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The Persuasive Technique of William Langer

James T. Ertresvaag

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THE PERSUASIVE TECHNIQUE OF WILLIAM LANGER

by

James T. Ertresvaag

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B.A. in Speech, University of North Dakota 1950

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of the

Graduate School

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 James T. Ertresvaag in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the University of North Dakota, is hereby approved by the Committee under whom the work has been done.

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PREFACE

William Langer was a man of unusual talent with an equally unusual gift for winning votes. His success over a period of forty-five turbulent years in gaining and holding the loyalty of a sizable portion of the North Dakota voting public makes his career worthy of study as an example of the art of persuasion.

In order to understand Mr. Langer's effectiveness as a molder of public opinion, it was necessary to examine not only his public addresses but also to study the man as a person, his over-all methods of political operation, and the social economic and political history of the State of North Dakota. The primary emphasis in this study is, however, upon Mr. Langer's political campaigns and stump speeches from the time he first achieved prominence as a political figure in North Dakota to the time of his death in 1959.

Since Mr. Langer claimed never to have written out a political speech before 1953, it has been necessary to rely upon versions of his campaign speeches reported in the newspapers. Approximately forty-five such speeches were examined in part or in toto for this study. While I recognize the danger of inaccuracies appearing in reporters' and stenographers' transcriptions made during the delivery of speeches, I feel the newspaper versions to be accurate enough to reveal Mr. Langer's ideas, method of organization, habitual use of language and persuasive technique.

No one writes a thesis alone. Its preparation depends upon the

understanding and assistance of a great many people. I wish to express my gratitude to those who have given so much help and encouragement in the preparation of this study. I wish to thank the members of my committee, Dr. John S. Penn, Professor of Speech; Dr. John L. Harensberger, Assistant Professor of History, and Mr. Henry G. Lee, Associate Professor of Speech, for their helpful criticism and suggestions. I particularly wish to thank Dr. Penn, my thesis advisor, for his painstaking examination of my writing and his infinite patience with a somewhat reluctant scholar.

It is my wish, also, to acknowledge a debt to the staffs of the North Dakota State Historical Library and the University of North Dakota Library for their courtesy and assistance in the gathering of materials.

I wish to thank the following individuals for granting interviews and extending other assistance: A. J. Jensen, Commissioner of Insurance; Frank Albers, Deputy Commissioner of Insurance; Math Dahl, Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor; Thorwald Mostad; Margaret Rose, and Thelma Rudser. In addition, I should like to express appreciation for the interest and assistance of the late O. B. Burtness who took time from his busy schedule to discuss the personality and political methods of Mr. Langer with me.

Finally, I wish to thank my mother, Rilla Woods Ertresvaag, for her continued encouragement during the long process of this study, and for the many hours helping him to clarify his sometimes murky prose and often erratic spelling and punctuation.

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CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

I. The Land and the People

Two hundred years after the English established themselves firmly in New England and the Germans built their neat villages and farms in Pennsylvania, North Dakota came into being as a state. It was, in 1889, new not only in its proud statehood but new also to most of the people who inhabited it. Only nine years earlier, the first great wave of immigration began to wash over the rich borders of the Red River Valley to the rolling plains beyond. Until the period from 1880 to 1886, most of the region was sparsely settled by the white man.¹ But the rapid penetration of the area by the railroads, the development of new milling processes which made possible the use of hard spring wheat in the production of finer flours, and the bonanza crops in the Red River Valley in the late 1870's lured people into the territory in ever increasing numbers.² Although the influx was to falter after 1886,³ the energetic promotion by the railroads, especially James J. Hill's Great Northern Line, brought a wave of immigration to the state in the early 1900's.⁴ The subsequent

¹Glenn L. Brudvig, "The Farmer's Alliance Movement in North Dakota, 1884-1896" (unpublished Master's thesis, Library, University of North Dakota, 1956), p. 1.

²Ibid., pp. 3-6. ³Ibid., p. 1.

⁴Bruce Nelson, Land of the Dakotahs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1947), p. 26.

growth was so rapid that, while North Dakota had a population of only 320,000 in 1900, it had leaped to 577,000 to 1910.⁵

While the railroads' advertising circulars painted the new state in glowing colors⁶ and the early successes of the farmers seemed proof of the claims made for it, there were other indications to portend the future. At the time the state's constitutional convention was in session John Wesley Powell, a government geologist, prophesied the coming of economic disaster to the new born state.

After a thorough study of climatic and soil conditions in North Dakota, Powell concluded that for much of the state the small family farm was not practical. The greater portion, he said, was suited only for farming on a large scale and of a special kind. Farms should be approximately 2560 acres in size and devoted to the raising of garden produce and feed for cattle. Powell's study revealed that only in the Red River Valley could the farmer be certain of sufficient yearly rainfall. The farther west the farms spread out over the prairies, the less certain became sufficient moisture.

Powell's report showed, further, that the central portion of the state would have years of ample rainfall when the crops would be good, but these years would be followed by others in which hot winds would parch the land and grain would wither on the stalk. Indeed, much of the state, he maintained, was not fit for intensive farming since the soil was light and in dry years would blow before the prairie wind if stripped of its protective sod.⁷

But the federal land policies envisioned cheap land supporting

⁵Ibid. ⁶Brudvig, op. cit., p. 245.

⁷Nelson, op. cit., pp. 138-139.

large numbers of people. The Homestead act made available farms of 160 acres which the settler could possess upon the easiest of terms, while the Timber Culture act of 1877 and the right of preemption made still more land available.⁸ The warning of John Wesley Powell was not heeded then, nor for many years to come. The settlers came, the land was broken, and the dust and drought followed.

The enthusiasm and optimism of the settlers, too, were factors in the slow recognition of the limitations of climate and economics.⁹ It was widely believed that a little hard work and determination were all that were needed to build a proud and prosperous commonwealth from this raw frontier. Best of all, the seemingly endless prairies were relatively easy to work. Here were no tangled forests to cut, no stumps to be wrenched free from the ground, no rocky, sterile mountain side. Here were vast stretches of open country ready for the turning of the plow, the planting of the seed.

Furthermore, while some of the settlers may have been aware of the special problems to be faced in North Dakota farming, many had never before tilled the land.¹⁰ In addition, a great number of those who settled on the prairies, particularly during the early 1900's, were foreign born.¹¹ Straight from Europe, these people had little conception of what they faced in this strange and distant land.

In ever increasing numbers they came, speaking a variety of tongues,

⁸Elwyn B. Robinson, "Themes of North Dakota History," North Dakota History, XXVI (Winter, 1959), p. 17.

⁹Nelson, op. cit., p. 118; p. 123; p. 246. ¹⁰Ibid., p. 123.

¹¹Robert L. Morlan, Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 3.

bringing with them old world customs, old world manners and old world habits. They brought, too, a bright hope and a willingness to work. Norwegians and Swedes--used to garden-plot farms tucked away in mountain valleys or slanted along mountain sides; Germans--used to intensive cultivation of small plots of ground; Russian-Germans--used to tight, backward communities and primitive methods of agriculture.¹²

The population of the state came to represent twenty-five nationalities.¹³ These were the folk who built their sod huts and tar paper shanties out on the lonely prairies. These who fought the raging blizzard and found their cattle smothered in the snow. These who turned the soil for seed and watched the green shoots brown and wither in the burning sun, watched clouds of grasshoppers eat their way through acre upon acre of wheat, saw the wind catch the dry soil and fling it up to blot out the sun at mid-day.

Some of them died in the blizzards; some wore themselves out in a futile effort to plant one more crop; some broke under the silence and loneliness of the prairies; some lost hope and returned east; others stayed to continue the struggle.¹⁴

II. The Rise of Discontent

From the time the first plow bit deep into the sod, there began to develop a multiplicity of problems of which North Dakotans became only gradually aware. The great distance separating the North Dakota

¹²Joseph B. Voeller, "The Origin of the German-Russian People and Their Role in North Dakota" (unpublished Master's thesis, Library, University of North Dakota, 1940), p. 80.

¹³Morlan, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁴Nelson, op. cit., pp. 216-219; pp. 299-301.

farmer from the East was only one of these problems.¹⁵ Only through shipment over vast distances by railroad could his produce be marketed and processed. Further, the great centers of population and finance lay in the East, and the average settler, richer in hope than in capital, was dependent upon the willingness of Eastern bankers to extend credit. Although he received his loans directly from the local banker in most cases, the banker's lending policy was in large measure controlled by interests foreign to the state.¹⁶ Because of this and because of the obvious risks involved in financing the opening of this new country, interest rates were almost uniformly high. Often the farmer paid ten to sixteen percent on the money he borrowed.¹⁷

In good times the farmer tended to expand his holdings and purchase more machinery. At such times, also, bankers were inclined to be more liberal in the making of loans secured by farm property. However, one bad crop or a downward fluctuation of the market at harvest time could place the farmer in desperate financial straits.

Then, too, during World War I the government urged the farmer to grow more wheat so that the expansion of land holdings spiraled upward in spite of the fact that after 1915 North Dakota experienced a series of bad crop years.¹⁸ In this way more and more marginal land was put under cultivation, and more and more the farmer found himself shackled under heavy mortgages. And while the rest of the nation prospered during the twenties, the North Dakota farmer was beginning to experience a period of drought, bank failure and foreclosure which was to grow steadily worse until it

¹⁵Robinson, loc. cit., p. 7. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁷Russell B. Nye, Midwestern Progressive Politics (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951), p. 312.

¹⁸Morlan, op. cit., p. 299.

reached its depth in the early 1930's.¹⁹

Geographical remoteness, the generally subhumid climate with an average yearly rainfall of less than seventeen inches,²⁰ an almost total lack of industry, and dependence upon what was essentially a one-crop agricultural economy placed the state at a serious economic disadvantage.²¹

This economic disadvantage was partly the result of the nature of the region, and partly the manner of settlement. In essence, North Dakota was not settled by the gradual encroachment of individuals and families pushed out from over-crowded areas to the east. It was "boomed." It was "boomed" by the millers, traders, financiers and railroad interests of Minneapolis and St. Paul. To a large extent the latter were the key to the settlement and subsequent dependence of North Dakota.²²

Because railroads exist and prosper on the movement of goods into and out of populous regions, it was advantageous to the railroads to have North Dakota settled. One railroad magnate, James J. Hill, seemed obsessed with the settlement of this vast, empty territory. He saw himself as its benefactor bringing to it civilization and prosperity. The difficulty with his dream was not that he wished to develop the state, but the pattern in which he envisaged that development. He saw the prairies dotted with small family farms as far as the eye could see—exactly the sort of farming for which the land was not suited.²³ But his Great Northern line advertised far and wide, sending quantities of circulars abroad and employing agents in Europe to carry the story of this marvelous new land to potential settlers.²⁴

¹⁹Robinson, loc. cit., p. 15. ²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., pp. 8-10. ²²Ibid., p. 8.

²³Nelson, op. cit., pp. 244-245. ²⁴Ibid., p. 245.

Furthermore, the railroads were willing to do more than advertise the region. They provided special rates for the transportation of the immigrants²⁵--one way. And to complete the picture they sold land to the foreigners, for the railroads, by government grant, were the possessors of enormous tracts of land. One of them, the Northern Pacific, had been given approximately one-fourth of all the land in the state.²⁶ These lands were made available to the settlers at nominal cost since the rapid economic development of the state was of more importance to the railroads than immediate profit on land sold.²⁷

If the settlement policies of the railroad were not completely beneficent, neither were some of its other activities. Gradually the people began to feel that they bore a colossus on their backs.²⁸ Since the railroads were so important to the settlement of the state, and since they enjoyed an almost complete monopoly of commercial transportation facilities, it was, perhaps, inevitable that abuses should arise.

In time, the North Dakota farmer discovered that it cost more to ship a freight car of wheat over a given distance within the state than it did to ship the same car over the same distance in Minnesota.²⁹ In addition, no matter where the farmer shipped his grain, he paid charges to a terminal point such as Minneapolis, Duluth, or Chicago. Under this system, even though he sold his grain to a nearby elevator, he might pay charges to a distant city to which his grain did not go.³⁰ To heighten the travesty, when he bought his wheat back in the form of flour, he paid freight on it from Minneapolis even though it might have been milled

²⁵Ibid., p. 249. ²⁶Robinson, loc. cit., p. 9.

²⁷Brudvig, op. cit., p. 5. ²⁸Morlan, op. cit., p. 348.

²⁹Ibid., p. 16. ³⁰Nye, op. cit., pp. 312-313.

only a few miles from his home.³¹

Still another practice of which the farmer became unhappily aware was the tendency of the railroads to favor the line elevators³² over the farmer in providing freight cars during the harvest season. Too often there was a general shortage of freight cars at that time; the farmers maintained, and the railroads did not deny, that the elevators were favored over individual shippers.³³ The farmer regarded this as pernicious. The railroads, however, pointed out that it was easier, as well as more sound economically, for them to deal with sources handling grain in quantity than to attempt to provide cars for numbers of individual farmers who brought their wheat for shipment at varying times.³⁴ If this was sound economics, it was of no comfort to the farmer. He began to see the railroads and the large elevator companies as an oppressive combine acting in collusion to reduce him to a state of peonage.³⁵

For, if the farmer was becoming increasingly incensed by the practices of the railroads, he was scarcely less so at the alleged unfair practices of the line elevators and the milling interests controlled by members of the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce and the Duluth Board of Trade. Too often, it was said, top quality wheat was graded by the elevators as inferior only to appear on the market as top quality.³⁶ Indeed, some elevators shipped thousands more bushels of high grade

³¹Ibid., p. 313.

³²Strings of elevators owned by large companies.

³³Brudvig, op. cit., p. 24. ³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 16.

³⁶Morlan, op. cit., p. 12. The Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce was the grain exchange and was not simply a businessman's association as is the present body of that name.

wheat than their records showed they had purchased from the growers.³⁷ In addition, the experiments of Edwin F. Ladd at the state Agricultural College seemed to show that light weight wheat, for which the farmer was paid a lower price, often made flour of as good or better quality than grain given a higher rating under the existing grading system.³⁸

There was also the matter of dockage for impurities. The quantity of materials other than wheat in the loads the farmer brought to the elevator had a direct effect upon the price he was paid for his grain. The more impurities, the less he received. However, while the farmer received nothing for these so-called impurities, they were processed by the milling companies and sold to him later as feed.³⁹

Compounding these grievances was the curious coincidence that during the marketing season the price of wheat often fell just at the time the farmer had to sell his crop and rose again after the grain had come into other hands.⁴⁰ Not disposed to accept explanations that this was the result of the law of supply and demand, he saw this fluctuation as the result of market manipulation by what he referred to as the "Interests."⁴¹

It was one thing for the farmer to recognize these evils. It was quite another for him to take effective action. For, as in many western states, the government of North Dakota was largely under the control of

³⁷Ibid., p. 17. ³⁸Ibid., p. 8.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 9-10.

⁴⁰John M. Holzworth, The Fighting Governor: The Story of William Langer and the State of North Dakota (Chicago: Pointer Press, 1938), p. 4.

⁴¹Morlan, op. cit., p. 17.

the railroads.⁴² In North Dakota the administration and the legislature were dominated by a Republican party controlled by Alexander McKenzie who is reputed to have run the state in the interests of the railroads.⁴³ By adroit and extensive use of the free railroad pass, political manipulation and occasional coercion the shadowy McKenzie maintained control of the state government most of the time well into the twentieth century.⁴⁴ Even on those occasions when the state government came into other hands, the McKenzie machine remained a powerful factor in state politics.⁴⁵

Unable to call upon governmental aid, the farmer found himself caught between the discriminatory practices of the railroads on the one hand and the price manipulation and questionable grading practices of the St. Paul-Minneapolis milling interests on the other. While the farmer may have been prone to exaggerate his grievances, they did exist.⁴⁶ He was not able to control the transport and marketing of his products nor the prices of the commodities which he purchased and, therefore, was to a large extent at the mercy of interests foreign to the state.⁴⁷

One of the tenets of American democratic mythology has been the almost mystic relationship between the foundation of the Republic and the

⁴²John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmer's Alliance and the People's Party (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), p. 25.; Andrew A. Bruce, The Nonpartisan League (New York: MacMillan, 1921), p. 9.

⁴³Jerome D. Tweton, "The Election of 1900 in North Dakota" (unpublished Master's thesis, Library, University of North Dakota, 1957), p. 9.

⁴⁴Nelson, op. cit., p. 128; p. 253; pp. 257-258.

⁴⁵Morlan, op. cit., p. 5; p. 294.

⁴⁶Theodore Salutes and John D. Hicks, Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West: 1900-1939 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), p. 31.

⁴⁷Usher L. Burdick, History of the Farmers' Political Action in North Dakota (Baltimore: Wirth Brothers, 1944), p. 11.

concept of the yeoman farmer.⁴⁸ In America, particularly in campaign years, one of the recurrent themes has been the special place of the farmer as a cornerstone of the "American way of life." Although this theme is given a perfunctory sort of lip service even today, the farmer has not been blind to the discrepancy between myth and practice. Certainly as the state developed, the North Dakota farmer felt himself to be at the mercy of bankers, grain speculators, elevator tycoons, railroad magnates and middle men of every description. He was not long in concluding that if, as the political orators were fond of telling him, he was the embodiment of all that was good and true in America, then he was entitled to a just share of the nation's wealth.

Since he was convinced he was being deprived of what was rightfully his, and since every mythology has its demonology, the farmer cast about for a suitable demon. He found his demon in "Big Business." In his mind there gradually evolved a picture of a nation-wide conspiracy against him. He was certain that the twine manufacturers, the builders of agricultural machinery, the banks and the grain interests, all, combined with the railroads to form a gigantic plot against him.⁴⁹

Nor was this conception peculiar to the North Dakota farmer for "the notion of an innocent and victimized populace colors the whole history of agrarian controversy...."⁵⁰

While the notion of conspiracy was an over-simplification of the farmer's problems, he had legitimate grievances. However, the truth of his charges is not so important, perhaps, as the fact that he became convinced of their truth.⁵¹ For it was this conviction, this feeling of

⁴⁸Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 7. ⁴⁹Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁰Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 35. ⁵¹Ibid., p. 17.

persecution and the personalization of the sources of his troubles, that made the North Dakota farmer receptive to political appeals which leaned as heavily upon emotion as upon logic.

III. The Farmer Turns to Politics

The first organized efforts to do something about the problems of the North Dakota farmer came in the 1880's with the formation of the Farmer's Alliance. Part of a national farm organization, the North Dakota Alliance worked for a free market and sought to protect the farmer from the "encroachments of concentrated capital." Somewhat successful in its experiments in cooperative purchasing and insurance, the Alliance tried to provide the farmer with his own terminal elevator facilities by establishing an elevator in Duluth for the purpose of shipping wheat directly to English markets.⁵² However, partly through financial difficulties at its inception and partly through the opposition of the entrenched grain interests, the elevator survived only three years, failing in 1891.⁵³

While the Alliance became more and more politically active, its attempts to work through the existing parties were not particularly successful.⁵⁴ On the other hand, many Alliance men became prominent leaders in a new political force which appeared in the West in the 1890's.⁵⁵ The new movement, Populism, had sprung from a need for direct political action on the part of the mid-western farmer. In North Dakota the fusion of the Democrats and the Populists resulted in the formation of the Independent party which swept the administration of Eli C.

⁵²Robinson, loc. cit., p. 11.

⁵³Brudvig, op. cit., p. 99.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 134-135; p. 202.

⁵⁵Hicks, op. cit., pp. 157-158.

Shortridge into power in 1892.⁵⁶

Under Shortridge many, and for their time, radical reforms were attempted. Legislation was enacted to curb unfair practices in grain grading, to establish loading platforms along railroad rights-of-way so that the farmer might ship his grain without dealing through the elevators, and to establish a state-owned terminal elevator.⁵⁷

But much of this legislation proved ineffective, partly because of the inexperience of Populist legislators,⁵⁸ and partly because the "Old Guard" McKenzie machine retained much of its power in the legislature.⁵⁹ Although the Shortridge administration succeeded in passing legislation designed to establish a terminal elevator in Wisconsin or Minnesota, a provision of the law requiring ceding of the land upon which the elevator stood to North Dakota, the ineptitude of the attorney general in drawing up the bill⁶⁰ and the nation-wide depression of 1893 doomed the project.⁶¹

The failure of the Populists to deal effectively with the farmer's problems and a disposition on the part of the farmer to blame the depression on the group in power, caused their defeat in the elections of 1894.⁶² Although the Populists tried again in 1896, even the magic of William Jennings Bryan and the panacea of free silver was not enough. The state was, again, firmly in the hands of the McKenzie machine.⁶³

By the turn of the century Progressivism had become a factor in

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 257; p. 287. ⁵⁷Brudvig, op. cit., p. 177; p. 204.

⁵⁸Robinson, op. cit., p. 11; Brudvig, op. cit., p. 185.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 172-173. ⁶⁰Hicks, op. cit., p. 288.

⁶¹Brudvig, op. cit., p. 179. ⁶²Ibid., p. 192.

⁶³Nelson, op. cit., p. 256.

the national scene.⁶⁴ People were becoming more aware of the abuses in government and conscious of a responsibility to do something about them. What was true of the nation as a whole was also true of North Dakota. Indeed, the stirrings of Progressivism in the state were being felt as early as 1894.⁶⁵

While the Progressive movement owed a good deal to Populism and borrowed heavily from Populist principles, it was much broader in base.⁶⁶ Populism had been essentially a class movement, a farm movement. Progressivism, on the other hand, tended to be urban and middle-class.⁶⁷ In its ranks could be found young lawyers, jurists, journalists, writers, professional politicians--men of many professions. It represented a consciousness on the part of all classes of the need for reform.⁶⁸ Generally speaking, the North Dakota Progressives seem to have had little interest in economic reforms for the betterment of the farmer.⁶⁹ Indeed, John Burke, Progressive governor from 1906 to 1912, had a fairly consistent record of voting against farm legislation while a member of the legislature. And his administration was cautious in approving many of the measures farm groups wished enacted.⁷⁰

⁶⁴Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 164.

⁶⁵James T. Ertesvaag, "The Grand Forks Daily Herald; The Grand Forks Daily Plaindealer: The Stirring of Reform, 1894-1897" (unpublished Seminar paper, Dept. of History, University of North Dakota, 1958), p. 7.

⁶⁶Nye, op. cit., p. 197. ⁶⁷Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 131.

⁶⁸Nye, op. cit., p. 197.

⁶⁹Charles N. Glaab, "The Failure of North Dakota Progressivism," Mid-America, XII (October, 1957), p. 196.

⁷⁰Charles N. Glaab, "John Burke and the North Dakota Progressive Movement, 1906-1912" (unpublished Master's thesis, Library, University of North Dakota, 1952), p. 71; p. 201; p. 203.

Concentrating their efforts on the elimination of the McKenzie machine, the Progressives sought to remedy governmental corruption and indifference by returning the government to the people. Toward this end they favored such reforms as initiative, referendum, direct primary, civil service and anti-lobbying laws.⁷¹

In addition the Progressives advocated a wide variety of social reforms. They were concerned with the need for child labor laws, pure food and drug legislation, the responsibility of the government for the poor, woman suffrage and establishment of humane systems of penal and correctional institutions.⁷²

While the North Dakota farmer must certainly have been in sympathy with these aims,⁷³ they did not get at the heart of his personal difficulties. The failure of the Progressives to act to break the grip of the "Interests" upon his livelihood caused him to feel that they were no different from the McKenzie "Stalwarts."⁷⁴ This feeling of abandonment further ripened the farmer's discontent. In 1915 this dissatisfaction, this deep-seated belief that the fruits of his labor were garnered by other men, erupted into a political revolt that by 1918 placed the farmer in control of North Dakota government.

