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SHERIDAN COUNTY "REDS"?
A NEW LOOK AT THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EVENTS
IN SHERIDAN COUNTY, MONTANA
IN THE YEARS 1918-1932.

by

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B.A. Duke University, 1990

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for the degree of Master of Arts

The University of Montana

1998

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Dean, Graduate School

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Historical analysis of political and social protest movement in Sheridan County, Montana in the 1920s (46 pp.)

Director: Prof. David Emmons

A critical analysis of existing historical interpretations of political and social events that took place in Sheridan County, Montana in the years between 1918-1932. Interpretations to date have focussed on the radical nature of these events, supporting the idea that there existed a truly communist movement amongst the farmers of this region. These historians assume that since there were some Communist Party members in the region, that therefore every political and social development that transpired there was evidence of this communist movement.

This paper supports the idea that rather than being a radical, communist movement the developments in Sheridan County had much more traditional, albeit progressive origins. It is argued here that the ideology and movement culture created during this protest movement had more in common with the Granger movement, Populism, producerism, socialism, and the Non-Partisan League than with communism. The leaders of this movement, perhaps themselves communists, did not publicly articulate a doctrinaire communist ideology, but rather gained the support of the farmers of this region by building on this progressive but traditional foundation. This traditional yet progressive ideology is documented in an interview with the leader of this movement, Charlie Taylor, as well as evident in the newspaper at the center of the movement, The Producers News.
Located in the far north-east corner of Montana, bordered to the north by Saskatchewan, Canada and to the east by North Dakota, lies the county of Sheridan. If ever a geographic place had meaning, where people make connections to the land and were influenced by it, then maybe it is here. Standing in the midst of this barren, windswept land one can sense how this physical environment shaped the lives of those who worked its soil. Here in the wide open one can detect the loneliness, harshness that the homesteaders who arrived in the first couple of decades in this century encountered. This high prairie grassland (elevation 2000 feet) with its fertile soils lured ranchers and farmers to the region, but the wind, drought, baking sun, and remoteness of the region shaped their lives in ways unimagined. It is not hard to fathom that the farmers, miners, and laborers who worked this land sought to create a community or culture to overcome the isolation that the natural environment imposed on the inhabitants. One has to stand in the middle of a wheat field in Sheridan County to fully appreciate how this physical environment may have shaped the responses that the farmers of this region developed to deal with these bleak conditions. It was here that the “Sheridan County Reds” gained a political and cultural following and, as a result, a storied place in American agrarian and progressive history.

Sheridan County emerged in 1913 from Valley county, but then itself spun off acreage in 1919 and 1920 that led respectively to both Roosevelt and Daniels counties. The earliest settlers to the region were cattle ranchers who prized the region in the 1880s and '90s for its rich grazing lands. Perhaps the greatest impact on the region came in the early 1900s with the building of railroads. These railroads, most notably the Great Northern and the Soo Line, by 1913 had built extension lines that reached into what became Sheridan County. These railroads utilized changes in the Homestead Act in 1909 and recent bumper crops to entice homesteaders to Sheridan. What had been exclusively cattle country, soon became wheat, flax, barley, corn, rye, oats, and hay fields. Homesteaders migrated to northeastern Montana at such a rate that by 1920 Sheridan County had a population of more
than 13,000, and the county seat, Plentywood, boasted a population of 1,000. Certainly the people who came to settle this land brought with them their traditions, cultures, and ways of life, but they had to take into account and adjust to peculiar physical characteristics.¹

Sheridan County offered these settlers initial prosperity. World War One led to a dramatic rise in farm prices here in the USA, which also corresponded with unusually high levels of precipitation. Assuming that these conditions were the norm, settlers rushed into Sheridan County, often financially overextending themselves as they bought up land, equipment, supplies, etc. Unfortunately for these people, with the end of the war and a return to more modest precipitation levels, poverty and hardship followed throughout the 1920s. As dreams and promises vanished with the windblown soil, the people of Sheridan County looked for a way to express their frustrations and anger. Here in this remote region of Montana, that offered both the promises of prosperity and the chance for destitution, migrating settlers came together, out of economic, political, and social necessity to create a unique culture of protest that rose to challenge the existing culture. Perhaps for lack of a better understanding of this movement, this protest movement that these farmers created has been interpreted as a unique, radical political phenomenon, christened the "Sheridan County Reds". In many ways, members of the political left glorified and romanticized the history of Sheridan so that the events assumed mythical proportions that do not comport with reality. According to these sympathetic historians of the left, and even to those not sympathetic but who seek evidence of the threat Communism once had over this country, Sheridan County was believed to be under the influence, and at times dominated, in the 1920s and early 1930s by the Communist Party of America. While these accounts often

note the organic nature of the Communist movement in Sheridan County, they, nonetheless, assert that a truly radical movement took root that Communists dominated. One only has to examine the titles of the various studies on this region to see how historians interpreted this phenomenon in Sheridan County: "Who's going to Dance With Somebody Who Calls You a Mainstreeter: Communism, Culture, and Community in Sheridan County, Montana, 1918-1934"; "Red Waves of Grain: An Analysis of Radical Farm Movement Rhetoric in Montana, 1918-1937"; "Radical Rule in Montana"; "Rural Radicalism on the Northern Plains, 1912-1950"; and while broader in scope, the treatment of Sheridan County in Lowell Dyson’s Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers.²

At the center of these charges of radicalism is the belief that members of the Communist Party organized a Communist movement in Sheridan, at first outside of the organizational scope of the CPUSA, but then later under the direction of this party. Local CP members such as Charles Taylor, Rodney Salisbury, and Robert Larson organized a grass roots movement among the farmers of this county, most notably in the "rural crescent that circled Plentywood roughly from the southeast to the northwest, starting around Dagmar up toward Coalridge and Comertown and west to Raymond and Outlook."³

Historians who see a Communist movement in Sheridan claim the outward expressions of this movement, and indications of their success were seen in the elections between 1922-1928. At first the candidates of the CP ran under the banner of third parties: Non-Partisan

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League, Farm-Labor Party, and then as Independents. In these elections, the "Sheridan County Reds" first achieved limited success in the election of 1920 and 1922 as Non-Partisan League candidates, but then in the county elections of 1924 they swept their candidates into every office under the banner of the Farm-Labor Party. Ultimately, they ran openly as Communists in 1932. No matter under what party label they ran, these historians contend that the populace of Sheridan County knew that the candidates were supporters of the Communist movement, and that the rural electorate in Sheridan knowingly voted for these Communist sympathizers and organizers. Thus, Sheridan County supported a rural, grass roots, radical, Communist movement. For example, Dr. Zahavi writes, "In their early years, local CP members generally kept their party affiliations secret. But few who paid attention could mistake their ideological fealty." William Pratt stated that, "Montana also had one or two Communist legislators in the 1920s, and the Non-Partisan League leadership in Sheridan County, Montana was close to the Communist movement by 1922." Pratt pointed out that "Two years later (1922), 'Sheridan County Reds' took over the county government and sent Taylor to the state senate." This is not to say that all of those who voted this radical tickets were themselves Communists. Charles Vindex argued that the actual number of Communists never surpassed 575. He came to this number by determining the number of Sheridan County residents who voted the straight Communist Party ticket in 1932. However, even here Vindex suggests that a full twenty percent of the voting populace sympathized and converted to the Communist ideology at a time when the party's fortunes in Sheridan had already significantly declined. Vindex, Pratt, Zahavi, Dyson and other historians, while

4 Producers News, November 17, 1922 and November 14, 1924.
5 Party affiliation and election results can be found in the November and December issues of the Producers News.
7 Pratt, "Rural Radicalism," p. 45.
8 Vindex, "Radical Rule," p. 3. This percent was determined by looking at the election results in the Producers News on December 2, 1932 in order to estimate the total number of people voting.
pointing out that the majority of the population in Sheridan did not formally belong to the CPUSA, nonetheless, argue that the majority of the population chose to support Communist candidates, thereby tacitly showing their support for this ideology. However, they all acknowledge that a group of dedicated Communists drove this movement. Therefore, all of these studies begin with trying to explain how and why the Communists were initially so successful in this region, where as the CP failed as a whole across the country to generate much rural farmer support for its program, and then they look to explain why this Communist movement later faltered.

