The Grange in Nebraska, 1872-1911

by
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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 ready 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.
which convinced the Nebraskan that the Grange was the kind of organization Nebraska farmers needed. Painter hoped to see "glorious results" from affiliation with the Grange, and in August, 1871, a Grange organizer informed Kelly that a Grange had been established in Nebraska. However, not until January 1, 1872, did Harlan County Grange No. 1 formally apply for membership, thus becoming the first Grange which the National Grange recognized. Groveland No. 2 succeeded the Harlan County Grange on February 9, and fourteen others quickly followed. On August 2, General William D. Wilson, editor of the Iowa Homestead and Farm Journal and a deputy of the Iowa Grange, organized the Patrons of Husbandry on the state level in Nebraska. By the end of the year, forty-nine subordinate Granges were functioning in the state.

The Order grew rapidly in Nebraska and by May, 1873, 100 Granges had been organized. Despite that tremendous increase in number two newspapers supportive of the Grange, the Nebraska Advertiser and the Central Union Agriculturist, charged that its purpose was not generally understood. Many Nebraska farmers and businessmen believed the main object of the organization was to withhold business from local retail merchants in order to patronize those dealers who operated on a volume basis and therefore sold goods more cheaply. The Advertiser declared this belief erroneous since the farmers had merely banded together as "mutual protectors" in order to prevent monopolies from taking advantage of them. It then asked, "Merchants have their boards of trade, professions their clubs, mechanics their unions, why not farmers?"

While the Advertiser recognized that local businessmen would have to sell at a lower margin because of Grange commercial activities, it did not believe the town merchants could be superceded entirely because farmers could not purchase all of their necessities from wholesale houses. Furthermore, the Advertiser viewed the Grange agent as just another middleman, and one who was treated unfairly at that since Grangers expected him to be able to fill all their orders at a moment's notice. Some assumed the agent was willing to bargain over the price and extend to the farmer such courtesies as a cradle free of charge with the sale of a harvester in order to guarantee a sale. Such requests were so frequent that the Nebraska Patron assumed it was only a matter of time before someone would ask an agent to "throw in a boy" to operate the machine as a condition for the sale of a corn planter.

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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. 3

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 to 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." 4

Closely associated with Grange efforts to sell grocery and
merchandise 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.
"plant, located at Fremont, in 1874. The Grange sold its manufacturing to the railroads to get machinery. A parallel decrease in the price of corn cultivators also reduced the price of machinery. The factory produced about half a million of corn cultivators that could sell and consequently make a profit.

As a result of that success, the state agent William McCraig of Lecompton, Kansas, asked the farmers who had joined the Order to pay the creditors of the Nebraska Grange. McCraig, a state agent of the Order, now found himself in a difficult position. The debt of the Order reached $100,000, and McCraig had to pay the creditors of the now defunct Lecompton plant to keep the Order alive. He succeeded in selling the Nebraska Grange to 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.

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 1870s 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.

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.

The organizational problems of the subordinate Granges were general throughout the state. Eureka Grange No. 388 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
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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 erops 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1908 the National Grange contemplated "vigorou s 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, feneeposts, 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
Grange authorized the printing of subsequent monetary donations among those who were most destitute, I do not have the means to sustain the state. Grange exhausted its All of these factors—low prices, session in 1893 served to retard the state. Grange's membership experiencing another year of severe state. Grange remaining, looking back from the second failure of the organization. Despite 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.19

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2 Nebraska Grange, July 3, 1873; Nebraska Advertiser, July 3, 1873; Central Union Agriculturalist, January, 1874.

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3 Charles W. Pearson, "The Deterioration of the Grange Movement," Popular Science Monthly, XXXII (January, 1888), 196; Nebraska Advertiser, April 10, 1874; Exemplar Grange No. 20, Granger Records, Nebraska State Historical Society, hereafter cited as NSHS. George H. Simmons in A. E. Sheldon, January 6, 1878, Granger Records, NSHS; B. S. Cowles to Nebraska State Historical Society, no date, Granger Records, NSHS.

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4 Nebraska Advertiser, April 9, 1874; Nebraska, Rich Harvest, 21.

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7 Report of the Committee on Relief, December 16, 1874; Granger Records, NSHS; National Grange, Proceedings, 1873, pp. 32-76; Central Union Agriculturalist, January, 1875; James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1950), p. 342; National Grange, Proceedings, 1876, pp. 18, 56-57, 114. In 1875 the National Grange gave about $1,000 to Patrons who suffered losses from the grasshopper invasion in Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, and Minnesota.

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8 Olson, History of Nebraska, pp. 185, 187, 190; Buck, The Granger Movement, p. 196; Frank Dixon, "Railroad Control in Nebraska," Political Science Quarterly, XXII (December, 1896), 580, 633.

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9 Dixon, History of Nebraska, p. 185, Nebraska Patron, July 1, 1875.
* Nebraska Patron, March 3, 1879. West Butler Grange No. 479, Grange Records, NSHS.

* E. S. B. Beachler, secretary of the Nebraska State Grange, to John S. Mathen, secretary of the Exalted Grange, January 12, 1878, Grange Records, NSHS.

* Records of the State Grange of Nebraska, NSHS: National Grange, Proceedings, 1867, pp. 27-29.

* Records of the State Grange of Nebraska, NSHS.

* National Grange, Proceedings, 1888, pp. 56-57; Ollon, History of Nebraska, p. 225; Records of the State Grange of Nebraska, NSHS.


* National Grange, Proceedings, 1886, p. 30; ibid., 1913, pp. 27, 80-81; ibid., 1913-1914.