

# Political Turmoil in the 1930s

By Kay Atwood and Dennis J. Gray

The boom and bust cycle of the century's first three decades left a bitter legacy in southern Oregon, and long-held political tensions surfaced anew in the 1930s. The editor of the *Medford Mail Tribune* courageously chronicled events, as Medford orchardist and newspaperman Llewellyn Banks stirred political insurgency in Jackson County. Capitalizing on the unsettled Depression economy, Banks's message of reform reverberated among citizens who resented established businessmen, politicians, and the press. Deeply in debt, Banks and Medford businessman Earl Fehl built a political power base during the November 1932 elections, relentlessly harassing longtime political figures. When Fehl won election as county commissioner and another Banks supporter won the sheriff's post, political unrest reached moblike proportions as Fehl supporters verbally assaulted other officeholders. Those were the days, Talent resident Harold Thornily observed, "that every time a car would backfire at night, everybody would crawl under the bed."

In January 1933, seeing the political situation as intolerable, Banks's opponents secured a recount of the votes gathered in the 1932 sheriff's election. Threatened by this move, Banks, Fehl, and their supporters joined forces as the Good Government Congress. Decrying economic conditions, "tax levies always on the increase," and "eviction from our homes being imposed under law," the organization's preamble continued: "we find it necessary to form ourselves into an organization for the protection of our lives, our homes, and our properties."

The following month, thieves stole ten thousand ballots from the Jackson County Courthouse vault to prevent the vote recount and authorities suspected Llewellyn Banks and his Good Government Congress. On March 16, 1933, Constable George Prescott went to the Banks home to serve an arrest warrant. Banks shot Prescott, who died instantly. "Banks wielded a fiery pen," the *Medford Mail Tribune* editor wrote the next day, "and shot accusations and allegations against citizens, officials and organizations. He used his paper for furtherance of political and personal vengeance."

Tried and convicted by the state, Banks received a life prison term. Many Good Government Congress supporters renounced the organization after Prescott's killing, while others continued to support it. By the mid-1930s, however, the group had faded away. In 1934, *Medford Mail Tribune* editor Robert Ruhl received the Pulitzer Prize in journalism for meritorious public service for his reporting of the Good Government Congress and its activities.

The Depression's hard times also fostered rebellion in the mountain communities of northwest California and southwest Oregon, where a number of citizens proposed secession. Although several attempts to form a separate state had occurred in earlier decades, the Depression increased people's frustration with poor roads, lagging resource development, and perceived disinterest on the part of the Oregon and California state governments. The movement gained momentum during the late 1930s, and on November 17, 1941, proponents met in Yreka, California, to form an alliance. They named the new state "Jefferson" and selected Yreka as the temporary state capital. On December 4, movement members elected Judge John L. Childes of Crescent City as governor. The State of Jefferson rebellion ended suddenly three days later with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Although the official movement faded rapidly, interest in the mythical State of Jefferson has persisted through the years.

During the first half of the twentieth century, improved roads and changing economic patterns fostered expansion in some communities, while others simply disappeared. As the larger orchard and milling centers of Medford and Grants Pass developed, the southwest Oregon landscape shifted as residents increasingly left farms and mines for jobs in urban areas. Small-scale mining increased during the Depression decade and many young local men found employment in the CCC and other New Deal programs. Political upheaval in the region eventually calmed, but many local residents remained suspicious of established government.

© Kay Atwood and Dennis J. Gray, 2003. Updated and revised by OHP staff, 2014.

<https://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/political-turmoil-in-the-1930s/>