An Analysis Of The Scotts Bluff County National Farmers' Organization In The 1960s

Joan Merrigan
Carroll College

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AN ANALYSIS OF
THE SCOTTS BLUFF COUNTY NATIONAL FARMERS' ORGANIZATION IN THE 1960s

by
Joan E. Merrigan

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the Department of Political Science
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This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Political Science by:

Mr. Dennis E. Wiedmann
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science

Dr. Jeff Bemerescu
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science

Dr. Allen Pope
Associate Professor, Department of Education

December 19, 1975
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Finally, I am grateful to all the Scotts Bluff County farmers who took time out of their busy summer season to talk with me and answer my questionnaire. Without their help this paper would not have been possible.
DEDICATION

To my parents, H. J. Merrigan and Eve Merrigan, who through their participation in the National Farmers' Organization showed me the value of questioning my condition and attempting to change it.

And to my special friend, Cindy Scott, who through her encouragement and support enabled me to analyze the organization in which my parents believed.

J. E. M.
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INTRODUCTION

The 1960s will long be remembered in America as the decade of unrest and strife. Dissatisfaction with the status quo reached a peak during these ten years with the thrust always towards change—rapid change. The tumultuous '60s bring to mind groups such as blacks and militant students. These groups were highly visible and vocal in protesting against those things which affected their lives adversely, i.e., civil rights and Viet Nam. Through their protest they made the sixth decade in the Twentieth Century the pivot for change. They were later to discover that change would come very, very slowly, but their agitation had at least begun the process.

These groups are the most memorable because they were the largest and had the most impact. There were, however, other groups in the 1960s who were dissatisfied with the conditions governing their lives and who were looking for avenues of quick change. One such group was the farmers.

The price received by farmers for their goods at the market place had for years failed to keep up with the prices these same farmers had to pay for the goods they purchased. In the 1950s even these nominal prices began to sink slowly. Farmers began an exodus from the farm to the city where wages received for labor expended were more equitable than on the farm. The small farmers were hit first and as they began leaving the farms their land was purchased by already large landowners or by outside interests. As they left, their neighbors looked on and waited for the day when they too could no longer hold on to their land, to their way of life.
Charles Walters Jr. describes one such small farmer in Angry Testament:

Ever since World War II, he had watched the growth of corporate farms, the development of contract feedlots, the decline of the truly independent family farm, and the attendant economic and social withering of the small rural communities. He had seen the power of economic and individual forces pour acid on the walls of society that was, and had asked himself the same nagging question. Are these trends inevitable, or are choices still open to the independent man on the farm?^1

As these small, independent farms felt themselves being backed into a corner they began searching for an exit route and many saw only one hope—an organization of small farmers. The situation was new, and it was desperate. It called for more than the old and familiar farm organizations offered. It called for original direct-action tactics. The organization which seemed to embody these characteristics was the National Farmers' Organization. Here was a vital, new idea: the organization of farmers as a unit in order that they might bargain effectively by withholding their goods from the market. The goal of the organization was two-fold: 1) to dramatically call the attention of the public to the plight of the "little man" in farming, and 2) to give these farmers the power to do something about that plight.

The NFC, evidently, is not the first farm organization to make a goal of collective bargaining. Where it is innovative, is, first, in its seeking to become the first farm organization to achieve large-scale collective bargaining, and second, in its being the first farm organization to combine this goal with the tactic of withholding commodities.^2

The National Farmers' Organization and its innovative combination of tactics caught the imaginations of those farmers who felt a strong

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need for change. In turn, these farmers caught the mood of an organization geared for change. Their desperation and dedication would soon cause the organization to be labeled "militant", "radical" and "violent". In these labels, in their desire to see change come about through direct action, and in their dedication to their cause, they would find common ground with other pressure groups of the 1960s.

However, I could not research all of the pressure groups of the 1960s. Such an enormous task is incomprehensible. I chose a small pressure group with which I am most familiar—the National Farmers' Organization. Even this single organization was too diverse and complex to fit in the scope of this paper. The organization has been in existence for twenty years and has many facets—dairy farming, livestock raising, lobbying, government action, foreign farm policy etc. The organization has slowly spread from region to region and from state to state, each area having its own special problems and its own peak of activity. Again, for the sake of narrowing the subject, I chose to do a case study in an area with which I am familiar—Scotts Bluff County, Nebraska. It was here on a small family farm that I first heard the initials NFC. Even as a child I could sense the anxiety, the fear, and the dedication which accompanied those initials. This memory caused me to look here—at the Scotts Bluff County National Farmers' Organization of the 1960s—for the answer to my questions about this particular pressure group of that decade.

In this lies the seed from which my study has grown: 1) What made this group of people band together in a sometimes violent, but always intense pressure group? 2) What caused this intense action
to die as quickly as it was born? 3) In light of that death was the life itself worthwhile?
CHAPTER I

AN OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL FARMERS' ORGANIZATION

The Scotts Bluff County National Farmers' Organization is only a very small branch of the organization itself. Before any evaluation of this segment of the NFC can be made, it is essential that a brief sketch of the organization in its entirety be drawn.

The nature of the birth of the National Farmers' Organization is not surprising. Like all organizations, it was conceived at a time when the need for an organization of its type was obvious. In Iowa in 1955 the bottom had dropped out of hog prices. Hogs, along with the corn that fed them, were a primary farm commodity in Iowa. When the prices received by farmers for these hogs plummeted it was apparent to at least a small group of men that direct action was called for if they were to save their farms. Under the title National Farmers' Organization these men met, drew up some organizational guidelines and began a process of trying to influence legislative policy. By the 1957 national convention the organization had switched tactics; rather than concentrating on the political process, its drive would now be toward collective bargaining.\(^1\) In a unique coupling of ideas the NFC backed up its collective bargaining drive with the tactic of holding actions.

Holding actions were organizational, group actions in which

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 127.
members, and any nonmembers who cared to join them, would withhold certain commodities from the market. The goals of such an action were many: to drive the price of the commodity up by creating a scarcity; to force processors into a contract system of dealing with producers; to create a show of strength; to bolster the membership, and to gain new members. While some of these goals were more important than others, all had an impact on the initiation of holding actions. Cren Lee Staley, president of the NFO, summed up the importance of holding actions in this way:

Producers must prove to buyers and processors that they can match the strength which today exists at the buyer and processor level. This means using a holding action, when necessary, in order to achieve specific gains in bargaining. To organize agricultural producers without having the courage to use a holding action, is like building a locomotive without an engine.\(^2\)

Staley, an impressive speaker, has also been quoted as stating that without a holding action to back it up, the collective bargaining of the NFO becomes "collective begging".\(^3\)

The infant organization put its prime tactic—holding actions—to the test in three separate, very small actions between 1959 and 1961. The first action in October of 1959 lasted six days and was a holding action on hogs only. The majority of the NFC members were concentrated in and around Iowa at this time and the hog market was of the most interest to them. The second test action in April 1960 was also exclusively on hogs and lasted a mere eight days. By 1961 the National Farmers' Organization was expanding and in April of that year a holding action was called on hogs, cattle and sheep.


