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**THE FARM MOVEMENT IN AMERICA'S HEARTLAND:  
A PROFILE OF LEADERS, THEIR POWER, AND PROBLEMS**

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**Introduction**

A body of new farm leaders emerged during the mid-1980s in response to the farm crisis in the Upper Midwest. This paper explores the influence of these leaders in shaping the direction of their groups. It does so through examining the farm leaders' socio-demographic characteristics, their use of power, and the way they confront problems. The leaders of two groups, the Farm Crisis Committee (FCC) and Groundswell (GS), are studied. The data for this paper were collected through use of a nonrandom-purposive sampling method. They were gathered through administration of a survey questionnaire in 1986 and intensive interviews during 1986-87. All eight of the FCC's and seven of nine of GS's founding leaders participated. These persons were identified as leaders because they held elected or appointed positions in their groups. The surveys and interviews for the leaders of the FCC were carried out at the group's office in Emerson, Nebraska, while those of GS, because the organization in its early days had no headquarters, were conducted at their individual homes or in restaurants throughout Minnesota. This paper's findings are further supported through use of documentary data from the farm groups and supplementary secondary data, including scholarly publications, magazines, newspapers, and a television documentary.

The FCC and GS, as groups giving rise to a social movement, might be studied in many ways, but this paper focuses on exploring the leaders' influence in shaping the groups. Much of the scholarly literature on social movements explores how and why they originate. Social movements have been explained through structural (Brinton, 1965; Smelser, 1973), social-psychological (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1968, 1970), and organizational theories (Gamson, 1975; Obershcall, 1973; Tilly, 1975). Comparatively little theoretical attention has been given to discussing who leaders are and what they do.

Among those who have discussed leadership styles are Rex D. Hooper (1950), Rudolph Heberle (1951), Kurt and Gladys Lang (1961), and Lewis M. Killian (1964: 440-43). Killian provides the most useful model. He suggests that there are three basic kinds of leaders: charismatic, administrative, and intellectual. The charismatic leader uses personal attractiveness to rally followers. The administrative leader takes care of everyday organizational problems. And, the intellectual leader creates ideology. Killian adds that the charismatic leader often gives rise to the movement, while the administrative leader acts to consolidate it. In discussing how the farm leaders shaped their movement, this paper points out the leaders' different leadership styles, and notes how these styles influenced their movement.

The farm crisis of the mid-1980s had deep historical roots in the Midwest. Almost from the beginning of the region's settlement in the mid-nineteenth century, farmers experienced problems with weather and financing. Farmers historically believed they could succeed, but the problems they confronted repeatedly overwhelmed them. Continuing crises caused serious weaknesses within the principal institutions of farm communities. Farmers were left vulnerable to little understood outside forces, and this resulted in the sustained removal from the land with often catastrophic consequences for their families (Fite, 1981; Hamilton, 1986; Lewontin and Berlan, 1986; Nugent, 1986; Rasmussen, 1986; Taylor, 1953; Waterfield, 1986: 1-18; Wimberly, 1986). Agrarian protest movements in the Midwest have always lacked economic, political, and social coherence because farmers have remained isolated from the rapidly modernizing world and clung tenaciously to their traditional norms, values, and beliefs (Hoover, 1983; Kerbo, 1983: 268-72; Kolko, 1984: 23-26; McNall, 1988; Roberts and Kloss, 1979). Yet despite the objective conditions that farmers have faced, and probably because they failed to understand them fully, farmers have continued their attempts to organize to defend what they have perceived to be their own interests (Savola, 1985).

The historical crisis of the farmer in the Upper Midwest continued up through the mid-1980s. The Farm Credit system reported a loss on farm loans of \$2.69 billion for 1985, its first loss since the Great Depression of the

1930s and the largest debt ever posted by an American banking institution (Dorr, 1986). The United States Department of Agriculture (1985) estimated in March 1985 that 386,000 (18.0%) of the nation's 2.1 million farms were in financial distress, and that 93,000 (4.5%) of these farms were technically insolvent. Roughly 5.0% of America's farmers left the land in 1985 (Eason, 1986). The Midwest Association of State Departments of Agriculture estimated that about 5.0% of all farms in nine Midwestern states would fail in 1986 (Cordes, 1986). Stuart Hardy, an agricultural expert of the United States Chamber of Commerce, predicted that in 1986 there would be "another big bloodletting" (Eason, 1986). In addition, Robert Thompson, the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, commented that the Reagan Administration would like a 10.0% shrinkage in the land farmed between 1986-89. He further concluded that there were "too many farmers" (Eason, 1986). American farmers seemed to be in serious financial trouble and could expect little help from their government. The severity of the conditions that the farmers confronted gave rise to new farm protest.

