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Seeds of Change: Farm Organizations in Depression and Post-War Utah

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Farm organizations have made distinct contributions to the national political process, at least since the founding of the populist inspired Farmers Alliance and National Grange during the post-Civil War period. Although farm organizations routinely proclaimed their impartiality, both national parties solicited their support.

During the depths of the 1930s depression the Utah Farm Bureau Federation united with a majority of Utahns to cast its lot with reform-minded Democrats. Utah joined in the 1932 Democratic sweep by supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt for president; and by electing Democrats in both of the state’s congressional districts, a Democratic governor, and a majority of Democrats to the state legislature. Voters even favored first-time candidate, Elbert D. Thomas, over veteran Republican Senator, Reed Smoot.1

As Roosevelt prepared to launch the New Deal in 1933, Thomas emerged as one of his...
ardent supporters. Until the close of World War II, the Farm Bureau, along with a majority of rural Utahns, also embraced Thomas’s faith in expanded government and regulated economic activity.

The first farm bureau in Utah had been organized in 1915, shortly after Congress created the Cooperative Extension Service through the 1914 Smith–Lever Act. This act, designed to bring the latest agricultural research directly to the farmer, provided for cooperative funding agreements between the states and federal government, and established formal relations between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Utah Agricultural College, the State’s land-grant college. The USDA, through the States Relations (Extension) Service, supported the employment of extension agents at the college, to be placed within each of the state’s counties. Agents would provide instruction on farming practices, based on research emanating from the college. Local farm bureaus acted as an organizing arm for the College Extension Service, where the agents often worked formally with local leaders to build a constituency of farmers, and encourage participation in Extension Service programs.

This model worked particularly well in Utah. Until late during the nineteenth–century, the LDS church had encouraged cooperation and promoted self-sufficiency. The church greatly influenced how agriculture developed on Utah’s small irrigated farms, predisposing Mormon farmers to the type of cooperative organization that the Farm Bureau proposed.

The Farm Bureau and the Extension Service were practically indistinguishable during their infancy, an arrangement that benefitted both organizations. It enabled Extension personnel to reach a much wider audience, while allowing the Farm Bureau the opportunity to profit from increased membership. In 1916, the various county farm bureaus met in Salt Lake City and formed a state organization. Three years later, the Utah Farm Bureau Federation joined with other state organizations to become a member of the American Farm Bureau Federation. The Farm Bureau’s rise to become the nation’s largest farm organization within the span of a few years was directly tied to its relationship with the Extension Service.

Concurrent with its national affiliation, the Utah Farm Bureau entered into commercial agreements with farmers, while it lobbied for legislation

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2 Among other accomplishments, Thomas sponsored legislation which created the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Department of Education and Public Welfare, and the National Science Foundation. See Paul Jennens, “Elbert D. Thomas” in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Kent Powell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 557–58 For more inclusive detail see Frank Herman Jonas Collection, Ms. 641, Box 80, folders 8 and 19; Box 81, folders 14–17; and Box 83, folder 7, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. Hereafter referred to as Jonas Collection.

3 In 1932, Thomas carried all rural counties with the exception of Millard, Garfield, Piute and San Juan. Most importantly, he carried the major agricultural counties of Cache, Box Elder, Utah and Weber. See Secretary of State, Election Papers 1932–1936 (microfilm), Utah Reel 561, no. 12, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. Hereafter SCA.


favorable to its rural membership. The Farm Bureau had been actively campaigning for farm relief throughout the 1920s. In 1923, it was instrumental in securing passage of the Agricultural Co-operative Marketing Act, Utah’s counterpart to Congress’s Capper-Volstead Act. Together, these legislative initiatives allowed farmers to market their products collectively.

The Co-operative Marketing Act also enabled farmers to form associations that could collectively bargain with powerful corporations. Under the auspices of the Farm Bureau, its members in Cache County, for instance, organized the Sugar Beet Growers Association, and the Canning Crops Growers Association, to successfully negotiate a higher price for their produce with the Amalgamated Sugar Company and the California Packing Company.

Such leverage naturally ran counter to corporate interests, which denounced cooperative principles as having no legitimacy in a free enterprise system. “When all other schemes to undermine the movement fail,” bemoaned Utah Farm Bureau Secretary Tracy Welling, “when the opposition can no longer appeal to prejudice, it argues...that the principle is unsound and...all cooperation will finally result in disaster.”

Other Farm Bureau efforts to leverage the farm economy during the 1920s agricultural depression met with similar opposition from conservative business interests. When President Coolidge vetoed Congress’s attempt to raise domestic farm prices through the 1927 McNary-Haugen Bill, offering the farmer nothing more substantial than his condolences, Utah Farm Bureau Secretary M.S. Winder dismissed the President’s overture of sympathy. “Farmers don’t want sympathy!” he exclaimed. “All they ask is an intelligent understanding of the problems of agriculture and a square deal...”

