
The Green Corn Rebellion in Oklahoma

[events of Aug. 3, 1917]

by Bertha Hale White †

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The story of the wartime prisoners of Oklahoma is one of the blind, desperate rebellion of a people driven to fury and despair by conditions which are incredible in this stage of our so-called civilization. Even the lowliest of the poor in the great industrial centers of the country have no conception of the depths of misery and poverty that is the common lot of the tenant farmer of the South.

As long as we can remember, we have heard of their exploitation. We are told that the tenant must mortgage his crop before he can obtain the seed to put into the ground; that when the harvesting is over out of the fruits of his labor he can pay only a part of the debt so incurred, and that a burden of old debts must be carried over and added to new loans for the season; that debt piles upon debt until life becomes only a stolid acceptance of conditions that were hopeless in the beginning.

But when we set out to learn the truth regarding the uprising in Oklahoma which resulted in the imprisonment of so many of these tenant farmers, the stark horror and despair of their condition was brought into the pitiless light.

Perhaps the bankers and the landlords, those who grind the face of the poor, had never been more successful in their operations than in the year 1914. It is against the law in Oklahoma to charge more than 10 percent interest, but it is a law that is evaded and violated with impunity. Interest was compounded — rates rose merrily until they ran anywhere from 18 to 60 percent. And in their desperation, the tenants con-

ceived the plan of organizing, of banding themselves together to fight the exactions of landlord and banker.

The result of these efforts was a nonpolitical organization known as the Working Class Union. It had but one object — to force downward rents and interest rates. The center of the movement seems to have been the Seminole country, where even today one meets more frequently the Indian than the white man.

It has been asserted by authoritative people that not 1 in 15 of these tenants can read or write. It is obvious that very little of what is happening in the world is ever very closely understood by the majority of them.

In 1916 the Working Class Union had attained a membership throughout Eastern Oklahoma of perhaps 20,000. Although the union had disavowed any participation in politics, rumors of war had reached the officials of the organization. The issue of the campaign to them was simply a question of going to war or staying out of it.

They understood that President Wilson stood squarely upon a campaign pledge to keep America out of the European abyss, and the Working Class Union discarded its keeping-out-of-politics position and went into the campaign to re-elect Woodrow Wilson.

But they were soon wakened from the dream of security. They learned that war had come. They were told that officers would come into their pitiful homes and take from them their sons and brothers. That they would be sent across the seas to fight a people of whom they knew nothing and for reasons of which they had

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no faintest comprehension.

The South has a dual soul. There is the kindly South of story and tradition, with its splendid hospitality, its keen sense of honor, its rigid adherence to the pledged word. But there is also the South of the Night Riders, of the lynchings, of the Ku Klux Klan. It is this last which has written a record of desperation across the history of the war period in the state of Oklahoma. Law was not law — it was a club to beat down those already broken by oppression; it was a cloak to hide reprisals for ancient grudges and enmities.

News of conscription roused the spirit of rebellion and the Working Class Union began to hold secret meetings to discuss what they should do. They did not believe the people of the country would tamely submit to the violation of the pledges which had resulted in the re-election of President Wilson. And they decided they would not accept that violation. They agreed to hide their boys from the draft officers and to prevent troops from coming into the Seminole country.

On Aug. 3 [1917], nearly 4 months after the declaration of war with Germany, about 150 men were camped on a hilltop near the little town of Sasakwa. They were there with the definite intention of offering resistance to any attempt to take their boys and induct them into the military service. An alarm was sent out through the community, and about 50 men gathered to oppose this demonstration, which is now known throughout the section as the “Green Corn Rebellion.”

The “WCUs,” as they were called, had the advantage of position and numbers. They were armed — pistols and squirrel rifles and ancient shotguns in the main, it is true. But they could have annihilated the opposing forces. The men had to climb the hill. They were without protection and had to make their advance in the open. But those men were not the men

who had brought war and the draft to America. The rebels knew these men — they were the postmaster, the storekeeper, the druggist — people they had known for years and against whom they had no personal grudges. They could not fire upon their friends and neighbors — so they threw down their arms and quietly submitted to arrest.

All of those who had participated in the uprising were soon under arrest, and the net swept in others who had belonged to the organization, but had had no part in the rebellion. In all, nearly 300 men were involved, and when the case came to trial at Ardmore the following October *175 men received sentences ranging from 30 days in jail to 10 years at Leavenworth prison.*

It has been asserted that the rebellion resulted in loss of life. That is not true. Not a single shot was fired by either side. In the indictment under which these men were convicted, reference is made to an attack upon Sheriff Grall and Deputy Sheriff Cross, in which Cross was wounded. The Sheriff was not wounded. Mr. Cross is a citizen of Sasakwa and is very much alive.

In discussing the imprisonment of William Benefield, one of the men now in Leavenworth prison, Mr. Cross declared he would be extremely glad if the government at Washington would give Benefield “another chance.”

One of the businessmen of Sasakwa said the further the story of the rebellion traveled the more serious it became. He told of a cablegram which came from troops in the English Channel congratulating the officers upon the efficient handling of the “revolution.”

In Sasakwa, the Green Corn Rebellion is a story that provokes laughter.

There are men of fine character in Oklahoma. But these are not among those who ravaged the state of Oklahoma in the name of patriotism.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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