### **The Rise of the New Groups and Their Leaders**

Numerous new farm groups emerged after mid-1984 in response to the farm crisis. These groups were the offspring of the American Agricultural Movement of the late 1970s, which had emulated the strategies of previous generations of farm activists and the more recent civil rights and antiwar protesters, in an attempt to extract agricultural reform from the federal and state governments (Browne, 1988: 66-72). The new farm groups struggled to protest conditions, lobby politicians, provide emotional health care, supply emergency food, furnish information through telephone networks, and answer religious needs. These groups, generally speaking, suffered from lack of day-to-day organizational skills, understanding of the problems they confronted, and vision about the kind of change that was necessary to resolve their problems. These organizations were overwhelmingly committed to nonviolent reform, although some right-wing fringe groups existed that advocated violent resistance and even overthrow of the national government (Harrison, 1985;

Scholer, 1985). Among the most interesting developments of the new farm groups was the emergence of women into leadership roles. This change took place in conjunction with the more active role that women were playing throughout American society. These farm groups together momentarily became in the mid-1980s a powerful voice in the Midwest that called attention to the farm crisis not only in their region but throughout the nation. Among the newly emerging groups were the FCC and GS.

The FCC first appeared on the scene in November 1984. A group of farmers, who visited regularly at Tim Wrage's Emerson Fertilizer Company, a daily gathering spot for farmers from the area around Emerson, Nebraska, started the organization and elected Wrage as its leader. They believed Wrage was the most qualified to head up the group because he was a community business leader, had a college bachelor's degree, and solved problems quickly. The founders, in short, liked and respected Wrage (Fuchser, 1986; Wrage, 1986). Wrage quickly took control of the organization giving it coherence and direction as an activist farm group.

GS also began in November 1984, but in a somewhat different fashion. Bobbi Polzine and the head of Job Service in Worthington, Minnesota, wrote a grant proposal to obtain legal aid and psychological counseling for farmers in financial trouble. The grant in its final form was approved for the purpose of helping farmers to get out of farming. Polzine wanted nothing to do with a program that encouraged farmers to quit. She and several friends subsequently got together and planned a farm rally that was held at Memorial Stadium in Worthington during November. About five hundred persons attended the rally. Polzine commented to a news reporter that this represented a "groundswell." The name of the group accordingly emerged from the rally, and along with it Polzine as GS's foremost leader (Larson, 1986; Polzine, 1986).

Under the leadership of Wrage and Polzine, the founders of the FCC and GS worked to form their respective organizations. Both groups elected leaders, and established official policy. The FCC's leaders initially set their group's goals to obtain higher prices for commodities, lower interest rates on

operating capital, government imposition of a 5.0% limit on foreign matter in grain, short-term guaranteed farm operating loans, and a sense of unity and support among farmers and their organizations (Farm Crisis Committee, 1984). GS, likewise, elected its first leaders in November 1984. These leaders formed GS's initial steering committee. They formulated GS's first policy positions calling for a moratorium on farm, home, business, and bank foreclosures, a fair price for agricultural products, lower interest rates, farm debt reduction, and a short-term program of guaranteed farm operating loans (Groundswell, 1984). Both groups' goals were thus much the same.

The FCC and GS's strategies for achieving their goals also had common elements, for both wished to approach legislative bodies for reformist remedies. The FCC primarily looked to the federal congress for answers, while GS focused its efforts on gaining legislative assistance at the state level. Both groups carried on campaigns to make their positions known to politicians, the media, and the people in their areas! What differentiated these groups from the standpoint of strategy was that the FCC came to rely almost solely upon lobbying, while GS advocated not only the use of lobbying but nonviolent, passive resistance. This difference in strategic approaches gave these groups quite different public images, even though from the beginning their goals were quite similar.