The Utah Farm Bureau, along with its parent affiliate, enthusiastically...

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7 V. Allen Olsen, As Farmers Forward Go: A History of the Utah Farm Bureau Federation (Salt Lake City: The Federation, 1975), 20-23.
8 Ibid., 48.
9 Ibid., 37.
supported New Deal measures. Farm Bureau officials in Utah urged their county affiliates to support the New Deal’s 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), an “allotment plan for controlling surpluses by paying farmers to keep a percentage of their acres out of production.” Whenever, Utah Farm Bureau President, Ward Holbrook, reflected upon the penury of the farm sector, he confessed to feeling “very much as Lincoln… when he first beheld the auction block of human slavery.”

Even after the Supreme Court ruled the AAA unconstitutional in 1936, the Farm Bureau continued to champion farm subsidies through a system “based on soil conservation,” and urged that the newly created Soil Conservation Service be used to implement this plan through an association with the Extension Service. The national organization also participated in drafting a new Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1938, one which the courts ultimately found acceptable, and which continues to shape the nation’s farm policy to the present day.

New Deal farm programs allowed the Farm Bureau to exploit its relationship with the Extension Service. As administration of the AAA, along with other New Deal farm programs, “depended almost completely on the Extension Service’s county agents…,” the Farm Bureau continued its relationship by using agents to help bolster its membership. Between 1933 and 1940, national membership swelled from 163,000 to more than 500,000. The Utah Farm Bureau experienced a similar expansion, as its membership more than tripled during the same time period.

This chart outlines the relationship of legislative, executive, and administrative bodies for promoting and enhancing agriculture in Utah.
It was only after New Deal agencies, such as the Soil Conservation Service and the Farm Security Administration, began asserting their independence from the Extension Service that the state and national organization withdrew its support for New Deal programs. The Farm Bureau became less devoted to Democratic policies after 1940, and turned increasingly acrimonious to these following World War II.

Much of this reversal followed the election of Allan B. Kline as President of the national organization in 1947. Characterized as an “evangelist of free enterprise,” the dutiful Iowan re-inserted the sanctity of free-enterprise and free-market capitalism back into the national farm economy debate.

As the relationship between the Farm Bureau and Democrats chilled following the war, the relationship between its chief rival, the National Farmers Union, and Democrats warmed. The Farm Bureau and Farmers Union diverged particularly over President Truman’s new farm plan, unveiled in 1949 by Secretary of Agriculture, Charles Brannan. In most respects, Brannan’s proposal to maintain and invigorate the national farm economy simply endeavored to continue the system of price supports and subsidies begun under Roosevelt, which the Farm Bureau had helped to effectuate. It included a combination of purchase agreements, production payments, direct-purchase of agricultural commodities, and government loans. Significantly, however, Brannan also proposed appropriating even larger sums to provide cash payments to farmers whose income fell below that of comparable professions. Republicans generally, and the Farm Bureau in particular, denounced this as a measure certain to render the farmer forever dependent on the largesse of Congress. Utah Farm Bureau Secretary, Frank G. Shelley, observed that such “a program would simply mean government handouts to farmers and the end of free-enterprise in agriculture.”

Conversely, Farmers Union President, James Patton, asserted “the right of farm families…to be able to earn incomes equivalent to those earned by people in other walks of life.” Patton argued that “it is high time that we junk the idea that farm prosperity is based on price alone….Parity means equality in all things—in incomes, in schools, in roads, in markets, in parks and playgrounds, in recreation.”

The Farmers Union organized in 1902, and confined most of its early activity to the cotton-country of east Texas and adjoining states. Following
World War I, the Farmers Union spread to the upper South, Midwest, and Northeast, where a loose confederation of state organizations enjoyed great autonomy. The parent organization consolidated power only after the 1940 election of James Patton as its President.23

Patton helped mold the Farmers Union into a substantial, though fragile, national coalition, after having headed the state organization in Colorado during the 1930s. As part of the Colorado Union he had launched a mutual insurance company, which merged with the national organization in 1937. The availability of insurance attracted many new members, and because the company “was chartered...on a fraternal basis, Patton could use its salesmen to organize Farmers Union locals.”24

The Farmers Union established its first Utah local at Emery County in May 1948, where forty families affiliated, and immediately enrolled in the Farmers Union insurance program. In August, Patton visited the fledgling association, and by September, organizers had launched additional locals at Millard, Duchesne and Uintah counties.25

The sudden emergence of the Farmers Union in Utah, attributable in part to its insurance program, spurred the Farm Bureau into launching its own company in 1949.26 The competition between the two insurance companies would eventually extend to encompass additional commercial

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23 Dyson, Farmers’ Organizations, 224.
24 Ibid.
26 Olsen, As Farmers Forward Go, 62.
enterprises that supplied farmers with seed, feed, fertilizer, gasoline and automotive products. The rivalry for preeminence in the farm supply and insurance businesses further aggravated a growing ideological divide between the two organizations.