The immediate cause of the North Dakota farm revolt was the failure of the 1915 legislature to act upon a clear mandate given by the people for the establishment of a state-owned terminal elevator.⁷⁵ Indeed, the committee which had been directed to study the problems

⁷¹Glaab, "John Burke...", pp. 88-89. ⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Populist and Nonpartisan League legislation indicates an interest in social reform beyond the farmer's particular need.

⁷⁴Morlan, op. cit., p. 5.

⁷⁵Bruce, op. cit., p. 59.; Morlan, op. cit., pp. 19-21.

involved in such a project and to recommend the best methods of establishment, devoted much of its six hundred page report to expressing opposition to such an installation.⁷⁶

In an effort to influence the legislature, the annual convention of the North Dakota Union of the American Society of Equity, a farm organization stressing product marketing, met in Bismarck while the 1915 legislature was in session.⁷⁷ Finding his group generally ignored by the lawmakers, George S. Loftus, manager of the Equity Exchange, called the roll of the legislators during a speech at an Equity rally the night before the vote on the elevator issue. In the roll call, Loftus denounced those he expected to vote against the measure. Far from intimidating the legislators, these tactics alienated members who, up to that point, had been undecided. The next day the bill was defeated.⁷⁸

Disappointed and angered by what they considered to be the contemptuous handling by the legislature, the farmers nursed a growing feeling of persecution.⁷⁹ A young man who witnessed the rebuff to the farmers⁸⁰ was to use this emotion to weld them into a remarkable political machine—an organization which has been a deciding factor in North Dakota politics to the present day.⁸¹

At various times an itinerant plasterer, an unsuccessful grower of flax on a large scale and an organizer for the Socialist party in North Dakota,⁸² Arthur C. Townley saw in the North Dakota primary law the vehicle

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 19. ⁷⁷Ibid., p. 20. ⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 21. ⁸⁰Ibid., p. 25.

⁸¹Adam J. Schweitzer, "John Moses and the New Deal in North Dakota," (unpublished Master's thesis, Library, University of North Dakota, 1954), p. 3; Nelson, op. cit., p. 260.

⁸²Morlan, op. cit., p. 23-24.

through which the farmers might bring the government into their own hands. Perhaps with a backward glance at what had happened to the Populists, Townley wished to avoid the formation of a third party.⁸³ What was needed, he saw, was the creation of a well-disciplined, cohesive group based upon strong local organization. Furthermore, such a group would be most effective if it was non-partisan in character. That is, such an organization would have a program of its own and endorse candidates, no matter what their party affiliation, according to their willingness to accept that program.⁸⁴

Before the coming of the primary election in 1916, A. C. Townley had his Nonpartisan League well under way. A gifted salesman and organizer, his method was to approach the most influential farmer in a community, "sell" him on the League and use the new convert's prestige as an opening wedge with his friends and neighbors. As the League grew and acquired numbers of organizers, either from among the farmers themselves or from socialist ranks, this method of organization was continued.⁸⁵

Since this was to be a farmer's organization, its basic program was aimed toward the solution of farm problems. Drawn up by Townley himself, the program included: state ownership of terminal elevators, flour mills, packing houses, state inspection of grain and grain dockage, exemption of farm improvement from taxation, state hail insurance, and rural credit banks operated at cost. The long smoldering resentment of the farmer at last had an outlet and the infant league grew with startling rapidity; by fall it claimed a membership of 40,000 farmers.⁸⁶

⁸³Ibid., p. 34; p. 49.; Nelson, op. cit., p. 269.

⁸⁴Morlan, op. cit., p. 22; p. 29; p. 49.

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 26-28. ⁸⁶Ibid., p. 87.

It had long been maintained that the newspapers of the state were either owned out-right by the "Interests" or indirectly controlled by them.⁸⁷ The leaders of the League, well aware that the dominated press would soon attack the organization, established an official organ, the Non-Partisan Leader. Farmer members were warned not to believe anything about the League unless they read it in the Leader.⁸⁸

The spread of the League was so rapid and so quiet that the townspeople, politicians and newspapers seem to have become aware of its existence too late to effectively combat its growth.⁸⁹ As the newspapers began to note the progress of the League, their editorials progressed from rather condescending admonitions to the farmers to beware of slick operators going about the state taking the farmer's money, to hysterical tirades against "carpetbaggers" and "socialists."⁹⁰

In the face of these bitter attacks, the wisdom of founding the Leader became readily apparent. In fact the Leader often quoted attacks upon League leaders by opposition newspapers as attacks upon the farmer. It is probable that the newspaper attacks by their very bitterness helped to create League solidarity.⁹¹

The League grew steadily into a well-coordinated political organization. At its Fargo convention in March of 1916 a full slate of candidates for state offices was selected. Headed by Lynn J. Frazier, a farmer from Hoople, these candidates were successful in the June primary in spite of heavy rains which made the country roads nearly impassable and threatened to cut into the League vote. It is a tribute to the

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 39. ⁸⁸Nelson, op. cit., p. 265.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 264.; Morlan, op. cit., p. 34.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 35; p. 39; p. 61. ⁹¹Ibid., pp. 74-75.

efficient organization of the League and an indication of the farmers' mood that they swarmed to the polls--some driving for miles, some swimming ditches full of water to get there.⁹²

In November the League captured all the state offices but one and gained a majority in the lower house. The Senate, however, due to staggered terms, remained in the hands of the League's opponents by a majority of seven.⁹³ This was to prove a deterrent for the League program in the 1917 legislature.

Whenever possible, the League avoided endorsement of men who were avowedly running for office. The theory was that the office ought to seek the man since in the past the politicians had made promises to the farmer during the election only to break them once safely in office. Thus nearly all the candidates endorsed by the League convention were farmers.⁹⁴ However, some of the state offices required men of special training. One such office was that of attorney general. Sponsored reluctantly by William Lemke,⁹⁵ who with Townley and F. B. Wood had become the top three leaders of the League,⁹⁶ the young man who was to become known as the "stormy petrel"⁹⁷ of North Dakota politics stepped to the center of state affairs. William Langer was never to be far from that center during the next forty-three years.

⁹²Ibid., pp. 74-75. ⁹³Ibid., p. 95.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 47; pp. 51-52.

⁹⁵Edward C. Blackorby, "Prairie Rebel: The Public Career of William Lemke," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Library, University of North Dakota, 1958), p. 106.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 109. ⁹⁷Fargo Forum, November 10, 1959.

CHAPTER II

SUCCESSFUL POLITICIAN

I. Introduction

They called him "Wild Bill" Langer and the name fit. They called him a "ten thousand dollar errand boy" and he turned the epithet into a campaign slogan. He played the game of politics with relish, verve, a dazzling virtuosity and a fine disregard for any rules but his own. His balancing acts on the thin line between legality and illegality left his enemies fuming and his friends breathless.¹ For forty-five years his political unorthodoxy contributed to an ascending political dominance of the state of North Dakota.

As Attorney General of North Dakota, he invaded a telephone office at gun-point,² paid his staff in advance although this was forbidden under the law,³ and called the leaders of the organization that elected him "crooks, socialists and free-lovers."⁴ Yet his success in this office provided the foundation for his lifelong career in the political arena.

As governor, he declared an embargo on wheat shipments from North Dakota although he knew this was in violation of the United States Con-

¹Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

²Grand Forks Herald, May 10, 1917. Hereinafter cited as the Herald.

³Robert L. Morlan, Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 273.

⁴William Langer, The Nonpartisan League: Its Birth, Activities and Leaders (Mandan: Morton County Farmer's Press, 1920), p. 84; pp. 98-99.

stitution,⁵ vetoed portions of appropriations bills passed by the legislature although the State Constitution forbade vetoing bills in part,⁶ and declared martial law to avoid service of a writ declaring him unable to perform the duties of governor because he had been sentenced to prison by a federal court.⁷ But the people advanced him to a seat in the United States Senate.

As Senator, a life-long Republican from a Republican state, he voted against Republican measures as often as he voted for them,⁸ opposed the farm policies of the Eisenhower administration as ardently as those of the Roosevelt administration,⁹ visited federal prisons at three o'clock in the morning because that was "the only time to see what's really going on in the kitchen,"¹⁰ and demonstrated his disregard for party loyalty by riding through North Dakota on Harry Truman's campaign train in 1952.¹¹ And four years later received a tremendous majority from a Republican electorate.

The center of many a political Donnybrook in a life time of politics, Langer was a coldly practical, brawling, no-holds-barred in-fighter, most

⁵Louis H. Cook, "They Didn't Bury Him on the Lone Prairie," Saturday Evening Post, June 7, 1941, p. 105.; Bruce Helson, Land of the Dakotahs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1947), pp. 309-310.

⁶Nelson, op. cit., p. 309.

⁷Malcom B. Ronald, "The Dakota Twins," Atlantic Monthly, CLVIII (September, 1936), p. 326.

⁸Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959. Hereinafter cited as the Forum.

⁹Herald, March 3, 1958; Langer, Speech quoted in the New York Times, August 27, 1934, p. 2.

¹⁰Alfred A. Steinberg, "Judiciary's 'Wild Bill,'" New York Times Magazine, April 19, 1953, p. 20.

¹¹Forum, November 10, 1959.

dangerous when he was down, most resourceful when he was cornered.¹² Ruthless, capable of cutting down friends and enemies alike if they stood in his way,¹³ he was as disarmingly friendly as a great shaggy dog, greeting friend and foe with a wide grin, a pumping handshake and a jolting one-armed hug. His office staff found him difficult to work for but called him "Daddy" behind his back and regarded him with loyal, if bewildered affection.¹⁴

Brash and complex, he was a simple man in private life, avoiding the social whirl of Washington whenever he could. Given to bitter invective both during campaigns and on the floor of the Senate, he was a warm-hearted, kindly man who prized his four daughters highly and remained, to the end of his life, deeply in love with his wife.¹⁵

Possessed of a brilliant lawyer's mind, he had in him an odd streak of the romantic. This was evident in a refusal to move from his Washington apartment long after the building had been condemned. He regarded his own career with a kind of passionate delight and, as he sat in his Senate office re-fighting old battles for visitors, his eyes would flash and his massive hand would crash down on the table as he told of the dark plots hatched against him. Telling of his own counter-measures, he would grin broadly and chortle and guffaw in boyish glee.¹⁶

Known as "Bill" to thousands, Langer was often as great a puzzle

¹²Beverly Smith, "The Most Baffling Man in the Senate," Saturday Evening Post, June 23, 1954, p. 101; Time, November 16, 1959, p. 93.

¹³Cook, loc. cit., p. 29; Robert Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

¹⁴Smith, loc. cit., p. 26; p. 103.

¹⁵William B. Allen, Herald, February 27, 1957; Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959; Cook, loc. cit., p. 104.

¹⁶Smith, loc. cit., p. 101.

to his friends as to his opponents.¹⁷ Neither could predict what he might do next. As Senator, his disregard for party lines was legend. But more disconcerting, his colleagues could not prophesy with which party he might vote on any given issue. He might join the Republicans one time, the Democrats the next, and turn against the majority of both parties the next.¹⁸ It was said of him that the only time his vote could be predicted was when they voted to make-up the Senate at each new session. Then seniority privileges necessitated that he vote Republican.¹⁹

Just how much of the sound and fury surrounding the man was by design is difficult to assess. Some observers contend flatly that Langer was "out to get" what he could for Bill Langer by any method that came to hand,²⁰ others that he was a brilliant but impulsive man whose troubles were the result of accident rather than design.²¹ It was said that he possessed "sheer genius" for doing things which looked illegal but actually were not; that he was often in a position to prove his innocence at the outset but waited, often for months, to snap the trap shut on his enemies.²²

It seems possible that there is a little truth in all these

¹⁷William B. Allen, Herald, February 4, 1958; William Blair, New York Times, February 20, 1954, p. 1.

¹⁸Robert Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959. Langer was one of two Senators to vote against the United Nations Charter; one of thirteen to vote against the North Atlantic Treaty.

¹⁹"Wild Bill Untamed," Newsweek, April 7, 1958, p. 26.

²⁰Interview with Judge Olgar B. Burtness, November 21, 1959; Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959; A. C. Townley, Quoted in the Fargo Forum, November 11, 1959.

²¹Interview with Math Dahl, Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, November 12, 1959. Mr. Dahl said of Langer, "When he decided to do something, he did it."

²²Smith, loc. cit., pp. 102-103.

views. His undoubted political acumen, non-conformity and seemingly erratic behavior probably conceal as much as they reveal. What seems clear is that William Langer, like such public figures as Franklin Roosevelt and Huey Long, was a good actor with a dramatic sense of timing and of character.²³ That he utilized a natural warmth of personality, an independent spirit, natural courage and charm to create an image which would appeal to the public, surely is without serious doubt. He played the role of "Wild Bill" with consummate skill and evident relish.

II. The Young Dakotan

Although he was to use his farm boyhood as part of his political image in later years, Langer was in fact no ordinary farm boy nor did he come from an ordinary farm family.²⁴ Langer was of pioneer stock, however, as his parents, Frank and Mary Langer had homesteaded near Casselton in 1877.²⁵ But the Langer family was more fortunate than the average North Dakota farm family. As his two sons and four daughters grew, Frank Langer became increasingly prosperous. It was not long before he owned not only the land he farmed but also considerable other land. Soon he was not only a farmer but president of a bank as well and by 1889 was prominent enough to be elected to the first state legislature.²⁶

However, William could justly claim a frontier boyhood. Only ten years before Langer's birth Custer died at the Little Big Horn; three years before the fabulous Marquis de Mores had established his cattle empire in western North Dakota. When Langer was three years old, the

²³Interview with Math Dahl.

²⁴Irwin Ross, "'Wild Bill' of the Plains," Coronet, February, 1958, p. 65; Cook, loc. cit., p. 29.

²⁵John M. Holzworth, The Fighting Governor: The Story of William Langer and the State of North Dakota (Chicago: Pointer Press, 1938), p. 1.

²⁶Cook, loc. cit., p. 29.

Ghost Dance craze swept the Sioux tribes, Sitting Bull was slain at Grand River, South Dakota, and two hundred Sioux were slaughtered at Wounded Knee creek.²⁷

Further, young Langer had the experience common to farm boys of the time of receiving his early education at a one room country school house.²⁸ Later, when he attended high school at Casselton, he worked between sessions on farms in the area. According to his own account he had such a talent for leadership even then that one farmer put him in charge of a crew of men when he was but fifteen.²⁹

An unusually bright youngster, Langer graduated at the head of his class at sixteen and enrolled in the law school at the University of North Dakota where he engaged in forensic activities,³⁰ was elected vice-president of the junior law class, and, again at the head of his class, received his LLB degree in 1906.³¹

Too young to be admitted to the bar, Langer went east and enrolled at Columbia University. By the time he received his B.A. degree in 1910, he had been president of his class, chairman of the junior prom committee, participated in track, been rejected by Sigma Chi fraternity by a vote of twenty-two to one, been elected to Sigma Chi unanimously, been managing editor of the junior class publication, the Columbian, received the Roelker award as outstanding member of his class, been valedictorian, rejected an offer from the law firm of Francis S. Bangs, partner of Grover Cleve-

²⁷Nelson, op. cit., p. 228. ²⁸Holzworth, op. cit., p. 1.

²⁹Williston Herald, November 9, 1959.

³⁰Holzworth, op. cit., p. 2; Louis G. Geiger, University of the Northern Plains: A History of the University of North Dakota, 1883-1958 (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota Press, 1958), pp. 245-246.

³¹St. Paul Pioneer Press, November 9, 1959.

land,³² and been voted "the noisiest student, most popular man, biggest politician, and the most likely to succeed."³³

Returning to North Dakota, Langer spent his first year in law practice at Fargo³⁴ and then moved to Mandan, the seat of Morton County, in 1911. His practice there was so successful that he was soon made Assistant State's Attorney. But Langer was never content to remain second man for long. In 1914, backed by the Progressive Republican organization, Langer defeated the incumbent by a narrow margin in the primary and went on to election in November.³⁵

Not one to waste time, the new prosecutor went into immediate and spectacular action. Although North Dakota had state-wide prohibition at that time, liquor was sold more or less openly by "Blind Pigs"³⁶ and by a number of ostensibly respectable druggists. In his first day as state's attorney, Langer issued 167 warrants against liquor dealers and vice operators in the county.³⁷

As though the liquor interests were not big enough nor dangerous enough opponents, the young lawyer next launched an attack against a number of the biggest corporations doing business in the state. By leasing railroad rights of way for industrial sites, such corporations as the

³²Holzworth, op. cit., p. 2; William Langer Letter to William Lemke, July 17, 1909, William Lemke Papers, Orin G. Libby Collection, University of North Dakota Library, Grand Forks, North Dakota. Hereinafter cited as the Lemke Papers.

³³"Political Snarl in the State Nobody Knows," Literary Digest, DXVIII (July 28, 1934), p. 5.

³⁴Bismarck Tribune, June 3, 1920.

³⁵Bismarck Capital, November 10, 1959.

³⁶Illegal liquor establishments--speakeasies.

³⁷Holzworth, op. cit., p. 6.

Occident Elevator Company, the Standard Oil Company and various lumber concerns had long escaped paying other than nominal taxes. Langer filed suit against them and against the Northern Pacific Railroad as well. Although these companies were able to afford experienced and high-priced legal advisors such as Andrew J. Miller, Langer took the case to the State Supreme Court and won. The companies were forced to pay back-taxes amounting to \$1,250,000 and to return some \$30,000,000 worth of property to the tax rolls.³⁸ It was a victory to which Langer was to point with pride in later years and to use over and over as his seal of purity with the North Dakota farmer. Nothing could have been better calculated to endear him to the farmer than this early victorious battle against the "Interests."

It was this record as a crusader for prohibition and against the enemies of the farmer that brought him to the attention of the Nonpartisan League as it began its drive to capture the state administration.³⁹ He was sponsored as the League's candidate for attorney general by William Lemke. Lemke, who had a large part in the selection of League candidates,⁴⁰ had known Langer as a student at the University of North Dakota and had been watching Langer's operations in Morton County. In addition, Langer and his family had been involved in an unsuccessful land venture in Mexico which Lemke promoted.⁴¹ Langer was distinctly unhappy about the loss of some \$50,000 and Lemke may have felt it necessary to mollify him by furthering his political ambitions. This Mexican Land promotion was

³⁸Holzworth, op. cit., p. 107.

³⁹Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959; Holzworth, op. cit., p. 8; Nelson, op. cit., p. 271.

⁴⁰Blackorby, op. cit., p. 114.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 35-36.

to cause continuing bitterness between the two men and, although they were to be associated politically off and on for many years, their mutual antipathy was never far below the surface.⁴² Indeed, Lemke was to say of Langer in later years, "Mr. Langer is not only dishonest, but insane as well. Yet he is shrewd and cunning, but he does not know right from wrong. If there ever was a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, here is one."⁴³

III. The Attorney General

With his election as Attorney General on the Nonpartisan League ticket, Langer became an important member of one of the most controversial administrations in the state's history. The League immediately embarked upon a legislative program labeled as liberal in some quarters and radical in others.⁴⁴ The North Dakota farmers had taken to the League with all the fervor of religious converts.⁴⁵ In their enthusiasm they were ready to try anything, even an experiment in what was, most certainly, close to state socialism.⁴⁶

The key to the League program was the creation of an industrial commission to take charge of such projected state industries as a state bank and a state mill and elevator.⁴⁷ However, the State Constitution required alteration before the program could be put into effect. To this end House Bill 44 was introduced in the State Legislature as an

⁴²Ibid., p. 36; p. 56; p. 215.

⁴³William Lemke, Letter to Senator E. R. Burke, Lemke Papers.

⁴⁴Herald, January 23, 1917.

⁴⁵"The North Dakota Harvest of the Nonpartisan League," Survey, XLI (March 1, 1919), p. 355.

⁴⁶Morlan, op. cit., p. 355; Robinson, loc. cit., pp. 7-8; Andrew A. Bruce, The Non-Partisan League (New York: MacMillan Company, 1921), p. 2.

⁴⁷Morlan, op. cit., pp. 222-238.

attempt to rewrite the constitution without resorting to the time-consuming processes of a referendum and the calling of a constitutional convention.⁴⁸ Although the League's leaders, including Langer,⁴⁹ labored to get the bill through the legislature in 1917, due to the majority held in the Senate by the League's opponents, the measure failed.⁵⁰

Not until the League gained complete control of the legislature in 1918 could the industrial commission be created and the League program put into effect. Under the provisions of the law creating the commission, one of the three members was the Attorney General. Thus Langer found himself in a position of trust and considerable authority. But, while he was a strong advocate of the original program of the League,⁵¹ it was not long before he was in disagreement with the leaders of the organization. Just what the true causes of this disagreement may have been is, of course, conjectural. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that Langer resented Lemke's preeminence in the League and, while they maintained outward friendship, the Mexican land debacle and the natural rivalry of two inordinately ambitious young men must certainly have been a factor.⁵² Furthermore, Langer was not one to remain comfortable for long under the kind of absolute control exercised by the League's triumvirate, Townley, Lemke and F. B. Wood. These leaders brooked no opposition, no deviation

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 101-105.

⁴⁹Dale Kramer, The Wild Jackasses: The American Farmer in Revolt (New York: Hastings House, 1956), p. 170.

⁵⁰Morlan, op. cit., p. 104.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 229-237; p. 241.

⁵²Ibid., p. 241; p. 266; Kramer, op. cit., p. 170; Elackorby, op. cit., p. 215.

from League doctrine as set down by them. Those who disagreed, whether within League ranks or not, were subjected to immediate and immoderate abuse.⁵³

It is possible that Langer's ambition was the primary factor, but it would be far from accurate to label this as the only cause. Aside from his rivalry with Lemke and the dictatorial nature of the League's policy makers, a major element in alienating not only Langer but also State Auditor Carl Kositsky and Secretary of State Thomas Hall as well,⁵⁴ was the fact that the League soon strayed far from the path it had originally taken.⁵⁵

As the organization prospered, all sorts of radicals, promoters, and dreamers infiltrated its ranks.⁵⁶ Before long it found itself involved in an astonishing array of activities, some of which were legitimate, some of which were fantastic, and most of which suffered from inexperienced if not incompetent or dishonest management. Among the more bizarre enterprises in which the League engaged were a sisal plantation in Florida for the production of binder twine, and fish hatcheries on the Bering Strait. More mundane activities included the League Exchange, a clearing house and re-discount agency formed for the purpose of buying or controlling banks; the Northwest Publisher's Service, intended to supply the League with a system of newspapers; the Consumers' United Stores Company, established to provide cheaper goods to farmers; the Home Building Association, intended to provide low-cost housing; the purchase of a

⁵³Morlan, op. cit., p. 266; Blackorby, op. cit., pp. 223-224.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 241.

