

Hunger in the Fields and Milk in the Streets; Mother Bloor Comes to Sioux City

Strange place to start, but let's just go for it.

Ninety-five years ago, just about everyone in Sioux City would have recognized Mother Bloor, a 70-year-old wrecking crew who'd stormed into town from North Dakota just to agitate, to stir up a batch of trouble with mad farmers here, and there were more than a few because the whole lot of 'em could do nothing but watch their operations slip-slide into receivership.

Wasn't pleasant. Not at all. Fuel there was for the flames Emma Reeve Bloor, Mother Bloor, joyfully ignited with her own flaming tapers. And there were other provocateurs. Trust me.

Mother Bloor was a card-carrying American Communist. Seriously. Even though she was born on Staten Island and knew next to nothing about farming, she understood very well that far and near the fields were teeming with ripened farmers ready to overthrow any dang thing smelling of government, even here in conservative northwest Iowa. Those farmers weren't communists, but they were sure enough confident that something major had to be tossed out of the way life was lived.,

It was the Great Depression here on the Middle Border, and Mother Bloor leaned in to start strikes whenever and wherever she could tend 'em, hoping to focus all that brewing anger on the evil of the capitalist system. She had an office right here in Sioux City, and another in LeMars.

She made it happen all right. But then, her part wasn't back-breaking either. Everywhere you looked wrath was up and ready to harvest. Joy had gone belly-up a long time before farmers themselves saw no more light at the end of the road.

A farmer from MacGregor, clear across the state, shipped five calves to market in Chicago. That sale cost him two dollars. Cost him, mind you. Got a bill back, in fact. Sound familiar?

“Today,” said a woman in the *Des Moines Register*, “worn out with the struggle, with no money to buy gas or pay the fiddler, these people sit at home, brooding over their plight. It’s hard to even crack a joke.”

Right here in Siouxland, things reached fever pitch by way of an epidemic of foreclosures and farm sales. Nobody was making money; people licking their plates were losing what little they had.

Amazingly, farmers from right here in the neighborhood got together to scream out loud that they damned-well wouldn't take it any longer. Mother Bloor just stoked a fire already roaring, as did other stem-winders, one of them a real Iowa farmer named Milo Reno.

Right there in LeMars, Iowa, a boiling hot mob grabbed a judge right out of his courtroom, dragged him outside into the street, beat on him, and tried to make him swear he'd never again foreclose on another dirt poor farmer.

Judge Charles C. Bradley was his name. He looked up at his red-hot tormentors, and politely refused. Just said no.

So the strikers tossed him on a flatbed truck, drove him just outside of town, where they ripped off his pants and threw a noose over his head. It was April 23, 1933, and it looked for all the world as if Judge Bradley wouldn't be swinging another gavel.

Then the boys told him to pray, and he did, right aloud, "Oh, Lord, I pray thee, do justice to all men."

It may have been the prayer that quelled the anger, but whatever stepped in the way, the ruckus ended with the judge's prayer. The men got back in their trucks but left the judge on the side of the road.

All of that just outside LeMars, Iowa.

Mother Bloor loved it, I'm sure. She'd worked with copper miners up in Calumet, Michigan, Christmas Eve, 1913, when someone yelled "fire" in a second-floor hall full of dirt-poor copper miners and their families. Seventy-three died, mostly kids.

If you're asking why I'm even talking about Mother Bloor, just remember, back at the time of the Farmer's Holiday here, she had an office right downtown Sioux City. But she was there at the fire.

An American troubadour put the story of the massacre to music, and I can't help but think there's no better way to finish this whole Depression-era saga than to hear a voice from that time and all time.

You guessed it--Woody Guthrie--this time singing "The 1913 Massacre."