

HISTORIANS AND THE LOST WORLD OF KANSAS RADICALISM

by William C. Pratt

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

With this issue's fine review essay by William C. Pratt, we bring our review essay series to a conclusion. We certainly have not exhausted all possible Kansas themes for such scholarly treatment, but after six years, it seems like the right time to end the series and consider what it all means. What can the review essays as a whole tell us about Kansas and Kansans? Although this question is too large to fully answer, Professor Pratt's essay on radical politics in the Sunflower State brings some important issues into focus.

He begins with that oft repeated query, "What's the Matter with Kansas?," a question that has been asked and discussed, if not answered, by thoughtful Kansans for more than a century. "Coined" by that quintessential Kansan, William Allen White, in reaction to the Populist "menace" on the left, it was recently appropriated for a critical analysis of the political right by a Kansas expatriate, Thomas Frank, who got his professional start as a historian of the People's Party. In between White's editorial (1896) and Frank's book (2004), many notable Kansans directly or indirectly addressed this question.

In "Historians and the Lost World of Kansas Radicalism," Pratt explores a short but vital period in the state's political and social history and concludes "Kansas was probably the most radical state in the Union in the 1890s." Remnants of that dynamic era spilled over into the twentieth century and by most

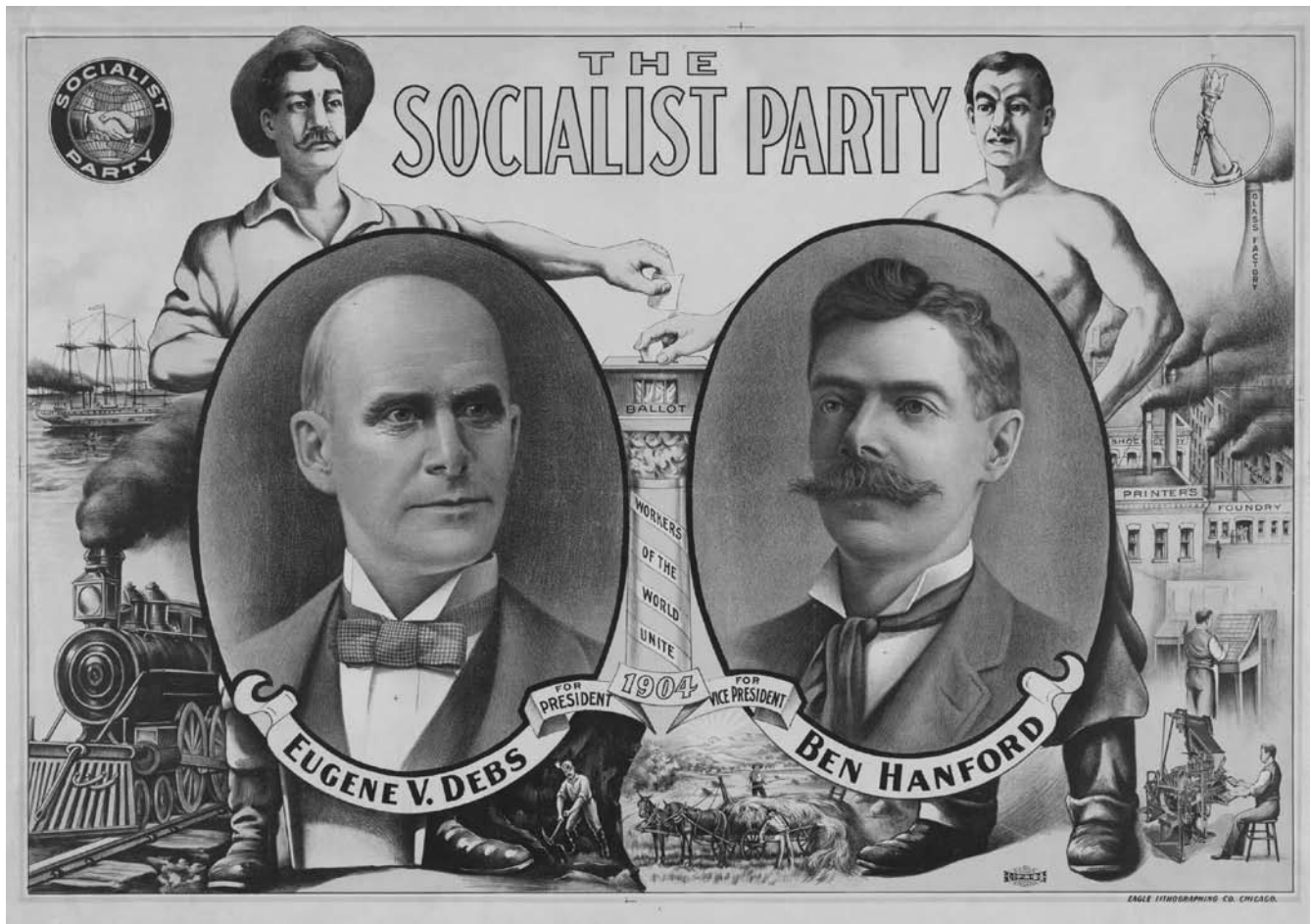
Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004) argues that leftwing politics once were commonplace in the Sunflower State.¹ It is an intriguing idea and serves as the point of departure for this historiographical essay on Kansas radicalism. In these pages "radicalism" refers to a leftwing political position beyond that of liberalism, a position that often embraced government ownership and socialism, seeking to control or abolish big wealth and private economic concentration. Radicals were not a monolithic group, as they frequently differed among themselves on objectives and tactics, and many of them sought to work within the ranks of broader, less ideological groupings at particular times. Groups in which Kansas radicals participated included the People's Party, Knights of Labor, Socialist Party, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies), Nonpartisan League, Communist Party, and mainstream unions such as the United Mine Workers.

Kansas was probably the most radical state in the Union in the 1890s, and leftwing efforts there continued for several decades. "For much of the twentieth century," wrote Fred Whitehead, "the state of Kansas has suffered the reputation of being a conservative bastion, yet during the 1880s, through the Populist movement of the following decade, and even until the anti-radical repressions of World War I, it was a dramatic laboratory of social experimentation, free thought, and wild political insurgency."² In no other state were the Populists as successful at the ballot box, electing

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1. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004). The concept of a "lost world" introduced in the title of the present article is borrowed from Robert McMath's "The Populist Southwest: A Lost World," *The Progressive* 42 (December 1978): 53-55.

2. Fred Whitehead, "The Kansas Response to the Haymarket Affair," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 9 (Summer 1986): 72.



*Prior to World War I, Kansas Socialists held picnics, turned out to hear party notables such as Eugene Debs (pictured here on his 1904 presidential campaign poster), and, perhaps most important for their cause, published the *Appeal to Reason*, the single most successful leftwing newspaper in American history. Poster courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*

a number of congressmen, two U.S. senators, and two governors, not to mention hundreds of other public officials, including the chief justice of the state supreme court.

Prior to World War I, Kansas Socialists held picnics, turned out to hear party notables such as Eugene Debs and Kate Richards O'Hare, and, perhaps most important for their cause, published the *Appeal to Reason*, the single most successful leftwing newspaper in American history. The radical IWW was also quite active in the state during the second decade of the twentieth century, organizing thousands of harvest hands and oil field workers. But U.S. entry into World War I in 1917 marked the beginning of the end of Kansas radicalism. By the early 1920s, the Sunflower State was well on the way to becoming the conservative bastion to which Whitehead alludes. Never again would Kansas be identified in the public mind with leftwing politics. Thus, Kansas radicalism is largely a topic confined to the years between 1880 and 1920. That said, however, a closer look at the sources reveals leftwing sentiment and efforts before and after those years. For the remainder of this essay, I examine how historians have treated Kansas's radical past, offering at places suggestions for future research.

accounts Kansas remained “a dramatic laboratory of social experimentation” until the United States entered the World War in 1917. “Radicalism had declined and lost its earlier pride of place” by the dawn of the new century, writes Pratt; but “it permeated into broader groupings such as the labor movement and the Farmers Union.” Radicals were obviously “less important and sometimes virtually extinct” during the thirty years leading up to the World War II, but well into the postwar decades “in some locales, leftwingers made their presence known and participated in the political arena and social movements.”

