

Arthur Borchardt
Narrator

Steve Trimble and Tom O'Connell
Interviewers

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Pine County, Minnesota

[**Note:** There are at least two other speakers on this interview, one referred to by Art Borchardt as "Pete" who is the main speaker identified as "?:" and another called "Ernie" at one point, who didn't seem to speak very much, but it was hard to tell sometimes who else was speaking. Art's, Tom's and Steve's voices were very distinct and "Pete's" became so, but I can't be sure that he was always the "?:" speaker, especially in the beginning of this interview.]

ST: I always like to just find out something about your background, where you grew up, what kind of family it was and things like that before going into any specific political sorts of things.

ARB: Well I had no choice in being here to begin with. Did you?

TO: No.

?: It was purely accidental.

ST: Were your parents from the Pine County area?

ARB: No, they lived in the Twin Cities. Then they got married and they moved up to Duluth and that's where I was born.

ST: What did you father and mother do?

ARB: Well, my mother was a homemaker, my dad was a mattress maker, and that's a lost art.

TO: Yes. Have you lived here all your...

ARB: I've been here sixty years.

TO: Sixty years.

ST: So they you went to school in Duluth?

ARB: Minneapolis.

ST: Oh, you were born in Duluth and then you went ...

ARB: We moved to St. Paul and were there about a year or two and then we were up in Minneapolis, east side, northeast.

TO: Northeast, yes.

ARB: Well, and then I lived in southeast for a few years too.

ST: Were your parents political in their background or...?

ARB: Well, my dad was a believer in socialism; that's about all I could say for him. I don't know how active he was. I don't imagine he was very active--might have been, for all I know. I don't know every move he made.

ST: So you didn't learn about early socialism from him?

ARB: Well, he believed in it he mentioned it to me. It's from my wife's folks that I got more interested.

TO: Did you get married after you moved up here or when?

ARB: No, it was before we moved up here.

TO: Before you moved.

ARB: The following year we moved up here.

ST: How did you like growing up in the city? How did you decide to take a crack at farming?

ARB: Well, I couldn't see any future in working in the factory. That's the way it is in most of the places there. Take [unclear]. You might put one nut on a bolt eight hours a day for 365 days a year. There's no future in that kind of stuff.

ST: Was it tough then to start farming. Did you know anything about it or just...

ARB: Well, I spent my summers up at grandmother's farm when I was a kid so I wasn't really a greenhorn at it. So, why I come here, I still don't know. It just so happened.

ST: What year was that?

ARB: That I moved up here?

ST: About 1925 or 1926?

ARB: 1916.

ST: So you've been here almost seventy years then.

TO: No, sixty.

ARB: Sixty.

TO: Sixty plus sixteen is seventy-six.

ST: You're right, you're right. Math was never one of my better...

ARB: What?

ST: Math was never one of my better points.

ARB: Oh, so I see.

ST: So, Clara [Jorgenson] was saying that when you came up here it was right at the time when the Non-partisan league had been developing. Could you talk a little bit about it?

ARB: Oh we took an active part in it. And right during the war period, first World War. I don't know, you probably have an understanding of what the Non-Partisan League is all about, where it started and why, so we can skip that part.

TO: Was there a big chapter here, a lot of farmers in it?

ARB: Oh yeah. And then, of course, you have the super patriots; they were organizing in the Home Guard.

TO: Yes.

ARB: [They] tried to use Hitler tactics there for anybody that didn't agree with them or yield to the status quo. Of course we were called everything but gentlemen, that takes anything [unclear]. And, of course, because of my heritage I was singled out quite a bit too, because my parents are both born in Germany so that naturally made me pro-German according to their way, their limited way of thinking. I said, "So what?". Well, they did tar and feather a couple of the organizers of the old Non-Partisan League in this area in this county. [Of] course we were

organized too, because we said, "Well [if] them guys happen to get us, we'll turn around and get them. Well, they naturally wore a mask when they [did] such stuff. They asked me what I'd do if a bunch of masked men come up my driveway. I said, "You tell you buddies I've got two swell automatics. When I say 'stop' they better stop because I'm going to shoot those masks out." "You might hurt somebody." "Well it'd be their hard luck if I told them to stop. They're trespassing, don't forget." So that took care of that.

ST: Clara said one time you went down, had heard some guys that were talking in a bar about going to get you and you walked in and...

ARB: That was a couple of local guys. One was the postmaster and one was a chief merchant and another one was in the lumbering business there. It was in the winter and the snow was deep and they were plotting to tar and feather me, but two women overheard so they come running out here in the two foot snow to have a little coffee and then I'll drive you back to town. When I went back into town they were still plotting, so I read them the riot act and told them what would happen if they ever come fooling around. That took care of that.

TO: Real brave.

ARB: What?

TO: They were real brave, weren't they?

ARB: Yes, in numbers. Another time, wasn't Lindbergh running for governor at that time?

TO: Right.

ARB: We had some meetings here for him and we had a co-op store there right on the corner in town. A bunch of Home Guard, kind of piled around me. They were a shooting off their caps. So I just backed up against the wall... there ain't going to be nobody in back of...and I know [I] could really handle myself. I had some pretty good training. Well, there [were] a bunch of them around there, too, but they didn't pile around them. They were just standing off on the side there watching. It was kind of interesting.