The Farmers Union had long resented the cozy association between the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service. Even though in 1921 the USDA and Farm Bureau had agreed to circumscribe the activities of county extension agents by limiting them only to educational outreaches stipulated under the terms of the Smith–Lever Act, a 1948 USDA investigation revealed a number of states in which the affiliation between Farm Bureau and Extension led to inappropriate activities.27 Extension and Farm Bureau leaders in Utah had immediately established their own accords following the 1921 agreement, as Salt Lake County Agent, Vere L. Martineau, reported his faithful observance of these restrictions. Agents no longer participate “in commercial activities…,” Martineau declared, “nor in any projects…of a political nature.”28

While the USDA did not mention Utah specifically in its 1948 report, solidarity between the Farm Bureau and Extension Service was evident. The Extension Service lauded the Farm Bureau for its support and urged extension agents to reciprocate by giving “assistance to…the Farm Bureau in the counties where [it] was the predominant farm organization.”29

Of particular importance to the Extension Service was the Bureau’s intercession following Governor J. Bracken Lee’s election in 1948. Arguably one of the nation’s most conservative state executives, Lee’s election created a dilemma for the Farm Bureau. Following the war, it had abandoned its support of progressive policies, and joined ranks with conservatives who, like Lee, associated Democrats with high taxes and bloated budgets. Lee eagerly cut taxes and slashed budgets, and was never reluctant to sound the alarm of encroaching government. Lee believed, as did his supporters, that the most effective way to curb the expanse and expense of government was to “cut taxes,” and deliberately decrease state revenues so legislators would have “less money to spend.”30 When it came to curtailing the state’s budget, no agency escaped the governor’s sharp pencil, or his sometimes even

27 “Extension – Farm Bureau Relationships,” USDA, May 1948. Contained in the Walter K. Granger Collection, Ms. 5; II, Congressional Work; D, Studies; Box 2, Folder 11, Special Collections, Gerald R. Sherratt Library, Southern Utah University, Cedar City, Utah. See also Block, The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service, 14.
28 These accords are discussed in Utah Extension News (Logan, Utah) 3 (December 1922), 2. Quote is from the Annual Report of the Salt Lake County Agent, 1922, 2, Series 19.2/1-1. SCA.
29 Meeting of the Utah County Agents Association held January 10, 1950, Series 19.1/2-1:33. SCA.
sharper tongue. “Let ‘em holler!” Lee retorted, as many did when he trimmed budgets by as much as 40 percent.31

Lee assured newly appointed Utah State Agricultural College President, Louis L. Madsen, that he would have his support if he asked “only for the real necessities.”32 Unseasoned to the usually combative process of preparing the state’s budget, the artless young president obliged and declared that the college shared the governor’s “spirit of economy.” Madsen nevertheless advised Lee that his bare-bone budget would necessitate a cut “in services,” and while he accepted these as “emergency measures,” he expected the governor to restore the “deficiencies...as soon as economically feasible.”33 The skeptical governor rewarded Madsen’s pledge of economy by reducing funds to the College’s Extension Service by an additional 33 percent.34

The Farm Bureau had generally approved of the Republican Party’s slogan to vote “Republican straight for good government in ’48.”35 Notwithstanding this newly formed alliance with conservatives, the Farm Bureau commenced lobbying the state legislature to restore the Extension Service budget, arguing that cuts to its programs for the control of soil erosion, bovine tuberculosis, and Bang’s disease, would impose a hardship on farmers, and create a significant health risk.36

While the Farm Bureau successfully persuaded the legislature, Lee

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31 Lythgoe, Let ‘em Holler, 54-55. The statement comes from the title of Lythgoe’s book.
32 Papers of Louis L. Madsen, series 3.2/8-1, box 46, folder 2, SCA.
33 Ibid.
34 Lythgoe, Let ‘em Holler, 125. The amount of the budget reduction is found in the “Annual Report of the Extension Director, 1953,” Series 19.17/1. SCA.
36 Lythgoe, Let ‘em Holler, 56.
remained unconvinced, and promptly vetoed the revised appropriations bill. The Farm Bureau persisted and after “considerable jockeying back and forth between the governor, both houses of the legislature and the joint appropriations committee….,” secured additional funds, although still nearly 14 per cent below what President Madsen had requested.37