Historiographically the literature on Kansas Populism is rich and far exceeds that of any other radical movement. But even here, as Pratt demonstrates, there is room for more work, and numerous opportunities exist for new studies of the Knights of Labor, the Socialists, the Wobblies, the Farmers Union, and the Nonpartisan League, as well as efforts to organize relief workers during the 1930s.

If White, one of Kansas Populism’s major detractors and yet one of progressivism’s great champions, was correct in 1922 when he wrote, “Kansas is . . . the low barometer of the nation. . . . [and] when anything is going to happen in this country, it happens first in Kansas,” these scholarly pursuits should be rewarding and of real significance. White’s assessment of Kansas, of course, is hyperbolic, but one could argue that if his characterization were ever really true it was true of the era identified by Professor Pratt as Kansas’s radical period, from 1880 through 1920. White specifically mentioned or alluded to dynamic reform efforts such as abolitionism and civil rights, feminism and suffrage, prohibitionism, Populism and by implication, socialism, and the many-faceted progressive movement. Kansas surely was a “laboratory of social experimentation” during this dynamic era.

But what about the period after White published these lines in “Two Famous Questions,” April 25, 1922? To paraphrase the Emporia editor, What happened to Kansas? Sure, we have witnessed the rise of new technologies, with their positive and negative impacts; we have experienced the urban and suburbanization of “rural” Kansas, along with

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Populism is the single most important radical movement to emerge in Kansas and, as a result, has attracted the lion’s share of scholarly attention. At last count, there were five books on facets of Populism in Kansas and another that offers a comparative study of it in the Sunflower State and Nebraska and Iowa. These are Walter T. K. Nugent’s *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (1963); O. Gene Clanton’s *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (1969); Michael J. Brodhead’s *Persevering Populist: The Life of Frank Doster* (1969); Peter H. Argersinger’s *Populism and Politics: William Alfred Peffer and the People’s Party* (1974); Scott G. McNall’s *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865–1900* (1988); and Jeffrey Ostler’s *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880–1892* (1993). In addition, Clanton recently published *A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854–1903* (2004), which is an extensive revision of his earlier study. It also should be noted that numerous journal articles have appeared on this topic, most of them since 1960 as well.³

The post-1960 scholarship builds upon earlier research on Kansas Populism, as well as responding to influential works that treated the topic more broadly. For the most part, before the 1950s historians portrayed Populism sympathetically, and John D. Hicks’s *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s Party* (1931) offered the standard interpretation.⁴ Then, in 1955, Richard Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* appeared. Hofstadter was not a specialist on Populism, but his treatment in this book changed the direction of scholarship on the topic. No other account has had such impact on the study of farm movements. He explored a darker side of Populism, focusing upon its illiberal tendencies. In his eyes, Populists indulged in conspiratorial thinking, nativism, and anti-Semitism.⁵ *The Age of Reform* won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1956 and, to this day, is acknowledged by many as one of the most influential works

3. Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969); Michael J. Brodhead, *Persevering Populist: The Life of Frank Doster* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1969); Peter H. Argersinger, *Populism and Politics: William Alfred Peffer and the People’s Party* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974); Scott G. McNall, *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa, 1880–1892* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); O. Gene Clanton, *A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854–1903* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 2004). For a thorough bibliography of both published and unpublished work on Kansas Populism and related topics, see Worth Robert Miller, “Bibliography on Farmers’ Alliance and Populist Party,” at <http://dio.missouristate.edu/wrmiller/Populism/Texts/bibliography.htm>; see also his “Historiography of Populism,” first published as “A Centennial Historiography of American Populism,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Spring 1993): 54–69.

4. John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s Party* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1931). For historiographical treatments of Populism, see William F. Holmes, “Populism: In Search of Context,” *Agricultural History* 64 (Fall 1990): 26–58; Miller, “A Centennial Historiography of American Populism,” 54–69.

5. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

by a post-World War II historian. It also provoked a firestorm of criticism among historians, some of them in graduate school hunting for dissertation topics. Much of the scholarship on Populism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s probably was written, at least in part, in response to Hofstadter's provocation.⁶

Among the young historians who responded to *The Age of Reform* were Norman Pollack, Walter Nugent, and Gene Clanton. In contrast to Hofstadter, they worked extensively in archival materials and newspapers, and all of them produced books and articles in the 1960s that seriously undercut the premises of the earlier work. Pollack's *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* appeared in 1962. Though its subject was midwestern Populist thought, much of this treatment was relevant to Kansas. For Pollack, Populism was a radical, forward-looking movement, essentially the opposite of Hofstadter's cranky portrayal. I think it fair to say that Pollack overstated his case and would have been on firmer ground (as someone suggested) had he titled his book, *The Radical Populist Response to Industrialism*, thus limiting his study to the leftwing current of the farm revolt of the 1890s. In *The Tolerant Populists* Nugent explored Hofstadter's charges of nativism and anti-Semitism in regard to Kansas Populism, utilizing over 170 Kansas newspapers. Kansas Populists, according to his findings, ran Jews for office and denounced the anti-immigrant American Protective League. Though there were scattered examples of anti-Semitic rhetoric in Populist publications, Populists were less likely to be nativistic and anti-Semitic than their Republican opponents. In this book and a subsequent *Agricultural History* article, Nugent argued that Kansas Populists had a realistic view of their problems and were a forward-looking movement.⁷

Clanton's *Kansas Populism* (and its revision, *A Common Humanity*) offers a broad narrative history of its topic. Previously, the only scholarly accounts in print that covered the whole topic appeared more than forty years earlier, and both of them were less than one hundred pages in length.⁸ Like Nugent, Clanton found little support for Hofstadter's indictment of Populism; anti-Semitism and nativism existed in party ranks, but according to Clanton, it was limited to a small, unrepresentative faction. *Kansas Populism* devotes attention to earlier third-party movements in the state, as well

6. Robert M. Collins, "The Originality Trap—Richard Hofstadter on Populism," *Journal of American History* 76 (June 1989): 150–67; David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

7. Walter T. K. Nugent, "Some Parameters of Populism," *Agricultural History* 40 (October 1966): 255–70; Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966). See also Norman Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of 'The Age of Reform,'" *Journal of Southern History* 26 (November 1960): 478–500. Hofstadter's sources on farm movements were almost exclusively "off the shelf," as he only consulted one manuscript collection and a handful of masters' theses and PhD dissertations for his discussion on Populism. Every other source cited probably could have been obtained at the Columbia library or through inter-library loan.

8. Elizabeth N. Barr, "The Populist Uprising," in *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, ed. William Connelley (Chicago: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1918), 2:1115–95; W. P. Harrington, "The Populist Party in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections* 16 (1923–1925): 403–50.

the depopulation and aging of our predominantly agricultural counties; we have seen the construction of huge lakes and reservoirs, and the rise of other water related issues; we, as a state, survived the Dust Bowl, and gave the nation a vice-president, a president, and at least two major party candidates for that office; and we have seen the expansion of civil rights and liberties to our nation's minority and female populations, in part due to that landmark case that began in Topeka. But during the past half century or so, how have we as a state "distinguished" ourselves from the rest of the nation? "It would have occurred to no one to call Kansas complacent or commonplace in the years from 1860 to about 1915," said Milton Eisenhower on January 28, 1949. "On the contrary, Kansas was known as among the most progressive of all States, high-minded, quick to react to needs, a leader in a dozen forms of social legislation." During subsequent decades, however, "a complacency strange to Kansas tended to smother honest criticism and discourage creative genius. Kansas lost its distinction as a social barometer for the nation, an exciting idea, a prophecy; she became simply one of the midland States."

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Kansans certainly agreed that their history was of the utmost importance, even if they did not always agree on its interpretation. I fear this cannot be generally asserted about recent generations, in large part, perhaps, because Kansans no longer know their own history. How can we possibly answer questions such as What's the matter with Kansas? or What's right with Kansas? if we do not possess this knowledge? If we are really to understand ourselves as a distinct people we must have a sense of place that can only come from understanding our collective past. The editors hope that this series of review essays has informed and will continue to spawn new research on themes and subjects—perhaps, especially, of a more recent historical vintage—that rekindle the historical interests of a cross-section of early twenty-first-century Kansans.

