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**Farmers Speak Out (1879)**

Proceedings of the Thirteenth Session  
of the National Grange

In the mid-to-late 1800s, the railroad industry was a major area of economic growth in the United States. Men with money began to invest in building railroads all across the country. In time, less profitable railroads went out of business or were bought by more successful competitors. As a result, railroad monopolies developed. Railroad titans got together and agreed to charge high prices for carrying freight short distances. Grain elevator operators also engaged in price fixing and overcharged the farmer for the use of their storage facilities. These practices, as well as high taxes, placed a large financial burden on farmers.

Beginning in the 1870s, the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry organized farmers to fight powerful business groups. As members of this influential organization, farmers were able to persuade state governments to pass laws that protected their interests. In time, the federal government passed similar laws, such as the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, which regulated railroads. In addition to political organizing, the Grange also provided educational opportunities and social activities for its members. The following is from a summary statement of the Grange's national meeting in 1879.

. . . American farming is growing less profitable and less encouraging.

In a country possessing so many facilities of cheap production this discouraging aspect of agriculture must be and is the result of other than natural causes. The annual additions of wealth [to the nation's economy] under the enlightened system of agriculture are enormous, but from the unequal divisions of the profits of labor and the unjust discriminations made against it, the enlistments of [economic

records on] property show that the farmers of the United States are not prospering. While it [agriculture] is rapidly extinguishing all debts and restoring an equilibrium [stability] to the currency of the country, its votaries [those devoted to agriculture] are deprived of a just share of the rewards of their toil. . . . Transportation companies are allowed to make and unmake prices at will by their unjust and discriminating tariffs and freights [shipping costs]. Subsidies and tariffs are created to protect other industries to the prejudice [harm] of agriculture. Commerce is shackled [chained]. American productions are denied the markets of the world through partial and restrictive laws. Agricultural property is made to bear an unequal and undue proportion of taxation to afford [make possible] exemptions and privileges to other industries. Monopolies are permitted to assume power and control and exercise prerogatives [rights] and privileges justly belonging to sovereignty [national government]. Encouraged by legislation and stimulated by power, they have grown dictatorial and imperious [overbearing] in their demands, unrelenting in their exactions [excessive fees], and cruel and unmerciful in their impositions [levies]. Society has become extravagant and is now a heedless [uncaring] spendthrift of the painful earnings of labor. Government has become proud and autocratic [using absolute power], while her toiling laborers are humiliated in their poverty. States are lavish and prodigal [reckless] with the people's money. Cities and towns grow rich at the expense and impoverishment of the country. . . . The farmers of America have on all occasions shown themselves to be a patient and enduring people, and further submission to wrong and injustice will be a sacrifice of manhood and exhibition of cowardice. Stirred with a just sense of right and supported by the integrity of our purpose, the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry in the name and interest of the farmer of the United States, sternly demand—

- 1st. That the Department of Agriculture shall be made an Executive Department, and the Commissioner a Cabinet officer.
- 2d. That the Agricultural Department shall be sustained and supported by annual appropriations commensurate with [equal to] the importance of the great and permanent industry it represents.

- 3d. That commercial treaties shall be made with all foreign countries, giving American products equal and unrestricted . . . [entrance into] the markets of the world.
- 4th. That governments be administered in a cheaper and simpler manner, consonant [in accord] with the conditions of the people.
- 5th. That a more rigid economy in the expenditures of public moneys be re-established.
- 6th. That the laws shall be plain and simple, to the end that justice shall be speedy, crime punished, and good government maintained.
- 7th. That the creation or allowing of monopolies to exist is in violation of the spirit and genius [character] of free republican government.
- 8th. That the tariffs of freight and fare over railroads and all transportation companies shall be regulated, and all unjust discriminations inhibited [ended] by law.
- 9th. That taxation shall be equal and uniform, and all values [rates] made to contribute their just proportion to the support of the government.
- 10th. That the revenue laws of the United States shall be so adjusted as to bear equally upon all classes of property, to the end that agriculture shall be relieved of the disproportion of burdens it bears.

## Review Questions

1. Why did farmers feel that it was necessary to form the Grange?
2. Why did the farmers blame “transportation companies” (railroads) for their problems?
3. Why did farmers feel that foreign tariff laws were discriminatory?
4. Explain how *each* of the following demands of the Grangers were designed to assist American farmers: (a) Demand #1: establishment of the Department of Agriculture as an executive depart-

ment with its commissioner a Cabinet member. (b) Demand #7: elimination of monopolies. (c) Demand #10: readjustment of revenue laws.

5. *Why is the Grange considered important to U.S. history even though it failed to achieve most of its demands?*
6. *Do farmers today have need of an organization such as the Grange? Why or why not?*