⁵⁵Morlan, op. cit., p. 241; pp. 262-266.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 114-115; Holzworth, op. cit., p. 14.

mill at Drake, intended as an immediate aid to grain marketing until the State Mill and Elevator could be established; and the founding of the Bank of North Dakota, whose major functions were to provide low cost rural credits and to finance state departments and enterprises.⁵⁷

While many of these enterprises were not, perhaps, in themselves ill-conceived, the fact remains that many of them became involved in the financing of the League as a political organization and many of them, such as the Consumers' United Stores Company, the Drake mill and the Home Building Association, were hopelessly mismanaged.⁵⁸

One of the chief promises the League had made to the farmer was that it would protect him from those who had robbed him in the past. It was, therefore, particularly damaging that some men prominent in League circles used their association with it as a means of furthering questionable personal financial transactions. One of the most serious offenders was John J. Hastings, manager of the League Exchange and vice president of the League owned Scandinavian-American Bank of Fargo. Hastings, together with T. Allan Box, another prominent Leaguer, became involved in a financial transaction concerning the American National Bank at Valley City.⁵⁹

The two promoters negotiated the purchase of the Valley City bank and persuaded farmer-stockholders to invest \$200,000 in the purchase. Thereupon the two collected a commission of ten per cent. This was legitimate. However, they had purchased the bank for \$15,000 less than had been represented to the investors and had simply pocketed the difference.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Morlan, op. cit., pp. 115-120; pp. 230-232; p. 247.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 116; p. 310; pp. 331-334.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 241. ⁶⁰Ibid.

All might have gone well with the scheme if it had not been for Attorney General Langer. Learning of the transaction, Langer, as a member of the State Banking Board, investigated and forced the return of the money before the board would approve change of ownership. In this incident Langer acted against the wishes of the League's leaders who defended the actions of Hastings and Box.⁶¹

The first serious rupture between Langer and the hierarchy came following the election of 1918. The League supported Superintendent of Public Instruction, Neil C. MacDonald was defeated by Minnie J. Nielson of Valley City, but he refused to relinquish his office on the grounds that Miss Nielson lacked the necessary educational qualifications for the position. Despite the fact that MacDonald had the backing of Frazier, Townley and Lemke, the Attorney General immediately took up the cudgels in her defense. Although he succeeded in ousting MacDonald, the League administration soon created a new agency, the Board of Administration, which relegated the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to relative unimportance. Neil C. MacDonald was appointed Educational advisor to the Board and General School Inspector. In his hands rested the real power over public instruction.⁶²

Miss Nielson, refusing to give up easily, again turned to Langer. Contending that Miss Nielson had been deprived of a constitutional power inherent in her office, Langer took the case to the Supreme Court. After proper hearings the court ruled against Miss Nielson.⁶³ While Langer was defeated in this legal tilt, the case was to provide him with political ammunition when he broke with the League later that year.

⁶¹Ibid. ⁶²Ibid., p. 241; pp. 253-254.

⁶³Ibid., p. 254.

The Attorney General again found himself at odds with the League leadership over the operation of the Scandinavian-American Bank of Fargo. This bank, one of the chief financing agents for the organization's political activities as well as its various enterprises, was, in many respects, the Achilles' heel of the entire League structure. The bank had been in shaky condition when it was purchased.⁶⁴ An investigation conducted by Deputy State Examiner P. E. Halldorson early in 1919 revealed that the bank's condition had not improved. On the contrary, it was, if anything, in even greater danger of collapse, but his warning was ignored.⁶⁵

It was ignored, that is, by responsible officials other than Langer. He immediately set about instituting an investigation of his own. In order to do this, he arranged that State Bank examiner O. E. Loftus be sent to Florida on business.⁶⁶ With Loftus disposed of, there remained only the problem of obtaining the necessary authorization of the banking board. Langer was, himself, a member, and he was sure that the second member, Secretary of State Thomas Hall, would support him. That left the third member, Governor Frazier, and Langer employed a ruse to allay his suspicions. He showed that a stockholder in a Fargo trust company registered a complaint concerning the acts of the majority stockholders. The banking board passed a resolution authorizing Langer to send an assistant to accompany a deputy examiner to Fargo to investigate. Langer drew the resolution so that the investigators were enabled to examine other institutions if it seemed necessary.⁶⁷

Langer's investigators really were interested only in the Scan-

⁶⁴Nelson, op. cit., p. 285. ⁶⁵Morlan, op. cit., p. 264.

⁶⁶Herbert F. Gaston, The Nonpartisan League (New York: Harcourt Brace and Howe, 1920), p. 307.

⁶⁷Ibid.

dinavian-American Bank. They found the bank insolvent and reported that it had lent money to League enterprises far in excess of the limitations set by law and, in addition, that its assets were based largely upon post-dated checks given by farmers for membership in the League and that as collateral they were next to worthless.⁶⁸ Loftus rushed back from Florida and succeeded in having the Supreme Court place him in charge of the bank. After a six day audit Loftus announced that the bank was sound and that there were no grounds for declaring it insolvent. Thereupon the Supreme court ordered the bank re-opened.⁶⁹

As in the Nielson case, Langer had managed to get himself considerable publicity. He seems in those years, and in later years as well, to have done nothing quietly. As Walter Davenport wrote with some literary license but considerable general accuracy, "Mr. Langer emerged from the bank crying at the top of his voice...."⁷⁰

He had been "crying at the top of his voice" in May of 1917, also, when he led a vice raid on the city of Minot. Aware that the vice operators were closely connected with city officials and that they were warned by telephone whenever a raid was imminent, Langer led a wild pistol-flourishing sortie which captured the telephone exchange and effectively sealed off communications. There was no doubt that the raid was justified and

⁶⁸Nelson, op. cit., p. 285; Morlan, op. cit., p. 264.

⁶⁹Morlan, op. cit., p. 265. Later the bank failed. John J. Hastings, its president, went to jail. Townley and Lemke were indicted on charges of embezzling funds but were not convicted. Bruce, op. cit., p. 187. Former State Supreme Court Justice Bruce contends that the court did not have jurisdiction.

⁷⁰Walter Davenport, "Mr. Lemke Stops to Think," Colliers, October 17, 1936, p. 26.

long overdue.⁷¹ Even an opposition paper such as the Grand Forks Herald did not doubt the need, but it did question the manner in which the raid was carried out.⁷² Langer was attacked as a brash young man who cared more for publicity than for the law.⁷³ The telephone company, outraged, had a warrant issued for Langer.⁷⁴ The governor, to prevent service of the warrant or perhaps to protect Langer from retaliation by the underworld, had him arrested on the rather flimsy charge of having entered a restricted area.⁷⁵ All in all, it must have been a most satisfactory raid from Langer's point of view.

That same year the rambunctious attorney general had Secretary of State Thomas Hall arrested on charges of embezzling state funds and differed with Governor Frazier over the composition of the State Board of Regents, in the former instance receiving delighted notice from the Herald.⁷⁶

By late 1918 and early 1919 it was becoming clear that Langer intended to go his own way. He had become so objectionable to some of the League hierarchy that Justice Robinson of the Supreme Court attacked him as being "a disgrace to his office."⁷⁷ When Langer pressed upon the sensitive financial nerve of the League by investigating the Scandinavian-

⁷¹The mayor resigned, the chief of police left town, a district judge refused to testify. Of one hundred indictments, all but three led to convictions.

⁷²Herald, May 11, 1917. ⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., May 12, 1917.

⁷⁵Ibid. Langer let himself be arrested by National Guard troops guarding a bridge between Bismarck and Mandan. The bridge was under guard as a war time security measure.

⁷⁶Herald, October 31, 1917; Ibid., November 29, 1917.

⁷⁷Ibid., November 3, 1918.

American Bank, the rupture was complete. The Legislature passed a resolution calling upon him to resign; the appropriations for his office were drastically cut;⁷⁸ he was removed from his key position on the Industrial Commission; and Townley launched a verbal attack against him. Langer was not slow in replying:

You imported into North Dakota radicals by the score . . . you and your hirelings have said that I am a crook, a traitor, and that I have sold out and betrayed the farmers of North Dakota.

Prove it and I will resign . . . And if you and your horde of detectives, organizers, spies and associates can't prove it, then stand convicted as a self-confessed liar and an assassinator of character, a man more despicable than the ghoul that sneaks out under the cover of darkness into 'No Man's Land' and robs the dead.⁷⁹

This turn about in Langer's activities was a source of sheer delight to the League's enemies. The Herald, which had so recently thundered against everything he did, suddenly found him a very upstanding and promising young man indeed.⁸⁰ The Independent Voter's Association⁸¹ gathered him into the fold and, although not trusting him entirely, nominated him over Rangvold Nestos as candidate for governor in 1920.⁸²

In the campaign that followed, Langer undoubtedly damaged the League severely in the eyes of North Dakota farmers. The spectacle of a man so recently a member of the League's inner circle ranging the state hurling charges of corruption and mismanagement at its leaders must have given many farmers cause to reflect.⁸³ However, the League was still

⁷⁸Morlan, op. cit., p. 273; Grand Forks American, December 11, 1919.

⁷⁹Morlan, quoted in Morlan, op. cit., pp. 242-243.

⁸⁰Prior to this period and during all the years of Langer's political activity, the Herald quoted Langer's speeches as seldom as possible. During the latter part of 1918 and through the election of 1920, however, the paper quoted him extensively and gave him very favorable publicity.

⁸¹Usually referred to as the I.V.A., this was a coalition of anti-League elements of both the Republican and Democratic parties.

⁸²Morlan, op. cit., p. 286. ⁸³Blackorby, op. cit., p. 244.

strong enough to carry the election and Langer was defeated by the incumbent, Lynn J. Frazier.⁸⁴

Following the election, Langer, feeling he had not received the full backing of the I.V.A., broke with it and opened a private law practice in Bismarck.⁸⁵ He must have viewed with mixed feelings what next occurred. His defection from the League and his constant attacks upon its leaders were among the factors enabling its enemies to obtain and win a recall election.⁸⁶ Charging incompetence and mismanagement on the part of the Industrial Commission, the I.V.A. and its allies succeeded in having the Commission recalled in October of 1921.⁸⁷

Little was heard of William Langer in the next few years,⁸⁸ but he was busily engaged in working his way back into the League. A number of circumstances were in his favor. Although many League members were bitter towards him, others felt that he had been justified in his actions. He had been most careful to attack the hierarchy and not the League itself. Events had proved that that leadership had, in many respects, been wanting. Then, too, the organization had been torn by factional struggles, Townley had fallen from power and been replaced by Lemke who was not able to maintain a tight rein on the organization, the Leader had failed and membership in the organization had fallen off sharply.⁸⁹

Lemke and the anti-Langer group were not able to prevent Langer's

⁸⁴Morlan, op. cit., p. 294. ⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶C. R. Johnson, "Is the Non-Partisan League Declining?" New Republic, XXIV (September 22, 1920), pp. 88-90.

⁸⁷Morlan, op. cit., p. 315; p. 326.

⁸⁸Interview with O. B. Burtness, November 21, 1959.

⁸⁹Morlan, op. cit., p. 293; p. 319; p. 341; pp. 346-347; p. 350; Blackorby, op. cit., p. 347; pp. 354-356; pp. 380-381; Kramer, op. cit., p. 188.

gradual rehabilitation as a Leaguer. By 1928 he was sufficiently reinstated in the graces of the League to be given the nomination for attorney general. This, however, was a rather empty honor since it was based partly upon Langer's ability to furnish campaign funds, and partly upon the fact that the League did not expect to win the election.⁹⁰

Somewhat ironically, although the I.V.A. administration of George Shafer was returned to office, the League candidate showing the most surprising strength was Langer.⁹¹ It was from this position of strength that Langer explained to a post-primary meeting of the organization that the reason for the League's defeat was that it lacked a newspaper.⁹² The members were impressed and authorized Langer to solicit funds and subscriptions to begin publication. Lemke was horrified. A newspaper in Langer's hands, he knew, would be a potent weapon which could lead to his capture of the League. Consequently, he did everything he could to make it difficult for Langer. The crash of 1929 combined with Lemke's opposition to make it impossible for Langer to continue with the paper venture.⁹³

But the 1928 defeat had weakened the control over the League by Lemke and his more radical wing. Further, he made the mistake of leaving the state for long periods of time during the next four years. Thus, when Langer came forward with an offer to reorganize the League, there was no effective opposition to him, and by 1932, after a bitter convention fight against T. H. H. Thorsen, Langer was given the nomination for governor.⁹⁴

⁹⁰Blackorby, op. cit., p. 399. ⁹¹Ibid., p. 404.

⁹²Ibid. The Leader had failed in 1923.

⁹³Blackorby, op. cit., pp. 404-406.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 408; pp. 410-411; Blackorby states that this 1932 convention fight was really between Langer and Lemke for control of the League.

In a three-way fight against Shafer and the Democratic nominee, J. F. T. O'Connor, the entire League ticket led by Langer was swept into office.⁹⁵ The stage was set for one of the wildest two year gubernatorial terms in the state's history.

IV. The Governor

In the spring of 1934 William Langer, Governor of North Dakota, was declared unable to exercise the powers of his office by the State Supreme Court. "Wild Bill" Langer was in trouble again and, as usual, the atmosphere around him was charged and explosive. Putted young national guardsmen, bayonets fixed, stood at parade rest outside the governor's office;⁹⁶ crowds of shirtsleeved men marched up the long curving drive to the capitol;⁹⁷ at night the lights of torches flickered against the bricks of downtown buildings as excited farmers chanted, "We want Langer!"⁹⁸

Langer had not gone out of his way since taking office January 1, 1933 to avoid adding to the already awesome roster of his foes.⁹⁹ His old enemies had not ceased sniping at him, but his efforts to build a political machine, the flamboyant manner in which he conducted his office, and his intemperate attacks on the Roosevelt administration had alienated others.

The Langer political machine was essentially a personal one based

⁹⁵Holzworth, op. cit., p. 16.

⁹⁶Holzworth, op. cit., p. 79; p. 81.

⁹⁷New York Times, July 20, 1934, p. 1.

⁹⁸"Political Snarl in the State Nobody Knows," Literary Digest, DXVIII (July 28, 1934), p. 5.

⁹⁹Blackorby, op. cit., p. 464.

upon the man rather than adherence to common principles.¹⁰⁰ It was built upon the old structure of the League and laid heavy emphasis upon thorough local organization and active political participation on the part of office and job-holders who owed their positions to the League. During both Langer administrations, state jobs were open only to those who were members of the League and designated as politically "right" by their county committee, the state committee and finally by Langer himself. So tight was the organization that one even had to be a Leaguer to deliver coal to the governor's mansion. "You didn't get a job if you didn't work for Bill Langer."¹⁰¹ Even the girls employed as secretaries at the capitol building were required to work for the Langer organization by typing circular letters and other campaign literature and distributing them to their friends and acquaintances.¹⁰² Indeed, on election day secretaries from the capitol could be seen standing at a safe distance from the Bismarck polls distributing pro-Langer materials.¹⁰³

There seems little doubt that Langer, from the beginning, made it clear that he intended to be the "boss." It may be that this was one of the reasons why John Nystul, Republican Party Chairman, and certain state officials broke with the governor in 1934.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, they

¹⁰⁰Bismarck Capital, November 10, 1959.

¹⁰¹Interview with A. J. Jensen, Insurance Commissioner, and Frank Albers, Deputy Insurance Commissioner, November 12, 1959.

¹⁰²Interview with Margaret Rose, Librarian, State Historical Society, November 12, 1959.

¹⁰³Interview with Thelma Rudser, November 14, 1959. Miss Rudser was with the W. P. A. in the late thirties and early forties. She ate at the same boarding house as Miss Rose and, also, recalled the secretaries distributing literature to fellow boarders.

¹⁰⁴Holzworth, op. cit., pp. 54-55. Following the 1932 elections Langer had refused to give Nystul charge over patronage. No doubt he intended to control this potent political weapon himself.

may have been genuinely alarmed by the direction the Langer administration had taken. Many of his actions, such as the declaration of a moratorium on farm debts and the embargo on shipment of wheat from the state, while applauded by the farmers, indicated a certain impatience with legal forms if they did not lend themselves readily to the course of action he wished to take. While the debt moratorium was probably legal,¹⁰⁵ his readiness to use the National Guard to enforce it was, most certainly, alarming. On the other hand, the wheat embargo had not a shadow of legality and it seems evident that Langer knew it.¹⁰⁶

There were other reasons for Langer's growing unpopularity in some circles. The burgeoning of Langer's power and his obvious ambition had, quite naturally, come to the attention of Senator Gerald P. Nye, who was faced with the necessity of running for re-election in 1938. He had little doubt that Langer would challenge him at that time.¹⁰⁷

Also, the Roosevelt administration had cause to look askance at the obstreperous North Dakotan. Langer, ever the advocate of immediate and, if need be, drastic action, was highly vocal in his criticism of the New Deal's efforts to aid the farmer.¹⁰⁸ The treatment accorded Langer and other farm state governors when they traveled to Washington in November

¹⁰⁵The moratoria were never successfully challenged in court.

¹⁰⁶Adam J. Schweitzer, "John Moses and the New Deal in North Dakota," (unpublished Master's thesis, Library, University of North Dakota, 1954), p. 38; Nelson, op. cit., p. 310; Interview with Thorwald Mostad, November 12, 1959. Mr. Mostad was one of the men elected to the state Senate on the League ticket in 1916.

¹⁰⁷Blackorby, op. cit., p. 405; pp. 539-540; Holzworth, op. cit., p. 58; p. 93; Cook, loc. cit., p. 105.

¹⁰⁸Holzworth, op. cit., p. 38; p. 57; Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West: 1900-1912 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1951), p. 558; Langer, Speech before the Farm Holiday Association at Des Moines, Iowa, Quoted in the New York Times, May 4, 1934, p. 40.

of 1933 did little to soothe his rising ire. The governors had gone to Washington advocating, among other things, a guaranteed cost of production for the farmer and an adjustment of tariff rates to protect American agriculture. Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, was something less than cordial. Placing his faith in the Agricultural Adjustment Act, he was cool toward the plan offered by the governors. Roosevelt, on the other hand, had been sympathetic to the governors' plan at first but a conference with Wallace caused the President to reverse himself. The governors were disappointed and angry. Langer was outraged. He said, "I am very disappointed and disgusted; the farmer is the Forgotten Man. Everybody has gotten here before him . . . There is nothing left for the farmer."¹⁰⁹ Following the Washington meeting, his attacks on government farm policy in general and Wallace in particular, became increasingly bitter.¹¹⁰

To what extent the groups opposing Langer formed a coalition against him is not clear.¹¹¹ If Nye, the I.V.A. and the Democratic Administration in Washington did work closely to bring about his downfall, it was a strange political aggregation indeed. Whatever the relationship, they all lost no time in moving against him when he became vulnerable to attack in connection with the solicitation of political contributions.

It has long been common for political parties to levy assessments against the salaries of those for whom they provide political office or positions within the structure of government. Langer's organization was no exception. He and his advisors were particularly concerned to see

¹⁰⁹Time, November 13, 1933, pp. 12-13.

¹¹⁰Holzworth, op. cit., p. 45.

¹¹¹Ibid., pp. 57-58; p. 64.

that the Leader be adequately financed. In order to do this Langer hit upon the device of having state employees purchase subscriptions to the newspaper amounting to five per cent of their salaries. The subscriptions then became the property of the purchaser who was entitled to re-imburse himself through re-sale of the subscriptions.¹¹²

On the face of it, this would seem a more equitable way of exacting political contributions than the more common method of direct assessment.¹¹³ Unfortunately for Langer, an agent hired by the Leader to sell subscriptions in the capitol building did not confine himself to solicitation in state offices alone. In making his rounds he entered the State Relief Office and sold a number of subscriptions. It was later contended that the agent, Harold McDonald, was not aware of the close connection between the state relief agency and the federal government.¹¹⁴ However, much of the funds being distributed through the depression ridden state by the relief office was furnished by Washington. Under federal law, the solicitation of political contributions from federal employees was illegal.¹¹⁵ Langer, as nominal head of the relief program in North Dakota, was directly accountable. On March 1, 1934, Harry L. Hopkins removed Langer from this position.¹¹⁶

Whether this move was justifiable or not on legal or ethical

¹¹²Holzworth, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

¹¹³Datus Smith, Jr., "North Dakota Seeks a Demagogue," New Republic, LXXX (October 3, 1934), p. 206. Smith says that the belief was common that state employees lost their jobs if they did not subscribe. The Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959 states that the employees at the sanatorium at Dunseith refused to buy subscriptions and were all dismissed.

¹¹⁴Holzworth, op. cit., p. 68.

¹¹⁵Blackorby, op. cit., pp. 467-468.

¹¹⁶Holzworth, op. cit., p. 57.

grounds, the timing of the removal order brings into focus the distinct possibility of political hatchet wielding. It came just five days before the League nominating convention was to meet in Bismarck. Therefore Hopkins' action could not have come at a time calculated to be more damaging to Langer's political future. In spite of Hopkins' action, and in spite of an attempt by Nystul and other dissidents to break up the Langer controlled convention, the governor received the nomination for a second term by unanimous vote.¹¹⁷

In the meantime federal investigators had come to North Dakota attempting to find evidence against Langer. On March 8 a grand jury was called but at that time no evidence was introduced. It was not until April 10 that a special grand jury met at Fargo, and Langer and eight others were indicted on charges of conspiracy to violate a law forbidding solicitation of political funds in a federal building and of conspiring to interfere with the orderly operation of an act of Congress. Trial was set for May 22 before Langer's old opponent, Andrew J. Miller, now a federal judge, in spite of a defense plea to have the trial postponed until after the primary campaign. On June 15, Langer and the eight men indicted with him were found guilty.¹¹⁸

Judge Miller granted a stay of sentencing until after the primary election. With the primary vote set for June 27, Langer had less than two weeks in which to campaign. It proved to be enough. North Dakotans, apparently convinced that the conviction represented political persecution, gave him the nomination by a wide margin.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 57; p. 61.

¹¹⁸Ibid., pp. 64-65; p. 67; p. 73.

¹¹⁹Holzworth, op. cit., p. 75; p. 77.

On June 29, Langer was sentenced to eighteen months in federal prison and fined \$10,000. Immediately following the conviction, Lieutenant Governor Ole Olson had taken the oath of office and begun a series of maneuvers designed to put him in the governor's chair.¹²⁰ Langer, however, had directed the sheriff of Burleigh County to station guards at the governor's office and had announced that he intended to maintain himself in office "by force if necessary."¹²¹ On primary day Langer ordered the guard removed, but it was resumed when he left for Fargo to be sentenced. Olson appealed to Attorney General P. E. Sathre to rule in his favor, but Sathre ruled that Langer's conviction was not complete until sentence had been passed. Olson then petitioned the Supreme Court to take original jurisdiction in the case.¹²² The Court complied and a hearing was set for July 3. At the hearing Olson's attorneys contended that a vacancy existed in the gubernatorial position from the time of Langer's conviction. Langer's counsel, on the other hand, maintained that the court had no jurisdiction and that he should remain in office until impeached by the House and tried by the Senate.¹²³

On July 12 Langer called for a special session of the legislature to meet on the nineteenth. On July 17, the court issued a writ of quo warranto removing Langer and designating Olson as Acting Governor pending settlement of Langer's appeal.¹²⁴ Langer promptly called out the National Guard.

Ostensibly the use of the militia was justified by the unsettled

¹²⁰Ibid., p. 75; p. 78.

