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“THE GREATEST THING I EVER DID WAS JOIN THE UNION”

A HISTORY OF THE DAKOTA TEAMSTERS DURING THE DEPRESSION

JONATHAN F. WAGNER

During the Great Depression the Dakota Teamsters established themselves as the most important union on the northern Plains.¹ Their success involved struggle and sacrifice, with a full complement of setbacks and losses as well as advances and gains. From the 1930s on, the union has reflected certain of the general characteristics of the parent body, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America. Like the International, the Dakota Teamsters was always basically a truck drivers' union, but also something more. As with the International, the concept of jurisdiction was elastic. “In our teamsters union,” the Minot, North Dakota, business agent explained in

1972, “we have had cooks, retail clerks, bakers, confectionery workers, waitresses, butchers, soft drink bottlers, grocery store employees, and many others.”² So it was in the Depression years.

Nevertheless, the Teamsters of North and South Dakota are also distinguishable from the International Teamsters Union and its locals in other parts of the country. The distinctiveness of the Dakotas' Teamsters was conditioned by three major factors: the low density of population, the scarcity of laborers and the lack of a union movement, and the problem of distance. The sparse population of the northern Plains decreed that absolute numbers of union members would always be a major concern. Whereas the locals in Chicago or Detroit could boast membership in the thousands, Dakota unions usually claimed only a few hundred adherents, or fewer. Moreover, the low numbers meant that the union's makeup was more general than that of locals in places such as Cleveland or Los Angeles. John King, an international organizer, explained: “We in North Dakota are too spread out to have craft unions and too, we do not have a large enough population. Therefore we must have general membership locals.”³

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Dakota locals in the Depression were simply too small to be concerned exclusively with one industry. Thus, their business agents were called upon to negotiate not one or two contracts but many different work agreements.

Second, because the Dakotas were basically farming and ranching states, their general population in the 1930s was overwhelmingly nonindustrial and not labor oriented. More often than not, Teamsters had to create sympathy and win converts among a population at best ignorant of unions and at worst hostile to organized labor. John King noted that in the Dakotas "measures used in larger cities will not work."⁴ Unionizing was extra difficult in an environment where, as organizers realized, the general population "was not used to unions."⁵

Finally, the Teamsters in the Dakotas had to carry out their activities in the wide open spaces. Potential members were "spread out" as in few other areas of the country.⁶ The distance between locals and between a local and its members often inhibited union activity and frequently forced the union to resort to unorthodox procedures. For example, a business representative in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, later petitioned the International seeking permission for a mail referendum ballot. He argued that it was physically impossible for the business agent to contact the state's membership in timely fashion because "the distance from Rapid City to Sioux Falls is about 360 miles, from Aberdeen to Sioux Falls about 212 miles, Huron to Sioux Falls about 122 miles, and Watertown to Sioux Falls about 112 miles plus several smaller towns from 50 to 100 miles."⁷ Having to function in the wide open spaces illustrates well what Elwyn B. Robinson has labelled the problem of remoteness in the history of the northern Plains.⁸ The outspread union membership and the great distances between the various locals, and between locals and the International leadership in Washington, made cooperation and cohesiveness much more difficult to attain for the Dakota Teamsters than for the brothers in Chicago, New York, or California. Moreover,

the problem of remoteness conditioned and differentiated Dakota Teamster history as it did the fate of other Dakota institutions and movements during the Depression.

Modern Dakota Teamster history really begins with the Depression. Although there had been earlier attempts at establishing the union, such as the short-lived local founded in Grand Forks in 1919, these efforts had fizzled out in the 1920s, and, as the 1930s began, there were no Teamster locals in either North or South Dakota. Indeed, in the 1920s a rising antilabor movement coupled with the false prosperity of the times made unionizing of all sorts difficult. As the open-shop movement gained strength, union numbers declined across the country. The problems of labor throughout the nation during the 1920s were mirrored in the Dakotas. Two specific developments, D. Jerome Tweton claims, worked to undermine labor's position in North Dakota during these "Lean Years": the collapse of the prolabor Nonpartisan League and the onslaught of an agricultural depression, the impact of which was already being felt in the first years of the decade. Since South Dakota's agricultural economy suffered similarly, its labor movement was also affected adversely.⁹

The 1930s would not seem to have been a propitious time for the Teamsters to make a new beginning in the Dakotas. If the 1920s had seemed bad, the early 1930s appeared worse. The Depression was in many ways more devastating on the northern Plains than in the United States as a whole. When severe drought and falling farm prices combined to all but destroy the ranchers and wheat farmers of the Dakotas, the ruined economies made life for laboring people equally difficult. Money was scarce and jobs hard to come by. Launching a new union movement required not only great energy and dedication but also organizing proficiency. Luckily much of the original organizing skill that would be crucial for the success of the Teamsters on the northern Plains was available in nearby Minneapolis, where the Teamsters had proven the strength of their organization.