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Populism is the single most important radical movement to emerge in Kansas and, as a result, has attracted the lion's share of scholarly attention. Pictured are citizens of Willowdale Township in Dickinson County on their way to a Populist rally, ca. 1890.

Populist era. Argersinger published several articles based on his research before the book appeared. One of them, published in 1969, is titled "Pentecostal Politics in Kansas: Religion, the Farmers Alliance, and the Gospel of Populism," and is an early example of what might be called the cultural history of politics. It shows the connection between religious sentiment and the Farmers Alliance and helps account for the emergence of Kansas Populism in 1890. Most of Argersinger's work, and this includes *Populism and Politics*, focuses upon the constraints that Populist politicians faced. Realistically, Populist candidates never attracted even 40 percent of the vote in a statewide contest in Kansas when they ran on a straight Populist ticket. Thus to win at the ballot box, they were obliged to conduct fusion or coalition campaigns with the Democrats, and that is how they elected governors in 1892 and 1896. On the other hand, most Populist voters (at least initially) were ex-Republicans, and Civil War sentiments about Democrats being the party of rebellion resulted in the alienation of large numbers of ex-Republican voters. Mary Elizabeth Lease and William Peffer were just two of the Populist notables who rejected fusion and ultimately returned to Republican ranks. Argersinger is sympathetic to middle-of-the-road Populists who rejected fusion, yet he is realistic enough to see that Populist electoral success was dependent upon cooperation with (at least many) Democrats.⁹

In 1976 Lawrence Goodwyn published *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*. It was the first general history of Populism to appear since Hicks's *The Populist Revolt* thirty-five years earlier. It may seem misleading to refer to this work as a "general history" in that it is more than

as to the Farmers Alliance, before examining in detail the political movement that emerged in the 1890s. Overall, it offers a balanced treatment of the topic and has made a solid contribution to our understanding of Populism. If a person were to read only one book on Kansas Populism, this should be it.

Five years after the publication of Clanton's study, Argersinger's *Populism and Politics* appeared. It mixes a biography of one of Kansas's Populist senators, William A. Peffer, with a detailed quantitative study of Kansas voter behavior in the

9. See Peter H. Argersinger, "The Political Limits of Western Populism," in *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 1-36; Peter H. Argersinger, "Pentecostal Politics in Kansas: Religion, the Farmers Alliance, and the Gospel of Populism," *Kansas Quarterly* 1 (Fall 1969): 24-35.

seven hundred pages in length and packed with detail. Goodwyn wrote in reaction to Hofstadter (and most other historians who had dealt with Populism in the West), offering a provocative new interpretation. He placed great emphasis on the Greenback tradition and especially the importance of the Alliance movement's cooperative crusade. To Goodwyn, the key to Populism was the role of the cooperatives in radicalizing their members: "To describe the origins of Populism in one sentence, the cooperative experience recruited American farmers, and their subsequent experience within the cooperatives radically altered their political consciousness." Kansas loomed large in this account and stood in great contrast with neighboring Nebraska, whose Populists were not real Populists, since they had not come to the movement through cooperatives.¹⁰ *Democratic Promise* initially was well received, and its author lionized by many young historians and activists.

Over a period of time, however, some scholars raised questions about Goodwyn's treatment on a number of points. Stanley Parsons and several of his students explored the cooperative thesis advanced in *Democratic Promise*. First, they determined that there was a relatively small number of cooperatives organized by the Alliance movement. In Kansas, for example, they found only thirty-two of them by 1890. Since the Alliance claimed a membership of approximately one hundred thousand at that time, it is unlikely that very many Kansas farmers had experience with cooperatives, which is what Goodwyn said made them into Populists. Furthermore, Parsons et al. found that many of the cooperatives were organized at roughly the same time the Kansas People's Party emerged.¹¹ McNall also explored this topic in *The Road to Rebellion* (1988). He believed there was ambiguity in the record about what constituted an Alliance cooperative, and was unable to confirm any of them in Kansas prior to 1890, the very year farmers opted for a third party. Although more research is warranted on this topic, Goodwyn's argument in regard to its application in Kansas does not seem persuasive. Yet, the Alliance was a very important institution in this state in the late 1880s, and there is a substantial body of evidence to confirm the existence of what Goodwyn calls a "movement culture."

McNall's study is the kind of book that many historians do not like. First of all, it is written by a sociologist and cites other sociologists as references. Second, the subtitle, *Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865–1900*, invites rejection on the part of traditional historians. Farmers in Kansas or any other state were (and still are) a mixed group made up of different strata. Some rented their land, while others owned vastly different amounts, ranging from fifty to thousands of acres. But it would be a mistake for people interested in Kansas Populism to ignore *The Road to Rebellion*.

10. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

11. Stanley B. Parsons, Karen Tooms Parsons, Walter Killilae, and Beverly Borgers, "The Role of Cooperatives in the Development of the Movement Culture of Populism," *Journal of American History* 69 (March 1983): 866–85.

*Populist
candidates
never attracted
even 40 percent
of the vote in
a statewide
contest in
Kansas when
they ran on a
straight Populist
ticket.*

'Truth Against the World'

**People's
PARTY
PICNIC!**

**AT
Coberly's
Grove.**

Two miles South of TEVIS in Shawnee county

AUGUST 18, 1894.

Hon. S. M. SCOTT,
Candidate for Congress
will be the Orator of the Day.

Hon. E. E. Chesney
and others will be present and
address the meeting.

QUENEMO GLEE CLUB
will furnish the music.

Teams will meet the Train at Tevis and
convey the people to the grounds, Free of
charge.

More Money! Less Taxes!
Assist us to Save the Home.
EVERYBODY COME.
BY ORDER OF COMMITTEE.

The account of Alliance organizer S. M. Scott, published in 1890, is particularly insightful on the relationship between the Alliance and Populism, though it has been underutilized by historians who study the topic. Scott, identified as a candidate for Congress, is an advertised speaker on this People's Party picnic flyer from 1894.

McNall's treatment of the Alliance is insightful and adds significant detail not found in other published scholarship. Building on Goodwyn's conceptualization of a "movement culture," he has made a significant contribution to our understanding of its development in Kansas. McNall's use of the account of Alliance organizer S. M. Scott is particularly insightful. This source, published in 1890, has been under-utilized by historians who studied the topic.¹² McNall did a lot of digging in Kansas sources, and his study can be read with profit by anyone interested in Kansas Populism.

R. Douglas Hurt, in a 2004 review essay for this series, wrote: "With the exception of biographical studies and local histories, the historiography of Kansas Populism may have peaked for further work, unless some new approach can address it."¹³ On the one hand, it is true, as I have sought to show in the above discussion, that there is already an abundance of good scholarship on this topic. In fact, the historiography of no other state can match it. On the other hand, I think there is still room for quite a bit more research. For starters, I suggest two areas that need additional work: first, third-party efforts before Populism, and second, a full-blown study of the Alliance movement. Historians have treated the Greenback and Union Labor parties in their accounts, and we have some solid article-length work on figures such as John R. Rogers and Henry Vincent, but we really do not know that much about these efforts in Kansas. Who were the organizers of these parties? What attracted them to such causes? Where was their base of support? What kind of vote did they attract for their local and state candidates?¹⁴ Although this approach will be dealt with in more detail below, it seems obvious that a great deal more work needs to be done at the local level, and one of the ways to determine what locales to study is to survey the vote that these parties drew in state and national elections.

Obviously, we already have an extensive scholarly literature on the Alliance movement in Kansas. But much of it treats the topic as a necessary antecedent to the "real story," the third party that emerged in the 1890s. To my mind, a book-length examination of this movement in Kansas, which treats it along the lines of Robert C. McMath's broader study of the Southern Alliance, would be a real contribution.¹⁵ Some of the best discussion we now have on the Alliance is found in Michael Lewis Goldberg's *An Army of Women: Gender and Politics in Gilded Age Kansas* (1997). The Alliance, we are often reminded, was a family farm

12. S. M. Scott, *The Champion Organizer of the Northwest: Or, My First Sixty Days Work as an Organizer* (McPherson, Kans.: S. M. Scott, 1890).