This paper will attempt to explore the origins of this radical movement in Sheridan County, and in doing so will challenge the basic assumption that these other historians accepted; that a truly radical, Communist-inspired movement existed. To claim that the political movement in Sheridan was a truly radical, Communist inspired movement would be to state that this movement voiced drastic, extreme changes based upon Communist ideology. What will be shown is that, rather than voicing Communist solutions such as collectivization or the abolition of private property according to ideological Communist doctrines, these “Sheridan County Reds” acted within a familiar, non-Communist framework with roots in American protest politics. While outsiders looking back on this movement may perceive it as "radical", it will be argued that for the actual participants, they were never asked to make a leap of faith that did not have some foundation in their previous political culture and discourse. Even the leaders of this movement, and most notably the movement's mouthpiece, the Producers News, espoused this progressive, not communist, ideological perspective. In the movement culture that they developed, it could be argued the “Sheridan County Reds” had closer ties to previous political protest in American history, Populism, Progressivism, the Non-Partisan League, etc., than to Communism. Yes, the “Sheridan County Reds” proposed changes, some of which would have significantly altered the look of capitalism in America. For this reason many could argue
that this movement proposed radical change. However, the "Sheridan County Reds" never threatened the abolition of the essence of the capitalist system: private property. The ideology of this movement was not radical relative to the ideology of orthodox Communism. Perhaps they have been perceived as radicals because they sought to challenge the existing individualist culture, so that greater emphasis was placed on cooperation and community. The actions of these farmers contradicted the widely held, but scarcely realized, idea of the "Agrarian Myth"; that is of the truly independent yeoman farmer. True, what took place in Sheridan with its emphasis on cooperation and community does not comport with our mythical view of the independent farmer and rancher of the west. However, one must be careful not to read too much into something, to see signs of a Communist movement where it did not exist. While acknowledging that some of the proposals of the "Sheridan County Reds" could be seen by many Americans as radical, this paper will argue that this movement was not radical at its essence because it was rooted in the tradition of American protest politics and it did not attempt to replace capitalism. It was not a Communist movement.

As a society we have certainly come to view any challenge to the existing structure of society as "radical" and thus worthy of resistance, but Lawrence Goodwyn argued that the ultimate victory of a ruling class is, "only when the population has been persuaded to define all conceivable political activity within the limits of existing custom." He argued that the ruling class, in this case bourgeois, achieved this hegemony by creating a dominant culture that viewed as "radical" any political activity that challenged the established cultural norms and power structure. As Goodwyn wrote, "A far more permanent and thus far more desirable solution is cultural--the creation of mass modes of thought that literally make the need for major additional social changes difficult for the mass of the population to

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imagine."^{10} It could be argued that this type of cultural hegemony colored people's understanding of events in Sheridan, to the point where any new culture and thus forms of protest could only be defined as being outside the cultural norm, thus seen as a challenge and thus radical.

The true character of this movement, that it was more a continuation of progressive politics dating back to the Granger movement than a truly radical Communist movement (at least during its most successful years up to 1928) will become apparent as the origins of this movement are traced. It will be shown that a progressive political movement built on the foundation of other progressive movements, carried on by supporters familiar with its message and by immigrants with a progressive tradition of their own, converged in Sheridan County to create a movement culture that challenged elements of the existing democratic, capitalistic culture but did not attempt to replace this culture completely. In fact, it was merely trying to come to terms with this existing capitalistic culture. While the organizers and leaders of this movement may have wished to take this movement in a more orthodox, Communist direction, one cannot characterize the movement based on the ideology of just a few. This interpretation of the "Sheridan County Reds" will help one to see the problem with previous interpretations. In these previous studies, historians question what the CP did wrong to lose the support of the farmers in the late 1920s. From the perspective employed here one will see that the CP did not do anything wrong; the fact remained that the majority of farmers were never and would never be Communists. The farmers of Sheridan County did not join the movement due to a conversion to Communist ideology. They supported a progressive movement based upon a traditional and familiar politics of protest. Ultimately, as the CP made their ideology more clear to the farmers, the farmers realized the incompatibility between their views and Communism, and thus left the movement. This fact can be seen in the election of 1932 in which the "Reds" ran openly on

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^{10}Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, p. XI
the Communist Party ticket for the first time and lost every office in the county but one that was un-contested. The fact remains that the movement reflected the interests of the supporters, and they were not reds nor true ideological Communists. They barely qualify for the term "radical".

To argue that the “Sheridan County Reds” were not ideologically bound Communists in itself is not an entirely new argument. Charles Vindex pointed out that, "... those who helped swell "red" majorities in the successful 1918-1926 elections were persons under the influence of radical ideas in general, never disciplined Communists." However, Vindex, while correctly exposing the weakness of the link to Communism, never explored the origins of this movement in satisfactory detail. After reading his account, one is still left with an incomplete understanding of what this movement was if not a radical Communist movement. In addition to debunking the misconceived perception of the political phenomenon in Sheridan County as a Communist movement, this paper will attempt to explain the true origins of this movement. If this was not a Communist movement as so many people claim, then what was it and why did this movement take shape here in Sheridan County? Vindex was on the right track when he claimed, "In Sheridan County special external influences coincided with special internal stresses at a difficult time." However his treatment did not examine in enough detail its true origins. While one must be appreciative of his efforts to expose the true meaning of this part of Montana’s history, there is more work to be done if we are to come to a complete understanding of this event. While not pretending to provide the complete, final analysis of the events that transpired in Sheridan County in the years between 1918-1934, I do hope to shed new light on this discussion by questioning some of the old premises and by raising some new questions.

11 Producers News, December 2, 1932
12 Vindex, "Radical Rule", p. 3.
13 Ibid., p. 3.
While the leaders of the movement had connections to the CPUSA, in fact some were members, the leadership deliberately downplayed the orthodox Communist ideology in order to gain the farmers' support. In examining the movement ideology that spread amongst the populace of Sheridan County, which was not necessarily the private ideological views of the leaders, we will see less in common with Communism than with the ideology espoused by Thomas Jefferson, the Grange, the Populists, and the Non-Partisan League. In this sense, this movement was successful in large part because it was opportunistic, willing to sacrifice Communist orthodoxy to the point that its publicly stated ideology resembled nothing close to Communism, but rather was appealing to the "producers" of society. Furthermore, this movement did not develop within a vacuum, but rather built on and utilized the familiar language and ideology of "producerism" and progressivism that could be traced back through the Non-Partisan League, the Socialist movement, the American Society of Equity, Populism, and the Granger movement. These previous political and economic organizations all bequeathed to the "Sheridan County Reds" not only an ideological framework, but proven strategies, newspapers, experienced leadership, cooperative organizations, and a culture of protest. The link between the previous movements and "Sheridan County Reds" was undeniable, and this made it much easier for the voters to make the transition to the succeeding movement. This linkage to previous political and economic movements can be traced through the leadership, the ideas employed, the organizations that existed, as well as through the experiences of the electorate. It can be proven from a statistical analysis of the 1920s manuscript census that the population in Sheridan County had extensive exposure to these previous progressive ideas based upon their experiences in their previous states of residence.

Large numbers of Sheridan County residents previously resided in the states of North Dakota and Minnesota where there existed strong ties to progressive politics and cooperative economic experiences. Additionally, Sheridan County attracted a
disproportionate number of Scandinavian immigrants who carried with them political, economic, and social experiences deeply steeped in progressive ideology. In other words, large numbers of the people who came to Sheridan County were predisposed towards the progressive message espoused in the county due to either their previous political, economic, and social experiences here in the United States or in their home countries. While these immigrants and migrants may not have personally held these progressive beliefs, they at least were made familiar with them. Perhaps due to this familiarity they would be more willing to support these ideas at a later date. Another factor that contributed to the success of this political movement, was the ability of the leadership to build a "movement culture" that facilitated the breakdown of the existing dominant culture. Having broken down the dominant culture, this movement culture helped create a culture of protest in which it became easier to challenge existing political ideas and replace them with more progressive ideas. It will be shown that this was one of the great areas of success of this movement in Sheridan County. Finally, some exploration of the economic situation must be made, because it is unlikely that this movement would have arisen if everyone had been prosperous and content. In examining these different factors, it will be shown that there was not any one single cause for the rise of this movement, but rather it was probably some combination of the various factors just mentioned that happened to combine uniquely in Sheridan County, Montana. Perhaps even a sprinkling of fortuitous opportunity also played a role. In any case, no matter what the true ideological nature of this movement, it certainly was different from the political experiences of the surrounding areas, if not from the rest of the American experience. What will hopefully emerge from this exploration is a new understanding of the events that transpired in Sheridan County from 1918-1934. The purpose of this paper is to chip away at some of the myths surrounding the "Sheridan County Reds", while at the same time provide an explanation for the occurrence of what was certainly an interesting development in American history.
The interpretation of the events in Sheridan County as being a Communist movement has been accepted de facto by various historians as mentioned previously. Whether seen as part of a broader Communist movement throughout America, or interpreted as a local indigenous Communist movement, the basic premise that the "Sheridan County Reds" were a Communist movement has been rarely challenged. Lowell Dyson wrote that the "Sheridan County Reds" were evidence of the success of the efforts of the Communist Party to cultivate support among the farmers of America. Dyson placed the struggle to build Communist support in Sheridan County within the context of the internal conflicts of the CPUSA as they debated the merits and ideological appropriateness of courting the farm element. Dyson believed that the halting and interrupted support that the Communists in Sheridan County received from the CPUSA reflected the internal divisions and conflicts within the CPUSA between William Foster and Jay Lovestone as they battled for the supremacy of their ideological perspective and strategy. This conflict in turn reflected the power struggles taking place between Trotsky and Stalin in the USSR. Jay Lovestone favored pursuing a course of politics that would include all "progressive factions", including an alliance with farmers through the use of organizations such as the United Farmers Educational League (UFEL) to complement the already existing Trade Union Educational League (TUEL). In opposition to Lovestone's strategy stood William Foster, who was opposed to this pragmatic approach and rather favored a more dogmatic and orthodox ideology that saw farmers as "bourgeois" opponents of Communism. Dyson argued that Charlie Taylor and the "Sheridan County Reds" were pawns of this internal power struggles of the CPUSA, thus always unsure of their standing within the CPUSA and the larger Communist movement. This shows how Dyson viewed everything that happened in Sheridan County in direct correlation to the CPUSA. Just as the CPUSA has