The FCC held a rally at the Sioux City Municipal Auditorium in January 1985 attracting about four thousand persons (Antonon, 1985). The FCC also sponsored a benefit concert at the Sioux City Municipal Auditorium in August 1985. The concert, which featured country-western singer Merle Haggard drew an attendance of about 4,500 (Fuchser, 1986). Haggard donated \$10,000 to the FCC despite the attendance being insufficient to cover the concert's costs. The FCC leaders, after this activity, stopped organizing mass rallies because they believed them to be an ineffective way to bring about relief from their problems. Thereafter, the FCC leaders focused their efforts on lobbying the federal government (Wrage, 1986).

The GS leaders' first major action came when they called upon farmers to march to the Minnesota capitol to protest farm conditions. This rally took

place during January 1985. It drew between ten and twelve thousand farmers ("Farmer Solidarity," 1985). Twelve people were arrested for disorderly conduct and criminal trespass (Malcolm, 1985). A small band of GS activists next took over the Production Credit Association office in Worthington during April to protest the planned foreclosure on the Polzine farm. Several people were also arrested at this gathering (Grant, 1985; Willette, 1985). The leaders of GS led a second march on the state capitol during January 1986, but only about 2,500 persons participated (Swoboda, 1986). GS activists additionally blocked foreclosure auctions throughout 1985 and early 1986 in an effort to keep Minnesota farmers on the land and to draw attention to their plight. They also pursued a more quiet approach of lobbying state legislators for help.

Despite the FCC and GS activists' efforts to bring government assistance through high-visibility actions and less attention-getting lobbying, these groups never really gained a sizable popular following, though they did at times attract large crowds with their mass rallies. The peak number of active supporters for each of the groups was probably never more than five hundred persons. Popular support from the farm community, as displayed by attendance at mass rallies, plainly dwindled for both groups by early in 1986. Farmers still faced economic hardship and foreclosures, and the new farm groups had made no real progress through protest or lobbying in bringing the crisis to an end (Young, 1986).

### **Characteristics of the Leaders**

A glimpse into the backgrounds of the farm leaders helps to explain how they affected their groups and struggled to resolve the crisis. This section therefore looks at different socio-demographic characteristics of the leaders, including sex, age, education, occupation, income, social assistance use, religion, participation in organizations, and political identification. The information used to construct this profile was taken from both the questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires supplied details concerning specific characteristics, and the interviews furnished additional insights and aided in

interpretation. When questionnaire data is used in this section, the leaders are not identified by name. This arrangement was agreed upon with the leaders so as to keep their personal characteristics confidential. The leaders are, however, identified, with their consent, by groups so that the leadership of the FCC and GS might be compared. Comments taken from the interviews of the leaders have, also with their permission, been used to help substantiate some of the interpretations of data.

Men have traditionally dominated farm leadership in the Midwest (Buck, 1920; Crampton, 1965; Flora and Johnson, 1978; Kile, 1948; Rogers and Burdge, 1972). But with the farm crisis of the mid-1980s, an interesting change took place. Women began to play an unprecedented role in farm groups. The farm women's activism corresponded with the emerging greater participation of women throughout American society. Remarkably six of the fifteen FCC and GS leaders were women. Four of GS's leaders were women, and two were in the FCC. Men in both groups reacted positively to the women's participation in leadership roles. All the leaders believed that women should not only add their insights but actively participate in farm group activities.

The farm leaders, both men and women, tended to be in their early to mid-forties. The range of their ages was from 30 to 62 years, with the men 30 to 62 and the women 31 to 51. There was no significant difference in ages between the leaders of the FCC and GS. Their ages revealed that those leaders confronting the crisis were chronologically mature persons. Their participation as activists was therefore somewhat surprising because most people at their ages in Upper Midwest communities were well-settled into their life styles. This finding perhaps suggested that their newly found activism may have been a measure of their desperation.

The farm leaders received only limited amounts of formal education. Both the men and women generally completed high school. The FCC leaders were slightly better educated than those of GS in that they were more likely to have attended some college. Out of all the leaders, there was only one college graduate. Sociologists Judith Heffernan (1985) and Thomas C.

Langham (1988) conducted studies examining financially distressed farmers in the Midwest, and they found similar educational levels in their samples. Also the United States Bureau of the Census (1985: 133) reported that people in the United States who were twenty-five years and older had a median education of 12.6 years. The farm leaders had about a typical education for Americans.