13. R. Douglas Hurt, "The Agricultural and Rural History of Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 27 (Autumn 2004): 206.

14. See Ronald C. Briel, "Preface to Populism: A Social Analysis of Minor Parties in Nebraska Politics, 1876-1890" (PhD diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1981).

15. Robert C. McMath, *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1977).

organization, and more attention to that feature is warranted. Goldberg, as others before him, reminded us that once the Populist Party emerged there was no longer a role for most of the Alliance's women members. Their organization went into eclipse, and only notables such as Mary Elizabeth Lease and Annie Diggs had much of a place in the new farmers' movement.¹⁶ But what happened to the Alliance organization itself after 1890? We know that it declined, as many local Alliances themselves were transformed into Populist clubs. Yet we do not know when and how this turn of events occurred in most places. It is clear that many members of the Alliance did not make the switch from the old parties to the Populist cause. Did a large number try to stick it out with the "nonpartisan" Alliance? When did the Alliance story end in Kansas? Did ex-Alliance members join the Farmers Union when it emerged in Kansas in the first decade of the twentieth century?

It may also be time to revisit some of the issues raised by Hofstadter more than fifty years ago. Although Nugent's *The Tolerant Populists* had the better of the argument and certainly was based on much more extensive research, perhaps it overstated the case. In 1995 Jeffrey Ostler published an article in *Agricultural History* titled, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism." He found little evidence of anti-Semitism but uncovered a great deal of conspiratorial thinking in the Populist press. Unlike Hofstadter, however, who saw such rhetoric as reflecting a paranoid style of thought outside the mainstream of American political discourse, Ostler tied it to a tradition of republicanism dating to the American Revolution. Populists used such rhetoric, Ostler argued, as a tool to mobilize "support for the new movement." The findings of this study are at odds with virtually all post-1960 scholarship on Populism, especially in the Sunflower State. The year before Ostler's article appeared, however, Virgil Dean published an essay in *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* on Elmer J.

16. Michael Lewis Goldberg, *An Army of Women: Gender and Politics in Gilded Age Kansas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Mary Elizabeth Lease has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. See O. Gene Clanton, "Intolerant Populist? The Disaffection of Mary Elizabeth Lease," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Summer 1968): 189-200; Dorothy Rose Blumberg, "Mary Elizabeth Lease, Populist Orator: A Profile," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 1 (Spring 1978): 3-15; Rae C. Gundersen, "Mary Elizabeth Lease: Voice of the Populists," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 13 (Fall 1980): 3-10; Rebecca Edwards, "Mary Elizabeth Lease: Advocate for Political Reform," in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 127-39; Brooke Speer Orr, "Mary Elizabeth Lease: Gendered Discourse and Populist Party Politics in Gilded Age America," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 29 (Winter 2006/2007): 246-58. See also Brooke Speer Orr, "Mary Elizabeth Lease: Nineteenth-Century Populist and Twentieth-Century Progressive" (PhD diss., George Washington University, 2002). Annie Diggs, who arguably was equally important in the overall history of Kansas Populism, has drawn much less attention. She too would be a good subject for a book-length scholarly study.

Farmers' Alliance
PICNIC!

The members of the Farmers' Alliance of
Dover Township will hold a Picnic in
MOON'S GROVE,
Wednesday, Aug. 28, '89.

President of the Day, J. W. Stewart, of Dover Alliance,
VICE-PRESIDENTS,
L. L. KIENE, Pleasant Valley Alliance, ✪
JOHN MECORD, Willard Alliance,
✪ EDWARD MITCHELL, Va'encia Alliance.

Marshal, ✪ Assistant Marshal,
Wm. M. Douglass. Byron Anderson.

PROGRAM.

Singing by the Choir.
Reading of the Declaration of Purposes, by the
President J. W. Stewart.
Music.
Address by A. E. Dickinson, State Lecturer
Music.
Address by Hon. Bradford Miller.
Music.
Paper by Mrs. Jennie Douglass.
Music.
Three Minute Speeches by Members of the Order
and others.

Refreshments on the grounds. The proceeds to be
expended for literature for the several Alliances.

✪ **BRING YOUR BASKETS** ✪

All who are in sympathy with the Farmers' Alliance
and similar organizations are cordially invited
to attend and hear the principles discussed.

EXERCISES WILL BEGIN AT 10 A. M.

By order of the Committee,
W. S. MARTIN, J. W. SAGE, G. D. WRIGHT,
W. M. DOUGLASS, L. T. YOUNT.

BARLIS & DOUGLASS, PRINTERS, TOWNSHIP, KAN.

There already exists an extensive scholarly literature on the Alliance movement in Kansas. But much of it treats the topic as a necessary antecedent to the "real story," the third party that emerged in the 1890s. A book-length examination of this movement in Kansas—considering events and organizations like those mentioned on this picnic flyer from Dover Township, Shawnee County, ca. 1889—would be a real contribution.



Once the Populist Party emerged there was no longer a role for most of the Alliance's women members. Their organization went into eclipse, and only notables such as Mary Elizabeth Lease and Annie Diggs had much of a place in the new farmers' movement. Diggs, pictured here, has drawn less attention than Lease but would make a good subject for a book-length study.

Garner. Dean's subject was a rightwing extremist who published an anti-Semitic newspaper in Wichita in the 1930s and 1940s. Ultimately, Garner was charged with sedition during World War II, although the case was dropped after the death of the presiding judge in 1944. A half-century before, Garner had served as the editor of the *Farmers' Advance*, a paper first identified with the Alliance and then with the Populist Party.¹⁷ How many more editors like Garner were there in Kansas?

To me, the best way to pursue a number of the questions raised so far in this essay is to explore them at the grassroots or in a particular locale. That is, we should encourage the study of third parties before Populism, the Alliance, and Populism itself in one Kansas county after another. To the best of my knowledge, there is not one county study on any of these topics in print.¹⁸ There are, of course, different ways to conduct research at the local level. But an obvious place to start is with locales where we already know there was some activity. For example, using state election records and references in the existing scholarship to pinpoint counties where the Greenbackers or Union Laborites attracted a significant vote, the local and movement press could then be consulted to determine if there is adequate information available to pursue further research. The Alliance and Populist movements are a better bet for local studies, to be sure, but I think quite a bit more work could be done on the earlier third parties as well.

Local Alliance records in Kansas are scarce. Yet we know that both the Northern and Southern Alliances were established in the state, and the local press and other papers often covered Alliance activities in particular locales. A close reading of local newspapers is probably the best available approach to determine questions about membership; the participation of women; the formation, success, and failure of cooperatives; the emergence of the new third party; and perhaps the ultimate demise of the Alliance organization itself. Likewise, a similar inquiry in locales of Populist strength promises good results. While Kansas Populism never recovered from its 1898 electoral setback, some pockets of third-party sentiment persisted. One historian noted that a local Populist ticket

17. Jeffrey Ostler, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism," *Agricultural History* 69 (Winter 1995): 1-27; Virgil W. Dean, "Another Wichita Seditiousist?: Elmer J. Garner and the Radical Right's Opposition to World War II," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Spring 1994): 50-64.

18. The only local studies cited in Worth Robert Miller's Populist bibliography are two unpublished masters' theses: Ralph Hutcheson, "The Populist Party in Sedgwick County" (master's thesis, Wichita State University, 1932); Harold R. Smith, "Populist Study in Need of Revision: A Case Study of Kearney County, Kansas, in the Populist Era" (master's thesis, Ft. Hays Kansas State College, 1969).

carried Graham County as late as 1904.¹⁹ It would probably be worth the effort to research the Alliance and Populist experience there and in some other locales where Populist sentiment persisted after 1898. And, again at the local level, it would likely be worthwhile trying to determine where ex-Alliance members and ex-Populists ended up organizationally in the new century.

