

Records of the National Grange in Its Washington Office

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National Archives

THE National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry,¹ the first important organization of farmers in the United States, originated in Washington, D. C., on December 4, 1867, in the office of William Saunders, Superintendent of Propagating Gardens of the Department of Agriculture. The office building, a small brick structure, was set amid the gardens.² The organization was conceived by Oliver Hudson Kelley, who had obtained a clerkship in the Department of Agriculture in 1864. He had returned to his Minnesota farm in 1865 but had soon been recalled to Washington by Commissioner of Agriculture Isaac Newton. In January 1866 he had been sent on a trip through the Southern States to gather agricultural information. On this trip he had been impressed with the farmers' lack of progressive spirit and of social life. Kelley, a Mason, had concluded that a secret order of farmers was needed; and he began to interest others in his plan for a national farmers' fraternal organization. On his return to Washington he developed a formal plan of organization, with the help of Saunders; John Trimble and John R. Thompson of the Treasury Department; Francis McDowell and Aaron Grosh of the Department of Agriculture; and William Ireland of the Post Office Department.

The plan included a Masonic ritual, with provision for a series of degrees and admission to membership of both men and women. The constitution provided that a subordinate grange, corresponding to a township, be the unit of organization. Four degrees were provided for the subordinate grange. When 15 subordinate granges

* The author, a member of the National Archives staff, spent some time in research for this paper in 1959, and has now brought the account up to date. She wishes to acknowledge the courtesy and assistance of the staff of the Washington office of the National Grange in permitting her access to the records. Dorothy Kerwick, office manager, and Dorothy Blackwell, secretary to the National Master, were especially kind in giving her information in lengthy interviews. Jack Jackson, Director of Public Relations, was extremely helpful in answering questions.

¹ To protect against infringement, papers were issued on March 4, 1922, by Thomas E. Robertson, Commissioner of Patents, registering this name.

² Near this site, on the southwest corner of 4th St. and Madison Drive on the Mall, a bronze tablet memorializing the founders was erected by the National Grange and dedicated in 1951.

within a State had been founded, they might organize a State grange, which could confer the fifth degree. The National Grange, to consist of masters and past masters of State granges, was authorized to confer the sixth degree. Members of the sixth degree were to constitute the National Grange, and after serving one year they might take the seventh degree and become members of the senate, which had control of the esoteric work of the Order. The senate soon became known as the Assembly of Demeter. In 1874 a type of district organization (later known as the Pomona grange in the fifth degree) that generally followed county lines was added. Officers at all levels of the organization included the master, overseer, lecturer, steward, assistant steward, chaplain, treasurer, secretary, gate-keeper, and an executive committee of at least three members. The officers of the Assembly of Demeter included the High Priest, Priest Archon, Priest Annalist, and Priest Archivist.³

The time was ripe for a farmers' organization. Prices of agricultural products were low; and farmers became increasingly hostile to the railroads, corporations, and banking interests. Overproduction and depressed prices, high farm-to-market transportation costs, scarce credit, and exorbitant interest rates all weighed against the farmer. In such a setting the aggressive efforts of the founders, especially of Kelley, who resigned his position with the Government to devote full time to the Order, bore fruit. By 1873 there were granges in all States except Nevada, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Delaware; and the membership was 150,000. Although the Grange had begun as an organization devoted to cultural interests and self-improvement, it became absorbed in political and economic issues during the years of its greatest power. Cooperative ventures were introduced to buy supplies, market farm products, sell insurance, and even manufacture agricultural implements. The membership grew to 868,050 in 1875, with its greatest strength in Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, and Iowa.

Although the Order suffered financial loss and declined rapidly thereafter, the influence of the Grange's ideas and ideals was discernible in almost all the farm organizations that succeeded it. The Grange also took steps to safeguard and assure proper use of lands and funds assigned to the State colleges of agriculture, and largely through its influence the Department of Agriculture was raised to Cabinet status. It encouraged farmers' institutes, advocated the teaching of agriculture in the public schools, and helped to obtain the establishment of State agricultural experiment stations and of

³ Charles Gardner, *The Grange—Friend of the Farmer*, p. 357 (Washington, 1949).

rural mail delivery and the parcel post system. The organization was opposed to fraud and adulteration in food processing, called for forest conservation, fostered crop reporting, and advocated ballot reform. The social activity fostered by the Grange was a very real contribution to the quality of living in rural areas.⁴

