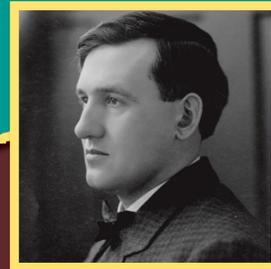


Usher L. Burdick's Early Political Career in North Dakota and the Rise of the Nonpartisan League

By Edward C. Blackorby



Usher S. Burdick (1879–1960) was a powerful and colorful character in North Dakota's political history, from his early years as an influential young banker in the newly platted town of Munich to his twenty years in the United States Congress. In his mature years, Burdick became associated with almost every reform movement that arose in North Dakota. His formative years were those in which the Populist movement swept the North Dakota prairies.

In these early years of the twentieth century, North Dakota bore some similarity to a third-world one-crop country. A few, wealthy nonresidents, as in many third-world countries, dominated its political scene. They exploited the farmers, siphoning the agricultural profits into their own pockets. **Alexander McKenzie** was the coordinator who served this Twin City elite, but, unlike a third-world dictator, his power stemmed not from the control of the military but from management of the North Dakota Republican Party, especially through the faction known as the Stalwarts. The tools he used included railroad passes, the spoils system, government contracts, employment by the corporate interests, ballot stuffing, gerrymanders, intimidation, and his commanding personality and sophisticated political insights.¹ When reform newspapers mobilized public opinion against him, he encouraged his supporters to purchase ownership of those papers or to establish rival publications.

Burdick matured in this environment and heard about the abuses of the “old gang” and the reforms vainly sought by the Grangers, Populists, Fusionists, and others. These movements unsuccessfully struggled to protect the farmers from those who preyed upon them, but, at the same time, they created farmer awareness of their victimization and left a smoldering, bitter resentment towards the Twin City interests. Burdick shared these feelings, and his experiences as a banker, implement dealer,

farmer, and rancher, gave him further insights into the injustices suffered by North Dakota farmers and businessmen.

In later years, the **North Dakota Progressive League** and the **Equity cooperative movement** provided an outlet for this farmer indignation. The Equity proposal for a state-built terminal grain elevator in Minnesota or Wisconsin became the central purpose of Equity and of North Dakota farmers.² They believed it would eventually correct the inequities that cost farmers an estimated \$55,000,000 a year.

Historians have misunderstood the failure of the North Dakota Progressives. They concluded that Progressives took little interest in farm legislation and thus failed the farmers. Actually, with the aid of Democratic Governor John Burke, they enacted many laws to assist farmers. Furthermore, they performed the major task of amending the Constitution to enable North Dakota's government to build a terminal elevator; both amendments—the first in 1912 and the second in 1914—were ratified by an overwhelming majority of voters, 73 percent.

Another miscalculation concerns history's view of Alexander McKenzie. Journalists and scholars spoke of the “**revolution of 1906**” and the “dethronement of McKenzie.” In reality, McKenzie retained a major influence in the Republican Party machine and prevented the Progressives from capturing a

Republican gubernatorial nomination in every election year from 1906 through 1914.

Burdick was first elected to public office in 1906 as a representative to the state legislative assembly. His entry into politics was encouraged by **George Winship**, a state senator from Grand Forks and the founder and publisher of the *Grand Forks Herald*. Winship was one of the **Progressive Republicans** who supported reform of state government and opposed the **Stalwart Republicans**, led by McKenzie.³ By consenting to run for the legislature,



Figure 1. Usher Burdick was an outstanding athlete and played football for the University of Minnesota while he attended law school in Minneapolis from 1901 to 1904. (Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 2070, File 403)

Burdick joined reformers in the struggle against McKenzie's political machine that helped define his political position for years to come.

Burdick was reelected to the state legislature again in 1908, the term in which he was chosen as Speaker of the House, giving him a visible and active role in the shaping of the state's young government. Though young himself, Burdick moved with ease in the political turbulence surrounding him. He mingled with his characteristic charm and the assurance of a veteran legislator, enjoying the camaraderie. He capitalized on his assets as a political newcomer, conversing and bantering with his colleagues without regard to political affiliation. Thus, he won friends in all factions and made no unnecessary enemies.

Burdick's hopes of running for governor or the U.S. Congress in the 1910 election were thwarted by the Progressive decision-makers, who nominated him instead for the lieutenant governor's position. Burdick reluctantly agreed, and he won by a margin of almost two to one, serving with Democrat John Burke, who was elected to his third term as governor.

As lieutenant governor and president of the Senate, Burdick demonstrated masterful leadership, outmaneuvering the Stalwarts, and, with the one exception of gaining women the vote, saw that the Senate ratified the Progressive agenda, including the enactment of an anti-pass bill, that stopped McKenzie and the railroad companies from offering free transportation as a bribe.⁴ It became illegal for them to thus influence convention delegates, members of the executive branch of the government, legislators, judges, local government officials, and newspapers.⁵

Usher Burdick fully expected 1912 to be his year to run for the governor's seat, particularly when John Burke chose not to run for a fourth term. Once again, however, as in 1910, Burdick was overconfident and failed to take advantage of opportunities to seek actively the nomination. He and his wife, Emma, and their two-year-old son Quentin had

moved from Munich to Williston in November 1910, and Burdick was busy establishing his law office and buying and selling horses. The financial problems that had developed as a result of his long absences from home and work preoccupied him, and he neglected to attend the Progressive meetings held to discuss the upcoming elections. Party leaders still thought of Burdick as a newcomer, and they looked to someone with more experience who might be more inclined to consult them as a better choice for the governorship. After months of political maneuvering in meetings, conferences, and the newspapers, particularly editor A.T. Cole's Progressive newspaper, the *Search-Light*, Burdick's hopes for the governorship were dashed by the Progressive leadership. They overlooked his popularity and political appeal and chose instead Charles A. Buchanan as their gubernatorial candidate, endorsing Burdick again for lieutenant governor.⁶ Burdick refused the endorsement and decided to run for Congress. However, business in Pennsylvania interfered with his plans.

In April 1912 Burdick chose to turn his hand to local politics and, in a last-minute decision, filed for the post of Williams County state's attorney.⁷ Burdick's easy election allowed him the security of a regular monthly salary, the opportunity to build up his business enterprises in Williston, and the comfort of being home with Emma, Quentin, and their newborn son, Eugene.

The Progressives' Buchanan lost to the Stalwart-endorsed candidate, Louis B. Hanna, a former congressman and banker from Fargo. Hanna held positions that made him attractive to North Dakota voters: he advocated women's suffrage and prohibition, had the support of the *Grand Forks Herald*, which was now a Stalwart paper, and he supported Theodore Roosevelt and his "Bull Moose" Party in the presidential election. His victory put McKenzie and the Republican Stalwarts in a position to block Progressive reforms, but, within four years of McKenzie's 1912 return to power, the Progressive and Stalwart factions were finished as organized entities. Farmers were angered by the Stalwarts' reactionary policies,

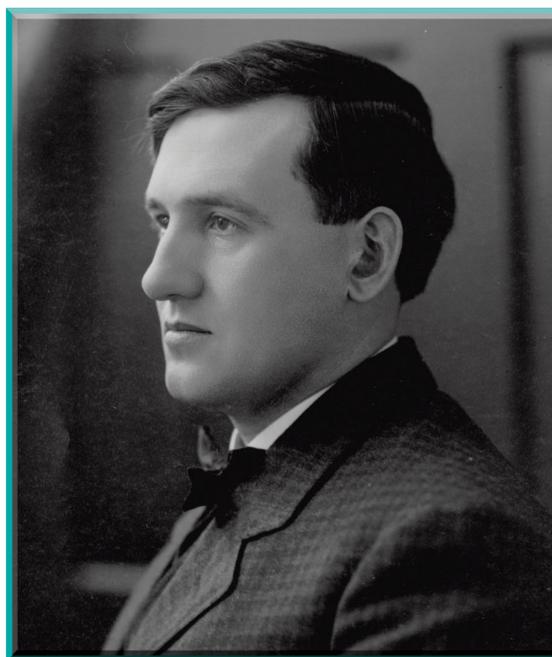


Figure 2. Usher Burdick was first elected to public office in 1906 and his political career would span the next 50 years. (SHSND E0138-2)

particularly their opposition to the building of a terminal elevator. Led by A.C. Townley, until then a political unknown, they revolted and brought new leaders and policies to the fore, completely altering the factional alignment of North Dakota politics. Burdick's public career did not end until 1959, but never again would he have such an open opportunity to become the dominating political force in North Dakota as he had in the election year of 1912. For Burdick, the lost opportunity to run for the governor's seat was a political misfortune; for the Republican Progressive faction, it proved to be fatal.