FIG. 1. Three Sioux Falls Teamsters, 1939. From left to right, Harold Janzik (milk driver), Charles Jan (ice cream maker), Howard Rang (shipping clerk). Photo courtesy of Charles Jan.

In 1934 Minneapolis became the setting of a dramatic clash between Teamsters Union Local 544 and a powerful alliance of Twin Cities employers. Prior to 1934, Minneapolis had been an antilabor, open-shop city, but with the advent of the New Deal's National Recovery Act and its prolabor provisions, the truckers of Minneapolis moved to challenge the city's antilabor tradition. In the late spring of 1934, Local 544, under the aggressive leadership of William Brown and the Dunne brothers (Ray, Miles, and Grant), demanded improved working conditions, increased wages, and recognition of the union as bargaining agent. The strongly negative response of the employers prompted a truckers' strike that shut the city down. Employers responded

by arming special deputies to force the trucks back on the road. In the ensuing violence, heads were broken and lives were lost until the governor of Minnesota called out the National Guard to prevent the escalation of class warfare. Finally, in the summer of 1934, under pressure from both the state and federal governments, a settlement was reached in which, according to Ray Dunne, the union secured what it had "fought and bled for from the beginning."¹²

The victory of the union in Minneapolis strengthened an earlier resolve of the leadership to extend its efforts beyond the Twin Cities and into the Dakotas, an organizing task for which the Dunne brothers in particular were well qualified.¹³ The Dunnes either



FIG. 2. *The Dunne brothers at work.* Photo courtesy Anchor Foundation. Reprinted by permission of Pathfinder Press, Inc.

belonged to or sympathized with the tradition of left-wing communism associated with Leon Trotsky.¹² Although the rank and file with whom they worked were clearly aware of their left-wing sympathies, the Dunnes never pushed their radical ideology to the point of alienating the membership. As efficient workers and effective speakers, they were generally viewed by the nonradical rank and file as persons to be trusted.¹³ In the wake of the Minneapolis victory the Dunnes envisioned the establishment of a district Drivers Council to coordinate the activities of Teamsters throughout the upper Midwest. They turned their attention first to Fargo, North Dakota.

NORTH DAKOTA

Several reasons explain why Fargo appeared a likely place to the Teamsters. Fargo was a significant rail and trucking center with a tradition of labor and labor organizing. More important, Fargo had a Teamsters union by 1934. In October 1933, Clarence Peterson, a barber, had initially contacted the International leadership in Washington for help in establishing a Fargo Teamsters local. Daniel J. Tobin, the president of the union, responded positively by sending out an application for a charter. Peterson and William H. Cruden, a milkwagon driver, went to work soliciting members and soon secured commitments from seven milk and coal drivers. They then applied for and were granted a charter as Teamster Local 173 of Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota.¹⁴

In order to strengthen its position in both states, Local 173 formed ties in February 1934 with Minneapolis Teamsters Local 574. Later that year, Local President Cruden and a Fargo delegation went to Minneapolis to assist in the truckers' strike. Impressed by the sincerity and dedication of the men from Fargo, the Minneapolis organizers offered to teach the westerners some strategy techniques. In May, 1934, William Brown and Miles (Mickey) Dunne visited Fargo to lend advice and encouragement to the sister local. Fargo's initial response

to the Minneapolis overtures was so promising that the Minneapolis leadership agreed in the fall of 1934 to send Dunne to Fargo, where he became business agent and organizer for Local 173.¹⁵

According to the *Fargo Forum*, it was not until the arrival of Miles Dunne "that things began to hum" for Local 173.¹⁶ More precisely, this meant that in the fall of 1934 the union rapidly increased its membership to more than seven hundred members. Its newfound strength prompted it to flex its muscles in a test case in November 1934. The creamery drivers of Local 173 struck the milk industry for, among other things, the closed shop, increased wages, a forty-eight hour week, and union recognition. The strike organizers skillfully rallied union members and their supporters, employing a new device: cruising picket assignments of two or three men in a car or truck. As Sannes noted, this mobile picketing gave the strikers several tactical advantages. They could patrol for scab drivers on the streets and highways and quickly move reinforcements to any place that trouble developed. The moving pickets could continue to harass a scab driver as his truck proceeded along its route.¹⁷