The formal education that farmers achieved was not necessarily sufficient to help them avoid the problems that the farm community confronted. First, their limited education made obtaining employment beyond the farm very difficult. Jobs were hard to locate in the Midwest during the mid-1980s, and even more so without a technical skill or college degree (Bluestone and Hession, 1986: 127-28). This lack of education may have in part led them to become activists. Secondly, the farm leaders believed that their lack of formal education kept them from fully understanding the causes of what was happening to them, and that this prevented them from developing effective strategies to deal with their situation. Fuchser (1986) commented that she thought the FCC was unable to set up programs to help farmers because their group did not have enough education. The lack of education among the leaders may have had a critical impact, as it did with many farm families, on their ability to make a living, but probably little affected their response to the crisis. Additional formal education, for instance, at a Midwestern land-grant university, would not have done much to prepare them to lead a social movement nor to develop the understanding necessary to move beyond present structural arrangements.

Income was another important factor in explaining the activism of those who led the farm groups. Table 1 shows the net incomes of the farm leaders for 1984. Only two of the fifteen leaders had nonfarm incomes. They have been excluded from the table, because their incomes were atypical of the farm leaders. The net income of the farm leaders' families in 1984 ranged from -\$111,000 to \$12,600, with the FCC from -\$25,000 to \$12,600 and GS -\$111,000 to \$10,800. Table 1 reveals that the farm crisis probably had a more severe financial impact on the GS leaders than it had on the FCC leaders. These net

income losses and low incomes of the FCC and GS leaders for 1984 were no doubt an important factor that led them to activism.

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Table 1  
Farm Leader Family Net Income in 1984

FCC	GS
-\$25,000	-\$111,000
-\$10,000	-\$44,000
-\$6,500	-\$30,000
0	-\$10,000
0	\$6,574
\$11,000	\$10,800
\$12,600	

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The United States Bureau of the Census (1985: 645), based on a random sample of 1,558 farm families completed in 1983, reported that 23.2% of the families had incomes under \$10,000, 16.3% between \$10,000 to \$14,999, 13.5% between \$15,000 to \$19,999, 12.0% between \$20,000 to \$24,999, and 35.0% at \$25,000 or greater. When compared to the farm family income categories above, the farm leaders' incomes were toward the bottom of the income levels that might have been expected. This data thus provides further insight into why the farm leaders chose to protest.

The low incomes of the leaders might suggest that they would have received federal or state social assistance. Yet, at the time of this survey, most farmers could not qualify for social services because their assets were counted as income. Only four of the thirteen leaders received any kind of assistance from the federal or state governments, with one from the FCC and three from GS. The help given was in the form of food stamps and fuel assistance. This was an extremely small number in light of the fact that seven of the thirteen leaders in 1984 had net income losses. Federal regulations were in part changed following the administration of this study's questionnaire. The modifications reportedly enabled more farmers to become eligible for food stamps (*Farm Crisis Committee Newsletter*, April 18, 1986). This still may not

have changed the leaders' utilization levels for social assistance, because area farmers placed great importance on remaining independent and self-sufficient. There was therefore a sad irony in this situation in that those farm leaders who produced crops and livestock could not afford to feed and cloth themselves and their families as they had been accustomed to doing in the past.

The data on religious participation among the farm leaders revealed a curious pattern. Despite the wide array of Christian churches in the area, the farm leaders belonged to either the Catholic or Lutheran denominations. Nine of the fifteen leaders were Catholic, with five from the FCC and four from GS. Six of the fifteen leaders were Lutheran, with three from the FCC and three from GS. Why all the farm leaders came from just two religious groups is unclear. Possibly the members of these religious denominations, which have a reputation in the region for being highly cohesive, experienced, as a consequence of the farm crisis, comparatively serious social disorganization in their lives. Or, perhaps the cohesive nature of the Catholic and Lutheran groups provided a setting, which other religious denominations did not, that encouraged farm activists to organize.

The farm leaders were unusually active people in their communities. Eleven of the fifteen leaders participated in activities (such as farm, labor, political, and social organizations) beyond their own farm group. Nine of the fifteen leaders, four from the FCC and five from GS, had held leadership positions prior to the establishment of their groups. As for farm organizations, they had belonged to the National Farmers Organization, the National Farmers Union, or the American Farm Bureau Federation. None stated that they had been previously associated with the American Agricultural Movement. Their participation in farm and other organizations as well as their previous leadership experience demonstrated that the majority of the leaders had long histories of community activism. Their histories of past community leadership are important in explaining their more recent activism. The farm leaders did not just appear on the scene, but rather they were people who had always taken an interest in their communities. Equally important, the farm

leaders were members of well-established community groups, and none had linkages to extremist organizations. This perhaps goes a long way toward explaining their reformist analyses of the crisis of the mid-1980s.

