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Ambitious Beginnings: The Early Life and Political Career of William Langer

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AMBITIOUS BEGINNINGS: THE EARLY LIFE AND POLITICAL CAREER OF
WILLIAM LANGER

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2000

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

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This thesis, submitted by Eric Rogness in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This thesis meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements for the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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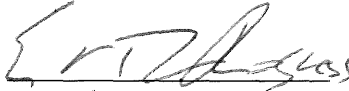
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To My Mother

ABSTRACT

This essay examines William Langer's early life and political career until his abortive attempt to become governor of North Dakota in 1920. It argues that William Langer was a man driven by a need for status. It was this quest for status that drove him to politics and explains his rapid rise through the ranks. It also explains the large degree of publicity and controversy that permeated his early career. He was a man who wanted to stand out, he wanted recognition by his peers, and he wanted public office. Publicity and controversy served those ends. Moreover, I feel that in order to understand the post-1920 Langer, it is necessary to understand the early Langer who laid the foundation for a forty-five year career in North Dakota politics.

In order to undertake this study, it was necessary to consult a vast array of sources. William Langer's personal papers have provided the bulk of the material cited. Regional newspapers have also contributed much to the work at hand. The *Fargo Forum*, the *Grand Forks Herald*, and the *Bismarck Tribune* are only a few. A multitude of secondary sources have also added their voice. Most were works that dealt with North Dakota politics, such as Robert Morlan's preeminent work on the Nonpartisan League, *Political Prairie Fire* and Edward C. Blackorby's, *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke*. Also invaluable to this study were the many unpublished master theses that covered the period in question.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

William Langer was a North Dakota phenomenon. No other word can describe his career so aptly. For forty-five years, his presence dominated North Dakota's political scene. His slightest whim could send ripples through the volatile waters of the state's machinery, earning the gratitude of some and the hatred of others. He led a career of controversy and publicity. As state's attorney, he made headlines by zealously enforcing the law in Morton County, and as attorney general, he created a furor by attacking the Nonpartisan League. Later as governor, he made headlines again by declaring a moratorium on debts and an embargo on wheat shipments leaving the state. After being elected senator, he made a reputation as a "maverick," often voting against his own party.

It is only natural that William Langer's career has attracted the attention of scholars. Two books, a host of master theses, and multiple articles have been devoted to the study of this political dynamo. It would be safe to say that every aspect of his life has been examined. Why then is it necessary for yet another work on William Langer? The answer to that question lies in an oversight by other historians: none have truly addressed his ambitious personality as it emerged in his early life and political career. To be sure, some have touched upon the issue in their writings, but more often than not, it is glossed over. Langer is typically portrayed as a heroic fighter for the common people of North Dakota. His actions as a politician are usually attributed to an unselfish desire to right the

many wrongs within the state and rarely does he emerge as a self-focused political hopeful.

No where is this more apparent than in John M. Holzworth's book *The Fighting Governor*. Holzworth documents William Langer's life up to his third term as governor in 1938. The author, a former classmate of Langer's from Columbia University, published the book shortly before the latter entered his first race for the United States Senate. Consequently, the work reads like a 133-page campaign circular. Langer is portrayed as a demigod whose sole purpose in life is to bring relief to the long-suffering farmers of North Dakota. He is a savior, a selfless crusader devoid of any ambition outside of his quest for justice. Offering no analysis or objectivity, *The Fighting Governor* is perhaps a more fitting example of propaganda than biography.¹

Agnes Geelan's 1975 book, *The Dakota Maverick*, is a full-length study of William Langer's life. The author documents his controversial political career and hints at some of the man's underlying ambition. However, Geelan's work is laudatory and stops short of offering a truly objective study of his motivations. Her work is more of a tribute to Langer than an analysis. Like Holzworth, she too portrays Langer as a noble figure working for the betterment of North Dakota. She fails to offer any conclusions that might detract from this heroic image of William Langer.²

This is also true of Glenn H. Smith's article "William Langer and the Art of Personal Politics." Smith provides a succinct overview of Langer's political career with

¹ John M. Holzworth, *The Fighting Governor* (Chicago: The Pointer Press, 1938).

² Agnes Geelan, *The Dakota Maverick: The Political Life of William Langer also known as Wild Bill Langer* (Fargo: Kayes Printing Company, 1975).

little analysis. Like Holzworth and Geelan, he depicts Langer as a crusader whose sole political motivation stems from his strong moral character. There is no room in his work for a self focused William Langer. All of his actions, according to Smith, were for the benefit of North Dakotans.³

The numerous master theses that cover Langer's early career follow a similar course. The most notable of these are Ronald Olson's "William Langer's Rise to Political Prominence" and Elaine J. Weber's "William Langer: The Progressive Attorney General (1917-1920)." Olson's work is a narrative that documents Langer's career to his election as attorney general in 1916. His focus is on the intricacies of Langer's political campaigns. He does not attempt to explain any of the politician's motivations. However, in his conclusion, Olson does hint at some underlying ambition driving the young William Langer to higher political office. Unfortunately, like Geelan, he does not expand upon this point.⁴

Elaine Weber, unlike the others, gives an in depth explanation for Langer's early political actions. She argues that Langer's motivation stemmed from his belief in the progressive sentiments then sweeping the nation. His zealous enforcement of progressive measures, she argues stemmed from his belief in the "perfectibility of man". While Weber offers a compelling argument, it smacks of the "heroic thesis" offered by Holzworth, and ultimately falls short of the mark.

³ Glenn H. Smith, "William Langer and the Art of Personal Politics" in Thomas W. Howard ed., *The North Dakota Political Tradition* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981).

⁴ Ronald Olson, "William Langer's Rise to Political Prominence" (Masters Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1967); Elaine J. Weber, "William Langer the Progressive Attorney General (1917-1920)" (Masters Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1967).

Other theses have given a cursory examination of his early career. James T. Ertresvaag's, "The Persuasive Technique of William Langer," highlights some of Langer's more controversial actions. Like Geelan, he touches upon Langer's ambitious side commenting that, "He seems . . . to have done nothing quietly." Ertresvaag's focus, however, is on the politician's campaign techniques not his impulses, and like the others tends to credit Langer's motivations to a firm sense of right and wrong. Gordon W. Johnson's, "William Langer's Resurgence to Political Power in 1932," is in a similar vein. He documents Langer's early career, focusing on his involvement with the Nonpartisan League. However, he too portrays Langer as a man who simply sought to right the wrongs within his state.⁵

While these theses do not portray Langer in the same saintly fashion as Holzworth and Geelan, they show a hesitancy to analyze Langer's political ambition. All seem to ascribe Langer's controversial political actions to moral indignation. For example all, save Olson, argue that Langer attacked the NPL in 1919 because it was not fulfilling its promise to the farmers of North Dakota. That is a ready explanation and one that Langer himself promoted. However, it is one that only scratches the surface of his motivation. This essay, for instance, will show that he attacked the NPL not on the behalf of farmers but in a risky gambit to become governor in 1920. There was more to William Langer than met the eye. The present work ferrets out the ambitious side of William Langer that for too long has been hidden in plain view.

⁵ James T. Ertresvaag, "The Persuasive Technique of William Langer" (Masters Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1960), 34; Gordon W. Johnson, "William Langer's Resurgence to Political Power in 1932" (Masters Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1970).

To accomplish that task this essay will examine Langer's early life and political career until 1920. This is a significant period for several reasons. It was during this time that his ambitious nature first emerged and also when he burst upon North Dakota's political scene. Something extraordinary happened during those early years. In 1911, twenty-four year old William Langer returned to his home state as an obscure attorney. By 1920, he was a strong candidate for governor. This era more than any other gives a window into his political identity. Indeed, understanding this period of his life is essential in understanding the entirety of his career.

This essay will argue that William Langer was a person driven by an inner need to stand out. It will show that his early career was fashioned by this ambitious need for status. He was a man who simply wanted to be recognized by his contemporaries. While many people share the same desire, Langer was willing to go to great extremes to see that he got the recognition he craved. Therefore, he was a publicity prone politician who cared little if the headlines he generated were favorable or negative. He wanted attention and a position of prominence within society. Creating controversy and achieving high office was a way to achieve those goals.

By no means a study in psychological history, this approach was inspired by extensive research into William Langer's personal correspondence, state newspapers and many secondary sources dealing with his career. An examination of those materials reveals a highly ambitious and controversial politician who, over a period of forty-five years, was scarcely out of the news. Langer never did anything quietly. He exhibited a pattern of behavior that followed him throughout his career. This essay will show that that pattern originates in his early life and career. It will also show that his impetus as a

politician, and his rapid rise in North Dakota politics, stemmed not entirely from a sense of morality and justice but from an ambitious need for recognition and status.

CHAPTER II

AN AMBITIOUS BEGINNING

William Langer, like most Americans, could trace his roots to foreign shores. His grandfather, Franz Langer, was born in an unidentified region of what would become greater Germany. In 1852 Franz, along with his wife Rosa and their two children - Frank and Joseph - immigrated to the United States. Arriving in New York with only four dollars, the family could not speak a word of English among them. Despite these obstacles, the family was able to strike out for the Midwest, and in 1861, they found a home near Plainview, Minnesota.⁶

At Plainview, Franz and his family were able to enjoy a productive life on their homestead. The two Langer children learned their letters and numbers at Plainview's schools even as they learned lessons from the land at home. The call of the Earth was strong in the two Langer boys, for in 1877 they set out to explore the free land being offered in Dakota Territory.⁷

The Langers found land that appealed to them in Everest Township near

⁶ Olson, 1; Lewis F. Crawford, *History of North Dakota*, vol. 2 (Chicago: The American Historical Society, Inc, 1931), 412; Geelan, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7; Crawford, 412.

Casselton. They were able to purchase three quarters of land with which to start their ventures in the territory. The family disposed of their properties within Minnesota and settled on their new farm in 1879.⁸

Frank Langer had wed Mary Weber in Minnesota on December 7, 1874. As a young girl, she had immigrated to Minnesota from Sandskon, Austria, with her family. In 1879 when they set new roots in their portion of the Langer property, they already had a daughter named Hattie. Through careful management and desire to increase his family's holdings, Frank was able to turn his initial 160 acres of land into 5000 acres by the end of the century.⁹

Frank Langer was not content to busy himself with only the day-to-day operations of the farm. Soon after arriving in the area, he immersed himself in the political and social scene of their new community. He was instrumental in organizing the area's first church, the Catholic parish of St. Leo and helped create the community's school district. A staunch Republican, he was elected to the fledgling state's first legislative assembly in 1889. There he represented the eleventh district of Cass County for one term. In what would be an ironic twist, Frank Langer was present at the legislative session that wrote a prohibition law into the state's constitution.¹⁰

Frank Langer was also active in the business sector. He was the director of the First National Bank of Casselton as well as a director of the Casselton First State Bank. He served as secretary-treasurer of the Cass County Fire and Lightning Insurance

⁸ Geelan 8.

⁹ Olson, 3; Johnson, 1; Geelan, 8.

¹⁰ Olson, 4-5; Geelan, 9-10.

Company, a company he helped build. Langer was also present in many different township offices and on the local school board. In addition, he had a reputation in the community for generosity. When a fellow farmer was in dire need of funds, he would often loan him the money necessary to carry on operations.¹¹

Energetic and ambitious, Frank Langer was very much an active member of his community. He was a well-to-do farmer, politician, businessman, and, in times of need, a generous friend. It would be safe to say that he held a position of status within his community. He could not have known that on the morning of September 30, 1886, when his wife gave birth to their fifth child, she not only gave him a son, but a virtual mirror image as well.¹²

William Langer followed four sisters into the Langer household: Hattie, Clara, Mary, and Adelaide. An additional child would follow: Frank. The Langer siblings grew up in an environment not only dominated by a politically and socially active father, but also in a household with strong ties to their Old World heritage. German was often spoke in the Langer home. In addition, Mary Langer spent much of her time aiding friends and neighbors from Austria in finding new homes in North Dakota. These cultural ties would later play a part in William Langer's rise to political office.¹³

The Langer children grew up in a world that was still very much a part of the American frontier. They received their education in one-room schoolhouses and their

¹¹ Olson, 5-6.

¹² Ibid.; Geelan, 11.

¹³ Ibid.; Olson, 3-4.

lives ebbed and flowed with the seasons. When William was four he entered the world of scholastics for the first time. Much like his father before him had in frontier Minnesota, Langer learned the lessons of farm labor in tandem with academics.¹⁴

At an early age, William was expected to contribute to the farming operation. As a child, he often served as water boy for the threshing crews. It was his responsibility to see that the steam-driven machines were supplied with enough water to function. At the age of ten, he was charged with recruiting hired hands for his father. Although filled with youthful vigor over his charge, men in Casselton met him with ridicule. However, something in Langer's personality inspired confidence in others. When his Uncle Frank became ill one spring, sixteen-year-old Bill took over his farming operation. For an entire season, from seeding to harvest, he controlled every aspect of his uncle's sizable farm.¹⁵

The influences Langer felt from his farm duties and perhaps more from his father's farming and political ambitions began to coalesce in the young man. In a letter to one of his sisters dated January 10, 1900, he wrote:

So you know my new plan when I get big, its this. Gordon S. [a childhood friend] and I are going to catch and raise sheep and take up a homestead and buy the land around it until we have 36 sections then we will put a fence around it and have gold tops on top of the posts and have a keg of beer on tap all the time and have cider and champane[sic] for the visitors. When we get as rich we want to we will sell our township and get married then we will be millionaire brokers and I will be President of the United States.

While only thirteen years old, he revealed an ambitious leaning towards status and politics. One could argue that this was merely the fantastic dream of a young boy and

¹⁴ Geelan, 12.

¹⁵ Ibid.; Olson, 8.

nothing more. However, it is obvious that his father's ambition was affecting his outlook on life. Frank Langer was a farmer and at times a politician, a dominant figure in the community. This letter may, in a sense, reveal the root of William Langer's later efforts to stand out: he was a boy who not only wanted to emulate his father, but surpass him as well. In the realm of political standing he would do just that.¹⁶

Despite his many responsibilities at home, he graduated from Casselton High School on May 27, 1904. Langer was an average student who engaged in extracurricular activities, such as football and literary societies. After graduation, his ambitious nature truly began to emerge. He was not content to remain on the family farm. Instead, he enrolled in the six-year-old Law College at the University of North Dakota. He was one of fifty-one students registered in the fall of 1904. There he enrolled in the two-year program and began working towards a law degree.¹⁷

In college, he attacked his subject matter with gusto. Rarely found outside the library, he became vice president of the junior law class, and displayed enough talent to be the representative of the law school in a campus wide oratory contest. While he failed to win the contest, he did pass the bar exam in the summer of 1906, impressing the board members with his grasp of the legal profession. At the young age of nineteen he was capable of entering the professional realm as a lawyer. However, Langer faced an insurmountable barrier; students could take the bar exam upon completion of their

¹⁶ Letter to unnamed sister from William Langer, January 10, 1900. Box 1, Folder 1, William Langer Collection, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks; hereafter referred to as Langer Collection.

¹⁷ Olson, 8-9; Geelan, 14.

degree, but according to state law attorneys had to be twenty-one years of age to be admitted to the bar. With two years until his twenty-first birthday, he was not content to sit idle and wait for admittance.¹⁸

Some authors, such as Ronald Olson, have argued that when he found out this fact after graduation he decided to go on to more education. This is highly improbable because if he had not known of this statute before he entered the law school, he surely would have learned of it during his two years studying to be a lawyer. Being aware of this fact would have given him ample time to prepare for more schooling after graduation.¹⁹

Moreover, he did apparently have a plan for after he left the University of North Dakota, because he went on to further his college education in the fall of 1906. Although the sources do not reveal it, it was probably with his father's financial backing that he set out for New York City's Columbia University that fall. Why did he choose Columbia? Perhaps it was the first college to catch the impatient youth's eye, or, perhaps it was the power and prestige inherent in such a large eastern university that drew him. It is hard to believe that this ambitious young man chose Columbia at a whim; it is much easier to believe that he chose the university because an ivy league education would make him stand out. As this essay has been establishing, and as the following paragraphs will attest, William Langer was a person who did not want to blend in to the background. By his very nature, he was a creature that had to inhabit the foreground.²⁰

¹⁸ Geelan, 15; Ertresvaag, 25; Olson, 11.

¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁰ Ibid., 12.

No where is this more apparent than in his years at Columbia. There are many stories and tall tales surrounding the time he spent there. In these stories, Langer is a cross between brash political mediator and social dynamo. According to one story, shortly after he arrived on campus a dispute broke out between the sophomores and freshmen. As the story goes, a group of sophomores had captured three of Langer's fellow freshmen at the University's yacht club and began pelting them with eggs. The president of the junior class, who instructed Langer and two others to go down and rescue their classmates, notified several other freshmen. Apparently, this did not satisfy the remainder of the freshmen class, for a riot ensued that ended in the destruction of the yacht club.²¹

The damage done totaled \$4700 and the university president was presented with the bill by the yacht club and asked to resolve the matter. A meeting was called between the sophomore and freshmen classes to debate the issue. Langer, according to the story, rose to the occasion and defended the freshmen with such persuasiveness that the president saddled the sophomores with the entire bill.²²

Another story involved Langer using force to aid his fellow students. As the account went, one of Langer's classmates and his date had entered a school dance intending to only stay for the first waltz. Soon after leaving, the couple realized they had left their coats on chairs near the dance floor. In their absence the dance hall manager took the coats and checked them into the coatroom. When the young couple approached the manager, he demanded that they pay for tickets and the checking fee before returning

²¹ Ibid., 13-14.

²² Geelan, 17; Olson, 14.

their coats. The offended couple then sought out Langer and asked for his assistance. Apparently, after some arguing with the manager, he was unsuccessful in securing the coats. Since no further progress was forthcoming, Langer took it upon himself to kick in the door to the coat locker, thus rescuing the garments.²³

Another story had Langer coming to fisticuffs with Kingdom Gould, the grandson of financial giant Jay Gould. During a hazing ritual, Kingdom Gould had allegedly pulled a gun, which he brandished towards the initiators. Apparently, this incident led to some animosity between Langer and Gould, for the two later came to blows, with Langer emerging as the victor.²⁴

While these are fascinating tales, they should be treated with a high amount of skepticism. Perhaps the best, if not only, window into Langer's life at Columbia, is the school paper the *Columbia Spectator*. An examination of the paper, for the years Langer was in attendance reveals no such occurrences on campus. While some of the lesser occurrences, of course would probably not have made the paper, it is reasonable to assume that \$4700 worth of damage inflicted upon the yacht club by a mob of enraged freshmen would have. That the campus paper would neglect to carry such a sensational story is improbable.²⁵

Ronald Olson and Agnes Geelan both point out that many of these accounts were told and recorded by Langer's friends when he was running for public office later in life.

