

The Grange in Nebraska, 1872-1911

by
R. Douglas Hurt

The Nebraska Grange was founded little more than six years after Oliver Hudson Kelly toured the South as an agent for the Department of Agriculture surveying the conditions in that war-torn region. Kelly began his tour in January, 1866, and returned to Washington in late April convinced that the depressed conditions of the southern farmers could not await the whims of politicians for relief. He was also certain that northern and southern farmers had little knowledge of each other's needs and ended his tour believing that many of the problems of all farmers stemmed from inadequate educational and social opportunities. In order to band farmers together nationwide, help restore order, and improve the cultural level of the agrarian class, Kelly began developing plans for a secret agricultural organization modeled after the Masonic Lodge. By November, 1867, his plans were nearly complete and he sent out over 300 circulars proposing the creation of such a secret agricultural association. A month later on December 4, Kelly and six associates constituted themselves the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry. Almost immediately they proceeded to organize the first subordinate Grange, Potomac No. 1, to serve as a model and school of instruction. The following year the first permanent subordinate Grange was organized in Minnesota and in February, 1869, Minnesota became the first to have a State Grange.¹

During the time that the Grange was becoming established in Minnesota the population of Nebraska was rapidly increasing. Indeed, the states of Nebraska, Kansas, and Minnesota and the Dakota Territory grew in population from about 300,000 in 1860 to nearly 1,000,000 by 1870. Most of the newcomers in this region were farmers taking advantage of the homestead law of 1862. As the rural population of Nebraska grew and the Grange deputies intensified publicity campaigns and organized farmers in surrounding states, Nebraska agrarians began to take interest in the Grange. On July 7, 1871, I. H. Painter of Harlan County wrote Kelly requesting information about the Patrons of Husbandry. Painter declared in his letter, "Our citizens are anxious to unite with anything almost that will encourage agriculture." Kelly supplied Painter with literature

quickly recognized the potential savings which Grange cooperatives offered. As a result, the anti-middleman feature of the Grange attracted more members than all other advantages combined. In early April, 1874, the Charter Oak Grange near Grant, Nebraska, had \$200 worth of groceries on stock for sale to members at 10 per cent over wholesale. The Excelsior Grange sold groceries at the same rate and dry goods at 5 per cent above wholesale; even at these prices both Granges undersold local merchants. The Charter Oak grocery business brought price-cutting retaliation from the local grocers in an attempt to lure farmers away from the Grange enterprise and destroy competition. This action led one Granger to remind his fellow Patrons to support the Grange store--an indication that not all farmers were willing to deny merchants their business if prices dropped below those at the Grange store. When Grange cooperative stores were functioning, though, savings to farmers were often substantial. Some Nebraska Patrons were able to purchase Singer sewing machines for one-fourth off the retail price; others purchased Cooper wagons which normally sold for \$140 for \$75, and one farmer bought a cultivator for \$32.50 in 1873 only to buy another the following year as a Granger for \$22.⁵

A Brownsville merchant tried to explain that retail prices were somewhat higher than prices at Grange stores because of the expense incurred from spoilage, breakage, risks on poor creditors, and stock of goods which might not be sold. But such explanation was of little avail since most Grangers believed retailers willfully overcharged them. Nemaha County businessmen attempted to win favorable Granger opinion and their business by catering to the organization in advertisements urging them to buy "Granger Cigars" and patronize the "Granger Saloon" which allegedly sold the "best liquors provided at Granger prices."⁶

Closely associated with Grange efforts to sell grocery and mereantile goods was its attempt to manufacture farm implements and thus force a price reduction on the part of the major implement manufacturers. After 1872, the desire to reduce the price of farm machinery was without a doubt a major cause for the growth of the Grange. In the early seventies the price of reapers was usually fixed at \$200 to \$225, and the Grange attempted to obtain lower prices on those machines by making volume purchases directly from the manufacturers. When these efforts failed, the Grange decided to go into the business itself and break the "Harvester Ring" by purchasing the patent rights to the Werner harvester and making arrangements to manufacture the machine in Nebraska, Iowa, and

Minnesota. The Nebraska harvester plant, located at Fremont, began production in the summer of 1874. The Grange sold its harvesters to members for \$140, cash on delivery. As a result of that enterprise, farm implement manufacturers reduced the price of harvesters all across the state, and the railroads began to grant cheaper transportation rates on eastern machinery. A parallel attempt to establish a plant for the manufacture of corn cultivators at Plattsmouth met with less success; the factory produced about twice as many cultivators than it could sell and consequently suffered a net loss totaling over \$5,000.⁷

