

April 2, 1995

Mark Wexler, Editor
National Wildlife
National Wildlife Federation
8925 Leesburg Pike
Vienna, VA 22184

Dear Editor:

Having spent nearly four years studying Wisconsin's agrarian history, I must comment on Scott Pollack's article "What Farm Bureau Members May Not Know" (April/May 1995) to offer further detail which may be of interest to your readers. The history of farm organizations in the Midwest is a compelling story, and one many have not yet heard. While Pollack's article mentions Farm Bureau's overinflated membership numbers, it does not discuss its genesis as a counter to agrarian reform movements, its connection to large supermarket chains (Kroger, Safeway), American Cyanamid and the USDA Extension service as further explanation of its political motivations and leanings.

Farm Bureau first organized in 1911, in New York State in reaction to Progressive reform (a Republican party reform movement begun in Wisconsin by Robert LaFollette) and the NonPartisan League (an agrarian reform movement begun in North Dakota). As the first Wisconsin-born Governor, LaFollette appealed to farmer's concerns in his anti-big business campaign. His administration established a railroad commission to regulate shipping rates so farmers and others could transport their goods at a fair price, replaced the party boss system with a direct primary, and brought intellectuals, farmers and other businessmen together to discuss and resolve other political issues of the day.

Writings of the time in New York characterized these movements as the "bolshevism in the Midwest". In reality, these were cultural movements of recent immigrants from primarily Norwegian, Swedish, and German traditions (and other agrarian, non-English speaking, ethnic Americans) in response to big business control of government, transportation and markets centralized in New England.

Farm Bureau, then, began as an ideological response to regional ideological conflict. Business did not want to lose control over wheat and transportation prices, as well as over state politics. The early Farm Bureau received money from railroad interests for start-up funds. The Rockefeller Commission also contributed to early efforts, funneling more than \$500,000 per year to the Farm Bureau--big bucks at the turn of the century.

Farm Bureau found a government ally with the passing of the Smith-Lever Act creating the Extension Service in 1914. Extension's mission was to work with the land grant colleges and state and federal Departments of Agriculture to disseminate information to farm families on agriculture and homemaking. Smith-Lever provided matching federal funds for public or private money to hire Extension agents. In many cases, Farm Bureau's corporate sponsors provided the matching funds for Extension. The Chicago Board of Trade contributed \$1,000 to each of the early Farm Bureaus for this purpose.

Although the Farm Bureaus were politically inactive at the county level, they took on legislative and commercial action before World War One. Some states enacted legislation requiring a county Farm Bureau before a county Extension agent could be hired. In turn,

Extension agents actively recruited Farm Bureau members, in addition to their mission of providing information to farm families.

Before World War One broke out in Europe in 1914, cultural diversity in the United States was taken for granted. Surely nativism (anti-ethnic) sentiments existed, especially on a regional or issue-basis, but for the most part, nativism found little opportunity for expression on a grand scale. The Great War unleashed and focused nativist sentiment, profoundly influencing ethnic expression in Norwegian-American, German-American and other ethnic enclaves in Wisconsin. Nativists also lashed out at agrarian reform movements such as the Progressive movement and the NonPartisan League, perpetrating hate crimes and consistently calling their loyalty to the United States into question. The NPL went so far as to issue a declaration of loyalty at their convention in St. Paul, 1917:

"We pledge anew our devotion to our country in this supreme hour of trial. We renew our faith, our fortunes and our sacred honor to the struggle to free the world from autocracy and establish democracy, political and industrial, among the Peoples of the Earth.... While giving our utmost energies to the prosecution of the World War for democracy, we are not unmindful that there are enemies of democracy in the homeland. These are the powers of special privilege which take advantage of the opportunity which war affords to more firmly entrench themselves in their control of government and industry. These interests are amassing enormous fortunes out of the world's misery. They are reaching for our remaining public resources. They are striving to destroy the organization of farmers and workers. They are handicapping the progress of the war by their profiteering and thus prolong the war and sacrifice the lives of thousands of America's finest sons." (Bruce 1921; p.161)

In the meantime, the Farm Bureau was rapidly growing, deliberately organizing ahead of the NonPartisan League with the help of Extension agents. The Director of State Relations in the USDA suggest Farm Bureau become a national organization, which they did in 1919 with clearly political and commercial interests. At the Farm Bureau's first national meeting in Chicago, 1920, one of its main objectives was to stop any effort "that will align organized farmers with the radicals of other organizations". By spring 1920, the NonPartisan League and state Farmers Union affiliates called into question the relationship between the Farm Bureau and the state-supported Cooperative Extension Service before Congress. In autumn, Progressive and NonPartisan League candidates were one and the same in Wisconsin, sweeping elections for Congress, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Secretary of State.

