or a 49¢ work dress for me.*

Eggs were 11¢ in trade last Sat[urday]. 9¢ cash. Cream 20 or 21¢. We cant have only the most necessary things and scrimp on those. Hungry for a change of food, we sure are. There is one thing we have plenty of and that is *water*. We have a deep well but many families in the neighborhood cant have that. Every bodies well pumps dry.

I will have to say where the Russian ambassidor entertained at Washington *Mister Henry Agard Wallace* was "Johny on the spot." ¹¹ Russia sounds good to him *when* he get all hog tied as in Russia — *When* he does, What will happen?

Dear Senator do not forget — to be happy its *live and let live* not *you live* & the rest starve. I pray you not to help make such laws as those you told of to night. This is America not Russia. Im thankful I can vote and kick some of those weak knees out of Congress next Nov. 8. We farmers only ask Justice[.] We do not ask any special favors[.] Just cost and a reasonable profit as all as other business get. Is that not fair? In I[ow]a. when you fight for justice they call out the National Guards & stick thire bayonetts under your ribs. The guards are for *no* other use only to support the right & justice.¹² Body guards for money changers.

I enclose under separate cover some papers and some examples of the New Deal we are receiving out here in Iowa.¹³ You will not get that news in Washington. From these papers you will get the sentiment in Iowa and its the same in all the middle west. I have no ill feelings toward you, I wish you well but damn Wallace and his A.A.A.

Respectfully

Mrs. N. G. ROGERS

Missouri Valley,

Iowa

1. On the changing nature of American agriculture and its resultant protest themes, see Anne Mayhew, "A Reappraisal of the Causes of Farm Protest in the United States, 1870-1900," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXII (June 1972), 464-75; *Farmer's Alliance*, 23 Apr. 1890, quoted in John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmer's Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 83-84.

2. On the Agricultural Adjustment Act and its agency, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, see Edwin G. Nourse, Joseph S. Davies, and John D. Black, *Three Years of the Agricultural Adjustment Act* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1937).

3. The speech was printed in *Congressional Record*, 73rd cong., 2d sess., CXXVIII (30 May 1934), 9,971-73. See also, Joe Brent Tarter, "Freshman Senator Harry F. Byrd, 1933-1934" (unpublished masters thesis, University of Virginia, 1972), 33-59.

4. Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 433-41.

5. These meetings were obviously of the Farmer's Holiday Association, which for well over a year was a very active and influential organization.

6. The "Dems." nevertheless carried both Iowa and Harrison County in the 1936 presidential election (Richard M. Scammon, comp. and ed., *America at the Polls: A Handbook of American Presidential Election Statistics, 1920-1964* [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965], 154-55).

7. A reference to President Roosevelt's fondness for sailing and fishing with wealthy friends on Vincent Astor's yacht *Nourmahal*.

8. Father Charles E. Coughlin, founder of the Shrine of the Little Flower in Detroit, Michigan, was known as the "Radio Priest" and was enormously popular in the mid-1930s. An early supporter of the New Deal, by 1934 he was turning sour and blaming Roosevelt for the tardiness of the recovery. Coughlin's radicalism took peculiar turns and allied him with such people as Louisiana Senator Huey P. Long, North Dakota Congressman William Lemke, Arkansas rabble-rouser Gerald L. K. Smith, and finally with his own fascist-like brown-shirted League for Social Justice (see David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Party, 1932-1936* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1969]).

9. The reference is probably to Wallace's speech of 11 November 1933, which had been designed as a foil to the inroads that the Farmer's Holiday movement was making on Roosevelt's midwest political support (Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, 485-86). The reference to the "patent clappers" is to the quiet reception President Herbert Hoover received in Des Moines when campaigning through Iowa in October 1932. Looking out of his train window he could see farmers silently standing along the tracks gazing bleakly at the train. Many held up signs reading, "In Hoover we trusted; now we are busted." Hoover rode through thickly crowded streets in Des Moines in an erie silence (*ibid.*, 445-46; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1932* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957], 422).

10. The National Recovery Administration, another product of the Hundred

Days, was coming under fierce attack by the early summer of 1934 because it was not producing rapid recovery, because it was interfering with the traditional independence of businessmen, because it was being used to foster the growth of labor unions in basic industry, and because of the dictatorial and arbitrary rule of its administrator, General Hugh ("Iron Pants") Johnson (see Leverett S. Lyon et al., *The National Recovery Administration: An Analysis and Appraisal* [Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1935]).

11. In November 1933 Peoples' Commissar for Foreign Affairs Maxim Litvinov arrived from the Soviet Union and negotiated with President Roosevelt for an exchange of ambassadors between the two countries. A farewell banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria drew a strange mixture of politicians and capitalists to dine with the Bolshevik (William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* [New York: Harper & Row, 1963], 206-7).

12. In September 1931, in order to force farmers in Tipton County, Iowa, to submit to having their cattle inspected by state animal health agents, Governor Dan Turner called out the National Guard, declared martial law, and braving an exchange of "words, mud, clubs, and tear gas," had the cattle inspected (Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, 441).

13. The papers which Mrs. Rogers promised to "enclose" were extracts from middle western newspapers and Farmer's Holiday pamphlets to judge by an undated and unsigned package of papers in her hand which are filed with the present letter in the Byrd Papers. They shed no additional light upon her thinking or upon conditions in Iowa.