About the same time that the Plattsmouth plant was failing, Nebraska Grangers began to accuse state agent William McCraig of using money sent to him for the purchase of machinery for his private enjoyment. In July, when the debt of the Order reached \$12,000, the State Grange removed McCraig from his position and appointed an executive committee to pay the creditors of the organization. Ironically, the Nebraska farmers who had joined the Grange in hopes of economic betterment now found themselves contributing to the state coffers in order to rectify the mistakes of their leader. Quite naturally, the *Advertiser* asked, "Does it pay to be a Granger?" Unfortunately for the Order in Nebraska many farmers answered, "No." The indebtedness of the organization was, of course, too great to be met with donations from members so the State Grange appealed to the National Grange for aid. Because the National Grange was impressed with the manufacturing efforts of the Nebraska Patrons, and because it felt that bankruptcy would have a devastating effect on the entire Order as well as allow monopolists to gloat over the failure, the executive committee granted the State Grange \$3,500 credit to help ease its financial strain. Master William B. Porter along with the other members of the state body signed a note promising repayment.⁸

Had the Nebraska farmers not suffered substantial economic loss from the 1874 grasshopper plague, Grangers might have been more vigilant over their manufacturing interests. Crop loss due to the grasshoppers was nearly total in thirty-four counties, and once again, the State Grange asked the National body for financial aid. The executive committee of the National Grange responded with a \$2,000 donation which it hoped would tide the Nebraska Grangers over until the next harvest. The State Grange distributed most of that money in the spring of 1875 for the purchase of seed. The National Grange also authorized Nebraska to draw upon the Louisiana State Grange for \$1,000 and to receive \$750 in donations

from the Ohio State Grange. When agricultural conditions were slow to improve, the National Grange granted a special \$3,500 loan to Nebraska in 1876 and canceled the previous year's note to alleviate the indebtedness of the State Grange.⁹

Still, the work of the Nebraska Grange did not totally succumb to hardship or failure. In fact, the Grange achieved one of its major goals--the drafting of a new constitution which provided for railroad regulation. This constitution, written and adopted in 1875 and modeled after the 1870 Illinois constitution (a Granger document), enabled the legislature to regulate the railroads in the state. Although the railway interests bitterly opposed the provision for railroad regulation and one Nebraskan even referred to it as the "red flag of communism," the public overwhelmingly approved the new constitution. Yet, midwestern agrarian demands for strict railroad regulation never became an overriding concern of Nebraska Grangers during the 1870's largely because railway transportation was underdeveloped in the state throughout the decade, and because the desire for railroad expansion tended to curb radical demands for controls. This is not to suggest that Nebraska Grangers turned their backs on the railroad problem; they did not. When Nebraska Grangers met in convention, they passed resolutions denouncing railroad practices in other states which served as warnings to railway companies not to introduce similar practices in Nebraska. A vigorous attack on the railroads in Nebraska did not come for nearly a decade, and in 1890 the People's party, not the Grange, provided the leadership for railroad regulation.¹⁰

The failure of the manufacturing enterprises, insufficient capital, over-expansion, the grasshopper plague, and an inadequate money supply that prevented Grangers from patronizing their own stores all contributed to the dissolution of the Nebraska Grange. Dissatisfaction with the Order was clearly evident less than three years after the founding of the state organization, when the *Nebraska Patron* urged Grangers to keep interest in the Grange alive by promoting the discussion of practical farming questions at meetings. Most of the farmers, the *Patron* maintained, desired more from the Order than ritual and ceremony. Unfortunately for the organization, many Granges were allowing political matters to "mingle" in the meetings. Partisan politics was the road to ruin, and the *Patron* warned Grangers to avoid political entanglements.¹¹

The organizational problems of the subordinate Granges were general throughout the state. Eureka Grange No. 368 was not alone in complaining that a lack of interest made meetings dull. All too

often business consumed the meetings, and the lectures were seldom beneficial to the farmers. Nor was sufficient time allotted for social intercourse. Consequently, many Grangers became skeptical about the advantages of membership. Nebraska farmers who tended to judge things in terms of their practicality now asked Grangers, "What have you made by belonging?" The answers became increasingly less satisfying. And, when members did not voluntarily attend Grange meetings, the West Butler Grange attempted economic coercion. It fined any officer twenty-five cents for an unexcused absence, threatened members with expulsion if dues remained unpaid for six months, and finally resolved that "a continued absence from the Grange should be sufficient cause for expulsion from membership." The Excelsior Grange, in contrast, tried to bribe members into attendance by placing all delinquent members in good standing if they paid their dues only for the last quarter. In early 1878, P. E. Beardsley, secretary of the Nebraska State Grange, informed the Excelsior organization that it was one year arrears in dues and would not be considered in good standing until all non-dues paying members were expelled and at least thirteen dues payers were maintained on the rollbook. All efforts to boost Grange attendance failed and after 1877 the Nebraska Grange ceased to exist on the state and local levels.¹²