The farm leaders were for the most part registered with the major American political parties. Ten of the fifteen leaders were registered with the Democratic Party, with four from the FCC and six from GS. Three of the fifteen leaders were registered with the Republican Party, all three from the FCC. And, two of the fifteen leaders, one from the FCC and one from GS, were not registered with any political party. Even though the farm leaders had been driven to create new organizations to deal with the farm crisis, they surprisingly showed little alienation from the mainstream parties. They were certainly not as alienated as the typical financially distressed farmer seemed to be. Langham (1988) observed a high degree of political alienation from the major political parties among farmers experiencing financial difficulties in the same geographical area. This may have been because the leaders were the sort of people that believed and participated in the established political system. The farm leaders comprised a distinctive group of individuals in the agricultural community whose personal characteristics in large part gave rise to their activism. The pressures of insufficient income and education, and the apparent disruption of their church community, made the leaders personally and painfully aware of the crisis. Their histories of community involvement also provided a reason for their taking leadership of the newly emerging farm groups. These factors, combined with important changes in American society involving women, helped to make sense of the unprecedented participation of women in leadership roles. Yet, the political activism of the new leaders, both men and women, led them down a very traditional path, for they were long-time participants in their local communities' political establishments. Their penchant for traditional political solutions, a reflection of their deeply rooted ties to the structure of their society, perhaps explains their failure to comprehend the historical-structural dimensions of the crisis. It also probably provides a reason for their inability to look for new solutions beyond the structure that systematically robbed them of their livelihood and community.

### **Power in the Farm Groups**

Power within an organization is determined by the ability of individuals to get what they want through the decision-making process. And, charismatic authority, as pointed out earlier in this paper, can dictate the use of power. Wrage and Polzine's charismatic use of power early on shaped the FCC and GS. The structure of the FCC and GS are outlined in this section to reveal how Wrage and Polzine, as charismatic leaders, played, along with a few other leaders who possessed considerably less power, a major role in influencing the direction of their groups. The roots of power in these groups can best be observed through examining who made the daily decisions, constructed general policy, produced the newsletter, obtained media visibility, and delivered public speeches. By examining who controlled these several important aspects of the groups, what becomes clear is that a very small number of persons shaped the FCC and GS.

A handful of leaders, but especially Wrage and Polzine, held most of the FCC and GS's power in terms of making daily decisions as well as general policy. Four national leaders and the three state coordinators constituted the FCC's board of directors. Together they made decisions on everyday matters and larger policy concerns. The inclusion of the state coordinators was supposed to assure that the concerns of all the members would be considered, but in practice the larger membership was little consulted on most issues. Wrage stated that he tried to delegate power to various committees, but they proved unable to make decisions (Wrage, 1986). Daily decisions as well as general policies were in fact thus generated at the Emerson headquarters of the FCC by Wrage and those board members who passed in-and-out during the day. The more formal governing structure of the organization did little more than ratify those decisions. Wrage was at the core of the daily decision and policy-making process at all levels.

GS's steering committee, made up of the handful of leaders surrounding Polzine and Larson, recommended policy to its sixty-member board of directors. The board of directors only ratified policy and could not veto any

steering committee decision concerning policy. The group's real power therefore resided in the steering committee, and especially in the hands of its co-chairs, Polzine and, to a much lesser extent, Larson. As mentioned earlier, the steering committee members also chaired the committees that made up GS. Accordingly a small number of persons in GS, just as in the FCC, ran the group, and both organizations were dependent on the visions of their founding leaders, Wrage and Polzine.

Control of the groups' newsletters was an important source of power, for the information they provided shaped the ideas of the followers. Wrage, Betty Fuchser, and Pat Huggenberger primarily were responsible for writing the *Farm Crisis Committee Newsletter*, and Delores Swoboda was the sole author of the *Groundswell Newsletter*. Both newsletters were published irregularly, but they generally were circulated about once per month. The newsletters well-reflected the farm leaders perceptions of the farm crisis as well as their ideas for resolving it. They provided simplistic explanations offering conventional solutions, largely borrowed from local news media sources and other farm groups. The *Farm Crisis Committee Newsletter* was quite folksy, at times offering recipes, remedies for home problems, and even comic clippings from newspapers. The *Groundswell Newsletter* stuck more to reporting events related to the farm crisis, but it too, like the *Farm Crisis Committee Newsletter*, fell far short of being useful because of its provincial explanations and failure to comprehend the structural roots of the crisis. So while only a few members of the FCC and one person in GS controlled the newsletter, none of these people fully utilized the power that their news organs might have offered to rally and educate supporters.