14Dyson, Red Harvest, pp. 27-50.
been criticized for its "top down" strategy that did not allow for any deviation, so too Dyson falls victim to this same "top down" analysis, thereby precluding any other interpretation of events in Sheridan County. For Dyson, the movement in Sheridan could be nothing but a Communist movement because it was sanctioned by the CPUSA and there were Communist leaders active in Sheridan. This interpretation of events led him to state that,

Sheridan County, Montana had the most successful party (Communist Party) organization throughout this period. Left-wing socialists had abounded in the Plentywood area even before the arrival of Charlie Taylor to take over the fledgling weekly, *Producers News*, in 1918. Most of the leaders of this group had quietly joined the Communist Party within a few years after its birth. Between 1920 and 1924 they gained control of the county government and extended their influence into adjoining counties.15

The problem with this analytical framework is that it does not allow for the consideration of any other possible interpretation or explanation of events in Sheridan. Dyson saw Communists in Sheridan, knew that the CPUSA was interested at various points in organizing the farmers in the area, and thereby concluded that any movement that arose was therefore a Communist movement.

Dyson was by no means the only one to interpret events in Sheridan in this fashion. While others may have been less interested in placing events in the county into the context of the larger Communist movement in America and even the world, other historians, nonetheless, adhered to this rigid interpretation of the Sheridan movement as an exclusively Communist movement. As can be deducted from the title of his article, "'Who's Going to Dance With Somebody who Calls You A Mainstreeter'; Communism, Culture, and Community in Sheridan County, Montana, 1918-1934", Dr. Gerald Zahavi in his analysis of events in Sheridan started and ended his interpretation with the notion that there was no question but this was a Communist movement. There was never even any debate on this matter as shown here at the start of his analysis,

15Ibid., pp. 31-32.
In examining the history of the rise and fall of a Communist movement within a single county in Northeastern Montana, and exploring how it saturated local political, social, and cultural life—education, youth culture, town-country antagonisms, religion, prohibition and crime, as well as personal and political conflicts—I hope to demonstrate the value of this approach.\textsuperscript{16}

At the conclusion of his essay, Zahavi wrote,

Still, the reputation of the county and the memories of those who lived through the decade of radical rule recall an era when Marxist radicalism took on a significant place in the lives of everyday people, and when it saturated various aspects of their social, cultural, political, and economic lives.\textsuperscript{17}

William Pratt at the University of Nebraska, considered to be one of the experts on the history of political movements and agricultural organizations in the Northern Plains region, argued that, "The northern plains had a small number of Communist branches in the middle and late 1920s, but Sheridan County and two Finnish communities in the Dakotas may have been the party's most important rural bases in these states."\textsuperscript{18} Finally, the hegemony of this interpretive framework continues through to this day in a recent film treatment of this story entitled "The Wide Open", that includes among its historical advisors Lowell Dyson, William Pratt, Michael Malone, Thomas Wessel, and Harry Fritz; all accomplished historians of Montana. In this treatment it is written,

Two men, the notorious newspaperman and orator Charlie Taylor, and his field general, the rough and ready Sheriff Rodney Salisbury, were the lightning rods that sparked the "Reds" of Sheridan County, in the northeast corner of Montana, which for most of the Twenties, was the only all-Communist county in the United States—the epicenter of an agrarian revolution which spread like wildfire through the states between the wars.\textsuperscript{19}

These historians who view the activities in Sheridan County as part of a Communist movement do so based upon the definite links between the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) and various citizens within Sheridan County. That there were links, both formal and informal, cannot be denied. Charlie Taylor and a few other locals

\textsuperscript{16}Zahavi, "Who's Going to Dance," p. 2.  
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 34.  
\textsuperscript{18}Pratt, "Rural Radicalism," p. 46.
established a "Communist group" in 1920 in Sheridan County, perhaps formally joining the CPUSA in 1922. By the early 1920s it was believed that were at least twenty or so "core Communist Party activists in the Plentywood area; more were active in the outlying county hamlets that ringed it." Taylor was active in the UFEL, which later became the United Farmers League, and was even named National Chairman of the UFL, organizations which were certainly dominated by the CPUSA. Additionally, the National Farm-Labor Party under which Charlie Taylor and the "Sheridan County Reds" ran in 1924, 1926, and then again in 1930, came to be controlled to a great extent by the CPUSA at the national level at its initial founding in 1924. Although the CPUSA support was later revoked, for many people the fact that the F-L Party was controlled at the national level by Communists and that the local branch of the F-L Party in Sheridan County did well in the 1924 election (they won every elected office in 1924 and all but one in 1926) served as evidence that the movement in Sheridan County was therefore a Communist movement.

Historians also looked to the election results throughout this time period for evidence of the community's support for this Communist movement. Historians such as Gerald Zahavi claimed that, "In the early years, local CP members generally kept their party affiliation secret. But few who paid attention could mistake their ideological fealty." If one believes this statement by Zahavi, then it would follow that knowing that Taylor and other leaders in Sheridan were known Communist Party members, yet were successfully and at times overwhelmingly elected to office in Sheridan, that, therefore, the majority of the population of Sheridan County supported Communist ideology. One only needs to look at election returns between the years 1920-1928 to see the success that Taylor and other "Reds" enjoyed during these years. Under various party labels that included the Non-Partisan

22 Dyson, Red Harvest, pp. 46-49, 68-70, and 106.
League, Farm-Labor Party, and Independent Party, Taylor and the "Reds" controlled politics in Sheridan County from 1922-1928. They won every elected office in 1922, again in 1924, and all but one office in 1926.\(^{24}\) Finally, in the county elections of 1932 and then again in 1934 there were several candidates who ran openly under the Communist Party, making obvious to all what most had already considered a Communist movement.\(^{25}\) In his interview with Charlie Taylor, Lowell Dyson also uncovered a direct link between the CPUSA and the *Producers News*, the official newspaper of the "Sheridan County Reds". In 1928-29 Erik Burke took over as editor of the newspaper and he was under the direct supervision of the CPUSA who even paid his salary.\(^{26}\)

Certainly with this evidence in hand, it could lead one to draw a very simple and what would seem to be logical conclusion; that the apparent links between the CPUSA and the leaders, citizens, and organizations within Sheridan County were evidence that the political events that developed in Sheridan County between 1920-1934 were Communist inspired. It is this emphasis on the linkage of the CPUSA and people, events, and organizations within Sheridan County that led historians like Dyson, Pratt, Zahavi, and others to conclude that the "Sheridan County Reds" really were Communists, and that the electoral results in the 1920s were evidence of the appeal of the Communist movement within the county of Sheridan. However, there remain a few troubling aspects to this analysis. To begin with, this interpretation of events in Sheridan uses the ideology and assumptions of the CPUSA, in the case of Lowell Dyson, and imposes them upon Sheridan County. In his bid to discuss the success and failures of the CPUSA in regards to its rural/agricultural strategy, he concedes to the Communist movement right from the start that what took place in Sheridan County was all a reflection of the high level of

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\(^{24}\) For election results for 1922 see the November 17, 1922 edition of the *Producers News*, for 1924 results see the November 14 edition, and for 1926 see the November 12 edition.

\(^{25}\) For CPUSA control of the National Farm-Labor Party see Taylor interview, p. 49-66. For results of the 1924 election see the *Producers News*, November 14, 1924. The *Producers News* on December 2, 1932 and then on November 23, 1934 show the election returns with party identification.
support for Communism. He starts with the basic assumption that the people who voted "Red", meaning those who did not vote for one of the two traditional parties, were voicing their support for Communist ideology. When the "Reds" began to lose support in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the argument was that the Communist Party made certain mistakes to lose the support of a population that was Communist, but he began with the basic assumption that a large block of voters in Sheridan County were disposed towards Communism and that these people were for the CPUSA to win or lose. In the case of Pratt and Zahavi, there was a tendency to examine the private beliefs and aspirations of certain leaders of this political movement, namely Charlie Taylor and Rodney Salisbury amongst others, and assume that the population of the County similarly came to endorse their vision of a Communist society. Since there were at least a few known Communists participating in these events, the unassuming historian therefore assumed that this meant one was witnessing a Communist movement. In taking this line of analysis, the historian demeans the very intelligence and independence of the hundreds of voters of Sheridan County by assuming that the voters will automatically follow along. Just because there was a group of devoted CP members working actively for the success of their party does not make for a Communist movement. That line of thinking gives too much credit to the ideas of a few people and does not take into consideration the will, the interests, and the beliefs of the populace at large. Perhaps the voters knew the candidates were privately Communists, but the ideology they voted for was not Communism.