Although the police supported the employers and once arrested Dunne and several other picketers, the Teamsters persisted. The city's Trades and Labor Assembly supported Local 173's cause as did the Cass County Farmer's Holiday Association. The governor of North Dakota, Ole H. Olson, chaired the mediation committee that eventually broke the deadlock between intransigent employers and determined strikers. From a strike that had lasted just over two weeks, the union emerged triumphant, having secured bargaining agent recognition and substantial wage gains.

The success of the creamery drivers prompted 173's leadership to confront the coal industry.¹⁸ The Fargo Teamsters' coal strike of 1935 remains one of the most controversial and dramatic episodes in the entire history of the Dakota Teamsters. Coal represented life itself in the midst of a bitterly cold winter. Stung by the success of the milk drivers just a

few months before, the Fargo employers were determined to prevent any further union advances. Miles Dunne and the radical local leadership were equally determined that their union be recognized. The resulting strike cut off the delivery of coal to the city. City officials moved forcefully. The police harassed pickets and secured warrants for the arrest of Miles Dunne and the union leadership. On 27 January 1935, the city police, seeking to snatch Miles Dunne, gassed the union hall, arrested some ninety-five union members, marched them off to jail, and charged them with rioting.¹⁹ Although only a few of those arrested were actually forced to stand trial, the raid had suppressed the strikers, dealing the union an extremely bitter and disheartening setback. Displeased with the union's role in the crisis, International President Daniel Tobin revoked the charter of Local 173 in March 1935. According to Farrell Dobbs, the pretext Tobin gave for revocation was nonpayment of per capita dues to the International. The real reason, Dobbs insisted, was Tobin's conservative disapproval of the increasing militancy of Local 173.²⁰ Disapproval from the center, however, did not signal the end of the Teamsters in Fargo.

In a little over a year, a new union, Local 116, was chartered to carry on where 173 had left off.²¹ And it did. In October 1937, the union called a strike involving about two hundred men against six Fargo transport companies. The members pursued their object vigorously, even when that meant going outside Fargo. The *Grand Forks Herald* reported that one resisting transport company employee "was halted near Hawley [Minnesota] and struck in the face when he refused to accede to demands of men he said represented the Fargo strikers." The settlement arrived at on 30 October provided much of what the union had originally demanded—a reduction in work hours per week, a pay raise of between 12 1/2 to 20 cents an hour, and recognition of the union's right to appoint labor representatives to negotiate with management.²²

The unionizing effort soon spread from

Fargo to other cities in the Dakotas. In North Dakota, Teamster locals appeared in Grand Forks and Minot in 1937 and in Bismarck in 1939. All of these locals, as affiliates of the American Federation of Labor, associated themselves with the North Dakota State Labor Federation as well. Although variations existed among these locals, the several centers faced similar problems and tried similar solutions. For example, Grand Forks, north of Fargo, established Teamsters Local 581 in the spring of 1937. The *Grand Forks Herald* reported on 9 May that the charter had arrived from Teamster headquarters in Washington and that the union would include "truck drivers in the city and employees of wholesale grocery concerns, creameries, and coal and lumber yards."²³ In the start-up and first years of this local, Minneapolis 544 was intimately involved. According to one long-time Grand Forks Teamster, the Dunne brothers often visited and "extended assistance whenever the local appeared to be in trouble."²⁴ William Brown, the Minneapolis general drivers union president, likewise appeared in Grand Forks to help organize and to negotiate on behalf of the new local.²⁵

Like Fargo 116, Grand Forks Local 581 did not hesitate to press for immediate advantages for its members. Directed by its business agent, Floyd Coverston, Local 581 followed Fargo's lead and in mid-October 1937 moved against the city's transfer firms to try to force concessions similar to those granted in Fargo. Although only one shipping company was actually struck, the union gained advantages not unlike those won by Local 116.²⁶