\(^3\)Ibid.
This action lasted sixteen days. These actions affected a limited area for a short time only, resulting in very little publicity for the organization. But the publicity did not yet seem to be the goal; the organization was merely testing its strength and practicing its tactics. The time was not yet right for a large-scale, NFC-backed farm holding action.

Before that sort of action could take place, one more pressure would be placed on American farmers. Low prices at the market place coupled with higher costs of production had been driving more and more small farmers from their farms to the cities. The farm census in 1950 reported that there were twenty-five million people living on farms. By 1960 this number had dropped to fifteen and six-tenths million and the estimate for 1970 stood at eight million.

An exodus of this magnitude was enough to frighten even the most economically stable farmer. Many of these farmers continued to put their faith in the federal government to develop a farm program which would enable them to hang onto their farms. In 1962 their hopes were dramatically dashed. In July of that year the Committee for Economic Development formulated a plan to solve farm problems. The committee recommended that the federal government allow farm prices to fall, and then follow a comprehensive plan to move more than two million farmers off the land within five years.

Farmers across the nation were shocked, and vocal in their

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5"Farmers in a Flutter." Newsweek, 3 September 1962, p. 58.
protests against the report. Instead of the assistance they had expected, or at least hoped for from the federal government, they were seeing reports which spelled out their doom. "Probably for the first time in history, farmers were being told what would happen to them, how it would come about, and who would do it." Most farmers did not need it stated any more clearly that the federal government would not bail them out of the desperate situation in which they found themselves.

The pressure on farmers in the 1960s was two-fold. Prices were falling and remaining too low to allow any profit on the farm, and the general exodus from the farm caused by these prices would not be curbed by assistance from the government. As these conditions prevailed the membership of the National Farmers' Organization continued to grow. Old channels of change, such as the political process no longer worked. Bold tactics were called for. The time seemed right for a large-scale holding action.

In late August 1962 such a holding action was called. Hogs, cattle, sheep, corn and soybeans were withheld from the market. The immediate aim of the organization in taking the action was to raise prices at the market place; the final aim was to establish contracts with processors for a set amount of farm products at a predetermined price. Staley called it "... a battle for the survival of family-type agriculture ..." The government upon which many of the farmers had counted brushed off this "battle for survival" as an impossible hope. President Kennedy stated:

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This kind of an effort has been tried in the '20s, in the '30s and other occasions. It has not been successful because there are so many farmers, and they are so separated that it's not been possible to have them together to present a bargaining position.®

Just as the importance attached to this month-long farm strike varied, so did the interpretations of its effect. The organization itself claimed it was actually boosting market prices. Processors were quick to point out that any jump in price was temporary—as soon as the strike ended and the commodities came to market the price would drop back down. Claims that contracts had been signed were made by supporters and denied by processors.

Whether any actual market prices were affected beyond the time of the actual strike is open to question; however this first large-scale holding action was important for other reasons. One very important aspect of the action was the publicity it brought to the farmers and their plight.

In fact, for the NFC, the publicity attending their action may be the major benefit: and, it could very well be the effect the organization's leadership has been seeking, as a means of boosting its membership and gaining more leverage for bargaining with the meat processors.®

The strike was covered by national newspapers, magazines and television, as well as local news agencies. The organization was becoming recognizable and recognized. "In fact, not in thirty years has the interest in nongovernmental action to raise farm prices matched the star created by the NFC in just three months."®

At times this public opinion took on the moralizing tone which

8"Let 'em Eat Money," Newsweek, 10 September 1962, p. 79.
was to be heard more and more frequently as the NFO's activities heightened. A moral issue arose in the public's eye as to whether or not a farmer had the right to destroy the food he produced. This issue would become more visible in the late holding actions as farmers dumped tons of milk on the ground, shot and buried livestock, and burned produce.

In this 1961 holding action another aspect of the organization, one which would plague it increasingly in the years to come, was born --violence. The very nature of this new organization was intense and disturbing. The men who joined did so for the most part because they felt their way of life was being threatened. To many, especially as the years wore on, it was literally a struggle for survival. Their mood can only be described as desperate. In 1961 their activities were limited to chanting down auctions at rural sales, establishing livestock check points to tabulate the number of livestock actually being sold, and taking the names of farmers arriving at auctions. Reports also accused members of shooting at livestock trucks. As it would many times in the future, the National Farmers' Organization disclaimed any knowledge of or responsibility for the shootings.

During this holding action news articles reporting it began using the words "militant organization" and "farm revolt" to describe the action. The organization, with its terminology such as "minuteman system" seemed for the first time to create a sense of threat to some of those doing the reporting.

After a brief holding action on milk and soybeans in 1963 the issue of violence was to become the main plague of an "all-out holding action" called by the NFO in late summer of 1964. During this action the NFO became linked with barn burning, fence cutting, tire slashing,
firing at trucks bound for market, and dynamiting livestock sales facilities. The National Farmers' Organization was consistent in denying that its members were responsible for these actions. Claims were made that these acts were being committed by nonmembers in order to discredit the organization. The actual parties involved will never be revealed and their identity seems secondary to the idea that the atmosphere surrounding the NFO's actions was sufficiently threatening to set the mood for these acts of violence. The men staging the actions and those opposing them were very intense, at times desperate, individuals.

This violent mood reached its peak on September 9, 1964, when two NFC picketers were killed at Bonduel, Wisconsin. NFC members had set up pickets around a livestock delivery point in that city. As a truck ground its way through the crowd that had gathered, two members were crushed to death under its wheels. One of the men, Howard Falk, was quoted as saying to a friend the day before he died: "My family is all grown but I would be willing to die if it would make farming better for the next generation." The deaths were the climax of the 1964 holding action.

This action seemed to signal an end to an era in NFO history. The days of the front page news and the constant publicity were of the past. Ahead remained only the day-to-day plodding to become recognized as a force to be taken seriously in setting farm prices and establishing farm policy. The National Farmers' Organization had grown from a handful of members and a single-office leadership to an interstate organization which boasted thousands of members and was headed by

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a national office which had itself become a bureaucracy (much to the chagrin of many of the original members).

The actions of the organization were by no means over—they merely took on a new face. The trend was now toward dealing with specific commodities rather than lumping them together for the dramatic effect of an "all-out holding action". The year 1967 would be the year of the great milk withholding action. News coverage of these actions centered around side-by-side pictures of farmers dumping milk on the already white ground contrasted with small children dying of starvation somewhere in the world. Very little was said about the give-away programs of the organisation, and much less was said about the plight of the farmer doing the dumping.