In fact, this paper will argue that in its bid to create a political alternative to the existing two party system, the political ideology that developed in Sheridan County bore little resemblance to Communism and, in fact, had much closer ties to the traditional politics of producerism and progressivism that evolved out of the Granger movement, Populism, the Socialist Party, and the Non-Partisan League. The leaders had to develop

\[26\] Taylor interview, p. 100-101.
this pragmatic ideology in order to gain the support of these people. Zahavi pointed out that, "... organizations like the Sheridan County Progressive Farmers represented an arena of struggle for Communists, one in which they were continually forced to compromise."27 However, if one compromises on the ideology to such an extent, at what point does it no longer bear any resemblance to the original ideology and thus cease to be Communism? It will be argued that no matter what the private beliefs of the leadership in Sheridan County that may have remained Communist, the public ideology that was expressed through the leadership of Charlie Taylor and most expressively in its official organ, the Producers News, bore little resemblance to Communism. While the leaders, the committed Communists, may have had ulterior motives in the hopes of leading the population from a course of progressive politics to more orthodox Communism, the fact is that the majority of the population throughout the 1920s in Sheridan County supported a political ideology rooted in the traditional, progressive American experience; not Communism. To see it the other way around is to ignore and minimize the actions, ideas, and beliefs of the population in Sheridan County, by elevating and aggrandizing the actions, ideas, and beliefs of a few committed Communists.

Despite the fact that Charlie Taylor saw himself as a Communist organizer intent on creating an agrarian Communist movement, the public political message that he and the newspaper he ran, the Producers News, put out to the local population in Sheridan County bore little resemblance to the ideology of Communism. As Taylor himself stated, "But I always separated carefully my main work from injecting too much Communism. I talked bourgeois taxation and about their local problems that they understood and that were immediate. I talked more about immediate problems to these men."28 Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to call into question the assumption that this was a Communist movement, and instead argue a different explanation of this political development in

Sheridan County during these years. For evidence of the true ideology of this movement, that was based upon local support at the polls, we shall examine the ideology of its foremost leader, Charlie Taylor, and the official mouthpiece of the movement, the Producers News.

Throughout these years, both Taylor, his fellow "Reds", and the newspaper that Taylor edited for much of the decade, the Producers News, relied upon for their support the rural farmers in Sheridan County, who lived outside of the main town of Plentywood.

Large pockets of strong CP support emerged in the farming and lignite mining area just west of the North Dakota border, in Comertown, Westby, and South toward Coalridge and Dagmar. That region's reputation as a "red" enclave was firmly established, surviving well into the 1980s; former residents of a conservative bent referred to the eastern edge of the county as "Communistic country" and "Mother Bloor country. Especially radical was the rural crescent that circled Plentywood roughly from the southeast to the northwest, starting around Dagmar up toward Coalridge and Comertown and west to Raymond and Outlook.29

Therefore, what emerged was a political division within the county between the rural farmers and miners who supported the "Reds", and the small and large businessmen, the "mainstreeters", living in the town centers who for the most part opposed the "Reds".30 What is important about identifying the occupation and areas of support of the "Reds" is to understand that these farmers were property owners. It is extremely unlikely that farmers, steeped in a culture that embraced the concept of private ownership of property, would be willing to embrace a Communist ideology that would call for the public ownership of all property and possibly the collectivization of farming. The limits of the radicalism of the ideology presented in this movement can be seen in this quote from the Producers News in 1921, in which the newspaper denies any intent to end the profit system currently in place.

There was a time when the world was not so socialistic as it is now, in fact we doubt if our advocates of private industry realize how much socialism there is in the old United States right now. We mention these things not to poke fun at those yelling about socialism, although that is entirely fair, but to

28Taylor interview, p. 157.
30Zahavi does an excellent job in his article, "Who's going to Dance", in detailing the true base of support of this political development in Sheridan County, highlighting the rural/town division that resulted.
point out how unfair they are in yelling socialism at the organized farmers. Unless we are all socialists, a socialist is one who proposes a complete elimination of the profit system and the substitution therefore of publicly directed enterprises.\textsuperscript{31}

The newspaper went on to argue that the elimination of the profit system was something that neither the \textit{Producers News} nor the NPL advocated. In other words, its goals were not so radical. In order to gain the support of the farmers in Sheridan County, the Socialist Party, then the Non-Partisan League, then the Farm-Labor Party, then even the Communist Party, no matter under what party affiliation the "Reds" ran, they declined to campaign on orthodox Communist ideology knowing that they would lose the support of the farmers if they even mentioned collectivization or doing away with private property.

Instead of utilizing the standard Communist lexicon and analysis with its long term goals of a proletarian revolution, Taylor, the \textit{Producers News}, and other CP leaders had to focus on more immediate issues and goals. It was their attention to these concrete problems in Sheridan County (such as the mark up of goods and supplies by middle-men and store owners, high interest rates charged by banks, lack of insurance, excessive rates charged by grain elevators and railroads, and relief from farm mortgage foreclosures) that gained the farmers' support to the movement of the "Reds"; not due to any conversion nor acceptance of Communist ideology. In writing about the history of farmer radicalism in North Dakota and the eastern section of Montana, William Pratt writes about early attempts by the Socialist Party to win over the farmers,

Initially, party platform called for the collectivization of agriculture; this had minimal appeal to small farmers and tenants who felt oppressed by the middle man, bankers, and land lords of 'electric light tower', but remained deeply committed to the idea of the privately owned land. Once the SP allowed its farm advocates to develop a practical farm program, the movement was able to attract a significant amount of electoral support in Oklahoma and to a lesser extent in other locales in the Southwest and North Dakota.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Producers News}, may 13, 1921

Pratt has not been the only agrarian historian to notice that the SP, the ideological predecessor to the CP, did well in gaining the support of farmers so long as it did not concentrate on converting the farmers to orthodox Socialism and later Communism. John Shover in his analysis of the failure of the CP to gain control of the Farm Holiday Association in the 1930s and turn it into a Communist movement, observed that the CP failed because it overestimated the depths of farmer radicalism. He noted that farmers were interested in an organization such as the FHA, even if it had ties to Communism, so long as it concentrated on the immediate needs of the farmers. However, as the CP tried to exert a more ideologically rigid approach to the FHA, the farmers abandoned the CP and came under the influence of the more conservative Miles Reno.33 Similarly, in Alabama in the 1930s, the CP made significant inroads into gaining the support of African-American workers by concentrating on the immediate needs of the workers, not by imposing some preconceived analytical framework upon the Alabama workers. In Oklahoma in the first couple of decades, the SP was able to build a base of support by taking the yeoman's, tenant farmers', and sharecroppers' issues and grievances as their own, not by coming in and imposing their ideological vision on the farmers.34 Charlie Taylor himself commented that the very fact that the CP ignored the events in Sheridan County in the early to mid late 1920s, led to a great deal of success for the “Sheridan County Reds” as they could follow a more pragmatic ideology, rather than a dogmatic one. "But to a lot of fellows (other CP members), they (farmers) were bourgeois and you couldn't do anything with them."35 It is interesting to note that the “Sheridan County Reds” enjoyed their greatest success in the years 1922-1926, at a time when they were virtually ignored by the CPUSA thus free to

34For information on the CP’s efforts in Alabama, see Robbin Kelley Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Depression. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 18. For information on the SP activities in Oklahoma and the greater Southwest see James Green, Grass roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest 1895-1943. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), p. XVIII.
create their own ideological vision. It was only in the later years when the CPUSA became more involved in the affairs in Sheridan County, starting in 1928 with the placement of Erik Burke as the editor of the PN, that the newspaper took on a more ideologically rigid Communist line, and not surprisingly it was in that election in 1928 that the "Reds" won only two offices in the county thus losing control for the first time since 1922. Taylor commented on this when he stated, "... but they (CP) didn't know anything about agriculture, weren't paying any attention to it, and just let us go. They commenced to pay attention when they sent Erik Burke out ..." What these different examples shows, was that including the events in Sheridan County, the CP could succeed in building a political movement in the most unlikely of areas, the agrarian community, so long as it did not attempt to convert the farmers to Communism. In other words, the movement that was built in Sheridan was not really a Communist movement other than the fact that there were some Communist members who lived in Sheridan and were politically involved, going so far as to provide much of the leadership.