The Utah Farm Bureau took particular umbrage when Utah Congressman Walter K. Granger introduced his so-called Divorce Bill in 1950. This bill, which Granger reportedly submitted on behalf of Farmers Union organizers in Utah, would have separated state farm bureaus from the Extension Service, and thus deprived farm bureaus of their important partner.38

Utah Farm Bureau President, John H. Schenk, reiterated his unwavering compliance with the 1921 guidelines when he appeared at the 1950 congressional hearings on Granger’s divorce bill. He intimated that passage of Granger’s bill would have little effect on Utah. Although Schenk speculated that it may prohibit Utah Extension workers from enjoying the customary slice of cake and glass of lemonade with local community members at the conclusion of an Extension program, he otherwise labored to find any deleterious consequences for the state.39

37 Annual Report of the Extension Director, 1953, Series 19.17/1, SCA.
Beyond inhibiting the social activities of county agents, Granger’s bill, according to the commonly held view expressed by Schenk, assured “complete federal control” of the Extension Service. Witnesses called to oppose Granger’s bill repeatedly denounced it as an encroachment of the federal government, one witness even describing it “as un-American as the tenets of Lenin…” In the political climate of the early 1950s, such comparisons to the Soviet Union, however absurd, were enough to cause cowering legislators to recoil from even the most salutary of proposed initiatives. Much as would befall the Brannan Plan two years later, the divorce bill died in committee, with all Republicans and eight Democrats voting to table its reporting.

Granger’s purported attempt to restrain the nation’s largest and most influential farm organization had grave consequences for Utah Democrats in the 1950 elections. The Farm Bureau singled Granger out as the “Number One enemy of a free, independent American agriculture.” Its contempt for Granger extended effortlessly to include fellow Democrat, Senator Elbert Thomas, especially after he imprudently acknowledged to a crowd of farmers in Cache County that he usually deferred to Granger on agricultural matters.

While political advertisements in Utah frequently lampooned Democratic candidates Elbert Thomas, Reva Beck Bosone, and Walter Granger as communists, the Republican National Committee targeted Thomas specifically for defeat in the election of 1950. Hoping to “create doubt and fear in the mind of the voter…,” it enlisted the services of veteran political propagandist, Walter Quigley, to pen a thin but devastat-
ing invective remarkable for its disregard for the truth.46 The United States Senate News, Utah Edition, succeeded in consistently misrepresenting Thomas’s positions on all issues of public policy. Furthermore, Quigley ornamented this “yellow rag” with cartoons depicting Thomas as a puppet of organized labor, a crony of socialists, and a spokesman for the American Communist Party. The newspaper circulated to every Utah voter with an address or phone number. More than two hundred thousand copies were mailed out, only days before the election.47 The effective smear campaign enabled Wallace F. Bennett to handily defeat Thomas.

Thomas may have been conditioned to endure the slings and arrows of his political opponents, but not those of his church, to which he had devoted his life. Only days before the 1950 election, the LDS church-owned newspaper, Deseret News, prominently displayed a picture of American Farm Bureau President, Allan B. Kline, and President of the LDS Church Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, David O. McKay, which conveyed the “unmistakable message that the Mormon Church approved of Kline, the Farm Bureau, and Republicans.”48 Furthermore, the LDS Church Law Observance and Enforcement Committee circulated a letter just prior to the election that urged members to “vote on the basis of principle... and

47 Jonas, “Political Dynamiting,” 135-47.
48 Cowley and Nielson, Thunder Over Zion, 166. Photograph was published in the Deseret News, November 3, 1950.
to seek the counsel of their Bishop if they wished further advice as to the candidates.” Accompanying the letter was a list of preferred candidates that conspicuously omitted Thomas’s name.49

LDS church leaders received President Truman’s Fair Deal policies as unfavorably as they had Roosevelt’s New Deal. Yet, despite their opposition, the New Deal, along with other approaches at reordering society, remained popular among church members.50 During much of its early history the church had endorsed unconventional approaches. Until early in the twentieth century, the co-op store was at the ubiquitous center of most Mormon communities. Church leaders also encouraged some communities to adopt church founder Joseph Smith Jr.’s United Order, a societal arrangement founded on social justice and economic principles heretical to free market capitalism.51 Not until statehood during the 1890s, did the church relinquish its former emphasis on these alternative social and economic models.