More dramatically though, at the end of the same month Local 581 struck the major wholesale grocery firms—Grand Forks Mercantile, Gamble-Robinson, and Nash-Stone Companies. This strike involved some forty employees and included the usual wage, working hours, and union recognition demands. Although for the most part peaceful, the strike was forceful. The strikers brought to a standstill all truck movement at the involved grocery firms and decisively countered the

actions of employers. For example, on 2 November, when strike breakers working for the Grand Forks Mercantile Company sought to load a railway car with perishables, "the union men pulled away a gangplank reaching from the warehouse to the car, then pushed it away from the loading platform. They also refused to allow Northern Pacific railway men to replace the padlock with a seal." The employers asked Governor William L. Langer to intervene, but his government held off taking sides and the strike succeeded. On 4 November, the *Grand Forks Herald* reported that workers returned to their jobs with "wage increases of from 4 to 21 percent, reduced hours, seniority rights, vacations and sick leave with pay."²⁷

In late January 1938 the Grand Forks local struck the city's thirteen coal companies because the owners would neither recognize the union nor meet with its representatives. The strike by the sixty workers who distributed coal in Grand Forks never became as emotional nor as violent as its Fargo and Sioux Falls counterparts because the city administration quickly prevailed upon both parties to accept a truce. On 1 February, union members went back to work while their representatives sought to bargain with the employers,²⁸ but the acceptance of the truce had divided the union's ranks. This helped stiffen employer resistance, and the ultimate settlement arrived at under the auspices of the National Labor Relations Board was a compromise. The union received recognition but neither the wage concessions nor the closed shop it sought.

Six months later, on 16 August, Local 581 launched a much more forceful and ultimately successful strike against an old adversary, Gamble-Robinson. When union and employer could not agree on how to adjust wage and seniority rights after the expiration of the contract struggled over the year before, seven drivers and eleven warehousemen went on strike. On 18 August a scuffle took place at the Gamble-Robinson plant and three union picketers were arrested and charged with criminal conspiracy for attempting to interfere

with a loading operation. The union protested loudly that the police had unfairly taken the employer's side, and the Teamsters continued the picketing and resistance. On 26 August another twelve pickets were arrested, this time for refusing to move away from a railway boxcar that was scheduled to be loaded, but still the union continued the strike. After seven weeks the union reached a settlement to its liking. Local 581 members received a ten percent wage increase and recognition of their seniority rights from Gamble-Robinson.²⁹

In Minot, North Dakota Teamster Local 74 showed a similar pattern of outside organizers and militancy. In 1937, the American Federation of Labor launched a major organizing drive in Minot with a recruitment rally on the evening of 25 March. The impressive array of speakers and dignitaries included North Dakota governor William L. Langer; Minot Mayor J. A. Peterson; Meyer L. Lewis, the national organizer for the A. F. of L.; Morris Erickson, secretary of the North Dakota Farmers Union; Pat Corcoran, vice president of the Minnesota Federation of Labor; and Farrell Dobbs, secretary of Local 544 of the Minneapolis Teamsters and Drivers Union. The tone of the rally and subsequent organizing activity was set by Meyer Lewis who assured listeners that "we didn't come to bring to Minot or to the state a threat; . . . we are not interested in causing trouble; we don't want people hurt. But sometimes that is the price when people will not understand the problems of labor."³⁰

The following day the several labor leaders met with the city's existing unions, such as the electrical workers, the bricklayers, the stagehands, and the railway clerks, in an effort to strengthen these unions. At the same time an attempt was made to organize new unions, including what would become Local 74 of the Teamsters. On 1 April 1937, the *Minot Daily News* reported that Teamster recruitment had gone well with the membership drive having enrolled about one hundred members.³¹

The Minneapolis militants, led by the Dunne brothers, were as active in Minot as



FIG. 3. *Farrell Dobbs*. Photo courtesy Anchor Foundation. Reprinted by permission of Pathfinder Press, Inc.

they had been in Fargo and Grand Forks. Also present was Farrell Dobbs, one of the most effective of Minneapolis 574's leaders.¹² Dobbs, who combined organizing skills with ideological radicalism, not only contributed to expanding Teamster units into the Dakotas during the Depression, but he also was the guiding force behind organizing over-the-road drivers in the upper Midwest. The extent of Dobbs's radicalism can be seen by his career after the Depression: between 1948 and 1960 he ran four times for president of the United States on the Socialist Workers ticket. Dobbs employed his significant oratorical and persuasive powers to good effect in Minot.