In 1913 a Progressive problem and Usher Burdick's major concern was that Alexander McKenzie again controlled the sitting governor, **Louis B. Hanna**. As Buchanan's leadership faltered, Burdick felt pressure from within himself and from Progressive leaders to challenge Hanna, despite the difficulties. Not only did Hanna have the advantage of incumbency, he could also plead he was entitled by tradition to two terms. There seemed little doubt that Burdick would have easily defeated Hanna in

1912 had he had the chance; defeating incumbent Governor Hanna appeared a formidable task in 1914.

Progressives did not wait long before approaching Burdick, calling on him in early 1913 and urging him to declare his gubernatorial candidacy. Seemingly willing but not eager, he led them to believe he would accept a unanimous endorsement, provided the platform adhered to Progressive principles.⁸

Burdick understood his popularity with Progressive leaders, yet he felt an obligation to the cause. In a letter to Torger Sinness, his mentor and former teacher, he commented “. . . no one in the Progressive bunch. . . believes one of their men can be nominated over Hanna, consequently they are leaving a clear field for me.” He speculated further that, “The Progressive movement ought to be represented and the idea of winning ought not be the paramount thought of the candidate.” In other words, it was his duty to run even if the obstacles to winning seemed forbidding.⁹

On January 22, 1914, the Progressives held a conference in Fargo. The *Courier-News* reported that some of Burdick’s friends advised him against accepting the endorsement, feeling that the second-term tradition for North Dakota governors would insure his defeat. Others asserted he had a chance to win but, if defeated, he could be certain of election in 1916 when there would be no incumbent, since Hanna was expected to run for the Senate in 1916.¹⁰ Sinness feared the outcome and wrote another Burdick admirer, “I do not consider him [Burdick] as strong as he was in 1912,” adding that he thought Burdick could win nevertheless. He observed further that the governorship was not worth fighting for: “I . . . believe [that the governorship] is a stepping stone” [to the Senate].¹¹ Privately, Burdick opposed being a gubernatorial candidate but publicly indicated that if the Progressives would endorse no other, he would make the race. He seems to have concluded that the governorship lay in his future, if not in 1914, then in 1916.

Despite doubts about the Republican Party, Burdick determined to spend what was necessary to make the best race possible. He asked Sinness, now an attorney in Minnewaukon, to be his state-wide campaign manager and wrote, “It may take some little money but I will simply sell off my horses [to finance the campaign] if I have to.”¹²

Burdick launched a campaign more vigorous than the state had experienced. He started out with a speech at Grand Forks, followed by speaking appearances in Hillsboro, Fargo, and points west on the Northern Pacific Railroad. He then took grueling tours of smaller towns in almost every region of the state, traveling by auto and train and giving from four to eight speeches a day. In 1914 North Dakota roads were prairie trails, two tracks worn into the ground from repeated usage, so transportation by car could still be hazardous and time-consuming.

His political platform was built of Progressive and Populist planks. Attending a Northwood Equity meeting of farmers with **George Loftus**, the leader of Equity, at his side, he pledged support of the Equity proposal for a **state-owned terminal elevator** in Minnesota or Wisconsin.¹³ Three other of his planks were Populist in nature. He advocated state laws lowering the legal contract rate of interest and commercial rates of interest and creating loan associations or land banks that would make long-term loans to farmers at an interest rate of 4½ percent.

The Populist inclination was a thread that ran through Burdick’s entire public career. A contemporary noted Burdick’s sympathy for the underclass and in so doing described the theme that dominated Burdick’s entire public career:

Burdick . . . will make a campaign that will open the eyes of the stalwarts. . . . He has a heart as big as an ox . . . with keen, honest sympathy for all those who earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow. He is no ‘grandstander,’ and he is no polished politician. He is just one of nature’s honest noblemen.¹⁴

The Paramount State Issues



By Usher L. Burdick

**Candidate for the Republican Nomination for Governor of
North Dakota at the Primaries June 28, 1916**

"The Man Who Knows No Boss"



*Issued by State Headquarters Burdick for Governor Clubs
GRAND FORKS, NORTH DAKOTA*

Courtesy of Eugene A. Burdick

Figure 3. This 1916 campaign poster promotes the Republican nomination of Usher L. Burdick for governor. (Courtesy of SHSND)

Burdick's other proposals resembled typical Progressive reforms. They included supporting the short ballot, recall elections, **direct legislation** (the power of the people to initiate and refer measures), strict enforcement (prohibition of alcohol sales and consumption), women's suffrage, local enforcement of hunting and fishing laws (abolition of state game wardens), stricter corrupt practice laws, support for the state tax commission (to collect from large corporations and the wealthy), the single tax (tax on land but not improvements), and good roads (state and county aid to townships).¹⁵

On the campaign trail, Burdick emphasized Governor Hanna's wealth and its influence upon his public policies. He described Hanna as an honest, upright, benevolent, moral man, but, as the owner of 102 quarters of land and president or director of thirty-nine banks, he belonged to the wealthy class and looked at public policies from the standpoint of the rich.¹⁶

The daily newspapers presented nearly a united front against Burdick. Some newspapers, except when Burdick campaigned in their immediate area, blocked out any Burdick coverage. The *Grand Forks Herald* gave Burdick's first address favorable coverage, but, from that time forward, its news columns weighed heavily in favor of Hanna. On one occasion, William Langer challenged a front-page *Herald* story that stated the Progressives leaders met secretly and were giving up.¹⁷ In reply, the *Herald* asserted the story was true, but stated the source was confidential. Whether a fabrication, rumor, or an actual fact, the *Herald* story damaged Burdick's candidacy.¹⁸

For Burdick, the *Fargo Courier-News* was a major disappointment. In past years, it consistently supported Progressives and, in 1912, had supported Buchanan and opposed Hanna. It strongly supported prohibition. The paper, at first, remained neutral in the Burdick-Hanna contest. Whether it was pressure from Fargo advertisers or Burdick's stand on prohibition, the *Courier-News* shifted from its Progressive position of previous elections and endorsed Hanna, the hometown candidate. As

a former Progressive supporter, the paper became one of Burdick's most effective opponents.¹⁹

The terminal elevator question did not become an issue in the campaign because Hanna seemed to favor the Equity proposal. As the law required him to do, he had appointed a commission to make plans for the terminal elevator. During the campaign, he listed "the investigation of the terminal grain markets with a view to State erection of its elevators for its own people" as one of his accomplishments. In a June 6 editorial, the *Bismarck Tribune* stated it "had taken up the Equity movement because it believes that it is full of possibilities for great good." The editorial also denounced the grain trade in righteous, populist rhetoric. Hanna's statements in seeming support of the Equity terminal elevator, and favorable articles about Equity in Stalwart newspapers soothed Equity leaders and kept the terminal elevator from becoming a major campaign issue.²⁰

Stalwart leaders feared Burdick's campaigning ability and planned for a hard-fought election. Stalwarts developed a strategy aimed at the bloc votes and those Progressives for whom efficient government was a major issue. The three **bloc votes** were German-Americans, Norwegian-Americans, and the prohibitionists. With Hanna, an ideal candidate to carry out their plans, they successfully wooed or neutralized each bloc and made surprising converts among the men who founded the Progressive movement.