¹²¹Roy L. Miller, "The Gubernatorial Contest in North Dakota," American Political Science Review, XXIX (June, 1935), p. 425.

¹²²Holzworth, op. cit., p. 76.

¹²³Ibid., p. 78. ¹²⁴Ibid., p. 79.

conditions in the state capital.¹²⁵ Members of the Farm Holiday movement had gathered in the city to support Langer,¹²⁶ workers in the relief offices had demonstrated,¹²⁷ and a mob had invaded the capitol building.¹²⁸ These justifications, however, were somewhat weakened by Langer's declaration that he intended to hold office by any means necessary and by his appearing before the demonstrating relief workers and stating, "I think you're doing the right thing in protesting in this manner. . . I want to compliment the leaders of this movement . . . the more hell you raise the sooner they'll come to understand the situation."¹²⁹ What might have ensued had he maintained control of the militia is conjectural. After several days of vacillation, Adjutant General Earl R. Sarles declared his allegiance to Olson. Langer's source of power was removed and he quietly vacated the governor's office.¹³⁰

But the struggle had not ended. Despite an order from Olson cancelling the special session of the legislature,¹³¹ members of that body had appeared in Bismarck by July 19.¹³² In the next few days, although the Leader wrote glowing accounts of the session,¹³³ neither house had much success in gathering a quorum.¹³⁴ Indeed, in at least one instance a Senator was dragged into the Senate chamber by main

¹²⁵Miller, loc. cit., pp. 426-427; Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959.

¹²⁶The Leader, July 26, 1934; New York Times, July 20, 1934, p. 1.

¹²⁷Miller, loc. cit., pp. 426-427.

¹²⁸Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959.

¹²⁹Miller, loc. cit., p. 426.

¹³⁰Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959. ¹³¹Ibid.

¹³²Holzworth, op. cit., p. 80. ¹³³The Leader, July 19, 1934.

¹³⁴Bismarck Tribune, July 24, 1934; Miller, loc. cit., p. 427.

force.¹³⁵ None-the-less, Langer appeared before the House on the nineteenth, outlined the situation as he saw it, and called for the institution of impeachment proceedings.¹³⁶ Although the House did appoint a committee to study the charges against him, the special session was not a great success and by July 24 the legislators were on their way home.¹³⁷

In the meantime, Langer's appeal had been upheld and a new trial ordered.¹³⁸ In October of 1935 Langer and the other defendants were re-tried before Judge A. Lee Wyman. In this second trial the jury was not able to agree upon a decision and Wyman ordered the charges dismissed.¹³⁹ But, as a result of the first trial, Langer had filed an affidavit of prejudice against Judge Miller, charging that his conduct of the trial had been unfair. This affidavit led to an indictment of Langer for perjury. The third trial was also heard by Judge Wyman who ruled that there was insufficient evidence to prove the charge.¹⁴⁰

When Langer had been removed from office, he had also been prevented from running in the November general elections. In consequence the League had nominated his wife, Lydia Cady Langer, to run in his place.¹⁴¹ She was defeated, however, by Thomas Moodie, the Democratic nominee.¹⁴² Langer

¹³⁵Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1934; New York Times, July 22, 1934, p. 24.

¹³⁶Langer, Speech to the Special Session of the Legislature, Quoted in the Bismarck Tribune, July 21, 1934.

¹³⁷Bismarck Tribune, July 25, 1934.

¹³⁸Holzworth, op. cit., p. 91; New York Times, May 8, 1935, p. 3.

¹³⁹Holzworth, op. cit., p. 95; New York Times, November 16, 1935, p. 2.

¹⁴⁰Holzworth, op. cit., p. 95; The Leader, December 26, 1935.

¹⁴¹Holzworth, op. cit., p. 86; The Leader, August 2, 1934.

¹⁴²Schweitzer, op. cit., p. 41.

immediately set about investigating Moodie's qualifications. He found that, since Moodie did not meet the residence requirements because he had voted in Minnesota five years previously, his assumption of the governorship was not legal.¹⁴³ Moodie was forced to step down and Lieutenant Governor Walter Welford took office.¹⁴⁴ Langer had snatched another victory from defeat.

But scarcely had Welford taken office than he made it clear that he meant to be governor in fact and had no intention of taking orders from Langer.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, the break was so complete that Welford ran against Langer in the primary elections in 1936. Although Langer's great popularity had waned somewhat and Welford was able to defeat him in the primaries, he promptly called the League into convention, had himself nominated to run as an independent, and defeated both Welford and the Democratic candidate, John Moses, in November.¹⁴⁶

The first Langer administration had been characterized by drastic economy measures,¹⁴⁷ relief for the depression-ridden farmer, the embargo and moratorium and the fight for the gubernatorial office. The second administration followed much the same pattern as the first. Langer called

¹⁴³Holzworth, op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁴⁴Gerald W. Movius, New York Times, sec. 4 (January 27, 1935), p. 7.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 6-7; Schweitzer, op. cit., p. 41.

¹⁴⁶Holzworth, op. cit., pp. 100-101.

¹⁴⁷Alfred S. Dale, "North Dakota Shifts the Farmer's Burden," New Republic, LXXVI (August 16, 1933), p. 16. Dale states that the budget was cut by fifty per cent. Louis G. Geiger, University of the Northern Plains: A History of the University of North Dakota, 1883-1958 (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota Press, 1958), p. 373, points out that Langer even went so far as to veto portions of appropriations bills, an illegal use of the veto. The University of North Dakota's budget request was cut from \$1,000,000 to \$518,000 by the legislature and Langer cut out \$5,000 more set aside for lignite research.

for greater relief for the farmer, more federal aid and continued his fight to bring a fair market price for farm products.¹⁴⁸ The latter he carried out in a more legal, if less flamboyant, manner than he had in 1933. When grain prices dropped overnight in July of 1937, Langer went into action immediately.¹⁴⁹ He sent representatives throughout the state collecting two-pound samples of wheat. This wheat was taken to the State Mill and Elevator in Grand Forks, milled, tested and baked into loaves. Because of rust the crop that year was light weight. Langer hoped to show that the wheat could still be used to make bread of good quality. When it was found that the wheat did make good bread, Langer announced that the State Mill and Elevator would buy North Dakota wheat at a price thirty-five cents per bushel above that the farmers were being offered. Within twenty-four hours this price was met in Minneapolis.¹⁵⁰

But the real business of the second term was the building of a tighter organization for the fight against United States Senator Gerald P. Nye in 1938.¹⁵¹ However, the time was not yet ripe. Langer appears to have underestimated Nye's strength and, perhaps more important, the strength of his old adversary, William Lemke. The League offered Lemke its endorsement for Congress if he would back the entire League ticket. This he would not do, apparently because he would not back Langer. The Langer dominated League thereupon chose to run Henry G. Owen in Lemke's

¹⁴⁸The Leader, September 9, 1937; The Leader, July 29, 1937.

¹⁴⁹Holzworth, op. cit., pp. 115-116; The Leader, July 29, 1937; New York Times, sec. 2 (August 4, 1937), p. 6.

¹⁵⁰Holzworth, op. cit., pp. 115-116.

¹⁵¹Gerald W. Movius, "Rivals United by Langer Moves," New York Times, sec. 4 (January 10, 1937), p. 10; Blackorby, op. cit., p. 465.

place.¹⁵² Had this not been done, had the League not insisted that Lemke back the entire ticket, it is possible he might have avoided open attack on Langer. As it was, Lemke's entrance into the fight against Langer was of considerable help to the successful Nye.¹⁵³

In 1940, Langer mounted an attack in another quarter. That year Lynn J. Frazier, occupant of the state's other Senatorial seat, ran for re-election. Pitted against him was William Langer. He had nothing against Frazier and no real issue. It was simply that Frazier was in the way.¹⁵⁴ When Langer defeated Frazier in the primary, the anti-Langer forces found themselves hoist by their own petard. In 1939 the legislature had passed a law which seemed to bar a man defeated in the primary from running again in the fall.¹⁵⁵ This action was the result of Langer's feat in 1936 and was designed to stop him from repeating the maneuver.¹⁵⁶ Now the anti-Langer forces were faced with the problem of finding a replacement for Frazier. Since Lemke was considered to be the strongest possibility, he consented to run, but likewise suffered defeat in the general elections.¹⁵⁷

Langer's opponents were not ready to forsake the cause. Obviously they were no less tenacious, if somewhat less successful. Scarcely had the turbulence of the campaign died down than a group of people, led by Charles R. Verry of Minot, petitioned the Senate to deny a seat to Langer on grounds of moral turpitude.¹⁵⁸ The charges were based upon a variety of

¹⁵²Ibid., pp. 540-541.

¹⁵³Blackorby, op. cit., p. 540. ¹⁵⁴Cook, loc. cit., p. 106.

¹⁵⁵Blackorby, op. cit., p. 554. ¹⁵⁶Ibid.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 555; p. 63.

¹⁵⁸New York Times, October 9, 1941, p. 13; Newsweek, March 30, 1942, p. 30.

alleged crimes and misdemeanors, some rising from his conduct as governor, some from his actions in private law practice, and some involving questionable transactions concerning the sale of North Dakota bonds. The list of charges was extensive and the Senate was asked to investigate, among other things: why a tax lawyer for the Great Northern Railroad paid Langer \$25,000 for stock in some Mexican land after the railroad's taxes had been cut \$150,000 a year; why an attorney named Gregory Brunk had paid him \$56,000 for farm land Brunk had never seen after Brunk had profited in the sale of North Dakota county bonds; whether or not Langer had defrauded a woman of \$2,000 by promising to get her son out of prison and then had ^{failing to take} taken no action;¹⁵⁹ how he had escaped conviction when he was tried for perjury;¹⁶⁰ what was Langer's connection with alleged irregularities in absentee voting in the 1938 election.¹⁶¹

The Senate seated him "without prejudice"¹⁶² and referred the charges to its Privileges and Elections Committee which heard a long procession of witnesses and compiled volumes of testimony.¹⁶³ In December of 1941 the committee voted thirteen to three not to seat him.¹⁶⁴ Its report stated that Langer was guilty of "gross impropriety, shotgun law enforcement, jailbreaking, rabble rousing, breach of the peace and tampering with court officials."¹⁶⁵

But such Senatorial luminaries as Charles N. McNary of Oregon,¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁹Time, December 29, 1941, p. 26; Newsweek, March 30, 1942, p. 30.

¹⁶⁰New York Times, November 4, 1941, p. 48; Ibid., November 5, 1941, p. 25.

¹⁶¹Time, December 29, 1941, p. 26.

¹⁶²Newsweek, April 6, 1942, p. 29. ¹⁶³Time, April 6, 1942, p. 42.

¹⁶⁴Time, December 29, 1941, p. 26; Time, April 6, 1942, p. 14.

¹⁶⁵Life, April 6, 1942, p. 28. ¹⁶⁶Newsweek, April 6, 1942, p. 29.

and Tom Connally of Texas,¹⁶⁷ came to Langer's aid. When the clouds of parliamentary battle had cleared in April of 1942, Langer had retained his seat by a margin of fifty-two to thirty.¹⁶⁸ "Wild Bill" Langer had won another major battle. There were more to come.

V. The Senator

The Senator from North Dakota, in nineteen years of confounding his colleagues, the people of his own state, the press, and three national administrations, gave the impression that being a United States Senator was the greatest fun in the world. Seemingly completely erratic, a lonewolf, noted for the introduction of more trivial legislation than any other Senator,¹⁶⁹ consistently on lists of "worst Senators,"¹⁷⁰ given to long, desk-pounding tirades on the Senate floor,¹⁷¹ at one moment a liberal and at the next conservative,¹⁷² Langer called down upon his own head abuse from both sides of the aisle and a kind of bewildered admiration.¹⁷³ The prevailing attitude toward him seemed to be that of half angry, half amused affection. This attitude was perhaps best expressed by a Senator referring to Langer's absent-minded habit of picking up any coat in the Senate cloak room. "Bill," he said, "wears no man's collar, but any man's coat."¹⁷⁴

He was consistently isolationist,¹⁷⁵ anti-militarist,¹⁷⁶ and

¹⁶⁷Newsweek, March 30, 1942, p. 30.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., April 6, 1942, p. 29. ¹⁶⁹Time, March 20, 1950, p. 18.

¹⁷⁰New York Times, October 27, 1952, p. 21; Time, July 7, 1952, p. 14.

¹⁷¹Ross, loc. cit., p. 63. ¹⁷²Smith, loc. cit., p. 27.

¹⁷³Ross, loc. cit., pp. 62-63. ¹⁷⁴Smith, loc. cit., p. 103.

¹⁷⁵Newsweek, November 16, 1959, p. 31; New York Times, June 28, 1946, p. 20; Time, March 20, 1950, p. 18; New York Times Magazine, March 3, 1957, p. 12.

¹⁷⁶New York Times, June 5, 1946, p. 3.

Anglo-phobe.¹⁷⁷ In the light of his Middlewestern background and constituency, these attitudes are not, perhaps, so strange as they have often been painted. As a Midwesterner, and one of Germanic descent at that, his stand against lend-lease,¹⁷⁸ the draft,¹⁷⁹ and the leasing of fifty destroyers to Britain,¹⁸⁰ while not arguing, perhaps, for the clarity of his vision, was not necessarily peculiar. The same might be said of his votes against the United Nations Charter, the Atlantic Treaty,¹⁸¹ the Marshall Plan,¹⁸² American participation in the United Nations,¹⁸³ and American involvement in the Korean War.¹⁸⁴ Certainly his feelings toward Universal Military Training were consistent with his heritage. When the Universal Military Act was before the Congress, Langer said, "My people came from Europe to get away from that kind of thing. I'll never vote for it."¹⁸⁵

He tended, also, to vote rather consistently with labor.¹⁸⁶ One of his more solid accomplishments as chairman of the Senate Post Office Committee was the improvement of salaries for postal employees and other

¹⁷⁷Newsweek, November 16, 1959, p. 31; New York Times, March 2, 1946, p. 17.

¹⁷⁸Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959.

¹⁷⁹New York Times, June 5, 1946, p. 3.

¹⁸⁰Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959.

¹⁸¹New York Times, July 29, 1945, p. 1.

¹⁸²Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959.

¹⁸³Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959. The vote was sixty-five to seven in favor of participation.

¹⁸⁴Steinberg, loc. cit., p. 20.

¹⁸⁵Langer, Quoted by Leslie D. Polk, Williston Herald, November 12, 1959.

¹⁸⁶Robert Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

government workers.¹⁸⁷ In addition, he was a staunch opponent of the Taft-Hartley act¹⁸⁸ and, in his last term, was one of two Senators to vote against the Landrum-Griffin labor bill.¹⁸⁹ Certainly Labor regarded him most favorably,¹⁹⁰ and at his death the newspaper Labor praised him as a staunch friend of the working man.¹⁹¹

His agricultural policy, of course, was that of the dominant farm groups in North Dakota.¹⁹² He was a strong supporter of the Missouri Valley Authority,¹⁹³ a loud advocate of rural electrification,¹⁹⁴ a firm believer in price supports,¹⁹⁵ and a rabid opponent of the farm policies of Ezra Taft Benson.¹⁹⁶

His attitude toward large corporations harked back to the early days of the Nonpartisan League and even, some said, to the Populists of the 1890's.¹⁹⁷ Not only were his speeches studded with derogatory references to "Big Business" and the "Interests," but he was active in

¹⁸⁷The Leader, December 11, 1947.

¹⁸⁸New York Times, June 5, 1947, p. 3.

¹⁸⁹Labor, November 14, 1959. The other Senator was Wayne Morse of Oregon.

¹⁹⁰At an A.F.L. rally at Madison Square Garden, he was the only Republican on the program who received applause. New York Times, June 5, 1947, p. 3.

¹⁹¹Labor, November 14, 1959.

¹⁹²Robert Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

¹⁹³Nelson, op. cit., p. 334; The Leader, November 3, 1949.

¹⁹⁴The Leader, February 26, 1948.

¹⁹⁵The Leader, November 3, 1949.

¹⁹⁶Bismarck Capital, November 10, 1959; Herald, March 3, 1958.

¹⁹⁷Senator Wayne Morse described Langer as "the last of the Populists in our political life." Williston Herald, February 5, 1960; New York Times, March 19, 1954, p. 31.

opposing business and its representatives. He called for an investigation of railroad monopoly¹⁹⁸ and in 1950 demanded an investigation of an alleged attempt by Lever Brothers to "corner" the market in fats and oils.¹⁹⁹ He defended public ownership against private ownership in championing the REA²⁰⁰ and in instituting an investigation of the Dixon-Yates activities in the Tennessee Valley.²⁰¹ Moreover, he seems to have regarded the ownership of tidelands oil by the states in something approaching the same light and supported President Truman in a bitter fight to keep control in federal hands.²⁰²

Some of his more spectacular performances were the direct result of the fact that Langer seems never to have left North Dakota politically and intellectually.²⁰³ He seems to have regarded the Senate floor as simply a larger stage from which to shout the virtues of his native state and to rail against the wrongs done her by national administrations, the "Interests" and other enemies of the "common people" to whom he was apt to refer as "pirates."²⁰⁴

An illustration of his paradoxical behavior was his attempt to block the appointment of Earl Warren as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in 1954. Langer had supported Warren's candidacy for President.

¹⁹⁸The Leader, November 9, 1949; New York Times, March 19, 1954, p. 31.

¹⁹⁹New York Times, January 19, 1950, p. 42.

²⁰⁰The Leader, November 3, 1949; New York Times, December 23, 1953, p. 38.

²⁰¹New York Times, August 22, 1954; U. S. News and World Report, September 10, 1954, p. 16.

²⁰²New York Times, July 25, 1951, p. 16.

²⁰³Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

²⁰⁴Smith, loc. cit., p. 27.

He admired the man personally and was friendly toward him. Yet, in his position as Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he blocked Warren's appointment for days, insisting upon a thorough examination of the man's record. Although even the members of his committee were outraged, Langer held firm and conducted the farcical hearings with a sort of unholy glee.²⁰⁵

Actually, this conduct should not, perhaps, have surprised his colleagues. Langer had served notice as early as 1950 that unless some North Dakotans were appointed to important government positions he felt to be their due, he would feel called upon to block all Presidential appointments. At that time he said:

Time and again on the floor of the Senate I have called the attention of the Senate . . . to the fact that no citizen of North Dakota has been named to head any important office. Year after year has gone by without any citizen of North Dakota being nominated to any such office. . . . I am serving notice that the next time the Senate is called upon to confirm anyone to head any office I propose to oppose the confirmation.²⁰⁶

Historically, Langer's battle for recognition of North Dakota seems to have begun much earlier. In 1943 he attempted to block the appointment of Wiley B. Rutledge to the Supreme Court.²⁰⁷ In 1944 he fought against the appointment of Edward R. Stettinius as Secretary of State and of W. Averril Harriman as Ambassador at Large in 1948.²⁰⁸ Later he held up the confirmation of John F. X. McGokey as New York Federal Judge

²⁰⁵James Reston, New York Times, February 18, 1954, p. 14; Ibid., February 24, 1954, p. 1; "Bilbo of the North," Time, March 1, 1954, p. 13; "Langer's Outburst," Newsweek, March 1, 1954, pp. 19-20; In the end, Langer was one of the members of the Judiciary Committee to vote for Warren's confirmation, New York Times, February 25, 1954, p. 1.

²⁰⁶James Reston, New York Times, February 18, 1954, p. 14.

²⁰⁷New York Times, February 5, 1943, p. 3.

²⁰⁸Ibid., November 30, 1944, p. 13; Ibid., April 27, 1948, p. 7.

in 1950,²⁰⁹ and in 1954 announced his intention of blocking the appointment of John Marshall Harlan to the Supreme Court.²¹⁰

It was most probably not simply the pride of a native son that prompted Langer's actions in these cases. Control of patronage has always been a source of considerable political power. Langer was anxious, therefore, to acquire some "plums" to distribute.²¹¹ It was this desire that caused his outrage at the Eisenhower appointment of Fred G. Aandahl, Langer's opponent in the 1952 election, as Assistant Secretary of the Interior.²¹² He was unable to stop the Aandahl appointment, but when the Eisenhower administration again ignored him in appointing four new postmasters in North Dakota, Langer exploded and succeeded in blocking them by declaring the appointments "personally offensive to him."²¹³

Langer's role as champion of the underdog has often been questioned. It would seem undeniable that he possessed a genuine sympathy for ordinary people. As governor, he opened both his office and his home to people of all classes and economic circumstances. Even the man who delivered coal to the governor's mansion was apt to be invited in to eat with the Langer family. Those who came to him for help in the 1930's were asked immediately, "Do you have anything to eat?" If not, Langer saw to it that they were fed.²¹⁴ Later, as Senator, he carried on the practice of helping with even

²⁰⁹Ibid., February 8, 1950, p. 20.

²¹⁰Ibid., December 3, 1954, p. 15.

²¹¹"Bilbo of the North," Time, March 1, 1954, p. 13.

²¹²James Reston, New York Times, February 18, 1954, p. 14.

²¹³William Blair, "Wild Bill Langer In Trouble Again," New York Times, February 20, 1954, p. 7; "Bilbo of the North," Time, March 1, 1954, p. 13.

²¹⁴Interview with A. J. Jensen and Frank Albers, November 12, 1959; Interview with Math Dahl, November 12, 1959.

the most personal kinds of problems of his constituents.²¹⁵ It was widely known that he did innumerable favors for the people back home. He was widely criticized for this, but it is a fact that he was as willing to do favors for an enemy as for a friend.²¹⁶ Humanitarian considerations aside, of course, this readiness to meet with ordinary people, to answer letters personally,²¹⁷ and to expend every effort to help reaped certain political dividends on election day.

It is also true that he was known to Washington lawyers as a "soft touch" for a case involving indigent clients.²¹⁸ Indeed, he was known for his willingness to assist citizens of Washington D. C. who had no money and, more important, no vote.²¹⁹ In a similar vein, Langer was famous or infamous depending upon the point of view, for the introduction of a great number of bills enabling individual aliens to remain in the United States. The true motivation for his actions in behalf of these people has never been determined, but it has been charged that his interest in aliens was pecuniary rather than humanitarian.²²⁰

That Langer was a "maverick" and a nonconformist was made evident

²¹⁵Smith, loc. cit., p. 103; Fargo Forum, November 10, 1959; Minneapolis Morning Tribune, November 10, 1959, p. 4.

²¹⁶Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

²¹⁷Minneapolis Morning Tribune, November 10, 1959, p. 4; Bismarck Tribune, November 10, 1959, p. 1. As a matter of fact, requests for aid sent by applicants to Langer were often referred to the proper state agency in Bismarck. Once the application had been acted upon, the state agencies were required to send the information or materials back to Langer's Washington office so that the constituent would receive them from there. Interview with A. J. Jensen and Frank Albers; Interview with Miss Margaret Rose.

²¹⁸Ross, loc. cit., p. 66.

²¹⁹Smith, loc. cit., p. 103.