While the church’s leadership became increasingly conservative as the twentieth-century progressed, the ideal of cooperation remained deeply entrenched within Utah’s farming communities. Some church members perceived the 1930s economic depression as an opportunity to renew this cooperative spirit and campaigned to reinstitute the United Order. Dean R. Brimhall, head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for Utah, observed how “pressure groups” within the church had frequently beseeched LDS church leaders to reprise the United Order. Brimhall maintained that the state legislature’s appropriation of forty thousand dollars to “establish a self-help cooperative board [was] in response to such pressure.”52

Utah became the first state to legislatively sanction the growing national self-help movement, which encouraged mutual aid and cooperation between consumers and producers. As Brimhall rightly asserted, Utah’s legislation grew directly from the earlier efforts of Benjamin B. Stringham, who in 1931 formed the Natural Development Association (NDA). Inspired by historic Mormon alternatives to capitalism, the NDA promoted a barter system, and issued scrip as a means of exchange. It proscribed the use of

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50 In 1936, when the LDS Church’s First Presidency ventured to sway church members from their Democratic allegiance by accusing Franklin Roosevelt of “promoting unconstitutional laws and advocating Communism,” public out-cry over the Desert News editorial was deafening. See D. Michael Quinn, Elder Statesman: A Biography of J. Reuben Clark (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 81. See also Brian Q. Cannon, “Mormons and the New Deal: The 1936 Presidential Election in Utah,” Utah Historical Quarterly 67 (Winter 1999): 13-16.
51 The Law of Consecration and Stewardship, or the United Order, was established as part of historic Mormonism through a revelation that Joseph Smith claimed to have received. See Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Section 82, 15-19. For a social and economic analysis of the United Order see Gordon Eric Wagner, “Consecration and Stewardship a Socially Efficient System of Justice,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1977).
52 Papers of Dean R. Brimhall, Ms. 114, Box 29, folder 1, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.
money, adopting Stringham’s belief that where “there is no money…there will be no enticing, inducing and deceiving…”53 Despite Stringham’s aversion to money, he had a talent for generating it. The NDA’s business volume skyrocketed from a mere fifty-seven dollars in January 1932 to more than seventy-two thousand dollars by October. By 1933, the organization could boast of having nineteen trading partners in six states, and a membership of thirty thousand.54

The LDS Church First Presidency responded to the movement’s meteoric rise by strongly condemning it as “revolutionary and socialistic in character…” They admonished “members…not to identify themselves with it…”55 The NDA’s success, however, soon overwhelmed its ability to keep adequate records, as inflation rendered the repeated issue of scrip practically worthless. Whether caused by poor business practices or church censure, the NDA ceased to exist by July 1934.56

Still, the NDA’s popularity throughout depression-era Utah pointed to an acute need for a more stable organization that could better articulate cooperative principles, and act as a clearinghouse for community projects. In an effort, perhaps, to circumvent the inevitable opposition that the LDS church would bring to bear, Stringham lobbied for state legislation to create the Self-Help Cooperative Board.57

Established in 1935, the Self-Help Cooperative Board began immediately to use its forty thousand dollar state appropriation, plus matching federal funds, to make no-interest loans to qualified organizations consisting of “unemployed and low income people.”58 Projects included farm and garden cooperatives, canneries, lumber mills, and coal mines. The board hoped to foster self sufficiency among project participants where produce “grown on the farms and gardens and canned at the canneries could be exchanged for lumber from the saw mills and coal from the mines.”59 Unlike the NDA, however, the Board realized little success. Over half of the thirty-seven funded cooperatives disbanded during the first year.

Hoping to sustain those projects that remained solvent, the Board created the Utah Cooperative Association (UCA) in 1936 to centralize the exchange and distribution of commodities between the remaining cooperatives, and to act as their purchasing and selling agent. The UCA affli-

57 Summit County Representative and President of the Utah Federation of Labor, Paul Peterson, shepherded the legislation through to its passage on March 25, 1935. *Ibid*. See also Joseph A. Geddes, “I Remember the Utah Self Help Cooperative Board,” Papers of Joseph A. Geddes, Ms. 75, box 3, folder 4, SCA. Hereafter Geddes.
ated with the Consumer’s Co-operative Association, a regional distribution center based in Kansas City, Missouri, to make wholesale purchases, as well as to broaden the market for local products.60

This was the second attempt by the Consumer’s Co-operative Association to establish itself in Utah. In 1931, it had partnered with the Farm Bureau to establish a network of automotive service stations. The Great Depression, however, simply overwhelmed the service station venture. In 1936, the Consumer’s Co-operative Association reacquired the service stations from the Farm Bureau and sold them to the UCA.61

Until the end of World War II, the relationship between the Farm Bureau and the UCA remained cordial. The UCA continued to provide Farm Bureau members with discounts on oil and gas after they assumed ownership of the Bureau’s service stations. In fact, farmers seemed to have no preference whether they obtained their supplies through a cooperative affiliated with the UCA, or one affiliated with the Farm Bureau.