Once established, the Minot Teamsters union did not hesitate to push for advances nor to strike. On 19 July 1937, Local 74 struck the city's ten creameries when demands for wage increases, hour reductions, and union recognition were turned down. This was, the

Grand Forks Herald announced, "the first major strike in Minot since the railroad employees walk-out in 1922." Lasting only four days, the strike nevertheless created a great stir, for it threatened the city's supply of milk and milk products and affected some one hundred workers, including cream graders, churnmen, pasteurizers, buttermilk dryer operators, samplers, can washers, cleanup men, cream dumpers, tub and box liners, butter wrappers, milk bottlers, and city delivery men. Although shortlived, the strike involved enough violence that six union men were eventually charged with assault or malicious mischief. Most of the trouble involved efforts to interdict the transportation of milk and cream. Other labor groups supported the Teamsters, including representatives from the Ward County Farmers Union. On 22 July the union accepted a settlement calling for "a minimum wage of 41 cents per hour, eight hour day, six day week, and a week vacation with pay to employees who have worked for the company at least one year."¹³ The union demand for a closed shop was not conceded.

Less than a month after the creameries strike, Local 74 struck again but with far less success. The strike, which began 11 August, involved fourteen drivers of the city's taxi and bus lines. The owners of the cabs defied the strikers by driving their own cars, undermining the strike from the beginning. In addition there were no acts of intimidation nor violence. The November settlement gave drivers little of what they had originally sought. Union recognition, a major goal of the strikers, was not really conceded. Rather the settlement agreement stipulated that "a seniority list must be posted with no discrimination for or against nonunion employees where ability and experience are substantially equal" and "there shall be no discrimination by the union against any employee because of lack of union affiliation." Drivers received at best token wage increases. Worst, only four of the original fourteen strikers were returned to work.¹⁴ The failure of the taxi strike, due to employer intransigence and the limited num-

ber of union men involved, represented a momentary setback. By early 1938, the union's spirit and fortunes were once again on the rise.³⁵

SOUTH DAKOTA

South Dakota developments closely paralleled events in North Dakota. By late 1936 Teamsters were unionizing in the state. Between 1936 and 1939 locals associated with the South Dakota State Labor Federation were founded at Watertown, Aberdeen, Huron, Rapid City, and, most important, Sioux Falls. From the start of Sioux Falls Local 749, Minneapolis 544 was involved. Farrell Dobbs was present.³⁶ As Charles Jan, one of the founding members of 749 recalled, all three Dunne brothers made appearances in Sioux Falls and contributed financial and organizational help. In addition, Happy Holstein and Jack Maloney, both Dunne appointees, were specifically dispatched to monitor the new local's development.³⁷

In South Dakota the Teamsters worked militantly to better the lot of their members. Following the example of Fargo and Grand Forks to the north, Local 749 struck all twelve transportation firms in Sioux Falls on 13 November 1937. The eighty-six strikers demanded union recognition and better wages, and they set up pickets at the loading depots and on the roads leading into the city, effectively shutting down the transport business. Sioux Falls owners were particularly upset with the involvement of so-called "outside agitators" and initially refused to confer with any but local men.³⁸

One of the prominent "outside agitators" was Jack Maloney. Born of immigrant Irish parents and raised by a Teamster stepfather in Minnesota, Maloney was radicalized early. As a young man, he became a union representative in the Minneapolis drivers' strike of 1934, staying on after the strike as part of Local 574's organizing staff. He was a member of the group that initiated the Central District Drivers Council, the successful effort to organize the



FIG. 4. *Jack Maloney.* Photo courtesy Anchor Foundation. Reprinted by permission of Pathfinder Press, Inc.

over-the-road drivers throughout the upper Midwest. Because of his experience, militancy, and general organizing skill, Maloney was assigned in the fall of 1937 to help the leaders of the newly chartered Teamster Local in Sioux Falls, who, according to Farrell Dobbs, had specifically requested Maloney's presence.³⁹

Although the strike started out peacefully and remained so for about ten days, it turned violent on 23 November, the day after the operators threatened to hire new men to replace any truckers who stayed on strike. The union's spokesman, Happy Holstein (another "outside agitator" who had been sent by Minneapolis 574 to Sioux Falls), responded by charging that the owners' ultimatum was "an attempt to break the strike and means that the men will have to go out on the streets and fight for their jobs. We do not want this but we will not see strike breakers on our jobs." Violence flared up when fifty strikers sought to prevent

about the same number of strike breakers from unloading a railroad carload of furniture. The police had to break up the resultant melee with tear gas and clubs. "A dozen on each side," it was reported, "emerged with black eyes and bleeding noses." The strikers held on, however, and on 28 November an agreement ending the strike was reached. The settlement provided for union recognition, collective bargaining, seniority rights, and a wage increase, but no closed shop.⁴⁵

