

# Agrarian movement had lasting impact



Courtesy, Glenbow Archives

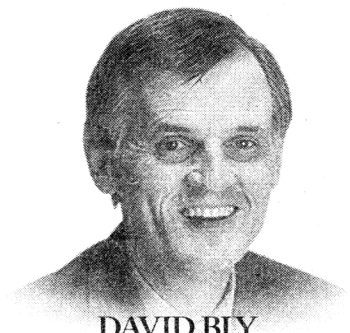
**The first executive of the United Farmers of Alberta, shown in January 1909, included, standing from left, George MacDonal, A. Von Mielichi, George Long, president James Bower, an unknown gentleman, Rice Sheppard and, seated, E.J. Fream, secretary-treasurer.**



Calgary Herald Archive

**Irene Parlby, above, and Henry Wise Wood, below, were prominent leaders during UFA's heyday.**





DAVID BLY

HERITAGE

## UFA left its mark on Alberta's political culture

A group of Albertans got together and talked over their concerns: corruption in party politics, banks making obscene profits, eastern interests exploiting the West and a federal government knowing little and caring less about what happens west of Ontario.

It wasn't a Canadian Alliance constituency meeting last week; it was in 1908 as leaders of two agrarian groups, the Alberta Farmers Federation and the Society of Equity, met to discuss common concerns.

From that meeting came the United Farmers of Alberta, one of the greatest populist movements in the history of North America, according to Bradford Rennie, Western Canadian historian and author of *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy* (University of Toronto Press).

Rennie, speaking to the Chinook Country Historical Society, said the UFA was one of the most notable of agrarian movements in North America.

"Alberta's prosperity owes a lot to the UFA and the movement that gave rise to the UFA government," he said this week.

It was the UFA government that persuaded the federal government to give Alberta control of its own land and resources, clearing the way for the province to reap its share of oil revenues.

The UFA and its adjunct organization, the United Farm Women of Alberta, left an indelible mark on Alberta's political culture, Rennie said. It was the first of several populist movements to sweep the province and it established the pattern of one-party dominance and political non-conformity.

Those who formed the UFA didn't set out to be a government. Their aim was to influence the government and established parties.

"The UFA had a great deal of success with political pressure at the provincial level," Rennie said.

The Liberal government in Alberta was persuaded to pass the Direct Legislation Act, for example, as a result of pressure from the UFA.

But the UFA was not successful in bringing about lower tariffs, one of the issues that galled farmers the most.

Farmers had to sell on the international, openly competitive market, he said, but had to buy goods produced in a protected domestic market. They felt squeezed between the free market and the tariffs.

The UFA was part of the Siege of Ot-

---

tawa in 1910, when more than 800 farmer delegates marched on Parliament Hill. Their demands to Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier included, among other things, reciprocal trade with the United States, better trade arrangements with Britain, federal ownership and operation of grain terminals, a more flexible Bank Act and an end to freight rate discrimination.

Laurier was largely unconvinced, although he made vague promises. But the delegates were not discouraged — they had organized a national demonstration and had been heard in Ottawa.

The event took on mythical dimensions for the UFA, Rennie writes, and became a symbol of self-respect for the agrarian movement.

The demonstration influenced Laurier's government to draw up a reciprocal trade agreement with the United States. Reciprocity became the focus of the next national election, but the anti-reciprocity movement, among whom were some defected Liberals, won the day and the Conservatives came to power.

The Conservatives immediately ditched the reciprocity agreement and the farmers realized they would have to start taking direct political action.

Still, the UFA continued to function as a powerful pressure group. Under James Speakman, the organization succeeded in persuading the Alberta government to hold a referendum on the prohibition of alcohol in 1915.

"The liquor interests were blown sky-high," Rennie said, "and Prohibition was implemented in 1916."

The UFA was also at the forefront in agitating for voting rights for women and, as a result, women in the Prairie

provinces got the right to vote in provincial elections in 1916.

"The UFA believed that if women were given the vote, they would clean up society," Rennie said.

Women in the UFA formed the

---

## QUOTABLE

“  
The UFA  
had  
a great deal  
of success  
with  
political  
pressure  
at the  
provincial  
level  
”

**BRADFORD RENNIE,  
HISTORIAN**

United Farm  
Women of Al-  
berta in 1916.

While it was an adjunct to the UFA, the UFWA had representation on the UFA's board.

The first UFWA president was Irene Parlby, who worked for various causes, including women's property rights and improved rural health care.

"Women such as Irene Parlby did a lot to improve the quality of life in rural areas," Rennie said.

Parlby later became one of the Famous 5, the women who succeeded in convincing the British Privy Council that women were persons, clearing the way for the appointment of women to the Senate.

She also served as minister without portfolio in the Alberta government from 1921 to 1935.

The UFA influenced many aspects of Prairie life, holding picnics, forming local bands and sponsoring Chatauquas, those travelling shows

that brought education and entertainment to small towns.

But the UFA wasn't able to make the political inroads it sought. By the end of the First World War, farmers were fed up, believing the established political parties were riddled with corruption and of little use to them. The last straw came when Prime Minister Robert Borden reneged on a campaign promise and cancelled the conscription exemption for farmers' sons.

In 1918, the UFA moved toward direct political involvement by forming a central political association. In 1919, a UFA candidate from Cochrane won a provincial seat in a byelection.

Henry Wise Wood, whom Rennie calls the UFA's greatest leader, did not want to form a new political party, convinced that would cause the UFA to fall apart.

He believed in a theory he called "group government," with representation by occupation. The various groups of occupations would be forced to come to a consensus on policies, rather than succeeding in implementing policies that favoured one group over another.

Rennie said Wise Wood was not a flashy orator, but commanded loyalty because of his sincerity and integrity.

In 1921, hoping to catch the UFA unprepared, the Liberals called a snap provincial election. To the surprise of many, including themselves, the UFA candidates swept into power with a majority. The Liberals have never governed Alberta since.

Wise Wood refused to take the premier's post, and it was offered to Herbert Greenfield. John Brownlee became premier in 1925 when Greenfield resigned.

Rennie said the UFA provided competent, honest government. Brownlee is known to many as the premier forced to resign because of a sex scandal, but Rennie said the scandal was not a major factor in the defeat of the UFA in 1935.

The voters were disappointed that the UFA had not banished the problems of the Great Depression, and transferred their loyalties to another populist movement, Social Credit.

The UFA never regained political power, but its legacy is still felt to

---

CONTACT DAVID BLY AT 235-7550

OR E-MAIL HIM AT BLYD@THEHERALD.SOUTHAM