These sensational stories were to be the last of their kind, for these holding actions marked the end of an era for the NFC—an era of publicity. The organization would never again (to the date of this writing) catch the public eye as it had in the '60s. The National Farmers' Organization had mellowed. What caused the original intensity of the organization? What caused the mellowing at the end of only a decade? These are questions which I will attempt to answer by studying a very small segment of the National Farmers' Organisation—the Scotts Bluff County NFC.
CHAPTER II

THE NATIONAL FARMERS’ ORGANIZATION IN SCOTTS BLUFF COUNTY

Scotts Bluff County, Nebraska, is located on the western edge of the state, in what is generally known as the Nebraska Panhandle. The county has an area of 464,640 acres, of which 460,478 are in unincorporated areas. The land then in the county is predominantly rural.

According to the Comprehensive Plan for Scotts Bluff County, the population trend in the county showed almost no change from 1940 to 1960. In 1970 the total population of the county was 36,432—a gain of 7.8 percent over the previous census. The rural segment of the county, however, did not reflect this growth. This rural component (excluding all incorporated areas) dropped from 32.9 percent of the total population in 1960 to 29.9 percent in 1970. In reporting these grim statistics on farmers the report sums up: "The decline in rural population follows the overall statewide trend and emphasizes the trend toward urbanization."¹ The decline was also in keeping with the general exodus from the farm which was taking place across the nation.

Forty percent of the total land area in the county is under irrigation. Important crops are sugar beets, Great Northern and Pinto beans, alfalfa and corn. Cattle, raised for the most part on

non-irrigated land, is also an important farm commodity. The local newspaper, *The Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, runs a daily schedule on prices for certain of these farm commodities. These prices are the prices being paid for the commodity within the valley itself. For the purpose of this study two commodities, beef cattle and beans (both Pintos and Great Northern), were chosen to illustrate any variance in prices during the decade of the 1960s. The two commodities were chosen because of the availability of statistics at the local level and also because of their importance to the National Farmers' Organization movement. (Both would be the subject of holding actions and contract negotiations.) October 15 was chosen as a comparison date primarily to assure uniformity in comparison, but also because it follows the bean harvest in the valley.
TABLE 1

DAILY PRICES OF STUDIED COMMODITIES*

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Steers</th>
<th>Heifers</th>
<th>GN #1</th>
<th>GN #2</th>
<th>Pintos #1</th>
<th>Pintos #2</th>
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<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>28.00-30.00</td>
<td>26.50-29.00</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>19.50-21.50</td>
<td>18.00-20.50</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>5.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>23.00-23.50</td>
<td>22.00-22.50</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>26.50-27.50</td>
<td>25.50-26.00</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>6.95</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>22.25-23.00</td>
<td>21.50-22.25</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.50-5.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>23.25-23.75</td>
<td>22.25-22.50</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>6.20</td>
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<td>1965</td>
<td>24.50-25.25</td>
<td>22.50-23.00</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>9.15</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>27.00-27.75</td>
<td>26.00-26.50</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>7.20</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.50</td>
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*Daily prices as shown in The Scottsbluff Star-Herald for October 15 of the years shown, figures are in dollars per hundredweight.
These market prices need little interpretation. It can be seen from the chart that prices for livestock fluctuated during the 1960s, but never reached the price received in 1950. Bean prices remained somewhat steady, peaking in 1965, a year of agitation for bean contracts within the NFO. There may or may not be a significant correlation between the agitation and the price received. The fact that the NFC continued to strive for bean contracts and the price still sloped off would seem to indicate that NFC activity had little to do with the price jump. Members of the organization, though, would be quick to point out that the price remained above the 1950 level. It also appears that in 1965 some processors signed a master contract agreeing to pay 8.89 and later in that same year the Star-Herald could report bean prices at 8.75. Whether the organization's activities actually did affect prices is not as important here as whether the members believed they did—a question which only those involved can answer and do attempt to answer in the next chapter.

The important information which can be obtained from the table of farm statistics is that in the early 1960s farm prices for two important commodities in Scotts Bluff County were either lower or only slightly higher than prices for the same commodities in 1950. At the same time prices paid by the farmer for consumer goods had risen along with the prices paid by the rest of the nation. This left the western Nebraska farmer in a tight squeeze. The intensity of this squeeze was evidenced by picking up the local newspaper and seeing the number of notices of farm auctions. Each day the paper ran complete pages

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2 Scotts Bluff County National Farmers' Organization, Minutes of County Chapter Meetings, meetings of 16 April 1963 and 16 February 1965. (Typewritten.)
announcing farm sell-outs. As the number of auctions continued to run high, farmers expressed their fear that the farms were being purchased by large and powerful operations, and the chances for the small farmer still on the farm appeared even bleaker than before.

A rural county, where low farm prices were resulting in an ever-decreasing rural population, Scotts Bluff County in the early 1960s was ripe for the young National Farmers' Organization. As the first strong NFC holding action got underway in August of 1962, interest in the organization among county farmers began to jell. "The widely heralded NFC embargo, has brought a sharp increase in interest in the NFC over the state... I sent an organizer to Scottsbluff this week and there were over 500 at the meeting... Interest is real high," (Orville Lenz, the 1962 president of the Nebraska NFC). This particular meeting is still vivid in the memories of the NFC members. For the first time they realized just how many farmers were unhappy and ready to listen to new ideas for solving their problems.

Activities in the county during this first big thrust of the holding actions included more than just organizational activities. Although the county organization had not yet become structured, the Sentinel System was put into effect by early members. Through this system checkpoints were set up to check stock being shipped to market. Harold Woodward, a regional NFC official in charge of Omaha operations, explained the Sentinel System: "We aren't too concerned with what farmers outside our organization do, but we are very concerned with the activity of large feeding operations controlled by outside interests."  

3"Nebraska NFC President Says Bankers to Aid," The Scottsbluff Star-Herald, 2 September 1962, p. 2.

Although the leading livestock auction barn in the county, Morrison Livestock Co., was blandly reporting that the NFC holding action had had no noticeable effect on the market by September 2nd, the effect of the holding action was being seen in a different way throughout the valley. By September 8, 1962, the Star-Herald could report that more than seventy-five farmers had joined the NFC in four organizational meetings held in the valley.\(^5\) Unhappy farmers had begun the process of making commitments.