The Knights of Labor was an important part of the history of Populism, but it was more important as a labor union. Historians have disagreed among themselves as to whether or not it was a radical movement per se, but it seems clear that many leftwing unionists took part in its activities.²⁰ It shared in the ideology of Producerism held by committed Alliance members and Populists, and many Knights in Kansas and elsewhere supported the third-party insurgency of the 1890s. To date, however, there has been very little published scholarship on the Knights in this state. The most thorough treatment is found in R. Alton Lee's *Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860–1960* (2005), which surveys the history of organized labor in Kansas. As early as the 1870s the Knights were active in the state, but it was not until the mid-1880s that they surged in membership. From an early date they organized railroad workers and established a foothold in railroad centers. As is the case with the Alliance and the People's Party, there has been little research on this topic at the local level. The one exception here is Leon Fink's study of the Knights in Kansas City, Kansas. Fink focused on their involvement in local politics. His study shows one of the main reasons why a strong farmer-labor coalition did not emerge in Kansas in this era. In Kansas City, political activists in the Knights often established relationships with the old parties prior to the emergence of Populism, and those connections survived the firestorm of insurgency that swept across the rural areas of the state. This accommodation (or what some might see as cooptation) also helps explain why many Alliance members on the Plains or in the Upper Midwest could not bring themselves to leave the Republican Party. As some historians have observed, another reason that many urban workers were not attracted to the Populist cause, despite its underlying rhetoric of Producerism, was that the third party campaigned mostly on rural issues. Lee and others show that the Knights were well into their decline by the time of the Populist revolt.²¹

Research on the Knights is a wide-open topic in Kansas and the rest of the Plains. Although it was often involved in politics, the Knights of Labor was basically a labor union and much more attention could be paid to that part of its history in this state. More than thirty years ago, Jonathan

Local Alliance records in Kansas are scarce. Yet we know that both the Northern and Southern Alliances were established in the state.

19. Harrington, "The Populist Party," 448.

20. See Leon Fink, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 115–36; John P. Diggins, "The Misuses of Gramsci," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 141–45.

21. R. Alton Lee, *Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860–1960* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), chapter 5.

Historians have disagreed among themselves as to whether or not the Knights of Labor was a radical movement per se, but it seems clear that many leftwing unionists took part in its activities.

Garlock compiled an extensive database on the Knights in the United States. His findings for Kansas show references to more than four hundred assemblies at one time or another, with the highest number in 1886. According to this compilation, many Kansas communities (all of which Garlock lists by name) had some kind of Knights activity. Perhaps many of these assemblies were short-lived or even stillborn, but Kansas had a larger number of them than the neighboring states to the north. Garlock's list of assemblies can serve a very useful purpose for students of the Knights in Kansas, identifying locales in which they were present.²² Further research on this topic promises to lead to a fuller understanding of Kansas's labor radicalism, as well as local and state politics and labor history generally. The Knights of Labor may have been the single most important labor union in the nineteenth-century United States, and it behooves us to learn more about its tenure in this state. As with ex-Alliance members and ex-Populists, it would be interesting to determine what happened to former Knights after their organization declined. That is a research question that could be pursued in one Kansas community after another.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

In regard to political radicalism there is a big divide between the Populist era and what follows in Kansas and most of the Plains states. Except in Oklahoma and North Dakota, it never again approached center stage. This dramatic shift may have been most pronounced in Kansas. Pockets of radical sentiment persisted, now under the banner of Socialism rather than Populism, but at best they were leftwing outposts, not the basis for a state-wide constituency. The most important radical effort in the United States in the early twentieth century was the Socialist movement. Although its origins pre-date the Populism of the 1890s, its heyday was between 1900 and 1917, during what most American historians call the Progressive Era.²³ James R. Green's *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (1978) focuses on Oklahoma, where the Socialists had their strongest following. But Green emphasized the importance of Julius Wayland and his weekly Socialist newspaper, the *Appeal to Reason*, which was published in Girard, Kansas, in the southeast corner of the state. Oklahoma led the nation in terms of Socialist Party (SP) members and it elected a number of Socialists to local office and the state legislature. In 1914 the SP gubernatorial candidate polled 20 percent of the vote, carrying fifteen counties. Although

22. One of the very few studies in print is Erling N. Sannes, "Knowledge is Power: The Knights of Labor in South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): 400–30; see also Jonathan Ezra Garlock, "A Structural Analysis of the Knights of Labor: A Prolegomenon to the History of the Producing Classes" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1974); Jonathan Garlock, comp., *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

23. For broad treatments on the U.S. Socialist movement, see Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897–1912* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967); James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).

the Socialists never approached the following of the Populists, they were proven vote getters in Oklahoma and gave the Democrats a run for their money in numerous locales, especially in the southern and western sections of the state.²⁴

In contrast, the Socialists never did as well elsewhere on the Plains. In Kansas, they elected a few legislators and gave Eugene Debs 7 percent of the vote in the 1912 presidential election. Their strongest enclave was in the southeast corner of the state or what was known as the "Little Balkans." This was the stomping ground of Wayland and the *Appeal to Reason*. Though other historians, including Howard Quint, have addressed this topic, the most thorough treatment is Elliott Shore's *Talkin' Socialism: J. A. Wayland and the Role of the Press in American Radicalism, 1890–1912* (1988). Wayland had been

a leftwing Populist editor, who broke away from the party in 1896, in the wake of William Jennings Bryan's candidacy. He moved his paper to Girard in 1897 and began one of the most remarkable experiments in leftwing journalism in American history. The *Appeal to Reason* was designed to draw a wide readership across the country, and its articles avoided dogma and ideology, offering cartoons, muckraking exposes, human-interest stories designed to promote socialism, news of SP efforts across the country, and ongoing subscription contests. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* first appeared in its pages in serial form in 1905, and other prominent Socialist figures were contributors from time to time as well. The paper had a nationwide readership and claimed a circulation of more than 500,000 by 1910. At their peak special editions may have reached 750,000 copies. (Wayland's empire included a number of other publications as well, occupying two buildings and employing as many as thirty-five people.) The *Appeal to Reason*, although privately owned, was the Socialist Party's most important cultural institution and it (and the Appeal Army that hawked subscriptions in countless communities across the country) contributed to the electoral success that Socialists enjoyed prior to U.S. entry into World War I.²⁵



In Kansas the Socialist movement was made up of leftwing outposts rather than a statewide constituency. The state was home, however, to Julius Wayland and his weekly Socialist newspaper, the Appeal to Reason. The paper was published in Girard, where these men are pictured in 1913 with 23 tons of a special edition waiting to be loaded for delivery. Postcard courtesy of the Leonard H. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University.

24. James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980). See also Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910–1924* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976); Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

25. Howard Quint, "Wayland Plants Grass Roots Socialism," in *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill Company, 1964), 175–209; David Paul Nord, "The Appeal to Reason and American Socialism, 1901–1920," *Kansas*

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Girard was the county seat of Crawford County, which is in the heart of the tri-state mining country. The presence of the *Appeal* helped the local Socialist cause, and in 1912 the party carried the county with its local slate, electing Benjamin F. Wilson to the legislature and giving Eugene Debs 30 percent of the presidential vote. But 1912 would prove to be the peak of Socialist strength in this locale and many others in the region and the country. Wayland himself committed suicide soon after the election. The *Appeal* continued to be a major force for the movement, but SP advances in southeast Kansas slowed to a halt.²⁶ Kate Richards O'Hare was the most important Socialist orator to emerge out of Kansas, and Neil Basen and Sally M. Miller have published important work on her efforts. Initially, she had some involvement with Wayland and the *Appeal to Reason*, but in 1910 she and her husband went to the *National Rip-Saw*, another Socialist paper that was published in St. Louis. Her husband, Frank O'Hare, played a major role in organizing Socialist encampments in the Southwest, and Kate was often a featured speaker. She toured the country for the party, ran for public office, and assumed a leadership role in the national organization. Aside from Wayland, the *Appeal to Reason*, and O'Hare, there is little published scholarship on Kansas Socialism in the twentieth century. G. C. Clemens and Frank Doster, leftwing Populists who became Socialists in the 1890s, have been the subject of solid biographical studies, but little else has been written.²⁷