For Local 749, a less successful but even more dramatic confrontation than the transfer companies' strike occurred the following winter when the Sioux Falls Teamsters struck the coal industry. Here again, as in Fargo and Grand Forks, a raw nerve had been touched, for the threat to the city's source of heat in the depth of winter vitally concerned everyone. The strikers, including the coal haulers and yard workers in all eighteen of the city's coal

yards, called for increased wages, union recognition, and reduced working hours. With emotions running high, the affair soon turned nasty. Already by 1 February, the second day of the strike, strike breakers and strikers were squared off. The *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader* reported that "A glass window in a coal truck cab and the window of a striker's car were smashed as coal drivers and pickets hurled coal at each other." In response to the union's determination the city government itself stiffened, ordering thirteen special police added to the force and coal deliveries escorted by police cars. The violence did not cease, however. Union men did whatever they could to stop the coal trucks, including, according to the local paper, scattering nails in a number of coal yards and taking offending drivers to union headquarters where they were forced to join the union. As the strike dragged on into its third week, the violence increased. At one point, strikers and police were engaged in hand to hand fighting. "Eight officers," the *Grand Forks Herald* asserted, "responding to a disturbance call, reported they found four men attacking three others who were manning a coal truck. The four turned on the officers but were soon subdued after a brief fight."⁴⁶

In the end Sioux Falls Mayor Graff and District Attorney Barron prevailed over the strikers because they consistently pursued a hardline, no compromise policy. From the beginning, the police frequently arrested strikers, jailing as many as seventeen in one day. The prosecutor's office and police required little pretext to act. The *Argus Leader* reported on 18 February that District Attorney Barron would "file a charge of assault with a dangerous weapon against Phil Johnson . . . [because] Johnson had bound his fists with black tire tape." By the end of February the strike was virtually over; union drivers had been replaced at the coal yards and normal coal deliveries had been resumed. During the bitter confrontation, however, the Teamsters had won the sympathy of their fellow Sioux Falls workers. Throughout the strike's course, the Sioux Falls Labor Assembly soundly con-



FIG. 5. *Happy Holstein*. Photo courtesy Anchor Foundation. Reprinted by permission of Pathfinder Press, Inc.

demned the mayor and the district attorney for their "persecution" of the union coal drivers.⁴²

Although the Teamsters clearly lost the coal strike, the South Dakota union rebounded. Locals in Sioux Falls and elsewhere continued to seek better conditions for their members and pursued successful strikes in the summer of 1938. In August the bakery drivers in Sioux Falls and Teamsters working for Gamble-Robinson in South Dakota walked off the job. Both strikes won the union workers increased wages and recognition of seniority rights. Writing about the South Dakota Teamster experience some years later, the Minnesota advisor Farrell Dobbs claimed that, overall, the strikes strengthened the union.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the Depression the International Brotherhood of Teamsters had clearly established itself in nine centers on the northern Plains: Fargo, Minot, Grand Forks, and Bismarck in North Dakota and Sioux Falls, Aberdeen, Watertown, Huron, and Rapid City in South Dakota. These Teamsters locals had associated themselves with the larger labor federations in both states. By national standards, the Dakota locals were small and fragile. Watertown, South Dakota, Local 277, for example, had only 23 members in 1937.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, these unions had developed an *elan* of camaraderie and cooperation during the Depression. As one old timer put it, "Everybody was behind everybody back in them days."⁴⁵ Time and again these green locals proved themselves unafraid to do battle for their rank and file. Of the thirty-four strikes in North Dakota between 1936 and 1940, the Teamsters had the largest share.⁴⁶

Most Teamster strikes were effective. For one reason, the strikers showed dogged determination, standing up to employers, strike breakers, and the police. Many of the strikes involved violence and arrests. Second, the Teamster strikes involved vital industries: food, dairy products, coal (the source of heat

in one of the coldest parts of the country), and the general provisioning of the population. Because of the crucial nature of the industries and businesses struck, the small number of strikers often did not greatly matter. The Dakota Teamsters won as frequently as they did because the services they provided were essential for the economy of the northern Plains and for the people living there.