It was during this same year of initial NFC sign-ups in the county that the Committee for Economic Development came out with their report advocating that the government help move some two million farmers off the land in five years. National Farmers' Organization members in Lincoln, Nebraska, demanded that 200 plus companies with executives on the CED board repudiate the report. In the same city 150 members marched on a Sears, Roebuck Store and Ford Motor Co. There were similar protests in Omaha and Kearney.\(^6\)

The interest shown in Lincoln ran high across the state and in Scotts Bluff County, and remained high even after the holding action ended in October of 1962. On December 6, 1962, an organizational meeting was held to set up a Scotts Bluff County Chapter of the National Farmers' Organization. County officers were elected and the county members began meeting on a monthly basis. The infant organization established, almost immediately, its primary crop marketing concern --beans. Meat was later to be established as the second most important


\(^6\)"Farmers in a Flutter," Newsweek, 3 September 1962, p. 58. Many of these companies later repudiated the report.
bargaining commodity in the county.

Throughout 1963 and 1964 interest in bean contracts played a major role in NFC activity. Members hoped to negotiate with bean processors throughout the valley. Negotiations would be based on a specified number of beans to be delivered to the processor for a pre-determined price. The processor would be assured a well-stocked beanery and the farmer would be guaranteed a fair price. By 1964 the goal of contracts had become the national organization's goal as well. During the holding action of 1964 President Staley was quoted as saying, "The objective is not to raise the price temporarily, but to get contracts that will maintain our gains."  

Other action being taken on the county level in 1963 and 1964 included a television program to be aired each Sunday on the local station to explain the situation of the farmer and the NFC's philosophy and methods of alleviating that situation. Interest in these methods and goals were shown by communities throughout the valley. In Mitchell, a community of 1,841, the city council passed an ordinance that it would be against the law to sell imported meat in Mitchell. 

Throughout 1965 and 1966 bean contracts continued to be negotiated. The county organization expressed support for the dairymen in their holding action in 1967. Also in that year the county organization began arranging with Denver processors to send hogs from several farms in one shipment for a specified price. From recorded evidence


8Scotts Bluff County National Farmers' Organization, Minutes of County Chapter Meetings, meeting of 24 April 1964. (Typewritten.)
only a few of these shipments were made.\(^9\)

Even though negotiations continued in Scotts Bluff County after 1965 the tone of the county organization had changed. The activities of the organization were no longer headline news and the intensive public relations campaign once carried on by the county NFO had been allowed to die. Information concerning the organization could only be gained through talking to members or by reading the minutes of the county meetings. The National Farmers' Organization was no longer a headline-stealing, crowd-drawing movement in Scotts Bluff County, but rather a very subdued organization seemingly resigned to incremental advancement. What had happened? Had the brief spurt of activity accomplished anything? If so, why did it die?

Seemingly the only people who can answer these questions are the participants themselves. In the following chapter Scotts Bluff County NFO members of the 1960s attempt to answer those questions.

\(^9\)Scotts Bluff County National Farmers' Organization, Minutes of County Chapter Meetings, meetings of 7 July 1969 and 15 September 1969. (Typewritten.)
CHAPTER III

AN ANALYSIS ON THE COUNTY LEVEL

As noted in previous chapters, the National Farmers' Organization of the 1960s was not a quiet, deferential organization. It was vocal, demanding and insistent. As such it drew attention from not only the news media, but also from scholars. Many master's theses and doctoral dissertations have focused on the sociological, psychological and political aspects and implications of the movement. Of these, many studies three have had a special impact on my study.

The first study, "Deprivation, Discontent, and Social Movement Participation: Evidence on a Contemporary Farmers' Movement, the NFC," by Denton E. Morrison and Allen D. Steeves is important in that it is an attempt to summarize and coordinate all of the important studies on the NFC up to the time of its writing (December 1967). Thirteen studies are taken under review in this paper and the accumulative data of the thirteen are analyzed. The studies are for the most part comparative in nature and strive to discover what sort of person joins the NFC and what his expectations are. The overall conclusion seems to be that the NFC member generally has a better farm income than the average farmer.

This finding is in basic agreement with the bulk of the data reported in the empirical literature which show persons well above the lowest socio-economic levels—commonly middle-level persons—to be more often or at least first involved in power-oriented social movements.¹

¹Denton E. Morrison and Allen D. Steeves, "Deprivation, Discontent and Social Movement Participation: Evidence on a Contemporary Farmers' Movement, the NFC," Rural Sociology, 4 December 1967, p. 422.
According to Morrison and Steeves the impetus for joining the NFC did not lie solely in economic disadvantage, but rather in a more acute sense of relative deprivation. Although they are not the most economically deprived of farmers, they tend to look more at laborers or others who are more affluent than they, and feel a sense of deprivation as compared with these groups—relative deprivation. The authors themselves sum up their studies:

A more cryptic summary-hypothesis might be: it is not having less but wanting more which is related to movement participation, because wanting more means more probability of getting less than one wants, and thus of being more dissatisfied about his situation.\(^2\)

Much of the importance of this paper lies in its accumulation of other studies on the NFC. Perhaps more important, though, is the indication in its hypothesis that it is an attitude that differentiates a NFC member from a nonmember; an attitude consisting of how the member views himself in relation to other groups and in relation to the world in which he must operate.

Another study which has been useful to my work is "The Mission, History and Times of the National Farmers' Organization" by William Anderson. The study is a quick summary of farm organisations and a comprehensive study of the National Farmers' Organization. As such it was helpful in putting together an overview of the national organization up to 1965, the time of its writing. Its most important contribution was the suggestion that NFC members are above average in their sense of isolation from the rest of society. It is, I believe, an attitude which, if it does exist, is much nearer to the heart of NFC activity than the "relative deprivation" theory put forth by

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 433.
Morrison and Steeves. If members do in fact feel isolated from society, the anger and intensity felt at times throughout the movement are much more rational than is at first apparent.

A third, and very important study is "An Analysis of the Sauk County National Farmers' Organization" masters' paper by Kenyon Giese (1965). The significance of this paper lies primarily in its structure. Giese's study was limited to a single county in Wisconsin. The thrust of my paper is also single-county. Although obviously possessing prejudices against the National Farmers' Organization, Giese concedes that it is a definite force in the county and credits that force to economic conditions. "Agricultural economic conditions provided the spark that sent disgruntled, debt-ridden Sauk County NFC members searching for this method of alleviating their economic plight." Again, the most important contribution of this paper to my study was its form. A county-wide study, it was carried out primarily through the use of mailed questionnaires, a method which I adopted. Giese's method of questioning was also an important guideline for my work.

These constitute the three major studies I relied upon as background for my study. Morrison and Steeves' paper is sociological, Anderson's is historical, and Giese's is political. Each approached the subject from different directions and varying hypotheses were reached. All were important background for my analysis of the Scotts Bluff County National Farmers' Organization.

My study was based on information taken from the local Scottsbluff newspaper—the Star-Herald—and from a valuable source of NFC activities in the 1960s: the minutes of the county meetings held during this time.