The leaders of the FCC and GS also amassed power through media and speaking appearances. Public appearances were the most important source of power that the leaders held, because those who gained the most visibility had the greatest influence over their groups (DeLind, 1985-86). Wrage was the main spokesperson for the FCC, and had the greatest visibility of the FCC leaders. From the earliest days of the FCC, he delivered a weekly editorial-informational piece on a local Sioux City, Iowa, radio station, KMNS, entitled

"Tim's Radio Speech." KMNS dropped this radio program in March 1986. The station underwent a programming change and all agricultural broadcasting, except the market report, was ended (*Farm Crisis Committee Newsletter*, March 14, 1986; Fuchser, 1986). The loss of the radio program coincided with the farm activist groups decline in popular support. Beyond the radio program, Wrage also spoke throughout the Midwest region at public gatherings and periodically traveled to Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of farmers. Wrage's public appearances thus served as an important basis for his power within the FCC.

Polzine and Larson were the main spokespersons for their group. Both appeared in a 1985 Home Box Office documentary, "Down and Out in America," that in part focused on the farm crisis (Grant, 1985). The media directed most of its attention to Polzine, and she was regularly quoted on television, in newspapers, and on radio. Polzine's public appearances attracted a great deal of media attention, and resulted in added financial support for GS. Polzine appeared on national television at Willie Nelson's first Farm Aid Concert in Champaign, Illinois, in September 1985. GS, as a result, received \$20,000 from the Farm Aid Concert Committee. Polzine was also invited to visit Nicaragua, and took two trips there, one during summer 1985 and the other in spring 1986. While in Nicaragua she studied farming methods and met with the leaders of the Daniel Ortega government. Still later, Polzine was asked to travel to the Philippines to view the workings of the government of Corazon Aquino (Larson, 1986; Polzine, 1987). As the foremost spokesperson of her group, Polzine, like Wrage, was thus able to gain power through media and speaking appearances, and this gave her great influence among her fellow leaders and supporters.

Wrage and Polzine controlled the core of power in their groups. This power was rooted in their charismatic leadership that made possible the founding of their groups. They reinforced their charismatic power through shaping daily decisions and general policy, and through maintaining high public visibility. Their active roles gave them the authority to lead. Ultimately this point was perhaps best illustrated when many of the leaders who were

interviewed for this study suggested that Wrage or Polzine be asked for clarification of information. The other leaders seemed to have less confidence in themselves to make policy statements or decisions, and chose to defer to the most visible leaders of their groups. In the final analysis, Wrage and Polzine, from the earliest days of the FCC and GS, held the power to lead, and this power was grounded in charismatic authority.

### **Farm Movement Problems**

The leaders of the FCC and GS confronted several problems in attempting to bring about changes that would improve the situation of farmers in the Upper Midwest. From the standpoint of leadership, the charismatic authority of Wrage and Polzine would prove inadequate to push their groups forward. Their leadership would give way. Wrage presided over the collapse of the FCC, and Polzine was removed from the leadership of GS. Administrative leaders replaced Polzine. No intellectual leaders would emerge in either group, and this would prevent the groups from finding new ideological direction. Almost from the outset of the founding of these groups, they confronted; in addition to a crisis of leadership, two additional kinds of problems that impeded their ability to deal with the farm crisis. These problems were ones of organization and understanding. The organizational problems involved isolation, fragmentation, and personalism. The problems of understanding revolved around the leaders' failure to comprehend the full extent of the crisis and their confusion regarding objectives and strategies. While the organizational problems manifested themselves in a greater number of ways and threatened the continued existence of the groups, the problems of understanding proved to be even more difficult to resolve because they required the time necessary to learn to think in new ways. The leaders of the FCC and GS faced these problems from almost the beginning of their organizations, and they limited their effectiveness in achieving the groups' goals.