Then we had a meeting out east of town. One guy made a crack at my wife there. He had a billiard cue, a half of one--about that long, you know--supposed to be "persuasive" I guess. So I walked up to this guy and I says, "You owe this lady an apology." He started in and I says, "None of your goddamn skunk, Are you man enough to take your cap off when you talk to a woman?" He did and that took care of that. The speaker, he got tarred and feathered later on. so then we had another meeting there and he had a 30-30 there one the stand in front of him. Rupert Kinney, you remember him?

?: Who?

ARB: Rupert Kinney.

?: Ah, yes.

ARB: He was the organizer up in this end of town. They finally did get him, and then we went after that bunch too. He [Kinney] was already on his way back all made up and tarred and feathered. And we went out, there was two carloads of us [who] went and we all had shotguns. I wished we'd met up--some shits flying.

ST: I know the beginnings of the League in general, but how did you personally first find out about it and join up?

ARB: ...they worked, watched the farmers and people that were more or less well known in their communities, that's the way it usually works, you know, pick out people that are active. I was young then.

ST: Were you active in other, like the Socialist Party or anything, before they came in?

ARB: Well, there was an organization here prior the [their] coming into the country but they were all dissolved already [by the time the League began]. I found out later and the postmaster here was supposed to have been the organizer and then he sold out. Tiny Shaw was a congressman; he was blind to somethings so...The one good thing I could say about the guy was that he was an atheist. His political philosophy had completely turned.

ST: Like what would the organizers say for the Non-Partisan League when they'd come in? How would they approach a person, because they seemed to be fairly successful.

ARB: Well, they'd tell the story of what happened out in North Dakota where the Non-Partisan League originated. Of course [they] had the literature and stuff like that, you know, that he passed out. So we knew what the problems were with the farmers in North Dakota. Of course North Dakota was a different set-up than Minnesota in that North Dakota was agricultural in the main and, of course, they'd been fooled by politicians out here the same as they always have been everywhere. What prompted them to finally organize and set up this league was a prominent politician would come around and make big promise that would sound good to the farmers. Then when they got elected they didn't do a damn thing. The farmers went down and barged in and wanted to know how [he was] making good on the promises. [And] they used these words: "Go home and slop our hogs. We'll take of this." That was the phraseology they used, the term they used for men. So they did get a number of reforms there in Dakota as a result of that Non-Partisan League. It mean, it meant cash to them. For example, their state elevators and hail insurance and crop insurance and stuff like that, and the grading of grain and stuff like that. See, they'd haul grain to an elevator, you know, and they'd run it through a farming mill to grade it. The stuff that they graded out they kept instead of returning to the farmers. They kept it. Some

of that stuff was valuable, like mustard, for example. It's a valuable medicinal property, so it make quite a difference, you know, when they started getting paid for everything. Or they had the option to take their screens home. Of course those that had cattle or sheep or something like that, well, that was a good feed, real high in protein. We got posted on all that going on there.

Eventually the Farmer-Labor set-up came in and was dominated by the labor fakards (?), if you know what I mean. I was one the state central committee of the Farmer-Labor Association and we used to meet in the Labor Temple in St. Paul. Well, those labor leaders that were in the state then, they were an arrogant type and they were persistent about wanting everything their way. Of course they were quite a contributor to our publication, The Minnesota Leader. You heard of that.

Eventually it got to be a merging of the Democrats which was only a patronage organization; they had no constitution, no bylaws, no nothing. I know that for a fact because I served on the committee that persisted on drawing up a constitution for the merger.

TO: Were you with the party from the beginning, the Farmer-Labor Party?

ARB: Yes.

TO: Right after, I mean in the 1920s...

ARB: Yes.

TO: ...before it was real successful? Was Pine County primarily Farmer-Labor?

ARB: Yes, we were one of the more liberal counties in the state. ...organization right down tot he precinct captains.

TO: Even in the Twin...

ARB: That was how we could get it you know, twenty-two organizations, but then, you know, there was bunch of opportunists to contend with so it didn't help any.

TO: How did you educate the membership? Did you [have] meetings where you had speakers and ...

ARB: Of yes, we had meetings, we had our official papers. No organization without an official publication will ever amount to anything.

TO: Right.

ARB: It's the only way they can educate their people.

ST: Do you think, then, that was the most important education tool?

ARB: The most important thing in any organization is the publication that goes to their membership that educates them, that keeps them posted on whatever's going on and their program and to arrange for meetings and conventions and local caucuses for one another. That goes for any organization. If they haven't got a good medium of information and education how else can they know what they're doing or what they want to do? For example, we can see something happen over here, chances are our interpretation of what we saw, every one will be different.

TO: Was the Farmer-Labor Association real active between elections?

ARB: Oh yeah, we used to have our monthly meetings and we put on various doings, card parties mostly, and other...

ST: That would be card parties and social things in addition to the monthly?

ARB: Well, we expressed our grievances and what was likely to be come about it, like they do with any organization.

TO: Did a [party] platform in those days man more than it does now?

ARB: Well, it had a definite meaning but after the merger with the Democrats it became meaningless because you had those two political gangsters in there, Humphrey and Freeman, and they haven't changed their colors to this day.

ST: How do you think they were able to move in and do what they did?

ARB: Well, it's the same as the gangsters rule things. Now I know one time right after we merged we had a meeting in the St. Paul Hotel. For some unknown reason the head of our old set-up was supposed to be the chairman of the merger group [but] he was weak. So across the hall from wherever we met old Humphrey had a bar set up and he had a bunch of suitors there, you now. They got pretty loud and it got so damn rough I said to hell with the whole thing, why should I waste my time, and I quit. They operated that way throughout the state, the patronage organization. They were most[ly] good solid Catholics because the Catholic Church boasted of the fact they controlled the Democrats and the Republicans in the county. And then you had a bunchy of guys there that...Alfa Noward (?), you know and they managed to get their way and so it got to the point where he said that there's no point in making any more effort here; you really ain't going to get anywhere, you just waste your time and my time is worth something.