²²⁰Herald, June 18, 1952; New York Times, March 28, 1953, p. 12.

on many occasions. At the height of the excitement surrounding the Rosenberg spy case, Langer took it upon himself to speak in behalf of Morton Sobell, a convicted communist agent, before what was labelled a communist-front meeting. Asked about the incident, Langer, with typical nonchalance, simply observed that Sobell had a right to appeal his conviction to a higher court, that Langer was simply helping him to acquire money to do this, and, as to appearing before a communist-front meeting, "It was the principle that counted."²²¹

Given to towering rages on the Senate floor,²²² which may or may not have been genuine, Langer shocked the Senate by calling an unnamed colleague who had "leaked" information given to Langer's Foreign Relations Committee by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, "a traitor . . . as inimicable to the ways of this country as a vulturous enemy picking the bones of our American soldiers in the field of battle."²²³ On another occasion, Langer arose in the Senate, announced that a new song had been written about North Dakota and proceeded to sing it "to a rapt audience." When he had finished he turned to Estes Kefauver and invited him to sing the "Tennessee Waltz."²²⁴

For all the bitterness of his tirades, for all the eccentricity he displayed, Langer somehow managed to convey the impression that it was all in fun. This was partly the result of his rather unusual sense of humour. There was no telling where this humorous bent might arise. One of the alleged crimes with which he was charged during his conspiracy trial in 1934 was the misuse of funds from the Leader. In church one Sunday, Langer found himself seated beside one of the young attorneys

²²¹Ross, loc. cit., p. 66. ²²²Ibid., p. 63.

²²³Herald, June 16, 1956. ²²⁴Ross, loc. cit., p. 62.

prosecuting him. When the collection plate was passed, Langer made his contribution and, winking at the embarrassed young man, whispered, "Leader money."²²⁵

No respecter of persons, policies or protocol, Langer took the occasion of a visit to this country by Winston Churchill in 1952 to wire the Vicar of Boston's Old North Church asking him to hang a lantern in the belfry as a warning.²²⁶ Two years earlier in opposing a loan to Great Britain Langer introduced a bill calling for the use of a portion of the \$30,000,000,000 in question to provide urinalyses for the American people.²²⁷

He was as apt as not to turn his humour upon fellow Senators. It was his habit to sit directly in front of a Senator who was speaking. The speaker never knew what he might do or say. Senator Homer Capehart of Indiana was forced to stop in the middle of a speech because, as he spoke, Langer sat in front of him plucking cigars from the Senator's breast pocket.²²⁸

It was obvious that Langer enjoyed the lime-light tremendously and he seems not to have cared particularly whether the publicity he received was favorable or not.²²⁹ The object always seemed to be to remain in the public eye, to keep alive the portrait he had created of a warm-hearted, unpredictable, nonchalant champion of the people.²³⁰ By

²²⁵Smith, loc. cit., p. 101.

²²⁶New York Times, January 1, 1952, p. 6.

²²⁷Time, March 20, 1950, p. 1; New York Times, March 2, 1946, p. 17.

²²⁸Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959.

²²⁹E. E. Makiesky, Williston Herald, November 10, 1959; Interview with O. B. Burtness.

²³⁰Ross, loc. cit., p. 62. Ross observes, "He has left the disconcerting impress of a personality that is at once impudent, gaily irresponsible, arrogant, kindly, and high-minded."

the time of his death on November 8, 1959, so tangled were the skeins between legend and the man that it is difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends. But, whatever might be said of his motives, of his methods, of his failures or of his accomplishments, one thing is certain, "Wild Bill" Langer was never dull.

CHAPTER III

THE ISSUES OF THE DAY

I. The Campaign of 1919-1920

Generally speaking, the issues in North Dakota politics long have been centered about agriculture, government vs. private ownership, and William Langer. The intermingling of these three powerful catalysts has produced many a violent political reaction. One period of such activity was that from the advent of the League in 1916 to the recall election in 1921. Of the many explosive moments during this time, the campaign of 1919-1920 was, perhaps, one of the more spectacular.

For a number of reasons the League entered the campaign at a distinct disadvantage. The League had been swept into office because of its promises of better conditions for the farmer but conditions had not improved. Crops were poor; farmers had borrowed heavily to expand their operations during World War I and had not been able to retire their debts; banks had extended credit on the basis of inflated values and now found themselves in difficulties; the price of wheat collapsed; taxes were up,¹ and three top officials had broken with the organization and launched a bitter attack against it.

The most prominent of these defecting officials, Langer, was given the gubernatorial nomination by the I.V.A. "because he was such a

¹Edward C. Blackorby, "Prairie Rebel: The Public Career of William Lemke," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Library, University of North Dakota, 1958), p. 251; p. 295; Charles Merz, "The Nonpartisan League: A Survey," New Republic, XXII (May 12, 1920), pp. 333-338.

fighter."² He demonstrated these fighting qualities during a tireless, state-encompassing campaign in the course of which he used his knowledge of the inner workings of the League to attack it where it was most vulnerable.

One of the charges made against the League from its inception had been that it was heavily socialistic in its leanings.³ The I.V.A. gubernatorial candidate readily turned to this accusation and made it a vital issue of the campaign. In striking against socialism in the League, Langer made little attempt to prove his case. In general he simply made the charge and left it at that:

The state of North Dakota is in a bad way indeed, and I say that Townley and his socialistic outfit can pass law after law, resolution after resolution . . . but they cannot crucify the spirit of the real men of North Dakota.⁴

Seven months later he was still using the charge of socialism when he discussed the Nielson case at St. Thomas:

There isn't a man among you who can show in the original program anything about taking the schools from Miss Minnie J. Nielson and turning them over to a bunch of socialists. I am going to keep on fighting until I have the schools back where they belong and our business affairs and other state offices are run by real republicans or democrats, at least not by socialists.⁵

Langer did not confine his attacks on the League socialism to his speeches alone. In 1920 he wrote a book on the League which is filled

²Interview with O. B. Burtness.

³Robert L. Morlan, Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), pp. 253-355; p. 269; Herald, June 29, 1918.

⁴Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Herald, December 24, 1919.

⁵Langer, Public Address at Lakota, quoted in the Bismarck Tribune, June 23, 1920. Hereinafter cited as the Tribune.

with such bitter attacks,⁶ and he was one of those responsible for the publication of The Red Flame, a lurid political magazine filled with stories and cartoons depicting the dire fate of North Dakota should the "Reds" gain complete control.⁷

As has been pointed out in chapter II, the League was particularly vulnerable because of its fiscal policy. Therefore, most of Langer's speeches contained attacks on Townley's management of League finances. He told an audience at Richardton:

Instead of admitting his miserable mismanagement of league [sic] finances; instead of explaining how it happened that he borrowed \$147,000 from the Scandinavian-American bank alone for the league [sic], for the Consumer's store, \$66,000 for his league exchange and \$47,000 for his papers. Instead of explaining this and some fifty or sixty more facts, he camouflaged by calling Hall, Kositsky and myself traitors.⁸

Perhaps his most bitter denunciations arose from what he called the "Reign of Terror" to which North Dakota was being subjected. According to Langer not only was the governor a mere pawn in the hands of A. C. Townley,⁹ but also many of the laws passed by the legislature threatened the liberties of state officials and the citizenry. One such law, commonly termed the "anti-liars law," made it a punishable offense for a state official to write or speak an untruth concerning the state government. This, Langer maintained, was dictatorship.¹⁰ Contending that the law was

⁶William Langer, The Nonpartisan League: Its Birth, Activities and Leaders (Mandan: Morton County Farmers Press, 1920), p. 15; p. 26, et passim.

⁷The Red Flame, I (February, 1920), p. 7; Ibid., (March 1920), p. 3.

⁸Langer, Public Address at Richardton, quoted in the Herald, November 19, 1919.

⁹Ibid.; Langer, Public Address at Gilby, quoted in the Herald, January 7, 1920.

¹⁰Langer, Public Address at Jamestown, quoted in the Herald, December 30, 1919; Langer, Address at Valley City, quoted in the Herald, December 24, 1919.

designed primarily to muzzle him, he challenged his opponents to jail him if what he was telling the people was not true.¹¹

Still another League action, which Langer claimed to be dictatorial, was the creation of a legislative committee with wide powers of investigation. Langer claimed that this so-called "smelling-committee" possessed powers which were almost limitless and that it could investigate a man's business or his love letters, and what was worse, make them public.¹²

That the League was a farmer's organization Langer denied. "Get that out of your heads," he told the farmers.¹³ It was his contention that the farmer-members had been misled when they joined the organization. He stressed the idea that when the farmers joined the League and paid their sixteen dollars, that Townley had not told them that "he, and Wood and Lemke would have absolute control."¹⁴

Langer answered accusations of having betrayed the League by countering that it was not he who was the traitor but Townley;¹⁵ that he still supported the original program but was "opposed to side-dishes of socialism and frills of free love."¹⁶ Indeed, he promised to back the industrial program "till hell freezes over."¹⁷ It was this insistence

¹¹Langer, Address at Gilby, quoted in the Herald, January 7, 1920; Langer, Address at Jamestown quoted in the Herald, December 30, 1919; Langer, Address at Hillsboro, quoted in the Herald, January 6, 1920.

¹²Langer, Address at Jamestown, quoted in the Herald, December 30, 1919.

¹³Langer, Address at Hillsboro, quoted in the Herald, January 6, 1920.

¹⁴Langer, Address at Richardton, quoted in the Herald, November 1, 1919.

¹⁵Langer, Statement, quoted in the Tribune, June 7, 1920.

¹⁶Langer, Public Address at St. Thomas, quoted in the Herald, January 31, 1920.

¹⁷Langer, Public Address at Minot, quoted in the Herald, April 1, 1920.

upon his loyalty to the basic League program which was partially responsible for the fact that he was able to work his way back into the organization in the years following 1920 and to lead it to eventual victory in 1932.

II. The Campaign of 1932

In 1932 the stage was set for another agrarian revolt.¹⁸ The long depression which had begun so early in North Dakota had spread throughout the nation. Private and public funds had "dwindled toward the vanishing point,"¹⁹ banks were closing and people by the thousands were out of work. In some areas of the Middle West members of the Farm Holiday Association had initiated a violent farm strike and the noose, symbol of the penny sale,²⁰ hung over many a barn door in Iowa to warn any sheriff who attempted to foreclose of the fate that awaited him.²¹

In North Dakota plagues of grasshoppers left devastation in their wake. By day the sun burned dully in a dust laden sky and hot winds piled tumble weeds in bristling rows along fence lines; by night great clouds piled up, thunder crashed and lightning streaked across the sky—but the rain did not come.²²

¹⁸Adam J. Schweitzer, "John Moses and the New Deal in North Dakota," (unpublished Master's thesis, Library, University of North Dakota, 1954), p. 12.

¹⁹Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt, Vol. I: The Crisis of the Old Order (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 12.

²⁰Penny sales were auctions held by a farmer's neighbors to prevent the sale of the man's household goods, cattle and equipment for debts. The neighbors bought the man's property for pennies and returned it to him and prevented, by force if necessary, higher bidding by outsiders.

²¹Dale Kramer, The Wild Jackasses: The American Farmer in Revolt, (New York: Hastings House, 1956), pp. 225-231; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt, Vol. II: The Coming of the New Deal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 27; p. 43.

²²The author recalls vividly the violent, rainless thunderstorms of the 1930's.

Take a slow trip from Rugby, North Dakota, to Steele, North Dakota, a straight line of 150 miles which goes through the heart of the North Dakota drought area . . . past alkali lakes and sloughs now dried into white patches like old buffalo skulls. Fences torn, buildings unpainted, dust-drifts along the fence lines, . . . deserted farms—as far as the eye can see²³

It was against such a background that Langer waged a campaign which centered around nepotism in state government, corruption and high taxes. He promised, if elected, to "reduce the tax burden to the point where it will no longer be unbearable" ²⁴ One of the reasons taxes were high, he maintained, was the padding of the payroll with relatives of government officials. Moreover, he charged this "abominable and dastardly practice of nepotism" was "depriving many others from earning a living."²⁵

In the light of future events, perhaps the most interesting of Langer's statements during that election year was made in the opening speech of the campaign. Speaking of his promise to impose an embargo if the price of wheat dropped to thirty-five cents a bushel, he said, "Only a coward hides behind the word unconstitutional."²⁶ It was a clear indication of the roughshod methods Langer was to use during his first administration.

III. The Campaign of 1934

This somewhat cavalier attitude toward the law became one of the focal points of the next primary campaign in 1934. While the federal

²³Alfred Klauser, "It Can't Rain Here," Nation, CXLIII (July 8, 1936), p. 152.

²⁴Langer, Statement, quoted in the Fargo Forum, July 2, 1932. Hereinafter cited as the Forum.

²⁵Langer, Public Address, quoted in The North Dakota Progressive, June 21, 1932.

²⁶Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Forum, September 7, 1932.

government investigated the sale of Leader subscriptions and his opponents charged his administration with corruption, Langer told his audience, "You have to judge this administration by its accomplishments in these times."²⁷ The accomplishments to which he referred were drastic cuts in the cost of government, the moratorium, the embargo, lower taxes, and stabilization of state bonds.²⁸

Langer could not afford to ignore the action in federal court against him. He told the voters that the real reason for the indictment was that he had refused Democratic inducements to run for re-election as a Democrat:

I replied then as I reply to the federal government now that I am a 100 per cent Republican governor . . . the democrats [sic] know that the common people are overwhelmingly supporting me . . . now they are desperately working with renegade Leaguers, reactionary I.V.A.'s and mudwumps [sic] of every description . . . I challenge the government to proceed with the production of evidence."²⁹

He insisted that there was nothing wrong with the Leader subscription plan. It was certainly fair that "employees of your government now undertake the establishment of such a paper when the old Leaguers who dug down in their pockets in years gone by now find themselves unable to do so."³⁰

The economy measures of the Langer administration, particularly those appropriations which affected state institutions, were under heavy criticism. Langer's reply was to cite cases of individuals who had been

²⁷Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, March 15, 1934.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Langer, Statement, quoted in the Herald, March 2, 1934.

³⁰Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Leader, March 15, 1934.

helped and to insist that the state institutions were "doing all right."³¹

Generally he assumed his usual stance as a victim of political persecution which resulted from his fight for the "common people," and proclaimed, "If there is any penalty I have to pay for having been your friend, mark this--and mark it well--I, William Langer, am prepared to pay that penalty."³²

IV. The Campaign of 1936

The primary in 1934, the struggle for the governorship in 1934 and 1935, and friction within the League left many scars. As a result the campaign in 1936 was a particularly bitter one. Lemke convinced of the corruption of the Langer administration stumped the state speaking against him,³³ while Walter Welford, his opponent, minced no words:

Bill lives for politics. He does not live for the farmers, nor does he live for anybody, unless he can get them in his clutches It is only a criminal lawyer, well trained with a crafty mind that can come before you and try to manipulate you, try to tear down and promote himself as the saviour of all when you have his record.³⁴

Langer, for his part, attacked the financial policies and what he insisted was the padding of the payroll by the Welford administration. In his keynote address at Devils Lake, he told his audience that taxes "during my administration were cut five and one half million dollars. Compare that with the Welford administration in which taxes have been

³¹Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

³²Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the New York Times, June 18, 1934, p. 38.

³³Blackorby, op. cit., pp. 539-540.

³⁴Walter Welford, Public Address, quoted in the Herald, May 24, 1936.

raised and appropriations increased by approximately nine million dollars"³⁵ The reason for this increase, he contended, was that "they've got the biggest political machine fastened to the state payroll that the state has ever seen."³⁶

When his record was attacked, Langer answered the charges with counter-charges: "Now they tell you about the Leader. The Leader didn't cost you taxpayers a cent. Just compare that with the thousands of dollars that are being spent to finance all those rumper newspapers."³⁷ He also charged the Welfordites with duplicity:

Those speaking against me . . . thought I was a pretty good governor two years ago I haven't been governor since that time . . . Maybe they can tell you whether they were lying two years ago or whether they are lying now"³⁸

Langer assured the voters that if he were dishonest, it should have been proved long ago since "the federal government spent nearly half a million dollars to prove me honest."³⁹ Indeed, he laid claim to being the "only candidate who has been thouroughly inspected by the United States and found to be 100 per cent pure."⁴⁰

Once again Langer presented himself as the champion of the common people promising tax reduction, free text books for children, reduction in government expenditures and a "moratorium with teeth in it."⁴¹ As he depicted the situation, he had arrayed against him not only a "well oiled political machine" but also the "private contributions of the railroads, and the other utilities These gentlemen never donate anything for

³⁵Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the Leader, May 21, 1936.

³⁶Ibid. ³⁷Ibid. ³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 29, 1936.

⁴⁰Ibid. ⁴¹Ibid.

nothing."⁴² Although he was defeated in the primary, Langer ran in the November elections and was successful.

V. The Campaign of 1938

He was not to be so successful in 1938 in his bid to win Gerald P. Nye's place in the Senate. Once again Langer ran on his record and charged his opponents with being enemies of the people. But the central issue of the campaign quickly became the forty dollar a month pension plan for the aged that he originated. In his keynote address Langer told his audience, "our enemies are those who, unwilling to work for themselves, live on the work of others."⁴³ And in a later speech he called upon every "Nonpartisan Leaguer, and every progressive citizen in the state of North Dakota to join us in meeting the challenge . . . placed before us by a reactionary political element and the vested interests."⁴⁴

While Langer stressed his work for the farmers of the state, particularly the embargo, the moratorium and the use of the state mill to buy wheat,⁴⁵ he was not unmindful of the suspicion with which many business men regarded these actions. He told them, "The Moratorium [sic] was absolutely necessary to protect the farmer and keep him in North Dakota . . . I submit to you that unless the producers of North Dakota have someone to fight for them . . . the businessmen of North Dakota are going to get the worst of it"⁴⁶

⁴²Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the Leader, October 8, 1936.

⁴³Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 26, 1938.

⁴⁴Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Leader, October 6, 1938.

⁴⁵Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, February 17, 1938.

⁴⁶Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Leader, June 23, 1938.

Although Langer made plain his support of the Townsend Plan, his opponent, Senator Nye, received the active support of Dr. Townsend. Needing a spectacular issue to counteract the Townsend endorsement of his opposition, Langer initiated his forty dollar pension plan. He carefully side-stepped, however, the question of how the plan was to be financed:

The wealthy classes and politicians who are fighting to stop our \$40 a month pension plan . . . are trying to frighten you with the old cry 'Where is the money coming from' I say, 'Look at the record.' Hasn't every single old age claim been paid under the present set up. Several hundred old folks are getting from \$25 to \$30 per month. Small and insufficient as they are, nevertheless they have been paid.⁴⁷

Following his defeat in November, he continued to avoid presenting a plan to finance the pension. Although he had promised to reveal a method for doing so in his retiring message to the state legislature, he offered the excuse that he did not do so because the measure was being contested in the courts.⁴⁸

Although he found himself out of public office after suffering defeat at Nye's hand, Langer continued to publish his pension plan during the trying economic times and thus kept his name before the public in preparation for the campaign of 1940.⁴⁹

VI. The Campaign of 1940

In 1940 he set his sights on the other United States Senatorship from North Dakota and the incumbent Lynn J. Frazier. During the campaign Langer ran on his record once again, advocated federal aid for schools,

⁴⁷Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1938.

⁴⁸North Dakota, Governor, Retiring Message of Governor William Langer to the Members of the Twenty-Sixth Legislative Assembly, (Twenty-Sixth Legislative Assembly, 1939), p. 8.

⁴⁹Blackorby, op. cit., p. 545.

pensions for the needy aged, a legislative program for farmers and small businessmen, and attacked the records of Nye and Frazier in Congress. His record, he said, was untarnished. Despite the efforts of both a Republican legislature and a Democratic governor to find evidence of dishonesty in his administration, the board appointed by his successor, John Moses, had not "removed a single appointee of my administration . . . what a splendid answer . . . to the vile baseless charges made by these politicians two years ago."⁵⁰

He reminded the voters that it was he who had discovered North Dakota's monopoly on durum and, by purchasing wheat through the state elevator, had forced the "grain gamblers to pay the farmer what his light weight wheat was worth."⁵¹

While thus lauding his own record, he contended that Nye and Frazier were more of a liability than an asset because they had never cooperated with any national administration.⁵² Furthermore, the only agricultural bill either had to his credit was one bearing Frazier's name which was designed to "assist the farmer to go through bankruptcy."⁵³

In his customary manner Langer pictured himself as the underdog battling for the people. Claiming that he had no political machine, Langer said, "The only machine I have is the friendship of the poor, the blind, the underprivileged and the oppressed."⁵⁴ On the other hand, his opponents had "behind them all the power of the federal government, all the payroll of five thousand employees"⁵⁵

⁵⁰Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

⁵¹Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1940.

⁵²Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1938.

⁵³Ibid. ⁵⁴Ibid. ⁵⁵Ibid.

VII. The Campaign of 1952

In the years following Langer's election to the Senate, the issues did not change a good deal basically for in 1946 the emphasis was upon his conduct as governor,⁵⁶ while after 1946 the emphasis simply shifted to his conduct as Senator--his voting record and his penchant for doing innumerable favors. He continued to remind the voters of the dark days of the depression and to maintain that his enemies were the same ancient enemies of the people.⁵⁷

At New England during the campaign in 1952 he attacked his opponent, Fred G. Aandahl, candidate of the Republican Organizing Committee,⁵⁸ as the representative of the big corporations.⁵⁹ Furthermore, he accepted as a badge of honor the charge that he was a "ten thousand dollar errand boy."⁶⁰ Indeed, he made political capital of that epithet. "I am just the hired man sent down to Washington," he said.⁶¹ On the other hand, Langer told his audiences, "I have never been the errand boy of the big banks, railroads, the oil interests. I let the ROC do the dirty work."⁶²

Although Langer was forced by the pressure of the times to vote for war against Japan and Germany in 1941, beginning in the 1930's one of

⁵⁶Blackorby, op. cit., p. 537.

⁵⁷Langer, Public Address at New England, quoted in the Herald, June 4, 1952; Langer, Public Address at Dickinson, quoted in the Herald, June 6, 1952; Langer, Campaign Sheet, June 16, 1958.

⁵⁸The regular Republican organization in North Dakota. It is often referred to as the ROC.

⁵⁹Herald, June 4, 1952.

⁶⁰Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959.

⁶¹Langer, Public Address at Marion, quoted in the Herald, November 1, 1952.

⁶²Langer, Address at New England, quoted in the Herald, June 4, 1952.

his regular promises had been that he would never vote for war.⁶³ Whatever his personal convictions may have been, it seems reasonable to suppose that the fact that much of his political strength stemmed from the German population of the state influenced his attitude. Most of the German population of the state had come to the United States either directly from Germany or from German communities in Russia in the early 1900's. In both of these Germanic groups there still remained a strong sentimental attachment to Germany. While this did not necessarily mean that they were pro-German in the sense that they gave their primary allegiance to that country rather than the United States, the conflict between the two nations in World War I and World War II was difficult for them to accept. Thus, it is not surprising that Langer repeated his anti-war promise in 1952. He said, "I'll never, never vote to send a single American boy to the battlefields of Europe or Asia."⁶⁴

Also, during the 1952 campaign, Langer defended his voting record as a champion of rural electrification.⁶⁵ But the major issue of the campaign in North Dakota became the disposition of tide lands oil. Aandahl defended the right of the coastal states to it. Langer hammered away on the concept that the oil belonged to the people.⁶⁶ Although the people of North Dakota were hundreds of miles removed from the tide land oil fields, they recognized a new verse to the old song--the people vs.

⁶³Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Leader, June 23, 1938; Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

⁶⁴Langer, Public Address at Dickinson, quoted in the Leader, June 6, 1952.