Alexander McKenzie took steps to manage the German-American vote. **John H. Wishek**, a veteran Stalwart and long-time associate of McKenzie, was president of the North Dakota German-American Alliance. He was the political boss, and the German voters responded with a high degree of unanimity to his suggestions. McKenzie knew that Hanna's law enforcement actions as governor and his speech to the national Anti-Saloon League convention in Cincinnati had offended German-American voters. McKenzie invited John Wishek to a conference in the St. Paul Merchants Hotel, where he lived, and suggested to him that the German-American Alliance

create a political party and call it the Personal Liberty League. It could nominate candidates for governor and lieutenant governor and possibly other offices. By doing so, he could serve the interests of Stalwarts by keeping votes from going to Burdick and, at the same time, demonstrate how much political clout the North Dakota German-Americans possessed if they chose to use it. Wishek's son, Max, later recalled, "It was believed that Hanna was weak in the German counties and father was induced by McKenzie to run for governor to help Hanna. . . ." ²¹ John Wishek came home and organized the Personal Liberty League. He was chairman of the nominating committee and chose himself as the nominee for governor and Henry Sagehorn as lieutenant governor. ²²

The primary election of 1914 happened to occur during Norway's centennial celebration, a coincidence that strengthened Hanna's position with Norwegian voters in the state. Presumably at the request of North Dakota Norwegian-American leaders, Representative Treadwell Twitchell introduced a noncontroversial bill to appropriate \$10,000 for a North Dakota exhibit at the Norwegian centennial. The resolution provided that the governor be chairman of the exhibit planning commission. The bill passed and Governor Hanna signed it on March 20, 1913. ²³

Events moved so rapidly that it appears they had been planned before Representative Twitchell introduced the legislation. The original plan for the exhibit developed quickly. A model of a typical North Dakota Norwegian-American farm, paid for by the \$10,000 appropriation, was finished and shipped to Christiania, Norway, in the fall of 1913 for the centennial celebration that lasted from May 17 to August 31, 1914.

Less than a month after Hanna signed the appropriation bill into law, the *Fargo Fram*, a Norwegian language newspaper, quoted Hanna as stating that a statue of Lincoln would be cast and that he would personally present it to King Haakon of Norway on July 4, 1914, accompanied by a contingent of North Dakota citizens. ²⁴

The dimensions of the Norway project had grown, and the political dividends became obvious. ²⁵ Hanna's tour met with a favorable response from Norwegian-Americans. Those who could afford it made up most of his delegation, and those who were invited but couldn't go were flattered with the invitation. Ironically, Hanna's most effective campaign to win the Norwegian vote was to leave North Dakota and the primary campaign, thus avoiding a confrontation with Burdick that he feared.

Burdick and Sinness were stymied. Sinness worked frantically with the Norwegian press but found his efforts nearly fruitless, and, despite his efforts, Norwegian voters had made no decided shift towards Burdick. ²⁶ Hanna's trip to Norway was an effective manipulation of an ethnic bloc of voters and a plausible reason for avoiding a confrontation with Burdick.

The other two thrusts of the Stalwarts became most apparent in the last two weeks of their "stop Burdick" campaign. Winning converts among Progressive leaders and their cohorts went hand in hand with a significant move of prohibition votes from Burdick to Hanna. The Stalwarts successfully wooed two significant former Progressive leaders, which helped defeat Burdick. Joseph Devine, a former governor and a current member of the Progressive executive committee launched a speaking tour on behalf of Hanna that hurt Burdick. Hanna's prize convert, however, was the founder and leader of the North Dakota Progressive movement, George B. Winship. On April 5, 1914, a signed *Grand Forks Herald* article by Winship declared his endorsement of Hanna:

In a strictly political way, I have not been closely associated with Governor Hanna. He has not been progressive enough for me along many lines of political activity and he seemed unwilling to accept the responsibilities of leadership; but I regard his administration of state office as eminently progressive, efficient, and economical. Governor Hanna is a trained businessman, and having made good in his affairs,

he brought to the state an equipment in business training such as the state needs in the executive office . . .²⁷

He elaborated further and added that Burdick and Wishek were well qualified but “no match for Hanna.” He equated Burdick, the reformer, with Wishek, a veteran associate of the McKenzie machine, and belittled both of them. From the founder and, until his retirement, the moving force of the North Dakota Progressive League, this seemed treason. Even if he had reservations about Burdick, it dimmed Winship’s record to enter the fray against one who had so long labored with him in the reform movement. Only a short four years earlier, Winship’s *Herald* appealed to Burdick’s loyalty to the Progressive movement and pressured him into running for governor.²⁸ Burdick viewed Winship as an ingrate and a double-crosser. Winship may have sensed that what he did appeared less than fair. He commented apologetically that he had not been captured by the Stalwarts and would support Woodrow Wilson for reelection and John Burke, if he ran, for the U.S. Senate. How effectively Hanna had courted Winship became apparent on the day the *Kristianiafjord* sailed from New York for Norway. George B. Winship’s name was prominent among the passengers listed in the news reports.²⁹

Once Hanna won Winship’s support, it was easier to persuade other Progressive leaders to desert Burdick. Winship was the leader who brought temperance-minded Progressives into the Hanna flock.

Burdick’s campaign continued under difficult circumstances. He had been denounced and belittled by the founder of the North Dakota Progressive League, and he was campaigning against an empty chair. When Burdick criticized Hanna’s policies, the governor’s supporters charged that it was unfair to criticize a man whose official duties prevented him from being in North Dakota to defend himself.³⁰

Prohibition was not an issue in either Hanna’s or Burdick’s campaign until about ten days before

the June 24 primary election. In the final days before the primary, it became the central issue, eclipsing the economic issues, such as interest rates, that Burdick raised. Stalwart daily newspapers made prohibition the issue by printing editorials about the danger of dividing the anti-saloon vote. They maintained that if the “wets” supported John Wishek and the “drys” split their vote evenly between Hanna and Burdick, Wishek could win. They admitted that Burdick’s position on this issue was identical to Hanna’s, but maintained that Burdick was up against an incumbent and could not be elected. The nub of their argument was that the next governor would be either Hanna or Wishek, and that a vote for Burdick merely strengthened Wishek’s chances.

Election day was approaching, and little time remained to counter this sudden appearance of prohibition as an issue. The Burdick forces sent out a press release quoting a statement by **Robert M. Pollock**, one of the promoters of **North Dakota prohibition** and the immediate past president of the North Dakota Progressive League. He declared, “There is not a man in the state who will better serve the cause of temperance and law enforcement than Usher L. Burdick.” The Stalwarts did not disagree. Their argument was not against Burdick’s position on the prohibition issue; they were asserting that Burdick was unelectable and votes given to him might permit Wishek to defeat Hanna.³¹

Events moved rapidly. The “Wishek will bring back the saloons” campaign continued, and the **“Burdick Special”** train nearly circled the state. The news stories about Hanna’s tour of Norway appeared daily. In Fargo, on the Sunday before the election, rumors circulated in the Fargo churches alleging that Burdick, was “a drunken cowboy,” who beat up his wife and children during alcoholic binges. This sleazy slander cost Burdick many Cass County votes. It was an unjust and unfounded attack. Burdick was virtually a teetotaler and there was no support for the accusation of domestic violence.³²



Figures 4 & 5. The Patterson Hotel in downtown Bismarck was the site of much of the political wheeling and dealing that went on in state government in the early twentieth century. (SHSND 0070-41) **INSET Alexander McKenzie**, pictured here in 1886, had a fistfight with a Democratic opponent in the hotel lobby after the 1906 election. (SHSND A2279)

The election returns reveal the hollowness of the **“stop Wishek” campaign**. Hanna’s final vote total was 26,261; Burdick’s, 22,195, and Wishek’s total vote was but 12,745.³³ If McKenzie had not persuaded Wishek to run as a “spoiler,” it appears that Burdick would have defeated Hanna, and North Dakota’s political history would have been decidedly different.

In a sportsmanlike manner, Burdick reacted to defeat. “If I cannot be a good loser, I would not be a good governor” was the substance of his comment. He compared the campaign to a football game, “We had the ball near the goal line when time was called.”³⁴ Even though he lost the election, his prestige appeared undamaged, and he seemed assured of a bright political future. Progressives and neutral observers felt he had waged a magnificent campaign doing well in an uphill fight. Incumbency and the two-term tradition defeated him, and, if he were to run for governor in 1916, he would not have those handicaps, and he felt confident he could win.

After the election, Burdick turned his attention to a new source of income. World War I had begun in the summer of 1914, interrupting Hanna’s planned European vacation tour, but creating an opportunity for Burdick. There was a demand for horses, which he shipped to the Twin Cities and other commercial centers and sold to procurement officers at handsome profits. The money earned in the horse market replenished what he had spent in the 1914 campaign, which relieved him of his financial worries and offered contentment for the Burdick family.

Burdick was happy. He fought the good fight and remained true to his ideals. Part of his strength lay in his belief in the reform movement. Waging the fight against opponents of reform, even though he lost, was fulfilling. As did most Progressives, he believed the system was perfectible.