From the beginning, the Dakota Teamsters exhibited another of Elwyn Robinson's themes of Dakota history, namely dependency on outsiders. Although Sannes has described in detail how local Dakota leaders played important roles in the evolution of the Teamsters on the northern Plains, influences from outside the Dakotas were crucial. As noted, William Brown, Farrell Dobbs, and the Dunne brothers from Minneapolis 544 supervised the establishment and evolution of the Dakota locals. Dakota Teamsters relied upon these leaders for their experience and know-how. From the first milk and coal strikes in Fargo in 1934-35, Minneapolis 544 was the model to which Dakota Teamsters looked. In the years that followed, this dependency continued.

As the Depression ended, new problems and pressures faced the Teamster locals in the Dakotas. Although membership increases and militant activity all but ceased during the war, the union expanded rapidly in the prosperous postwar years. Even the antilabor mood of the late 1940s, which saw open-shop statutes become law in both Dakotas, could not arrest the union's growth. By the early 1950s a movement was underway to consolidate Teamster union growth in the Dakotas, resulting in the 1952 formation of a Joint Council for the Dakotas that would run the affairs of the scattered locals. This move to amalgamate illustrates yet another of Elwyn Robinson's themes of Dakota history—the Too-Much Mistake and the subsequent necessary adjustment to compensate for the original overindulgence—but it also illustrates the union's flexibility. Clearly in the enthusiasm of the Depression years, Dakota Teamster organizers had not been overly concerned either with

numbers or with economic viability. Joint Council 82 sought to remedy this.

By the formation of the Joint Council in 1952, the modern Teamsters union had been in existence in the Dakotas for nearly 20 years, and the reasons for its viability lay in its Depression successes. During the 1930s the Teamsters' determination and imagination confronted the particularly Dakota problems of sparse population, wide open spaces, and anti-union sentiment. In the course of the second half of the decade the union had acclimated itself to the northern Plains and proved its will to survive. The lessons learned in the 1930s and the successes enjoyed enabled the Dakota Teamsters to exist until the amalgamation of 1952 and to move ahead into the succeeding decades.

NOTES

1. Quotation in title from Morris Sletmoe, long-time Fargo, N. Dak., Teamster. Author's interview, 24 June 1986.
2. Sylvan Hubrig, "Someday We've Got to Get Organized," (New York: 1972), p. 70.
3. Joint Council Minutes, Fargo, N. Dak., 20 March 1949.
4. General Membership Minutes, Bismarck, N. Dak., Local 123, 4 April 1949.
5. Author's interview with Ray Scheile, Grand Forks, N. Dak., 1 July 1986, and Anthony Goetzfried, Bismarck, N. Dak., 17 June 1986.
6. Author's interview with Gene Willits, Fargo, N. Dak., 24 June 1986, and Anthony Goetzfried, Bismarck, N. Dak., 17 June 1986.
7. Greg Helvig to James R. Hoffa, 10 April 1961, Teamsters Union Papers, Sioux Falls, S. Dak.
8. Elwyn B. Robinson, *The Themes of North Dakota History* (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota Department of History, 1959). Robinson's suggestions about North Dakota have been applied in this paper to South Dakota as well.
9. D. Jerome Tweton, *In Union There is Strength* (Grand Forks: North Dakota Carpenter/Craftsman Heritage Society, 1982), p. 49. Because of limitations of space, I have not dealt with pre-1930 attempts at establishing the Teamsters on the northern Plains. As Tweton indicates, a labor movement had begun to develop in the Dakotas by the end of the nineteenth century and experienced considerable prosperity and rapid growth, particularly during the war years. Apparently the Teamsters were involved in this expansion. How much so and to what extent remains to be explored in another article.
10. Thomas R. Brooks, *Toil and Trouble: A History of American Labor* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1964), p. 169. See also Philip Taft, *Organized Labor in American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 445-56.
11. *The Militant*, 10 November 1934, p. 1.
12. Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 478.
13. Author's interview with Charles Jan, Minot, N. Dak., 8 August 1986, and Arthur Carlson, Sioux Falls, S. Dak., 8 July 1986.
14. Erling Sannes, "There Is Power in a Union: Organizing Milk Wagon Drivers in Fargo in 1934," *North Dakota History* 54, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 4.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
16. "Truck Driver Slugged as He Delivers Load of Coal," *Fargo Forum* (hereafter cited as FF), 31 January 1935.
17. Sannes, "There Is Power in a Union," p. 8.
18. Henry Martinson, *History of North Dakota Labor* (Fargo, N. Dak.: Labor Temple, 1970), p. 29.
19. "95 Jailed After Strike Riot," FF, 28 January 1935.
20. Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), p. 49. Existing Teamsters Union records do not contain the reasons for the revocation. Author's conversation with Erling Sannes, Minot, N. Dak., July 1987.
21. Martinson, *North Dakota Labor*, p. 34.
22. "Fargo Trucking Halted by Strike," *Grand Forks Herald* (hereafter cited as GFH), 14 October 1937; "Continue Parlays on Fargo Strike," GFH, 22 October 1937; "Settle Trucking Strike at Fargo," GFH, 31 October 1937.
23. "Charter Arrives for Drivers Union," GFH, 9 May 1937.
24. Author's interview with Howard Norman, Grand Forks, N. Dak., 2 July 1986.
25. "Elsholtz Division Strike Here Settled," GFH, 3 November 1937.
26. *Ibid.*
27. "Union Pickets Halt Perishables Loading," GFH, 2 November 1937; "Business Normal After Strike Here," GFH 6 November 1937 (quoted).
28. "Truck Drivers of Coal Firms Here Strike Today," GFH, 28 January 1938; "Seek Settling of Dispute in 15 Day Period," GFH, 1 February 1938.
29. "Gamble Robinson Strike Continues," GFH, 17 August 1938; "Arrest 3 in Fruit Firm Strike Here," GFH, 18 April 1938; "12 Strike Pickets Bound Over Here," GFH, 27 August 1938; "Gamble Robinson Strike Ends After 7 Weeks," GFH, 5 October 1938.
30. "Local Leadership in Labor Organization Drive Pledged By Speeches at Minot Rally," *Minot*