⁶⁵Langer, Public Address at New England, quoted in the Leader, June 4, 1952; Langer, Public Address at Maddock, quoted in the Herald, June 11, 1952.

⁶⁶Herald, June 8, 1952; Herald, June 17, 1952.

the interests.

VIII. The Campaign of 1958

Although the Senator stood for office once more, in 1958, the campaign was not the bitter, spectacular show of other years. Age, his physical condition and the ill health of Mrs. Langer robbed him of much of his former vigor. Denied the endorsement of both the Nonpartisan League and the state Republican organization, Langer, after a few public appearances and television broadcasts during the primary, carried all of the state's fifty-three precincts in the fall election without returning to the state.⁶⁷

The issues were Langer's record and his health. He stressed his seniority and his record, attacked his old foes, the "interests" and the newspapers, and reminded the voters of the old days and of the embargo and the moratorium.⁶⁸ He called the campaign a fight against "two political machines--the Republican and the League" and called on his friends to show the nation that the "bosses" could not rule North Dakota politics.⁶⁹ If the old fire had begun to flicker and dim by 1958, it still fed upon the same fuel.

⁶⁷Herald, June 25, 1958.

⁶⁸Herald, November 7, 1958; Langer, Campaign Sheet, June 16, 1958.

⁶⁹Herald, June 25, 1958.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

I. The Personal Touch

One of the peculiarities of the democratic system in America is the need for an aspirant to political office to make the voters at the "grass-roots" level feel that they know him as a person. It is not enough that a candidate come before the people with a program to which they can enthusiastically subscribe. They want to feel that here is a man like themselves who understands and likes ordinary folk. It is not enough that a man possess unusual ability and character, for he must create in the minds of the voters a sense of kinship—a feeling that he is one of them.

William Langer was a master of the personal touch. Even those who opposed him politically found his personality difficult to resist.¹ One foe "after ripping out a series of oaths to express his opinion of the Senator, paused uncertainly . . . 'you know,' he said, 'when you're with Bill, you can't help but like the old son-of-a-gun.'"²

There is little doubt that Langer possessed considerable physical presence and personal charm. A tall, broad-shouldered, big-framed man, blue-eyed and large of hand, he possessed a quick wit, a ready smile, "an air of gallantry" and an "unflinching interest in people and a rather rare

¹Interview with O. B. Burtness, November 21, 1960.

²Beverly Smith, "The Most Baffling Man in the Senate," Saturday Evening Post, June 23, 1954, p. 103.

ability to remember their names."³

These qualities stood him in good stead in his campaign tours around the state and he utilized them fully. They contributed to the Langer legend of ready accessibility to the common people, and he constantly employed them as he gave substance to the story by making every effort to meet as many people as possible. Often he used a campaign technique which created a seemingly natural situation—not like "political campaigning" at all:

The car moved slowly down the main street of a small town in North Dakota The driver parked the car, and jumped out. He walked about half a block down the street. He reached out and grabbed a stranger's hand and pumped it.

'Hi there, how are you?' the driver said. 'Say did you know Bill Langer is in town? I just saw him sitting in a car down the street.

'Oh is that Bill. Well I'd better go over and say hello to him,' answered the man who had been accosted.

Langer, as he saw the man approaching, had jumped out of the car.

'Well, by golly, how are you,' he boomed as he threw one arm about the man's shoulder and gave him a hearty handshake with the free arm.⁴

Langer was careful not to miss any voters. After he had met everyone on the street, he would begin a tour of the business establishments. When he entered a cafe, "everyone from the cook to the waitresses and customers got a big hello."⁵ His inexhaustible appetite for personal contact manifested itself even on those occasions when campaigning was at its height. If he spoke at an evening gathering, Langer would often go to a restaurant for a sandwich and "more talk."⁶ Sometimes he would give his speech and simply disappear from the platform. After the meeting his aides would go in search of him. Usually they would find him in a cafe or a saloon (although he never drank) chewing the cellophane wrapped

³Robert Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

⁴Alden McLachan, Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

cigars that were his trademark (although he never smoked), surrounded by a group of well-wishers.⁷

This personal touch and ability to project a warm regard for ordinary folk carried over into his correspondence with constituents:

Even when Langer mailed a constituent a bulletin from the Department of Agriculture, or an excerpt from the Congressional Record, somehow he managed to convey the impression of having performed an act of personal thoughtfulness.⁸

Part of this impression was created by his habit of scrawling a personal note at the bottom of circular letters sent to constituents. A person receiving such a communication might find simply the words, "Write me any time!" and Langer's signature written at an angle across the bottom of the page.⁹ Or if the constituent had written the Senator's office for government bulletins he would often find a note in Langer's hand ("If they don't come soon, let me know. Bill.")¹⁰ included in the letter from Washington acknowledging receipt of the request. It did not matter whether the constituent was a personal friend, a political enemy, or one of the anonymous electorate who had not so much as shaken Langer's hand, the letter would always be signed "Bill."

The impression of personal concern was increased, too, by the wording of the communications themselves. Even the most routine of them possessed an air of informality and friendliness:

Enclosed is a list of free bulletins. If you think any of these would be of use to you, please check the list and return it to me. I shall see that the bulletins you check are sent to you as soon as

⁷Interview with A. J. Jensen and Frank Albers, November 12, 1959.

⁸Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

⁹William Langer, Letter to Harry Scouton, November 20, 1952, Orin G. Libby Historical Collection, Library, University of North Dakota.

¹⁰William Langer, Letter to Elwyn B. Robinson, March 13, 1953, Orin G. Libby Historical Collection, Library, University of North Dakota.

possible.

Be sure and let me know if there is anything at all I can do to help you in any way.

Hoping you and yours are well and happy, with kindest regards I am¹¹

Over and over again he reminded his constituents that he was ready to do anything for them at any time. "All you have to do is drop me a note, and I shall do anything I can to be of service to you."¹²

Much of the time Langer and his staff could not possibly handle the influx of requests resulting from his highly successful use of this technique. Therefore, requests for aid or information were often channeled from his Washington office to the appropriate agency in Bismarck. An insurance matter, for example, might be turned over to the office of the Insurance Commissioner; but Langer insisted that when the matter was processed the information should be routed through his office to the person who requested the aid. Consequently, forms, papers, pamphlets and the like were sent from North Dakota to Washington for transmission to North Dakota.¹³

It has been said that scarcely a birthday, wedding or similar event involving his constituents went unnoticed.¹⁴ Certainly Christmas was not. Every holiday season the state was flooded with thousands of greeting cards, often with pictures of the Langer family and always signed, "Bill and Lydia."

¹¹William Langer, Circular Letter, September 10, 1957, Lemke Papers.

¹²Ibid.; "Wild Bill and Good Will," Time, July 7, 1952, p. 17.

¹³Interview with A. J. Jensen and Frank Albers; Interview with Margaret Rose, November 12, 1959.

¹⁴"Wild Bill and Good Will," Time, July 7, 1952, p. 14.

II. The Speaker on the Stump

Another of Langer's political assets was his seemingly boundless energy. Except for the last years of his life, "his personality seemed to breathe vitality" and he was able "to create an image of nonchalant vitality and fighting strength."¹⁵ Often he spoke from early morning until late at night,¹⁶ driving long miles to reach small North Dakota towns—a considerable feat, especially in the twenties and thirties when even primary North Dakota roads were not paved and often poorly maintained. On one occasion in 1920 he was reported to have traveled nearly impassable roads to keep an engagement at Ashley.¹⁷

As the Bismarck Capital put it, "He was a whirlwind in the old days."¹⁸ In 1936, during a nine day period he appeared at twenty-three rallies, traveling from the south east corner of the state, through the Red River Valley and its western fringes, up across the northern quarter of the state. In nine short days he had managed to spend several hours in each of these communities and to cover many hundreds of miles over dusty, discouraging roads. Despite these fatiguing circumstances he faced each crowd with vigor and enthusiasm. Under equally trying winter conditions of cold, snow and ice, he traversed the entire state in seven days in mid-February of 1950 to speak at evening Lincoln Day dinners at Bismarck, Dickinson, Williston, Minot, New Rockford, Grand Forks, and Fargo.¹⁹

¹⁵Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

¹⁶McLachan, Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959.

¹⁷Tribune, June 17, 1920.

¹⁸Bismarck Capital, November 9, 1959.

¹⁹The Leader, June 11, 1936; Ibid., February 2, 1950.

The heart of any "grass-roots" political campaign is the speaking, and Langer was a skilled "stump" speaker. A showman to the core, he was able to attract people to his audiences who had no intention of voting for him. They attended simply because they knew he always "put on a good show."²⁰

It was a noisy, raucous, highly emotionalized performance.²¹ Like the political orators of other days, Langer harangued his audiences. He would stride on stage, often rip off his coat and tie and "Shoot the works . . . He roared, he shook his fist. He had a good time, and so did his audience."²² Lashing out at his enemies in his harsh (often hoarse) booming voice he "spoofed his opponents with the glee of a school boy. He needled them, and pawed them down with slaps of imaginative humour."²³ He strode about waving his arms in wide, violent wind-mill gestures and brought his great hand thundering down on a table top or lectern to emphasize his words.²⁴ Political opponents attended a Langer rally at their peril for on such occasions he would point an accusing finger at them and challenge them to come to the platform to repeat the "lies" they had told about him.²⁵

Langer knew what his audiences wanted and gave it to them. "He

²⁰Dale Kramer, The Wild Jackasses: The American Farmer in Revolt, (New York: Hastings House, 1956), p. 160; Interview with Thorwald Mostad, November 12, 1959; McLachan, Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959.

²¹Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

²²McLachan, Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959; Interview with Thorwald Mostad.

²³Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

²⁴Tribune, November 9, 1959; Interview with Thorwald Mostad.

²⁵Herald, January 29, 1920; Ibid., December 24, 1919; Cory, Minot Daily News, November 9, 1959.

cussed everything they were against and praised all they stood for."²⁶ Furthermore, he did his praising and his cussing in two languages. In a state in which the second largest national group is German, Langer's ability to speak the language was a tremendous political asset.²⁷ Often he would give his campaign speech first in English, then switch to German and repeat it. Nor was he averse to singing to his audience in German.²⁸ He fully realized the emotional ties suggested by the mother tongue of these first generation Americans and with it built a strong and lasting bond of political loyalty.

Langer possessed, also a marked ability to assess his audiences and gave them what they were in a mood to hear. Since he rarely spoke from manuscript, and most of his speeches were extemporaneous (often very nearly impromptu),²⁹ he was not tied to any set development of his topic for any given speech situation. An old campaign team-mate, Math Dahl, commenting on Langer's ability to analyze and adapt to his audience observed, "He often deviated from his notes and went by memory because, when he looked an audience over, he could tell whether what he had planned to say fit that audience or not. If not, he changed his talk. He was very clever that way."³⁰

²⁶Interview with A. J. Jensen and Frank Albers.

²⁷Joseph B. Voeller, "The Origin of the German-Russian People and Their Role in North Dakota," (unpublished Master's thesis, Library, University of North Dakota, 1940), p. 66; p. 104. Voeller shows that, generally speaking, the higher the percentage of German-Russian population in a county, the greater the margin of pro-Langer votes during the years 1932, 1936, and 1938.

²⁸Interview with A. J. Jensen and Frank Albers; Interview with Math Dahl; Leader, June 4, 1936.

²⁹Interview with Math Dahl; Langer, Letter to Elwyn B. Robinson, March 13, 1953, Lemke Papers; Leader, November 1, 1951.

³⁰Interview with Math Dahl.

Although Langer used notes to some extent "in the majority of his speeches, there was never any script other than when required by radio stations."³¹ Frequently he strode before the audience claspng a handful of newspaper clippings, usually from opposition papers. These would be the starting point for his address. He would read the clippings to the audience and then attack the points they contained.³² Or if he had come into possession of letters damaging to his opponents he would read them delightedly word by word.³³ On occasion he would stand before the audience and read all or part of bills before the legislature.³⁴ When he saw that the audience was tiring of that sort of thing, he would insert a story or a joke. Often these were on himself, a deft poke at his reputation or a current or past difficulty in which he found himself.³⁵ Or fully aware of his reputation for shrewdness and resourcefulness, he might refer to his helplessness among the professional politicians. In one instance he told his audience of a meeting he had had with the leaders of the regular Republican organization and referred to himself as "just a little lamb among the wolves."³⁶

This penchant for humour took a good deal of the sting from his bitterest attacks.³⁷ He was fond of referring to his political opponents

³¹Ibid. ³²Ibid.

³³Langer, Public Address at Robinson, quoted in the Tribune, June 17, 1920; Langer, Public Address at Hillsboro, quoted in the Herald, January 6, 1920.

³⁴Langer, Public Address at Jamestown, quoted in the Herald, December 30, 1919; Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Herald, December 24, 1919.

³⁵Tribune, June 18, 1934; Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934; Lauren D. Luman, "North Dakota War Waged on a Parched Plain," New York Times, sec. 8 (July 29, 1934), p. 11.

³⁶Smith, loc. cit., p. 27. ³⁷Herald, November 9, 1959.

as servants of the "interests," and accused them of being:

Monsters who have lived off the sweat and toil and tears of those who work . . . this bunch of bandits who have served the large corporations from outside the state . . . the plutocrats . . . the tide-lands-oil-barons, the railroads, banking and grain profiteers and all those other pirates.³⁸

Yet he was perfectly capable of doing as he did with Fred G. Aandahl during the 1952 campaign. After attacking Aandahl (who was on the platform with him), Langer turned to his rival and presented him with a bouquet of flowers.³⁹ Or he could point out a political foe in the audience, call him a liar, subject him to all sorts of abuse, and then shake hands with him in full view of the audience.⁴⁰

He did not limit his attack to politicians, however. One of his favorite targets was the press for the daily newspapers of the state vigorously opposed him.⁴¹ Again his attacks could be bitter but were often tinged with humour: "I've got a representative of the Fargo Forum following me around writing lies about me. He's in the audience someplace. Where is he? Where are you? He's the homeliest man in North Dakota."⁴²

One reporter who covered his 1932 campaign described how it felt to have Langer point him out to an audience:

When I reported what I regarded as glaring contradictions in the speeches he made in different towns . . . he launched into a bitter attack on me. Sometimes he pointed grimly at me during his talks. It gave me some uncomfortable moments on occasion as I watched the

³⁸Smith, quoted in Smith, loc. cit., p. 27.

³⁹Herald, June 8, 1952.

⁴⁰Herald, January 29, 1920; Ibid., June 4, 1952.

⁴¹"Wild Bill and Good Will," Time, July 7, 1952, p. 17; Herald, June 6, 1952; Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934; Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Leader, March 15, 1934.

⁴²McLachan, Fargo Forum, November 9, 1959.

reaction of highly partisan audiences, but I quickly reflected that if the going got tough, Big Bill would be the first to come to my rescue.⁴³

In essence then, Langer was a colorful old-time political stump speaker who "pulled out all the stops" before an audience. Although his voice was harsh, it carried well and was easily heard. He used vigorous gestures, particularly sledge-hammer blows of his massive fist upon table or lectern.⁴⁴ He understood his audiences and possessed a rare ability to fit his speech to the audience and the occasion without apparent effort. He attacked bitterly and vigorously all those who opposed him, but tempered his attacks with such imagination and humour that he took much of the sting from his words without diminishing the impression he really wanted to leave with his audiences--that of a peerless champion of the common folk battling fearlessly against powerful and unscrupulous enemies.

⁴³E. E. Makiesky, Bismarck Tribune, November 9, 1959.

⁴⁴Some idea of the vigor of his blows may be had from the knowledge that he once split the top of a Senate desk during a speech.

CHAPTER V

THE STYLE AND STRUCTURE OF HIS SPEECHES

I. His Pattern of Speech Organization

Analysis of Mr. Langer's campaign speeches reveals that his use of language and pattern of speech organization resulted in a style peculiarly his own. Shrewdly aware that his audiences were composed for the most part of unsophisticated farm and village folk and were not the sort to follow and be persuaded by reasoned discourse, he developed what might be termed a "shotgun approach" to the pattern of presentation. Since his general purpose seems to have been to construct and to reinforce a picture of William Langer as an intrepid fighter lashing out against the powerful and unscrupulous enemies of the people, his method was to stimulate as many members of his audience as possible with as many emotional appeals as he could marshal.

To this end, he dealt with a large number of main points in his campaign speeches. For the most part, each of the main points in a given speech was relatively independent of the others. Indeed, there was frequently no transition of any kind between these sections of the speech. This resulted in what was in essence an inductive pattern of a sort, but it was not the classic inductive method in which the speaker leads his audience through a series of selected evidence to the conclusion he wishes to establish. Langer completed only a portion of this process because he failed to draw the threads together in any kind of final summarization.

The consequence was a unique arrangement which might be labeled for convenience a "non-conclusive inductive style."

This non-conclusive inductive style is quite evident in a majority of his campaign speeches over the years. In his keynote address at New Rockford in 1934, for example, he divided his speech into fifteen main points which he presented in the following order:

- (1) The money interests are fighting my administration.
- (2) The state was in desperate financial straits when the League took office.
- (3) My administration has been working to cut governmental expense.
- (4) My administration raised corporation taxes.
- (5) My administration has done everything it could to help cripples and other unfortunates.
- (6) My administration has been the friend of the farmer.
- (7) All the Big Business newspapers are fighting my administration.
- (8) State industries have made an outstanding record.
- (9) All the money in North Dakota couldn't buy the League convention.
- (10) I wish to pay tribute to John A. Simpson.
- (11) The moratorium is not a shield for chislers.
- (12) The embargo was an effective weapon in the fight to raise grain prices.
- (13) I asked Wallace to put a tariff on wheat.
- (14) I am willing to stand on the record of my administration.
- (15) I ask support for the entire League ticket.¹

In effect, this speech is really a series of fifteen one-point speeches delivered successively before an audience during a period of two to three hours.

¹Langer, Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

A similar pattern is evident in earlier speeches. At Gilby during the campaign of 1920, he divided his speech into eight major points which were discussed in the following order:

- (1) the liars license law
- (2) the reign of terror existing in North Dakota
- (3) the reign of terror in the 1919 legislature
- (4) the Minnie J. Nielson case
- (5) the Valley City bank case
- (6) the Scandinavian-American Bank case
- (7) an attack on State Senator Hemmingson
- (8) the League caucus system²

An examination of his radio addresses also reveals this tendency to discuss a large number of non-related subjects. In a radio message delivered in March of 1938, Langer discussed seven major topics in about thirty minutes:

- (1) charges of graft in his administration
- (2) the record of his administration in reducing state debts
- (3) a loan program for farmers through the Board of University and School Lands
- (4) refinancing of county governments through bond issues
- (5) the executive moratorium against crop seizures
- (6) relief for cripples and other unfortunates
- (7) improvement of state roads³

A study of twenty-one representative speeches over a period of forty-one years shows this pattern to have been used consistently. In speeches delivered on the stump in various communities of the state he

²Langer, Public Address at Gilby, quoted in the Herald, June 7, 1934.

³Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, March 31, 1938.

averaged nine main points per speech. When confined to shorter radio speeches of thirty minutes, he usually discussed five to seven non sequiter main points. Similarly his gubernatorial messages to the state legislature and his appearances on the floor of the United States Senate involved the presentation of many main points with seemingly little relationship.

This peculiarity of style seems at first to be exceedingly strange in view of Langer's legal training, his successful law practice, and his two terms as attorney general. Most certainly he was well able to prepare a brief and was well aware of what constituted tight, logical organization. Furthermore, he was too astute politically to be careless concerning such an important aspect of political life as speech making. It seems most probable then that his style was used deliberately and that it represented a conscious subordination of logical proof to the exigencies of time, place and audience.

II. His Use of Supporting Materials

In addition to the special adaptation of the organization of his speeches to particular audiences, Langer also chose his supporting materials to appeal to the unsophisticated. Although he made extensive use of factual materials, the bulk of his support consisted of illustration, specific instance, repetition and restatement.

Illustration and specific instance were usually developed in narrative form. For example, in a speech in 1919 he attacked the creation of the state "Smelling Committee" as a limitation on the rights of individuals. He demonstrated the possible effects arising from the unusual powers given the committee through a series of hypothetical illustrations among which was the following:

Taking a step further, suppose you are a banker or a merchant in

competition with some other bank or store. Struggling along day and night, trying to keep your bank or store going. And suddenly one of this committee compels you to appear before him; to tell him just what kind of contract you have with your wholesaler and gets every bit of confidential information about your business that there is. This committee or any one of them can immediately give this information to your competitor. There is not a thing in the law to prevent this.⁴

On another occasion he attacked the alleged unscrupulousness of the public utilities with the following illustration:

One of them came over to Bismarck. He brought along a lawyer from St. Paul. There was that bill in my office, raising their taxes from five to twelve per cent, and he told me what a great governor I was, the smartest fellow in the west, that I had the loveliest wife and the nicest children any governor ever had; and I was a good business man; and he liked me; and he talked along and finally he said, 'you are too good a business man to sign this bill for the increase of our taxes from five to twelve per cent; and besides it is unconstitutional.' He said, 'we had a recall in this state a few years ago, and we recalled the governor; and I would not be surprised if you signed that bill, there would be another recall.' So I reached over for my pen and the inkwell, I pulled that old bill out, signed it while he was looking, and told him 'go ahead with your recall.'⁵

Langer also made extensive use of specific instance. In one speech he defended the economy program of his first administration in this manner. The effects of the program upon state institutions had received special criticism. Langer answered these criticisms through five paragraphs of specific instances in which he attempted to show that state institutions were "getting along all right." Among those paragraphs was the following:

Another thing I am mighty proud of is the care we have taken of the crippled folks in North Dakota. Right over here in Devils Lake is a young man who is twenty years old who had never walked. We took him to Fargo and had an operation performed on his feet, and today you will find him working his farm. There was a young lady in Finlay who had been in bed for twenty three years. She is walking today. Or take the case in Bottineau of the youngster, six years

⁴Langer, Public Address at Jamestown, quoted in the Herald, December 30, 1919.

⁵Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

old, a boy, who had never been out of bed. He is going to school now.⁶

Repetition was another device of which Langer made extensive use. Such repetition frequently took the form of a key word used throughout the speech as with the word terror in a speech against the League in 1919, or the repetition of a key word in a series of consecutive sentences, or the repetition of a phrase in the same manner. Typical of this was a paragraph from the Valley City speech:

We are going to fight in such a way as the manhood and womanhood of North Dakota never fought before, and the best part of it is that the fight won't be made by those men and women whom Townley says are Big Business, but, my friends the fight is going to be made by the common people of North Dakota.⁷

He often used the repetition of phrases in the initial position in sentences for their cumulative effect. This technique was utilized in attacking those who accused him of interference in the affairs of the Agricultural College at Fargo:

And [it] is in order to secure that kind of an institution this administration must fight the small clique who apparently speak for the Chamber of Commerce at Fargo, let them know once and for all we are prepared to go to the very end with them. Let them know once and for all that the state of North Dakota and not the Fargo Chamber of Commerce runs that institution. Let them know once and for all that they can prepare resolutions till doomsday and they will not deter the Board of Administration and the governor of North Dakota from doing their duty. Let them know once and for all that we can be neither frightened or intimidated by lies.⁸

Perhaps even more extensive than his use of repetition was his use of restatement. Typically, in a 1936 address he emphasized the fact that the men who were opposing him in that campaign had previously supported him. He used restatement to drive in the impression that these

⁶Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Herald, December 24, 1919.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, August 27, 1937.

men were dishonest.

