

Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Grant and Blackford Counties

Founded: [1889–91]

Location: Original location unknown, Grant County (1889–); 302-304 South Washington Street, First National Bank Building, Marion; 402–404 South Washington Street, Marion National Bank Building (–1957); 812 South Washington Street (1958–); 2125 South Western Avenue (1990s–)

The Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Grant and Blackford Counties is rooted in the mutualistic traditions of Grant County farmers and grew out of early rural cooperative and self-improvement efforts. In the 1880s Grant County farmers established the Grant County Farmers' Association, which was formed to promote discussion of farmers' interests and later merged with the Farmers' Institute, a state-supported educational body. Several individuals later associated with the Farmers Mutual Insurance Company—Joshua Strange, Isaiah M. Miller, Jesse M. Ballard, and A. A. Burrier—served as chairman of the Farmers' Institute. Grant County farmers also established the Farmers' Mutual Benefit Association, which provided its members with discounts at local merchants. This association, however, eventually disintegrated due to political divisions. In January 1891 a group of sixteen farmers filed articles of incorporation for the Grant County Farmers' Mutual Fire Insurance Company.

The new mutual association's articles of incorporation were drafted on some old business stationery of Joshua Strange, one of its key organizers. A farmer, stockbreeder, and businessman, Strange was born in Grant County in 1844. In the 1890s he discovered oil and natural gas on his landholdings. Strange was early drawn to agrarian politics and cooperative ventures and in the 1870s joined the Grange, a fraternal organization devoted to improving the social and economic life of farmers. In 1890 he helped organize the

People's party in Indiana. The Populists, as members of the party were commonly known, were agrarian radicals who blamed farmers' economic problems on self-interested financiers and monopolists. Populists advocated democratic electoral reforms, such as the direct election of senators and provisions for the initiative and referendum. Strange was an unsuccessful candidate for Congress on the Populist ticket in 1890 and 1892.

The Grant County Farmers' Mutual Fire Insurance Company was organized to provide its members fire insurance at cost. In its first years members were assessed fees only when a loss occurred. Total payments in 1891 came to \$83.78 but had grown to \$5,503.87 by 1900 and in 1910 reached \$12,923.10. The mutual protection association was tested early on when one member became the target of repeated acts of arson. The association was nearly wrecked and returned to stability only when the unfortunate member temporarily withdrew. Despite this early difficulty, however, the association prospered. By 1913 the company had issued more than \$4 million in farm property insurance; seven years later the figure was more than \$8 million. In 1919 the company expanded to include Blackford County in its territory and by the early 1920s was known as the Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Grant and Blackford Counties.

Early secretaries of the mutual insurance company included Strange, Luther T. Hale, and Robert L. Smith. Isaiah Miller, a large landholder and longtime president of the Upland State Bank, was president of the company in the 1910s and 1920s. Arthur A. Burrier, a state representative at the turn of the century, served as president in the 1920s and into the depression years. Longtime secretaries of the association included Charles Leer, Verlin S. Nesbitt, and John Newby. The mutual insurance company occasionally

engaged in countywide fire prevention efforts, such as an inspection of all flues in 1915, as well as education programs. In 1936 the company hired an electrician to inspect the wiring of all farm buildings using electricity. In 1947 the company broadened its coverage to include crops such as wheat, oats, corn, soybeans, and rye.

Between 1957 and 1958 the Farmers Mutual Insurance Company moved from the Marion National Bank Building at 402 South Washington Street to 812 South Washington Street. In the 1990s it moved to 2125 South Western Avenue.