Equity members realized that a 1915 legislative hurdle lay ahead, but they felt the overwhelm-

ing majorities ratifying the two constitutional amendments would insure favorable legislative action. That the Board of Control, which the commission had charged with planning a terminal elevator, would refuse to carry out its mandate seemed improbable and may never have occurred to Equity leaders or to North Dakota farmers.

The election of 1914 did nothing to dampen farmer optimism relating to the future of a terminal elevator for North Dakota. Both Burdick and Governor Hanna had supported it during the campaign; Stalwart newspapers carried articles that favorably mentioned Equity and other cooperative movements. Farmers paid little heed to a newspaper article questioning Hanna's sincerity. Many farmers gave more attention to social and ethnic issues raised during the campaign.

Equity leaders knew that the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce was doing everything possible to destroy their cooperative marketing efforts. However, George Loftus had the support of some St. Paul businessmen who wanted a terminal elevator built in their city instead of in Minneapolis. Equity members were reluctant to believe post-election rumors of potential betrayal.

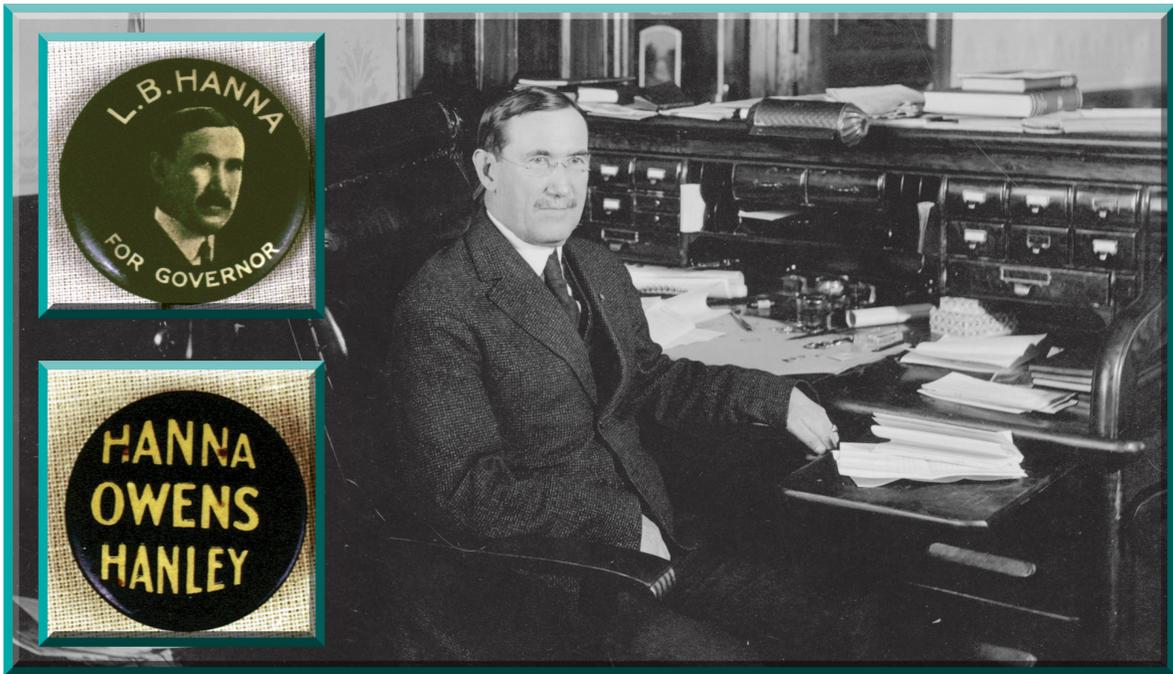
The Board of Control, made up of Hanna appointees, did not recommend a site or present plans for a terminal elevator as the legislature had directed. Instead, they reported that their investigation discovered that it would be inadvisable to build a state-financed terminal elevator and presented a 600-page brief that explained the reasons for ignoring the legislative mandate. In anticipation of trouble, Loftus had called an Equity state convention to meet in Bismarck at the time the legislature was to consider the report.³⁵

Events during this Equity convention reached an emotional peak. A march of five hundred farmers for a mile and a half through the snow from the downtown hotels to the capitol heightened the tension but failed to impress the legislators.

Sensing that the legislature was going to act unfavorably, Loftus convened an evening session where he called the roll of the legislature, identifying how each legislator was expected to vote. Equity members occasionally responded angrily as Loftus named and commented upon a wavering legislator or a known opponent of Equity. Anti-Equity visitors at the meeting interrupted Loftus, making caustic remarks that increased the resentment of Equity members. It became an agrarian article of faith that, at some time during the session, Representative Treadway Twitchell told Equity members to **“go home and slop the hogs and leave the making of laws to us.”** The legislature resented the roll call, and it stiffened their opposition to the Equity terminal elevator project. Enough Progressives joined the Stalwarts to decisively defeat Equity by voting against the terminal elevator.

Interpretations are many as to why Loftus deliberately alienated legislators. Some maintained that he wanted controversy and did not wish a terminal elevator to be built. Others observed that he was hot-tempered and simply lost control of himself. One very convincing explanation argues that Loftus recognized that the 1915 legislature, influenced by the commission's report, would not act favorably on the terminal elevator. Hoping to focus the anger on the wayward legislators in the next election, he took the risk of losing a few votes. From his standpoint, legislators who could be bamboozled were as useless as outright opponents. He skillfully set the stage for winning Equity support in the 1916 election.

At Loftus's invitation, Burdick had gone to Bismarck and spoken to the Equity members, making a major effort to dissuade wayward Progressives from helping Hanna's effort to defeat the terminal elevator. He was distressed at how easily some of his staunchest allies in the reform movement had been deceived by Hanna's arguments. Burdick was concerned, too, that Equity members vowed to give no quarter. They were determined to defeat competent legislators who, except for this one instance, had fought the good fight for the reform



Figures 6, 7, & 8. Louis B. Hanna (pictured here in 1917), was elected governor of North Dakota in 1912 and 1914. He had previously served three terms in the state legislature, was chairman of the Republican state central committee (1902–1908), and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives for two terms (1908 and 1910). (SHSND A2471) **INSET TOP** This political button is from one of Hanna's two gubernatorial races. (SHSND 2793) **INSET BOTTOM** This button is from the 1926 Republican primary campaign in which the Republicans named were all defeated: James M. Hanley, Morton County, for governor; William G. Owens, Williams County, for U.S. Congress; and Hanna, for the U.S. Senate. (SHSND 1990.113.15)

movement. After several days, feeling that he had done all he could, Burdick returned to Williston. He knew which way the wind was blowing, and defeat of the terminal elevator bill did not surprise him.³⁶

There were others who recognized the anger and discontent that Loftus had aroused and decided to take advantage of it. **A.E. Bowen**, **A.C. Townley**, and other ex-Socialist organizers observed the rebuffs to the Equity movement. They conceived of a plan to organize farmers, charge them membership fees, and use the fees to continue organizing. The strategy of the organization was to capture the majority party in the primary election and the state government in the general election.

Thus began the **Nonpartisan League** (NPL). Townley became the dynamo of the organiz-

ing process and continued to dominate the movement during its glory years. The platform of the new faction included state-owned terminal elevators, flour mills, banks, packing houses, home building associations, a state bonding fund, and a state-owned compulsory hail insurance program. Between the March adjournment of the 1915 legislative session and the following December, he persuaded between 30,000 and 40,000 farmers to join. The timing was perfect to take advantage of the farmer anger about the rejection of the terminal elevator. Townley himself admitted that he could not have had the success he did in a previous year or a year later. He stated that the crop [of discontent] was planted and ready for harvesting, and “I harvested it.” In an interview, he described in detail his early success in selling memberships and then said, “I stopped selling memberships and began training organizers.”³⁷

Nonpartisan League

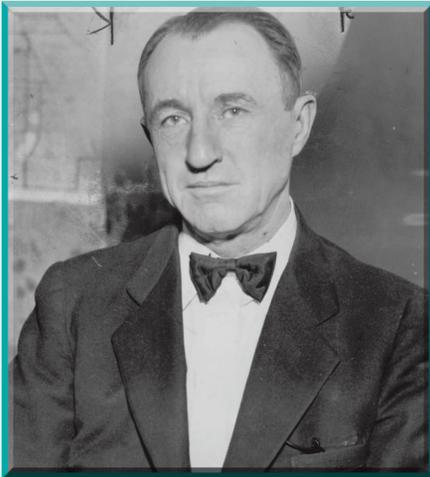


Figure 9. Arthur C. Townley was one of the founders and a leading figure of the Nonpartisan League. (SHSND 0823-04)