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Of greater importance as reference sources than even the minutes were the men who themselves took part in the movement and caused it to happen. I talked to some of these men at great lengths and they were instrumental in giving me a feeling for the organization as it was a decade ago. Mr. Phillip Hort, Mr. Dave Deines and Mr. August Lager were all active members in the 1960s and all gave willingly of their time. Most importantly my father, H. J. Merrigan, one-time leader of the movement in the county, patiently consented to being questioned time and again about the activities of the county organization.

It was from these men, three of whom were at one time chairmen of the county NFO, that I caught the sense of continuing loyalty to the organization as it was in the 1960s, and a sense of deep regret that it had changed. They firmly believed that the organization had been important and has had an impact on the conditions of farmers today, and yet only one remained an active member in the organization.

In order to better gauge the prevalence of this attitude the subjects of my questioning needed to constitute a broader representation of the membership of the county NFO. It was at this point that my study hit its first major snag. It has always been a strict policy of the NFO that the size of the membership should not be made known. The line of thought upon which this policy hinges is that it is of primary importance to the organization that its strength can never be accurately calculated. To put it in perspective: if the NFO threatens to call an all-out holding action, the processors against whom the threat is made have, ideally, no way of calculating how menacing the threat actually is. Therefore, no figures as to the strength of the Scotts Bluff County NFO in the 1960s were ever recorded or are
available. Estimates from that decade’s members range from two hundred to four hundred and fifty.

My goal was to obtain a completed questionnaire from a number of those members. The decision to mail these questionnaires was based partially on a tight time schedule, but primarily on the knowledge that NFC members place special importance on anonymity. In an attempt to insure response to my questions I planned to contact each farm home by telephone to introduce myself and explain my purpose, while assuring anonymity, before sending the questionnaire. Using the largest estimate of four hundred and fifty members, I contacted ten percent, or forty-five homes. Of these, twelve declined to accept a questionnaire. Reasons varied. Some felt that since they had left the organization they had nothing to say about it. Others excused themselves by saying they had never really been active in the organization in the first place. Still others just did not want to discuss their participation in the organization at all. This left thirty-three members who consented to having the questionnaire sent to their homes. Of these, twenty-one members replied. One person’s reply consisted of merely a note at the bottom of the questionnaire. "Due to the plight of the NFC I will not answer these items at this time." A total of twenty men who were members replied in full to the questionnaire. Members were sent questionnaires for one of two reasons: either their names were mentioned by the members I interviewed or they were chosen at random from the minutes of the 1962 through 1966 Scotts Bluff County NFC meetings. A copy of the letter and questionnaire sent to each of these members and a record of their replies follows.

4 Anonymous reply to questionnaire.
Dear Sir,

Enclosed is a questionnaire designed to aid me in my research of the Scotts Bluff County National Farmers' Organization of the 1960s. No names are requested on the questionnaire so that anonymity in answering is assured. The answers received will be used for academic purposes only. There are to be presented in Senior Thesis form to the Political Science Department of Carroll College in Helena, Montana. The present Scotts Bluff County NFC leadership is aware that this study is being made.

I would appreciate it if you would complete the questionnaire and return it to me as soon as possible. Thank you in advance for your contributions.

Sincerely,

Joan E. Merrigan
Route 2, Box 334
Scottsbluff, Nebr. 69361
Please answer all of the following questions.

1. What year did you begin farming? _______

2. What year did you join the NFO? _______

3. Are you still an active member? _______

4. If you are no longer a member, what year did your active membership stop? _______

5. What were your two major reasons for joining the NFO? (Please check two, indicating your first reason by circling the check.)

   _______ Low market prices for farm products
   _______ Inactivity of other farm organizations
   _______ Belief in the collective bargaining idea
   _______ Emphasis on economic, rather than political action
   _______ Positive action taken in holding actions
   _______ Other (Please state)

6. Check the activities you participated in as an NFO member.

   _______ Livestock checker during holding action
   _______ Caller in minute man system
   _______ Actively sought out other farmers to join
   _______ Attended county NFO meetings
   _______ Helped present contracts to processors
   _______ Gave talk on NFO to social group or gathering
   _______ Regularly attended monthly organizational meetings
   _______ Attended national conventions
   _______ Other (Please state)

7. Do you feel the government should be more or less active in forming farm policy (subsidies, tariffs, etc.)?

   _______ More active
   _______ Less active
   _______ Present activity about right

8. How much impact do you feel the farm vote has on the making of government farm policy?

   _______ Great amount
   _______ Some
   _______ Very little
   _______ None
9. Check the groups to which you belong.

________ Fraternal organizations or lodges
________ Veterans organizations
________ Church groups
________ Social groups or clubs
________ Other (Please state)

10. Circle the groups in question 9 in which you have held an office.

11. Do you feel that urban America was aware of the plight of the farmer in the 1960s?

________ Yes
________ No

12. If aware, do you feel they cared?

________ Yes
________ No

13. NFC gained prominence in Scotts Bluff County in 1962 and became less active about 1965. What do you think caused this decline in activity?

________ Rising market prices for farm goods
________ Leadership of the national organization
________ Awareness that NFC activities would not work
________ Change in leadership of local organization
________ Other (Please state)

14. Check the areas in which you feel NFC was successful.

________ Bringing the attention of the public to the plight of the farmer
________ Boosting the market price of farm goods
________ Educating the farmer to the merits of organizing
________ None of the above
________ Other (Please state)

15. Do you feel collective bargaining is a workable solution to farm marketing problems?

________ Yes
________ No
________ Other

16. Do you think it will ever be possible for farmers to organize and work together as a unit?

________ Yes
________ No
17. Under what circumstances do you think Scotts Bluff County NFO will become the active organization it was in the 1960s?

- [ ] a) If farm prices drop drastically
- [ ] b) If NFO leadership changes
- [ ] c) If holding actions begin in other parts of the country
- [ ] d) Other (Please state)
- [ ] e) Never

18. Under which of the above circumstances would you become actively involved in NFO?

(Check one or more)

- [ ] a) 
- [ ] b) 
- [ ] c) 
- [ ] d) 
- [ ] e) 

19. In the middle 1960s farm prices began to rise gradually. Do you credit NFC with this rise or do you feel it was a natural occurrence?