²³ Geelan, 17.

²⁴ Olson, 15.

²⁵ *Columbia Spectator*, August 1906-May 1910.

The stories listed above were first recorded in September 1932, when Langer was campaigning for governor of North Dakota. It would be safe to assume that if there were seeds of truth surrounding these occurrences they flowered considerably when they were recounted two decades later. The fact that the tales in many ways resemble Langer's later brash actions as states attorney and attorney general would suggest that these were after-the-fact tales designed to aid Langer's 1932 bid for governor.²⁶

However, it must be pointed out that the stories above do fit the personality paradigm this essay seeks to establish. They show a young man striving to stand out amongst his friends and classmates. Perhaps the reason these tales are similar in manner to his later political career is that they reflect the continuity of his personality. And while the truth about his social life at Columbia may never be known, it should be pointed out that his classmates did vote him "the noisiest student, the most popular man on campus, and the one most likely to succeed." Even if the above stories are not true, it would appear that he did stand out amongst his colleges at Columbia.²⁷

His academic career also reflects this, for it is there that he really strove to achieve status within his college environment. He was a virtual whirlwind during his four years at the university. He was a member of the student board, the debate team, and the athletic association. He was also managing editor of Columbia's 1910 yearbook, assistant business manager of the school newspaper, and captain of the track team. His involvement in these campus activities led to him receiving the Rolker Award, which provided a cash prize of \$50.00 to the recipient. The award came to the senior recognized

²⁶ Ibid., 13-14; Geelan, 16.

²⁷ Olson., 22.

by fellow classmates as exhibiting distinction in academic achievement, student functions, or athletics. Despite this busy lifestyle, he graduated as class valedictorian and president of the senior class in the spring of 1910. His active life on campus truly reveals the profile of a young ambitious man seeking recognition.²⁸

Langer's activities at Columbia reveal much about his personality. His time there also exposes in some ways the direction he intended to take with his life. As will be shown, he had not given up his childhood desire for political office. In the senior class prophecies, he received a very revealing tribute that in part testifies to that fact. In the prophecy, the author foreshadowed Langer's future political career with an eerie accuracy:

To Washington was my next excursion and I hastened to the office of the third successful politician of our country who could at the same time be fearless and truthful. The first Lincoln, the second Roosevelt, and the third Bill Langer. He held no position except his seat in the Senate, but his influence pervaded Washington as subtly as it at one time did our own campus. When I entered the door to the inner sanctum I noticed above it was hung the old proverb, 'To the Victor Belongs The Spoils.' Optimistic Bill met me half way and he was the same old Bill always glad to have a fellow drop in on him no matter how busy he was.

Agnes Geelan attributed clairvoyance to the author of this prophecy. There is, however, probably a more mundane explanation for the author's accuracy. The prophecy suggests that Langer had made it well known to his classmates that he had an interest in politics. That the ambitious youngster had expressed an interest in public office is bolstered by the fact that his fellow seniors also voted him "the biggest politician". This prophecy, and the

²⁸ Ibid., 21-22; Geelan, 18.

comment by his classmates, suggests that, during his years at Columbia, Langer's status-driven personality was steering him towards a career in politics.²⁹

After graduating in the spring of 1910, Langer had a chance to begin his law career in the East. He received several job offers from law firms on the East Coast, the most prominent coming from the Wall Street law office of Francis S. Bangs, law partner of former President Grover Cleveland. Langer, however, chose to return to his native soil in North Dakota. The exact reasons for this decision remain unknown. One account, recorded by Ronald Olson, claimed that Langer promised his father he would return upon completion of his degree. However, as Olson himself points out, this story has little substance to support it.³⁰

Why then would he turn down these potential employers? Maybe he felt out of place in the East and simply longed to return home or maybe he was homesick. It would be easy to speculate endlessly on possible explanations for his leaving the East. However, a potential explanation fits Langer's personality. Perhaps he saw more opportunity within North Dakota for advancement than he did in the East. This at first appears to contradict the idea of a young man seeking to make a name for himself. Why would he turn down lucrative job offers in the East for the relative obscurity of his home state? Considering that he was a young man who wanted to stand out, a logical answer to that question appears.

It has already been established that he received recognition at Columbia. To be popular and well known in the closed confines of an eastern university was one thing, to

²⁹ Olson, 22; Geelan, 18.

³⁰ Ertresvaag, 25; Olson, 22-23.

stand out on the eastern seaboard quite another. Perhaps he instinctively recognized the problems inherent in trying to achieve a high level of status in a community that numbered in the millions, especially when there were countless others who surely shared the same goal.

If he was going to establish himself a name for himself and build a political career, the east undoubtedly appeared a poor choice to him. North Dakota on the other hand offered an attractive solution. In 1910 the state could boast of a population of only 577,056 while New York State for instance had a population of 9,113, 614. While small population size can be a detriment to a state in many ways, it would be a boon to Langer. He must have recognized that the quickest way to achieve recognition and establish a political reputation was to share the stage with as few other actors as possible. In the sparsely populated state of North Dakota he would be able to put his eastern education to work and establish a name for himself in short order. Simply put, there were less people he had to stand out amongst.³¹

Langer in fact shared this idea with a college acquaintance in May of 1911, when he put to pen an ambitious plan for the future:

I desire now to make a living and a record so I may one day become popular enough to be the most popular man in the state just like I was in college and be given some political office large enough to attract the notice of my former classmates in the East.

This is a very important passage for several reasons. It is here that the first concrete evidence emerges, showing that he intended to enter politics. However, more

³¹ Famighetti, Robert, ed *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*. (New York: Primedia Reference Inc., 1999), 385.

importantly, he revealed the reasons behind his desire to become a politician. He wanted to be “popular” and he wanted “to attract the notice of [his] former classmates in the East.” In other words, he wanted status and recognition, and he saw politics as a way to achieve those goals. One of course may argue that his words came as a boast or for some reason that will forever remain his own. However, there is a way to test the veracity of the passage above, and that is to compare it with his later actions in the political realm.³²

A pattern in William Langer’s life had begun to emerge. From his youthful desire to emulate his ambitious father, he strove to stand out. Attending two universities, he achieved a degree of status amongst his peers, and set his sights on public office. However, he was not sated. Craving a higher degree of recognition and status than he could possibly find in the East, he returned to North Dakota seeking to make a name for himself. Once in his home state, he would find opportunity to stand out as few other North Dakotans had done before.

³² Letter to Mrs. Charles M. Rolker from William Langer, May 18, 1911, Box 1, Folder 1, Langer Collection.

CHAPTER II

THE POLITICS OF AMBITION

The North Dakota that Langer returned to 1911 was only twenty-one years old, but it already had a rich and controversial political history that could be traced to its territorial origins. To understand this history it is necessary to look at the opening of the territory by rail and its exploitation by eastern business interests.

An economic identity for the future state of North Dakota began in the 1870s. It was in this decade that the railroads began to penetrate deep into northern Dakota Territory. The territory would have the advantages inherent in the lines that connected it to the eastern part of the country. Markets for goods produced in the state would have an outlet, while its inhabitants could partake of the riches of the east. However, this interconnectedness came with a price.³³

From the beginning North Dakota, farmers faced a depressing paradox. They farmed some of the most fertile soil in the world, but they were subject to outside interests that controlled the result of their productivity. The key to this paradox was North Dakota's fixation on wheat. In the 1870s the advent of the bonanza farm made clear to all the agricultural potential of northern Dakota Territory. The state's soil proved ideal for the production of wheat and it soon became the focus of production. The farmers of the region

³³ Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 131.

willingly fell under its spell and ultimately under the control of eastern financial powers.³⁴

Arrayed against North Dakota farmers were the railroads, and mills and elevators of the east. Having a monopolistic market, railroads were able to charge whatever prices they saw fit for the shipment of grain. Possessing no terminal elevator, prices for wheat were set by the whim of boards of trade in Minnesota and Chicago. These forces, from the very beginning, were able to insert their tentacles into the territory's, and later the state's, politics.³⁵

In North Dakota, these factors coalesced under the auspices of Alex McKenzie. Known as the boss of North Dakota, McKenzie was the puppet master of the state's government. Operating out of the Merchants Hotel in St. Paul, Minnesota, he was in effect the ambassador of the Northern Pacific. He not only represented the railroad but also the institutions dependent upon it, such as the mills and elevators, and banks and insurance companies. His job was to see that the territorial (and later state) legislators did nothing to impede the profitability of these bodies, thus rendering the state representatives, who did oppose the interests, ineffectual. Together they formed a complex economic web that ensnared the state's inhabitants.³⁶

Faced with a chronic lack of capital, farmers - many of them newly arrived immigrants ignorant of these nefarious practices - were at the whim of these powerful forces. These injustices would continue throughout the latter territorial years and well into statehood. While on the outside it appeared that the population accepted these

³⁴ Robert Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League 1915-1922* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985), 4

³⁵ Bruce Nelson, *Land of the Dacotahs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 253.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 253, 134.

practices with indifference, underneath it seethed with rage. This animosity would show itself in the late nineteenth century with the emergence of the Populist movement.³⁷

In 1892, the citizens of North Dakota elected Populist Eli C. D. Shortridge governor. Running with the campaign promise of a state-owned terminal elevator, the farmers of the state hoped he would break the yoke of outside interests. Despite the passage of legislation in favor of the farmer, the Populist movement in North Dakota died out due to the machinations of the McKenzie machine and the financial depression of 1893. By 1894, North Dakota was again firmly in the clutches of Alex McKenzie, and it would remain so until 1906. However, the idea of a state-owned mill and elevator would persist and be the cause of much debate in the future.³⁸

The iron grip of McKenzie's ring would not be broken until the early years of the twentieth century. It was in these years that the progressive movement swept across the nation. Spearheaded by such statesmen as William Jennings Bryan, Robert LaFollette, and North Dakota's own John Burke, this movement advocated legislative cures for societal problems, and the destruction of boss politics and trusts. It found the unrest in North Dakota fertile soil within which to take root.³⁹

One could argue that the growth of the progressive movement in North Dakota was a direct result of the McKenzie machine. Whereas McKenzie strove to monopolize the state legislature with the interests of his circle, the progressives sought to expand the democratic process and encourage more involvement by the citizenry. The movement

³⁷ Ibid., 255.

³⁸ Robinson, 224; Nelson, 256.

³⁹ Robinson, 255-256.

proved to be a popular rallying point for those who had long suffered under the rule of “Big Alex”.⁴⁰

North Dakotans showed their support for the movement in what has been called the “revolution of 1906”. In that historic year, the Republican Party that had long been under the control of McKenzie suffered a split. Those Republicans dissatisfied with the antics of machine politics broke away to form the Progressive Republican Party. Those that remained under the sway of McKenzie became the Stalwarts. When the state’s Democratic Party nominated John Burke for governor in 1906, the Progressive Republicans readily endorsed the ticket.⁴¹

Despite the great efforts of McKenzie, the reform platform carried the gubernatorial election of 1906. The alliance between the disgruntled Republicans and the heretofore obscure Democrats proved fruitful, and revolutionary. During the 1907 legislature they controlled the House and were able to pass such reforms as the direct primary law. Their standard bearer, John Burke, would win two more elections for governor in 1908 and in 1910, effectively destroying the house that McKenzie built. By 1911, the progressive alliance between Democrats and Republicans had reached its pinnacle of power, when it controlled both houses of the North Dakota legislature.⁴²

It was able to use that control to enact not only political reform but societal reform as well. The progressive movement had become a decisive and powerful force

⁴⁰ D. Jerome Tweton and Theodore B. Jeliff, *North Dakota: The Heritage of a People* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1976), 131.

⁴¹ Robert P. Wilkins and Wynona Huchette Wilkins, *North Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), 112.

within North Dakota. In the process of reshaping the state's political scene, it had destroyed the bane of honest legislator and average farmer alike: Alex McKenzie. Thus, in a sense, William Langer arrived in a state that had not only been knocked off its political axis, but was extremely open to reform-minded politicians. In William Langer's case, however, reform would soon become synonymous with publicity.⁴³

The year between Langer's graduation from Columbia and his final return to North Dakota was marked by socialization, sickness, and mystery. Soon after graduation, he was with friends at Long Island, New York, followed by a visit to the lakeside home of family friends in Minnesota. This relaxful fraternization, however, was overshadowed by illness. Throughout his final weeks at Columbia and his post-graduate social activity he had been plagued by appendicitis. In July of 1910, he returned to North Dakota and underwent a successful appendectomy at Devils Lake. This however, was followed by a bout of jaundice that laid him low for two months. In January, he had recovered sufficiently to make a trip to Mexico to partake in a business activity that marks perhaps the most enigmatic period of his life.⁴⁴

While at the University of North Dakota, Langer had become friends with an upper classman named William Lemke. This friendship continued after both had gone on to further their educations. While Langer had continued his education at Columbia, Lemke had gone on to the equally prestigious Yale University. There were many

⁴² Tweton and Jeliff, 132-133.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Letter to Mrs. Charles M. Rolker, May 18, 1911. Box 1, Folder 1, Langer Collection.

similarities between the two men beside their hunger for education. Both were of German descent, and were Catholic, but most importantly, both were highly ambitious.⁴⁵

In 1906, Lemke had organized the Black Earth Finance Company for buying Mexican lands. Lemke's dream was to transplant the American way of life to a small area located in the Mexican State of Sinola. The reason for wanting to establish this unofficial American colony was simple; Lemke saw the potential for huge profits when his company sold the lands it had purchased. With financial backing provided by investors, including Langer and his father, the company was able to raise \$400,000, enough to purchase 550,000 acres of land for resettlement. Of that acreage, 80,000 were deemed "rich agricultural land," valued, by the company, at \$20.00 an acre. Selling this land alone would have earned the company \$1,600,000, a profit of \$1,200,000. The remaining 470,000 acres were labeled rich in timber and grazing, and valued at \$1.25 an acre. The math was simple, and the potential for profit was clear.⁴⁶

It is no surprise that Langer convinced his father to invest in Lemke's scheme. All told, Langer's family invested \$34,000 in the company by the summer of 1909. As an ambitious man, seeking a position of status within society the monetary returns promised by the company would have been appealing. However, the profits that investors hoped for never materialized.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Edward C. Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* (Lincoln: University of Kansas Press, 1963), 12.

⁴⁶ Blackorby, 17.

⁴⁷ Olson, 19.

By May of 1911, the company that William Lemke and others had invested so much in would be in its death throes. The formation of the Black Earth Finance Company, later named and incorporated as the Land Finance Company in 1907, happened to coincide with one of the frequent periods of revolution that checker Mexican history. Plans for profit and resettlement were torn asunder as the winds of insurrection swept across Mexico. In January of 1911, despite occurrences of guerilla warfare throughout the country, the Columbia graduate went to Mexico to inspect the land his family had invested so much in. What follows is another one of those periods of his life, like his time at Columbia, that is highly questionable.⁴⁸

The story, which appears to vary in subsequent retellings, follows a basic theme. Langer arrived in Mexico in January and began inspecting the company lands. While thus engaged, he learned that rebel forces were approaching the company's holdings. Fearful of imprisonment, he notified Lemke who stubbornly refused to leave. Langer, apparently short on funds, demanded that Lemke give him money to get back to the states. Lemke gave him the money, and Langer then preceded to walk towards the border. On his sojourn he hitched a ride with two men in a Ford that, unbeknownst to him at the time, were also fleeing the rebel forces. Eventually the three were picked up by rebel troops. The two men who had picked him up were executed for some unrecorded grievance and Langer himself faced execution as well, until a timely escape saved his life.⁴⁹

That he indeed made a trip to Mexico in January 1911 is certain for he says as much in a letter that reveals much about the affair. In the course of his narrative, he

⁴⁸ Blackorby, 17-21.

⁴⁹ For three differant versions of this tale see Blackorby, 19; Olson, 19-20; and Geelan 19-20.

provided a rough outline of what occurred. Rebel forces had apparently captured large areas of Sinloa, and confiscated the company's guns and horses. Langer went on to write that "... their provincial control made my presence here any longer useless as business is paralyzed - so you see here I am bound for the United States again" He cheerfully added "... one year wasted . . . but . . . I learned quite a little Spanish, and regained my perfect health." The tone of the letter hints to the fact that Langer was still in Mexico when it was written and its casual nature suggests that he was not running for the border as the tales record. These factors point to the conclusion that something less dramatic happened in Mexico than has been recorded. This is supported by Ronald Olson, who points out that many the many versions of this story were based on a book written in the 1930's titled *Mexico Today* by an author with political ties to Langer. It also worth pointing out that later references to this story are based on oral interviews recorded forty or more years after the actual events. These facts combined would imply that perhaps Langer's later political career influenced the story's content, as was probably the case with the stories surrounding his life at Columbia.⁵⁰

The truth may never be known as to what actually happened during Langer's trip to Mexico. What is known is that Lemke's company failed, and while it would take decades to completely die, an immediate result was a cooling of relations between him and Langer. Another result was that Langer returned to North Dakota in May 1911 to begin his professional career, having received offers from two law firms in the state. The offers were remarkably similar, both came from old school friends who were state's

⁵⁰ Letter to Mrs. Charles M. Rolker from William Langer, May 18, 1911, Box 1, Folder 1, Langer Collection; Olson, 20; Blackorby, 283.

attorneys and both offered the position of law partner and assistant state's attorney. One was located in the city of Bowman, and the other in the city of Mandan. Langer chose Mandan.⁵¹

Money at first appears to have been the determining factor. At the law firm of H. R. Bitzing Langer was offered \$90 a month and a third of the business profits. An additional supplement to his income would derive from a side business that Bitzing operated, whereby he borrowed money from eastern banks at interest rates of 5-6% and then loaned it out to the surrounding community at 9-10% interest. Still reeling from the disaster in Mexico and already a year out of college, it is no surprise that Langer expressed interest in a ready source of income. However, there were undoubtedly more factors affecting his decision than he revealed.⁵²

One thing that undoubtedly influenced his decision was geography. A glance at any North Dakota map will reveal this point. Bowman is located in the far southwestern corner of the state - literally in the middle of nowhere - and with a population in 1911 of only 700 people, it undoubtedly looked like a city of limited opportunity. Mandan on the other hand, seated on the western bank of the Missouri River opposite the state capital at Bismarck, had a population of 3,873 in 1910, and was right next door to the hub of North Dakota's political activity. Mandan was an excellent opportunity for the ambitious young man.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 18; Geelan, 20; letter to Mrs. Charles M. Rolker from William Langer, May 18, 1911, Box 1, Folder 1, Langer Collection.