To my mind, there is room for a lot more research on topics related to pre-World War I Socialism. First, I think that someone should study the extent of Socialist political activity in the state in the years between 1900 and 1920. A way to begin such a project would be to tabulate the SP vote in certain elections, such as 1900, 1908, 1912, and 1916, to determine the relative Socialist strength in particular counties. Then, after determining these locales, a survey of the local and party press should be undertaken to discover what types of party activity occurred there. Such an inquiry would not establish that Kansas was as "Socialist" as Oklahoma in "the golden age of American socialism," but it would enable us to have a firmer understanding of the topic than we do now.²⁸ It would also help us determine

History: A Journal of the Central Plains 1 (Summer 1978): 75–89; Elliot Shore, *Talkin' Socialism: J. A. Wayland and the Role of the Press in American Radicalism, 1890–1912* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988). For a sampling of the contents of the *Appeal to Reason*, see John Graham, ed., "Yours for the Revolution": *The Appeal to Reason, 1895–1922* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

26. For Socialist life in Girard, see these articles in *Little Balkans Review* 4 (Fall 1983): Randy Roberts, "The Girard Homes of the Appeal," 50–57; Gene E. Vollen, "The Social Impact of the Socialists on Girard," 58–65. The Socialists elected a second legislator from Girard in 1914. He was George Brewer, a long time party figure, who had worked with the *Appeal to Reason*. See Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 292.

27. Neil K. Basen, "Kate Richards O'Hare: The 'First Lady' of American Socialism, 1901–1917," *Labor History* 21 (Spring 1980): 165–99; Sally M. Miller, *From Prairie to Prison: The Life of Social Activist Kate Richard O'Hare* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993); Sally M. Miller, "Kate Richards O'Hare: A Life of Dissent," in *John Brown to Bob Dole*, 178–92; Michael J. Brodhead and O. Gene Clanton, "G. C. Clemens: The 'Sociale Socialist,'" *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (Winter 1974): 475–502; Brodhead, *Persevering Populist*.

28. The phrase "the golden age of American socialism" is taken from Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, 55.

the extent of the connection between Populism and Socialism in the Sunflower State. We already know that some key individuals such as Wayland and Clemens took part in both movements, but a close look at particular locales will add to this knowledge.

For a number of historians, the most radical movement in twentieth-century United States history probably is the Industrial Workers of the World.²⁹ For some of these scholars, perhaps the Socialists had too many members who made a fetish of legality, and when they managed

to get elected to public office often acted like bourgeois reformers. On the other hand, the Wobblies were the “real McCoy” as far as radicalism was concerned. Kansas was the site of a significant amount of IWW activity, particularly in the immediate pre-World War I era. Thousands of workers in the oil and wheat fields signed up with the Wobblies at least for a short time. Surprisingly, considering the interest many historians and others have expressed in this subject elsewhere, there is little published scholarship on the IWW in Kansas. With the exception of Lee’s recent study on the state’s labor history, the attention has tended to focus more upon what was done to the IWW in Kansas, rather than on what the Wobblies themselves actually did. Several articles, including two in publications of the Kansas State Historical Society, treat trials involving IWW members. These are solid studies, but it is time for scholars to research other parts of Wobly history as well. Here, Kansas historians could follow the lead of Nigel Anthony Sellars’s *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905–1930* (1998).³⁰



As demonstrated by this image of the Kansas State Socialist Convention held in Wichita on December 14–15, 1915, Socialists were active in the years leading up to and during World War I. The extent of the party’s political activity in the state in the years between 1900 and 1920, however, is a matter that demands more study.

29. See Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969).

30. Clayton R. Koppes, “The Industrial Workers of the World and County Jail Reform in Kansas, 1915–1920,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Spring 1975): 63–86; Clayton R. Koppes, “The Kansas Trial of the IWW, 1917–1919,” *Labor History* 16 (Summer 1975): 338–58; Richard C. Cortner, “The Wobblies and Fiske v. Kansas: Victory Amid Disintegration,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 4 (Spring 1981): 30–38; Nigel Anthony Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905–1930* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998). See also Charles James Haug, “The Industrial Workers of the World in North Dakota, 1913–1917,” *North Dakota Quarterly* 39 (Winter 1971): 85–102; Charles James Haug, “The Industrial Workers of the World in North Dakota, 1918–1925,” *North Dakota Quarterly* 41 (Summer 1973): 40–53; David G. Wagaman, “The Industrial Workers of the World in Nebraska, 1914–1920,” *Nebraska History* 56 (Fall 1975): 295–337; Theodore H. Grossardt, “Harvesting Hoboes: The 800 Mile Picket Line” (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 1999); Ted

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In some respects, the IWW on the Plains was a very different kind of radical group when compared to the Populists or Socialists. Most of the Wobblies, especially in the wheat fields, were transients who only worked in a particular state for a short period of time. The transient nature of their work may have made them more vulnerable to harassment and repression, as they usually were not part of local communities and were not constituents of local officials. Research on this topic could focus at least some of its attention on the identity of Wobblies and how many of them were actually from Kansas. Although much of the scholarship on the IWW focuses upon World War I era repression, there was a widespread Wobbly scare prior to U.S. entry into the war. Again, research at the local level promises to provide a lot more information on this notorious group. Did it find a hostile reception everywhere across the state? How does the Kansas experience prior to the war compare with that of other Plains states? What was the relationship between Socialists and Wobblies in Kansas? What happened to IWW members after their organization declined?

Leftwingers have often participated in broader-based movements that have many more non-radicals in their membership. In Oklahoma there was a connection between the Farmers Union and Socialist Party members in the early twentieth century. Farmers Union activists often were Socialists and vice versa. Jim Bissett's *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904–1920* (1999) argues that many early Farmers Union members opted for the Socialist cause in Oklahoma prior to 1910 after becoming disillusioned with the farm organization. We know precious little about the history of the Farmers Union in Kansas at any time. It apparently arrived in the state in 1907 and grew to about eight thousand members in the first year or so. Theodore Saloutos wrote: "During these early years Kansas was probably the most important center of Union activities," and quoted William Allen White making a comparison between the new movement and the Farmers Alliance of the late 1880s. By 1920 the Kansas organization claimed a membership of approximately 120,000.³¹

Where did the Farmers Union membership come from? Were the recruits ex-Populists? How many of them were or became Socialists? The answers to these questions are tucked away in obscure local newspapers awaiting their first researchers on such topics. Many Populists (or Populist voters) were not deeply committed to the Omaha Platform or other Populist positions; the same is true for many Socialists (and there were not nearly as many of them as there were Populists), and, to be candid, for many Farmers Union members as well. The Farmers Union was a mass organization

Grossardt, "Harvest(ing) Hoboes: The Production of Labor Organization through the Wheat Harvest," *Agricultural History* 70 (Spring 1996): 283–301; Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905–1930* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001).

31. Theodore Saloutos and John Hicks, *Twentieth-Century Populism: Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900–1939* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, [1951]), 224–25; Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*.

like the Farmers Alliance before it, and there were no political tests for membership. In the pre-World War I era, just as there would be in the 1930s and 1940s (and after), there was a range of political sentiments among the membership. I suggest an exploration of the makeup of the Kansas Farmers Union between 1907 and 1920 would illuminate not only the nature of its membership in those years, but also the connections between Populism and Socialism and this important farm organization. A promising way to make such an inquiry would be to examine particular locales where there was a strong Farmers Union presence. One of the most impressive pieces of research on agrarian radicalism in recent years is Marilyn Watkins's study of Lewis County, Washington, between 1885 and 1925. She looked at Populism, the Grange, the Nonpartisan League (NPL), and the Farmer-Labor Party and found that during this time there was a persistent leftwing presence that was relatively successful at the ballot box.³² Perhaps comparable sources are not available in Kansas locales, but we will not know that as fact until inquiries are made. We do know that every Kansas county had weekly newspapers, that many communities had Alliance and Populist papers, that there existed numerous Socialist newspapers, and that the Kansas Farmers Union published a newspaper as early as 1908.