If the ideology that emerged in Sheridan County in the 1920s was not Communism, then what was the political orientation behind the "Sheridan County Reds"? It will be shown that the ideology that the leaders espoused and that the major propaganda source, the Producers News, articulated was a familiar and progressive ideology, but not a radical nor Communist one. In part, it will be argued that this movement was not radical nor Communist because the majority of the people of Sheridan never made the conscious decision to participate in a Communist movement. Instead, the ideology that they embraced was one based on a familiar, progressive tradition. The leaders of this movement, and most notably the Producers News, used the ideas, language, people, and culture of

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35 Taylor interview, p. 104-106.
36 For election results in 1928 see the November 9 edition of the Producers News. For evidence of greater Communist orthodoxy in the Producers News once Erik Burke became editor, see compare editorials from before and after 1928.
37 Taylor interview, p. 106.
previous progressive political movements so that the people of Sheridan were never required to make a decision to embrace a "radical" ideology. Leaders such as Charlie Taylor used the Producers News to facilitate the transition to an increasingly more progressive ideology, but it appeared to be based upon the notion of a cooperative commonwealth that employed government intervention on behalf of the farmers and laborers to level the playing field in their struggle against "big business." In this sense, this ideology had more in common with "producerism," that is to the producers should go the profits, then it did with Communism. With the emphasis on "producerism", this movement tied itself to an ideology and language that has a long tradition in American history. While there was an attempt to inculcate a greater sense of class consciousness, ultimately, where could the Communists go with this since the farmers remained wedded to private property? Since this incremental indoctrination was employed, and because every idea was based on previous ones, this ideology that emerged hardly appeared radical to the people of Sheridan County. While it could be argued that the Producers News did become both radical and Communist in its orientation in the later part of the 1920s and early 1930s once the CP took direct control of the paper, it should also be noted that this was when the "Reds" lost political power and support in Sheridan County. It would seem that it was only when the ideology did in fact become radically Communist that the movement began to lose support.38

One can begin to see the non-radical origins of this movement in Sheridan County by examining the ideological origins of the movement. As stated earlier, the Sheridan County experience was not a movement that materialized out of nowhere. It represented the continuation of the farmers' struggle to maintain their way of life in a world that was becoming increasingly controlled by large, impersonal corporations. Due to economic

38One can begin to detect this more radical, Communist rhetoric as early as June 1925 once P.J. Wallace became editor in place of Taylor. See the Producers News, January 1, 1926 for evidence of this. However Taylor then returned to the paper in Sept. 1926, and the rhetoric appeared to subside until about 1928-9
forces, beyond the control of the farmers, in the second half of the 1800s both business and workers began to organize in order to compete more aggressively. According to some historians, farmers were left in a precarious position as they were confronted with the responsibility of maintaining the legacy of the "Agrarian Myth" of individualism and free market enterprise on the one hand, and a desperate need to organize in order to compete in the increasingly competitive and organized commercial economy of America.\(^{39}\)

Larry Remele in his article "Things as They Should Be: Jeffersonian Idealism as Rural Rebellion in Minnesota and North Dakota 1910-1920," argued the rural insurgencies in the Northern Plains region, namely the Socialist Party, the American Society of Equity, and the Non-Partisan League, all of which served as the ideological foundation upon which the events in Sheridan grew out of, were far from radical but were guided by the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson. Remele argued that as a result of economic and political developments that led to the concentration of power, the farmer could no longer afford to remain as independent producers in the face of such organized opposition. Rather, Remele argued that while seemingly in apparent opposition to Jefferson's image of the independent yeoman, the farmers of America acted collectively in order to secure their rightful place in society so that they could serve their role as the defenders of liberty and maintain the supremacy of the rural way of life as Jefferson imagined. While Remele might go too far in ignoring the quite monumental change envisioned by these farmers as they called upon the state to protect their role in society, the connection that he draws between the political movements of the early 1920s and Thomas Jefferson's philosophy does draw attention to the non-radical nature of the ideology of these "Sheridan County Reds".\(^{40}\) Steve Hahn, in his important work on Southern Populism, also noted the connection between his Populists

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in Georgia and the language and ideology of producerism. Similarly, John Shover made a comparable argument in his analysis of the Farm Holiday Association when he argued that the family farmer was an isolated out-post of the traditional free enterprise system who was threatened by the consolidation of the corporate economy. He believed that the FHA was an attempt to preserve this way of life; the traditional rural and small town economy and culture.  

The point is that while there certainly were Communists present in Sheridan, there exists the possibility that instead of being Communist in its origins and ideology, the events in Sheridan may have greater links to more traditional forms of American protest politics.

For instance, examine the following ideas that were laid out in the party platforms by the various political parties that were used by the "Reds" during the years of their greatest electoral success, 1918-1928. In 1918, the Producers News identified the following as the platform of the NPL in the upcoming election: state owned banks operated at cost; state hail insurance; state owned terminal elevators, ware houses, flour mills, stock yards, packing houses, creameries, and cold storage plants; equal taxation of all property; state grain grading; state insurance for workers; state employment agencies; old age pension; and an eight hour day.  

In the election of 1922 the platform of the NPL included the following provisions: an income and inheritance tax reform; a guarantee of bank deposits; a reduction of the legal rate of interest; the abolition of lawyer fees in foreclosure of mortgages and collection of notes; a revision of county printing laws; and a generous state soldiers bonus.  

As the NPL transformed into the Farm-Labor Party in Sheridan in 1923, the F-L party platform called for: the public ownership of all utilities; industrial insurance against unemployment, accidents, etc.; an eight hour day; child labor laws; a federal minimum wage; income and inheritance tax reform; a tax on excessive profits; a

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41 pp. 1-2.
42 Producers News. May 17, 1918.
43 Producers News. August 18, 1922.
soldiers bonus; the federal reserve system to be run for service, not for profit; a five year moratorium on farm mortgage foreclosures; and the "... elimination of landlordism and tenancy on farms, the land to be held by the users only as long as they use it."44 Now compare these various platforms collectively to the ideas presented by the People's Party in its 1892 Omaha Platform:

The financial plank was a recapitulation of greenbackism, and included the following demands: government control of the currency and its distribution to the people without the use of banking corporations by means such as the subtreasury "or a better system," "the free and unlimited coinage of silver ...", a graduated income tax ... The transportation and land planks were brief but contained truly radical demands—public ownership of railroads and telegraph and telephone systems and an end to monopolistic control and alien ownership of land. ... various plans for the protection of labor ...

A quick comparison will reveal that in their basic ideas they were very similar. Both called for an end to the current financial system dominated by private banks, and both called for the government to step in to regulate the currency system in a not for profit manner. Both platforms called for tax revisions to level the playing field, government ownership of utilities, and various laws to protect laborers. Additionally, both call for an end to "alien" or absentee ownership of land. Finally, many of the provisions that are not found in common, were already beginning to be discussed as real possibilities and many of these ideas were soon to be implemented. These included federally sanctioned minimum wage laws, unemployment insurance, workers compensation, and child labor laws. Once again, the point is to prove that the political ideology that was presented to the voters of Sheridan County and to which they subscribed, regardless of the personal convictions of the leadership, was not Communistic but its origins could definitely be found in the traditional American political heritage. It is interesting to note that Theodore Draper, considered an expert on the history of Communism in America, noted that many people have attempted to draw a link between the progressive politics of the Populists and the origins of

44Producers News, August 3, 1923.
45Robert C. McMath, Jr., American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898. (New York: Hill and Wang,
Communism here in America. Ultimately, Draper dismissed any linkage by stating that by looking at the party platform of the People's Party, one can see that Populists were merely "idyllic followers of the Agrarian Myth" who never emerged as a radical force. While Populists sought government intervention and control, even ownership, to level the playing field, the farmers were never willing to do away with private property. It was their defense of the system of private property, most notably their own private property, that disqualified them from consideration as a early, radical link to Communism. Draper's logic could similarly be applied to the ideology that emerged in Sheridan County in the 1920s and the conclusion would be the same: that the farmers of Sheridan County showed no more willingness to abandon their private property and thus had no ideological link to Communism.

It was exactly due to the threat posed by this consolidating corporate economy that American farmers first began to form farmers organizations, which in turn came to be viewed as evidence of the radical nature of the farmers movement since the cooperative organizations were seen as the first step towards a communal, Communist society. In the past, there existed some debate as to whether farmers organized so as to preserve their individualistic, non-commercial way of life, or if they organized so as to better compete in an increasingly structured and organized market economy. While this may have been debatable in the mid 1800s with the Grange and even the Populists, by the early 1900s it was clear that the corporate market economy was here to stay and that farmers had to organize in order to compete successfully. While "big business" led the way in organization, workers soon followed, and while not as successfully as these two other

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46 Theodore Draper, The Roots of American Communism, p. 37
groups, farmers attempted to work together. Making this task more difficult for the farmers was that they had to overcome notions of individualism and self-reliance that the Agrarian Myth fostered and had been imposed upon the farmers.⁴⁸

Despite these limitations, farmers in the 1880s and 1890s began to organize in order to compete more effectively in the market place, and this was not due to any predisposition towards Communism. Farmers began to realize that they could not act independently and effect changes beneficial to them so they began to act cooperatively. In this sense, the origins of the cooperative movement in farming is not a "radical" tool of pre-destined socialists or Communists, but rather a collective action taken by farmers so that they could more effectively compete in the existing market economy. Both Samuel Hay and Richard Hofstadter see farm cooperative movements as attempts by the farmers to create interest groups to pressure government just as "big business" and labor were doing.⁴⁹ One of the problems that historians have had, and it has been a disservice to the field, is to view all cooperative movements as necessarily "radical" because of the collective and thus potentially socialist implications. However, as the historian William Pratt wrote on the cooperative movements in the Upper Midwest, "... let it simply be observed that cooperatives are also business ventures, and unless the business values on the job are countered by a broader philosophy, it is likely that many active cooperatives will become conservative."⁵⁰ Evidence of potentially non-radical influence of cooperatives can be found in the Agricultural Census of 1925. While people have often pointed to the existence of large number of cooperatives in Sheridan County as evidence and sources of radicalism, the fact is that Roosevelt County which borders Sheridan to the South, had a significantly larger amount of cooperative marketing. In 1925 Roosevelt reported the value of farm

⁴⁸Hofstadter, see chapter on "Agrarian Myth and Commercial Realities", The Age of Reform.
⁴⁹Hofstadter, p. 121 and Hays, pp. 58-63.
goods sold through cooperatives as $517,301 compared to $407,878 for Sheridan. Furthermore, Roosevelt farmers purchased goods from cooperative stores in the amount of $30,180 compared to $4,424 for Sheridan County.\textsuperscript{51} Since Sheridan County certainly enjoyed a more progressive political climate than Roosevelt, yet had a smaller cooperative movement, one cannot claim that coops necessarily lead to a "radical", Communist political outcome.