Perhaps the most vexing organizational problem that the farm leaders confronted was the isolation of their groups from one another. This problem

came about as a result of the structure of American agriculture, which produced a society typified by great distances between farms and towns. These distances encouraged the development of regional leadership and groups. Both the FCC and GS carved out their own spheres of influence. The FCC, although it claimed to be a national organization, having satellite groups in Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota and working to establish others elsewhere, was geographically confined to Western Iowa and Northeastern Nebraska. Likewise, GS operated within narrowly defined geographical areas of Minnesota, and had even less aspirations to extend itself. This meant that these groups, and others like them throughout the Midwest, operated autonomously and with little specific knowledge of what other groups were doing. The FCC and GS did sometimes exchange newsletters, but beyond that they maintained little contact.

The National Save the Family Farm Coalition (NSFFC), which the FCC and GS joined, appeared in 1986. It was one of several larger organizations that was formed during the mid-1980s to foster contact between the many emerging farm groups throughout the nation. The NSFFC was for the FCC and GS perhaps the most influential of the overarching organizations that they joined, but they also belonged to others, such as the North American Farmers' Alliance, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the Center for Rural Affairs, and Prairiefire. About thirty farm groups associated themselves with the NSFFC. Its ability to pull the groups together remained limited, and the farm groups continued to be isolated (Browne, 1988: 78-79). The consequences of the FCC, GS, and other groups' isolation was that they proved unable to define their problems in a common way and failed to act in concert to seek solutions.

Another serious organizational problem that the farm leaders faced was fragmentation within their groups. Internal conflict involving personalities, tactics, and policy adversely affected both the FCC and GS. Much of this conflict originated in the charismatic-style leadership of the groups' leaders. Many of the FCC's Iowa supporters left the group in May 1985 to form the Western Iowa Farm Crisis Committee (later renamed the Iowa Farm Crisis

Network). This split developed due to personality conflicts and disagreements concerning strategies for getting help from the government (Fuchser and Schmedding, 1986; Whiteing, 1986). GS also experienced a similar sort of fragmentation. A number of GS's leaders objected to Polzine's personalistic control and found the general disorganization of their group to be discouraging. The consequence of this disenchantment within GS was fragmentation.

GS's problems reached the crisis point during spring 1986. The group's leaders became angered with Polzine after she returned from her second trip to Nicaragua. They complained they were not being informed of her activities, and that those activities were in conflict with the group's goals. GS's steering committee removed her in July from the post of co-chair, and the group's other co-chair, Larson, subsequently resigned. GS continued under the collective leadership of the steering committee (Larson, 1987; Polzine, 1987; Swoboda, 1987). Administrative leadership prevailed with the removal of the group's charismatic leader.

Fragmentation plainly has been a longstanding problem for farm groups. The situations that the FCC and GS found themselves experiencing were only the latest manifestation. Their fragmentation was a product of their poor understanding of the crisis, disagreements over strategy, and lack of a cohesive policy, all of which stemmed from the groups' early charismatic-style leadership. These combined problems set up a situation that led to personalistic control, and subsequent infighting over power and policy direction.

Personalism posed still another serious organizational problem for both the FCC and GS. Personalism involves the arbitrary use of power by a leader to gain support for control of the group, and it leads to loyalty to the leader rather than to the group's goals. The failure to institutionalize a group's power produces it. Personalism is common among newly forming activist groups (Roberts and Kloss, 1979: 52-54). It often occurs during the rule of a charismatic leader or when there is no intellectual leader. The consequences of this phenomenon can be seen in the failure of its supporters to understand the issues that brought them together and the sometimes resulting fragmentation.

The loyalty of the supporters to Wrage and Polzine was personalistic. In these cases this created difficulties for moving toward realistic objectives to resolve the problems of farmers, for Wrage and Polzine's ideas guided, but also limited, the thought and action of their groups. Neither Wrage nor Polzine were able to provide the necessary intellectual leadership. Personalism therefore led directly to the fragmentation of the FCC and the creation of the Iowa Farm Crisis Network. GS also found itself in a similar situation involving the personalistic leadership of Polzine, which resulted in her removal and the resignation of Larson.