- [ ] Credit NFC
- [ ] Natural occurrence
- [ ] Other (Please state)

20. What effect do you feel NFC holding actions had on market prices in Scotts Bluff County?

- [ ] None
- [ ] Some
- [ ] Very little
- [ ] Much

21. What do you feel is the major farm problem in America today?

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

22. Please use the space below to make any comments on the National Farmers' Organization, its past or its future, or any comments on farmers or farm policy.
### Question 1
What year did you begin farming?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>1957</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Question 2
What year did you join NFC?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Question 3
Are you still an active member?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Question 4
If you are no longer a member, what year did your active membership stop?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 5
What were your two major reasons for joining NFC?
Please check two and indicate first choice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>One of two choices</th>
<th>First choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low market prices for farm products</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactivity of other farm organizations</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in collective bargaining idea</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on economic, rather than political action</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive action taken in holding actions</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 6
Check the activities you participated in as a NFC member.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Livestock checker during holding action</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caller in minuteman system</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively sought out other farmers to join</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended county NFC meetings</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped present contracts to processors</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave talk on NFC to social group or gathering</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly attended monthly organizational meetings</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended national conventions</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 7
Do you feel the government should be more or less active in forming farm policy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More active</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less active</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present activity about right</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 8
How much impact do you feel the farm vote has on the making of governmental farm policy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great amount</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very little</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions 9 and 10
Check the groups to which you belong.
In which groups have you held an office?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Belong</th>
<th>Held an Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fraternal organizations and lodges</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans organizations</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church groups</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social groups or clubs</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 11
Do you feel that urban America was aware of the plight of the farmer in the 1960s?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 12
If aware, do you feel they cared?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Question 13**
To what do you attribute the decline in NFC activity in the 1960s?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rising market prices for farm goods</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership of the national organization</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness that NFC activities would not work</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in leadership of local organization</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 14**
Check the areas in which you feel the NFC was successful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bringing the attention of the public to the plight of the farmer</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosting the market price of farm goods</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educating the farmer to the merits of organizing</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 15**
Do you feel collective bargaining is a workable solution to farm marketing problems?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 16**
Do you think it will ever be possible for farmers to organize and work together as a unit?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 17
Under what circumstances do you think Scotts Bluff County NFC will become the active organization it was in the 1960s?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumstances</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If farm prices drop drastically</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If NFC leadership changes</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If holding actions begin in other parts of the country</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 18
Under which of these circumstances would you become actively involved in NFC?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumstances</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If farm prices dropped drastically</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If NFC leadership changes</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If holding actions begin in other parts of the country</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 19
In the middle 1960s farm prices began to rise gradually. Do you credit NFC with this rise or do you feel it was a natural occurrence?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occurrence</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credit NFC</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural occurrence</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 20
What effect do you feel NFC holding actions had on market prices in Scotts Bluff County?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Much effect</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some effect</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very little effect</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No effect</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seventy-five percent of the farmers replying to the questiona
taire began farming before 1955, a year in which, as has been shown, prices in Scotts Bluff County dropped drastically. Fifty percent of the total number began farming in the "... 1940s when farm prices were high and farm expenses were relatively low." By the time NFO was established on the county level in 1962, fifteen percent of those replying had already joined the national organization, another fifty percent joined that year, and another twenty-five percent the following year. A total of ninety percent of the farmers answering had joined NFO within one year of its establishment at the county level. This percentage would tend to give credence to Giese's suggestion that worsening economic conditions provided the stimulus for farmers to join the young organization. Further support for this hypothesis can be found in the replies to question five. The question reads "What were your two major reasons for joining NFO?" The farmer was asked to check two reasons and then indicate his primary reason by circling the check. Some of those replying checked more than two reasons, making a total of forty-four reasons checked. Of these, only thirteen primary reasons were indicated. Approximately ninety percent of the farmers indicated that low market prices for farm products constituted a reason for joining NFO. Forty-five percent of the group indicated low market prices as their primary reason for joining NFO.

It may be concluded that a substantial percentage of those indicating their reasons for joining NFO joined because of economically hard times. Belief in the collective bargaining idea, inactivity of other

---

farm organizations and emphasis on economic, rather than political action ranked second, third, and fourth respectively as the reasons most often indicated for becoming a member of the National Farmers’ Organization. The surprising outcome of this particular question was that not one farmer indicated that the positive action taken in holding actions was responsible for his entry into the organization. In contrast, Giese offers "tangible proof" that holding actions had a very definite, very positive effect on the recruitment of new members. The media also seemed to be ready to give credit to the tactic of holding action for boosting NFO membership.

In fact, for the NFC, the publicity attending their action may be the major benefit; and, it could very well be the effect the organization’s leadership has been seeking, as a means of boosting its membership and gaining more leverage for bargaining with the meat processors.

The assumption that the wave of holding actions washed in many new members is reasonable until it is compared to the reasons for joining given by the twenty Scotts Bluff County members. Again, not a single member credited holding actions as being responsible for his conversion. This indicates that they did not see the organization as a kind of band wagon to be leaped upon because, judging from all the fanfare surrounding it, it was obviously going somewhere. Rather, it seems they joined because of economic conditions and a belief that the collective bargaining idea proselytized by the organization would indeed work in attempting to alleviate that economic condition.

If the drive behind the organization in the beginning was the result of poor economic conditions, what caused the decline of the

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6 Ibid., p. 144.

7 "Farmers Strike, Consumer Pays." Business Week. 15 September 1962, p. 36.
organization? Was it a natural cyclical occurrence of rising farm prices and, therefore, a better overall economic situation for the farmer? As noted previously, the public activities (television shows, headline news, huge meetings) of the county organization declined around 1965. Fifty-five percent of the farmers replying to the questionnaire had cancelled their active membership before 1970. Farm prices were rising during these years and the desperate situation of the farmer seemed to be lessening. Some farmers do indeed credit the rise in prices and bettering economic conditions as the cause of the declining activity of the NFC. (Indicating the reasons for the decline in county-level activity, twenty-five percent of the study group saw rising market prices for farm goods as a cause.) When asked in question seventeen under what conditions they thought Scotts Bluff County NFC would become the active organization it was in the 1960s, thirty-five percent indicated they thought this would come about if farm prices dropped drastically—a definite change in economic conditions.

A much larger group—sixty-five percent—held national leadership at least partially responsible for the organization's decline in the 1960s. In making additional comments as requested in question twenty two, thirty percent of the farmers mentioned the shortcomings of the leadership. Some of their comments were more detailed than others.

NFC was a young organization with a belief that could be readily understood by all farmers. Because of this, farmers themselves believed the policy would work. Members got discouraged because the national organization was not ready to move or could not move fast enough. They neither had the personnel to organize
nor were they a wealthy organization, which could help cover expenses of people trying to help. Our leadership at the national level could not keep up with the growth of the organization and our national people could not handle the responsibility nor their quick fame. Therefore farmers themselves lost confidence and interest.

Another farmer commented tersely, "Get rid of Staley and there can possibly be a good organization." A substantial number of the farmers blame the national leadership for the decline in activity at the county level.

One question remains to be answered: Regardless of why or how it began or declined, did the National Farmers' Organization in Scotts Bluff County in the 1960s accomplish anything? Was its existence at all significant? The farmers constituting my particular study group attempted to answer these questions in their replies to questions fourteen, nineteen and twenty of the questionnaire.