⁵² Ibid., Geelan, 21.

⁵³ Ibid., 21; Palma Fristad, *Historic Morton County: Early Days to 1970* (Mandan, North Dakota, 1970), 2.

Furthermore, Mandan was located in Morton County, the geographically largest county in the state. It had a population of 25,000 and a reputation as one of the most crime-ridden counties within the state. Accordingly, he would not run short of criminal cases. An additional factor, and one that Agnes Geelan eloquently pointed out, was that of the county's population, approximately forty-five percent were of Germanic descent. If this was a factor, it would mean that he was already considering the voting constituency in 1911. Whether these facts were instrumental in his decision is unknown, but it is apparent that of the two options Mandan was the better choice. It had a sizable population, but not too large, and it had potential for a practicing lawyer to build a reputation.⁵⁴

His decision made, Langer relocated to Mandan sometime in 1911. Once there he soon allied himself with the state's progressive Republicans. His choice of political affiliation comes as no surprise and is explained by several reasons. The Republican Party, with exception to the "revolution of 1906," had always been the dominant political entity within the state. Moreover, while the Democrats had gained a modicum of control with the election of John Burke, it had only been possible with the support of progressive-minded Republicans. He would not have passed over the Republican Party by joining the traditionally weak Democrats. To do so would have been political suicide.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Geelan, 22.

⁵⁵ Wilkins, 108.

Another reason is this, in Morton County the pro-McKenzie Republicans reigned supreme. By aligning himself with the Progressive Republicans, he affiliated himself with the state's prominent party while at the same time championing a popular cause: progressivism. Elwyn B. Robinson once commented that "For a time, everyone in North Dakota was a progressive, or at least wore a progressive mask." Langer was one of these individuals. By adopting the reform ideals of progressivism, he would be part of a prominent movement within the state. However, more importantly it would give him a springboard from which to launch a very public political career. After settling down in his new career and environment, that is exactly what he did.⁵⁶

The first two years of his life in Mandan were spent trying court cases and learning the nuances of the county. This would not remain the case for long, however. He was an obscure lawyer in a city of 3,873 people. He wanted attention, he wanted recognition, and he wanted public office. He knew that his name had to be recognizable to the only people who could put him there: the voters. In April 1913, he began a process that not only helped him achieve his objectives in Morton County, but also ultimately made him a household name across the state.⁵⁷

The case first broke on July 18, 1913. In April of that year, Langer took it upon himself to begin an investigation of properties leased out by the Northern Pacific Railroad in Morton County. With the aid of Bitzing, Langer's investigation turned up damning evidence against the railroad. For thirteen years, they found, railroad properties had been escaping taxation. Under North Dakota law at the time, any properties along the

⁵⁶ Robinson, 256.

⁵⁷ Fristad, 2.

rails that were used in conducting business were exempt from real estate tax. However, any property owned by the railroad not used for the direct purpose of conducting business, such as leased-out properties, would be required to pay the tax. Langer and Bitzing discovered that the Northern Pacific owed Morton County back taxes in the amount of \$48,000.⁵⁸

This action in Morton County had wide-ranging results. While Morton County would see a total of \$23,834 for the six years of back taxes, the entire state netted a much larger dividend. A year after the case first emerged, the Northern Pacific began to pay back taxes in all counties through which its lines ran. An assessment of the value of the land through the state that had been escaping taxation revealed that an astounding sum of \$4,000,000 would be added to the state's annual tax revenue. It was enough to reduce the annual tax per taxpayer by almost \$30.00.⁵⁹

A line in the *Mandan News* reported that "The affair is one of the biggest and most important legal matters ever brought up in the county." The case was not only important for the county, but for Langer as well. He had made headlines for the first time, and gained the attention he wanted. His name was now part of the public domain, and for the rest of his life, it would remain there. It is also important to note that the nature and timing of the case are both worth examining.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Mandan News*, July 18, 1913.

⁵⁹ *Bismarck Tribune*, January 20, 1915; *Mandan News*, August 14, 1914.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

As pointed out earlier, this was a very reactionary period in North Dakota's political history. The Progressives had risen to combat the hated "interests". They had gone toe to toe with Alex McKenzie and emerged victorious at the ballot box. Is it an accident that Langer attacked the most visible symbol of those powers - the railroad - as he began his journey towards political office? Probably not. Taking down the old powers within the state was, to borrow the slang term, the "in thing". Progressivism was a popular cause, and he was ready to champion it to get recognition.

The timing of this landmark case is also curious. Both Langer and Bitzing had political aspirations for 1914. In December 1913, expressing his intentions of running for the state senate, Bitzing announced that he would not seek reelection to the position of state's attorney. That this was known before hand by Langer is supported by a letter he received from North Dakota Congressman P.D. Norton on August 17, 1913. Norton, a fellow progressive, congratulated Langer on the discovery of the back taxes due Morton County and added that:

This is certainly a substantial find and one that can't help but meet with appreciation from the taxpayers of Morton County. I don't see any good reason why you should not accept the office of State's Attorney if your friends in the county want you to. The responsibility and experience of the position are both desirable.

The tone of the letter suggests that Langer was toying with the idea of running for state's attorney at least four months before Bitzing made his announcement. This would indicate that Bitzing had informed Langer of his decision before he made it public. One need not possess the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes to realize the timing of the case is convenient. That combined with their business relationship makes it quite possible that Langer and Bitzing conducted the investigation to be mutually beneficial. The fact that

the attack came as progressive sentiment marched across the state, and a year before the 1914 primaries, would suggest that this was a deliberate move by Langer to gain name recognition and a chance at the office of state's attorney. What better way to earn a reputation and votes than to strike a blow against the state's double-edged sword: the railroad?⁶¹

In April 1914 Langer and Bitzing dissolved their partnership in order to pursue their own interests. In that same month, Langer announced his intent to run for state's attorney of Morton County. The office proved to be a coveted one. By the time Langer announced his candidacy in April, four others had already announced theirs. All four were established lawyers in Morton County with considerable law experience behind them. Three of the candidates Louis H. Connolly, B.W. Shaw, and I.N. Steen were Republicans, and one, John F. Sullivan was a Democrat.⁶²

In February of 1914 the *Bismarck Tribune* reported "Politics Seething In Morton County." Indeed they were, for by all accounts Morton County politics had usually been mildly interesting affairs. The primary campaign of 1914, however, would be different. As the candidates fought it out for the Republican nomination, their struggles garnered statewide attention. In the end, Langer emerged as victor in the primary elections in June, receiving 995 votes compared to Connolly's 836, Steen's 773, and Shaw's 478.⁶³

⁶¹ Geelan 22; *Glen Ullin News*, December, 19, 1913; letter to William Langer from P.D. Norton, August 17, 1913, Box 1, folder 1, Langer Collection; Robinson 270.

⁶² *Bismarck Tribune*, April 6, 1914; Olson, 29-31.

⁶³ *Bismarck Tribune*, 24, 1914; *Mandan News*, July 3, 1914.

From the start, the campaign between the four Republican candidates had come down to ethnicity and sectionalism. It was during this campaign that Langer's Germanic heritage first garnered him political support. The western and southern areas of Morton County were heavily populated with people of German descent, and, while it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many German-Americans voted for Langer, they surely aided him in his bid for the Republican nomination. In some cases, he received almost every vote in predominantly German precincts.⁶⁴

Another factor in his victory was undoubtedly the year old Northern Pacific case. The *New Leipzig Sentinel* was very enthusiastic in that regard. The paper described Langer as the candidate who stood against the interests that dominated Morton County declaring that his three Republican adversaries were tools for the powers that ran the county. It must be remembered that by the spring and summer of the 1914 campaign season, Langer's case against the Northern Pacific had netted the county thousands in back taxes. It also cast him in the mold of a crusader for law and order.⁶⁵

During the campaign, Langer had to take a stance on the governor's race that must have caused him considerable unease. The two candidates for North Dakota governor were the Republican L.B. Hanna and the Progressive Republican Usher L. Burdick. As a member of the progressive faction, Langer was duty bound to support

⁶⁴ Olson 36, 34; Steen was viewed as the Norwegian candidate, Shaw the English, and Connolly the Irish, see Geelan, 22.

⁶⁵ Olson, 31; Olson has concluded that in addition to support from German-Americans, Langer's victory stemmed from several other sources. He argues that votes received by Steen and Shaw deprived Connolly of much needed votes and that Bitzing's endorsement of Langer added to the latter's lead. Secondly, he points out that a confusion of names on the county ballot deprived Steen of votes. Olson, however, fails to explain how Steen's lost votes would have affected the election results if both his and Shaw's votes were mere detractors from Connolly's close runner up

Burdick. In fact, Langer had been actively involved in the workings of the Progressive Republican League in Morton County from almost the beginning. Throughout the fall of 1913, he was in continual correspondence with influential League member, and North Dakota Congressman, P.D. Norton. Langer was Norton's link to political happenings within the state, keeping him abreast of events as they unfolded.⁶⁶

In addition Langer worked hard to organize support for Burdick within the county. He canvassed sections of the county to gauge where Burdick most needed to make campaign speeches. Langer also took it upon himself to answer campaign letters for Burdick. In all, Langer was very much an active part of the League program. In July of 1914, the Progressive Republican League officially endorsed Burdick as their candidate for governor. At the same meeting, Langer became secretary of the League, further cementing his allegiance to the organization.⁶⁷

In Morton County, however, the regular Republican Party held sway. Langer more than likely recognized that by supporting Burdick, he risked his own nomination at the primaries. For the state's attorney race Langer put party loyalty ahead of his own interests. Although Langer did secure the nomination, this would be the first and last time in his early political career that he would put loyalty ahead of his own ambitions.

After securing the Republican nomination in June, he wasted no time in getting on the road to secure the office in the fall election. His active campaigning almost produced

⁶⁶ Geelan, 23; for examples of Langer and Norton's correspondence, see Box 1, Folder 10, Langer Collection.

⁶⁷ This correspondence was usually by telegram, see Box 1, Folder 10, Langer Collection; Langer's response to campaign letters can be found in Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection; Republican Progressive League meeting minutes, July 17, 1914, Box 1, Folder 10, Langer Collection.

tragic results. While on the road, Langer's campaign car skidded off a muddy road and rolled over. Though the car was "demolished," Langer emerged with minor injuries. This did not slow down the eager politician for long. He was soon back in the field, in one instance touring thirteen Morton County towns in one week.⁶⁸

In addition to the time consuming, and apparently dangerous, aspects of the campaign, Langer embarked upon an ambitious letter drive as well. Fully recognizing the significance of the German vote in the primaries, Langer hired a local woman, miss Emma Brandt, to write campaign letters in German. While this woman's contribution to Langer's campaign has not gone unnoticed by previous scholars, it has been unappreciated. Often writing while sick, she turned out dozens of letters a day for Langer, eventually producing hundreds of them in German. While it would be difficult to gauge exactly how many people these letters influenced, Brandt's efforts were undoubtedly a component to his success.⁶⁹

During the busy fall campaign season, there came before Langer a golden opportunity. On September 24, 1914, a nineteen-year-old immigrant named George Harried was arrested by the Bismarck chief of police George Fortune for peddling without a license. According to Harried, Fortune and a patrolman by the name of Mason, confiscated his bag, which contained his sale goods and \$72 in cash, before throwing him in a cell. After an hour in lockup, Harried claimed that Bismarck judge W.S. Casselman approached him and told him he must immediately pay a \$25 fine or face ninety days in jail. After he balked at the suggestion, Harried claimed that Casselman threw insults at

⁶⁸ *Mandan News*, June 26, 1914, October 23, 1914.

⁶⁹ Correspondence between Emma Brandt and William Langer, Box 1, Folder 10, Langer Collection.

him and threatened to give him ninety days anyway. Harried relented and paid the fine. His persecutors gave back his belongings. After which, patrolman Mason threw him into an automobile, and dropped him off near the Missouri River. When Harried opened his bag, he found that approximately \$61.25 worth of goods and cash was missing.⁷⁰

That was the story presented to Langer when the youth, shortly after, walked to Mandan and secured his services. Why exactly the young man picked Langer is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that the latter saw potential in the affair. Here was another opportunity to get his name in the news and get the public's attention, only weeks before the general election. However, taking such a step surely involved great risk and may even have backfired. That Langer was willing to take the chance suggests that Fortune and his associates already had a reputation for such antics. Perhaps Langer recognized it was a sure thing.

Whatever the case, Langer wasted little time; he immediately began an investigation and secured a search warrant for the homes of all three of the alleged perpetrators. Securing the aid of a Bismarck constable, all three houses were searched. Goods belonging to Harried were found in Fortune's home, resulting in the arrest of Fortune, Mason, and Casselman. Langer had again made headlines, but he also had a campaign to consider.⁷¹

The intricacies of the state's attorney race between Langer and Sullivan have been documented elsewhere, but it is worth a cursory examination here. During the race,

⁷⁰ *Bismarck Tribune*, September 30, 1914.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

the split in the Republican Party proved to be a major issue. Cowed perhaps by his legal attack on the railroad and his audacious prosecution of the police chief case, the Stalwarts of the Republican Party no doubt anticipated a shake up in the county if Langer won. Accordingly, many Republicans cast aside party affiliation and voted for Sullivan in an effort to prevent a Langer victory.⁷²

Despite these political intrigues, Langer was the victor in the November elections. Langer's popularity was no more evident than in Mandan itself, beating Sullivan 83 to 29 in the first ward, 163 to 92 in the second, and 133 to 85 in the third. This pattern was reflected in many of the townships throughout Morton County. Where Langer won, it was usually by a large majority. The result was Langer 2062 and Sullivan 1623, a significant victory for the young attorney and the first of many rungs he would fashion as he constructed his own ladder to high political office.⁷³

Langer was not content, however, to coast through his final weeks as assistant state's attorney. In December of 1914, he again immersed himself in a case without precedent in North Dakota. This time the case involved a prohibition violation. While prosecuting an assault and battery case in early December, in which an owner of a garage in the town of Hebron had assaulted another man, Langer was privy to some very interesting details. Langer found out that the fight began over the quality of barreled wine stored in the man's garage. Apparently, the judge did not know of that particular tidbit of information, for he dismissed the case. Langer, however, was not prepared to let an

⁷² Ronald V. Olson gives an excellent account of the election, see Olson, 33-39

⁷³ *Mandan News*, November 6, 1914.

opportunity slip away. The informer's testimony had hinted that a large amount of wine was stored in the garage.⁷⁴

Langer secured the assistance of a deputy sheriff and conducted a silent raid on the man's property. Again, he hit pay dirt. Upon searching the garage owner's buildings, they found barrels of wine "stacked three high and four abreast". Liquor was found in several of the buildings searched, and the amount of spirits confiscated was staggering. All told, it equaled 4,850 gallons. There were so many barrels, law enforcement officers had to employ two freight cars to ship it to Mandan. It was the largest seizure of illegal liquor in North Dakota's history. It was a sensational raid and it made the headlines. North Dakota was rapidly becoming acquainted with William Langer.⁷⁵

Once in office Langer expanded upon his philosophy of publicity by keeping his name in the news. Multiple authors have reported that on his first day in office Langer swore out 167 warrants for the arrest of prohibition violators and miscreants. This number appears to have originated in John M. Holzworth's 1938 book *The Fighting Governor*. Holzworth, who was more concerned with propaganda than historical truths, appears to have grossly inflated the number. A slightly lower tally comes from a campaign circular during Langer's bid for attorney general, which claims seventy-four warrants were issued the first day. However, a much lower, and more realistic number

⁷⁴ *Glen Ullin News*, December 11, 1915.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* For further examples of December 11, 1915, headlines see, *Bismarck Tribune*, *Mandan News*, *Fargo Forum*, and *Minot Daily Tribune*.

was reported by the *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, in which it stated that Langer issued thirty-four warrants his first day of office.⁷⁶

Regardless of how many warrants he issued that day, once state's attorney he did not let lawbreakers rest. He was a whirlwind as he traversed the county conducting raids and investigations. Rarely did a month go by that he did not make a headline. In January, he raided a "HOUSE OF ILL FAME." According to *The Mandan News*, the "place was operating in full blast" when Langer raided the establishment at 2 A.M. By the end of January, he had arrested over 100 violators of liquor and vice laws. Many malefactors, fearing the executive net settling over the county, fled before they too were arrested. More importantly for him, however, was the fact that he was remaining in the papers on a continual basis.⁷⁷

In February, he took it further; he accused officials in Bismarck of not doing enough to enforce the law. In a very brash action, and one surely designed to garner attention, Langer wrote letters to the Burleigh County State's Attorney, the Attorney General of North Dakota, the Speaker of the State House of Representatives, and the Lieutenant Governor. He wrote the officials to inform them that the capital city of North Dakota was awash with "blind pigs, bawdy houses, and gambling joints." This fact, he wrote, was making his job of cleaning up Morton County even more difficult. The Burleigh County State's Attorney fired back demanding that Langer come up with the

⁷⁶ Holzworth, 6; Undated campaign circular, Box 1, Folder 18, Langer Collection; Agnes Geelan has reached a similar conclusion based on slightly different evidence, see Geelan, 26; *Bismarck Tribune*, January 10, 1915.

