

An Interview with Henry R. Martinson

Interviewed by Robert Carlson

Henry R. Martinson (1883-1981) was interviewed in 1974 about his memories of the **North Dakota Socialist Party** and the **Nonpartisan League**. Martinson homesteaded in Divide County in 1906 and later moved to Minot, where he worked as a house painter. He became a staunch socialist and the editor of the Socialist newspaper, the **Iconoclast**. He organized for the **Nonpartisan League** in 1918 and 1919 and participated in other left-wing groups. He was deputy commissioner of labor for North Dakota from 1937 to 1964 and was the state poet laureate from 1979 to 1981.

Q. How many members did you have in the Socialist Party in Minot at its height?

Oh, I'd have to estimate, but I would say that we had four hundred to five hundred men and women. That is, we'd take in whole families, you know, at one time. It was going pretty good there for awhile. We even had a good movement in Fargo and other parts of the state, too! They were scattered over the country and in small towns.

Q. Why do you think it was stronger in the west?

Well, several reasons. In the first place, the people that came out west there were inclined to be more progressive than the people that stayed home, whether it was in the Minnesota town or Wisconsin or eastern North Dakota. The very fact that they went out there [meant] they were more progressively inclined. And there's something about the life there. Everything was pretty much western. Homesteaders and the towns were wide open! Take, for instance, in Minot you'd think you were out in the towns that the storybooks described. It was all gambling down in the basements, you know, and liquor freely flowing. They didn't wear any six-shooters on the streets; but I noticed in one gambling place the owner had one in his hip, but that was a kind of a spirit that prevailed there. Ya, it was pioneer spirit really! It sounded like socialism, but it was the pioneer spirit out here.

Q. It would appear to me that Minot socialists must have had a lot of clout!

We were! We elected a mayor there! There weren't enough members to elect him, but the influence of those members was enough on the rest of the common people to elect a mayor. Art LeSueur was our mayor there, and we elected a commissioner of street, Dewey Dorman, and we ruled the roost for a little while. But LeSueur made his mistake when he began from the top to clean up the town.

Q. When did the Socialist Party start to decline?

Just as soon as the League got really going. Then the membership began to decline. It didn't take long either after it started to go downhill because the **Nonpartisan League**, of course, went like a prairie fire over the whole darn state when it got started. And most of the Socialists went over to the League.

Q. What did the Nonpartisan League have that accounted for the appeal?

They took those immediate demands that the people could understand. The farmers could understand that they were being exploited by the grain gamblers and big business. But they couldn't understand Karl Marx! They wanted relief and they wanted better prices for their grain. They

wanted terminal elevators. They didn't want to get gypped on the grade and they saw they were being exploited—the prices that were charged them for machinery and everything. That they could understand!

Q. Do you think the label “socialist” would immediately conjure up visions of free love or something like that with many people?

Ya, it would, some of ‘em. I know us organizers who were socialists talked socialism and they didn't seem to be afraid of socialism; but we didn't get to ‘em, you know? We couldn't get a majority of ‘em like the Nonpartisan League did; but, by the same token, the Nonpartisan League failed, too, after they got into power. It didn't take very long because of the very fact that their membership was not educated. They got some of the things that they wanted. They got their state bank; they got state hail insurance; they got their state mill; the workers got their workmen's compensation and minimum wage law. “Well, maybe that will do it,” they thought in their minds. “Maybe we should quit now; we shouldn't be quite so hardheaded.” They did quit!

Q. Course, before the 1920s, there hadn't been too much antisocialist propaganda.

I think maybe the reason for it was that the people that were really opposed to socialism didn't know how fast it was going! You know, we almost got a million votes in 1912 with Eugene Debs [Socialist Party candidate for president] and they began to figure, “We can't stop it!” They even put Debs in prison when they couldn't stop it. So then it really hit the Nonpartisan League harder than it ever did. Matter o' fact, I understand they tarred and feathered a couple o' Nonpartisan Leaguers! They never did that to socialists up in this part o' the country. The business people, especially the smaller business, were more afraid of the Nonpartisan League than they were of the socialists because the Nonpartisan League attacked them really where it hurt when they started establishing banks, mill,

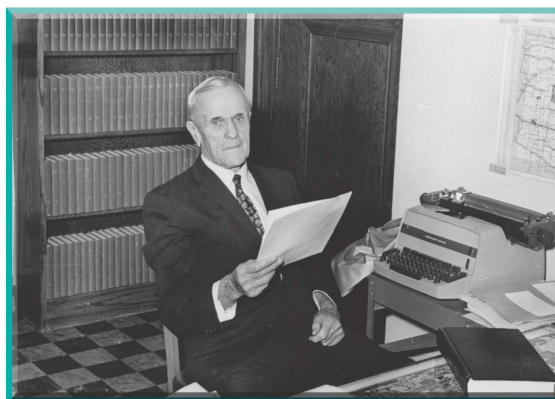


Figure 1. Henry Martinson homesteaded in Divide County in 1906 and was an early Nonpartisan League and Socialist Party member. (SHSND A5637)

and even stores like the consumer stores. My God, that threatened their way of life!

Q. What kind of a man was A.C. Townley? You must have known him.

Well, he was kind of a complex character. They have pictured him as kind of a boss, a despot, unscrupulous, and a racketeer, but he wasn't any of them. In fact, my notion is that he was inclined to be a little bit religious and he was very intense-natured and he was one of those pugnacious fellows. He wanted to stand up for his rights, and he'd fight for them, and he was one of the best organizers and crusaders that has been in this part of the country! He wasn't strictly a Marxian-socialist. I don't think he ever understood socialism from that angle and perhaps that was all to the good insofar as organizing a league is concerned.

About the Interviewer

Robert Carlson, who is president of the North Dakota Farmers Union, was assistant director of the North Dakota Oral History project, which operated from 1974 to 1977. He earned an M.A. in history from the University of North Dakota. He serves on numerous agricultural boards and commissions and farms south of Glenburn, North Dakota.

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