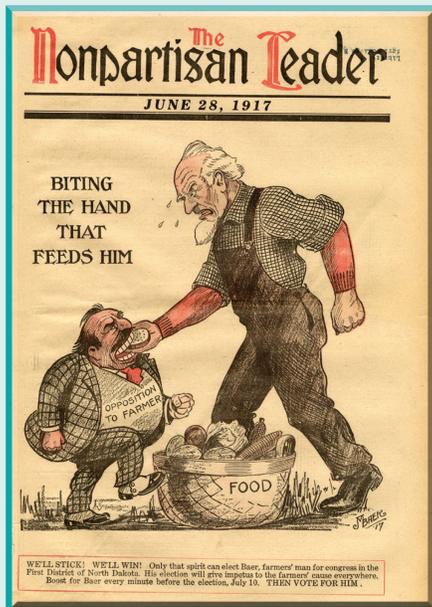


Figure 10. In 1916, the NPL began publishing its own newspaper, the *Nonpartisan Leader*, to promote the League's purpose, plans, and current politics. (Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo)

The Nonpartisan League (NPL), born in 1915, united progressives, reformers, and radicals behind a platform that called for many progressive reforms, ranging from improved state services and full suffrage for women to state ownership of banks, mills and elevators, and insurances. Led by A. C. Townley, the NPL used the primary election to take control of the Republican Party in 1916, dominated all state government by 1918, and enacted its program in 1919. Its administration, headed by Governor Lynn J. Frazier, instituted many reforms in state government; among them were reorganization of state services, expansion of educational services, development of health care agencies, and improved regulation of public services and corporations. However, its core program generated fierce opposition fueled by funds from out-of-state corporations; those interests used every means to obstruct the NPL program, including lawsuits and extreme propaganda.

The anti-NPL movement gained strength during and after World War I. Charging that the NPL's leaders, many of whom were former Socialists, were opponents of American participation in World War I, the anti-NPL forces united in late 1918 into the Independent Voter's Association. Harsh political infighting followed. The IVA attacked on many fronts, rapidly sowing disunity within the NPL and splitting the coalition of cooperative groups that had helped support the League. Economic distress caused by the precipitous decline in grain prices after World War I and a drought in western North Dakota helped diminish NPL support. In 1920, the IVA took control of one legislative house and in 1921 forced a recall election that deposed Governor Frazier and other members of the Industrial Commission that governed state-owned industries. The first NPL era, one that significantly altered North Dakota government, had ended.

The NPL left an indelible mark on the state. The Bank of North Dakota at Bismarck, opened in 1919, has become a large and powerful economic force; the State Mill and Elevator at Grand Forks, completed in 1922, provided a market for grain and a source of feed and seed; the state hail insurance program benefitted many farmers until its elimination in the 1960s. Perhaps most importantly, the NPL established an insurgent tradition in the state that blurred party lines for four decades, and both the League and the IVA elevated a generation of leaders to power. Each official recalled in 1921, for example, later regained public office.

Organizing was done quietly among farmers by dozens of individuals working on a commission basis, many of them with experience in organizing for the **Socialist Party**. When townspeople became aware of the activity, they at first spoke of it as the farmers' movement. Townley chose Non-partisan League as the name of the new organization, emphasizing that they cared not which party they captured so long as that party enabled them to gain control of North Dakota's government. No one but farmers could join, and the organizers cautioned members not to talk about the organization with townsfolk. Not until the early weeks of 1916 did the press recognize that the NPL might be a factor in the coming election.

Even then, Burdick remained unaware of the new movement's potential power. He was traveling widely as the president of the state livestock association, vice president of the North Dakota chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution, and an officer of a national horse breeders association. As always, he gave much time for public speaking, in addition to managing his farm and ranch lands. What time remained was absorbed by his burgeoning law practice. Preoccupied by his work, he let political matters drift until 1916.³⁸

Because Burdick appeared to hold the inside track in the 1916 gubernatorial race, reporters constantly sought to question him. He took care to banter with reporters and avoid outrightly declaring his candidacy, but his response to a Twin City newspaper story changed this situation. The newspaper reported that Burdick and **U.S. Senator Porter McCumber** had an alliance. Burdick was to support McCumber for the Senate and, in return, McCumber was to back Burdick for governor. Shown the story, Burdick dismissed it, saying, "if I ever mixed up in that fight [,] I would be a [senatorial] candidate myself."

This last joking comment became a serious mistake. Immediately, rumors circulated that he planned to run for the Senate, which, Burdick worried, might offend McCumber supporters. While on a Chicago trip, Burdick became alarmed, and when

the train he was riding reached Devils Lake, en route to Williston, he issued a press release:

Recent newspaper articles have created the impression that I am a candidate for United States Senator. I wish to correct this report. I am a candidate for the Republican nomination for governor . . . I am entering the campaign as a Republican, basing my candidacy upon my record in the legislature and will later publish the platform upon which I seek the nomination.³⁹

He had declared his candidacy and planned to write the platform. Instead of rejoicing at having a viable candidate, those who dominated the Progressive conferences resented his action.

An impasse developed. Burdick would not ask the Progressives for endorsement, and the Progressives saw no need to act, inasmuch as Burdick had nominated himself. Burdick felt they had no other alternative than to endorse him and contentedly waited. He was quoted out of context several times, and his remarks were interpreted to mean that he did not need endorsement. This was construed as meaning that without the Progressives' endorsement, he could run as a consensus candidate. The situation is described by the *Search-Light*:

The Progressive Republicans have their . . . bosses and . . . [they] are [insisting] that to their care shall be committed the selection and control of nominees. Some of the . . . bosses would have Burdick come begging at their doors for permission to be a candidate for governor, . . . Burdick will not do this.⁴⁰

The *Search-Light* went on to say that there were individuals "trying to knife him [Burdick] and put him out of the race." As a result, the first 1916 Progressive conference failed to act aggressively. Held in Fargo during January, neither Burdick nor Sinness attended the conference, an indication of Burdick's confidence and of the disdain he felt for Progressive kingmakers.

The conference met and, after three days of discussion, adjourned without endorsing a slate of candidates. One of the reasons given for nonaction was Burdick's alleged request for no endorsement. Langer wrote Sinness:

I still believe that it was a big mistake on the part of yourself and Mr. Burdick that [neither] you nor himself were present. . . . It strikes me that if you and Mr. Burdick are serious about electing him, you certainly ought to do something else . . . than trying law suits.⁴¹

He added that Burdick's Minot interview in which he was reported as stating that he did not wish endorsement caused the conference to withhold its backing, but that most Progressive Republicans would support Burdick anyway. In this same letter, he also asked Sinness to encourage Burdick to come to Morton County and give a few speeches, and he lamented Burdick's failure to address a meeting at Leith as scheduled. "Had he been there, he would surely have carried this county. There were over three thousand people present."⁴²

At the time of the Fargo conference, townspeople were beginning to become aware of the Nonpartisan League, but few realized its potential political power. Progressives thought of themselves as agents of change and considered the Stalwarts as supporters of the status quo. They could not envision that a farmers' group could start from scratch and in a few months become a major factor in state politics, strong enough to defeat the Progressives and Stalwarts. They could not imagine that most of the individual members of the Progressives and Stalwarts would become allies in a newly constituted conservative organization, its sole purpose to resist the changes sought by the NPL. From 1916 to 1934, the two factions in the Republican Party were no longer the Progressives and the Stalwarts, but rather the NPL and their conservative opponents, the **Independent Voters Association (IVA)**.