The elaborate cooperative projects, which brought financial loss and left a burden of discredit and indebtedness, were partly responsible for the decline of the Grange; partly responsible also was the reaction from the excessive growth in the early seventies. Too many members seem to have joined the Order to use its influence for their own advancement. Moreover, the connection of the Grange with a number of political movements that either came to naught or discredited themselves by extreme radicalism was also responsible for the decline.⁵ By the turn of the century, however, the Grange was abandoning business and politics for its original program of social and educational reform and was beginning a slow and steady growth. By 1941 it had 860,000 members, mainly in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Oregon.⁶

Since 1872, when for the first time a Master of a State grange was present, the Grange has held annual meetings at which the members pass resolutions relating to agricultural policies and programs. At these meetings reports of committees appointed by the Master are submitted for approval of the delegate body. The approved reports become Grange policy. Committees are assigned to work on specific areas such as foreign policy, taxation, and so on. The annual meetings are also the occasions for ritualistic degree work.⁷

Agitation for a headquarters office, especially for the Secretary of the National Grange, began as early as 1869, when Kelley wrote to McDowell from his home in Itasca, Minn., proposing that the Grange purchase a house and an acre or two of ground near Cincinnati, Ohio. In June, after an informal meeting of the National Grange, it was decided, however, Saunders wrote to Kelley, "Washington is our best center at present." Accordingly, Kelley moved to Washington and settled at 1424 6th Street, where he began to issue circulars and write letters on behalf of the Order.⁸ After the eighth annual meeting, in 1875, however, the Secretary's office was moved

⁴ Murray R. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the U.S., 1790-1950* (New York, 1953).

⁵ Solon J. Buck, *The Granger Movement*, p. 72 (Cambridge, Mass., 2d ed., 1933).

⁶ Lowry Nelson, *American Farm Life*, p. 118 (Cambridge, Mass., 1954).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Oliver H. Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry*, p. 181, 196, 305 (Philadelphia, 1875).

from Washington to Louisville, Ky.⁹ Since then the Secretary has had his office at any place convenient to him. For several years other National Grange officers did likewise.

Meanwhile, after 1883, an effort developed in the Grange to purchase or build a "Temple to Ceres" in Washington. For years the response to this effort was disappointing. At the Boston session in 1920 a resolution was adopted that the money collected plus "the sum of \$5,000 annually deposited by the treasurer become the nucleus of a Washington Building Fund to assist in the purchase of a permanent home for the Grange in Washington."¹⁰

By 1918 it was decided to assign a permanent representative to Washington to speak for the Grange before congressional committees. When the National Grange met in Syracuse, N. Y., the Committee on Finance introduced a resolution "that the Executive Committee is instructed to establish Grange headquarters in Washington city."¹¹ The resolution was adopted unanimously, and in January 1919 the first legislative representative, Thomas C. Atkeson, opened an office in the capital city. After occupying several rented quarters for more than two decades, the Grange purchased the building at 744 Jackson Place from the Brookings Institution, and in 1944 this building became the executive and legislative headquarters of the National Grange. In 1956 it became mandatory for the Lecturer as well as the National Master to maintain his office in Washington. Other staff positions have been added from time to time. A few years ago the Federal Government acquired the headquarters property. Land for a new building some hundred feet west was given to the Grange by the General Services Administration as part of the price for condemnation of its former headquarters. There it erected a new building at 1616 H Street N.W., which was first occupied in May 1960 and was dedicated by President Eisenhower in June of that year. Six other national farm organizations and Washington correspondents for more than two dozen farm publications share the new Grange headquarters.

The records of the National Grange in its Washington office fall into two main groups: (1) fragmentary records of Grange officials created before and brought together after the establishment of the central office and preserved for reasons of historical interest and (2) records mainly created after the establishment of the office and maintained for administrative purposes. There are many gaps in

⁹ Thomas Atkeson, *Pioneering in Agriculture*, p. 79 (New York, 1937).

¹⁰ Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

¹¹ *Journal of Proceedings* . . . 1918, p. 123.

both groups of records because of the shifting locations of offices of National Grange officials and the lack of a central records depository. Moreover, many past officials apparently considered the records of their activities as personal papers and kept or disposed of them as such. Since the establishment of the Washington office interest in the systematic maintenance of official records has increased.

