



Top Center: Rodney Salisbury
 Photo courtesy: Glyn Deem, Deem Studios
 From The Red Corner by Verlaine McDonald

Rodney Salisbury (1888-1938)

Radical Sheridan County sheriff who co-organized the strong socialist movement in Montana. He was suspected to have masterminded the robbery of the county payroll and area banks to fund socialist activities. He publicly raised two families: one with his wife and one with his mistress who happened to be married to another man!

**Note: Knowledge of Salisbury's early life is sketchy.*

- **1888-Birth.** Rodney was born on May 2, 1888 in either Wisconsin or Brinsmead, North Dakota where the family homesteaded. He was the oldest of eight children.
- **School.** He left school after the fourth grade to work on the farm. As a youth he also allegedly performed in a traveling road show where he danced for dimes and quarters and performed a comedy act with his grandfather.
- **Marriage.** It was in Brinsmead where he met and married Emma Ryan. The couple soon moved to northeastern Montana where they homesteaded in the community of Raymond. They eventually had six children.
- **1920's.** During the 1920s as homestead farmers in eastern Montana and the Dakotas were stricken by drought and low wheat prices, they increasingly turned to politicians offering radical solutions to their problems. This trend was especially strong in Sheridan County in Montana's furthest northeast corner. Here voters throughout the decade elected self-proclaimed Communists to virtually every single public office.
- **1923-1928.** Sheridan County Sheriff. He was one of the most prominent and probably the most radical of Sheridan County's "red" office-holders during his tenure as sheriff.
- **Charles "Red Flag" Taylor.** Salisbury was an early follower of Mr. Taylor, the charismatic Communist editor of Plentywood's popular farmer-labor newspaper, *The Producers News*. With Taylor's support, Salisbury won election to the County sheriff position as part of a slate of radical candidates who rode to office on a tide of farmer unrest. Taylor lauded Salisbury as a skillful organizer but also noted that he was "an extremist and kind of a Wobbly type."
- **Controversy.** Salisbury's six-year tenure as Sheridan County Sheriff was controversial to say the least. Over the years he was accused of taking bribes from bootleggers, engaging himself in the illicit liquor trade, working in partnership with the owners of local brothels, and masterminding the armed robbery of the county treasurer's office. It was rumors of Salisbury's involvement in the treasurer's office robbery in late November, 1926 that probably led to the loss of his reelection bid in 1928. The robbers made off with more than \$100,000 and were never caught. Salisbury emphatically denied involvement in any of the crimes that his political enemies and rival newspapers accused him of committing. Meanwhile the *Producers News* noted that "newspapers under the control of the Bankers and Usurers in the county are making weekly assaults upon him."
- **The Other Woman.** Nor was Salisbury's personal life above reproach. Sometime in the mid-1920s, he began a long-term affair with Marie Chapman Hansen, the wife of a local flour merchant. Marie was among the first women in the county to bob her hair and she shared Salisbury's radical politics, having worked for the "Producers News." Salisbury eventually fathered three children with Marie. The first two were born before she divorced her husband. The couple never attempted to hide their relationship which was well known throughout the county.
- **1932-Janis Salisbury funeral.** The death of Rodney's daughter, Janis, illustrated the conflict between religion and the Communist movement. It is believed this single event was the beginning of the end for the socialist movement in the area. Janis died of appendicitis but her funeral services drew national attention. It was well known that children were taught socialist ideals through school clubs. Janis'



funeral was described in detail on the front page of the *Producers News*. The service was conducted with full Bolshevik rites including her classmates marching in and singing revolutionary songs and reciting the pledge to the “Red Flag.” With such a public display of communism came a backlash of criticism from the public which would lead to the ousting of socialist candidates during the next upcoming election.

- Following his tenure as sheriff, Salisbury remained active with the Communist Party and ran for governor of Montana on the Communist ticket in 1932. He received only a handful of votes and was buried in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Democratic landslide of that year.
- Several years later, Salisbury, Marie, and their three children moved from Sheridan County to Billings and from there they soon relocated to Missoula. He remained a radical activist, serving as president of the Montana Farm Holiday Association, a group calling upon farmers to keep their crops off the market until prices went up. It was Salisbury’s involvement with this group that cost him his membership in the Communist Party, as party leaders regarded Association members as traitors to the red cause.
- **1938-Death.** Taylor died on June 14, 1938, of a cerebral hemorrhage while visiting friends in Plentywood. Even his death was not without controversy. Rumors quickly circulated that he might have been poisoned by Marie. Others speculated that the hemorrhage was the result of a barroom fight. Salisbury’s daughter attributed his death to a stroke. Upon Salisbury’s death, the *Plentywood Herald* observed: “Probably no other man in Sheridan County has been on the lips of friend and foe as Rodney Salisbury. His enemies and others bitterly condemn his past activities. Friends today said he was fearless in his convictions and that he was no lover of sham. His fight, they say, was for the underdog.”



Information and photos of Rodney Salisbury gathered from Montana newspaper clippings and the book “The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana” written by Verlaine McDonald. The happenings in Sheridan County during these years were swept under the rug by most residents and preferred to be forgotten about. Sheridan County historians are now developing a documentary about their role in our nation’s political history.

**Note: Janis Salisbury was originally buried at the Salisbury home in Plentywood, MT. When Rodney moved to Missoula, he dis-interred Janis and reburied her in the Missoula Cemetery. Her grave lies across the street from his.*