⁷⁷ *Mandan News*, January 29, 1915; *Bismarck Tribune*, February 6, 1915.

proof for the alleged violations. While the state papers thought the accusation sensational, they did not record Langer's response to the state's attorney's demand.⁷⁸

Langer did not draw the line at enforcing the law upon blind piggers and vice operators. In February 1915, he began a campaign against violators of North Dakota's blue laws. All pool halls and theaters were to be closed on Sundays. Not even the federal government escaped his grasp, when the construction of a new United States Post Office continued into Sunday, Langer issued warrants for the arrest of eight construction workers on site.⁷⁹

By April of 1915, Langer was beginning to achieve statewide recognition. In that month, Langer received a letter from Devils Lake lawyer D.V. Brennan. A close friend of Langer's, Brennan was an individual who possessed an uncanny understanding of the state's political climate. During the course of Langer's early political career, he would be an essential figure, often serving as advisor and mentor to the young man. On April 30, he wrote:

You sure have been putting up a fight there in Morton, Bill. I don't know how they look upon the results in Morton County but the people of the state certainly are for you and don't forget that for a moment. It may look a bit useless at times to keep after them but in the end you will be on top without any question. Just keep right on giving them hell from day to day. The elements you are fighting can't stand up under hard blows from a clever fighter who is willing to go the limit with them.

Clever indeed; Langer was using the lawless conditions in Morton County to build a political foundation. Based on zealous and sensational law enforcement, it would be a springboard for future office. His machinations resulted in popularity, for the letter

⁷⁸ Ibid.; *Mandan News*, February 12, 1915.

⁷⁹ Ibid., May 28, 1915.

above, was the first of many such encouraging signs he would receive from Brennan and others across the state.⁸⁰

In the fall of 1915, Langer set his sights upon yet another target. This time it would be the schools of Morton County. It had come to Langer's attention that many children in Morton County were not attending school on a regular basis. In his usual fashion, Langer did not let an opportunity for headlines and publicity pass. During the first weeks of November he conducted an investigation of Morton County's 293 schools and found several transgressions. The most grievous of the discoveries revealed by the investigation was that 1,716 children between the ages of 8 and 16 were not attending school on a regular basis. This affront was coupled with another common infraction. State law required that the United States flag be present over every schoolhouse. However, a great many schools did not comply with the statute.⁸¹

Acting immediately upon these results, Langer issued writs of mandamus to 87 schools by which he demanded they hoist the flag and inform him of all children on their rosters who were continually absent from school. If they did not comply, court proceedings would ensue. Langer also sent letters to parents of children not attending school. He informed parents that they had five days to get their children back in school, or, as he advised them, "I will be obliged to take stringent action against you." Again,

⁸⁰ Letter from D.V. Brennan to William Langer, April 30, 1915, Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection.

⁸¹ *Mandan News*, November 19, 1915; *Glen Ullin News*, November 19, 1915.

residents of Morton County, and indeed the state, were forced to take notice of William Langer.⁸²

By November of 1915, residents of Morton County knew that when Langer issued such a decree it would be backed by action if necessary. Therefore, his office was bombarded with responses. Dozens of letters from parents offered their acquiescence or reasons as to why their children had been absent. School districts also toed the line. Dozens of letters arrived informing Langer that the flag would fly and that lists of absent children were being compiled.⁸³

While these actions were a continuation of Langer's ambitious philosophy, it should be noted that he did express concern over the children in Morton County. While this concern may not have been of a truly progressive nature as some have suggested, it was there nonetheless. In his letters to the various school districts he added that they must construct fire breaks around the schoolhouses. He also made efforts to increase the scope and efficiency of medical inspections at schools, informing school districts that handicapped and sick children be reported at once to state medical inspectors. In another case, he found out that children near the town of Almont had to crawl under a barbed-wire fence that enclosed the school. The children received lacerations as a result. Langer

⁸² *Mandan News*, November 19, 1915; examples of these letters can be found in Box 2, Folder 13, Langer Collection.

⁸³ For examples of these letters, see Box 2, all folders, Langer Collection.

wrote the school district and demanded that they put in a “proper gate” at once, so the children would not have to crawl under the fence.⁸⁴

Langer again received positive support for his controversial actions. In a letter from November Langer was informed that “I guess this is causing some stir, William, & [to] say nothing about home county.” Attached to the brief letter was a clipping from a St Paul, Minnesota, paper that detailed his actions against Morton County schools. In another letter, this time from a New Leipzig teacher, he was told “ your efforts along this line should receive unanimous commendation and general support.”⁸⁵

However, his actions were not unopposed. W. F. Lorin, the Superintendent of Schools for Morton County, offered a scathing rebuke that claimed the results of Langer’s investigations were unfounded. Lorin’s conclusions were supported in part by correspondence received by Langer. Included in the dozens of letters offering their pledge to follow his mandates were letters from parents and school districts that claimed children were not absent and that the flag had always flown over their school. This would suggest that Langer’s investigation was not altogether thorough. That a problem did exist is hinted at by a 1913 editorial in the *Glen Ullin News*, in which a “WARNING TO PARENTS AND GUARDIANS” was issued. The editorial claimed that it was well known that children in Glen Ullin had not been attending school regularly. It informed

⁸⁴ For example of letters sent to school districts see Box 2, Folder 13, Langer Collection; for examples of letters concerning health of school children see Box 2, Folder 26, Langer Collection; letter to Simon Glaser, November 29, 1915, Box 2, Folder 16, Langer Collection.

⁸⁵ Letter to William Langer from I.C. Everson, November, 1915, Box 2, Folder 12, Langer Collection.

parents and guardians that it was the law in North Dakota that all children must attend school. It was a case of the law not being enforced, and Langer took full advantage of it.⁸⁶

It becomes apparent that there was a unique combination of ambition and opportunity in Morton County. Langer was an Ivy League graduate who had expressed a desire to make a name for himself. In Morton County, he was able to clamor aboard the handy vehicle of Progressivism and bring recognition by enforcing laws largely ignored. An examination of three area papers for the two years prior to Langer's bid for state's attorney, show few if any instances of vice laws or school laws being enforced. If officials were previously enforcing those laws within the county, they did not do it as loudly as Langer did.⁸⁷

He could have ignored these transgressions (or opportunities for publicity) as apparently, others had, but he did not. Langer understood that the best way to earn notice in a crime-ridden county is to enforce the laws. It is only natural that in an area that knew little law enforcement, a zealous enforcement of those laws would garner attention. One of course could argue that Langer was merely enforcing statutes that he believed morally correct. He may very well have believed he was doing the right thing by vigorously enforcing the law. However, that does not explain the sensational manner in which he chose to do so.

⁸⁶ Lorin's response came in the form of a circular issued sometime in early April, 1916, Box 1, Folder 13, Langer Collection; for examples of letters sent by parents and school districts claiming they were falsely accused of disobeying school laws see Box 2, all folders, Langer Collection; *Glen Ullin News*, November 14, 1913.

⁸⁷ Papers examined were the *Bismarck Tribune*, the *Mandan News*, and the *Glen Ullin News*.

The investigation of the Bismarck police chief, the large seizure of liquor near Hebron, and the arrest of over 100 prohibition violators during his first month as state's attorney were attention grabbers to say the least. Threatening dozens of parents with arrest was nowhere less sensational. He wanted recognition. He wanted citizens of North Dakota to sit up and take notice of William Langer. To do so, he shook Morton County as an enraged child shakes a toy for attention. He would not do anything quietly, nor did he want to.

Throughout his controversial actions in Morton County, Langer had not been ignoring the political workings of the state. He had his eyes set on higher office. As early as April 1915, stories circulated around the state that he would seek the office of attorney general. While he denied these rumors, it was clear that his work in Morton County was making him eligible for higher endorsement by the Progressive Republican League. In February, Usher Burdick wrote:

I want to congratulate you on your stand against the "Boose Peddlers" in your county. You will clean out one of the most corrupt counties in the state when you clean Morton County, *and besides build a reputation that will give you most anything you want* [emphasis added].

This was a very revealing letter of encouragement. Whether he knew it or not, Burdick had observed the true intentions behind Langer's zealous stand on crime in Morton County. He was in fact building the reputation he needed for political advancement. And, while Langer was planning a move up the political ladder, he was not quite ready to make it public. For much of the summer of 1915, he concerned himself with the workings of the Progressive Republican League.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Letter from D.V. Brennan to William Langer, April 15, 1915, Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection; letter from Usher L. Burdick to William Langer, February 27, 1915, Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection.

However, it was clear to many by the fall of 1915, the progressive movement in North Dakota had run its course. A new and more powerful force was emerging upon the plains state: the Nonpartisan League. Whereas the progressive movement at heart had been largely an urban phenomenon, the Nonpartisan League was a rural-based movement that courted the North Dakota farmer. Like a whirlwind this movement raced across the state giving hope to farmers and opportunity to politicians. It was on the wings of this movement that Langer cast aside the guise of progressive and donned the cowl of prairie socialist.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Tweton, 135.

CHAPTER IV

RIDING THE TIDE

Throughout the years of progressive reform, it had become clear to the North Dakota farmer that its program did little to rectify his economic plight. Indeed, to the farmer it appeared that progressivism was merely a new name for the same “old gang” that had controlled the state’s politics for so long. The Nonpartisan League offered something new and different to North Dakota’s farmers: it identified their core problems and offered simple and direct solutions.⁹⁰

The brainchild of the NPL was Arthur C. Townley. Once known as the “flax king” of North Dakota, due to his prosperous farm near the city of Beach, he new full well the vagaries of farming in the state. In 1912, flax was bringing in \$3.00 a bushel. Gambling all on 8,000 acres of the valuable commodity, he was devastated when early winter weather destroyed the majority of the crop that fall. With only a remnant of his crop left, at \$3.00 a bushel, he was confident that he could have covered the initial investment. However, much to his dismay, speculation on the market had plunged the price to \$1.00 a bushel. Townley emerged from the experience a financially broken and embittered man. Seeking solace, he turned to socialism.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Morlan, 5.

⁹¹ Ibid., 22-23.

After a brief flirtation with the state's socialist party, Townley was still frustrated. In 1915, he was present at the state legislature when a bill for the proposed state terminal elevator was defeated. In addition, he witnessed the severe diatribe of one legislator who reportedly told the farmers present that they should all "go home and slop the hogs." Sensing the anger of the farmers present, and indeed across the state, Townley decided that the opportunity was at hand for a new farmers' organization. Borrowing heavily from the socialist party's platform, Townley and his colleagues offered a plan that cut to the core of the farmers' grievances.⁹²

Using the premise of state ownership, the newly christened Farmers Nonpartisan League used as its rallying cry such things as state-owned terminal elevators, state hail insurance, credit agencies that offered low interest loans, and state inspection of grain shipments. The NPL offered a very appealing package to the economically dependent farmer. The mechanics of the NPL were simple. The League would not put forth its own candidates for office. Instead, it would nominate candidates from either the Republican or Democratic Party that supported the League's programs. Members of the League were then expected to vote for those candidates at election time. Thus the League worked within the existing system, and, though it crossed party lines, the preeminence of the Republican Party within the state made it a forgone conclusion that it would endorse Republican candidates.⁹³

Through 1915, the NPL gained in strength and support, establishing its own newspaper in September of that year: the *Nonpartisan Leader*. The popularity of the

⁹² Robinson, 330-331.

⁹³ Ibid., 331; Morlan, 49.

League was such that by the early months of 1916 it could boast of 26,000 members. It was rapidly becoming a political force to be reckoned with. Indeed, it was an organization that's endorsement could catapult ambitious politicians to higher office.⁹⁴

During the NPL's meteoric rise to power, Langer continued his aggressive policy of law enforcement while taking tentative steps in the direction of attorney general. His actions against the criminal element of Morton County sometimes led to situations that were both dangerous and dramatic. In one instance, while searching a building for stolen property, the young state's attorney almost lost his life. Responding to a tip that stolen goods were located on several farms near the town of New Salem, Langer and several law enforcement officers went to investigate.⁹⁵

They found stolen items at the first farm they searched and arrested the thief responsible. They then proceeded to the next farm with suspect in tow. Upon arriving, Langer confronted another suspected thief: a Spanish man named Cemoe Rasaface. After a brief argument with Langer, Rasaface agreed to show the officials where the rest of the stolen property was. He led them to a small lean-to in behind a farmhouse. Langer followed the man into the dimly lit structure. After stepping into the building, Langer turned to adjust a flickering lantern he was carrying. At that moment, Rasaface pulled "a murderous looking revolver" from his pocket and leveled it at the young attorney's back. Before Rasaface could fire what would surely have been a fatal shot, one of the law

⁹⁴ Ibid., 37,48.

⁹⁵ *Glen Ullin News*, September 3, 1915.

officers accompanying Langer jumped upon the man and pinned him to the ground. Even inadvertently, he managed to make the news.⁹⁶

Apart from his always interesting, and sometimes dangerous, duties as state's attorney, Langer expressed a growing interest in the office of Attorney General. By September of 1915, Langer's intent to run was clear to close associates. Some like D.V. Brennan, however, were conscious of Langer's ambitious nature and urged caution. He wrote Langer in September of 1915:

I have been thinking over the matter of your running for attorney general and am frank to say that it is something of a puzzler. If you made the race and lost it would be a shame as a defeat of that kind is a hard thing to overcome, compared to an unbroken line of victory. The thing is not impossible on the other hand and I assure you I will gladly do anything in my power to help if you decide to run.

Brennan went on to outline a course of action that he insisted would be essential for Langer to win. First, he pointed out that Langer must secure the support of the Equity Cooperative Exchange, and use its influence to spread his name. Second, he urged Langer to get in touch with the newspapers that supported him and work to gain the support of those that did not. Third, he stressed the importance of writing letters and making personal visits to constituents in order to create a network of support throughout the state. And, finally, he told Langer that he must "Establish a publicity bureau that will never sleep from the day you start till the day the fight closes."⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ The Equity Cooperative Exchange was a popular organization established in 1908. Its purpose was to facilitate fair wheat prices for North Dakota farmers from terminal elevators, see Robinson, 276-277; letter to William Langer from D.V. Brennan, September 1, 1915, Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection.

Langer's response in November to Brennan's plan indicated that he was sizing up the situation and proceeding cautiously. In many ways, Brennan recapitulated what Langer already knew. He had learned full well the value of publicity during his campaign for state's attorney and by December 1st, he had already toured 19 counties in the central and southern regions of the state by auto, and believed he would carry them if he decided to run. Langer was still hesitant to throw his hat in the ring, however. He was confident of victory, but that was not enough; he wanted to be sure of victory.⁹⁸

In December, he began to add to his political machinery by implementing Brennan's scheme, constructing a personal organization with which he could canvass the state, gauging his strength and increasing his support. For example, he had Brennan make a trip to the Minot area to see if it was friendly, and on December 6, Langer's friend, George E. Wallace, informed him that he had been "hustling for you at Devils Lake and Lakota." Wallace talked to newspapermen and told Langer that the *Devils Lake Daily Journal*, the *Wahpeton Times*, and the Norwegian paper *The Normanden* would be willing to support him if he decided to run for attorney general.⁹⁹

By mid-December, the Progressive Republican League had taken Langer's attorney general candidacy for granted. In early January Usher Burdick wrote him "you would be a very strong candidate for any office you desired to run for. It may be that we shall have to run you for governor . . ." Despite such praise, however, he still held back from announcing his candidacy. By late February, he had the endorsement of the

⁹⁸ Letter to D.V. Brennan from William Langer, November 10, 1915, Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection; Letter to D.V. Brennan from William Langer, December 1, 1915, Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection.

⁹⁹ Letter from D.V. Brennan, December 2, 1915. Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection; letter from George E. Wallace, December 6, 1915, Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection.

Progressive Republican League and the Equity, but still he held out for further support. He was waiting for the NPL to back him. Langer fully recognized the power inherent in this new organization. On January 31, he had purchased his own \$6 NPL membership.¹⁰⁰

In a sense, this represents a new era in his political life. By running for Attorney General of North Dakota, he not only entered a larger political race but a new arena as well. He fully recognized this, by coveting the support of the Equity and NPL. In doing so, he was in fact waiting for the largest voting body in the state to support him, the farmer. This is a pivotal period in his career, for he was in essence leaving behind the narrow confines of county politics for the unfamiliar realm of state government.

On March 29 and 30, 1916, the NPL held its first convention at Fargo. It was an exciting two days for the League. A sense of optimism and exuberance was in the air as it endorsed candidates for office, including Langer as attorney general. The excitement reached a fever pitch as thousands of farmers, in the midst of band music and fireworks, marched through the streets in an expression of solidarity. Langer surely must have been overjoyed to hear of his endorsement.¹⁰¹

Political scientist, Theodore Pedeliski has pointed out that nowhere in Langer's correspondence does it suggest that he actively sought the endorsement of the NPL. The accuracy of that statement is undeniable. Moreover, while Pedeleski fails to point it out, there was a very good reason why Langer did not do so. The NPL had made it quite clear

¹⁰⁰ Unsigned letter to William Langer, December 10, 1915, Box 1, Folder 11, Langer Collection; letter to William Langer from Usher L. Burdick, January 11, 1916, Box 1, Folder 12, Langer Collection; letter to F.B. Streeter from William Langer, February 28, 1916. Box 1, Folder 12, Langer Collection; receipt for NPL membership, January 31, 1916. Box 1, Folder 12, Langer Collection.

¹⁰¹ Olson, 73.

that it would not tolerate politicians who pursued its endorsement. The *Leader* summed up the organization's stance in November 1915 when it noted:

Farmers must keep in mind that they cannot expect right service and a square deal at the hands of a man who goes gum-shoeing for political preferment. Farmers do not need in office a man who seeks the glory of political prestige . . . What the farmers want is a man who knows the farmer's needs . . . Not only so but they want a man who is so adverse to political preferment that he must be "drafted" into service.

