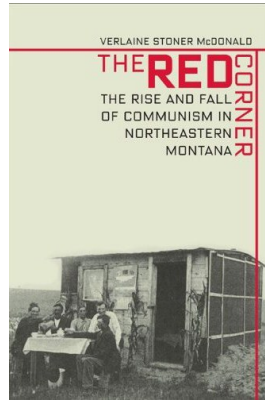


Montana's Communist Past

[The Billings News](#)

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It is a story so sensitive that for decades many Montanans were ashamed to even talk about it.

A new book published by the Montana Historical Society Press at last brings to light a nearly forgotten chapter of state history when communism gained a strong foothold and even a national voice in radical politics during the 1920s and 1930s.

“The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana” by Verlaine Stoner McDonald is a riveting book that recounts newspaper wars, farm labor activism, communist picnics and youth organizations, ugly corruption and scandal.

McDonald's journey into the dark days her family had lived through began in 1985 when a hired man came across some old newspapers on her family farm. One of the papers that had been published in nearby Plentywood in 1932 bore the headline “Vote Communist Tuesd'y, Nov. 8.”

Although she had lived in Sheridan County most of her life, McDonald said she only began to discover the radical history of her community as she read through the yellowed newspapers.

“When I attended school in the 1970s and 1980s, the county's Communist movement simply was not discussed, certainly not in classrooms and never in polite conversation,” she said.

At the heart of the story is newspaper man and communist organizer Charles “Red Flag” Taylor and his

comrade county sheriff Rodney Salisbury, who allegedly combined graft, prostitution and bootlegging with his politics.

For nearly two decades Taylor's organization held sway in the northeast corner of Montana through his flagship newspaper, The Producers News, which for a time was an official organ of the Communist Party USA and had readers across the nation and even internationally.

Taylor and some of his cronies were even elected to the Montana Legislature.

When economic times got tough in northeast Montana, Taylor found fertile ground for his communist interests among immigrants who had experienced socialism in their native Europe.

Eventually other strong-willed newspaper men like Burley Bowler, the stronger ties to religion that most of the immigrants had, and other factors spelled the end of the movement in the area. By the late 1930s people were trying to put their past behind them.

McDonald used newspaper accounts, oral histories, FBI reports and even internal communist party files to research her book.

Montana author Ivan Doig praised McDonald's detective skill, scholarship and “local savvy” in putting her book together. “This extraordinary chapter of Montana history, little known at best and often deliberately obscured, at last has found its clear true voice,” Doig said.

The 232-page book that includes many illustrations and photographs sells for \$16.95 in paperback and is available in most bookstores, or can be ordered directly from the Society Museum Store by calling toll-free 1-800-243-9900.