There were a few Progressives who, in 1916, foresaw the future and joined the NPL, such as William Langer, Thomas Hall, Carl Kositzky, Neil McDonald, A.T. Cole, and William Lemke. How did it happen that Burdick, the most prominent agrarian reformer of the North Dakota Progressive movement, did not sense the mood of the farmers? Key supporters warned him. Frank E. Packard,



Figure 11. Boys dressed as clowns for a Nonpartisan League picnic, July 4, 1916. (SHSND 32-WD-13-8)

who had been one of his strongest supporters in the 1914 campaign, told him that he could not be elected governor unless he made some arrangement with those who controlled the thirty to forty thousand members of the NPL.⁴³

Burdick's misunderstanding of the situation had many causes, and one can only speculate as to the determining factors. For Burdick, the rise of the NPL became a hazard and not an opportunity. He felt little responsibility to the Progressive organization. His loyalty was to those many Progressives with whom he had worked shoulder to shoulder. Defection of Burdick to the NPL would be a greater blow to them than that of any other one individual. Loyalty was one of his distinctive qualities. Even if other factors did not influence him, he would have found it difficult to desert old comrades.

Burdick based his decision on the faulty premise that no one without statewide name recognition could lead any faction to victory. Failing to realize that the intense loyalty of NPL members would cause them to vote for all NPL endorsees, Burdick felt secure. Too, he had confidence in his campaigning ability. With his statewide recognition as a champion of the farmer and his ability to move crowds, he felt certain he could bring most farmers to disregard NPL loyalties and rally to his cause.

Burdick's reservations about the NPL had a substantive base, some of them borne out by subsequent events. He had favored the building of a state-owned terminal elevator, but he expected it to be leased to Equity. He did not favor state operation of the business. Nor did he favor the state ownership and operation of many other enterprises as advocated by the NPL. His populism also differed from that of the NPL. In his view, local bankers, merchants, and other middlemen were helpless tools of the eastern capitalists. The NPL considered the resident middlemen, bankers, and townspeople (laborers excepted) the enemy. The NPL fostered hostility between Main Street and farmers that equaled or exceeded any agrarian movement in American history.

This was not Burdick's style. Even in his attacks on Louis Hanna, Burdick was civil. Burdick, in 1914, did not demean Hanna or foster hate. NPL vindictiveness toward legislators who voted against the terminal elevator bothered him. Burdick thought they should be judged on their entire record. Burdick also criticized Nonpartisan Leaguers for not placing a prohibition plank in their platform.

He did advocate two positive government actions. A stringent U.S. grain grading law, he felt, would do away with many of the abuses that cost North Dakota farmers tens of millions of dollars each year. Also, he supported a federal law forbidding the sale of grain except for delivery. He argued that this would prevent the buying and selling of futures contracts and the manipulation of market prices.⁴⁴ The trade in "phantom" bushels of wheat that did not actually exist at the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce forced the price of wheat down by as much as fifty cents a bushel. This gave buyers an unfair advantage over the North Dakota farmers who were selling wheat.

One favorable factor in this election was President Wilson's call for the North Dakota National Guard to serve on the Mexican border. Progressives rejoiced that John H. Fraine, a Stalwart gubernatorial candidate and the commander of the North Dakota National Guard, would not be present to campaign, and they hoped he would withdraw his candidacy. This, he refused to do, stating that while he served in Texas, he would ask his friends to campaign for him.⁴⁵ Another factor was that, contrary to what happened in 1914, the temperance forces lined up behind Burdick, pledging their united support. They were not pleased by Fraine's stand on prohibition, while the NPL took no stand.⁴⁶

Burdick missed another opportunity. Though reputed to be the leading Progressive, he remained in Williston, practicing law and managing his farm lands, apparently unconcerned about either Progressive inaction or the NPL threat. Townley sent representatives to interview him as a possible NPL endorsee for governor. Without stating their

purpose, Townley's agents sought out Burdick. Congenial as always, Burdick expressed sympathy for farmer grievances and objectives. But he treated Townley's investigators as though he held the trump cards. He did not realize that he needed their support and that they did not need him as a candidate. Thinking that Townley was seeking his aid, he misunderstood the purpose of their visit and did not sense that he was being evaluated.

He could have bought time by asking for an interview with Townley, expressing a hope that they could sift out what they could do together for North Dakota farmers while he assessed NPL strength. When the Progressives did not endorse him for governor at their Fargo conference, he had a perfect excuse for accepting an NPL senatorial endorsement. Too confident, he made the mistake of assuming that the NPL in 1916 was a small blaze that would soon burn itself out. Townley's agents reported that Burdick, as an NPL endorsee, would have his own agenda and followers. Endorsing him, in Townley's own words, would be the same as turning the NPL over to him, so he crossed Burdick off his list of potential candidates for governor.⁴⁷

What cohesiveness North Dakota Progressives had achieved melted away as the power of the NPL became evident. The Progressives tried to repair the damage caused by the failure of the January conference to endorse Burdick and a full slate of candidates. Correspondence, telephone conversations, and several mini-meetings finally resulted in the endorsement of a ticket with Burdick their endorsee for governor.

There was one more attempt to make NPL victory certain and, at the same time, salvage Burdick's career. The NPL endorsed **Lynn J. Frazier** for governor. Frazier was an unknown farmer from Hoople whose previous political experience was as a school board member and as township supervisor. He was a strict Methodist who favored Sunday blue laws and frowned upon liquor, tobacco, and dancing.⁴⁸ Though some Progressives feared a Frazier victory, most thought Fraine was the real danger and that Frazier might draw enough votes from Burdick to elect Fraine.

These anxieties in both camps resulted in a meeting in Fargo on April 24 with a few of Burdick's friends who were consulting with NPL representatives. The proposal being considered was Burdick's withdrawal from the governor's race to run with Progressive endorsement and NPL support for the U.S. Senate, leaving Frazier with a better chance for the gubernatorial nomination. According to this plan, R.A. Nestos, a Progressive who had announced his Senate candidacy, would be asked to withdraw. This would leave a three-cornered Senate primary race between McCumber, Hanna, and Burdick (two Stalwarts and one Progressive) for the Senate seat nomination. With the Stalwart vote divided, it was argued, NPL support of Burdick for the Senate would assure his victory. Likewise, Lynn J. Frazier would easily defeat Fraine.⁴⁹

It all came to naught. After consulting some of the younger Progressives, Burdick chose to continue as the Progressive endorsee for governor. The Progressives supported Burdick and the slate of



Figure 12. Arthur C. Townley speaking to a large NPL crowd at Crosby, North Dakota, 1920s. (SHSND A2902)

candidates they had selected, stating that two or three Progressive speakers would be assigned to each county.⁵⁰ Burdick went home, still hopeful that his problems would be solved by the vigorous campaign he was conducting. NPL leaders continued their backing of Frazier for governor and made no endorsement for any candidate in the McCumber-Hanna-Nestos race for the U.S. Senate seat.

Burdick's decision appears to have removed the last chance to save his public career from the NPL onslaught and raises questions as to his judgment. His failure to recognize the changed political climate must be conceded, but there were other factors to consider. To have accepted the *quid pro quo* [change of candidates] would have meant abandoning the Progressive endorsees for other state offices, leaving them to certain defeat. As noted above, Burdick's nature was such that he might prefer losing to deserting.

Burdick may have detected a possible flaw in the proposed bargain with the NPL. Hanna, in four years as governor, had built a solid block of voter support. If Burdick and McCumber split the anti-Hanna (for Senate) vote evenly, it could happen that Hanna might win. Again, there is no evidence that this was a factor in the final decision as to whether Burdick would enter the Senate race. There are few certainties in politics, but it is difficult to see how Burdick, with the support of the NPL, could have lost the Senate contest.

Burdick waged a vigorous campaign, just as in 1914; however, he spent more time in the southern portion of the state. Beginning with a speech in his home county, he pursued the 1914 pattern of several speeches a day. He drew good crowds but soon sensed that something seemed amiss. In early May, he arrived in Jamestown after a strenuous tour through the southwest corner of the state. A news story stated that he appeared discouraged and ready to drop out of the race. He vigorously denied the report and promised to continue his campaign.