ST: Now before the merger, did anyone predict that something like that would happen, or like were some people against the...

ARB: Yeah, they had people against the merger. Old Susie Stageberg was strong and she was right it was a mistake when they merged. I'm convinced of it to this day.

TO: Were you in favor of it at the time?

ARB: Well, there was people that should have known better that didn't.

?: Yes, that's true you know. It was the Party, you know, [that] came out in favor of it.

ARB: Yes, they came out strong for it.

ST: So you think it was just like a political mistake that was...

ARB: Yes, it really was. I think we could have got a hell of a lot more all the way, right up to the present, if we remained independent and not merged.

ST: See one reason I'm interested in that too is that both Tom and I ...

ARB: But then there were certain things like during the 1930s [when] this red-baiting started in. I can remember one time we had a meeting over in Garrison. Do you know where that is?

TO: No.

ARB: That's the one in the northwest corner of Lake Mille Lacs, a little town there, it's on [Highway] 169. Benson was there giving a speech and he was rattled, you know. Stassen and his tribe [were] there. He was hollering "communists" and [that] we were a bunch of free loaders and all, you name it. So he made a statement and after the meeting I went up there I said, "[unclear] solitude is rotten. You made a statement there that I'll bet you wish you could glom it out. You made the statement that you didn't know nothing about communism and that you were against communism. How in the hell can you be against something that you admit don't know nothing about? You're going to lose that election with that kind of an attitude." That old Elmer Benson he was too honest to be a politician, I still believe that.

TO: Did you know both him and [Floyd] Olson?

ARB: I wasn't too deeply involved to get in on that.

TO: Yes. He was more of a politician, wasn't he?

ARB: Yes. Well, he died at a convenient time because he was burning his candles from both ends. That's the way I look at it. I still believe it.

TO: How do you mean?

ARB: Well, if you're going to be a good politician you've got to have funds to work with and he began to play both sides of the game; [he was] not loyal to either side, that's the conclusion I've come to. I still stick with it.

ST: What was the other side that he was dealing with for the funds?

ARB: With Floyd Olson? He began to waver on a number of things, I don't remember all of them or too many of them. He did put in some good licks there--he declared a moratorium that was really worthwhile in the state--but being a politician you've got to jockey around to a certain extent and Elmer Benson couldn't do that. He knew those labor leaders were a bunch of fakers and he just wouldn't bother with them so that was the beginning of the end for the Farmer-Labor Party. The Democrats saw a chance to take over [and] that's what happened.

ST: Earlier you were telling us about the Non-partisan League in North Dakota and they were primarily...

ARB: But then these opportunist they're always around and manage to get in position where they can feather their own nest. That was the very same thing that happened in the Party with the labor leaders we had. I used to get so goddamn burnt up at times. You'd meet in a small room and there was all smoke in there and, Christ, you could cut that some with a knife. It got so I just couldn't take it and I'd have to get out every once in a while and get a breath of air. But those guys were so important, you know. They had to be heard at once, their time was so limited. We had to spend three days for a meeting away from home and work and then they'd bill us there, give us probably three minutes to state our case. So that would be the [unclear].

TO: Did you have differences on the issues between these labor leaders?

ARB: Well there was bound to be a difference in issues. The same thing applies a good deal in the legislatures, too. They were in their heavy-settled centers like Duluth and the Twin Cities there, looking out for their end and to hell with the farmers. If you want to be honest about it, that's the way they'd put it because that's the way they act. The only labor organization that ever amounted to a damn was the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] because they had an educational program that included the farmer's problems.

Now, what the hell [did] the unions amount to? I've had experiences in the labor movement too. As a kid, at sixteen I was treasurer of an upholsterer's union. And my younger son and son-in-law, they were both union men, plumbers. [You] got to a meeting there's a little clique that dominates the thing and [if] anybody outside of that clique brings up anything, [then] you're out of order and you shut up or they bat you over the head and throw you out in the alley. That's the way the unions operate.

ST: When you were with the Farmer-Labor Party what were some of the things you did to sort of make it a union of both of the interests of both of them?

ARB: Well we tried to make a bi-partisan set-up. That's the only way you could ever hope to get anywhere. You[ve] got to favor labor and the labor's got to favor the farmers.

TO: Did farm organizations ever get involved with supporting strikes?

ARB: They did during the Depression years. They had a hall of organization there when farmers were being foreclosed and they had foreclosure sales. They were well organized in those days, but it fell apart. They had what they called penny sales for the auctions and stuff. If anybody'd horn in there they'd slap them down physically.

TO: Were there any of those in Pine County, penny sales, do you remember?

ARB: I don't remember too much of that going on here. There was some but the leadership we had was just opportunists [unclear] too. You remember them, Pete [Jorgenson].

?: Oh, yes.

ARB: Well, that's the kind of [unclear] Holiday Association.

TO: Do you know John Bosch, the state president [unclear].

[**Note:** microphone fumbling noises all throughout this section make accuracy difficult.]

ARB: Yes, he was pretty much opportunistic and he had these two guys, henchmen, in this county to keep control. Some of these guys they get power drunk, you know, and they'll goof around and become good yes-men and that's it.