This was the political image that the League fostered; it wanted humble men who only accepted office when they were called to duty by their fellow man.¹⁰²

The embodiment of this ideal was found in the person of Lynn J. Frazier, the NPL's choice for governor. Frazier was an obscure farmer from Hoople, North Dakota, and surely would have been overlooked by other political organizations. For the League however, he was an ideal choice. He was not a politician but a farmer. As such, he had no prior political affiliations that may have tarnished his wholesome image. Soon dubbed "the modern Cincinnatus," Frazier was lauded as a humble sodbuster that grudgingly cast aside the implements of husbandry for the frock coat of politics. More than that though, he represented a fresh start in North Dakota politics. Here was a man "drafted" into service. A man who did not place his ambition above the betterment of his neighbor. Just the sort of person the League sought to endorse. Anything less was viewed with suspicion and dealt with in a vicious manner.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Theodore B. Pedeliski, "The German-Russian Ethnic Factor in William Langer's Campaigns, 1914-1940," *North Dakota History, Journal of the Northern Plains* 64 (Winter 1997): 5; *Nonpartisan Leader* quoted in Morlan, 48.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

This became quite evident to all in February 1916, when the League publicly humiliated gubernatorial hopeful George J. Smith. On February 1, Smith had written a letter to a political ally asking his aid in securing the League's endorsement at a county convention. The NPL, which was able to acquire a copy of the letter, roared at the insult. The *Leader* gave Smith and the letter front page billing in its February 10 issue. Smith was charged with attempting to corrupt the League by controlling its delegates. When Smith wrote a response expressing his indignation, the *Leader* further humiliated him by recording, "George falls with a splash that is heard all over the state." Needless to say, George Smith did not receive the League's endorsement, nor was he elected governor. Langer was too shrewd to share Smith's fate. He quietly waited for the NPL's endorsement.¹⁰⁴

Langer probably had little to worry about. His actions as state's attorney had already shown him a reform-minded politician and had caught the attention of the NPL. As early as October 1915, the *Leader* had pegged Langer as a possible candidate for attorney general, its editorial claiming that "if sufficient pressure is brought to bear upon him he will get into the field, although it will be with great reluctance." He was the type of politician the NPL was looking to endorse. He had already proved to be an enemy of "Big Biz" and a friend of the farmer. And as the *Leader* succinctly put it, "his political shadow . . . falls athwart the . . . McKenzie machine and beclouds their deliberations."¹⁰⁵

While he did not actively seek the endorsement, there is little doubt that he desired it. Moreover, it is more than likely that he closely monitored the *Leader* to gauge

¹⁰⁴ *Nonpartisan Leader*, February 24, 1916.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, October 21, 1915.

his support from within the League. In late February 1916, he wrote an associate that he was still waiting for the NPL nomination before announcing his candidacy, but, as he added, "Chances are ninety-nine out of a hundred that I will run." While he played the League's game and waited, his correspondence was alive with an eagerness to get the campaign underway. In a sense, the NPL convention was a dam holding back not the raw power of a river, but the political energy of William Langer.¹⁰⁶

After the NPL had claimed him as one of its own, the dam burst. Langer was free to actively campaign for the office of Attorney General. What followed was an explosion of activity, which can only be described as an extension of the publicity war he waged as state's attorney. He sent out dozens of letters asking for votes and aid in the upcoming election. Like an octopus, he reached his tentacles into the far corners of the state, constructing a network of information and support.¹⁰⁷

Typical of the letters sent by Langer is the following example

I am out for Attorney General and am going to put up a big scrap. I want you to boost to beat the band, and to send me the names of all the traveling men you run across who are favorable to me, so that I can get in touch with them. That is very important as one traveling man is worth a lot more in a campaign of this sort than you yourself perhaps have any idea of.

Langer had a keen sense of how to spread his name and what he stood for, as the letter above perfectly illustrates. In the month of April, alone he wrote to forty-four people across the state in twenty-five different counties. Between May and June he repeated this with sixty-one letters going out to individuals in thirty-eight different counties.

¹⁰⁶ Letter to F.B. Streeter from William Langer, February 28, 1916, Box 1, Folder 12, Langer Collection.

¹⁰⁷ For examples of this correspondence see Box 1, Folders 12-13, Langer Collection.

In response to his letters, he often received valuable information. In April, he was still hoping to obtain the support of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In that same month, he received, through correspondence, the names, addresses, and directions to the homes of nineteen influential members of the organization. It is unknown whether he visited these people, but the fact that he received this information shows how valuable the network was.¹⁰⁸

Langer in no way ignored the German element in the state. In addition to campaign ads in German-language papers, he sent out letters in German as well. This was a tactic that had proved useful in his bid for state's attorney and he probably expected similar results. It is difficult to gauge how many letters he sent. His correspondence for June of 1916 contains dozens of copies of a campaign letter written in German. However, there is no indication as to how many or where copies of this letter were sent. What is known is that, in a further appeal to these constituents he sent campaign material to all the German social clubs within the state.¹⁰⁹

With his long list of endorsements and expanding campaign network in place, Langer was supremely confident in his ability to win the upcoming election. He wrote in early April "My Hat's in the ring. I am going to beat hell. I doubt whether anything in the world can stop me." Despite such confidence, he knew he still faced some serious

¹⁰⁸ Letter to H.L. Mickelson from William Langer, April 4, 1916, Box 1, Folder 13, Langer Collection; the number of letters and the towns and counties to which they were sent were found in Box 1, Folder 13-14, Langer Collection; unsigned letter to William Langer, April, 1916, Box 1, Folder 13, Langer Collection.

¹⁰⁹ For examples of this letter see, Box 1, Folder 15, Langer Collection; Pedeliski, 4.

obstacles in his bid for attorney general. One thing that appears in his correspondence is that the support of the NPL was a double-edged sword.¹¹⁰

After receiving its endorsement, Langer was urged by William Lemke to support all NPL candidates. He was more than willing to cast aside political allies for the support of the fast growing organization. They had chosen to endorse Lynn J. Frazier for governor instead of Usher Burdick. Many people throughout the state wrote to Langer asking if he would support his fellow progressive or Frazier in the upcoming election. In the tangled web that was fast becoming North Dakota politics, Langer sought to make his stand clear and justify what amounted to his abandonment of Burdick. In a letter to a concerned constituent he wrote:

I wish to say that I am for William Langer for Attorney General [italics mine] and that is all the fight I have. It usually keeps a man busy to see that he is elected himself without mixing into anyone else's fight. For instance can you tell me who Mr. Burdick is for United states Senator or for States Auditor? Is there any more reason why I should be either for Mr. Burdick, Mr. Frazier, Mr. Smith or Mr. Frayne, than Mr. Burdick should be for Mr. Hanna, Mr. Nestos, or Mr. McCumber?

In yet another revealing piece of correspondence the real William Langer shows through. He was in the political game for himself. The progressive faction of the Republican Party had been a convenient tool with which he could establish himself as a politician. The NPL would be another such device to climb yet further up the political ladder.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Letter to L.A. Foot from William Langer, April 5, 1916, Box 1, Folder 13, Langer Collection.

¹¹¹ Letter from William Lemke to William Langer, April 21, 1916, Box 1, Folder 13, Langer Collection; Morlan, 72; examples of letters questioning Langer's loyalty to Burdick can be found in Box 1, Folder 13, Langer Collection; undated letter to Alex R. Wright from William Langer, Box 1, Folder 13, Langer Collection.

In late June, he embarked upon an aggressive campaign trip with all the NPL candidates. In a somewhat ironic fashion, the political hopefuls crisscrossed the state using the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads. In a matter of six days, they made over one hundred stops at various stations giving speeches and building support. The League platform proved to be popular, for at the June primary all candidates endorsed by the organization were nominated.¹¹²

Langer was now officially a candidate for the office of Attorney General of North Dakota. In November 1916, the success of the NPL at the primaries repeated itself. All those supported by the League ticket, save P.M. Casey, the Democratic nominee for state treasurer, won office. Langer easily beat his Democratic rival G.S. Woolledge by 58,670 votes. In addition, he carried every county within the state. Not a bad beginning to a career in state office.¹¹³

Once in office, Langer continued the tried and true publicity measures he had employed as state's attorney. He zealously enforced the state's Blue Laws, school laws, and prohibition. As state's attorney, he learned how to make noise. His attorney generalship would be no different. Langer vigorously enforced the Blue Laws, closing down pool halls, movie theaters, and preventing baseball on Sundays. So stringent was he on these laws that one farmer reportedly asked his local sheriff if it was legal to farm on Sundays.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Geelan, 33; Morlan, 75.

¹¹³ Olson, 87.

¹¹⁴ Weber, 25-31.

Langer was just as zealous when it came to the state's school attendance laws. Absentee children were apparently a problem throughout the state. In his typical fashion, Langer offered a clear response to the problem. Children would only be excused from school in cases of ill health or farm necessity. Any abridgement of this would bring a swift legal response. Langer advocated a harsh measure in order to stress the seriousness of his stance "an arrest or two in practically every county in the state would probably help a great deal in increasing attendance."¹¹⁵

In the realm of prohibition, Langer again stood out. While his actions with the Blue Laws and school laws tended to be overshadowed by the rise of the NPL and the encroaching war in Europe, he managed to make headlines with attacks on prohibition violators. Two cases in particular illustrate his capacity and willingness to get statewide attention. The first involved a raid in Minot.

On the night of May 7, 1917, he pulled off an operation that would have made Elliot Ness proud. Langer, along with newly appointed Assistant Attorney General Dan Brennan, had spent several weeks infiltrating Minot's illegal liquor establishments. Once they had gathered enough damning evidence Langer got the necessary warrants and coordinated the raid. A score of plainclothes officers and conscripted deputies gathered into ten groups under Langer's direction. Each was given a specific target and all were to strike at the same time. To ensure that no warning would go out to those targeted, Langer had deputies seize the city's telephone switchboard. Then, according to the *Minot Daily*

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

News, there was an hour of excitement the sort of which the city had never before seen, as “Doors were broken down” and the city jail turned into a “Babylon” of humanity.¹¹⁶

The results of the raids were impressive. Approximately 100 people were arrested and ten “drayloads of liquor seized”. More significantly however, was the attention the action garnered Langer. The major papers fairly screamed with excitement over the outrageousness of the operation. For instance, the front page of the *Grand Forks Herald* reported “LANGER STIRS UP HORNET’S NEST IN MINOT,” and the *Fargo Forum’s* front page read, “FORCES OF EVIL AT MINOT GIVEN RUDE AWAKENING.” Again, he was at the center of attention, but it did not end there. Langer was determined to milk the incident for all the sensationalism he could.¹¹⁷

Three days after the raid a warrant was issued for Langer’s arrest by a Minot judge. He was charged with obstructing the transmission of telephone messages, a felony under North Dakota law. Langer had conveniently left Minot only hours before the judge issued the warrant. After leaving the city, he drove to Bismarck. Upon arriving in the capitol, he took an action that had the papers talking for weeks.¹¹⁸

According to newspaper reports, Langer steered his car to the Northern Pacific bridge over the Missouri. The bridge, due to wartime contingencies, was a restricted area under surveillance by the National Guard. He purposely crossed into the restricted area and the National Guard promptly arrested him. Langer was supposedly sequestered in Camp Frazier, a Guard outpost near Bismarck. Whenever he left, he was escorted

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16; *Minot Daily News*, May 9, 1917.

¹¹⁷ *Grand Forks Herald*, May 9, 1917; *Fargo Forum*, May 8, 1917;

¹¹⁸ *Grand Forks Herald*, May 10, 1917.

everywhere by three guardsmen. The major newspapers in the state were more than curious about the situation and speculated endlessly as to why he allowed himself to be arrested. Most, like the *Fargo Forum* and *Grand Forks Herald*, however, assumed it was to avoid the arrest warrant issued from Minot. It turned out that that was exactly what Langer had in mind.¹¹⁹

However, there was an interesting, but not surprising, twist to the controversy that, according to the *Grand Forks Herald*, “ha[d] every tongue wagging at the capitol.” Apparently, the story that he had crossed into a restricted zone and arrested was false. Securing the aid of Governor Frazier and military authorities, Langer had “staged” the whole incident. In reality, he was ceremoniously arrested by National Guardsmen in the governor’s mansion at Frazier’s request. It was purely a superficial arrest, for no federal warrant had been issued that would have allowed the National Guard to legally restrain him..¹²⁰

Langer claimed that he needed the protection of the National Guardsmen to prevent his arrest by civil authorities. An arrest would have interfered with the ongoing case in Minot. He did perhaps have a point, for the specifics of the case were being worked out as late as May 14. However, as important as he may have thought his presence was, were there not other avenues that could have been taken to prosecute the case in his absence? As attorney general, he had six assistants, could he not have entrusted one or more of them to pursue the case while he faced arrest? Surely, there was

¹¹⁹ *Bismarck Tribune*, May 10, 1917.

¹²⁰ *Grand Forks Herald*, May 11, 1917; *Fargo Forum*, May 11, 1917, May 10, 1917.

some legitimate option he could have exercised that would not have endangered the Minot affair whatever it may have been. Langer instead chose the sensational route of staging an arrest by National Guardsman and having his own personal bodyguard around the city.¹²¹

He created quite a spectacle as he went about his business in Bismarck with three guardsmen in tow. The *Bismarck Tribune* called it “the most monumental bit of burlesque ever staged by a governor and an attorney general in the history of this state,” while the *Grand Forks Herald* reported on the night of May 12 that, “Wherever Langer goes tonight he is accompanied by three lusty North Dakota Guardsmen.” Again, he was the object of the media’s attention.¹²²

It was clear that Langer was feeding his insatiable need to be at the center of attention and controversy. Few things are as controversial as the state’s highest ranking law enforcement official staging a sensational hoax and evading arrest with the aid of three armed National Guardsman. The *Bismarck Tribune* was not far from the mark when, in reference to the affair, it wrote, “Langer is in his glory. He is basking in the limelight.” Indeed he was and he was loath to let it slip away.¹²³

Several months later Langer embarked upon yet another sensational attack on liquor violators. On the night of July 27, Langer took his war against alcohol across state lines when he raided the East Grand Forks Brewery. The brewery was notorious for shipping its liquor into North Dakota. Using the new Webb-Kenyon Act as an excuse,

¹²¹ *Bismarck Tribune*, May 14, 1917.

¹²² *Ibid.*, May 12, 1917; *Grand Forks Herald*, May 12, 1917.

¹²³ *Bismarck Tribune*, May 11, 1917.

Langer secured the aid of Minnesota officials and launched the raid. He seized the brewery owner, all the employees present, and the company books. In addition, law enforcement officials dumped \$30,000 worth of liquor into the Red River. In all it was a very successful raid. However, as always with William Langer, there was controversy.¹²⁴

One obvious aspect of the bust, and one that the newspapers were quick to dwell upon, was that no Grand Forks officials were present at the raid. There was of course a very good reason for this; Langer had not informed them about the action. Grand Forks State's Attorney, Theodore B. Elton had been investigating the brewery for months and had informed Langer that he was seeking to get a subpoena to inspect the company's books. He had been conducting a low-key investigation to be sure all the proper evidence had been gathered to secure convictions. He had in fact sent Langer samples of evidence he had acquired and asked the attorney general for advice on how to proceed. Langer never responded to the state attorney's inquiry.¹²⁵

However, he did respond to the potential publicity offered by such a target. Langer, in his typical manner, took the opportunity and launched a preemptive strike against the brewery securing not only liquor, but statewide attention as well. In addition to keeping Elton in the dark about the raid, Langer waited until the state's attorney was out of town to launch the assault, thus making sure that the local authorities would not interfere with his grandstanding.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Weber, 18; the Webb-Kenyon Act was a federal prohibition law passed after America's entrance into World War I, see Geelan, 36.

¹²⁵ *Fargo Forum*, July 28, 1917.

¹²⁶ Geelan, 36.

Langer continued his campaign against the liquor element in North Dakota throughout his career as attorney general. In the spring of 1919 he organized the "Flying Squadron," an organization of special agents to enforce prohibition. The organization was an extension of his zealous law enforcement and secured 400 arrests in its first four months of existence. However, his career as attorney general was to be dominated by another war, this time against the state's most powerful political organization, the Nonpartisan League. It was against the NPL that he launched his most grandiose political ploy ever, insurrection.¹²⁷

In his campaign for attorney general, William Langer's ambition again surfaced, as did his keen sense of opportunism. He quietly waited for the NPL's endorsement before launching an aggressive publicity campaign to secure the attorney generalship. He was truly beginning to achieve political status within the state. That was not enough, however. Once in office, he again met his ever-present need for recognition by enforcing the law. The Minot liquor case, and the histrionics involved, provides an excellent example of his unique personality at work. The size of the raid, the seizure of the telephone exchange, and the bold hoax that followed, could only have been designed to capture media attention. This holds true for the East Grand Forks affair as well. By subverting the investigation of the Grand Forks state's attorney, he got the booze and the headlines.

¹²⁷ Weber, 21-22.

CHAPTER V

INSURRECTION

The Nonpartisan League swept into power as a reactionary movement designed to alleviate the plight of North Dakota's farmers. Its popularity was evident in its victories during the elections of 1916, 1918, and 1920. During those years, most League candidates captured their offices by large majorities. However, during those same years the NPL was attacked by a host of opposition agencies such as the Independent Voters' Association, a hostile press, and William Langer.

Robert Morlan, in *Political Prairie Fire*, pointed out the fact that in 1919-1920, Langer "was a different type of opponent." While others targeted both the leadership and the program of the NPL, Langer attacked only the League hierarchy. Morlan was correct in this statement. Repeatedly through correspondence, newspapers, and speeches Langer professed his animosity towards League leaders while standing steadfast by its industrial program. Why did Langer take this unique stance? The answer is simple. He recognized two things: the popularity of the League's program with farmers and what a powerful force those farmers could be once harnessed. An ambitious young politician, he wanted that power for himself. It was the type of power that could win him the highest position of status within the state: the governorship. However, before he could supplant the leadership of the League with his own, he had to become the champion of their popular

cause.¹²⁸

As mentioned previously, the NPL's original platform promised several essential things to the farmers of the region. The state would build and own the processors of North Dakota farm products, such as terminal elevators, flour mills and packing houses. State officials would conduct the inspection and dockage of grain, and there would be tax exemptions for those who improved their farms. In addition, there would be affordable state hail insurance and rural banks that offered credit with the lowest possible interest rates.¹²⁹

The popularity of the League platform was apparent in the November of 1916. Not only could it boast of 40,000 members, but also, with exception of the senate, that it had won control of every branch of North Dakota's government in its first election. It also succeeded in getting all of its endorsed candidates, save one, into office. Its most spectacular achievement in the election was the victory of Lynn Frazier, who received 80 percent of all votes cast for governor. It was truly a political power to be reckoned with.¹³⁰

While stalwarts in the senate blocked the NPL's platform of state ownership, it did not slow the organization's growth. By the end of 1917, Leagues had sprouted in thirteen Mid-western states. By the following year, the NPL recorded 188,365 members

¹²⁸ Morlan, 293.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹³⁰ Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Twentieth Century Populism: Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West 1900-1939* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1951), 168.

across those states including North Dakota. So fast were the ideals of the League spreading that Townley changed the official name of the NPL from the exclusive title of Farmer's Non- partisan Political League of North Dakota to the much more inclusive title of National Nonpartisan League. Control over all of these transplanted offspring resided within the original League leadership.¹³¹

The NPL had little trouble during the election of 1918. In a close repeat of 1916, the League swept the primaries and the November elections with all of its endorsed candidates retaining their positions. This time, however, it succeeded in gaining control of both houses and achieved a majority in the state supreme court. Because of this victory, the League was able to enact its program of state ownership.¹³²

The legislature of 1919 made the League program become a reality. First, it created the Industrial Commission. Consisting of three members including the governor, attorney general, and commissioner of agriculture, its responsibility was to implement the industrial program of the League. In addition to the Industrial Commission, the League created the Bank of North Dakota, the North Dakota Mill and Elevator Association, the Home Building Association, and a hail insurance system. The League had scored its greatest victory. However, its greatest challenge was to come. Powers were gathering that threatened to destroy its leadership. To understand these forces it is necessary to look at the national and local context within which the League secured its program.¹³³

¹³¹ Robinson, 340.