The Nebraska Grange remained dormant for ten years. Finally, on March 22, 1887, the National Grange successfully called a state meeting for the purpose of reorganizing the Order. In July, 1886, L. C. Whitney, a National Grange deputy, had taken to the field to revive interest in the organization and by late October had located 5 Granges struggling for existence with a total membership of less than 80. By February, 1887, Whitney had visited 16 counties, mailed 700 publicity letters, and distributed 2,500 circulars. The results were almost immediate. A month later 26 Granges with over 600 members were functioning in 13 counties. This was sufficient strength to warrant the reorganization of the state body. Accordingly, a convention met in Hastings where Whitney called for unity, urged Grange organization on a large scale in the northern and western portions of the state, and cautioned Patrons to remember that cooperation did not mean buying at reduced prices while selling at advanced rates but rather systematic buying and selling, economy, and sound business practices.¹³

On March 23, 1887, the Nebraska State Grange was formally reorganized but with 600 fewer subordinate Granges than during the Order's zenith in the mid-seventies. By the following November

membership totaled nearly 1,000. The Granges that met often and had good literary programs generally showed the largest increases in membership. The isolation of many Granges was still a handicap since some organizations were 30 to 40 miles from a sister organization and communication among them was difficult at best, but many Patrons displayed a "we have come to stay" spirit. However, the drought which began on the Great Plains in 1887 and lasted for nearly a decade drove many farmers away from the conservatism of the Grange and into what was then considered radical political activity. The results were catastrophic for the Grange.¹⁴

The Nebraska Grange did not immediately fail for the second time. In fact, the year 1888 promised continued success. Even though there had been no large gain in membership, six new Granges had been organized, business relations had been established with a wholesale grocer in Chicago, and arrangements were made for commission firms in Omaha to handle the sale of Granger livestock and farm produce. The following year brought the best crops in a decade and with it some of the lowest prices Nebraska farmers had ever received. The return of economic hard times contributed to quarreling within the Granges. An indication of the growing division among Grangers occurred when J. F. Black, Master of Red Willow Grange No. 28, was charged with conduct injurious to the best interest of the Patron of Husbandry. Three members of the Grange accused Black of ignoring certain banking resolutions and points of order and with using "language and personal insinuations prejudicial to the peace and harmony of the Grange." On April 16, the executive committee of the State Grange found Black guilty of those charges and suspended him for one year. It also expelled him indefinitely for having written "malicious and obscene letters" regarding the character of L. C. Root, the secretary of the State Grange.¹⁵

By 1890, the Grange in Nebraska was once more on the verge of collapse. Falling prices, insufficiency of money and credit, and the long haul-short haul freight differential were met with disagreement among members over the proper methods of remedy. Once again many were disappointed with the failure of the cooperative stores and other enterprises to provide substantial savings, and as a result, membership fell faster than it had increased three years earlier. A substantial number of Grangers sought direct political action and joined the People's party. In addition, a severe drought occurred in 1890 causing so great a need in the state for economic relief that the

executive committee of the National Grange authorized the printing of circulars asking for help. The subsequent monetary donations were distributed to those Grange members who were most destitute, yet half of the Nebraska Patrons did not have the means to sustain themselves through the winter and the state Grange exhausted its reserves providing for their relief. All of these factors--low prices, drought, politics, and another depression in 1893 served to retard expansion of Grange activities in the state.¹⁶

In 1894 when Nebraska was experiencing another year of severe drought, Master O. E. Hall admitted that although the Grange was still alive, it was "struggling to hold the fort." Many farmers did not harvest a crop that year, and in the face of the coming winter, thousands fled the state for promises farther west and the Grange in Nebraska disappeared. One Granger, looking back from the perspective of the twentieth century, attributed its demise to the disposition of the members to look to the National Grange to "rain down showers of blessings on them;" they sought "rainbows" rather than self-reliance. As a result, they were "easily manipulated by adverse influences and were soon discouraged." Another Patron believed the Grange failed because of an inadequate supply of currency. Grange stores dealt on a cash basis, and with little money in circulation farmers were unable to sustain those operations. While all of these factors have merit the failure of the Grange in Nebraska can be ascribed to two fundamental causes. First, the Grange failed in 1877 because of careless investments and mismanagement of its affairs. The second failure of the organization in 1894 resulted from the politicizing of a majority of its members. The People's party offered the farmer better chances to achieve a redistribution of the national wealth, destroy monopolies, and purify the political order than did the Patrons of Husbandry.¹⁷