In searching for evidence that would prove the truly non-Communistic nature of the ideology that developed in Sheridan County in the 1920s, one can look to the official publication of the "Reds" to examine the exact nature of the ideology that was presented to the populace. The \textit{Producers News} first began publication in April of 1918, as a newspaper to promote the interests of the Non-Partisan League. Charlie Taylor was sent to Plentywood by the NPL headquarters in St. Paul to edit this newspaper, as he had previous experience editing various other socialist newspapers, including the \textit{Port of Call} in International Falls, Minnesota.\textsuperscript{52} While the paper originally was purchased by the NPL, shares in the company that owned the paper, The People's Publishing Co., were then sold to the citizens of Sheridan County. After three weeks, over two hundred farmers owned shares in the company, within three years it offered a state edition as it took over as the state publication of the NPL, and in 1925 it became the official paper of Sheridan County.\textsuperscript{53} As a result of this arrangement whereby the subscribers owned shares in the company, the \textit{Producers News} could rightfully claim on its masthead that it was, "A paper of the people, by the people, for the people."\textsuperscript{54} While Taylor could initially claim that "nearly every one of the them (shareholders in the People's Publishing Company) are members of the league

\textsuperscript{52}Taylor interview, pp. 24-26.
\textsuperscript{53}\textit{Producers News}, April 26, 1918, October 14, 1921, and January 22, 1925. Also, Taylor talks of his role in founding the \textit{Producers News} in the Taylor interview, pp. 31-36.
\textsuperscript{54}\textit{Producers News}, April 26, 1918.
(NPL), the Producers News did not remain politically bound to the NPL but rather evolved into different political movements as Taylor and other of the "Reds" evolved from the NPL to the Farm-Labor Party, to the Progressive Farmers movement, and then ultimately openly to the Communist Party. In fact, an argument could be made that the Producers News, acted as the vehicle by which the voters of Sheridan County were brought into progressive politics. Charlie Taylor, P.J. Wallace, and then Erik Burke used their positions as editor of the Producers News to help coax, convince, and lead the population of Sheridan towards a successively more progressive course of political action. Taylor himself recognized the important role played by the Producers News when he explained that the reason that Sheridan County enjoyed a more radical political climate than neighboring areas, even more so than Williams County, North Dakota another perceived radical county, was that Sheridan County had a newspaper and an editor that drove the political discourse towards this more radical perspective. While the majority of voters of Sheridan often proved willing to follow the lead of the Producers News so long as the paper concentrated on their immediate needs and avoided the language of Communism, the paper and the leaders of the movement were always restrained by the ideological constraints of the population of Sheridan. These were farmers who valued their private property in a capitalist system, not Communists.

In examining the editorials, articles, advertisements, and announcements of the Producers News from the years 1918-1928 which include the years when the "Reds" controlled Sheridan County, one can see that the ideology that emerged from the Producers News, which was edited by Charlie Taylor from 1918-1925 and then again from 1926-1931, was an ideology that embraced the concept of producerism. Those who do not produce anything, i.e. bankers, lawyers, investors, middle men etc., should not benefit

55 To determine the affiliation of the paper, one can look at the editorials from various years.
56 Taylor interview, p. 44.
57 McMath, American Populism, p. 51.
from the actual work performed by others. The Producers News utilized the language of producers versus capitalists (those who do not make anything but money). The newspaper saw farmers and small businessmen in an alliance against the "plundering profiteers of 'big business.'"58 "It has been the hopes of this paper to show the local and small businessman that the farmers are actually their friends ...", and that they should form an alliance between farmers, workers, and small businessmen of a non-monopolistic nature.59 Increasingly, the Producers News saw a division in society between the "exploiters" and the farmers, workers, and small businessmen that made up the "producers."60

Revealing the non-Communist nature of this movement in these formative early years, the Producers News called for an alliance between farmers and small businessmen, both property owning groups. These are hardly the makings of a Communist society, but it is exactly these elements of society that the Producers News courted in the hope of creating a "progressive coalition." "The League wants all farmers and producers no matter who they are, to work together harmoniously for the 'great program'. It is barring none."61 The enemy as identified by the NPL and the Producers News was not private property owners, but monopolistic 'Big Business' that stripped farmers and small businessmen of their independence. This appeal to the producers of society and the lack of Communist ideology inherent in this language can be seen in a speech given by Judson King at the St. Paul's convention of farmers and workers and reprinted in the Producers News:

You (small businessmen) are fighting monopolistic big business; not competitive little business. I wish the small businessmen of the state and nation would come to see that. ... they still continue to think somehow that they are independent businessmen like their fathers were. But they are not--and in this great struggle they belong with the masses and not the classes.62

58Producers News. May 24, 1918.
59Producers News. August 30, 1918.
61Producers News. April 26, 1918.
The enemies identified by the Producers News were not property owners as a class, but only those exploitive, monopolistic capitalists. The word "capitalists", in the language of the producerism, took on a much different meaning than it does today. To them, a capitalist was not any person participating in the free market, for-profit system as it does today, but rather meant someone who made no meaningful contribution to society but made large profits off of other people's labor; like bankers, merchants, and other middle men. The Producers News ran an announcement that stated that, "Bouck will speak at the Farm-Labor Temple December 5. Noted farmer, leader, and speaker will deliver important message to Sheridan County farmers at Plentywood and other centers--Bankers and other exploiters will be barred from meetings." The most convenient target of the Producers News was 'Big Business', an encompassing term that covered all businesses that opposed the interests of the farmers; namely bankers, merchants, grain operators, etc. "Big Biz" as it was often called, was portrayed as the force behind all of the farmers problems. The term "Kopper" was used to describe 'big business' interests that were tied to the copper industry that dominated the politics of Montana, and 'copper collared' referred to those people, politicians, and businessmen associated with the copper industry and seen as the enemies of the farmers. The Producers News even resorted to an old Populist analysis by seeing a conspiracy behind the plight of the farmers. In an editorial Taylor wrote, "It must mean, dear readers, that there is a conspiracy, and this is the tail of the beast." The beast that he referred to was the banking interests and "Big Biz." Furthermore, the newspaper went so far as to claim that this conspiracy could be traced to Jewish financiers.

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63 Producers News. November 27, 1925.
64 Producers News. May 3 and October 18 and 25, 1918.
65 Producers News. September 27, 1918.
While it claimed that there was no problem with Jews per se, there happened to be large numbers of Jews in finance so indirectly they were to blame.\textsuperscript{66}

The point to be made with all of this evidence, is that in using the language of producerism, in the alliances they attempted to form, and in the enemies they identified, the \textit{Producers News} had more in common with the traditional American politics of protest than it did with Communism. As mentioned earlier, the philosophy of producerism could be traced back in American history to Thomas Jefferson, recurs in Jackson's time, and then again in the age of the Populists. Robert McMath argued that "artisanal republicanism" and "radical republicanism" are just another term for the ideas incorporated by the term "producerism".\textsuperscript{67} In other words, the ideology and language employed by the "Reds" and their newspaper the \textit{Producers News}, could trace their ideological origins to the Founding Fathers, not Lenin or Marx. Various economic and political organizations made use of this language during these years, notably the Populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s, however this language was not restricted merely to agrarian movements.