In a public speech in 1920, the Chief of Extension C.B. Smith responded to accusations that Extension was organizing Farm Bureaus instead of working with existing farm organizations like the Farmers Union, the Equity, the Grange or the NonPartisan League.

"Practically all of these are secret organizations, or commercial organizations... [the federal and state governments] felt the necessity of developing a non-class, nonsecret, and permanent institution open to all farmers in the county..." (McConnell 1953; p.195)

As noted earlier, Farm Bureau and Extension relied heavily on money from commercial interests, especially for start-up funding. The idea that other farm organizations were secret may have been fostered by the fact that they were grass-roots organizations, pulled together by communities rather than created by an outside agency like the USDA or the Chicago Board of Trade. Since those in the federal government could no longer control Wisconsin government through party-controlled elections, they changed tactics to sponsoring an outside group to quell

farmer discontent.

Although Farm Bureau membership peaked in 1921, membership was down 2/3 by 1933. Farm Bureau was less dependent on farmer dues, increasing its operating budget by relying on government and commercial money for its work. In 1921, dues rose to \$10, a move that excluded many small farmers. In 1924, 93% of Farm Bureau's funds were from public coffers. Early Farm Bureaus promoted cooperative development, forming Farm Services cooperatives (FS). But by 1925, many state affiliates were opposed to developing cooperatives, focusing on commodities instead. This was especially true in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa. During the 1920s, the national Farm Bureau began working with Kroger and Safeway food store chains, and American Cyanamid on fertilizer and other petrochemical products. In the New Deal Era, Farm Bureau was put in charge of developing a program to assure farmers of a fair price for their products, and they developed the system of commodity program subsidies that, as the Environmental Working Group has pointed out, goes primarily to the shareholders of large corporate-scale farms. (On the other hand, the National Farmers Union was put in charge of electrifying rural America, and they developed the Rural Electrification Association, a very different program.)

In summary, farmer support for agrarian reform movements came from Midwestern farmers, the majority of whom were of non-English speaking heritage. They tended to be wary of Eastern-controlled big business, and felt their lifestyles threatened by large-scale agriculture. At the height of the grass-roots agrarian reform movement, its supporters faced nativist hostility and competition from the predominantly English-American Farm Bureau, a farm organization financially supported by federal and state governments, land grant colleges, the railroads, Rockefellers and the Chicago Board of Trade. As I work on the 1995 Farm Bill in alliance with sustainable agriculture, environmental and progress farm groups, I still see the scars of this conflict, as well as the same battle lines.

This history of the Farm Bureau and its link with Wisconsin is well documented in a number of histories as well as original documents at the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Those interested in pursuing a deeper understanding may want to refer to:

Dollar Harvest: The Story of the Farm Bureau by S.R. Berger, 1971

NonPartisan League by A.A. Bruce, 1921

The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service by W. Block, 1960

Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War One by F.C. Luebke, 1974

The Decline of Agrarian Democracy by G. McConnell, 1953

Political Prairie Fire by R.L. Morland, 1955

Harvest of Discontent: The Social Origins of the Non-Partisan League by K.D. Moum, 1986

The New Day by the NonPartisan League, 1919

The NonPartisan League: Facts About the Socialist Movement in Wisconsin and Other North Eastern States, by R.B. Pixley, 19

A Voice of Protest: Norwegian-Americans in American Politics, 1890-1917 by J. Wefald, 1971

My thesis may also be of interest, and provides documentation of the above account--
Cultural Diversity and Conflict in American Agriculture: Intergenerational Responses of a Wisconsin Farm Family, 1992--on the shelf at the Memorial Library, UW-Madison.

Sincerely,



Michelle Miller
608/255-1900

c: Ken Cook, Environmental Working Group
Jim Slana, Conscious Choice Magazine
Wayne Schmidt, National Wildlife Federation