The records of Grange officials created before the establishment of the Washington office have not been maintained in clearly definable series. Among them, however, are two series that can reasonably be designated as records created and accumulated by Oliver H. Kelley and William Saunders.

Kelley's records, ca. 1865-69, include correspondence with Saunders and Commissioner of Agriculture Newton pertaining to Kelley's professional work and the founding of the Grange. They also include an important although little-known diary kept by Kelley during his southern trip for the Department of Agriculture in 1866; a "Record Book" of early Grange activities, especially a pledge signed by five of the founders to extend the Order; minutes of Grange meetings in 1867 and 1868; and the Order's original manuscript constitution.

Saunders' records were apparently received by the Grange as part of his library, which was bought from descendants in 1930. Officials of the Department of Agriculture had shown some interest in acquiring the library because of its many publications dealing with horticultural subjects. In examining the collection, however, the Department's librarian, Claribel Barnett, noted that it included historical papers concerning the Grange.¹² For this reason, perhaps, and because Saunders was a founder and first Master of the Grange, his library was sought by the Grange and was eventually purchased after the death of his daughter, Belle C. Saunders, who had long been its faithful custodian. The manuscripts, dated 1867-99, include Saunders' correspondence with Kelley in 1867 and 1869; letters received by Saunders, 1868-84, documenting his work in the Department of Agriculture and as an official of the National Grange; and a book kept by Saunders in 1873 recording his activities as chairman of the Executive Committee of the Grange. A scrapbook, presumably kept by his daughter, contains clippings relating to Grange history and an interesting "map of the grounds and design for the improvement of the Soldiers' National Ceme-

¹² Claribel Barnett to A. F. Woods, Aug. 4, 1930, in correspondence of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives, Record Group 16.

tery, Gettysburg, Pa., 1863, by W. Saunders, Landscape Gardener, Germantown, Pa."

The records created or maintained by the Grange's Washington office for administrative purposes may be grouped and described mainly in terms of administrative origin or custody. An important exception is the *Journals of Proceedings*, more than 5 linear feet of leather-bound volumes, an official file of the reports of the annual sessions from 1873 to date.¹³ The *Journals* through the years have followed fundamentally the same pattern, describing in detail the official program, which always has included an address by the Master and reports by other national officers, State masters, and various committees. For example, the volume documenting the 1957 meeting includes the list of delegates; the Master's address; reports of officers (the Lecturer, Treasurer, Secretary, Board of Managers of the *National Grange Monthly*, State Masters, the Home Economics Chairman, the Youth Deputy, and the Juvenile Matron); and reports from these committees:

- Agriculture
- Audit, Credentials, Compensation and Session Activities
- Cooperative Activities
- Education and Health
- Grange Law and the Good of the Order
- Home Economics
- Juvenile Grange
- Foreign Affairs
- National Welfare
- Taxation and Fiscal Policy
- Transportation
- Youth

There are also reports of affiliated farmers' insurance groups, lists of national award winners in contests sponsored by the Grange, and minutes of the several Executive Committee meetings that occur during the year.¹⁴

The National Master, chief administrative officer of the Grange, maintains records that document the duties of his office. These duties include the power to appoint members of the Order as deputies, to organize granges either where no State grange exists or elsewhere with the approval of State masters. The National Master serves on the Executive Committee, presides at meetings of the National Grange, and oversees the activities of officers and

¹³ A record of the proceedings of annual meetings before 1873 is in Kelley's *Origin and Progress of the Order*.

¹⁴ *Journal of Proceedings* . . . 1957, p. 1-184.

members of committees. Furthermore, he must insure that the constitution, bylaws, and resolutions are observed, and he must report to each session of the National Grange all rulings made since his last report.¹⁵

Among the records in the Master's office is a file of the *National Grange Monthly*, 1926 to 1962, when publication was suspended. The usual issue contains an editorial by the Master; feature articles of interest to the Order; a page devoted to the Juvenile Grange; a report of bills in Congress of interest to the farmer; news of pertinent activities in the Federal Government's bureaus, committees, and departments; and articles by the Secretary and the Chaplain. The present Master, Herschel D. Newsom, has preserved also copies of the minutes of the meetings of the Executive Committee, 1939 to date; clippings relating to his work, 1950 to date; copies of the *Deputy Weekly News Letter*, 1940 to 1960, when it was replaced by the *Grange Letter*; printed copies of statements of legislative policies and programs recommended by the Grange, 1921 to date; and resolutions proposed by State granges and arranged according to the committee to which the Master referred them. There are also in his office some records of the activities of his predecessor.

