

Progressive Era

Progressivism arose in the 1890s from a variety of campaigns for political and social reform, especially those in favor of economic protections for farmers and small business owners. From the Civil War to the 1890s, Wisconsin's political system had been dominated by political "bosses" and machines that played on ethnic and religious divisions. The Republican Party controlled nearly all of Wisconsin, except for some lakeshore counties where Catholic ethnic groups, who tended to vote Democratic, predominated (See *State Government*). Politicians offered voters little in the way of policy, but secured government jobs for their party members and supporters. Each political party had a behind-the-scenes boss who dispensed *patronage* (jobs and favors), perhaps his most important task. The boss controlled day-to-day activities and acted as a go-between for large financial interests. Under this political system, railroads, utilities, and other interests competed for economic advantage, at the expense of small farmers, business owners, and consumers.

Sources of reform. Wisconsin and several other midwestern states had large numbers of northern and western European immigrants who were experienced in political movements, familiar with oppression, and sympathetic to calls for reform. In the 1870s and 1880s, rural political protests arose in the form of the Grange farmers' league, the Greenback Party, and the People's Party (also known as the Populists). They had short-term success, but were not able to attract a large enough urban following to survive. The rise of industrialism and urban population growth in the 1870s and 1880s resulted in a stronger working class, which formed labor unions and socialist parties. Economic recessions, which widened the gaps between rich and poor, and between politicians and their constituents, gave momentum to these movements. An 1872–73 recession bolstered the Grangers, Greenbackers, and Populists, and led to the election of Grange-backed Democrat William R. Taylor as governor (see map on facing page). A severe 1893–98 depression motivated their political

Milk Strikes

In the Great Depression of the 1930s, the prices of farm products dropped, while farmers' production and shipping costs rose (see pie charts). Many dairy farmers who produced milk for cheese and butter were driven into poverty, but the farmers who produced fluid milk for bottling continued to make a living (see *Dairyland*). In 1933, small dairy farmers turned to what they called a "Boston Milk Party." In a series of three strikes, begun by the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool and later joined by the Wisconsin Farmers' Holiday Association, they withheld milk and blocked it from the market (see map at left). The milk strikes began among poorer dairy farmers in eastern Wisconsin, but as government promises to raise prices went unkept, later spread through Wisconsin's dairy belt and into other states. Thousands of small farmers closed dairies, blocked truck and train traffic into major cities, and confiscated and dumped many tons of milk (below). Police and National Guardsmen used tear gas and clubs, deployed machine guns and bayonets, armed antistrike farmers as "deputies," and declared "war zones" around Milwaukee and Shawano. Desperate strikers turned to bombing cheese factories, burning creameries, and pouring oil or kerosene into milk vats. In the end of the year, two Wisconsin strikers had died, and the strike lost support. New Deal farm policies later met some of the farmers' demands. After World War II, many small eastern Wisconsin farms were consolidated into large "agribusiness" holdings. In the 1970s, some dairy farmers symbolically dumped their milk to protest the continuing loss of family farms.