Nevertheless, competition between the UCA service stations and the Utah Poultry and Farmers Cooperative, the Farm Bureau’s flagship cooperative, which by 1948 had grown to become the state’s largest wholesale cooperative, rendered both enterprises less profitable.62 After reviewing these competing interests, the USDA recommended joining the two organizations and in 1953 dispatched cooperative expert, Joseph G. Knapp, to effect the merger.63 Post-war politics, however, had led to hostile relations between the UCA and the Farm Bureau, which were further exacerbated by the UCA’s relationship with the bureau’s rival, the National Farmers Union.

60 Ibid., 70.
61 Ibid.
62 Founded initially as the Central Utah Poultry Exchange in 1923, the Utah Poultry and Farmers Cooperative now operates as the Intermountain Farmers Association. In 1969, Farm Bureau discontinued the Utah Agricultural Marketing Association, which had served to centralize its cooperative enterprises since 1923, and established the Farm Bureau Service Company as an incorporated business model. See Olsen, As Farmers Forward Go, 99-100.
63 J. Warren Mather, Coordination of Cooperative Supply Purchasing Activities in Utah, USDA Farm Credit Administration special report, no. 161 (July 1946), 51-52. Papers of the Utah Cooperative Association, Ms. 129, box 3, folder 3, SCA. See also Notes Covering Ben Lomond Hotel Conference of Utah Farm Cooperative Leaders, August 31, 1953, Geddes, box 3, folder 1, SCA.

The West Millard Co-op Gas Station.
In 1950, UCA acquired the Kelly Seed Company from Paul Kelly, who had led the 1948 effort to organize the first Farmers Union local in Emery County. In October 1950, UCA discontinued its contract to cooperatively supply oil, gas, and automotive products to Farm Bureau members. In 1952, the UCA officially affiliated with the Farmers Union, when the latter agreed to invest more than one-hundred thousand dollars with the association.64

The Utah Poultry and Farmers Co-operative and the UCA were both amenable to the merger then being orchestrated by the USDA, but UCA ties to the Farmers Union proved too much for the conservative Farm Bureau to accommodate. The Bureau simply could not tolerate “the entanglement that would grow out of UCA affiliation with [Farmer’s Union],” insisted President John Schenk.65 Secretary Frank Shelley ruefully recorded how the Farmers Union “has come into Utah and advocates policies and ideologies which we cannot agree with. We could never bring ourselves to agree that earnings from a business we support should go to advance such programs.”66

Ideological differences became intractable after the Farm Bureau published its contention that the Farmers Union was a “Communist-dominated” organization. The Utah Farm Bureau Board of Directors met in October 1950, and endorsed a “firm stand on the principles and issues as presented by the American Farm Bureau Federation….Vigorous opposition will be taken towards those who have opposed these principles,” the Farm Board stated. “This action applies to candidates for National, State and County Offices.” The board pointed out how “Senator Thomas and Representative Granger had been in opposition to Farm Bureau in every instance where their department of Congress was involved…. The board singled out Granger for exhibiting “his evident animosity toward farm organizations (except the Communist dominated Farmers Union).”67

In November 1950, the National Farmers Union responded by filing a libel suit in the United States District Court for Utah, claiming that the Farm Bureau had “in a document accompanying a letter addressed to various…members…published of and concerning…that the Farmers Union was Communist dominated and a Communist organization.” The Farmers Union sought judgment for the “false and defamatory publication,” which it claimed had “injured… their reputation and… their business.”68

District Court Judge Willis W. Ritter presided. Prior to his judgeship,
Ritter had championed the New Deal and campaigned for Utah Democrats. He, along with Warwick (Rick) C. Lamoreaux, had effectuated Senator Thomas’s nomination in 1932.69 Ritter also worked for Thomas’s reelection in 1938, and again in 1944. Upon the retirement of Judge Tillman Johnson in 1949, Thomas rewarded Ritter by nominating him for this vacated judgeship.70

Between September 1949 and June 1950, Ritter endured several long, contentious Senate confirmation hearings, which scrutinized his politics, national loyalty, and personal conduct. Utah’s junior Senator Arthur V. Watkins led the charge against him, producing witnesses who challenged Ritter’s Americanism and devotion to the Constitution.71

One can only imagine Ritter’s delight as he looked down from his judge’s bench to find defendants representative of his political enemies, who now were captives in his court. He could have had no more favorable a forum from which to even old scores, such as the “communist” and “fellow traveler” charges leveled against him at his confirmation hearings, as well as those that destroyed his friend, Elbert Thomas, during the 1950 campaign.72