In question fourteen the farmers were asked to check the areas in which they felt the NFO was successful. Forty answers were given. Of the twenty farmers answering the questionnaire, ninety percent felt that the NFC had been successful in bringing the attention of the public to the plight of the farmer. Sixty percent felt that the organization was successful in educating the farmer to the merits of organizing. In the eyes of these farmers the NFC was successful and instrumental in educating the public to the problems facing the farmer. This process of education was inevitable. The publicity given the NFO during the 1960s was greater than at any other time in its history. Its activities were at times sensational and always controversial. Farmers were withholding cattle from the market in protest against

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8 Anonymous reply to questionnaire.

9 Ibid.
the low prices they received; and elsewhere consumers were cutting back on beef consumption because they could not afford to pay the price demanded. Farmers were dumping tons of milk on the ground and wading through it; and elsewhere children were starving from malnutrition. Farmers were accused of obstructing traffic to the farm market place; and elsewhere other farmers were singing the praises of a free market system. These and many more "radical" actions of the farmers belonging to the National Farmers' Organization were news-making. In making news they placed before the public the case of the farmer. As the survey indicates, many farmers feel that because of the NFO this case was given hearing for the first time.

Again, ninety percent of those interviewed felt the NFO was successful in bringing the attention of the public to the plight of the farmer and sixty percent credited it with success in educating the farmer himself to the merits of organizing. Of perhaps greater interest than these figures themselves is the contrast produced when they are placed beside a figure of only thirty percent of these same farmers expressing the belief that the organization was successful in actually boosting the market prices of farm goods. A much greater percentage saw the organization as a successful educational tool (both to the public and to the farmer) than saw it as a successful economic leverage. Ability to exert economic pressure was by definition the primary purpose for the existence of the National Farmers' Organization and yet a sampling of its members of the 1960s does not for the most part seem to credit it as having this ability.

The degree to which these particular one-time members are willing to credit the NFO in the economic sphere may be checked closer by
examining question nineteen of the questionnaire. The farmers were asked whether or not NFC was responsible for the gradual rise of farm prices in the 1960s or if that rise in prices was a natural occurrence. Only thirty percent credited NFC. Of that thirty percent a large number mentioned that bean prices in particular had been boosted by the organization's activities. But even some of these recognized the organization's educational aspect. "We know NFC helped bean prices. All prices have risen since NFO because of the attention paid to farmers because of NFO." Fifty percent saw the price rise as a natural occurrence. Ten percent felt the credit belonged somewhere other than these two categories, and five percent did not respond. The primary tactic of the NFO—holding actions—was the subject of question twenty. Fifty-five percent of the respondents replied that NFO holding actions had no effect whatsoever on the market prices in Scotts Bluff County. The primary effect of the National Farmers' Organization in the 1960s as seen by farmers themselves was not economic, but rather educational in nature.

That the respondents felt this education was indeed necessary is indicated in their replies to question eleven. The question asked the farmers if they felt that urban America was aware of the plight of the farmer in the 1960s. Eighty percent replied no, urban America was not aware of the farmers' plight in the 1960s. The need to educate urban America was obvious and many of this group of farmers seem to conclude that NFC accepted the task and excelled in it. Question twelve carries the point a little closer to the heart of the matter. The question asks if urban America was aware (or when it finally, perhaps through

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10 Anonymous reply to questionnaire.
exposure to NFC, became aware) of the plight of the farmer, did it care? Eighty percent answered no, it did not care. The other twenty percent refrained from answering. Not one answering farmer could state that urban America cared about his desperate situation. This phenomenon is in keeping with William Anderson's conclusion that the NFC farmer was, compared to other groups in society, above average in his sense of isolation from the rest of society.

If, and the evidence points in that direction, the NFC member does feel alienated from the rest of society, then the desperation which seems to pervade the movement becomes a little more understandable. If indeed the individual feels he is slowly being forced out of his way of life in a society where no one will recognize his plight, then he has his back against a wall and turns to an organization which will make that plight known and will attempt to do something about it. If the measures and tactics of that organisation are at times extreme, "radical" or "violent," they may seem necessary for an alienated group of individuals fighting for what they see as their very existence.

A sense of alienation from the government is felt as well. Sixty percent of the study group felt the farm vote has very little effect on the making of government farm policy and an additional thirty percent felt it had no impact at all (question eight). At the same time they express very little faith in the ability of the government to make sound farm policy. Eighty percent of the respondents expressed the opinion that the government should be less active in forming farm policy. Fifteen percent felt that governmental activity was about right and five percent did not answer (question seven). Not a single farmer replying to the questionnaire felt that the government should become more active in farm affairs.
Do these farmers who joined the NFC in the 1960s have any other characteristics in common besides this sense of alienation? Is there, as Morrison and Steeves attempted to show, a particular type of individual, possessing certain characteristics, who joined the NFC? The results of most studies have been inconclusive and correlating characteristics such as age, income, religious affiliation, etc., with membership in the NFC. However, Anderson hypothesized that the farmer joining the National Farmers' Organization was leadership-prone and a joiner. He believed that this farmer, while perhaps feeling a sense of alienation, was likely to join organizations, both farm and non-farm.

With this in mind the study group of farmers were asked in questions nine and ten to indicate the groups to which they had belonged and in which they had held an office. The results are shown in the charts. These results indicate that these farmers joined other groups, with each on the average belonging to 2.5 groups besides the NFC. Their level of activity after joining an organization also seems to be high as indicated by the replies to question six.

These findings on characteristics are not nearly as strong or as convincing as are the findings which seem to point to a particular set of attitudes shared in common by NFC members. These attitudes—a feeling of alienation, and a sense of confidence in a small, action-oriented organization—along with the economic situation, are the focal points of the entire movement. These attitudes, important as they are, are only expressions of an all-important characteristic of these farmers— independence. This characteristic, because of its visibility, is easily overlooked, but the attitudes which spring from it are essential in examining the organization. It is through these attitudes that the
organization was born, reached a peak and declined. It is these attitudes which created the phenomenon of the National Farmers' Organization in the 1960s.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

I introduced this paper by defining the National Farmers' Organization of the 1960s as a pressure group and comparing it with other pressure groups of that decade. That definition and comparison still stand. A pressure group is a group which exerts pressure on legislators and the public in order to advance or protect its interests. This is precisely what the 1960s NFC action was all about. In the attitudes expressed and tactics used, NFC takes a natural place beside other "militant", "radical" and "violent" pressure groups of the 1960s.

Definition and comparison were only secondary to the real purpose of this paper: analysis. Again in the introduction it was proposed that this analysis be centered around three basic questions: 1) What made a group of people band together in a sometimes violent, but always intense pressure group? 2) What caused this intense action to die as quickly as it was born? 3) In light of that death, was the life worthwhile? After analyzing the organization itself on the county level some answers to these questions seem to be within grasp.