Daily News (hereafter cited as MDN), 26 March 1937.

31. "Truck Drivers Climax Membership Drive with Rally Wednesday Night," MDN, 1 April 1937.

32. Author's interview with Ernest Mertens, Fargo, N. Dak., 24 June 1986.

33. "Strike Called at Creameries," MDN, 19 July 1937; "Seek Settlement in Minot Strike," GFH, 21 July 1937 (quoted); "Agreement Ends Strike in Minot," GFH, 24 July 1937; "Strike Called at Creameries," MDN, 19 July 1937; "Strike Ended at Creameries," MDN, 25 July 1937 (quoted).

34. "Minot Cab Owners Operate Taxis as Drivers Strike," GFH, 13 August 1937; "Strike of Taxi Drivers Settled," MDN, 3 November 1937 (quoted).

35. Author's interview with Ernest Mertens, Fargo, N. Dak., 24 June 1986.

36. "Fight over CIO May Bob Up at AFL Gathering," *The Daily Argus Leader* (hereafter cited as AL), 7 August 1937.

37. Author's interview with Charles Jan, Minot, N. Dak., 6 August 1986.

38. "Truck Strikers Block Highways; Tie up 12 Firms," AL, 13 November 1937; "Operators Object to Dealing with Minneapolis Men," AL, 16 November 1937.

39. Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, p. 155. The Minneapolis Local carried, at various times, the number 544 and 574.

40. "Crisis Expected Tuesday Morning in Truck Strike," AL, 22 November 1937 (quoted); "Violence Flares in S. D. Strike," *Bismarck Tribune*, 23 November 1937 (quoted); "Sioux Falls Truck Strike Peace Agreement Reached," GFH, 28 November 1937.

41. "Violence Seen on Second Day of Strike," AL, 1 February 1938 (quoted); "Police Blame Strikers for New Violence," AL, 4 February 1938; "Sioux Falls Police Fight Coal Strikes," GFH, 18 February 1938 (quoted).

42. "Officers Jail 17 Strikers in Sudden Thrust," AL, 11 February 1938; "Felony Charge to be Filed in Strike Case," AL, 18 February 1938 (quoted); "Labor Assembly Condemns Graff and Barron in Strikes," AL, 15 February 1938 (quoted).

43. Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, p. 155.

44. Expenditure and Receipt Record for 1937, Watertown, S. Dak., Local 273.

45. Author's interview with Gene Willits, Fargo, N. Dak., 24 January 1986.

46. Tweton, *In Union There is Strength*, p. 64.