In 1908 the National Grange contemplated "vigorous efforts" to resurrect the Order in Nebraska, but nothing came of those plans because of a statewide lack of interest and the inability to recruit organizers. Consequently, the Nebraska Grange remained dormant for another three years. Not until 1911, after seventeen years of inactivity, did the Nebraska Grange reorganize for the third time. Care was taken to create subordinate Granges close enough to each other to offer mutual support and encouragement, and they were established only where conditions promised success. Members quickly began cooperative buying of apples, fenceposts, salt, and coal in carload lots and even formed a mutual insurance company for the protection of their property. However, it took the years after

the depression of the thirties for the Nebraska Grange to attain a secure foundation. All too often membership increased during the days of agricultural affluence and declined in hard times--the very days, the leaders believed, that farmers most needed the Order. Nevertheless, after 1911, the most dedicated Nebraska Patrons never lost faith in the durability of the Grange. They were always men of good hope, and this spirit proved to be a dominant reason for the success of the Grange in Nebraska during the twentieth century.¹⁸

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NOTES

¹Thomas Clark Atkeson, *Semi-Centennial History of the Patrons of Husbandry* (New York: Orange Judd Co., 1916), p. 46; Kenyon L. Buittefield, "The Grange," *Forum*, XXXI (April, 1901), 232; Jennie Buell, *The Grange Master and the Grange Lecturer* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1921), p. 3; Sven Nordin, *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867-1900* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1974), pp. 17-18; Selou Justice Buck, *The Granger Movement* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 40-43; Oliver Hudson Kelly, *Origin and Progress of the Patrons of Husbandry* (Philadelphia: J. A. Wagenseller, 1875), pp. 124, 153.

²Buck, *The Granger Movement*, pp. 25-26, 54-55; Kelly, *Origin and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry*, pp. 339, 342-43, 367; National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1873, pp. 8, 8.

³Buck, *The Granger Movement*, pp. 58-59; *Nebraska Advertiser*, June 5 and July 3, 1873; *Central Union Agriculturist*, January, 1874.

⁴*Nebraska Advertiser*, July 3, 1873; *Nebraska Patron*, July 1, 1874.

⁵Charis W. Pierson, "The Outcome of the Granger Movement," *Popular Science Monthly*, XXXII (January, 1888), 368; *Nebraska Advertiser*, April 2, 1874; Excelsior Grange No. 26, Grange Records, Nebraska State Historical Society, hereafter cited as NSHS; George H. Simmons to A. E. Sheldon, January 8, 1918, Grange Records, NSHS; E. B. Cowles to Nebraska State Historical Society, no date, Grange Records, NSHS.

⁶*Nebraska Advertiser*, April 9, 1874; Nordin, *Rich Harvest*, p. 31.

⁷A. H. Hirsch, "Efforts of the Grange in the Middle West to Control the Price of Farm Machinery," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XV (March, 1929), 473-96; Amos C. Warner, *Three Phases of Cooperation in the West* ("John Hopkins University Studies," Vol. VI, Nos. 7-8; Baltimore, 1888), pp. 386-87; Buck, *The Granger Movement*, pp. 267-69; National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1875, p. 30.

⁸*Daily State Journal*, December 21, 1876; John Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Western Publishing Co., 1918), pp. 673-75; *Nebraska Advertiser*, January 6, 1876; National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1875, p. 30.

⁹Report of the Committee on Relief, December 16, 1874, Grange Records, NSHS; National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1875, pp. 32, 73; *Central Union Agriculturist*, January, 1875; James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 183; National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1876, pp. 18, 36-37, 112. In 1875 the National Grange gave about 11,000 dollars to Patrons who suffered losses from the grasshopper invasion in Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, and Minnesota.

¹⁰Olson, *History of Nebraska*, pp. 185, 187, 190; Buck, *The Granger Movement*, p. 196; Frank Dixon, "Railroad Control in Nebraska," *Political Science Quarterly*, XII (December, 1898), 620, 633.

¹¹Olson, *History of Nebraska*, p. 185; *Nebraska Patron*, July 1, 1875.

¹⁸*Nebraska Patron*, March 3, 1875; West Butler Grange No. 476, Grange Records, NSHS; Excelsior Grange No. 18, Grange Records, NSHS; P. E. Beardale, secretary of the Nebraska State Grange, to John S. Maiben, secretary of the Excelsior Grange, January 12, 1878, Grange Records, NSHS.

¹⁹Records of the State Grange of Nebraska. NSHS: National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1887, pp. 87-89.

²⁰Records of the State Grange of Nebraska. NSHS.

²¹National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1888, pp. 56-57; Olson, *History of Nebraska*, p. 229; Records of the State Grange of Nebraska, NSHS.

²²Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1901), p. 671; National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1891, pp. 15, 77.

²³National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1894, pp. 79-80; Frank F. Loomis to A. E. Sheldon, January 18, 1918, Grange Records, NSHS; T. N. Bobbit, "My Recollections of the Early Grange in Nebraska," *Nebraska History and Record of Pioneer Days*, V (January-March, 1922), 13-14.

²⁴National Grange, *Proceedings*, 1906, p. 10; *Ibid.*, 1911, pp. 27, 86-87; *Ibid.*, 1912-1972.