The first question--what made a group of people band together in a sometimes violent, but always intense pressure group?--is an obvious question to pose, but not so obvious to answer. The National Farmers' Organization in Scotts Bluff County came about during a time of change; change not only in the surrounding society, but change directly felt
by the farmer himself. This change took on one of two general faces. It was either economic or attitudinal in nature. The most obvious change, economic, had come about through lower farm market prices received by the farmer, coupled with a higher cost of living. It was a no-win situation in which the pressure was increasing year after year. The results of the pressure were seen daily as farm auctions became a matter of course. As noted earlier, ninety percent of the farmers answering the questionnaire in Scotts Bluff County claimed that low market prices for farm products constituted a reason for joining the National Farmers' Organization.

Accompanying the change in economic reality was a change in attitude on the part of the farmer himself. The traditional response to the economic hardship in which the farmer found himself would have been to look to the government for assistance, in the form of legislation, subsidies, tariffs etc. Slowly the farmer had been coming to the realization that this approach was not as realistic as it had been in the past. Governmental decisions are influenced by those who possess power—either monetarily or numerically—to exert influence. At one time, however, he had possessed the numerical power. In a nation which was primarily rural the farm voice had been influential. But in a nation of ever-increasing numbers the farm census had dropped from twenty-five million in 1950 to an estimated eight million in 1970. 1 It was unrealistic for the farmer to believe that he did indeed exert an influence on the government. And as shown in question eight of the questionnaire, farmers were aware of this situation.

The reality of the situation was never more evident than in 1962 when the Committee for Economic Development published its report stating that the government policy toward agriculture should consist of allowing farm prices to fall, thereby assisting in moving some two million farmers off the land in five years. Governmental policy was to take on even darker shades in 1967 when the federal government filed an anti-trust suit against the National Farmers’ Organization. The suit was in direct contradiction with the Capper-Volstead Act of 1922 which exempted farm organizations from the provision of anti-trust. Although the suit was never followed through it did succeed in breaking the 1967 milk withholding action.

The farmer realized he could no longer place his future in the hands of the government. The infant NFO which had begun in 1955 as a farm organization designed to affect legislation had recognized this and had switched to direct-action, self-help tactics. As the economic situation worsened and the attitude of the farmer changed the National Farmers’ Organization was there to offer an alternative.

If the alternative was a plausible one, what caused this intense action to die as quickly as it was born? Once again the answer which is most easily arrived at is economic in nature. As the end of the decade approached the economic situation of the farmer had improved. Farm market prices were on the upswing. The situation was no longer desperate and no longer called for the intense, direct-action methods which were the nature of the NFO. This may be part of the answer, but if seen as the entire answer it leaves the farmer as a seemingly short-sighted individual.

Was the vision of the farmer indeed this limited, or is there more to answering the question of declining NFO activity than economic
considerations? Once again the answer is far more complex than economic alone. In order to reach this answer it is necessary to look at the nature of the farmer and of farming. Not only is farming an occupation, but it is also a way of life. This means the farmer is his own boss, sets his own hours, takes his own risks and, if there is any, makes his own profit. It is a way of life in which the farmer through the decisions he makes for his own operation decides his own fate. The farmer himself recognizes this independence and the extremes to which it can be carried. One of the farmers answering the questionnaire replied in this manner when asked what he felt was the major farm problem in America today: "The farmer himself. His own stubborn refusal to cooperate with his neighbors, and thinking he is protecting his independence." Another member of the study group offered this observation at the end of his questionnaire:

If farmers ever realize that they have to give up a little of their ever-loving independence, then something like NFC might work. Until such time that they learn to work together, pulling in the same direction instead of working against each other, they will never be able to fully organize.3

The farmer is recognizable as an independence-loving human being. His entire way of life is centered around this value of independence. Then suddenly that way of life is threatened. It is threatened by falling market prices and by his inability to influence the governmental process. In order to salvage that way of life he joins an organization dedicated to and run by small farmers--others who presumably hold the same values that he holds. The organization defines itself as a cooperative bargaining unit utilizing as its primary tactic the

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2Anonymous reply to questionnaire.

3Anonymous reply to questionnaire.
holding action. The organization grows from a handful of men in Iowa to a multi-state organization boasting thousands of members. In order to handle this growth the organizational structure of the NFC changes from a casual vacant-store operation to a complex, bureaucratic operation more suited to deal with a complex, bureaucratic society within which it finds itself.

Stated differently, the organization of necessity grew to possess characteristics opposite those its members were striving to maintain; farmers by joining NFC were trying to hold on to independence and smallness; the organization itself had become large and bureaucratic by nature. This dichotomy is perhaps better understood in looking at the answers given to questions fifteen and sixteen of the questionnaire. When asked whether they felt collective bargaining was a workable solution to the farm problem, seventy-five percent of the farmers said yes and only ten percent answered a definite no. Immediately thereafter they were asked if they felt it would ever be possible for farmers to organize and work together as a unit. This time only thirty-five percent gave affirmative replies and sixty-five percent offered a definite no.

Again, the dichotomy is clear. While the farmer feels that organization is the workable solution to his problems, he does not feel that this solution will ever become reality. Thriving on an independent lifestyle, he cannot accept a large bureaucratic organization which is effective only as long as its members remain dependent on one another.

In placing the blame for the decline of the National Farmers' Organization it is natural to look to the man or group of men who are the personification of the bureaucratic nature of the organization--Cren Lee Staley and other national leaders. As was shown in the last
chapter a substantial number of one-time members are willing to do that very thing. The leadership of the organization is believed to be the cause of the organization's decline, when it is perhaps in reality the nature of the farmer himself which should be held responsible.

Given the reality of the decline of the organization, one final question remains to be answered: In light of its death, was the life worthwhile? This is the most difficult question to answer. As previously pointed out, a majority of the farmers answering the questionnaire credited the National Farmers' Organization of the 1960s with success in educating the rest of society to the plight of the farmer. Over half credited it with success in educating the farmer himself. A minority even gave it credit for raising the market prices of some agricultural commodities—particularly beans. These are very defensible positions. The massive amount of publicity received by the organization was alone capable of educating the public. By placing the organization before the public day after day, the media forced it to recognize that the NFC existed. The next logical step was to educate the public to the reason for the organization's existence, which was essentially to organize the farmer so that he could do something about his situation. In the process society became at least partially aware of the situation. It also seems probable that on particular crops on a limited local level—such as beans in Scotts Bluff County—market prices were boosted through the pressure exerted by NFC.

These accomplishments were of great importance. Of even greater significance, though, is the attitude expressed by the reality of the movement. By taking part in the movement farmers expressed the belief that a small group can reform what they see as an injustice. Regardless of whether or not they still belong to the NFC all members saw some
benefit in their active participation in a direct-action organization. It is a lesson which will be recalled in times of crisis. When the farmer again feels the urgent need to protect his interests he will form a pressure group such as the National Farmers' Organization of the 1960s.
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