Adding further intrigue to the proceedings, Rick Lamoreaux appeared as the lead attorney for the plaintiffs. Ritter’s amicable relations with Lamoreaux, his enduring friendship with Thomas, and his activism on behalf of the Democratic Party must certainly have been known to the defense team. These veteran litigators, A.H. Nebeker and C.N. Ottosen, reportedly advised their client to settle out of court, and although the Utah Farm Bureau was willing to acquiesce, “its parent organization was not.” The national organization “encouraged its Utah affiliate to seek total

68 National Farmers Union Service Corporation v. Utah State Farm Bureau Federation, defendants. United States District Court of Utah, Central Division, Civil no. 1923, Transcript of the Record, Complaint, November 27, 1950, 22-23. Hereafter referred to as Farmers Union v. Farm Bureau (record).
69 Cowley and Nielson, Thunder Over Zion, 41–46.
70 Ibid., 109.
71 Ibid., 140–60.
72 Ibid., 169. See also Jonas, Political Dynamiting, 146.
victory,” hoping to prove in a legal forum that its ideological rival and commercial competitor did indeed advocate communism. The trial revealed the spuriousness of the communist allegations directed against the Farmers Union. Robert McManus, a journalist who testified on behalf of the defense, and who frequently served as consultant to the American Farm Bureau, admitted that he had been the source of the Utah Farm Bureau’s offending phrase. Characterized by one writer as the “master of guilt by association,” McManus’s acknowledgment clearly reinforced the Farmers Union’s suspicion that the American Farm Bureau and the Republican Party had been the real perpetrators of attack. 

The jury awarded the Farmers Union a $25,000 judgment, nearly $250,000 by today’s standards. Although it remained the dominant farm organization in Utah, the Farm Bureau diminished in stature as a result of its defamatory campaign against the Farmers Union, which was too much for many Utah farmers to bear. By following the lead of its national affiliate the Utah Farm Bureau discovered that it can be costly to practice the politics of paranoia.

The casualties from such practices were, of course, littered widely across the 1950s political landscape. The outcome of this political carnage in Utah, however, appears to have been a general moderation back to the political center. For the next two decades, the state legislature remained almost evenly divided between the two national parties, as Utah voters supported moderate policies of elected officials who sought consensus, and concentrated on developing the state’s resources, encouraging economic growth, and supporting the state’s young population by providing opportunity through education. Furthermore, as funds for reclamation projects, roads, and defense facilities poured into the state, Utah’s congressional delegates, regardless of party affiliation, worked harmoniously to maintain this flow of federal dollars and to assure the continued prosperity of farm and factory. By 1971, the federal government was contributing nearly 35 percent of the state’s general revenue, more than ten times the amount it contributed in 1951.

Remnants of the brash conservatism that characterized the immediate post-war period still persisted. Governor J. Bracken Lee’s unrepentant support of Senator Joseph McCarthy during his censure by the U.S. Senate in 1954, coupled with his inflammatory criticism of President Eisenhower for failing to reverse the Democratic policies of his predecessors, likely cost

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74 Farmers Union v. Farm Bureau (record), minute entry, May 18, 1951, 28. The phrase “communist dominated organization” was used by U. S. Senator, Styles Bridges (R–NH), a past secretary with the New Hampshire Farm Bureau, in a two hour harangue delivered on the floor of the Senate. See Field, Harvest of Dissent, 90.
75 Field, Harvest of Dissent, 70–72, 134.
76 Crampton, The National Farmers Union: Ideology of a Pressure Group, 161.
77 Statistical Abstract of Utah (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1973), 140–41.
him a third term as governor in 1956.78

Not even Eisenhower's Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, Jr., a devoted anti-statist, dared try to reverse entrenched national farm policies and wean American farmers from the federal teat. Benson commanded enormous respect in Utah, where he served concurrently as an apostle in the LDS church. In 1954, he issued an executive order that officially separated the Extension Service from state farm bureaus, essentially implementing Representative Granger's failed 1950 divorce bill with a single stroke-of-the-pen.79 Neither locally nor nationally did the Farm Bureau contest Benson's display of federal authority, although both had accused his predecessor, Charles Brannan, of orchestrating a federal coup d'etat when he had supported Granger's legislation.80

Upon concluding his service to the Eisenhower Administration, an unbridled Benson affiliated with other ultra-conservatives, including retired FBI agent, author, and embattled Salt Lake City Police Chief, W. Cleon Skousen, who proclaimed in print what Benson had pronounced from the pulpit: that the communist conspiracy was real, that it posed grave dangers, and that it must be extirpated. Although neither acknowledged actual membership in the organization, both Benson and Skousen openly endorsed, supported, and defended the John Birch Society, a right-wing, anti-communist, fringe organization founded in 1958.81