In fact, those who are now out speaking against me and fighting the Nonpartisan League ticket, thought I was a pretty good governor two years ago. They were pretty proud of the way taxes had been reduced and the cost of state government had been cut five and one-half million dollars. They were out bragging me up for declaring the moratorium and the embargo. Well I haven't been governor since that time, but now these same fellows are out telling you what a crook and scoundrel I am . . . maybe you can tell me whether they were lying two years ago or whether they are lying now, whether they were trying to fool you then or whether they are trying to fool you now.⁹

On another occasion he characteristically employed restatement in driving home to his listeners the character of his opposition:

We find that the opposition is composed of those large corporations, those big utility companies, those large financial interests that Dr. Crawford mentioned. First of all, my friends, we are fighting the big fellows and the chain bankers . . .¹⁰

In the same speech he also tried to reinforce the contention that the state had been in desperate financial straits when he took office:

I say when they went out of office a little over a year ago, they didn't leave enough money on hand to pay the scrub women in the capitol. Instead of that, there was an overdraft of \$518,000.00, and unpaid bills. There was interest due on the bonds of the State of North Dakota in the sum of \$486,000. This is the legacy that the IVA, the so-called Independent Republicans, this half elephant, half donkey organization left us, the Nonpartisan League incoming administration. No money. Nothing but overdrafts, nothing but debts.¹¹

The use of these supporting materials, in addition to providing proof which would appeal to his audience and hold its attention, also enhanced his highly oral style.

⁹Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the Leader, May 21, 1936.

¹⁰Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1936.

¹¹Ibid.

III. His Sentence Structure

Analysis of his use of sentence structure also reveals the highly oral character of Langer's style. Generally speaking, the most common type of sentence construction, whether oral or written, is that sometimes called the loose sentence. Because of the extemporaneous nature of his delivery, Langer possibly employed more sentences of this type than truly good style would warrant.¹² However, he did make some use of balanced structure and of periodic sentences. His use of balanced structure was effective as a method of attaining both repetition and smoothness of rhythm. The following example demonstrates the employment of the balanced sentence to emphasize an idea through repetition in the form of restatement: "Let's frown upon every attempt to stir up fights among ourselves, to incite hatred and quarrels among ourselves, to array different interests against each other."¹³

The effect of balanced structure upon rhythm is better exemplified, perhaps, by the following passage: "My friends, The Nonpartisan League was born in the cradle of liberalism, reared in the atmosphere of government by the people and nurtured on the fruit of equality among men."¹⁴

Study of the speeches reveals that Langer used the periodic sentence rather more frequently than the balanced sentence. In all probability he was motivated to incorporate this technique because it is an effective method of achieving climax.¹⁵ One example (with which his

¹²Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, Speech Criticism: The Development of Standards for Critical Appraisal (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1948), p. 418. The authors point out the need for the interaction of balanced, loose and periodic sentences in judicious proportion.

¹³Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, November 19, 1936.

¹⁴Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, February 17, 1938.

¹⁵Thonessen and Baird, op. cit., p. 418.

speeches were replete) demonstrates his use of this type:

Because my grandfather was one of the very earliest settlers and my father was a member of the first legislature of the state, elected on the Republican ticket, and the close friend and intimate neighbor of John Miller, the first Republican governor of North Dakota, I early learned much about North Dakota while playing upon the knees of these men. When governor Miller did not run for reelection, and he was succeeded by Andrew H. Burke of my home town of Casselton, and my father's business associate, I continued to learn more.¹⁶

As has been suggested, it is the inter-action of these three types of sentences—that is the variety with which they are employed—that helps to create good style. Langer's speeches may not have been stylistic classics, but they definitely embodied variety in the structure of his sentences:

What the average citizen wants to know is what the newly elected United States senator [sic] is going to do for North Dakota. The business men are interested in the farmer's welfare because we are all dependent upon agriculture.

What the new senator does for North Dakota is what he accomplishes for the farmer. His success will be measured by the successful fight he may put up, and it is in that fight that I am trying to enlist. And in so doing I call your attention to the fact it nearly always has been under a Republican administration nationally that the farmer has prospered.

There is a peculiar likeness between the two North Dakota senators. One has been in office 18 years and the other 14. In Senator Nye's 14 years he has not a single agricultural bill to his credit. In Frazier's 18 years, the only law bearing his name is one to assist the farmer go through bankruptcy. That is how these two men have helped agriculture.¹⁷

Another aspect of sentence structure which contributes to good style is variety in sentence length.¹⁸ Perhaps the previous examples have provided sufficient illustration of the variety in length of sentences employed by Langer. For the most part there is a reasonable interplay of relatively short simple sentences with longer, complex,

¹⁶Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

¹⁷Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1940.

¹⁸Thonessen and Baird, op. cit., p. 418.

compound, and compound-complex sentences. However, Langer's speeches on study suffer from his tendency toward wordiness, a tendency which does little to aid general coherence. Brigance notes that "when any sentence gets over 20 words it starts to be 'fairly difficult,' when it gets over 25 words it becomes 'difficult,' and when it goes beyond 30 words it becomes 'very difficult.'"¹⁹ The following typical passage illustrates Langer's tendency, no doubt resulting largely from his extemporaneous delivery, toward long sentences:

You will remember how the politicians raved about illegal and wrongful bond transactions in the Bank of North Dakota—how they charged that they were so manipulated that graft resulted—and you also know that every bond transaction of necessity had to be, and was under the control of Frank Vogel and Robert Stangler, the manager and assistant manager of the Bank of North Dakota under my administration.

This is the same Robert Stangler who I had originally appointed manager of the Bank of North Dakota, and who had been retained by Governors Olson, Moodie and Welford.

But two years ago, the politicians in an endeavor to fool you, had to seize upon something. They could not imagine that everybody connected with my administration was honest. The politicians, corrupt in their thought, implied corruption which did not exist, to others, and the answer after two years, to these charges, is that a few months ago, Governor Moses, over the radio, commended the honesty, efficiency, and integrity of Frank Vogel, as manager of the Bank of North Dakota, and that he again over the radio, told about the promotion of Robert Stangler to become manager of the Mill and elevator and praised him in the most generous words.²⁰

Langer seems to have relied upon the sheer flow of words to carry his listeners along with him, to build an emotional climate. One specific device he used to bring that emotional level to a point of climax was the use of conditional clauses in series:

If you folks like moratoriums, the embargo, putting out the tax shark, if you like making fellows pay taxes on incomes and inherit-

¹⁹William N. Brigance, Speech Composition (2d ed.; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1953), p. 239.

²⁰Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

ances instead of making you bear the brunt of them on your land, if you believe in an administration that takes care of the people and of human rights over property, then I would like to have you go to the polls on the 27th day of June and fight for me.²¹

IV. His Use of Words

Of particular interest is Langer's use of words within the structure of the sentences to achieve a highly dynamic oral quality. This quality was achieved through the use of great numbers of active verbs, verb phrases, and verbals. The following typical passage demonstrates the frequency with which these forms appear. It also reveals Langer's use of such nouns as endorsement, fight, want, hunger, and battle--nouns which might be labeled "action nouns" since all of them may be used in that form or in similar form as verbs. This, too, adds to the swift movement of the sentences:

Where, oh, where is the official endorsement of the newspaper that is published by the Grange, the Farm Bureau, or the Farmer's Union? Only Congressman Usher Burdick has that endorsement. Only he has fought the good fight for you, only he is supporting me, and while testimonials [from] senator so and congressman so are sent out, Usher Burdick comes back to ask you to elect me to help him. He comes back to ask that the entire Republican ticket be elected and he does that because he knows that with him leading the fight in the lower house and I in the upper house, that we can make it mighty tough for the grain gamblers in Minneapolis who have reaped large profits out of the suffering, the want, the hunger of North Dakota farmers and business men. This is your battle. Do not permit yourself to be deceived by a lot of talk about political machines when a child knows that I have none, that I have been out of office two years and that the only machine that I have is the friendship of the poor, the blind, the underprivileged and the oppressed.²²

Langer's word choice not only served to create an impression of action, of movement, but also to appeal to the educational and social level of his listeners. Certainly there is nothing elegant or "flowery" about his language. It is almost exclusively colloquial with a heavy

²¹Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, August 5, 1937.

²²Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1940.

flavoring of slang. He never used the word conflict where he could use fight or battle; he did not use the word individuals where he could use folks. Sentences taken from a random selection of speeches show his use of colloquialism and slang:

"Am I a crook or not a crook."²³

"They say I sold out in the Standard Oil case."²⁴

"I went into office intending to fire a lot of fellows."²⁵

"Thousands of you folks have been writing to me"²⁶

As may readily be seen from even the most casual examination of his speeches, Langer's language was not only colloquial but also rich in emotionally colored words. Without exception, his campaign speeches are heavily salted with such language—a further indication of his adaptation to a particular kind of audience. Some of these words were selected and used over and over because they had special connotations for the farmers. It is scarcely accident that he made frequent references to grain gamblers, chain bankers, railroads and Big Business.²⁷

Aside from such words having special connotation for the North Dakota farmer, Langer used others whose emotional coloring was less sectional. His speeches abound with words and phrases such as: common people, Americanism, democracy, autocracy, fight, challenge, honest, clean, sacrifices, hardships, politician, God, home, and country. His use of such

²³Langer, Address at Larimore, quoted in the Herald, January 29, 1920.

²⁴Langer, Address at St. Thomas, quoted in the Herald, January 31, 1920.

²⁵Langer, Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Herald, May 23, 1934.

²⁶Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, February 4, 1937.

²⁷Above, p. 93.

emotionally colored words may be illustrated by a few brief quotations:

"I don't propose to send any more American money abroad to countries so greatly communistic or to nations entirely out of line with American ideals and our conception of democracy."²⁸

"I am an American, believe in America and am opposed to Europeanizing America."²⁹

"Join a real fight for the poor, the blind, the crippled, the homeless"³⁰

Langer was particularly addicted to the use of perhaps the least defensible of emotionally colored words—the epithet. He was not averse to calling those opposed to him "political pirates and scallywags,"³¹ or more mildly to refer to them as "the same old political gang."³² On one occasion he called a group of state legislators "dirty sneaking cowards."³³

V. His Use of Objective Elements of Vividness

Not only were Langer's speeches swift moving and highly emotional, they were also vivid. He achieved this vividness largely through the use of direct discourse and illustration.³⁴ One of the ways of achieving vividness and directness is the use of personal pronouns.³⁵ Langer's

²⁸Langer, Address at Center, quoted in the Leader, November 6, 1947.

²⁹Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, February 18, 1937.

³⁰Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 29, 1936.

³¹Langer, Address at Valley City, quoted in the Herald, December 24, 1919.

³²Langer, Statement, Quoted in the New York Times, March 28, 1942, p. 1.

³³Langer, Address, quoted in the Herald, January 6, 1920.

³⁴For an example of Langer's use of illustration see above pp. 90-91.

³⁵Brigance, op. cit., p. 241.

speeches are liberally sprinkled with them as the following typical passage indicates:

I was born in North Dakota. My grandparents lie buried in the soil of North Dakota. I love the state, and I am willing to go out and fight for it . . . fight for the rank and file of the common people. But I say that if you want that kind of governor, that governor has the right to demand that you elect on the same ticket with him those men named at Valley City by the rank and file of the people of North Dakota. I have the right to ask you that. I know if Walter Welford is elected lieutenant governor of the state and if I leave the state he will not be carrying on secret conferences with the enemy and that he will be carrying out the policies of the Non-partisan League. I know that if he presides over the Senate for 60 days, he will be fighting for progressive legislation and won't be secretly meeting with the head of the Bismarck Tribune. And, my friends, I want you to send Lynn J. Frazier to the Senate, and we need Lemke and Burdick in congress.³⁶

Two other methods of direct discourse which Langer frequently employed, were direct quotation and interrogation. In one representative example, Langer used direct quotation to establish in the minds of the audience his closeness to the late John A. Simpson, national president of the Farmers' Union.:

He showed me his speech that he had written out and said, 'only a few months ago representatives of the Farmers' Union in Topeka met with the President and he promised he would be for the Frazier bill. But we have been betrayed. The President is against us. Instead of issuing currency to help out those farmers so they can get loans from the federal land bank, they are issuing billions of dollars of bonds and the farmer will have to pay the interest on all of them I wish I had the intestinal fortitude to tell some of those people who were elected on the promise of helping the farmer what I think of them, to tell the people of the United States what I think of them, over the radio, but I don't dare.'

I sat there listening to him, and said, 'By George, I'll say it for you.' And you people who listened in over the radio to that speech know that after I had read fifteen minutes of a prepared speech, I threw the papers aside, and I said over the radio just what I said to you people tonight. And when I got through, John Simpson took me by the hand and said, 'I'll tell you, Governor, it is a thousand times better for you to be governor for two years and be the kind of governor you are than to be governor for ten years and let the chain banks and the big insurance companies run you

³⁶Langer, Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

while you are in office.³⁷

This same speech contains numerous examples of Langer's use of interrogation. As Brigance points out, an interrogation is a "personal matter, demanding individual attention from each member of the audience. It is an appeal inviting a silent reply."³⁸ In this speech, Langer used both the direct and the rhetorical question: One or two examples of the direct question should suffice.

"What does the constitution say? First of all it guarantees us life, and then liberty and then property. Notice, Life comes first."³⁹

Do you know how many men were selling liquor at the time of the passage of the beer law? There were 2,378 liquor dealers in the state on October 22nd, 1933⁴⁰

Langer made rather more frequent use of the rhetorical than the direct question. Usually he did not employ a single rhetorical question but used them in series, thus:

And when they say, as this man who was nominated at Jamestown said the other day, that I am the representative of big business interests, I ask you, is it not strange that every one of the newspapers controlled by big business, every one, is against me? Isn't that right? And is it not the very best proof in the world that these bankers and financial interests of Wall Street that control some of our North Dakota newspapers are coming out morning, noon and night telling you how I am headed for the pen, and telling you what a terrible man I am.⁴¹

An examination of a radio address given in 1940 reveals his use of the same technique:

1934. ³⁷Langer, Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24,

³⁸Brigance, op. cit., p. 245.

1934. ³⁹Langer, Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24,

1934. ⁴⁰Langer, Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24,

⁴¹Ibid.

Now with the world once more at war the government pegs the price up just a little through the means of a loan to our farmers. What is that government price peg? Who is there in this state who will dare rise up and say it is anywhere near the parity price which farmers should receive? Where are and where were our two senators? Why are they not out there fighting?⁴²

Langer made little use of the other techniques of direct address, apostrophe and personification. Nor did he make great use of such elements of vividness as the epigram, allusion, or figures of speech such as metaphors and simillies. Surprisingly, he also made less use of analogy than might be expected. When employed, however, it was apt to be colorful. In describing the tendency of office-holders to resist removal from their jobs, he used an analogy which must certainly have made the problem vivid to his rural audience. He said:

That fellow thinks he owns that job, and as I said, it is a little like the old Duroc sow with little pigs. If they have only been sucking a few weeks, you can take them off the teat and they don't squeal much, but you let a fellow who has been on the payroll four or five years know that you don't need him, and it is like trying to wean a pig five months old—you pull and you yank, and you pull and that teat will stretch and stretch and when you finally yank him off he will yowl and squeal and want to get back on the payroll.⁴³

It is sufficient, perhaps, to close discussion of the style and structure of Mr. Langer's speeches by reiterating that while his methods may not have resulted in the epitome of structural and stylistic excellence, they were suited to the creation of the kind of presentation he wished to make to the kinds of audiences to which he spoke. Through sentence variety, specific and colorful words, colloquial language and such devices as direct address and illustration, he fashioned speeches which moved rapidly, played upon the emotions of the listeners and left the desired impression of a dynamic, and courageous man of the people.

⁴²Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1940.

⁴³Langer, Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

CHAPTER VI

PERSUASIVE DEVICES

I. Introduction

An examination of Mr. Langer's speeches reveals that certain persuasive devices were used consistently throughout his political career. Among those devices he used most frequently were the following: the common ground technique, loaded words, name calling, appeals to class feeling, appeals to self-interest, appeals to the sense of fair play, appeals to the ego, appeals to parental love, appeals to loyalty, appeals to the sense of conflict, and appeals to feelings of gratitude.

In addition, a variety of other appeals to human motivation are to be found in his speeches. They appear, however, with considerable less frequency. Among the latter are: appeals to sympathy, fear, social responsibility, social approval, reverence and duty.

II. Common Ground

A device which Langer utilized repeatedly with apparent effectiveness was the common ground technique. It is employed by a speaker in establishing an area of likeness or of agreement between himself and the audience. As a North Dakotan by birth and as a member of a pioneer family, he had some excellent materials quite ready at hand for establishing common ground with his constituents.

As he did so often, in his keynote address at New Rockford in 1934, Langer told his audience, "I was born in North Dakota. My grand-

parents lie buried in the soil of North Dakota."¹ In another variation he explained to a radio audience that he had special knowledge of North Dakota and her politics "because my grandfather was one of the earliest settlers and my father was a member of the first legislature of the state,"² This common heritage was a significant tie which the voters were not permitted to forget.

Another device for establishing common ground was his frequent use of the conventional political locution, "My Friends." Evident in many of his speeches it was recorded by a newspaper reporter in his Valley City speech in 1919. In the course of that speech the reporter noted the phrase "my friends" eight times.³ At New Rockford in 1934 he used the word "friends" alone or the phrase "my friends" a total of five times.⁴

Furthermore, Langer varied the technique frequently through the employment of such personal pronouns as "we," "our," and "us." It seems significant that he should use these pronouns particularly in those portions of campaign speeches in which he was making a direct appeal for votes. In the last paragraphs of a radio address delivered in October of 1940, he asserted that he had no political machine and that he was calling upon his friends to help make North Dakota "the great state of which we are all so proud and which we love, and loving it we will fight for it,

¹Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

²Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

³Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Herald, December 24, 1919.

⁴Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

and loving it we will each one get out into the precincts and get out our votes."⁵

Sometimes the manner in which Langer pictured himself to his audience in a single phrase established a feeling of common interests, common background, common beliefs. Perhaps the most effective such device was his claim in 1952 that he was "just the hired man" sent down to Washington.⁶

III. Loaded Words

Colorful figure that he was, it is not surprising that an outstanding characteristic of Mr. Langer's speeches was an abundance of "loaded" words—words, that is, which have strong emotional connotations.⁷ Such words as sacrifice, hardship, America, truth, duty, progressive, pioneer, honesty, machine, working man, poor man, common man are examples of only a very few such words which appear with regularity. Three typical passages serve to illustrate this use of emotion evoking words.⁸ During his campaign for governor in 1920, Langer was faced with the necessity of explaining to farm audiences why he had broken with what was, ostensibly at least, a farmers' organization. He rounded off one such explanation in the following manner:

I want you farmers to remember that even when the crisis came in our government I had the courage and independence to go out and tell you the truth. I realized the strength of the machine that Towmley had built up and just what I would have to fight, but I saw my duty

⁵Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1934.

⁶Langer, Public Address at Marion, quoted in the Herald, November 1, 1952.

⁷Emotional Language as an element of style has been discussed in Chapter V, pp. 98-99.

⁸For other examples see above, pp. 98-99.

clearly and I did it.⁹

In 1936 he called upon the citizens of the state to rally to the Nonpartisan League cause in a passage crammed with "loaded" words:

The time to fight for good, clean, honest government is now, before it is too late; and I call upon my friends to rally to the support of our cause, to join a real fight for the protection of the poor, the blind, the crippled, the homeless . . . a fight, a battle, to make North Dakota the fine, great state that our pioneers fought so hard and long to make it.¹⁰

Even non-campaign speeches illustrate Langer's habitual use of such language:

Let us continue on the way to help those who need help. To aid the blind, the crippled, the dependent children, the needy, the destitute and those in distress, so that when we again have rain and crops and we look back upon this dark hour, already prolonged far too long, we can say that we met this problem with true old fashioned pioneer North Dakota Spirit, and that no man, woman or child lost his chance because the great citizenry of North Dakota failed in the hour of need.¹¹

IV. Name Calling

Closely akin to "loaded" words is the technique of assigning "bad names" to those persons, ideas or institutions the speaker wishes to discredit in the eyes of the audience. Mr. Langer, as has been indicated previously in this study, minced few words in attacking the opposition or labelling individuals. During the campaign in 1920, for example, his attacks on Townley and his supporters were particularly bitter. At Valley City he lashed out at the legislators from Barnes County:

Your Senator Noltimier! Your representative Olson!—cowards as they are, afraid to impeach me, afraid to give me a hearing, afraid to have the truth brought out before the people of this state. These

⁹Langer, Public Address at Wilton, quoted in the Tribune, June 29, 1920.

¹⁰Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 29, 1936.

¹¹Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, February 4, 1937.

men writhing under the lash of A. C. Townley and his political tools¹²

Nor had he finished with invective. Later in the same address he called Senator Noltmier a "lying cur."¹³ At Richardton, in an earlier speech he called Townley "unscrupulous, cold-blooded and crooked as hell itself."¹⁴

Such blatant hurling of epithets might be dismissed as the natural exuberance of a young politician who had not achieved a state of campaign acumen. However, his indulgence in vituperative attacks continued through the years as evidenced in 1934, when Langer referred to the Independent Republicans as a "half elephant, half donkey organization,"¹⁵ and later amended the description in another speech to "one half elephant and one half-Jackass."¹⁶

Defending his record as governor in 1936, he answered attacks upon the honesty of his administration by labelling his opponents as "character assassins."¹⁷ In a speech at Devils Lake during the same campaign he accused his opponents of having "hired men in the crowd as well as other payroll snoopers," called the Welford administration a "political machine," accused its members of being "tax eaters," and

¹²Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Herald, December 24, 1920.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Langer, Public Address at Richardton, quoted in the Herald, November 9, 1919.

¹⁵Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1924.

¹⁶Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the Tribune, June 18, 1934.

¹⁷Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 29, 1936.

called Welford's appointees "political hirelings."¹⁸

Moreover, during a single campaign speech in 1940 he made three separate references to "grain gamblers," and in 1952 he attacked his opponent, Fred G. Aandahl, as "a tool of the power trust."¹⁹ By no stretch of the imagination could these later uses of the name calling technique be excused as the oratorical excesses of a fledgling politician.

V. Appeals to Class Feeling

Langer was no more averse to making an appeal to class feeling than he was to the use of name calling. Although he rarely made references in his speeches to class as such, his constant references to the farmer, the working man, the poor man, the common people and his recurrent theme of battle against the chain bankers, railroads and various other forms of "Big Business" constantly emphasized an awareness of class feeling and discontent.

In accepting the League endorsement in 1934, Langer told the convention, "I consider your endorsement at this time the greatest honor that has come to me and I pledge you that if elected, that I will continue the government of this state in the interests of the common people"²⁰ Two months later he told his audience at New Rockford that the delegates at the Valley City Convention of the League were not "office holders, payrollers" as had been charged but represented the "rank and file of the people of North Dakota." He went on to say:

And I am telling you there wasn't enough money in the State of North

¹⁸Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the Leader, May 21, 1936.

¹⁹Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Herald, June 6, 1952.

²⁰Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Leader, March 15, 1934.