A side trip to St. Paul, for a conference with Equity leaders and a visit with George Loftus, briefly interrupted his campaign. Equity leaders expressed dismay at how completely, because of Loftus's illness, they had been removed from any influence in the NPL agrarian revolt. Loftus, on his deathbed, expressed regret that the NPL had not nominated Burdick for governor. He made a realistic appraisal of the coming election and told Burdick that Frazier would defeat him.⁵¹

Undeterred by Loftus's prediction, Burdick returned to the campaign trail. In his letters to his wife Emma, he seemed optimistic until late May. In a letter dated May 20, he broke the news to her, writing that "I think I am going to be trimmed again. The Farmers League [NPL] is strong. I don't intend to spend much more money."⁵²

Nevertheless, he campaigned through to election eve as vigorously as ever. The Burdick Special train, with the Williston band playing and parading at every major stop, just as in 1914, provided the final flourishes. Sinness predicted that the fight was between Burdick and Frazier and that a vote for John Fraine or George J. Smith, an independent candidate from Plaza, was for someone who had no possible chance. The **Frazier Victory Special** train, traveling the same route as Burdick, only counterclockwise, canceled out much of what Burdick temporarily accomplished.⁵³

On primary day, June 28, voters astonished both winners and losers. Frazier won decisively, receiving 39,246 votes to Burdick's 23,362; Fraine and Smith ran far behind.⁵⁴ The overwhelming defeat stunned Burdick and Sinness, and little was heard from either of them for some time.

Burdick's campaign tone protected him somewhat. He did call the NPL program socialistic, but in no way did he impugn the patriotism of anyone. He spoke respectfully of Frazier as an estimable person who was running on a flawed platform, and he avoided personal attacks on all NPL leaders. Given the situation, he created a minimum of ill will among Nonpartisan League members.

Before the election, Burdick had agreed to give a Fourth of July speech at Devils Lake. When he arrived, he found that the sponsors felt it necessary to invite the victorious Frazier as well. Both men delivered their addresses. They exchanged pleasantries, and Burdick congratulated Frazier on his victory and spoke in complimentary terms about the man who had bested him. He did not expect to meet Frazier in this manner so soon after his defeat, yet he handled the situation with grace and poise. Burdick's friends took this as a cue and correctly predicted that he would issue a statement of support for the NPL Republican nominees for state office in the coming November general election.

The first Nonpartisan League would dominate North Dakota for five years from 1916 through 1921, and Burdick's relationship with the organization was a minefield in which he needed to tread carefully. As a champion of agrarian causes, he found it difficult not to be a part of the NPL crusade. But there were facets of the NPL of which he disapproved. Moreover, he had chosen to oppose it, and to reverse his position and join the NPL would have been difficult even if he had desired to do so. The problem was complicated by the bitter controversies that followed the NPL victory in both the primary and general 1916 elections. The constitution must be amended, a lengthy process, to make it legal for North Dakota to engage in **government ownership of business enterprises**. The amending process required a minimum of two years, too long for the NPL to wait. NPL leaders decided to make the state legislature the equivalent of a constitutional convention by drafting House Bill 44, which, if enacted, would serve as a new constitution. The battle over this process consolidated opponents to the NPL (the former McKenzie Stalwarts and most Progressives) into an organization that became the Independent Voters Association (IVA).⁵⁵

During the early years of the NPL, Burdick responded to the situation by hunkering down. He could not bring himself to join the IVA with its shrill denunciations and accusations, and the situation did not make possible an affiliation with

the NPL, so he joined neither. Among those who were active Progressive leaders in North Dakota, Burdick may be the only one who, after 1916, remained neutral or at least did not actively participate in the fray. These were the bitterest years of North Dakota political history, and the combative Burdick remained on the sidelines, unseen and unheard. His nature made it difficult to keep out of a fight, and his neutral stance, no doubt, made him restless.

He stayed out of the presidential campaign, partly because of a real rebuff that cut to the quick. Burdick traveled to Fargo to be among leading Republicans who gathered to meet Charles E. Hughes, Republican nominee for president. Gunder Olson, a Stalwart and newly elected national committeeman, was in charge of arrangements for the Hughes visit. He excluded Burdick from the group of Republicans greeting Hughes. As leader of the Progressive faction of the North Dakota Republican Party, Burdick watched from the sidelines as other Republicans, including Frazier and Hanna, surrounded the presidential candidate.⁵⁶

The snub had consequences. Not one to grovel and push himself into a closed circle and sensitive because of his humiliating defeat, he returned to Williston without having met Hughes. In October, **William Lemke**, the chairman of the North Dakota Republican Party, asked Burdick to campaign for Hughes in the northwestern corner of the state. Burdick replied that he was not feeling well and that he would leave the task to those who had a better understanding of the issues.⁵⁷ Late election returns from those northwestern counties (Burdick's home area), especially along the Canadian border, enabled Wilson to defeat Hughes in North Dakota by a narrow margin of 1,733 votes. A switch of fewer than 900 votes would have carried the state for Hughes. A Burdick campaign tour in those counties would have made a significant difference.

If Burdick voted for Wilson in 1916 rather than Hughes, he soon regretted it. He applauded the six senators who opposed President Wilson's request



Figure 13. Arthur C. Townley addressing a Nonpartisan League meeting, probably in Glencoe, Minnesota, August 1917. (SHSND B0821)

for a declaration of war. Burdick's attitude on national policies differed from the neutral stance he took on IVA-NPL issues within the state. Readily expressing his opinion on the war, he emphasized the economic problems it caused for North Dakota farmers.

His stand as to the Nonpartisan League in the elections after 1916 is unclear. His doubt about the NPL was counterbalanced by its fight against the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce and the eastern financial interests. Intuitively, he knew that he had much in common with the NPL, but his prominence in the Progressive movement and doubts about the NPL caused him to oppose these agrarian rebels in 1916. Humbled by his defeat and hurt by the Fargo snub, he decided not to join the IVA that included many Stalwarts whom he regarded as minions of Alex McKenzie. This separated him from most other Progressives such as his friend and campaign manager Sinness, who was so appalled by the new farmers' movement that they

allied with the Alex McKenzie crowd to defeat the NPL. Other Progressives, such as Langer and Lemke, had joined the NPL, leaving Burdick isolated in his own neutral corner.

Burdick's relationship with Langer was consistent. Burdick always supported Langer when he ran as an NPL candidate and continued his support when Langer accepted IVA endorsement. In the 1916 general election, he offered to speak in Langer's behalf. Langer did not feel he needed further assistance but showed his appreciation by appointing an individual suggested by Burdick to be an assistant attorney general.⁵⁸ In ensuing elections, Burdick supported Langer by performing campaign chores and occasionally arranging for Langer to speak to Native American groups. He seldom, if ever, gave stump speeches or made himself visible on the campaign circuit.

Langer understood and accepted his unwillingness to speak. However, Sinness, chairman of an

IVA state campaign committee, fumed. A letter from IVA headquarters to a New Rockford doctor explained that “Burdick will not go outside of his own area to give speeches. I do not think he will do speaking of any kind.” Sinness sent a telegram to George Shafer of Williston, “Have been unable to get any reply from Burdick. Suggest you try and get in touch with him. Wire Answer.”⁵⁹

Every indication is that Burdick knew what he did not want to do and acted accordingly. He maintained his “hunker-down” attitude throughout the 1920 campaign and the 1921 recall election, just as he did in the 1918 NPL-IVA confrontation. His return to prominence was slow in coming. The second NPL passed him by, but the Langer-dominated third NPL endorsed and elected Burdick to Congress in 1932, reintroducing him to the political scene, this time on the national level.

Burdick’s neutrality in the NPL-IVA struggle made it possible for him to make a political comeback. The Great Depression, his leadership of the Farmers Holiday Association, and his aloofness from the IVA made him acceptable to the third NPL. Had he campaigned for the IVA in the years from 1917 to 1921, it is unlikely

he would have served twenty years in Congress or provided the catalyst that led the NPL into alliance with the Democratic Party. Neither is it likely that he could have launched his two sons, Quentin and Eugene, out on their distinguished public careers.

About the Author

Edward C. Blackorby (1911-2002) spent fifty-one years teaching, the last twenty-two years as a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, until his retirement in 1980. Dr. Blackorby earned a B.A. at Mayville State University and an M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of North Dakota. He was the author of *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* and *Prairie Populist: The Life and Times of Usher L. Burdick*.

Editor’s Note: *The previous article has been excerpted from Edward C. Blackorby’s book, Prairie Populist: The Life and Times of Usher L. Burdick, published by the North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, Fargo, and the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck in 2001.*

This article has been condensed from the original publication in *North Dakota History*, Vol. 67.3:2–23 (2000).