¹³² Ibid., 341.

¹³³ Saloutos, 192.

The legislative triumph of the League came after America's victory in World War One. While the United States counted itself among the victors, it was a traumatic and stressful time for the country. Nowhere was this stress more apparent than in the months immediately after the war. It was in that struggle's aftermath that a paralytic fear gripped the nation. Known as the Red Scare it was a period between 1919-1920 marked by anti-socialistic hysteria and super-patriotism. It was a dark time in American history where anything but blind obedience and conformity roused suspicion.¹³⁴

The roots of the Red Scare began to grow during the war years themselves. Before America's entrance into the conflict there was a large segment of the population that balked at any hint of American participation. The country's national socialist party fell within these ranks. However, when the nation did enter the war, most who advocated neutrality renounced their positions and offered their loyalty and support. Indeed, the nationalism created by the war was so powerful that, in the words of historian Robert K. Murray, "the demand for absolute loyalty . . . permeated every nook and cranny of the social structure." The nation's socialist party however, stayed its course and spoke out against the war.¹³⁵

During the conflict those on the home front sought out scapegoats upon which to vent their war frustrations. In a climate that produced such federal measures as the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, it was not hard to find targets, with the socialists providing an obvious one. The nation was looking for nonconformists and

¹³⁴ Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1955), 20.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

they fit the bill. That they had spoken out against the war was reason enough for the newspapers and magazines of the country to label them traitors. Lumped with the socialists were the Industrial Workers of the World or simply the I.W.W. Their willingness to back words with strikes and their virulent opposition to the war made them an ideal focal point for a victim seeking society.¹³⁶

Another group that became associated with treason, and became the basis of the Red Scare, were the Bolsheviks. The Russian Revolution of 1917 saw this group come to power. The fact that they had pulled Russia out of the war and advocated a worldwide revolution of the proletariat, did not sit well with Americans who had taken loyalty to the point of intolerance. The American public unceremoniously threw them in the same bag with the socialists and the I.W.W.¹³⁷

The state of North Dakota, like much of the country, had been opposed to any involvement in Europe's war. Newspapers called for neutrality and displayed a pro-German slant. Throughout 1915 and 1916 the people of North Dakota were generally against any war preparedness, voting against Woodrow Wilson's plan to expand the armed services. Indeed, many believed that the war was being fostered by munition manufacturers, in essence, "Big Biz" on a wartime footing. The state in many ways reflected the national consensus towards the war.¹³⁸

After the war declaration, however, North Dakota like the rest of the country rallied to the flag. Unlike the national socialist party, the NPL offered its full support and

¹³⁶ Ibid., 13, 20, 29.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 33-34.

¹³⁸ Robinson, 354-355.

loyalty to the cause by drawing up a war statement that “pledged League members to defend the nation.” The NPL’s only concern was with the financing of the war and with those who sought to profit from it. Townley argued that the nation should tax the accumulated wealth of the rich before the poor man, remarking that “Patriotism demands service from all according to their capacity.”¹³⁹

Despite their overt efforts at loyalty, the NPL soon found itself a target of attack. Robert Morlan has written that “The League was promoting a program which would normally have been popular with the classes they sought to interest, but its opponents were able to so emphasize the “loyalty” issue that all else was lost sight of by the average man.” Indeed, since the war began the League was on the defensive in regard to its loyalty.¹⁴⁰

A case study was the neighboring state of Minnesota in which the League had a strong presence. Fueled by the call for wartime patriotism, otherwise average citizens reacted with violence towards the socialistic League. Those gathered for League meetings were many times pelted with eggs, rocks, and paint. On some occasions, they were even doused with water hoses. In several instances, the attacks fell upon individuals, such as League organizers and speakers. They were often beaten or covered with tar and feathers. By March 1918, nineteen counties within Minnesota banned League meetings all together.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid., 363; Morlan, 111.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 157-159.

Violent acts against the League emerged elsewhere as well. Montana, South Dakota, Colorado, Iowa, and Texas all reported harsh measures directed toward their League branches. An indication of the paranoia and fear aroused by the war came from “super-patriot” Woodworth Chum, head of the Greater Iowa Association. Chum, incensed over League activity in Iowa, reportedly remarked that, “What Iowa needs most is 100,000 funerals in 100,000 Iowa farm homes.”¹⁴²

North Dakota was not free of such sentiments. But as Robert Morlan pointed out opposition was usually confined to “the press and platform.” Newspapers such as the *Bismarck Tribune* and *Grand Forks Herald* often carried stories that questioned the League’s loyalty. The *Grand Forks Herald*, in reference to Townley’s views on the war, remarked in June 1917 that “Unqualified allegiance” was the order of the day, not “treasonable utterances”. The *Bismarck Tribune* before the June primaries of 1918 made another revealing statement. In a patriotic call it advocated that citizens of North Dakota should “Vote As You Would Shoot.” The state was essentially a mirror of the nation.¹⁴³

North Dakota’s most sensational affair with anti-socialistic sentiment came with the case of Kate Richards O’Hare. O’Hare was a well-known socialist speaker throughout the country. On December 14, 1917, she gave a speech in Bowman where she reportedly commented that, “American women will never permit themselves to be used as brood sows for future wars!” Anti-League papers took the story and ran, claiming that

¹⁴² Ibid., 173-180.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 173; The *Grand Forks Herald* was quoted in Larry Remele, “Power to the People: The Nonpartisan League,” in *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, Thomas W. Howard ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 83. Here after referred to as *North Dakota Political Tradition*; the *Bismarck Tribune* quoted in Robinson, 341.

the speech was seditious and endorsed by the League. Because of the charges, O'Hare received five years in the federal penitentiary.¹⁴⁴

The anti-League attitude also produced a political party, the Independent Voters' Association. The I.V.A. had its origins in the Anti-Socialist Conference held in Grand Forks on April 11 and 12, 1917. The conference, composed of anti-League legislators, businessmen and newspapermen met to address the threat posed by the NPL's power and socialistic philosophy. Its purpose was to put forth candidates to counter the NPL in the primaries of June 1918. League opponent Jerry Bacon, publisher of the *Grand Forks Herald*, summed up the sentiment of the meeting. Bacon was quoted as saying, "They are socialists not of the constructive, but of the destructive class." The I.V.A. ran on a platform that was clear and concise: defeat Townley, socialism, and anti-Americanism. Although it was defeated in the 1918 primaries, it continued to fight the League in the press and in the 1920 primaries.¹⁴⁵

Langer's correspondence does not reveal any effort on his part to engage in the loyalty issue before 1919. In fact, before the 1918 election he still wholeheartedly endorsed the League. In a 1918 speech, he gave this glowing report of the League and the war:

The members of the Nonpartisan League are going to stick in this election because they have a real patriotic state administration which reflects their own love of this country and is really doing things to help the nation win the war - not merely talking.

¹⁴⁴ Morlan, 148.

¹⁴⁵ D. Jerome Tweton, "The Anti-League Movement: The I.V.A.," in *North Dakota Political Tradition*, 93-95.

One must bear in mind that this statement came before the 1918 election in which he sought to retain his position of attorney general. Any serious opposition to the League at that time would have destroyed his chances of receiving its endorsement. However, in the months following the election Langer's true colors emerged as he viciously broke with the League.¹⁴⁶

By early January 1919, Langer was toying with the idea of running for governor in the next election. Although he had won a second term as Attorney General, he was not satisfied. He was young and ambitious, and he wanted higher office. However, he faced a huge obstacle: the NPL. Its power had twice secured him the attorney generalship, but it was also holding him back. He surely must have realized that as long as Lynn Frazier, the League's Cincinnatus, could run for governor, he would not receive its endorsement. To become governor he would have to work outside the League, which meant that he would have to work against the League.¹⁴⁷

Therefore, he embarked upon a great gambit. He had over a year before the primaries of 1920; this was time he could use to build his case for the governorship of North Dakota. Things needed to be done quickly, however. A network of support needed construction, and publicity had to be achieved. In addition, an argument had to be made that not only legitimized his candidacy, but his break with the League as well. He found three existing tools that aided him on this quest: the anti-socialistic/Bolshevistic sentiment prevalent throughout the nation; the popularity of the League program with the farmers; and the apparent mismanagement of NPL programs by League officials.

¹⁴⁶ Undated speech by William Langer, 1918, Box 17, Folder 1, Langer Collection.

¹⁴⁷ Letter from A. Leslie to William Langer, January 20, 1919, Box 15, Folder 1, Langer Collection.

The key to this plan was bringing together all three in a cohesive argument. Langer did this in a clever fashion. He appealed directly to North Dakota farmers in an effort to subvert the constituency of the League. Through speeches, correspondence, and newspapers he pointed out the ineptitude of League leaders in managing the “farmer’s” program, at the same time calling them socialists and “Reds” whose true goals were anarchy and despotism. While advocating the removal of Townley and the others, he offered himself as a suitable replacement to carry out the original NPL platform. He wanted to be the champion of their popular cause, when in reality he was a usurper who wore the guise of savior.

One of course may argue that Langer was merely doing what he thought was right for the state. By 1919, many in North Dakota were questioning the loyalty and the agenda of the League leaders. Indeed, numerous people thought they were going to ruin the state’s government. There is no reason to doubt Langer’s sincerity when he expressed his mistrust of the League hierarchy. Like a great number of people, he probably thought they were bad for North Dakota. However, the point is not whether he was truly sincere or not in his attacks, the point is in the manner in which he conducted his insurrection. It is in that regard that the ambitious publicity-prone politician truly emerged. He saw opportunity for recognition and higher office in the chaotic political atmosphere of 1919 and he took it.

His first attack on the hierarchy came over the Minnie J. Nielson affair. Nielson was elected the new superintendent of public instruction in November, and on January 1, 1919, she attempted to secure her new office. The recently ousted superintendent, Neil

MacDonald, however, refused to turn over the office, claiming that Nielson did not meet the educational requirements for the position. Townley and Frazier supported MacDonald despite the fact that Nielson had received an overwhelming vote for the office. Langer rushed to her defense, getting a ruling from the state supreme court forcing MacDonald to vacate the office.¹⁴⁸

Langer again made headlines across the state. All the major papers carried the story as front-page news. The *Fargo Forum* and *Bismarck Tribune* for instance printed multiple front-page stories over a week's time. So sensational was the affair that it pushed aside headlines of Theodore Roosevelt's death on January 6. The *Fargo Forum* was very observant when it predicted that Langer's action, "may result in break between attorney general and governor." Well into February, Langer's name remained in the papers over the incident. It was the type of controversy that papers thrive on, and Langer delivered.¹⁴⁹

Langer's next attack came in February. As a member of the State Banking Board, he had learned that League bankers J. J. Hastings and T. Allen Box were purchasing the American National Bank of Valley City for a group of farmers. Hastings had a reputation for shady business dealings and it was probably this fact that inspired Langer to investigate the transaction. His investigation proved to be very successful. On paper, Hastings and Box had raised \$200,000 from stockholders to purchase the bank, charging a fee of 10 percent for their efforts. That much had been legal. However, in reality, the

¹⁴⁸ Morlan, 225.

¹⁴⁹ See *Bismarck Tribune*, January 6, 7, 10, 1919; *Fargo Forum*, January 6, 10, 1919; *Grand Forks Herald*, January 7, 1919

two financiers purchased the bank for \$15,000 less than they had claimed. Langer, with the assistance of fellow board member Thomas Hall, forced Hastings and Box to repay the pocketed difference.¹⁵⁰

Scarcely was the Minnie Nielson and American National Bank affairs out of the news before Langer again made the papers. The *Fargo Forum's* front page on February 22 screamed, "Langer kicks the lid off funny banking deals 'put across' by red 'gangsters'" The *Bismarck Tribune* also carried similar headlines. Langer refused to do anything quietly. He was like a little boy stirring an ant pile with a stick. He always seemed to be the nucleus of some political storm or another. And, as could be expected, hurricane Langer was not done blowing.¹⁵¹

In 1919, the League began to sponsor programs that were not part of the original NPL platform. Two such measures were a new educational bill and a bill that would establish official newspapers in every county. The educational bill was designed to establish a new board, that proponents argued could more easily control the facets of state education. Immediately charges were cast by the opposition that it was a plot to take power away from the superintendent of schools Minnie J. Nielson.¹⁵²

The newspaper bill was likewise viewed with suspicion. Designed to establish one official newspaper for each county, the election of 1920 would allow counties to vote upon which would be their official paper. Until then however, the state would establish a

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 117, 241.

¹⁵¹ *Fargo Forum*, February 22, 1919; *Bismarck Tribune*, February 21, 25, 1919.

¹⁵² Ibid., 234.

State Printing Commission to oversee all printing within the state. In addition, the commission would have the power to designate official county papers until the general election. The newspaper bill met extreme opposition. Langer opposed the bills, as did such League opponents as the I.V.A. The I.V.A. charged that it was a blow against the freedom of the press. Given the power inherent in the bill the opposition was probably close to the truth. Langer's opposition to these bills and his actions involving the Valley City Bank and Minnie Nielson of course made most if not all of the state's papers. They caused such turmoil on the political scene that the *Fargo Forum* declared, "EITHER LANGER OR TOWNLEY MUST GO." The *Forum* went on to say that the real question was whether Langer or Townley would be in charge of the League.¹⁵³

His opposition to these NPL actions provided him with an opportunity to begin breaking with the League as well as getting a fair amount of attention by the press. They also gave him ammunition that he could use to denounce the NPL's leadership. However, his opposition may also have been an effort to win the support of the I.V.A. The organization was utterly opposed to the education and newspaper bills, seeing them as another step in the destruction of North Dakota's government. Minnie Nielson had been an I.V.A. candidate when elected in 1918. Langer's defense of her, combined with an overt willingness to expose the Valley City Bank deal, may have been a way of telling the I.V.A. that he was open for future endorsement.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Ibid., 235; *Fargo Forum*, April 10, 1919

¹⁵⁴ Remele, 86.

Something more must be said about Langer's defense of Nielson. In 1917, the League enacted legislation that allowed women the right to vote in "local and presidential elections." Many attributed Minnie Nielson's victory in the 1918 election to this newly won privilege. It was a "result of women voting for women" papers proclaimed. Langer no doubt realized that this new body of voters would be a strong ally in future elections. By coming to Nielson's aid he may have been attempting to lay the groundwork for their future support.¹⁵⁵

Whether or not an appeal to the I.V.A. and women voters was part of his plan, his actions against the League proved successful. Townley soon branded him a traitor, bitterly denouncing him in the press. Langer took advantage of the accusation and brought his case before the farmers of North Dakota. On April 30, he issued a very public challenge to Townley, and the League leadership:

You and your hirelings have lied to and are deceiving the *farmers* of North Dakota. You who had the greatest opportunity ever given to any man in North Dakota, were not big enough for the job. You held your personal interests above the interests of the *farmers* who trusted you. Greedy for power, hungry for money, self indulgent in your whims and with a mighty hate for all honest men who dare to counsel moderation, you betray the *farmers* of North Dakota. You, who hold nothing sacred - if the educational system lies in your path, you ruin it; if the independent press dares to tell the truth, you wreck it; if an honest man exercises his American privilege of opposing certain bills, he is a crook, a coward, a dub, and a fool

Langer further criticized Townley, writing that:

you imported into North Dakota radicals by the score . . . These men . . . have no interests in North Dakota. To them North Dakota is nothing but an interesting experiment. The payment of taxes is to them, as is to you, a matter of indifference. Beyond milking them to the utmost of your ability you and these men "love not the *farmer*" and are not the *farmers'* friend. You and your hirelings have said that I am a crook, a traitor, and that I have sold out and betrayed the

¹⁵⁵ Robinson, 259; Geelan, 40.

farmers of North Dakota . . . Prove that I have betrayed the *farmers* of North Dakota and the resignation will follow

While Langer claimed that it was a challenge to Townley, it was obviously much more than that. It was a publicity stunt to be sure but it was also a direct appeal to North Dakota farmers. Langer in fact referred to them by name seven times. He informed them that Townley had “betrayed” the trust they had placed in him. Leaders that had gone bad were in fact victimizing them. On the same token, Langer also portrayed himself as a victim. He had asked for “moderation” but was deemed a “traitor” as Townley asserted his despotic rule. Langer was attempting to relate to the farmers of the state. In essence, he was saying that they were in the same boat, but together they could defeat Townley.¹⁵⁶

He had established that he was on the farmer’s side. Now he had to show that he supported the original League program. Through correspondence, he was able to inform countless numbers of people that he was for the League but against its leaders. Typical of his letters is the following, “Understand of course, that I am for the League program but am absolutely opposed to Townley because of the Valley City deal and other things have shown that he is not working for the farmers interested.” He would also often stress the fact that he was only opposed to certain attachments to the original program, such as the education and newspaper bills. Until the June primaries of 1920, his correspondence would resound with this theme.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ *Fargo Forum*, April 30, 1919; Langer’s April 30 challenge to Townley appeared in all the state’s major newspapers as well most of the minor ones as well, see Geelan, 43.

¹⁵⁷ Undated letter to Tom Johnson from William Langer, Box 15, Folder 2, Langer Collection; For more examples of this correspondence see Box 15, Folder 1, Langer Collection.