Personalism, combined with the loss of charismatic leadership, led to the disintegration of the FCC and reorganization of GS. Wrage declined to continue as the president of his group in December 1986. The FCC was dissolved within one month (Farm Crisis Committee, Annual Meeting, 1986). Following a different path, GS moved toward institutionalization, under administrative leaders, after the removal of Polzine. GS abandoned the tactic of public protest, sought grants to fund its activities, firmed up its organizational structure, and opened in March 1987 a headquarters in Wanda, Minnesota (*Groundswell Newsletter*, March 1987; Swoboda, 1987). In the early years of the FCC and GS, personalism had severely weakened the ability of these groups to achieve their objectives. Personalism actually brought an end to the FCC, and only when GS moved to institutionalize its power did the group achieve some degree of stability.

Beyond the organizational problems that the FCC and GS faced, they also lacked a thorough understanding of the farm crisis. No intellectual leaders emerged to create a new ideological understanding that could be used to guide the groups. The leaders failure to comprehend fully the historical-structural origins of the crisis prevented them from developing an effective strategy for improving the situation of farmers. When queried about what they did to inform themselves about the crisis, the leaders responded that they read newspapers and magazines and watched television (Polzine, 1986; Wrage, 1986). These popular media sources of information concerning the crisis left much to be desired for gaining an understanding of its causes, as they were

produced by the very interests that were producing the problems (Campbell, 1985; DeLind, 1985-86; Parenti, 1986). The crisis in fact was much more than simply an immediate or temporary crisis, and actually was the product of lengthy historical political-economic developments (Hamilton, 1986; Lewontin and Berlan, 1986; Nugent, 1986; Waterfield, 1986). The failure of the FCC and GS's leaders to understand this point led them to approach the crisis as if it were a temporary phenomenon that could be reformed away through appeals to state and federal legislative bodies. The strategies of the farm leaders were much the same as those of previous generations of farm leaders, and were wholly inadequate to deal with the deeply rooted nature of the crisis.

Because the farm leaders of the FCC and GS failed to understand the nature of the problems that they were confronting, their policies and strategies proved inadequate. Both the FCC and GS adopted reformist approaches to correct the situation in which they asked state and federal legislative bodies for help. They adopted policies that asked for higher prices, lower loan rates, and moratoriums on foreclosures. Requests for policy changes such as these did not, and could not, bring the desired long-term results that they sought. These were the same things farmers had been pleading for over the last one hundred years, and they had over that period brought at best only temporary relief from the continual displacement of farmers. The FCC and GS farm leaders candidly admitted their failure to get workable reforms from the government. Larson (1986) observed, "it's very frustrating when the state legislators say there is nothing they can do to help the farmer." And, Wrage (1986) commented, "the elected officials do not care about the farmers." Appeals to state and federal legislators for reform proved, as they had historically, to be a futile strategy for the farm leaders.

The FCC and GS farm leaders' ability to recognize and deal with the problems of organization and understanding was limited. There was little indication that the leaders comprehended the problems let alone were able to develop strategies to address them. This may explain why the new farm groups experienced the same outcome as earlier farm groups. That outcome was that farm groups were either tamed, like GS, through being co-opted by

the established political structure, or slowly withered away, like the FCC, due to power struggles among leaders and supporters. The problems of the FCC and GS were not insurmountable, but a failure to understand them resulted in a continuation of the historical trend of the inability of farm groups to survive and find fitting solutions.

### *Conclusion*

The social conditions that gave rise to the farm crisis in the Upper Midwest during the mid-1980s also produced the farm leaders who founded the FCC and GS. This can be seen in the personal characteristics of the leaders. They were middle-aged farm men and women being pushed off their farms who had a history of actively participating as community leaders. The economic and community crisis that the leaders confronted prodded these already active persons to take leadership positions in the new farm groups.

Unfortunately, their personal histories made them unlikely leaders for a social movement that could only succeed through mounting a profound challenge to the structural arrangements of American society. Those who first appeared to lead the groups were charismatic leaders, and critically needed intellectual leaders failed to emerge. The farm leaders of the FCC and GS were steeped in traditional norms, values, and beliefs that led them to seek traditional reformist solutions. Their upbringing, education, and general consciousness left them little prepared to deal with the profound historical-structural problems that they faced.

This profile of the farm leaders of the FCC and GS, perhaps more than anything else, points out how difficult change is to bring about without effective leadership that has a full understanding of the problems that it confronts. Whether or not the farm leaders who finally gained leadership, with their administrative orientation, will find the necessary understanding to regain control of their lives remains to be seen.

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