The most unique American agrarian political movement in the twentieth century was the NPL. It emerged in North Dakota in 1915 and came to power the following year, electing the governor, attorney general, secretary of state, commission of agriculture, and a majority of the lower house of the legislature. Unlike the Populists, the NPL was not a separate political party, but instead was a well-disciplined organization that worked within the existing two party system. In North Dakota, the League took over the Republican Party in the primary and elected its candidates as Republicans in the fall. Ultimately, the NPL implemented its platform, including a state-owned bank, mill, and elevator. The NPL idea had a lot of appeal to many farmers in other states, and the League sent organizers to South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Kansas.³³ Although it never had the same degree of success elsewhere, it did achieve some organizational success in parts of South Da-



On a Sunday evening in 1916, harvest hands pass the time on a curb in Delphos, Kansas, before a week's work begins. This harvest season witnessed heavy campaigning by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies) throughout the Midwest. Research at the local level promises to provide a lot more information on the actions of this notorious group in Kansas.

32. Marilyn P. Watkins, *Rural Democracy: Family Farmers and Politics in Western Washington, 1890–1925* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

33. Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985).



We know precious little about the history of the Farmers Union in Kansas from its arrival in the state in 1907 to its activities in the 1930s and 1940s. Photographs like this one, of women from Galena, Kansas, participating in a 1936 Union protest in nearby Columbus, witness the group's activities in the state, yet many unanswered questions remain. Some answers are perhaps tucked away in obscure local newspapers awaiting their first researchers on such topics. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

kota, Minnesota, Montana, and Washington.

To date, we do not know much about the NPL experience in Kansas. Bruce Larson has written two fine articles on the topic, but they focus much of their attention on one 1921 episode in Barton County in the north central section of the state. Here, the wartime suppression that disrupted Socialist and NPL activity across the region (other than in North Dakota, where there was a League administration in power) continued into the postwar years. During the war itself, William Allen White's *Emporia Gazette* renamed the NPL "the 'Hun-partisan League.'" Larson showed how constitutional guarantees were suspended when it involved the League, as local vigilantes and authorities harassed and broke up the NPL gathering at Great Bend.³⁴ Much more could be done on the topic of the NPL in Kansas, and part of the reason I would urge such research is that perhaps one of the keys to the

twentieth-century divergence of Kansas from the other Plains states may have taken root between 1919 and 1924. I suggest a close reading of the official League paper in Kansas, the *Ellsworth County Leader*, and selected examples of the local press in the north central section of the state. Who supported the League in Kansas? What was the attitude of the Farmers Union and the Grange toward the new farmers' organization? In North Dakota and Oklahoma, the Farmers Union was supportive, while in Nebraska it was less sympathetic, looking at the NPL as a rival. Although there was some League presence in Oklahoma, it did not develop much of a follow-

34. Bruce L. Larson, "Kansas and the Nonpartisan League: The Response to the Affair at Great Bend, 1921," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 1968): 51-71; Bruce L. Larson, "A Kansas Newspaper and the Nonpartisan League, 1919-20," *Journalism Quarterly* 49 (Spring 1972): 98-106; Herbert L. Pankratz, "The Suppression of Alleged Disloyalty in Kansas During World War I," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 42 (Autumn 1976): 277-307.

ing there. In 1922, however, the NPL, remnants of the Socialist Party, the Farmers Union, and much of the labor movement formed the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League, which proved to be a very powerful political force in the short run. It too had “a boring within” strategy akin to what the NPL had urged. In Oklahoma it opted to work within the Democratic Party, successfully nominating its slate and going on to elect its candidates to office in the fall. It would be an exaggeration to characterize the Reconstruction League as a radical movement, but leftwingers clearly had played a major part in the effort.³⁵ In neighboring Kansas, however, nothing like it appeared.

Yet there may have been a last hurrah of sorts for radicalism in the Sunflower State two years later, when Robert La Follette ran for president on an independent ticket. It was a poorly funded and disorganized campaign. Early predictions of a second place finish proved hopelessly optimistic. But La Follette attracted close to five million votes for 16.5 percent of the total popular vote. He carried his home state of Wisconsin and finished second in twelve states, including Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and California. In Kansas, La Follette received almost 15 percent of the total vote, which was a much better showing than in Oklahoma, where the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League administration had self-destructed the previous year. The La Follette campaign in Kansas, which incidentally was backed by Alfred M. Landon, might be a good topic to study. Crawford County, an early Socialist stronghold, gave La Follette approximately 5,500 votes, 31 percent of its vote, and several counties with relatively strong union membership such as Sedgwick and Wyandotte turned in a significant vote for the Wisconsin Senator as well.³⁶

One of the most puzzling things about Kansas is the relative lack of farm protest in the 1930s. There is no question that Kansas farmers were hard hit in the Depression era, but the Farmers Holiday had little recorded activity in the state. Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska all took part in the farm revolt and attracted national attention. Francis W. Schruben wrote in his *Kansas in Turmoil, 1930–1936* (1969): “The Farm Holiday Association, headed by Milo Reno, created interest but almost no action in Kansas.” To be sure, there was little Holiday action in Oklahoma as well, but there we can find the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, spilling over from Arkansas, where it was a major

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35. Gilbert C. Fite, “The Nonpartisan League in Oklahoma,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 24 (Summer 1946): 146–57; Gilbert Fite, “Oklahoma’s Reconstruction League: An Experiment in Farmer-Labor Politics,” *Journal of Southern History* 13 (November 1947): 535–55. Yet too much should not be made of this movement, as its major achievement was the election of its gubernatorial candidate, Jack Walton, whose behavior as governor led to his impeachment and removal from office. Fite wrote: “Within less than a year, however, the farmer-labor empire had tumbled like a stack of cards. The plebian leader, idol of the down-trodden, had been impeached; and Lieutenant Governor Martin E. Trapp, who had not been a farmer-labor candidate, sat safely in the governor’s chair” (Fite, “Oklahoma’s Reconstruction League,” 554).

36. Kenneth Campbell MacKay, *The Progressive Movement of 1924* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947); Kansas Secretary of State, *Twenty-fourth Biennial Report, 1923–1924* (Topeka: Secretary of State, 1924), 85.

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force.³⁷ The Farmers Holiday movement, in some respects, was a spinoff or a satellite of the Farmers Union. That being the case, the fact that the Farmers Union in Kansas had more conservative leadership than its counterparts in the Dakotas and Montana may help explain the lack of Holiday activity in Kansas.

A recent article by R. Alton Lee suggests perhaps a bit of caution may be in order before we close the books on Kansas radicalism in the 1930s. His article looks at how Kansas responded to the unemployment crisis caused by the Depression. This response included state measures, as well as New Deal programs such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Civil Works Administration (CWA), and especially the Works Progress Administration (WPA). What is of particular relevance to the discussion at hand is Lee's treatment of the efforts to organize relief workers, many of whom were hard-pressed farmers. Relief workers joined the Kansas Workers Alliance, which was affiliated with the Workers Alliance of America, protesting job conditions and cutbacks in federal relief projects. On several occasions, Lee reported, members of the Workers Alliance took over courthouses and conducted sit-down demonstrations in 1937 and 1938 to pressure authorities. What is more, these protests sometimes resulted in a restoration of previous conditions or even improved benefits.