TO: One of the things that I wonder about is the beliefs of the Farmer-Labor Association. Doesn't it seem like the new generation that came in right after the war, you know maybe didn't pick up on those? The sons and daughters and grandsons and [grand]daughters of the people that were in the Association ended up with a different set of beliefs. Is that...

ARB: Well, conditions changed. From the second World War on, and during the second World War, that thing is still true today, both of the farmers are working out, you can't make it on a farm. See, either one or two of them [parents] are working out[side of the farm], so as a consequence their kids go to hell. If there can't be a father and mother to help them along and keep them straightened out and tell them right from wrong, well, they'll get out in a gang and you know what that means. I know what that kind of life is, especially in the cities there where the kids have nothing to do. They form gangs there and they sometimes get into some serious trouble.

TO: What did you do after you quit, after the merger? You got disgusted. Did you just sort of drop out of politics for a while or what?

ARB: Well I dropped out of that end of it.

TO: Yes.

ARB: Went in for Party work then, even during the time I was in the Farmer-Labor set-up to try to keep things straightened out. But it was like butting your head against a stone wall after that merger.

TO: Did you ever have any trouble during [the] McCarthy period after the war? Did you get investigated or hurt or anything like that for being...

ARB: Well, not too close. Of course the last brush we had here is my son., They called him up and they had a car standing facing downhill there and they had the back door open and they wanted him to get in and talk to them. He slammed that goddamn door so hard I figured it was going out through the other side. He said, "Get the hell out of here !" and that was the end...

ST: It wasn't clear to me, when you moved out to the farm did you become political with the Non-Partisan League?

ARB: Oh sure.

ST: What sorts of things?

ARB: Well you try to build an organization and advocate because to me it's just this simple: the only way you can gain your economic need is through political action and anybody that tries to tell you any different don't know what he's talking about. Just that simple. Our prices are made in Washington.

TO: Right.

ARB: Now, like [President] Ford there, and [Earl] Butz [Secretary of Agriculture], they weren't for the farmers, never were and still aren't. I don't know if [President] Carter's any better. He sucks the same fingers that Ford does, the guys with the money.

ST: Did you become an organizer then with the NPL?

ARB: No. We had two organizers in the county, that was enough. I was busy trying to make a farm out of this place here. When Benson got in I had a chance to get a state job but I said I couldn't afford it. I'd have a job as long as [he was] at the head of it and when [he was] out, I'd be

out. And in the meantime my farm would be going to hell, so I couldn't. I just didn't want to make that sacrifice.

ST: So you merged from that into Farmer-Labor work?

ARB: Yes.

ST: Did everyone agree with that kind of a move or was there some thought that the Non-Partisan League...

ARB: From the farmers end there was enough of the labor leaders that were sympathetic that it was a matter of working together, for mutual ends there. And the only time that was done as far as labor is concerned that I can think of was when the CIO was involved. Labor, they forget about the farmers, see. Oh, I can remember what the hell year was that that the Teamsters' [truck] strike was on here in Minnesota?

TO: 1934.

ARB: 1934. We scraped up a hell of a lot of food for them down there. What the hell, what did we get for thanks? A kick in the pants. They were a tough lot you know; they put on a big tough front. I know. I had a brush-in with some of their leadership too.

TO: Do you know Farrell Dobbs, or the Dunne Brothers or any of those people?

ARB: Yes.

TO: Were you active in the, Clara was telling me about when the United Farmers League came around.

ARB: The what?

TO: United Farmers League, the Communist Party farm organizers.

ARB: Well, they never got too much of a hold.

TO: Yes.

?: They had no, nothing here in this county. Like I was telling you before, we did have some of their people come in and speak at our meetings and were always well received.

ST: Then you were part of the Farm Holiday too?

ARB: Yes.

ST: What sort of things did you do with that group?

ARB: Well, it was just on a local basis. [Now, with] the younger generation, everybody's for himself and the devil take the hindmost; there's no more real neighborliness in the county like there used to be fifty years ago. Every farmer is short-handed, you know. And those that want to work are working out, so you can have one hell of a time to get anybody to help you do anything. There's a few times a year where you've got to have extra help so about the only thing we've been able to get there is high school kids. Like during the summer, getting crops and stuff, hay. Of course then it [makes a difference the kind of] treatment those kids get too. They don't like to be stepped on too hard either, you know, or work for half-pay or something like that. Christ, I see how that works out. Of course we don't have no trouble here with that kind of stuff.

TO: A lot of the young people leaving here?

ARB: Well there's nothing to do and farming's no future. A young man can't start. How much do you think a good dairy operation is worth nowadays?

TO: I don't know, more than I could ever get.

ARB: Yes, chances are more than you'll ever dream of. You ask some of these guys in [unclear] and they'll tell you that you have to start out with at least a half a million if you're going to get enough land and have the buildings and machinery and cattle. Now like I mentioned about the present federal administration and Butz, the Secretary of Agriculture, they don't know up from down about farming. They aren't even interested in statistics. How many dairymen have quit in the last few years in this state alone?

ST: It's in the thousands.

ARB: It runs around three thousand a year. What happens to them? They go to town unemployed lists, on welfare and social security, that's it. A young man just can't get started nowadays. I heard a good one here back in early 1940's: We had a battery radio, that's before we had electricity. Well, I'd come in, in the winter, probably evening, to get the news, you know, that's about all I'd have time to listen to. And there was a [unclear] meeting in Wisconsin over at the University Ag College. The guy was giving a speech on agriculture and he had a question period. The question was raised how a young man could get started in farming, back in the early 1940s. This guy was really honest. He said there's only two ways he could think of, either step in you dad's boots or marry the daughter of a rich farmer. And that's just as true today. And now, especially, the way the land prices are; the land isn't worth it.