Except to a resolute, but shrinking, coterie of like-minded conservatives, Benson's political pronouncements generally played poorly throughout

78 Lythgoe, Let 'em Holler, 163-66, 203-207.
81 In 1963, Utah State University professors analyzed a speech given by Benson at the Logan LDS Tabernacle. They concluded that “about one-third of the speech came from the John Birch Blue Book without any reference to the source.” Published in 1959, the Blue Book consisted of a long speech given by John Birch Society founder, Robert Welch. See Papers of Clyde Stewart, Record Group 17.11:45, Box 1, folder 5, SCA. For additional insight see D. Michael Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, Extensions of Power, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 66-115. The society's methods and beliefs during the 1960s are discussed in Max P. Peterson, “The Ideology of the John Birch Society,” (Master's Thesis, Utah State University, 1966). In 1963, the LDS church renounced the John Birch Society, particularly the effort by
Utah. Furthermore, Utah farmers had grown weary of J. Bracken Lee’s obstinate penny-pinching.

As governor, he had twice defied the State Legislature, and again locked-horns with the Farm Bureau, when he vetoed bills to rebate taxes for gasoline used in tractors and other off-highway farm vehicles.\(^2\) The governor’s actions so incensed the Farm Bureau that it even offered a tacit endorsement to one of Lee’s Democratic challengers during the 1952 Utah Democratic primary election.\(^3\)

Lee had also gutted the Utah Water and Power Board’s construction fund, which farmers relied upon for improving irrigation systems, and for building storage reservoirs.\(^4\) The fund would not be fully restored until George D. Clyde replaced Lee as governor in 1956. While the Farm Bureau enthusiastically supported Clyde’s actions, he disappointed conservatives like J. Bracken Lee who opposed any measure that he construed as an entitlement. The “price of freedom is the same to you as it is to everyone

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\[^3\] UFBF News, August 1952.

\[^4\] State of Utah, Second Biennial Report of the Utah Water and Power Board to the Governor of Utah, for the period of July 1, 1948 to June 30, 1950, 1. See successive reports for information on subsequent appropriations.
else,” Lee disdainfully informed his farm constituency, “a little hardship when times are adverse.”

The number of farms in Utah declined precipitously from 16,500 in 1965 to 12,000 a decade later. Furthermore, legislative reapportionment, which the federal judiciary mandated in 1963, effectively eliminated the political advantage that rural counties had enjoyed. Political power shifted decidedly to the more populous counties along the Wasatch Front.

Federal legislation enacted during the 1970s to address environmental concerns, limit grazing, and provide greater access to public lands, further contributed to a sense of powerlessness in Utah’s hinterland. The widening gulf between progressives, who favored this new federal authority, and conservatives, who did not, created tensions throughout the interior West, and propelled the Utah Farm Bureau back to the forefront of state politics.

Perhaps it is inevitable that politics periodically erupt in populist furor. Utah’s brief period of political equanimity abruptly ended during the 1970s. The calculated actions and reactions from the ideological extremes on both sides of the political center rekindled the embers of intolerance that had ravaged the political landscape during the post-war period. In 1953, at the apex of their bickering, UCA Board member, Joseph A. Geddes, had encouraged greater cooperation between his organization and the Farm Bureau. Citing historical examples ranging from the Puritans through the Mormon pioneers, Geddes implored both parties to “become more tolerant,” to declare how “differences in ideology overemphasized are a menace to cooperation. Only increased tolerance…,” he implored, “can enable us to live in peace and work in peace.” It was as important then as it is now to heed Geddes’s call for a civil political discourse.

85 Lythgoe, Let ’em Holler, 59.
86 Utah Agricultural Statistics, (Salt Lake City: Utah Department of Agriculture, 1980), 8.
87 Until 1954, the Utah Constitution granted each county at least one House seat. Senate districts likewise remained unchanged from the original 1895 Constitution, which organized Utah into twelve districts consisting of eighteen senators. This situation obviously empowered rural counties, and made the state legislature disproportionately favorable towards agriculture. The UFBF had long been committed to maintaining this imbalance, and even after the legislature passed a reapportionment bill in 1954 to have the Senate apportioned by population, lobbied successfully to maintain the imbalance in the House. See UFBF News, May 1954. Not until 1964 did the courts strike down the constitutional requirement for each county to have one representative. See White, The Utah State Constitution: A Reference Guide, 122.
88 Notes Covering Ben Lomond Hotel Conference of Utah Farm Cooperative Leaders, August 31, 1953.