In the late 1870s and 1880s radicalism or producerism still provided the basic vocabulary of the North American Labor movement. Anti-monopolism, the rights of workers to enjoy the fruits of their labor and settler to occupy the land, the right of the people to a money supply not controlled by private banks: these were still powerful themes. Industrialization did not loosen their grip upon workers: rather it stimulated additions to the list: demands for the eight hour day, for government ownership of railroads and telegraph, and for fiat money (greenbacks). ... Post Civil War labor and farm organizations took this tradition and modified it in the face of new realities.\textsuperscript{68}

Even the enemies it identified, namely bankers and 'Big Biz', along with the ideas of conspiracy theories led by Jewish bankers can be found in the interpretive framework employed by the Populists. Read the following statement and one can imagine it appearing on the pages of the \textit{Producers News}, rather than from a Populist leader in the 1890s:

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Producers News}. March 16, 1919.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{McMath, American Populism}, p. 51.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Ibid.}, p. 53.
\end{flushright}
... co-operation, properly understood and properly applied, will place a limit to the encroachments of organized monopoly, and will be the means by which the mortgaged burdened farmers can assert their freedom from the tyranny of organized capital. ...While it is an established fact that the laboring classes of mankind are the real producers of wealth, we find that they are gradually becoming oppressed by combinations of capital, and the fruits of their toil absorbed by a class who propose not only to live on the labors of others, but to speedily amass fortunes at their expense.69

Not only do both of these movements identify the real struggle between the producers versus the capitalists (bankers, "Big Business", etc.), but the conspiracy theory runs strong in the history of American agrarian protest. Richard Hofstadter first made this argument popular in his book The Age of Reform. He said that, the Populists "loved the secret plot and the conspiratorial meeting" and that all "American history since the Civil War could be understood as a sustained conspiracy of the international money power."70 Furthermore, Hofstadter showed that the Populists also traced the roots of this conspiracy theory to the Jewish financier, just as the Producers News claimed. Hofstadter writes, "... it was chiefly the Populist writers who expressed that identification of the Jew with the usurer and the 'international gold ring' which was the central theme of the American anti-Semitism of the age."71 What can be shown with comparisons between the language and ideology of the Producers News and of previous political movements in American history, namely Populism, is that the language employed and the ideology that emerged in Sheridan County came out of traditional American politics, albeit usually protest politics. This once again proves that the "Sheridan County Reds" really were indebted to previous American mainstream political movements, not to Communism.

Even after the Producers News underwent its transformation to emerge as the official paper of the Farm-Labor Party in Sheridan County around 1923, while the language and ideology underwent slight revision, the basic message remained the same. Where as in the early years, 1918-1922, there had been a definite effort to court the small

69Ibid., p 84 and 90.
70Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, pp. 5 and 35.
71Ibid., pp. 61 and 77.
businessman into an alliance with the farmers and workers, by 1923 there was less effort to include these small businessmen and even well to do farmers.

Economic power is the base on which the entire social structure rests. Therefore control your economic power and you are a man among men. Let someone else control it and you are a tenant farmer or a wage slave. It is to be men among men that farmers and industrial workers should organize and compel Industrial Democracy. Pool your wheat!  

However, even as this ideology moved to narrow its base of support to exclude the small businessman, it by no means called for the elimination of private property. While calling for closer ties between farmers and workers, an idea that had origins in the Greenback-Labor Party, again showing the true non-Communist origins of this movement, the ideology presented to its readers was still one based upon producerism:

The ages old plan of divide and conquer is tried again and again. In this effort to stir up dissension between the two great armies of progress, farmers and industrial workers, ... slowly, all too slowly, perhaps, the great mass of mankind sees the truth that only those who produce should enjoy, and that the 'lounge lizard' and money grabber should be forced to exist on what they produce--nothing! 

Even in 1926 at the height of the "Reds" power in Sheridan, even despite the greater pointedness of the critical language, one still sees closer ties to the ideology of producerism than Communism:

The year 1926 is pregnant with wondrous things for the oppressed of the world. It promises to be the most fruitful year for the producing classes, in their war upon the brutal monster Capitalism. ... Therefore, it seems to us, that no resolution could be more meritorious for the farmers and workers, than the resolution to wage the fight against Capitalism, until the day arrives when we can transform this world of ours into a blossoming garden for all the toilers.

Similarly, in looking at the tactics urged by the Producers News, one again is struck by the extent to which these developments in Sheridan found their origins not in Communist ideology but in the experience of American history. For example, one of the

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72Producers News, May 13, 1921. One can find additional evidence of how the 'producing class' came to exclude the small businessmen and well off farmers in Sheridan County in the February 15, 1924 edition of the Producers News.

73Producers News, January 26, 1923.
major demands put forth by the Producers News was government support for agricultural prices, which remained exceedingly low. "The demand for living prices for farm products..." was again not an idea that did not have origins in the American experience. The Granger movement had proposed an "export debenture plan" to create a living price for farmers for their goods, and the later McNary-Haugen farm bill was passed by Congress in both 1927 and 1928, showing the widespread acceptance of this idea. Additionally, the newspaper encouraged farmers through advertisements and editorials to buy liberty bonds while W.W.I still was being waged in 1918. Again, these were not the actions of a Communist inspired group that would have been ideologically opposed to the war, due to the USSR's withdrawal and condemnation of the war. Finally, in reading through the pages of this newspaper throughout the years of its publication, one is struck by the bourgeois nature of this paper. It is a paper filled with advertisements for luxury goods, announcements for picnics, "socials", and dances. This was not a paper of a class conscious proletariat.

Perhaps the most radical of all tactics called for and endorsed by the Producers News was the creation of a third party, the Farm-Labor Party in 1923. As one writer in the newspaper put it, "I was an insurgent in the Republican Party for 15 years. ... I'm through with the buzzard whose right wing is tagged Republican, and left Democrat. They both belong to the same bird of prey." Seeing both parties as being under the control of the "exploiting class", Republican or Democrat, the paper called for a party that would represent the exploited class, both farmers and workers. While the resulting national Farm-Labor Party did initially end up under the control of the CP at the national level, the Producers News went to great effort to distance the F-L Party from the CP. The

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74 Producers News, January 1, 1926.
75 Producers News, March 2, 1923.
76 Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, pp. 18-19.
77 Producers News, April 26, 1918.
78 Producers News, July 6, 1923.
newspaper ran a headline on the eve of the Farm-Labor Convention in 1924 that read, "National Farmer-Labor Convention will not be Dominated", and the article went on to say that it would not be dominated by the CP.80 Furthermore, the editor of the newspaper, Charlie Taylor, claimed that he fought against CP domination of the F-L Party at its founding in 1923. "I tried to persuade them ... that the party (F-LP) should be made free from the party (CP) so that the party's future couldn't be dominated by the Communists."81 What this shows is that similar to many previous political movements that decided upon the formation of a third political party, the party that was founded, as presented to the electorate in Sheridan County, was not a radical Communist inspired and Communist led party. Rather, these people were led to believe as they read the pages of the Producers News, that Taylor was sincere when he claimed that, "The Progressive opinion, position, in the United States is to build a Progressive Party, and the Farmer-Labor Party is the answer to it."82 He claimed that he wanted a progressive party, not a Communist one, and he claimed he got this with the F-L Party. Once again, whether it came to be dominated by Communists at the national level or not, the voters in Sheridan County were told it was not and the ideology of the newspaper as it came to be the organ of the local F-L Party, indicated that the ideology remained rooted in producerism, not Communism.

The editors of the Producers News summed it up quite well, and we as historians would be well served by paying closer attention to these words, when the newspaper reported in 1923, "The last election has proven to anyone not prejudiced that the people of this county want progressive action."83 The electorate of Sheridan County had been courted by the Producers News that presented a progressive ideology of producerism. The people of Sheridan County wanted an electoral option outside of the two dominant political

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81 Producers News. April 25, 1924.
82 Taylor interview, p. 79.
83 Taylor interview, pp. 82-83.
parties, and they responded to this ideology by voting for these candidates who represented this ideology. In all of the writing in the Producers News there was never any discussion of Communist ideology, outside of mentioning events in the USSR, during these years 1918-1928. When election time drew near, the Producers News would run a biography of the paper's endorsed candidates, again never mentioning Communism or the CP.84 Therefore, when people went to the polls they were voting for the candidates identified by the Producers News as representing the ideology put forth in the newspaper. Since this newspaper was the official organ of the "Reds" it would be here that people would gain their understanding of the ideology of these candidates and there was not discussion in this newspaper of them being Communists or supporting that ideology. In fact, Taylor claimed that most farmers did not know who, if any, the people were in Sheridan County who were CP members.85 Therefore, in large part, it was from the pages of this newspaper that voters came to understand the ideology of the "Reds." During the crucial years of their success, this newspaper did not promote an ideology of Communism but rather an ideology based upon previous American experience, producerism, and progressive politics.

That Charlie Taylor stood at the center of the political events in Sheridan County has never been debated to any great extent. While Dyson, Pratt, and Vindex tended to give him greater credit for initiating events in Sheridan, as opposed to Zahavi, who examined to a greater degree the participants in the movement rather than just the leadership, Taylor's editorship of the Producers News gave him extraordinary influence over events in the county. As he wrote editorials, articles, decided on which announcements to promote, he used this position to set the ideological tone of the political discourse. While it can be debated what the true origins of the movement may have been, there can be little doubt that

84Starting about a week or two before the elections, the Producers News would print a biography of each of the candidates endorsed by the newspaper.
85Taylor interview, p. 94.
Taylor played a very significant role in defining the scope of the ideology used in Sheridan during these years. Therefore, in examining his ideology meant for public consumption one can find even greater evidence of his progressive, practical, fairly traditional ideology that eschewed dogmatic Communist doctrine. While he privately wished for an eventual triumph of Communism, he showed himself willing to utilize and employ more traditional, progressive political tactics and beliefs. In this sense, the public in Sheridan was presented with a leader who endorsed these progressive, pragmatic beliefs rooted in traditional American protest politics, not a dogmatic Communist leading a Communist movement.