ST: It's like further north too where you start getting into lake property and people coming in and buying it for cabins. They're willing to pay more than the land can produce for a farmer, so all that land goes into non-producing.

ARB: Yes, and at that same time they want blacktopped roads right to their doorstep. We have to vote tomorrow on two guys. One guy represents seven townships here and he's a pretty square shooter as far as I know. Then there's one up around the lake up at Sturgeon and he wants all the money for blacktopping the roads all around [for] those cabin owners. They've got an island up there they've developed. He's been raising quite a stir, advertising one thing or another. He's gotten quite a bit of money to campaign with from that group. Of course there's a number of people that retire who go out to the lake and have a year-round home. And, sure, everybody wants good roads so now there's going to be an amendment tomorrow. There's only one amendment that we vote on statewide. The proposition is to take part of the gas tax money that was initially made for roads and bridges and put that money in a general revenue fund so these politicians can fool around with it. Well, the people paying that money on gas tax, the people driving cars, goldarnit, that [money] should be spent on the roads where it belongs. You go out on some of these side roads and, by God, they're no better than there were sixty years ago. There's places I could take you where two cars can't pass, just can't pass...going down the ways of the ditch. Because in a wet year you wouldn't dare try it.

TO: That's interesting because in the city we get just the opposite. See I was inclined to favor that amendment because we could use the money for other things like mass transit in the city which is a more economical kind of thing. Of course we never think about bad country roads.

ARB: They're short-sighted with that sort of philosophy. If they do any travelling around on the roads they can see [that] they can stand plenty of improvement of the roads and bridge system. You travel out in the country and even on state roads there's not signs warning you about narrow bridges, stuff like that. Well, the state roads are kept up in pretty good shape but when they get a county the size of this one, what little money they had just can't go and build a road straight through and hard surface it. That money that was earmarked for roads in the first place and it should be kept there. Then, of course, [if] Duluth and the Twin Cities vote for it they can probably knock it out. And there isn't enough political clout left with the DFL to carry on an educational program in the Cities, is there?

TO: All the DFL does in the Cities...they're just concerned about elections. There's no education. You don't have meetings except to nominate people.

ARB: They have a couple of so-called liberals--depends on what your definition of liberals is--but you got a guy like [Don] Fraser. He's gone horseshit a few times too, and as a result when it comes to campaign funds he's got to go to General Mills or some of those.

TO: Looking back on all the things you've done, Farmer-Labor...

ARB: There's a lot of people that haven't got as good a political understanding as they should have. I know when I was on the Farmer-Labor Central Committee, I was the chairman of each county and the Farmer-Labor set-up was on the Central Committee. Well, in the county north of

us there, there was a lawyer from, I think it's Cloquet. I think he was a County Attorney up there at the time too. I forget his name; it doesn't really matter. The first time we met it was more of a get-acquainted affair. He came to me and [asked if] I drove down alone. I said, "Yeah, it's my only way of getting here." He said that he did too so why the hell didn't I let him pick me up; he'd appreciate my company. I said that I'd really appreciate it. So we talked things over on the trip. One time, coming back, he was singing the praises of Blatnik and I disagreed with him. We stopped at Hinkley for a cup of coffee and I says "Let me show you something." I had a little clipping in my billfold telling about [when] Blatnik was a steel trust and iron mining boy and [that] naturally he would favor them. Geez, he read that and he never mentioned Blatnik to me after that. Well that goes for most of the politicians.

TO: Yes, yes. What do you think...

ARB: Well, like my youngest son, Ernie. When he was still working in Minneapolis, he worked at the University, they had quite a crew down there of plumbers. That's some time back already, thirty or thirty-five plumbers in there, to maintain the school. There were all hopped up about Fraser when he was starting out: he was going out to raise some campaign funds and, what the hell was it Ernie he was telling, do you remember? It was out for several days and they didn't give even ten bucks. So what the hell, he had to look for [unclear].

ST: You had a question there?

TO: Yes. Of all the things that you did with the Farmer-Labor Association and Non-Partisan League, what do you think are the real accomplishments? And I know there's a lot of things that didn't happen that you wanted to see happen, but what...

ARB: Well they're bound to get some accomplishments. Of course one thing you got to remember, in those days the legislature could be liberal and the Senate could be conservative. I think that's a horseshit set-up that two House system and a unicameral system. The way the average voter votes, if one side isn't satisfactory, [the average voter] will switch over to the next side without knowing what it's all about. So what can you expect?

TO: Is there anything you'd do different if you had...

ARB: Well, if we'd had a one House system in the state, a unicameral legislature, then you've got two main parties. If one party's going strong like we've got right now you wouldn't have a lot of filibustering to stop a good measure. When you've got a governor, here now too, well, he could be a hell of a lot better.

TO: Sure.

ARB: If you don't believe me, ask Pete.

?: Well I told you though as far as the legislature, regardless of how you organize it, it's not going to be any good until the voters vote in the right kind of people.

ARB: Yes, but the thing is, I've always maintained this, we talk about democracy, what is democracy? What is the consistency of democracy? It's three components: it's initiative, referendum and a recall system. My wife's folks come from Switzerland and I don't know [unclear] tell, he says when you meet a politician on the street, you doff your hat to him. He was respected, it was an honor that he got that job. But if he made a promise and made no effort to carry out his promises, they'd haul him in with a very small amount of petitioners and try him the same as we would an arch criminal here. If he was guilty, out he'd go. What would happen with our politicians in this country is we had that system, huh?