Dakota, or in the bank accounts of those big financial interests, to control that convention composed of the rank and file of the people of North Dakota. The banks couldn't buy them. They represented the people, the laborers, and the farmers of North Dakota.²¹

Similarly, in 1938 during a radio address he said, "The twenty-three year old fight in North Dakota has always been the same—magnificent fight for the working man, the poor man, the underprivileged men and women" ²² This same theme was reiterated in the campaign of 1952 as he told an audience at New England that the "League is for the common man. The ROC for the big corporations."²³

It was in the 1938 campaign in which he was advocating a pension plan for the aged that Langer appealed most directly to class feeling:

We stand tonight on the threshold of a great offensive battle. Our enemies are those who, unwilling to work for themselves, live on the work of others Twenty-three years ago the farmers, small business men and the laboring men organized for mutual political protection

Since then, . . . we have seen the political organization of the common people making its progress onward²⁴

Later in the campaign he charged, "The wealthy classes and the politicians who are fighting to stop our \$40 a month pension plan . . . are trying to frighten you" ²⁵

VI. Appeals to Self-interest

Langer was fully aware that perhaps the most effective way to

²¹Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

²²Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, February 17, 1938.

²³Langer, Public Address at New England, quoted in the Herald, June 4, 1952.

²⁴Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 26, 1938.

²⁵Langer, Public Address at Valley City, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1938.

gain votes was to show the voters that they would gain by electing him to office or conversely that failure to elect him would result in losses to them. To that end he used frequent appeals to self-interest.

One of his main arguments against Townley and the League administration in 1919-1920 was that their financial manipulations were bringing the state to the brink of financial ruin. At Richardton he discussed what he termed Townley's "miserable mismanagement" of League finances and then told his audience, "Remember this—that you ultimately will be called upon to pay all these debts."²⁶

The appeal to self-interest in its baldest form is, perhaps, the political platform with its hodge-podge of promises for everyone. In a radio address in 1936, Langer set forth such a program at the very beginning of his speech:

The Nonpartisan League program and platform in the present campaign is one which merits the endorsement of every thinking citizen of this state. We propose, first of all, a sharp reduction in taxes and to cut down the cost of operating the state government: we favor the exemption from taxation of homesteads of farms up to the value of \$5,000; and in towns up to the value of \$1,500; that seed and feed loans should be cancelled; that free textbooks should be furnished the school-children of our state²⁷

Langer's first radio address of the 1940 campaign set forth a similar comprehensive appeal:

I will battle for federal aid for schools; for old age pensions and the Townsend plan; for dams, irrigation, water conservation, reclamation, and Missouri River diversion; to increase the present guaranty of bany [sic] deposits from five thousand to ten thousand dollars; to freeze branch banking as proposed in the Patman bill; for enactment of debt adjustment and the wheat certificate bill as advocated by the Farmers Union, and for the cancellation of feed and seed loans; for liberalizing of credit to the small business man through RFC; for the elimination of the surplus agricultural products

²⁶Langer, Public Address at Richardton, quoted in the Herald, November 19, 1919.

²⁷Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 29, 1936.

by using them to the amount of at least ten per cent in the manufacture of power alcohol for industrial purposes.²⁸

One of the most dramatic acts of Langer's second term as governor was his use of the state mill and elevator to buy wheat in an effort to force a rise in prices. He announced his plan on Monday, August second in a state-wide broadcast. The speech was addressed to the "farmers and businessmen of North Dakota." In the course of the speech, he attempted to rally the support of the business and professional men of the state. In order to do so, he appealed to their self-interest. He urged, "If you businessmen want your bills paid--if you doctors, dentists, implement dealers and merchants want to get your money from the farmers whom you have trusted--get out and help them secure a just price for their products."²⁹

VII. Appeals to Fair Play

Langer, also, made extensive use of appeals to fair play. He constantly depicted himself either as the innocent victim of unfair practices or as the underdog fighting against heavily financed, strongly backed opposition. An examination of representative speeches shows that this position was incorporated into his self-profile in campaign after campaign. Often this appeal was coupled with another for sympathy as it was in the following paragraph:

I have nothing but by [sic] bare hands with me in this fight. I am paying all my own expenses. We have not enough money to hire professional speakers from all over the nation. We haven't enough money to buy airplanes or even automobiles.³⁰

²⁸Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

²⁹Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, August 5, 1937.

³⁰Langer, Public Address at Wilton, quoted in the Tribune, June 29, 1920.

In 1932 he complained that "Those who oppose my candidacy have circulated the rumor that I am not friendly to the purposes and principles of the American Legion."³¹ That same year Mrs. Esther Johnson of Donnybrook claimed that Langer had accepted a fee of \$2,000 from her and promised to get her son out of prison but had not done so. This, Langer protested was a "frame up." The charge, he maintained, was a "political instrument, well timed and aimed to have adverse effect in this campaign." It was, he continued, proof that "our opponents, interests, fearful of our stand for honest government, will stop at nothing to defeat us."³²

He appealed again for fair play in 1936 when he told his audience:

In the primary campaign I had arrayed against me, not only a well oiled well greased political machine, but we had the private contributions of the railroads, and other utilities against us³³

In 1940 he brushed aside charges that he headed a political machine "when even a child knows that I have none," but asserted:

The two candidates opposed to me have behind them all the powers of the federal government, all the payroll of the five thousand employees and when you consider the fact that they can mail out almost free of charge all the literature that they wish, it is then that you realize the absurdity of talking about a Langer political machine

I have no huge army of employees; I have no huge war chest of money³⁴

VIII. Appeals to the Ego

Yet another appeal to basic human motivation which Langer fre-

³¹Langer, Public Address at Hazen, quoted in the Herald, October 13, 1932.

³²Langer, Statement, quoted in the Herald, November 3, 1932.

³³Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the Leader, October 8, 1936.

³⁴Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1940.

quently found useful was that to pride and self-esteem. Usually this device was coupled with another, loyalty to the state. In 1934 he answered attacks on the state bank and the mill and elevator by telling his audience, "I was down in Iowa, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Texas last winter, all through the northwest and middlewest. I found the people of those states looking to North Dakota for leadership, as we used to look to Wisconsin for leadership."³⁵ Similarly, during a speech in 1936, he pointed out that North Dakota was blessed with a "progressive" government and that, while the state was in difficulty at present, its people had never flinched before adversity. He said:

My friends, the people of North Dakota, the pioneers and the descendents of pioneers have never failed in any undertaking. North Dakota has never defaulted in paying any debts. There are no people in any state who more willing and courageously face the doing of a difficult job, and we will not falter now.³⁶

He concluded his speech with a similar appeal:

Ours is a great opportunity, in the midst of many hardships, to prove to the world that the people of North Dakota are stout-hearted and unafraid; ready to meet the problems and the tasks that lie ahead in a manner that will bring honor to our state.³⁷

On occasion, his appeal to ego was more personalized. In addressing the Nonpartisan League convention in 1938, Langer told them, "The people of North Dakota and progressives throughout the Northwest are looking to you delegates for guidance and leadership."³⁸

A divergent form of this technique was his disposition to flatter the voters. In 1940 his treatment of state institutions during his gover-

³⁵Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

³⁶Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, November 19, 1936.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Leader, March 10, 1938.

norship was under heavy attack. He defended his economy measures in a radio address asserting that the state schools and other institutions had managed well on their limited budgets. The present attack on his policies, he said, was simply political maneuvering and "politicians can't fool you people."³⁹

IX. Appeals to Parental Love

Appeals to parental love also have a fairly prominent place in Langer's speeches for he readily recognized the strong family ties of rural people whose working unit was the family unit. In his campaign for governor in 1920, he sought support by charging that the leaders of the League were planning to distribute harmful literature to the children of the state. In his campaigns in the nineteen thirties he appealed to this motive by promising to protect the schools or by pointing to what he had done for the schools in the past. In another variation, he touched this emotional cord by promising never to vote to send American boys to fight in foreign wars.

One of the most effective of Langer's applications of the appeal to parental love was made in connection with charges brought against the League in 1920. The appeal was based upon the discovery by Olgar B. Burtness of some questionable literature on top of a box of books intended for delivery to schools throughout the state. In a speech at Hillsboro, Langer implied that the board of administration, which the League's leaders had created in order to by-pass Minnie J. Nielson, would send such literature out to the schools:

These men dictate the educational policy of the state. They tell children what books they shall study, and read. I don't know how

³⁹Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

you feel about it, but I don't want my little girl reading books by Walter Thomas Mills, Kate O'Hare and Ellen Key.⁴⁰

At Center a few months later he told his audiences:

If any of you people do not believe that Miss Minnie J. Nielson has been stripped of her powers and duties, if you do not believe that the twice unfrocked preacher is hiring teachers, who have the duty of forming the first impressions on the young minds of our children, ask any teacher to exhibit her certification . . . Totten's name will be signed to it.⁴¹

In 1936 he combined concern with self-interest and parental love in promising that "free textbooks should be furnished by the state . . ."⁴² And in 1940 he used the same device, promising to "battle for federal aid for schools."⁴³

It is interesting to note that as early as 1938 Mr. Langer was promising parents, who in many instances had immigrated to this country or were only one generation removed from immigration, "I will never vote to send your boy into foreign conflict . . ."⁴⁴ In 1940, with Europe engaged in conflict, he repeated the promise saying, "I will fight to keep our boys out of any war of aggression . . ."⁴⁵ And in 1952 he told an audience at Dickinson, "I'll never, never vote to send a single American boy to the battlefields of Europe or Asia."⁴⁶

⁴⁰Langer, Public Address at Hillsboro, quoted in the Herald, January 6, 1920.

⁴¹Langer, Public Address at Center, quoted in the Herald, June 8, 1920.

⁴²Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 29, 1936.

⁴³Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

⁴⁴Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, June 23, 1938.

⁴⁵Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 24, 1940.

⁴⁶Langer, Public Address at Dickinson, quoted in the Herald, June 8, 1952.

X. Appeals to the Sense of Conflict

Throughout this study frequent reference has been made to Langer's concern with the human fascination for conflict. His speeches are filled with appeals of this kind, particularly through his references to the political campaigns as "fights" or "battles." A 1940 speech provides a typical example:

We who desire North Dakota to continue to remain great, those who love North Dakota will battle from now to election day to forever politically annihilate men who believe they are bigger than the people, who, when they are honored at a primary election by your votes, throw the nomination back in your face and say 'I-I-I am the dictator, 'I-I-I am going to make you vote for me for United States Senator.' 'I-I-I am going to tell the people who they can vote for.

My friends, I call upon you to help in this battle, to fight with me and to fight hard.⁴⁷

XI. Appeals to Gratitude

Aside from the appeal to self-interest, appropriately enough, the appeal which seems to be used to the greatest extent in Mr. Langer's speeches is that to gratitude. Of course, a politician seeking election customarily must stand upon his record, but Mr. Langer's use of this appeal often was almost startlingly bald. In 1920 he told his audience at Wilton, "I want you farmers to remember that when the crisis came in our government I had the courage and independence to go out and tell you the truth . . . I realized the strength of the machine . . . and just what I would have to fight, but I saw my duty clearly and I did it."⁴⁸

Nor was he less reticent at Devils Lake in 1934 when he defended his conduct as governor and asked his audience to remember that, no matter

⁴⁷Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1940. The Reference is to William Lemke's abandoning his nomination for reelection to his seat in the House to run against Langer for the Senatorial seat.

⁴⁸Langer, Public Address at Wilton, quoted in the Leader, June 29, 1920.

what the future might hold for him, for seventeen months they had had a governor who was willing to pay any penalty "for having been your friend."⁴⁹

During the campaigns of 1936 and 1938, he pointed with pride to his moratorium and the good it had done the farmer.⁵⁰ But it was during the campaign of 1940 that he used this appeal most blatantly, perhaps:

I shall seek and I know that I will obtain the help, the counsel the unstinted assistance of the leading farmers, just as I secured all this help when I was governor and just as I had their enthusiasm and co-operation when as governor I raised the price of durum 35¢ a bushel and stopped the grain gamblers in Minneapolis from lowering the price of light weight wheat on July 23, 1937, 52¢ a bushel Those who are fighting me have numbered among them an overwhelming number of the enemies of the farmer and the small business men of the state. They have not forgotten that I discovered that North Dakota had a monopoly on durum and that the farmer raising durum can practically charge his own price for it if protected and that we did it in 1938. Nor have they forgotten that through the mill and elevator at Grand Forks we compelled the grain gamblers to pay the farmer what his light weight wheat was worth.

You see we gathered over three thousand samples of that light weight wheat . . . threshed them and ground them into flour at your mill and elevator so that we knew the exact milling qualities of that wheat . . . and we saved the farmer twelve millions of dollars.⁵¹

XII. Appeals to Fear

A well established human motivation is that of fear or apprehension, and it has frequently been used in the political arena. Mr. Langer found it useful as a campaign device especially during the depression years. It was in connection with those trouble times that he resorted to this appeal in his speech at New Rockford in 1934. He reminded the audience that he had promised never to use the militia against the farmers and laborers of the state. This declaration possessed a special strength in

⁴⁹Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the New York Times, June 18, 1934, p. 38.

⁵⁰Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the Leader, May 21, 1936; Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, March 31, 1938.

⁵¹Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, October 31, 1940.

view of the frequency with which the governors of other states were using the militia in just that way at that time. Langer spoke of a trip he had made through the middlewest:

And when I went down to these other states, Nebraska, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Texas, Michigan, Oklahoma, and spoke to the people of these states, I found in all of them, with the exception of Oklahoma, that the militia had been called to fight farmers and laborers, picketing, burning bridges, and granaries. And the governors were the ones who had called out the militia. There has been no bloodshed in North Dakota. You folks have not seen any railroad bridges burned in North Dakota. The reason is that in North Dakota the rank and file of the people are in control of their own government. In some of the other states the bankers and financiers and big insurance companies have charge of the government. Take South Dakota, a case right south of Wahpeton and Lidgerwood in Roberts county, a man who had lived in the state for nearly half a century. He had mortgaged his farm to the bank and when he lost it through foreclosures, he offered to rent it. But the bank that held the mortgage told him to get off. When the day came to throw him off, eight hundred Holiday men were there to stop them and they had a petition signed by every businessman in Sisseton, to leave him on the farm. They stopped the sale, but some of those men were picked up and put in jail, and 17 of them are out on bail. Mind you, they were not reds, or communists, but people who had lived in the community for years. The district judge issued an injunction that these farmers should not meet in a schoolhouse, courthouse or any place in Roberts county and if they dared to have a meeting in Roberts county, they were liable to fine for contempt of court for violating an injunction sent out by their governor. There was no jury trial, and that judge could sentence those men to jail for contempt of court. They call this a free country. Well, it is not very free in South Dakota, where the common man has not kept control of his government.⁵²

At Devils Lake in 1936 he was appealing to both self-interest and fear when he said, "If I am elected governor in the coming election I promise you a moratorium—one that will protect poor people from losing their homes and farmers from losing their machinery."⁵³

In discussing the need for a community tax law at Fargo in 1947, he pointed to the rising cost of living and said:

⁵²Langer, Public Address at New Rockford, quoted in the Leader, May 24, 1934.

⁵³Langer, Public Address at Devils Lake, quoted in the Leader, May 21, 1936.

No one can fortell how many more years our land will receive the blessings of timely and bountiful rains. It is necessary to conserve within our state as much of our present revenue as we possibly can to fortify ourselves against the times when drought and low prices may shrivel our crops and lessen our incomes.⁵⁴

XIII. Appeals to Social Responsibility

The depression years provided the framework for use of another human motive by Mr. Langer. The common knowledge of the extent of the economic problems of the day engendered a concern for the welfare of friends and neighbors. During these years he frequently turned to this concern for social responsibility as he sought to win votes. In such a speech he said:

I ask that you employ every man in the coal mines, the stores, the factories, that you possibly can: [sic] to put everyone to work that you possibly can, to cooperate and help the president and the national administration in your business dealings. Let's get rid of unemployment in every way we possibly can, and let's pay decent wages while we are doing it.⁵⁵

He combined this appeal with those to fear and sympathy in ending a discussion of the lack of funds available for welfare purposes in North Dakota:

The great danger, however, is that we may suddenly find ourselves in the throes of a long spell of blizzards and exceptionally cold weather. That is why every person living some distance from towns is so fearful about the security of his family and himself . . . I beg that you take up the burden of seeing to it that every person in need gets their needs filled immediately, and that every proper protection be taken to avoid suffering, want, and the loss of life.

A long stretch of cold weather right now would be a catastrophe, unparalled in our history Let us continue on the way to⁵⁶ aid the blind, the crippled, the dependent children, the needy

⁵⁴Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, November 20, 1947.

⁵⁵Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, November 19, 1936.

⁵⁶Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, February 4, 1937.

XIV. Appeals to Social Approval and Loyalty

Langer seems to have made relatively little use of appeals to social approval, although he did use it in speaking to a League convention in 1938. In that case, he coupled the appeal with one to loyalty to the League:

You delegates have been sent here by your friends and neighbors back home. They trusted you, and I ask you as governor to be true to that trust and faith with the political organization which has given the common people of the state a real voice in their state government.⁵⁷

In some situations the desire for social approval was blended with appeal to the ego.

Let us show the world that North Dakota is in this fight to the finish, that North Dakota is going to whole heartedly back up the authorities in Washington. Let us prove, as we have done time and again that we have the fortitude to meet trouble and adversity smilingly.⁵⁸

XV. Appeals to the Sense of Reverence

Mr. Langer seems to have used rather sparingly reverence of the Deity as a persuasive device. More often this appeal came in the form of reverence for heroes or principles which his audiences held dear. In a political speech delivered on Lincoln's birthday, he joined the ideals and image of Lincoln to the Nonpartisan League:

It is fitting and proper that the League should choose the birthday of Abraham Lincoln for its precinct gatherings and that our organization should again take its stand for those great ideals and principles for which Abraham Lincoln fought and died.⁵⁹

More often his use of reverence as an appeal was based upon people's feelings toward certain principles and institutions which they had come to regard as sacred--the home, the nation, democracy, Americanism

⁵⁷Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Leader, March 10, 1938.

⁵⁸Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, November 19, 1936.

⁵⁹Langer, Lincoln Day Address, quoted in the Leader, February 17, 1938.

and the like. Thus it was that he told an audience, "We will continue the fine educational institutions that we have to rear young boys and girls who will join us in our great fight for God, for home, for country."⁶⁰

Nor is it surprising that he referred, often, to the western reverence for the pioneers. Knowledge of this feeling led him to say at New Rockford, "How proud I am tonight that I had a small part in keeping faith with those pioneers who came from Norway and Sweden, from Denmark and Scotland . . . to found a state where the poor man could have equal protection with the rich" ⁶¹

William Langer understood the people of his native state and well analyzed their backgrounds, their concerns, their attitudes and their motivations. He selected with care those factors of human motivation which were of greatest strength in the social and political atmosphere of North Dakota. Because he spoke the language of the people, he was able to phrase his appeals in language they understood and to stimulate them to act. He was a master of the practical psychology of politics and persuasion who well understood the sources of human motivation and how these sources might be tapped by a speaker in order to influence the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of human beings.

⁶⁰Langer, Radio Address, quoted in the Leader, March 31, 1938.

⁶¹Langer, Public Address, quoted in the Leader, May 26, 1938.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

William Langer was a son of the prairies. Throughout his long life he watched North Dakota develop from a raw frontier into a modern commonwealth. Because he grew up on the prairies, he knew and understood the heartbreak and frustration of those who had come to North Dakota filled with hope for a better life only to find themselves engaged in a bitter struggle against the forces of nature and the domination of outside interests to attain political and economic independence. As a Dakotan, he knew the people, their problems and their grievances. And it was in the latter that he found the source of his political power. Langer's chief stock in trade became the farmer's feelings of dissatisfaction and his tendency to blame all his ills upon those malignant powers personified in "Big Business." These feelings of persecution, deeply rooted in the farmer's mind from the earliest history of the state, provided fertile ground for implanting and cultivating the kind of political image Mr. Langer sought to create.

Both Mr. Langer's public speeches and his actions were calculated to strengthen the impression he sought to convey of a fearless, independent champion of the underdog standing alone in the forefront of battle, dynamic and incorruptible—a gallant, clever knight of the prairie tilting against incredible odds. But he was far too clever a practitioner of the political arts to project himself as a champion standing above and apart from the common herd. Always he depicted himself as a man of the people who stood

ready to make any sacrifice for the common good.

His warm personality, the readiness with which he made himself accessible to people from all walks of life, his careful attention to the smallest problems of his constituents all tended to reinforce this political image. Even the personal difficulties in which he so frequently found himself were turned to good account. When attempts were made to show him to be a man solely intent upon his own political advancement, when revelations were made of questionable activities in which he was alleged to have engaged, he was able to convince the people that each was one more attack upon them and upon their rights through him.

In all his contacts with the public—individually, in groups and conferences, and upon the speaking platform—his main concern was the projection of an image of a strong, compassionate man extending a protective and friendly hand to those in need; a battler against selfish and greedy forces for the welfare of the poor and aggrieved. Thus, Mr. Langer made little attempt in his public addresses to appeal to the intellect. His strength as a stump speaker lay, not in the careful organization of ideas, but in his talent as a showman, his use of emotional language, and his knowledge of the sources of human motivation. By no stretch of the imagination can his speeches be said to have been the product of careful attention to the purity of rhetoric. They often lack unity and coherence. This deficiency was the result of his habit of making little immediate preparation for a given speech, and a seemingly deliberate choice of a non-conclusive inductive method of organization. This unusual organization, however, enabled him to stimulate a great many members of his unsophisticated audiences with a variety of emotional appeals.

Just as Mr. Langer developed the arrangement of his speeches with a rural audience in mind, so he chose his supporting materials for his

homespun listeners. Shrewdly assessing his auditors, he chose those supporting materials which lent themselves most readily to the development of ideas through narration and which were most likely to appeal to emotion rather than to intellect.

In keeping with his purpose and his audience, Mr. Langer's speeches were of a highly oral nature. This quality resulted from his selection of supporting material, his method of organization, his extemporaneous style of delivery, his use of varied sentence structure and his choice of words.

Mr. Langer's language was the language of the people. It was emotional, it was colloquial, often colorful and spiced with slang. He talked to the North Dakota farmer in language the farmer understood and, more important, recognized as his own. Clearly, Mr. Langer's choice of words contributed to the bond between himself and his listeners.

In making a final assessment of Mr. Langer's persuasive technique, it should be emphasized that his appeal was largely class centered. Throughout his political career, it was toward the common people (particularly the farmer) that he directed most of his persuasive effort. William Langer knew his farmer constituents. He was fully aware of their prejudices, their limitations and their motivations. His method of dealing with them was to take their view of the world and make it his own, to play back to his audience in highly emotional terms those things they believed to be true. His career and his speeches do not reveal any real attempt to lead people toward higher ideals. True, he often used language which seemed to be that of idealism, but in reality he was phrasing the prejudices and self-interest of his listeners in idealistic terms.

It seems clear that Mr. Langer as a speaker and as a practicing

politician very early in his career hit upon an effective formula for selling himself to unsophisticated audiences. His campaign formula was a simple one--action and noise, plus assessibility, plus personal favors, plus emotion produced votes. Death during his nineteenth year in the United States Senate brought to an end a life-long career of winning friends, of influencing voters, and of building the legend of "Wild Bill" Langer.

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