1. A complete summary of Alexander McKenzie’s career is found in Robert P. Wilkins, “Alexander McKenzie and the Politics of Bossism,” in *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, ed. by Thomas Howard (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 3–39; see also Waldemar E. Lillo, “The Alaskan Gold Mining Company and the Cape Nome Conspiracy” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Dakota, 1935).
2. Robert Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The National Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 3–21. The Equity Cooperative Exchange (Equity) was part of a national movement to set a minimum price for agricultural crops. Organized in ND in 1907, it shifted its focus from withholding grains from the market to establishing a marketing agency in Minneapolis. Equity members could sell grain through Minneapolis commission agents.
3. For a complete summary of the North Dakota election of 1906, see Charles N. Glaab, “John Burke and the North Dakota Progressive Movement 1906–1912” (master’s thesis, University of North Dakota, 1952); for an equally complete study of the 1907 legislative assembly session, see Augustine H. Gleason, “Tenth Legislative Assembly of North Dakota—1907” (master’s thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1975). Irwin Weeks gives considerable
- space to the earlier years of Burdick’s life, and his thesis is very helpful with data on Burdick’s role on North Dakota legislation in the period from 1906 through 1911; see Irwin Weeks, “Usher L. Burdick in Congress, 1933–44” (master’s thesis, University of North Dakota, 1971). The author is indebted to these three scholars for their primary research on this period in North Dakota history. For an account of George B. Winship’s life and his struggle with McKenzie, see Edward C. Blackorby, “George B. Winship, Progressive Journalist of the Middle Border,” in Robert Wilkins, ed., *Essays on Western History in Honor of Dr. Elwyn B. Robinson* (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota, 1970), 7–21.
4. Senate consideration of the bill to give women the right to vote is described in the *Bismarck Tribune*, February 9 and 10, 1911; see also Senate Journal, 411–412 and 460–463.
5. Glaab, “John Burke,” 52, 150–156; Weeks, “Usher L. Burdick in Congress,” 26.
6. Cole’s editorial and the Burdick letters can be found in the late summer and early fall (1911) issues of the *Search-Light*. They are difficult to read, and dates are uncertain. The *Search-Light* was published in Fargo from 1905–1917.

7. *Williston Herald*, April 4, 1912.
8. *Williston Herald*, January 18, 1914.
9. Burdick to Sinness, February 7, 1914. This letter and other Sinness correspondence, unless otherwise indicated, are found in the Torger Sinness office files that were made available to the author through the courtesy and assistance of Torger's daughter, Ruth Sinness Haugland of Devils Lake.
10. *Fargo Courier News*, January 23, 1914.
11. Sinness to Victor Wardrope, January 19, 1914.
12. Burdick to Sinness, February 7, 1914.
13. *Bismarck Tribune*, April 8, 1914.
14. Norton to Langer, January 28, 1914, Langer Papers, Orin G. Libby Collection, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota, noted hereafter as Langer Papers.
15. *Search-Light*, April 11, 1914.
16. A typical speech can be found in the *Washburn Leader* as quoted in the April 19, 1914, issue of the *Williston Herald*.
17. William Langer was born in Casselton, ND in 1886. He attended UND Law School and began practicing law in Mandan in 1911. He was elected Republican Party secretary in 1914. As an NPL candidate he was elected Attorney General in 1916, but charged the League with corruption in 1919. He served several terms as attorney general, was elected governor in 1932 and 1936. He was elected Senator in 1940 and served until his death in 1959. In 1960, his Senate seat was filled by Usher Burdick's son Quentin, a Democrat.
18. *Grand Forks Herald*, April 1 and 3, 1914.
19. *Fargo Courier News*, April 7 and June 3, 1914.
20. *Bismarck Tribune*, June 5, 1914.
21. Max Wishek to author, April 26, 1985.
22. *The Palladium*, April 30 and May 1, 1914; *Bismarck Tribune*, May 1, 1914.
23. Report of Erik Luther Williamson, a UND graduate student whom the author engaged to read the Norwegian newspapers and summarize their articles on the Hanna trip to Norway.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Grand Forks Herald*, April 5, 1914.
27. Weeks, "Usher L. Burdick in Congress," 24.
28. *Grand Forks Herald*, June 10, 1914.
29. The author studied Winship's life and considered himself, and still does, an admirer of the preretirement fighting journalist. However, he ended his research with Winship's retirement and was disillusioned when he discovered Winship's role in the events that destroyed the North Dakota Progressive League. See Blackorby, "George B. Winship."
30. *Williston Herald*, June 18, 1914; *Fargo Forum* editorial quoted in June 18, 1914, issue of *North Dakota Siftings*; *Search-Light*, June 13, 20, and 27 and July 4 and 11, 1914.
31. Quotation from *Search-Light*, printed in *Williston Herald*, March 18, 1915.
32. Regarding his father, Judge Burdick wrote, "[He] never laid a hand on me—ever. Nor did I ever see or hear of him laying a hand on Quentin, Eileen, or my mother." This view of Burdick was confirmed by visits with members of his Congressional staff. One female staffer testified to his gentle manner and considerate treatment, commenting that "big men do not have to be gruff and intimidating. He treated me as though I were his daughter."
33. Compilation of Election Returns, 1914–1928 (Bismarck: North Dakota Secretary of State, 1930).
34. *Bismarck Tribune*, June 28, 1914.
35. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 3–21.
36. Burdick and Loftus were mutual admirers and close friends. Burdick later wrote a biography of Loftus, *The Life of George Sperry Loftus, Militant Farm Leader of the Northwest* (Baltimore: Wirth Brothers, 1940). For discussion on Loftus's oratorical skills, see 52–62, 68–69, 76, 79.
37. A. C. Townley, interview, Bismarck, N. Dak., January 14, 1951.
38. *Bismarck Tribune*, March 1, 1914; *Williston Herald*, January 20 and July 16, 1914; Usher Burdick to Emma Burdick, February 2, 1915.
39. Quote from Burdick's press release, September 28 or 29, 1915.
40. *Search-Light*, October 30, 1915.
41. Langer to Sinness, February 5, 1916, Langer Papers.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Langer's letters to Burdick, written on January 12, 29, and 31, tried to alert Burdick as to the difficulties that lay ahead, Langer Papers. Packard to Burdick, dated November 15, 1915, but the letter's content makes it clear that it was written in 1916. It is a five-page letter and the reference "of from 15,000 to 30,000" comes on page four.
44. *Williston Herald*, June 8, 1915.
45. *Bismarck Tribune*, April 16 and 20, 1916; *Williston Herald*, December 9, 1916; *Search-Light*, April 21, 1916.
46. *Leeds News*, April 13, 1916.
47. Herbert Gaston, *The Nonpartisan League* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1920), 102–103.
48. Though Frazier was an unknown, he was an able and an effective campaigner. Elected governor three times, he was recalled from office in 1921 and elected U.S. Senator in 1922, and reelected in 1928 and 1934; see Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel*, 37–41.
49. *Leeds News*, April 27, 1916; *Grand Forks Herald*, April 25, 1916; *Bismarck Tribune*, April 25, 1916. The story told by the *Leeds News* gives the impression that the editor was a participant in the Fargo meeting.
50. A form letter to Progressive supporters, June 19, 1915, Langer Papers.
51. Burdick, *The Life of George Sperry Loftus*, 68–70.
52. Usher Burdick to Emma Burdick, May 16, 1916.
53. *Bismarck Tribune*, June 22, 23, 25, 1916.
54. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 75.
55. See Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel*, 75–80; also see pages 95–103 and 119–122 for a description of financial controversy between the IVA and the NPL; Edward C. Blackorby, "Political Factional Strife in North Dakota from 1920 to 1932," (master's thesis, University of North Dakota, 1938), 28–48; Edward C. Blackorby, "The Public Career of William Lemke" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Dakota, 1958), 237–242; D. Jerome Tweton, "The Anti-League Movement: IVA," in *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, 93–122.
56. *Bismarck Tribune*, August 5, 4, and 10, 1916; *Williston Herald*, September 7, 1916; Robert P. Wilkins, "North Dakota and European War, 1914–1917: A Study in Public Opinion" (Ph.D. dissertation, West Virginia University, 1954), 149.
57. Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel*, 50; Blackorby, "Public Career," 142; Burdick to Lemke, October 1916, Lemke Papers.
58. Burdick to Langer, December 30, 1916; Langer to Burdick, date missing but probably in early January of 1916, Langer Papers.
59. IVA headquarters to H.H. Hagen of Hannaford, June 14, 1920; IVA headquarters to Dr. C. W. MacLaughlin of New Rockford; Sinness to Shafer, telegram, June 2, 1916, Sinness office files.