TO: There'd be a turn-over.

ARB: I'll say. So when they talk about democracy it's so...they take the "D" off and it's just a "mocracy;" there's no de-mocracy here.

ST: You were saying that you got into some Party work after you left the DEL. Was that the Communist Party?

ARB: I was in right during the same time I was in...

[**Note:** There is another speaker here, too, who is never identified; Art Borchardt addresses him several times as Pete. At one point there seemed to be another speaker too, a different voice, who was referred to as Ernie. But the majority of the "?:" labels are the one voice of Pete.]

ST: So he was the one that was up here...

ARB: That was while I still lived down there in the city.

ST: So you became a Party member in Minneapolis?

ARB: No, up here. John [Jorsensen] finally nailed me down.

?: Yes, I came over here and then...

ST: Because he said that he learned about it more at this conference down in Chicago and then joined after, or a little bit after that, was it?

?: Oh, yes.

ST: How did they...

ARB: Well, I was always satisfied that socialism was the answer to all this stuff, even as a kid.

ST: Was that before the NPL or...

TO: That would be after.

ST: Yes, it would be in the 1930s by then.

?: It was about 1930...I think 19...

ARB: Was about 1936.

?: Yes. Something...1936; I don't remember.

ARB: Yes.

TO: What did you call it? Did you call it a club?

?: Oh, the Party.

TO: The Communist Party, right, your local group here. Was it a county group?

?: Well it was the Communist Party.

ARB: Unit.

ST: Unit would be the word.

TO: Unit.

ARB: It'd be a unit of the organization.

?: We even called open meetings in Esko.

TO: Did people just show up sometimes?

?: Yes, yes. For instance, one time we had this movie; Mother, you know. When we showed that, that was through the Communist Party and of course it was free you know.

ST: That helps. I'm interested in internal education. Some of us now down in the Twin Cities will have study groups that will maybe read what is to be done and, you know, talk about it for three or four weeks and then read something else. What kinds of things did you do?

ARB: Well, through our literature and monthly meetings.

?: They had those kind of groups in the city too, you know. But of course out here it's very limited what you could have, after all, it's real far apart and...

TO: Did you read things? Did you have pamphlets or The Daily Worker?

?: Yes, we had the [unclear]--things that we always have had in the Party.

ARB: Daily paper.

ST: Part of the reason I'm interested, and Tom too, is that we're political down in the Twin Cities and are trying to get some ideas of how earlier groups were pretty successful and were able to do things and try to get hints of both positive things that you think you did and then if you think you made mistakes, what those were, so that we can be watching.

ARB: Any human being is going to make mistakes. But the height of our growth was during the Depression years in the state.

?: Yes.

ARB: Because we had speakers out and organizers and people were desperate. They were willing to join anything that would offer them anything. I knew we had one--I don't know if you remember the guy, Pete, he was an organizer originally for the Ku Klux Klan in the South and he came up here and he signed them up. He said, "I'll sign 'em up; yous guys can weed them out." Oh, he did really. It was during the Depression years and the people were so damned desperate there they were willing to try anything. Since then it's tapered off so that today the guys around the country...I can't think of a half-dozen farmers out here that are independent enough that they can make their sole living on the farm. They have to work out so they're so damn busy. And those that are still trying to farm, they're what they call "weekend farmers." They work Saturdays and Sundays. Well, you can't neighbor with them or nothing else or exchange help with them or nothing else, see.

TO: Yes.

ARB: And if they can get a nickel the best of you, why...Oh, it's getting to be a regular rat race.

TO: In the Party unit did you elect delegates to go to the state convention? Was it organized on a state basis, the Party?

ARB: Oh, sure. I've attended national conventions.

TO: You did? How many people were involved in the ...

ARB: The maximum unit?

TO: Yes, minimum/maximum. What was the range during that period?

?: Our best period?

TO: Yes, well, all through that period, your worst and your best, let's say.

?: We had a membership of, what, was there forty-some members?

ARB: Yes.

TO: Gee.

?: Yes, during the Depression.

TO: Just Pine County people?

ARB: Yes.

TO: That's real good.

ST: And that was just actual members.

ARB: Yes.

ST: So you probably had a lot of other people that would sympathize?

ARB: Yes, we could work with them.

?: Since that time there has been no new people brought into the Party so I'm one of the youngest ones in.

ST: For a while the Party was illegal, wasn't it?

ARB: Oh yes, but that didn't make no different. We still...

?: Well, no, It was never illegal, was it?

ST: Wasn't [it] during the 1950s?

ARB: Of sure.

ST: Wasn't it illegal to be a member of the Party?

ARB: Yes.

ST: But you went ahead and met anyway?

?: Well, yes. I suppose it was in a way. It was not really illegal but...

ARB: They were suppressing it, it amount to the same thing.

?: Sure.

TO: Now of the forty that were in the Party, did you all make it public that you were in the Party? That's one thing I wasn't clear about.

ARB: Not in the Party, just certain ones.

TO: Was that something that people would decide for themselves or was it a [unclear]?

ARB: It depends on what work they can do in another organization, because the minute you declare yourself [a member of] the Farmer-Labor party of the DFL, you go out and say, "I'm a communist." Well, you get your ass kicked out in a hell of a hurry wouldn't you?

TO: Right.

ST: Sure, sure.

ARB: Well, we had discussions on that too. Some of them weren't logical about things like that.

TO: How do you mean?