Taylor was inculcated with notions of traditional American protest politics from an early childhood age. His father was an early member of the Greenback Party in 1872, and the family subscribed to many progressive newspapers including the New York Tribune, The Farmers Alliance, The Representative, and the Farmers Voice, all of which were read out loud to the young Charlie Taylor by his father. Later, his father joined the Farmers Alliance when he lived in Minnesota, becoming active in the cooperative aspect of the movement. At its founding, his father joined the People's Party and, "... became quite prominent in it," as an organizer. Taylor also believed that his father became interested in the Knights of Labor, ultimately joining this organization as well. Growing up in this atmosphere of protest politics, it is not surprising that Charlie Taylor also followed in his father's footsteps. Taylor claimed that his interest in progressive politics began at an early age, as a strong supporter of Populism, which then lead him to join the Socialist Party in 1907, and then became active in the NPL in 1918. At the same time that he grew up in a household that embraced protest politics, he also boasted in the Producers News about his patriotic, non-radical family background. He pointed out that members of his family had served in all of the American wars to date, that he owned a Liberty Bond, and that he

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helped out with the Red Cross.⁸⁷ That is, while protest politics were a part of his heritage, there continued to exist a moderating influence on his radicalism that went on to temper his ideology. The ideological framework in which Taylor grew up shows how he may have been influenced by these various movements, showing once again the true origins of his ideology. What emerged was an ideology with roots in traditional American protest politics, tinged with pragmatism and moderation. This was the ideology that the people of Sheridan County followed.

This makes all the more sense when one views Taylor's evaluation of his own ideology and tactics. Taylor claimed that he was not a dogmatic ideologue, that above all else he remained practical, a supporter of progressive politics, and this view led him to offer help to the bourgeois farmer. Taylor believed that in order for Communism to triumph in America, that first there would be a bourgeois revolution led by small businessmen and then ultimately a proletarian revolution would take place. Taylor claimed that in order to achieve the ultimate Communist goal, Communists should be willing to work with any third party, even if they fell outside of Communist control and instead resembled progressive politics.⁸⁸ This is important because during his time in Sheridan County Taylor worked on bringing about the bourgeois revolution, and this led him to appear much more as a supporter of progressive politics than Communism. In discussing his pragmatic, progressive ideology that led him away from dogmatic Communism, he once claimed, "Yeast is all very fine, but you've got to have a little flour with it if you're going to make any bread to eat. You can't eat yeast."⁸⁹ Furthermore, Taylor again showed his lack of ideological rigidity when he showed his thought process in joining the clearly progressive, non-Communist Non-Partisan League, "Then I got to thinking--this was my thought process--a half loaf, maybe those fellows (NPL) were right ... A half loaf was

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⁸⁷ Producers News. May 10, 1918.
⁸⁸ Taylor interview, p. 70.
⁸⁹ Taylor interview, p. 105.
Taylor was very critical of the CPUSA when they failed to join forces with the LaFollette Progressive movement because he saw it as a lost opportunity to reach large numbers of people and move them towards the F-L Party. At the Farm-Labor convention in Denver in 1924 Taylor claimed that, "I persuaded that convention, aided by Tom Ayers of SD, to endorse the St. Paul call for a national convention and to declare for a united front with all progressive forces." Taylor described himself as belonging to the "progressive block" of politicians in the state legislature in Montana which numbered 17 of the 54 representatives. Taylor stated that only one other member of the "progressive block" was a CP member, Bob Larson, thereby proving his willingness to align himself with these progressive, non-Communist forces.

Taylor's support of progressive politics led him to take many actions that further revealed the pragmatic, progressive nature of his politics that won him the support of the majority of people in Sheridan County during these years. Taylor believed that to change anything politically in the US, one must build a majority. In building a majority, one must be willing to adopt moderate political measures. He noted that ideologically rigid positions, especially those not rooted in previous American experiences, were bound to face resistance. As he stated in 1918 in describing the electoral strategy he adopted to gain support for the NPL candidates, "... we compromised more or less." His own solution to the large numbers of unemployed in the years of economic troubles in 1921, was to have the government employ people to build highways and waterways, paying for these projects with greenbacks. This proposal, which combined aspects of the Populist's idea of the sub-treasury to increase the money supply with what would become FDR's solution to the
Depression in 1932, once again showed the limits of Taylor's radicalism and adherence to the Communist ideology. Rather, in his public ideology and actions, he supported progressive politics rooted in the American experience. While he may have envisioned a future based upon the Communist ideology, he did not impose this vision on his public ideology. His ideology and actions, during the time of his electoral success, would suggest that the public supported his progressive ideas, not because of his Communism.

In fact, Taylor worked very hard to distance what was going on in Sheridan County from having close links to the CP. Taylor once claimed that the CPUSA did not control the politics of the Farm-Labor Party in Montana, and that the CPUSA never told him what to write or print in the Producers News. Whereas the CP was notorious for its "top down" approach, Taylor claimed:

I was always rather opposed to handing everything down to them (farmers), and even when we were managing over them, we always worked on a policy of making it appear that everything came from the farmers. And we used a lot of farmers. Instead of our men doing so much talking, they'd talk to some farmer, win him over--and lots of them liked it.96

In one instance involving the F-L Party, Taylor discussed the initial progressive nature of this party at its founding. "... the national committee declared to ask any party that wanted to affiliate, any groups that wanted to affiliate, of all kinds with out distinction ... we aren't drawing lines against nobody." While this party initially had the support of the CPUSA, the CPUSA withdrew their support from the F-L Party in 1924 and ran their own candidate, William Foster for President. Taylor commented that he and the Producers News continued to support the F-L Party. "I voted the Farmer Labor electors right straight through. Whatever I might have thought myself, the PN (Producers News) had a policy and couldn't be switched around by Lenin himself. Nobody could. You can't do those

96 Taylor discussed the lack of CP control in the Taylor interview, pp. 85-86 and 100-101. This quote is also from the Taylor interview, p. 94.
things, that's all." This incident, while once again showing Taylor's support for progressive politics, also proved his lack of control by the CPUSA. Taylor pursued his own political agenda, by his own means, whatever the desires of the CPUSA. Furthermore, this quote showed that Taylor realized the difference between his own private ideology, which maybe supported the actions of the CPUSA in regards to the F-L Party, and his public ideology as portrayed in the Producers News. It is this public ideology that concerns us here, because it was this ideology that viewers saw in the Producers News and that many in Sheridan came to support, not Taylor's private Communist views. The extent to which Taylor, at least in his public ideology, deviated from Communist orthodoxy was revealed when Taylor was charged by the CPUSA of being guilty of "bourgeois deviations and opportunism" because he opposed the commencement of the "Third Period" initiated by the CPUSA, that called for greater ideological rigidity. Taylor continued to call for the "Popular Front" approach that called for the CP to work with other progressive forces to bring about a revolution. Through his actions as a politician and the public ideology that he espoused, one can again find much closer ties with progressive politics rooted in the American experience than Communism. Taylor did not talk Communism to the public through the Producers News and his political actions during this time reflected support for progressive politics, not Communism. Therefore, it would seem likely that the electoral support that he gained during these years, was the result of the message that people heard. That message was not one filled with Communist ideology. To a great extent, Taylor proved that this was the case in both his statements and actions.

As presented in this paper, the argument being made is that the political events in Sheridan County, while portrayed as evidence of the success of Communism in generating

97Taylor discussed matters concerning CPUSA control of the F-L Party in the Taylor interview, p. 66 and 82.
98Taylor interview, pp. 134-137.
a rural, agricultural movement, ultimately bore little resemblance to Communism and therefore it is a disservice to label the "Reds" of Sheridan County as Communist. It has been argued here that the people of Sheridan County supported the "Reds", not due to their links to Communism, but because the ideology presented to them offered a pragmatic approach to their problems, solutions which were rooted in the traditional, progressive discourse of American protest politics. It was exactly because this local movement abstained from ideologically rigid Communist doctrine, in fact avoided this language and making any reference to Communism in general, that it succeeded. In examining the political platforms of the parties that ran in Sheridan, the language employed by the official newspaper of the "Reds", and the ideology of the recognized leader of the "Reds", it became apparent to what extent this movement deviated from the Communist lexicon. This willingness to deviate from dogmatism and instead make use of pragmatic progressive politics certainly remains one of the reasons for their success. Thus, it is a disservice to our understanding of events in Sheridan to simply label all that transpired there as being part of a Communist movement. To reduce the events in Sheridan as merely being a part of a larger Communist movement simplifies our knowledge of this time and place rather than deepening our comprehension of what really took place. Realizing that the movement that developed in Sheridan had less to do with Communism than previously believed, and thus leaving us with a clearer picture of what this movement was about, would leave one focused for the next challenge, which would be to explain why this movement occurred here in Sheridan and not elsewhere. For while it has been argued that the political events in Sheridan County were not so much a sign of Communist influences, they nonetheless represent a unique series of events not widely found in America. It is in part due to this uniqueness that it is so important to clearly understand the events that took place in Sheridan in the 1920s and 1930s. An analysis of Charlie Taylor's story and the rhetoric of
the *Producers* News, makes clear the true origins and ideology of the “Sheridan County Reds”.
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