Lee is the first historian to treat the Workers Alliance in any Plains state. It may be that Lee has just scratched the surface in regard to the story of militant protest among relief workers in the Sunflower State.³⁸ One of the sources he studied is a WPA document titled "Kansas Unemployed Organizations," which was prepared by Ernest F. McNutt. As Lee's article shows, McNutt himself played a central role in the protests, serving as secretary of the Kansas Workers Alliance. His report, which runs over 185 pages, lists sixty-five separate Kansas relief organizations formed between 1931 and 1935 and also provides brief accounts of demonstrations and strikes in at least ten locales. In the 1930s, there were numerous organizations of the unemployed and workers on relief projects across the country, and radicals were often involved in these groups. McNutt had been the Kansas state secretary of the Communist Labor Party back in 1919, and John and Helen Hester, a Communist couple from north central Kansas, had an active role

37. Francis W. Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil, 1930–1936* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 113–14; John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

38. R. Alton Lee, "Drought and Depression on the Great Plains: The Kansas Transition from New Deal Work Relief to Old Age Pensions," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 39 (Spring/Summer 2006): 5–29. Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), appeared after this essay was almost completed. It discusses some of the episodes treated in Lee's article, but devotes much more of its attention to why relief workers were likely to protest than to their organizational efforts. Fearon's treatment shows that Crawford and Cheyenne counties, in the extreme southeastern corner of the state, were centers of protest in the Depression years and briefly mentions Alexander Howatt's role in a 1934 demonstration in Crawford County (Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression*, 100–1). Fearon's study is essential reading to understand Kansas's Depression era experience.

in the Kansas Workers Alliance. John served as the state organizer and Helen as the Kansas City representative on the state committee.³⁹

I do not know the extent of Communist involvement in the Kansas Workers Alliance, but Communists certainly played a significant role in the Workers Alliance nationally. While there is a great deal more research to be done on relief worker organizations in Kansas during the 1930s, I do not believe that the Communist movement amounted to much at anytime in the state's history. That said, two major Communist figures, Earl Browder and James Cannon, were native Kansans. Both Browder and Cannon were sons of socialists and were introduced to socialism early in their lives. Browder was from Wichita and Cannon from the Kansas City, Kansas, area. They became involved in radical journalism, and Browder was imprisoned during World War I for his opposition to the war. When the Communist movement emerged in the postwar period, both of them assumed active roles, with Cannon the more influential of the two for most of the first decade. By the early 1920s, both of them left Kansas for good. Browder became national secretary of the Communist Party (CP) in 1929; Cannon had been expelled from the party the previous year and assumed leadership of a newly formed Trotskyist movement.⁴⁰



Some Kansans responded to the unemployment crisis caused by the Depression by protesting job conditions and cutbacks in New Deal relief projects. Above, a protest supporting the Townsend Plan, a precursor to the Social Security System, is put forth on the bumper of a truck in Columbus, Kansas, in 1936: "Local 17: We will Win // Organize or Starve // Townsend for Pa + Ma." Such protests sometimes resulted in a restoration of previous working conditions or even improved benefits through New Deal programs. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

39. Ernest F. McNutt, "Kansas Unemployed Organizations," WPA Writers Project report, ca. 1940, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas; "List of State Secretaries and Representatives [of the Communist Labor Party of America], as of November 1919," <http://www.marxisthistory.org/subject/usa/eam/>. Background on the Hester family is found in Robert Nelson, "Red Cloud's Red Scare," *Omaha World Herald*, August 22, 1999.

40. Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1963); James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997); Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007). Browder led the Communist Party until 1945, while Cannon headed the most important Trotskyist group (that became the Socialist Workers Party in 1938) until his death in 1974. Palmer's richly detailed biography suggests an as yet unexplored history of radicalism in the Kansas City area that extends from the turn of the century into the immediate post-World War I era.



While there is a great deal more research to be done on relief worker organizations in Kansas during the 1930s, the Communist movement does not seem to have amounted to much at anytime in the state's history. Communist ideas were present even if the party in organized form was not, however, as can be seen in the slogans posted at this unemployment demonstration in Columbus, Kansas, in 1936: "A New Deal: For Full Social, Economic and Political Equality for the Negro People. Unite! Against War and Fascism." Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

From the mid-1920s into 1935, Kansas was part of the CP's District 10, a geographic unit that at times included Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. Despite its geographical area, this district had a relatively small membership throughout its existence, and a search of available CP records resulted in few specific references to activities in Kansas in these years.⁴¹ I am reasonably certain that a close reading of the *Daily Worker*, as well as the press in particular locales, will provide additional information of Communist efforts in this state in the 1920s and 1930s, but outside of the relief worker movements and the Kansas City area, I suspect this research will confirm that Kansas was a backwater as far as Communism in this era was concerned. Later, in the Cold War period, Kansas had one of the smallest numbers of party members of any state in the country. In 1948, according to FBI figures that counted twenty-six thousand CP members in the United States, Kansas had only six party members. That tied Kansas with Wyoming, and only Mississippi had a smaller number.⁴²

CONCLUSION

From 1890 to 1900, Kansas was arguably the most radical place in the United States. It served as a model for many leftwingers elsewhere and perhaps as a bad example for conservatives as well. By the end of that era, however, its radicalism had declined and lost its earlier pride

41. In mid-1935 John Hester reported to a party functionary meeting: "Six months [ago?] there were three Party units in Kansas functioning very slightly, one in Pittsburg and one in Fort Scott and the third in Kansas City. At the present time they have built up a little. In Marshall County have been organized three units and in Washington County 1 unit." Transcript of meeting, June 25-26, 1935, Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (RGASPI), Moscow, Russian Federation, Comintern records, 495-14-49, 74. (The meeting is more precisely identified in another document: Martin Young to Org. Department, July 11, 1935, RGASPI, Communist Party USA records, 515-1-3864, 59.) Another party figure wrote six months later: "We had a small unit in Kansas City[,] Kansas[,] and one at Ft. Scott. We established a small unit [a]t Topeka and one is being established tomorrow at Iola. We are working on new units for Pittsburg, Eldorado [sic], Cherryvale, Wichita, Achison [sic], Lawrence and a few other places. I believe [sic] in two weeks we will definitely have units in these places." Max to Comrades, January 22, 1936, RGASPI, Communist Party USA records, 515-1-4033, 2. Perhaps this document should have been placed in the "Hope Springs Eternal" file?

42. FBI chart, "1948 Communist Party Membership by State," President's Secretary File, Papers of Harry S. Truman, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

of place. As a practical matter, from that time on, Kansas was important to radicals as a disseminator of radical sentiments and prescriptions for other places. Perhaps the *Appeal to Reason* was the most important contribution, but a number of Kansas natives, including Kate Richards O'Hare and later Earl Browder and James Cannon, promoted radicalism outside the state and became major figures in subsequent leftwing movements of Socialist, Communist, and Trotskyist varieties. But historic American radicalism was a wider current than these ideological groups, and it permeated into broader groupings such as the labor movement and the Farmers Union. Radicals in the 1880s and 1890s played a big part in Kansas's political history. Later, between 1900 and 1940, they obviously were less important and sometimes virtually extinct. Still, at times and in some locales, leftwingers made their presence known and participated in the political arena and social movements. In the post-World War II era, some took part in labor struggles and a budding civil rights movement, as new recruits to new radical and progressive causes appeared in the 1960s and later.⁴³ But the new generations of leftwingers that emerged in these years were different in important ways from the historic movements discussed in this essay, and I suspect that in Kansas and a number of other places they probably owed little to such antecedents.⁴⁴ Yet that too could be a topic for future research, for such guesses and hunches are no substitute for actual digging in the sources. [KH]

From 1890 to 1900, Kansas was arguably the most radical place in the United States. It served as a model for many leftwingers elsewhere.

43. See Kristine M. McCusker, "The Forgotten Years' of America's Civil Rights Movement: Wartime Protests at the University of Kansas, 1939-1945," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Spring 1994): 26-37; Ronald Walters, "The Great Plains Sit-In Movement, 1958-60," *Great Plains Quarterly* 16 (Spring 1996): 85-94; Rusty L. Monhollon, "Taking the Plunge: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Desegregation in Lawrence, Kansas, 1960," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Autumn, 1987): 138-59; Rusty L. Monhollon, "This is America?" *The Sixties in Lawrence, Kansas* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). McCusker pointed out that Girard radicals Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius publicized racial discrimination in Kansas higher education in a controversial 1928 article titled "What Negro Students Endure in Kansas." See McCusker, "The Forgotten Years," 29-30. For Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius, see M. H. Hoeflich, "Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius: An Innovative Partnership in Publishing," in *John Brown to Bob Dole*, 193-203.

44. In making this comment, I am not intending to deny that there was any connection or argue that newer leftwing generations did not sometimes seek to draw upon earlier radical experience. See Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); William C. Pratt, "Using History to Make History? Progressive Farm Organizing During the Farm Revolt of the 1980s," *The Annals of Iowa* 55 (Winter 1996): 24-45.