Shortly after his public appeal to the farmers, Langer began to employ the prevalent fear of socialism in his campaign. His correspondence overflowed with references to socialism and Bolshevism. He would reply in simple but direct terms to those that wrote him. Comments such as the following were common "Townley and his bunch of socialists is doing the common people and the farmer no good." He often received favorable responses, and encouragement for this tactic. The editor of the *New Leipzig Sentinel*, for instance, offered free space in his paper to help counter the "Russian lingo" of Townley.¹⁵⁸

However, his appeal to the farmers went far beyond his personal correspondence. Building a network of support was old hat to him by now and he knew exactly how to proceed. In April, he began working with the *Morton County Farmers' Press*. The *Farmer's Press*, directed by Mandan attorney Robert Mackin, was a newspaper owned by 400 farmers from Morton County. This alliance more than anything revealed Langer's attempt to subvert the League's voting base.¹⁵⁹

In early May, Langer sent out dozens of letters asking individuals to send him lists of all the Nonpartisan farmers in their counties. These lists enabled him to send campaign literature directly to farmers that supported the League. It is important to note that the circulars were written to give the impression that they were an appeal from the farmers of Morton County and the *Farmers' Press*. An example of the type of literature he sent is as follows:

¹⁵⁸ Letter to J.E. Williams from William Langer, May 20, 1919, Box 15, Folder 2, Langer Collection; letter to William Langer from Sherman Vitze, June 6, 1919, Box 15, Folder 3, Langer Collection.

¹⁵⁹ Letter to F.J. Weir from William Langer, April 15, 1919, Box 15, Folder 1, Langer Collection; Johnson, 16.

We are writing you this as fellow farmers. For years here in Morton County we farmers have been fighting gangs. . .and blind piggers, all of us have joined the [NPL], all of us still belong to it, all of us are sick of Townley and the bunch of socialists. . .We want the [NPL] to exist without him, we want to get rid of him and the whole socialistic gang. The Minnie J. Nielson case. . .[and] the Valley City Bank deal shows how crooked they are and how near the gates of the Penitentiary they will go to fleece the farmers out of his money: the lying attacks of the . . . Leader on Bill Langer shows how they will misrepresent and torture the truth in order to gain their ends.

Langer, however, was not willing to rely solely on direct appeals. He wanted to blanket the state with his message.¹⁶⁰

In late May, he began requesting that individuals send him lists of newspapers that supported efforts to aid farmers but were against Townley. Upon receiving these lists, Langer would send them to Mackin and request that they be put on the *Farmers' Press* exchange list. Between June 2 and July 15, 1919, Langer was able to secure 208 farmer-friendly papers for the exchange.¹⁶¹

In turn, Langer instructed Mackin to ask each of the friendly papers to put the *Farmers' Press* on their exchange lists. Langer also gave Mackin a letter that was to be included with each request. This, more than anything, revealed why Langer wanted to set up such an exchange. The letter, which bordered on grandiloquence, read in part:

The Morton County Farmers' Press[sic], as you will note, is owned by four hundred farmers of Morton County, who are all bonafide farmers with the exception of the editor . . . We are for the [NPL] program but are unqualifiedly

¹⁶⁰ For examples of these letters see Box 15, Folder 2, Langer Collection; campaign circular, May 13, 1919, Box 17, Folder 11, Langer Collection.

¹⁶¹ Letter to G. Grimson, May 19, 1919, Box 15, Folder 2, Langer Collection; letter to Robert Mackin, from William Langer, June 2, 1919, Box 15, Folder 3, Langer Collection; number of papers on exchange was arrived at by adding together the total newspapers on each list Langer sent to Mackin, see Box 15, Folders 3-5, Langer Collection.

opposed to Townley and the bunch of socialists . . . This is the county that Bill Langer came from and outside of the socialists he has one hundred percent of the farmers with him. We know he is honest and when Townley attacks a man like him, we know there “is something rotten in Denmark.”

With hindsight, it becomes obvious what Langer was seeking to do with the *Farmer's Press*, not only was it a publicity machine, it was also his advocate. He was using its backing to legitimize his break with the League and build his own constituency of farmers. The two appeals quoted above provide an excellent example. They were powerful messages that promoted the overthrow of the League hierarchy. By playing the socialist card, Langer was able to portray Townley and the other NPL leaders as a corrupt “bunch of socialists” that were destroying the League program. He, however, was the “honest” man who had “one hundred percent of the farmers with him.” He was the point around which the disabused could rally. ¹⁶²

Shortly after the 1919 legislature, the I.V.A. counterattacked the League by seeking a referendum on certain laws passed. Governor Frazier proclaimed that a special referendum vote would be held on June 26 to decide the issue. Langer took advantage of this situation and began an aggressive speaking tour to denounce the League leadership and court North Dakota's farmers. ¹⁶³

Langer spoke at dozens of towns before the June referendum. For example on June 5, he addressed over 1000 members of the Grainmen's Union in Fargo. He would request several things before he gave such speeches. The first was that he would not give the speech in the name of any political organization, and the second was that he insisted

¹⁶² Letter to Robert Mackin from William Langer, June 2, 1919. Box 15, Folder 3, Langer Collection.

¹⁶³ Morlan, 240.

upon being introduced by a farmer before he spoke. These two measures were designed to ensure the audience that he spoke not as a politician but as a common man, a farmer. His speeches proved to be popular. He was usually booked for two a day and had to turn down many requests from people that he speak in their town.¹⁶⁴

That he was using this campaign to associate himself with the farmers becomes clear by an example of a speech he gave during that time. After reassuring the farmers in the crowd that he had always defended their way of life he began:

for years *we farmers* here in North Dakota have been robbed. When I say *we farmers* I mean, among others, my old father, my uncle. . .and myself. . . I . . . got up at three, four and five o'clock in the morning and worked until nine and ten o'clock at night not one year, two years three years or four years but year after year until I began the practice of law in Mandan . . . Since 1893 *we farmers* in the state have been fighting for terminal elevators [emphasis mine].

Langer then continued with a metaphorical diatribe directed towards the League hierarchy:

You know that out on the ocean when a great new ship is launched with its machinery in perfect working order and its crew enthusiastic that everything goes well but after the ship has been out on the water for a long time . . . animals fasten their long tenacles[sic] to the bottom of the boat and rot the boat and sooner or later the ship must be drydocked and the tenacles and parasites scraped off . . .that is the condition that *we farmers* . . . are in today [emphasis mine].

Langer's word usage in the above speech is very revealing. He used the phrase "*we farmers*" several times. He was definitely trying to ally himself with that portion of the state's population. Langer was portraying himself as one of them. He too was a simple farmer whom the League leadership had betrayed. His highly publicized challenge to

¹⁶⁴ Letter from G.H. Bruns to William Langer, June 5, 1919, Box 15, Folder 4, Langer Collection; letter to H. Denk from William Langer, June 6, 1919, Box 15, Folder 3, Langer Collection; letter to A.M. Thompson from William Langer, June 4, 1919, Box 15, Folder 2, Langer Collection; letter to William G. Owens to F.E. Packard, June 12, 1919, Box 15, Folder 4, Langer Collection.

Townley, his work with the *Morton County Farmers' Press* and his speaking tour were attention getters, but they were also an effort to ease himself into a leadership position. If Townley was discredited who would lead the farmer's program? A likely candidate would be one who had helped expose the man's corruption and exhibited an understanding of the farmer's plight. Langer was grooming himself for that eventuality.¹⁶⁵

Despite the efforts of the I.V.A. and Langer, the referendum was a failure for the League opposition. However, Langer had been successful in getting his message across. In an obvious reference to the 1920 primary, his assistant Frank E. Packard wrote him in late June that the referendum campaign had left him "in fine shape for the next fight." He also received support from citizens across the state. For instance, one farmer wrote him suggesting that a "Langer for Governor Club" be started with the slogan "For Langer and the *real farmer program* we will stick." [emphasis mine]¹⁶⁶

Throughout the rest of the summer, he kept up a busy speaking tour, denouncing Townley. He also continued to gather lists of Nonpartisan farmers and keep his name in the news. In August, he wrote the *Bismarck Tribune* requesting that they give his "April challenge" to Townley "as much publicity as possible." In addition, he began the process

¹⁶⁵ Undated speech by William Langer, 1919, Box 17, Folder 11, Langer Collection; Langer did not explain how he farmed "year after year" as a college student in New York or during the time he spent in Mexico.

¹⁶⁶ Geelan, 43; Letter to William Langer from F.E. Packard, June 30, 1919, Box 15, Folder 4, Langer Collection; letter from H.E. Thayer to William Langer, December 30, 1919, Box 15, Folder 6, Langer Collection.

of forming Langer for Governor Clubs in early December. Deemed the State Federation of Langer for Governor Clubs, Robert Mackin became secretary.¹⁶⁷

However, Langer also wanted to expose more misdeeds of the League leadership. In another highly sensational case, Langer again displayed how devious he could be. Historian Edward Blackorby has pointed out that as a member of the State Banking Board and Industrial Commission, Langer had a special insight into where weaknesses existed in the finances of the League. He used this benefit to his advantage. It had come to his knowledge that the League-controlled Scandinavian-American Bank was employing questionable measures in its handling of money. Langer knew that funds, in the form of large redeposit, were transferred from the Bank of North Dakota to the Scandinavian American Bank. He also knew that the latter had been making large loans to businesses started by League members. It was with this inside information that Langer and Secretary of State Thomas Hall, the majority on the state banking board, launched an investigation in October 1919.¹⁶⁸

How the investigation proceeded, more than anything else revealed Langer's crafty nature. In order to conceal the investigation from Governor Frazier, the third member of the banking board, Langer put together a clever ruse. He first assigned the state bank examiner, a loyal League official, to an investigation out of state. With the examiner out of the way, Langer drew up a broad resolution that allowed the deputy

¹⁶⁷ Reference to Langer's speaking tour and lists of Nonpartisan farmers can be found in Box 15, Folder 6, Langer Collection; letter to Bismarck Tribune from William Langer, August 5, 1919, Box 15, Folder 5, Langer Collection; letter from H.L. Woll, December 7, 1919, Box 15, Folder 5, Langer Collection; Johnson, 17.

¹⁶⁸ Blackorby, 101-102.

examiners to investigate a trust company in Fargo that was suffering financially. The resolution allowed the examiners to investigate not only the named trust company but also any other financial matters in Fargo that warranted investigation. The trust company had been nothing but a front. As soon as the examiners arrived in Fargo they proceeded directly to the Scandinavian-American bank and began an investigation. Consequently, they alleged that the bank had been making loans in excess of its reserve funds. They then declared the bank insolvent and ordered that it be closed.¹⁶⁹

With out a doubt as member of the banking board Langer knew the importance of the Scandinavian-American Bank to the League. It is also logical to assume that he knew exposing such an institution would bring him publicity. He was right. Nowhere in his early career did William Langer make headlines as he did over the Scandinavian-American Bank scandal. The front-page coverage was extraordinary. The *Fargo Forum*, the *Bismarck Tribune*, and the *Grand Forks Herald* all devoted nearly two weeks to the unfolding story. It was virtually two weeks in which his name was continually on the front page of the state's major newspapers. One can also assume the story was in many if not all the state's local papers as well. However, that was not all, for the first time William Langer achieved national recognition. So sensational was the story, it was carried in the pages of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*. Few presidents make as many headlines or are as skilled in the art of generating them.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ For examples of the headlines garnered by Langer see *Fargo Forum*, October 3-14, 1919; *Bismarck Tribune*, October 2-13, 1919; *Grand Forks Herald*, October 3-16, 1919. See also *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 1919; *New York Times*, October 4, 7, 8, 1919.

It is only natural that the *Leader* covered the story as well; like a banshee, it howled at the insult, dedicating multiple page articles to the affair. This was to be expected, the bank was key to the financing of League enterprises. So essential was it that its closing was almost a “fatal blow” to the financial structure of the NPL. To counter the banks closing the League launched an all out offensive to save it. Appealing directly to the state Supreme Court, officials managed to have it reopened. Langer, and Hall, became bank “wreckers” and traitors. Included with Langer and Hall was Carl Kositsky, the State Auditor who aided them in the investigation. With this action, the trio completely severed their connections with the League, and the hierarchy targeted all three for retaliation. Langer, however, bore the brunt of the attack. His office budget was cut and his powers as attorney general reduced by special measure of the League-controlled legislature. Langer rolled with the blows and used the case to further his charges against Townley, who actually lost popularity for his counterattacks on the three defectors.¹⁷¹

Langer’s most vicious attacks against the leadership of the League began in November 1919. They were also the most blatant attempt to use Bolshevik fears to achieve his ends. In that month a magazine called, *The Red Flame* hit newsstands across the state. The first issue claimed that it was published under the auspices of the Citizens Economy League. However, the real people behind the magazine were William Langer and Carl Kositsky.¹⁷²

It is uncertain when the two, quite possibly with the aid of Thomas Hall, began to collaborate on the project. What is known is that it was published through the Bismarck

¹⁷¹ *Nonpartisan Leader*, October 20, 1919; Blackorby, 102; Morlan, 273; Weber, 93, 101.

¹⁷² Morlan, 166.

Tribune Company and was probably funded by “moneyed interests” that had a stake in defeating the League. That the magazine was free despite the expensive of publication and distribution hints to the fact that there was considerable money behind the project.¹⁷³

Published on a monthly basis, *The Red Flame* was usually thirty to forty pages in length. It was equipped with a not so subtle red cover and distributed throughout North Dakota and neighboring states as well. The first issue proclaimed, “The Red Flame is SOCIALISM. Blind, unreasoning, radical SOCIALISM that has stolen into North Dakota under the guise of a “Farmers’ Movement.” It was this Red Flame that was “Burning the heart out of North Dakota”.¹⁷⁴

There were two reasons behind the publication of the *Flame*. One was to promote the names of Langer, Hall, and Kositsky. While Langer was out for the governorship, Thomas Hall and Carl Kositsky wanted to retain their present offices independent of the League. Across the pages of the magazine, they strode as a triumvirate dedicated to protecting the farmer. Countless articles and editorials pointed out the sacrifices the three had made for farmers across the state. The most visible format for their self-aggrandizement was cartoons. Dozens of self-serving images graced the pages of the *Flame*, showing the trio thwarting Townley’s plans. Townley always came across as a lanky, unkempt, buffoon, in a rumpled suit, while Langer, Hall and Kositsky were shown as tall, clean cut, men of action, going the extra mile to aid the agents of husbandry.

¹⁷³ Letter from Bismarck Tribune Company to Carl Kositzky, May 31, 1920, Box 15, Folder 7, Langer Collection; Morlan, 267.

¹⁷⁴ Morlan, 267; *The Red Flame*, November 1919, 1; all issues of *The Red Flame* cited were found in *The Red Flame: A Chronicle of the Fierce Controversy Surrounding the Early Days of North Dakota's Non-Partisan League*, comp. Norman L. Larsen (Minot: Lowe and Larson Printing, Inc., 1975).

One of the magazine's simpler but powerful images appeared in the May 1920 issue. It depicted a swarthy, talon of a hand descending upon a hapless farmer. On the shirtsleeve was written "Big (Biz) Five", while on its fingers were the names of five leading members of the League, including Townley. A powerful hand that gripped its wrist, however, had stopped the descent of the talon. Written upon this image of power and benevolence was the amalgam, "KOZYHALLLANGER." The implication was clear, Langer, Hall, and Kositsky were the self-assigned champions of the farmer.¹⁷⁵

Often the degree to which the magazine would go in that regard bordered on the melodramatic. In the April 1920 issue a poem entitled "Our Bill Langer" appeared. The poem read in part

Three cheers for you, Bill Langer!
You're the lad that rings true blue;
You're the one to guide our Ship of State
And see us safely through.
You rose above the reeking fumes
Of envy, greed and hate -
A sturdy, loyal patriot -
To save our Sunshine State

Such ostentation was common throughout the pages of *The Red Flame*. It takes little imagination to conclude that one aim of the paper was to promote the images of Langer, Hall, and Kositzky as champions of the people. They were selfless crusaders whose purpose was to drive out the evil leadership that threatened the sanctity of the NPL program. One might also add that it was a powerful publicity tool as well. The monthly

¹⁷⁵ *The Red Flame*, May 1920, 265.

magazine featured Langer's name and picture in every issue. Focusing attention upon the farmer's plight, was a way to focus attention upon himself as well.¹⁷⁶

The second purpose of the *Flame* was to tie together Red Scare hysteria, socialism, and the League leadership. The *Flame* was full of cartoons, editorials, and stories that compared Townley's brand of socialism to Bolshevism. Some even implied that he was taking his orders directly from Lenin. It was a connection meant to strike fear into the hearts of North Dakotans. One lengthy story that spanned several issues perfectly illustrated this point.

Beginning in March 1920, the story featured a fictional take over of North Dakota by Bolshevik insurrectionists. Titled, "When the Revolution Came to North Dakota: A Logical Application of Bolshevik Chronology in Russia to the Advent of the Soviet Regime in North Dakota, as Anticipated by Dr. Ivin Kurdovanitch," the tale was set on the future date of May 1, 1923, and featured swarthy, mustachioed riders running rampant through the streets of Bismarck with red flags flapping and guns blazing. These men obviously meant to represent Bolsheviks, ruthlessly shot down bystanders and destroyed property as they took control of the city and eventually the entire state.¹⁷⁷

The story implied that the *anticipated* revolution could have been prevented. In a subtle manner, the story warned that members of the NPL were to blame for the Bolshevik take over:

In spite of the close connection between the Bolshevistic movement in Eastern Europe and the Communist developments in the western hemisphere which the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., April 1920, 191.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., March 1920, 156.

patriotic press of America had repeatedly exposed, the mass of the people refused to remove the scales from their eyes. That which students of history recognized as pure communism was to these self-deluded citizens merely a farmers' movement.

The story then went on to warn readers of the results of such a revolution. In a chapter aptly named "The Reign of Terror," the author painted an apocalyptic picture of the future:

The striking of nine that morning of May 1, 1923, ushered in for North Dakota a reign of terror which had known no parallel since the opening hours of the Red revolution in Russia some five years before. As though by magic there appeared at prominent corners in every town and village in the state communist manifestos, proclaiming the dictatorship of the proletariat, the fall of the bourgeoisie, and the expropriation of public property.