ARB: For example, I should get a bunch of communist literature and stand out in the streets in Willow River and start peddling around and one thing and another? Well how effective would I be? I'd be ostracized so damn bad that I might as well croak.

TO: Yes, yes.

ARB: Now when some of the leadership can't see that, we had some pretty strong arguments on that kind of stuff.

ST: That'd be state leadership as opposed to local leadership?

TO: Or national leadership.

ST: Yes, or national.

ARB: Well...

?: No, the state leaders because they were known, you know.

ARB: The state officials, naturally, were known.

ST: No, I mean like the ones who would suggest [that] you go out on the streets in Willow River. Were they maybe people who were national people?

ARB: No, from the Cities.

ST: Yes, and wouldn't not...

ARB: You know, they didn't know their next door neighbors. But here, everybody knows practically everybody else, especially when you live here as long as I have.

TO: Sure.

?: I could speak for myself in that respect. I couldn't have been recognized as anything else but a communist down home. [But] First year before I went down to the city I was elected chairman of the Farm Holiday organization, in spite of that. So, I don't know...

ARB: Well people in those days were so desperate they'd try anything for a change.

ST: The word communist didn't throw them off as much?

?: Communist didn't scare them I don't think that.

ARB: No.

?: Not in those days.

ARB: But now they're scared fuckless.

ST: Now your wife. You were telling me and Clara was saying too [that she] was one real hell of an organizer. Could you talk a little bit about some of the things that she did?

ARB: Well, she worked another organization. She had the ability, the know-how how to handle people. She'd get citations from different organizations, even nationally.

TO: What were some of the organizations that she was most active in?

ARB: Well anything that come along. She even was a good church member to keep the old preachers straightened out, that meant a lot. Remember the Stockholm peace [petition] drive that was put on? How long ago that was?

TO: Stockholm.

ARB: Peace drive.

TO: Was that in the 1950s?

?: Oh no, it was much earlier.

ARB: Earlier than that?

?: It was much earlier.

ARB: Well my wife was on the school board at the time and she got everybody excited.

TO: Oh, that was before World War II.

ARB: Yes, One woman she kind of hesitated and there was one high school teacher here, she was well-liked too and [she said,] "Aw, c'mon comrades, let's go."

?: Now what did we call that organization that was against war and fascism?

TO: League?

ST: League.

ARB: Well this particular guy was that Stockholm peace petition drive.

TO: Do you remember [when] Stalin signed that Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler [and] Hitler attacked Poland all of a sudden the Communist Party's position had switched? Do you remember that period? A lot of people were caught off guard.

ARB: Well, there was nothing switched at all; it was a sparring for time.

?: Yes, I don't think there was any of us...

ARB: There was no switch at all.

?: ...that was fooled by it. We certainly didn't have no trust in Hitler, you know. How could we?

TO: Right. I just that it was an embarrassing [incident].

ARB: That's the way they publicized it, see.

TO: Yes, I just wanted to check it out with you. Was there, in terms of how decisions were made, Party policy? You know the ideal was that they were made on grassroots level.

ARB: Well look at the trouble we had right in this country about Stalin. Do they know what Stalin was up against? And the measures he had to use to hold that bunch together?

TO: No, you only get a one-sided picture, you don't get...

ARB: Even during Khrushchev's time he was talking about taking his bones out and hanging them up on the square and all that sort of shit. Well Khrushchev wasn't so hot, but Stalin, he had to go through [it] right from the very beginning. He had it tough and he couldn't fool around with traitors. There was only one way to get rid of a traitor, to stop him for good, [and that] was do away with him. When things get that tough you have to use tough measure. There's no getting away from it.

TO: Did you ever meet people who were in the Party who became disillusioned with the Society Union and then dropped out because it didn't turn out to be paradise? It didn't turn out to be what they thought it was going to be.

ARB: Well, I can't think of anybody in particular, can you, Pete?

?: There was none, none of [the] people we had up here fell for that at all I'm sure.

ARB: Because a lot of our people [had] some kind of socialist training or ideology before they ever come to this country. That was part of their being; they couldn't get rid of it. But mostly of them are dying off so, what the hell.

ST: When you joined the Party you were young. Do you have any explanation why people that are our age or younger didn't join, or what happened?

ARB: It was fear of being labeled and as a result of that they'd be ostracized. You know what happened to some of our people in show business, the top notchers. That's the answer.

I was thinking a lot of it, too, comes from public schools because I teach high school. Maybe your generation maybe wasn't as affected by going through fifteen years of public schools, or

some of the older immigrants weren't. But then the sons and the daughters got into public schools, and with radio and TV I think...

ARB: Yes, what in the hell do they learn in school? Nothing.

?: Well...

TO: They learn something.

ARB: A lot of them can't even read and write when they graduate from high school.

TO: Right.

ST: They learn competition.

TO: Yes, and they learn certain things about communism.

ARB: During the second World War we had what they called 'adult educational classes' that were put on by the federal government. We were fortunate in that we had a preacher as our instructor. Now, normally I have no liking for a preacher because their philosophy is "Don't do like I do, but do like I say." But his guy was student and at the beginning of the term we started out and made a selection of what we wanted to study during that term. One thing that we took up as government, all governments of the world, their construction and their philosophy and their action and all that stuff. He was well versed, you know, he didn't pull no punches. But the class wasn't as large as it should have been, otherwise people could have gotten a good liberal education from it. He told how they functioned over in the Soviet Union and their accomplishments and all that sort of stuff. Now we're so all mighty intelligent here that I'll venture a guess that we'll be one of the last countries in the world to resort to socialism. That's my honest belief. Of course things can change, you know. It could have happened back in Roosevelt's period if he hadn't yielded; the people were ready for revolution.

