

*'On to California!'*

Typical of the ridicule heaped on Upton Sinclair during his 1934 gubernatorial campaign was this political cartoon by Fred Korborg in the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*. (Courtesy of the San Francisco Examiner.)

scheme.” Facing such formidable opposition, it is hardly surprising that in the November election Sinclair was defeated by the Republican incumbent.

### From Merriam to Olson

Governor Merriam realized and acknowledged that he could not have been elected without the support of many relatively conservative New Deal Democrats, and in 1935 he signed a number of bills that brought the state into conformity with some of the New Deal’s policies and measures. The most active Democratic leader in the legislature was Culbert L. Olson, who had been elected state senator from Los Angeles County as a supporter of Sinclair. Though the senate was still predominantly conservative, Olson secured its approval of new laws that repealed the sales tax on food and established a moderate state income tax. Another measure slightly increased the provisions for assistance to the indigent aged.

In the New Deal’s Social Security Act of 1935, and in the corresponding Old Age Security program adopted by California in the same year, the use of the word “security” was a gross exaggeration of the benefits actually provided. To receive a maximum monthly pension of \$35, old people had to be not only without income but also without relatives who could contribute to their support. These provisions were inadequate, and they required humiliating investigations of personal finances and family relationships.

The way was thus open for a new pension scheme, an aberration known as Ham ’n’ Eggs. Robert Noble, a Los Angeles radio commentator, formed an organization called California Revolving Pensions and summarized its plan with the slogan “twenty-five dollars every Monday morning.” Noble entrusted some of his advertising

# **WARNING!**

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## **Retail Stores Can Not and Will Not Accept "Retirement Life Payment Warrants" (Ham and Eggs—30-Thursday)**

A broadside from the campaign against the "Ham 'n' Eggs" initiative of 1938. (*Courtesy of the California Historical Society, North Baker Research Library, Broadside Collection.*)

to an agency operated by the brothers Willis and Lawrence Allen, whose chief client up to that time had been the manufacturer of Grey-Gone, a hair tonic. The Allen brothers then formed their own pension organization, excluding Noble. They shifted his slogan to "thirty dollars every Thursday," and one of their campaign orators hit upon the motto "Ham 'n' Eggs for California," by which the plan came to be commonly known.

If Governor Merriam had flirted with the Ham 'n' Eggers in 1938 as he had flirted with the Townsendites in 1934, he would probably have been reelected. But he openly opposed Ham 'n' Eggs, while Culbert L. Olson won the Democratic nomination and the governorship largely by avoiding a clear stand on the issue. The Ham 'n' Eggs initiative was defeated in the 1938 election, but the vote in its favor was shockingly large. It might have passed had it not been for the exposure, during the last days of the campaign, of some of the corrupt practices of the Allen brothers, its cynical and irresponsible promoters.

One of Olson's first acts as governor was to carry out his campaign pledge of a pardon for Tom Mooney. Then, at the end of his first week in office, Governor Olson collapsed from exhaustion, and a month passed before he was able to resume his duties. This left the new administration without leadership at the most crucial time, and it never fully recovered from this demoralizing blow. But Olson could have accomplished little at best. Conservative Republicans still controlled the state senate, and although the Democrats had a small majority in the assembly, they were split into factions. The main accomplishments of Olson's governorship were a few modest reforms in the state's penal system and in its provisions for the care of the mentally ill.