The assistant to the Master has records in his office dating from 1952, containing Grange membership statistics, biographies of various officials, and copies of newsletters sent to field representatives.

The Lecturer visits "for the good of the Order" such parts of the United States as the Master and Executive Committee may direct, sponsors contests, publishes periodically handbooks and other aids to lecturers, and furnishes lecture materials to State and subordinate lecturers. He maintains files concerning this work, including copies of his *Handbook*, dating from the early 1930's. These volumes point the way toward programs of practical worth and offer useful suggestions in program preparation. The National Lecturer works with State grange leaders in planning and holding regional conferences and training schools for subordinate (local) and Pomona (county) granges. He also represents the National Grange on a number of boards and committees within and outside of the Grange.

The Director of Youth Activities has records in his office dating from 1947 relating to youth work in the Grange. A major portion

¹⁵ *Constitution and Digest of the Laws and Enactments of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry*, p. 11, 17 (Washington, 1958).

of these records consists of correspondence and placement material for the German Rural Teen-Ager Project, an exchange project sponsored by the National Grange in cooperation with the U. S. Department of State. This project involved the placing of approximately 400 German youths on Grange farms in the United States for a period of one year. There is correspondence with the youths and their host families during the course of the project and correspondence with the exchangees after their return to Germany. A Young Farmer Project, which brought young farmers from different European countries to work on Grange farms, was another youth project of the Grange. Similar records are also maintained for this project. Records and histories of a number of Grange-sponsored contests conducted specifically for Grange young people are also found in this department. They include entries, winning essays, project reports, and related materials.

The Youth Director has also retained copies of every publication specifically connected with youth work reproduced or acquired in connection with the work of his department. These consist of forms and information on contests and projects, together with resource and program material for the use of youth chairmen in the various granges.

The position of "Legislative Representative" is no longer maintained, and the work is divided up among the staff. As requested, a legislative counsel performs work for the Grange in his own local law office. There is at National Grange headquarters a file of "testimonies" (statements) given by Grange officials before congressional committees from 1927 to the present. These records show legislative measures supported by the Grange. For example, they contain suggestions for the strengthening of family farms through revision and expansion of the credit programs of the Farmers Home Administration. The Grange has worked closely with congressional committees in planning an expansion of the rural development program to provide technical assistance to farm families. It has advocated substantial increases in existing funds for agricultural research and vocational education. It has supported the proposed legislation that would prohibit the Interstate Commerce Commission from halting the use of agricultural trucks for return loads under "trip lease." The Grange helped secure passage of highway construction bills and has worked in developing new legislation for the farmer-owned and -controlled cooperative Farm Credit System, which combined the Production Credit Corporation and the Federal Intermediate Credit Banks. Vigorously the Grange

has supported authorizations to complete the improvement of the Great Lakes connection channels of the St. Lawrence Seaway. The view of the Grange on these and many other legislative measures is documented in its files by the statements made to congressional committees.

Since about 1940 the Supply Department has relieved the Secretary by taking over the procurement and distribution of supplies. Its records include publications "advertising" the Grange, and copies of songbooks, drill books, and the *Digest* of Grange bylaws.

Because of the Grange's decentralized organization important records of national officials may be found in many parts of the country; these are kept by the Secretary, Chairman of the Home Economics Department, Juvenile Superintendent, Treasurer, and Priest Annalist of the Assembly of Demeter.

There has been no systematic records disposal program. Some valuable records were lost in a flood in New England in 1955, which damaged the home of Mrs. Charles Gardner. Mrs. Gardner's deceased husband had been using the records during his lifetime to obtain information for his book *The Grange—Friend of the Farmer*.

Records of the Washington office of the Grange are accessible to scholars interested in agricultural history. In 1961 Stuart Noblin of the department of history and political science at North Carolina State College¹⁶ completed a work—based to a considerable extent upon records in the headquarters office—codifying the most important statement of policy adopted by the National Grange since the middle 1940's. Moreover, certain records relating to membership and other matters kept by the Secretary's office are available for perusal. On the tenth floor of the new Grange Building in Washington is the Gardner Memorial Library containing historical documents of the Grange.

¹⁶ Now North Carolina State of the University of North Carolina at Raleigh.

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