In case the implementation of communist doctrine was not enough to inflame the reader's passions, the author went on to describe horrors of a more base fashion, in what he deemed North Dakota's "Red Night":

appetites whetted by the blood which already had been spilled, the red army, intolerant of any discipline, poured forth in an orgy of rapine and murder. Cold type cannot reproduce the horrors of that night; they surpass imagination or description . . . Maddened, half-civilized brutes, long held in leash awaiting this day, were turned loose upon paralyzed, helpless communities. Yellow men and black, imported because they had proven past masters in the art of terrorism in ravished Russia, reached new pinnacles of debauchery in that Red Night.

This was a powerful message wrapped in the guise of a very frightening story. The implications were clear, if the people of North Dakota allowed Townley to stay in power they could very well find themselves in a nightmarish realm of barbarism and death. However, if they aligned themselves with Langer, Hall, and Kositzky, the original NPL program would be followed, thus preventing a "Red" disaster.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 157-160.

The *Flame* did not stop at such fictional accounts. The paper carried stories of I.W.W. members held on trial and other socialistic movements around the world. All were tied into the NPL and the actions of, "Townley and his oily-tongued breeders of discontent." Another theme prevalent in the *Flame* was that of "free love".¹⁷⁹

In early 1919, I.V.A. member Olger Burtness made public that the League's library commission had in its possession for distribution books that advocated "free love". While an investigation proved the charge groundless, the opposition of the League took the idea and ran. One of the *Flame*'s most famous cartoons depicted a classroom full of grade school children kissing while the buxom teacher sat on her desk reading a book titled "Free Love".¹⁸⁰

The Red Flame was nothing more than a propaganda machine. Its vivid imagery and commentary was designed to destroy the League hierarchy even as it promoted Langer, Hall, and Kositzky. To achieve that end it used the "Red Scare" as a weapon for character assassination. The stories, articles, and cartoons found within its pages were appeals to the emotional, rather than the rational, side of human nature. It was the portion of the brain that could be most easily aroused by such an approach.

The men behind the *Flame* did not want to cloud the issue with common sense; instead, they sought to incite fear amongst North Dakotans. An apprehensive population could be more easily led by men offering a plan to eliminate the source of their fear. In a

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., April 1920, 215.

¹⁸⁰ Tweton in *North Dakota Political Tradition*, 113.

sense, Langer, Hall, and Kositzky exacerbated, if not created, a problem so they could offer their own self-serving solution.

In addition to the publication of *The Red Flame*, Langer increased the tempo of Red baiting in his speeches. In a December speech delivered in Jamestown, he made a direct connection between the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the Nonpartisan League. Langer claimed that the organizational forces behind the League had given their wholehearted endorsement of the revolution. Langer furthered the connection by claiming that Townley sought to implement in North Dakota the same sort of "Industrial Autocracy" that Lenin and Trotsky advocated. Langer ended the speech with a call to patriotic duty that highlighted his dedication to the farmers and the country:

And in your State Capitol Building, here where us fellows inside of this farmers organization are doing all we possibly can to carry out its original program; doing everthing possible in protecting the farmer against . . . men like Trotsky . . . I say we people of North Dakota want no truck with anyone who wants to overthrow this government . . . the good old stars and stripes . . . is good enough for me and I would not change this government for either Trotsky's Russia or Townley's "Industrial Democracy".

In a January 1920 speech delivered at Portland, North Dakota, he told farmers

You know what happened to the Duma over in Russia when it would not do the will of the men temporarily in control, the men who happened to have the soldier's guns and the policemen's clubs. It was dissolved. There is to-day in Russia rule by the minority. They passed a law that only "Reds" could carry guns. My friends, we in this state are rapidly getting in to the same situation . . . Let the autocrats in control of the state know that gang rule is at an end in North Dakota. Let them know that farmers in North Dakota . . . are going to carry out their [original] program . . . we are going to get what we are after and . . . Townley[] cannot keep us from getting it.

Langer had an ability to foster fear while at the same time offering calm reassurance. He would present League leaders as the problem then offer himself as the solution. This concept was central to his campaign. Townley and the League hierarchy represented

chaos. Langer and the farm program represented order. It was a simple appeal meant to show that he, not the “autocrats,” had the farmers’ best interests in mind.¹⁸¹

In January of 1920, Langer also sought to further ingrain himself with North Dakota farmers. In that month, he began working with the Farmer’s Federated Committee; an organization set up to combat Townley. Exactly who was responsible for the committee’s origins is uncertain. Evidence suggests that Langer and Robert Mackin had a hand in its creation. In Langer’s correspondence are dozens of letters sent to prominent farmers throughout the state asking them to attend their meeting on January 28 in Bismarck. The letters mentioned that Mackin had suggested their names to the committee, revealing a close relationship with the Langer for Governor Clubs. Because of the meeting, the committee endorsed Langer for governor.¹⁸²

Langer’s plan was proving successful. In late January of 1920, his campaign manager, R.S. Wilcox, summed up the feelings of many farmers in the state, “Sentiment among the farmers who are leaving Townley, is that the only way the League can be saved and the reputation of farmer organizations maintained, is by ditching these leaders and getting behind a man like Langer.” Langer did not let it rest at that, however. By February, he was delivering a fiery accusatory speech every day. Consequently, people who had attended wrote him that they had witnessed Townley supporters convert to Langer supporters before their very eyes.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Speech given by William Langer, December 30, 1919, Box 17, Folder 2, Langer Collection; speech given by William Langer, January 3, 1920, Box 17, Folder 2, Langer Collection.

¹⁸² Correspondence relating to the Farmer’s Federated Committee can be found in Box 15, Folder 7, Langer Collection.

¹⁸³ Letter to J.A. Peterson from R.S. Wilcox, January 20, 1920, Box 15, Folder 7, Langer Collection; letter to William Langer from L.B. Garnaas, February 21, 1920, Box 15, Folder 6, Langer Collection.

On March 23, 1920, with feigned modesty, he announced his candidacy for governor:

In reply to the resolutions passed by the Farmers Federated Clubs requesting that I become a candidate for governor, and also influenced by the petitions from more than twenty thousand citizens of the state, who have banded themselves together in Langer for Governor Clubs, I accede to your wishes and will become a Progressive Republican candidate for Governor.

Langer presented himself as the farmer's and the people's choice. To distance himself from the League leadership he again ran as a progressive. To show his allegiance to the League program he ran on a platform that supported a plan of rural credit for farmers and nonpartisan political control over state industries. He received further support on May 13, when the I.V.A. endorsed him at its convention in Minot.¹⁸⁴

The I.V.A.'s support had come with great reluctance. Members of the organization were resentful that Langer supported the original program of the League. However, they faced a stark reality. Langer was the only candidate for governor that had a chance of defeating Frazier, which meant he was the best hope for wresting control of the government from Townley. The power and the severity of the blows Langer had delivered to the League must have also weighed heavy in their decision.¹⁸⁵

In the months before and after he became candidate for governor, he kept up a ferocious speaking tour directed at the farmers. In January, he received word that the ideal time to speak in Williston would be at the livestock sale when "three to five hundred farmers from all over this section of the state" were in town. He hammered home

¹⁸⁴ Weber, 103; Tweton in *North Dakota Political Tradition*, 110-111.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

the familiar theme of criticizing the NPL leaders while praising the program, often pointing out the Valley City and Scandinavian-American Bank scandals as indications of their corruption.¹⁸⁶

Langer's speeches again proved popular. Although he was making two to four speeches a day, he could not keep up with demand. He received one to five requests a day from people asking that he give a speech in their area. Well before the June 29 primary, he was booked solid. The *Grand Forks Herald* noted on June 22 that in the previous four weeks Langer had traversed 25,000 miles and spoke before 50,000 people. The paper also revealed the make up of the crowds he spoke before. These audiences, sometimes numbering as much as 2000 people, were approximately 80 percent farmers. Of that number, 50 percent were League members.¹⁸⁷

As the campaign progressed, Langer's correspondence resounded with excitement and activity. It was as if some climatic battle was waging. Indeed, Langer's headquarters made full use of military metaphors. His campaign managers began to call him "General Langer," often writing that he had the " 'Reds' on the run". And when, in late June, Townley had speakers come from other states to aid in the League campaign it was decried as a "foreign army invading the state."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Letter from W.G. Owens to William Langer, January 19, 1920, Box 15, Folder 7, Langer Collection; undated campaign speech by William Langer, 1920, Box 17, Folder 2, Langer Collection.

¹⁸⁷ Letter from E.B. Cox to A.A. Bruce, June 11, 1920, Box 15, Folder 2, Langer Collection; letter from F.E. Packard to Sam Neuman, June 15, 1920, Box 15, Folder 9, Langer Collection; *Grand Forks Herald*, June 22, 1920; Letter to Torger Sinness from V.M. Mandaulf, June 17, 1920, Box 15, Folder 14, Langer Collection.

¹⁸⁸ Letter from A.W. Carlson to J.A. Marsh, June 1, 1920, Box 15, Folder 11, Langer Collection; telegram from F.E. Packard to members of William Langer's campaign, June 18, 1920, Box 15, Folder 14, Langer Collection.

In one of his last public appeals before the primaries, Langer implored the state's citizens:

North Dakota has asked little of you: today she calls for just ten days of your time. Out here on the prairies are thousands of farmers looking to the first streaks of dawn of the day when they shall have been ridded of the yoke of socialism and autocracy. Men and women of North Dakota---the answer lies with you.

Again, the battle was not for William Langer but for the farmer. It was not only his duty, but also the duty of all North Dakotans to cast aside Townley and set them free. Despite his message and the vigorous campaign he used to drive it home, the power of the League proved too great. When the results of the June 30 primary were tallied, Langer lost to the incumbent Lynn Frazier by a vote of 5,414. However, the campaign had struck an ominous blow to the League. In 1918, Frazier had received a majority of 17,000 over his rival. In that same year, opponents of the League had only managed to nominate one candidate. The 1920 primary saw the nomination of not one but six opposition candidates, including Thomas Hall for Secretary of State and Carl Kositsky for State Auditor. However, as he reflected upon his ambitious and hard fought campaign these facts probably brought him cold comfort. His gambit had failed.¹⁸⁹

After his defeat in the June, primaries Langer received many letters of consolation and encouragement. Most asked him not to give up the battle, one in particular advising that, "as a rule wars are never won in a single battle." Others wrote him asking that he run as an independent in the fall. He turned down these offers, claiming he had no support for

¹⁸⁹ Campaign circular, June 1920. Box 15, Folder 15, Langer Collection; Blackorby, 110; Saloutos, 197.

such a move. His correspondence for this period reflects a melancholic mood. It was his first defeat and it must have hurt.¹⁹⁰

While the excitement that characterized his correspondence during the campaign was gone, he was still confident enough to write in early July that North Dakota “will clean out the bunch”. However, that was not to be the League would retain its power in 1920.¹⁹¹

However, it won by a narrow margin. Many voters had lost confidence in the organization. Langer’s vigorous campaign of exposing the weaknesses of the League and questioning the character of its leadership undoubtedly contributed to this turn of public opinion. In 1921, when the I.V.A. initiated a recall election of state officials, Governor Frazier, along with the newly elected Attorney General William Lemke and Commissioner of Agriculture John Hagan, lost their offices. Another issue put to the vote was the fate of the state industries. The I.V.A. sought to eliminate the program of state ownership all together. In a testament to the popularity of the program and Langer’s insight, the voters preserved it. While the leaders of the League fell from grace, the voters rallied around the program just as Langer knew they would. In a sense his plan did work, although it had not brought him to power.¹⁹²

William Langer’s attack on the Nonpartisan League reveals much about his ambitious personality. By January 1919, he began to cast covetous eyes towards the

¹⁹⁰ Letter from F.H. Sprague to William Langer, July 16, 1920, Box 15, Folder 15, Langer Collection; Weber, 113.

¹⁹¹ Letter to Jacob Remboldt from William Langer, July 7, 1920, Box 15, Folder 15, Langer Collection.

¹⁹² Robinson, 349-350.

office of governor. Is it a coincidence that in the same month he began a virulent campaign against the NPL hierarchy? The League was looking for a Cincinnatus to lead its program and he did not fit the bill. If he were to achieve the governorship, it would have to be without the support of Townley and other leaders. However, just because he did not have the upper echelons in his corner did not mean he could not win the support of League members.

He knew that attacking the NPL would be a publicity bonanza. How could he bring recognition to himself as well as the highest position of political status within the state? He would launch sensational attacks and speaking tours to destroy the League leaders while championing its still popular platform. In essence, he turned his own personal agenda into a highly publicized fight for the original League program in an effort to win the state's farming constituency. He may very well have believed that the League leadership was bad for the state, but his actions reveal that he was working towards his own individual goals. He saw an opportunity for political advancement in the volatile conditions of 1919 and he acted upon it.

Although his campaign resulted in defeat, he did not give up on capturing the League. He learned an important lesson between 1916 and 1920. He realized that the farmers of North Dakota, once organized, could be a potent force in politics. Properly managed, they would be a voting bloc that assured victory for whatever office he chose, it was this latent power unleashed by the League that drew him. It was a siren call he could not resist. And it is really no surprise that in the decade that followed, he worked his way back into the League, taking control, and using it to achieve the state's highest office: the governorship and ultimately the senatorship.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

William Langer rose quickly in North Dakota politics. The young college graduate had written in 1911 that:

I desire now to make a living and a record so I may one day become popular enough to be the most popular man in the state just like I was in college and be given some political office large enough to attract the notice of my former classmates in the East.

By 1920, he had, for all practical purposes fulfilled these goals. While he failed to become governor, he was one of the most well known figures in North Dakota and had attracted national attention. In nine years, he had gone from an unknown attorney to a strong gubernatorial hopeful. To be sure, active campaigning and a network of friends layed their part, but underneath, the impetus had always been the need for recognition and status. This need manifested itself as an ambitious climb through the state's political ranks.¹⁹³

In Morton County, there was a severe problem with liquor violators that nobody dealt with in a serious fashion. Langer saw opportunity. He could have turned a blind eye as apparently, others had, but he did not. He chose to launch raid after raid, arresting hundreds in the process. It was the same with the school laws. Others had not enforced them. What did Langer do? He threatened dozens of parents with arrest. These actions

¹⁹³ Letter to Mrs. Charles M. Rolker from William Langer, May 18, 1911, Box 1, Folder 1, Langer Collection.

put him in the public spotlight earning him what one political author has deemed the “strongest of political currencies: name recognition.” Indeed, one might ask oneself how common is it for a county state’s attorney to achieve statewide “name recognition?”¹⁹⁴

With his name continually in the news over law enforcement, he quietly worked to gain the Nonpartisan League’s endorsement for attorney general before launching a highly aggressive political campaign. Once in office, he repeated the publicity process he learned as state’s attorney. The Minot liquor case, and the theatrics involved, show Langer in classic form, as does the East Grand Forks raid. He knew opportunity to get headlines when he saw it, and he grabbed it in a grandiose fashion.

However, it was during his attack on the NPL that William Langer’s status-driven personality was at its finest. He saw the power of the farmer in the 1916 and 1918 elections. He knew what they were capable of once organized, and he wanted to harness that power for himself. Such a power in his corner could elevate him to the highest position of status within the state, the governorship. What better way to win the support of that voting bloc than to discredit the League hierarchy, while championing its farmer friendly program? Thus, he would not only have the adulation of North Dakota’s largest constituency but the recognition generated by his insurrection as well.

His desire for status brought him to the gubernatorial election of 1920. It also brought him defeat. However, that did keep William Langer down. Over the course of the next twelve years, he busied himself by working his way back into the League and eventually taking it over. By 1932, he used a newly reorganized NPL to secure the governorship.

¹⁹⁴ James L. Payne et al., *The Motivation of Politicians* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1984), 47.

While governor, he maintained a public life of controversy and publicity. His mortgage moratorium and grain embargo of 1933, are prominent examples. During the moratorium for instance, he took the sensational step of calling out the National Guard to stop foreclosure sales. Both these measures earned him places in the nation's newspapers and the adulation of farmers. However, those actions paled in comparison to the extraordinary move he made in the summer of 1934. After a conviction for soliciting campaign funds from federal employees in Bismarck, Langer stalled his removal from office by issuing a declaration of independence for North Dakota and calling out the National Guard to maintain order. To say that is peculiar behavior for a public official is to put it mildly.¹⁹⁵

His audacious activities resulted in popularity. He became United States Senator in 1940. As senator, his colleagues knew him as "the terrible Mr. Bang" for his childish antics on the Senate floor. In one instance, a senator stopped delivering his speech when Langer walked over and began pulling cigars from the man's pocket. He was notorious for impeding the proceedings of the Senate. He launched countless filibusters and in one case declared that he would vote against every bill put before the Senate. He also fostered the image of a "maverick" by disagreeing with his fellow Republicans on a regular basis. In 1947, he was deemed the "most chronic shifter," having voted against his Republican colleagues 37 times. In 1952, he offended the sensibilities of Republicans again by accompanying President Harry Truman on a whistle stop tour across North Dakota. He

¹⁹⁵ Geelan, 95.

always seemed to be the focus of controversy and he cared little if the publicity was good or bad. He seemed incapable of doing anything quietly.¹⁹⁶

These examples suggest that there was a pattern of behavior that transcended the offices he held, a pattern that emerged in his early years. He was a man who constantly thrust himself upon the public. He simply wanted the world to take notice. This does not mean he did not believe in the things he did. Langer may very well have felt he was doing the right thing for the state when he strictly enforced the law and later tried to oust Townley. As political psychologist James L. Payne has pointed out “ ‘to live a lie’ is psychologically taxing; few people - and few politicians - are able to do so to any extensive degree.” There is really no reason not to believe that Langer thought his actions were right. However, whether he was sincere or not in his outspoken beliefs is beside the point. It was the methods he used to do the “right thing,” that revealed the inner workings of the man. Countless politicians do what they feel is right without bringing statewide, and nationwide, attention to themselves. The manner in which William Langer conducted himself suggests that a need for recognition was key to his own personal platform.¹⁹⁷

This examination of William Langer has shown an individual who, from an early age, strove to rise above his fellow citizens. He wanted the attention and status that only a political career could bring. Through a combination of opportunism, sensationalism, and aggressive campaigning, he achieved his goal while building a reputation unequalled in the annals of North Dakota politics. He truly became a North Dakota phenomenon.

¹⁹⁶ Eric P. Bergeson, “Wild Bill Goes To Washington: A Reassessment of the Senate Career of North Dakota’s William Langer” (Masters Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1990), 31; Geelan, 91, 131, 122.

¹⁹⁷ Payne, 47.

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