No Butter Shall Pass!

Even though I must have been through the place a thousand times, I didn't even know it was a place--James, Iowa, just up the road from Leeds. From up above on Google Earth, James, looks more like a camp ground than a suburb; but right there on highway 75, it sits peacefully alongside the meandering Floyd, far southern Plymouth County.

Truth is, this story has little to do with James, Iowa. The town merits mention only as a setting, as in, "this whole business went down right here in James, Iowa." Nobody in James had a thing to do with it.

The trouble started with optimism, too much of it. It started with the Roaring Twenties and stock market bubbles that had everyone plus the family dog investing. Out here in farm country, the Great Depression started with bumper crops--way too much wheat, way too much grain, so much farmers found their produce worthless.

By 1933, four years after Black Tuesday's legendary crash, prices for hogs were well beyond abysmal--$3.85 for hundred weight, four cents per pound. Even a city slicker knows you can't raise hogs if your ledger goes that far south. People not only couldn't make money, all they could do was lose it.

And thus lose their farms. Which is what happened. Bank foreclosures skyrocketed, and, in time out here in the country, there were more farm sales than hymn sings.

Things weren't better for milkers. In 1932, dairy people were getting a dollar per hundred weight, two cents a quart. Like owning a tractor whose only gear is reverse. Good farm families were going under.

Along came a firebrand who felt called to save the farmer, Milo Reno, Des Moines, Iowa, who preached the gospel of solidarity to create a farmer's union, "The Farmers Holiday Association." It's impossible to imagine today, but Milo Reno and rock-bottom farm prices started Iowa farmers singing "Solidarity Forever" like a steel-mill union.

Some farmers from "the Holiday Association" got together one night in James, Iowa, Highway 75, just north of Sioux City, where pickets created a blockade. Called them a mob if you will, but others, more sympathetic, might say it was simply a collective action. What it wasn't, was peaceful; what it was, was violent.

Markets tanked. Farmers lost shirts and schivvies because of too much of everything, so the boys took a holiday and dumped produce and blocked roads so other farmers couldn't bring their goods to market.

Dumped it. Just outside of Moville, Holiday pickets dumped 400 gallons of milk in a ditch. At Kingsley, another bunch stopped a milker from Cherokee and dumped 100 gallons right there on the street.
They weren't kidding around. The boys were serious, but then their lives and families were at stake.

Now back to James, Iowa. What happened that cold January day on highway 75 was a butter dump. Some poor farmer who probably didn't like the Holiday boys to begin with was bringing butter to town, when highway pickets stopped the truck, took that butter, and dumped it over the bridge and onto the frozen Floyd, then simply picked up the farmer's pick-up, turned it around to the north, and spanked him on his way.

But what seemed a crime to those Holiday ruffians was to let that butter sit on the icy Floyd, so they climbed down off the bridge and retrieved that butter once the victim was on his way home.

Just in case you're wondering, this James, Iowa story's got a bit of Robin Hood even though the men are all in bibs. The very next day on County Trunk C-70 going east out of James, when ordinary farmers and their wives picked up mail, they reached into the box and pulled three or four pounds of free butter, descended, it must have seemed, from on high.

It was no Holiday back then, really. It was a sad time, an angry time right there on the Floyd River bridge just outside James, Iowa, right here in Siouxland.

And there's a whole magazine of more stories too--including one about a judge who got beat on and threatened with a rope. But that's a story for another time.