TO: That's true.

ARB: Those things, when they happen, they can happen awful quick, but the way things are going that's the way I look at it.

TO: Yes, I agree.

ARB: Take Africa. [By] our standards they're illiterate but they're forging ahead better than we are as far as a socialist goal [is concerned]. We talk about literacy but our literacy doesn't amount to a hell of a lot. Just what in hell do we learn in school and what are the conditions? You know, like these clowns that are running for president. You talk about crime and how to combat crime. There's an easy solution to fighting crime; put everybody to work.

ST: Jobs.

TO: That's right.

ST: I had this one teacher who in college [who] said, "All these sociologists know what's wrong with the poor and they look at the families and stuff like this ...[tape clicks]...make sure they have jobs so they have money.

?: Yes.

ARB: How many kids graduated from this year? Around six or seven thousand a year in the United States?

TO: At least, yes.

ARB: At least. And probably half that many from colleges can't get work and they aren't trained for anything. They're beginning to come to it but it just can't work out the way it should. [If] they have an educational program in most instances they don't take more in enrollment than what they can place in jobs after they've been through, that I know.

TO: Did you get to know other Party members around the state, very well? What would be your guess as to how large the Party was in the state?

ARB: Well, that's something we don't divulge.

?: We never counted them. There's never been a mass party, you know.

TO: Yes, I know.

?: I think the highest number of Party members in the country was something like seventy-five thousand, wasn't it?

ARB: No, it wasn't that much, was it?

TO: I read it was maybe as high as one hundred thousand. I've read that.

?: Maybe it was a hundred thousand but that isn't very many as far as that goes. How many we have now I have no idea, but I know it don't count into too many thousands.

ST: In the Twin Cities right now, in Minneapolis, I know that most of the members are younger now, so it's just the opposite of here.

ARB: Well at that bazaar I was heartened to see so many younger people there.

TO: What was this bazaar?

ARB: That bazaar we had down in, what was the...

?: But you see, that's like we say, the young people can't stay on the farm because there's nothing for them to do. You can't make a living farming so you go to the city.

TO: There's a lot of young people now who are socialist.

ARB: In the city?

TO: Yes, who live in the Cities [and] who are socialist or communist of one variety or another. But there's no party, no one group. And the Communist Party hasn't, I don't know what it's like in other cities, seemed like a good alternative.

ARB: There's no work for the young people out in the country, so they have to go to the Cities. There are a scattered few that find jobs locally that can stay at home. But I only got one grandson there. He went to the vocational ag school and he took up banking. Well, he got a job in a bank, but he stays home. He's on a wild ride, running trip up to Alaska, got a week's time...

ST: Out of your experience, what advice would you give to younger people who were trying to organize some sort of socialism? What would you tell them?

ARB: Well, my second youngest one is an ag teacher up in Baudette and he's got to be careful of his job, he's got a big family. But one woman there, she was crying on his shoulder. "What's the answer? What's the answer to all this stuff?" He said, "It's socialism." That's all he said. So now she's interested, she's going to get acquainted with it. But like I say, there's very few young folks around. In school they teach the kids [that] socialism or communism is a dirty word so they don't get any facts about events. I know the time my wife was on the school board for about twelve or fourteen years, my oldest son was going to college and he had to give a lecture and he had to do research. One of the books he got was that, what the hell was that book... I've got it here too, telling about the First World War and what the hell is the title to that book...[tape clicks]. He had to work like hell to get his education so he sent for this book at home and he said that he wanted me to have it for a reference. When my wife was on the school board, she got several copies installed in the school library. Now this grandson of mine that's the banker, he [needed] something on that subject so I told him that I'd let him have to book but to take exceptionally good care of it but that there should be several copies in the school library. He told me there were none there. Merchants of Death, the book.

TO: Oh, yes.

ARB: It really told the story about how the First World War functioned as an international group, you know.

ST: It tells the story, [I mean] the fact that they're not there anymore too.

ARB: Yes. Well how can the kids get information if they take those kind of books? They can't do any kind of research without them kind of books in the library. So I let the grandson take my book. He had it for quite a while and I told him that when he was through with it I wanted him to return it in good shape, don't let any of his little kid brothers tear it up because I hold him responsible for it. We had one superintendent that was pretty liberal but the school board had the say-so of what kind of books they'd put in the library. We had a pretty liberal bunch of high school kids that graduated during his term. He was here several years but he believed in socialism.

?: I wonder [how] liberal you get out of a book. In general I don't think it sticks too well, because it takes your real life experience. I think that's what it really takes.

ARB: Well they have to get out something there and they have to some research work; if they haven't got them books available they can't. Like that Merchants of Death there that told the whole story about the first World War, how it was manipulated.

TO: Yes.

ARB: ...how all those warmakers shared each other's plants and then after the war they got together and divided up the profit. Like the Germans, they had the international patent of the hand-grenades used, but God, they collected the royalty from every country that used those hand grenades, including the United States.

?: Well that's only fair.

ARB: Yes, well, it shows how them guys stick together. They do as they damn please because they got the "do-re-me" to buy off everybody.

ST: There was still a lot of people opposed our entry in World War I.

ARB: Our what?

ST: Opposed to our entry. After that war...

ARB: Well we had a book there too, from Woodrow Wilson. He...

ST: Mr. Borchardt, thank you very much for your time.