Chapter 5
The Rise and Fall of the Knights

Between 1869 and 1896, 15,000 assemblies of the Knights of Labor were established, and at least 2 million people joined the Order. The appearance of the Knights in Humboldt County in the mid-1880s coincided with their emergence as a full-fledged national labor organization that, at its zenith in 1886, had 800,000 members. In Humboldt, as in many other areas of the country, the Knights constituted the first mass organization of workers. In Humboldt, the IWA played a vanguard role in politicizing people’s discontents and laying the foundation for the Knights. The Knights tapped a long-standing dissenting tradition revitalized by local events and developments at the state and national levels. While they drew inspiration and sustenance from the radical strands of the democratic-republican tradition, some of the ambiguities of this legacy led to the formation of an Order that was ideologically diverse and institutionally inclusive. The bitter factionalism that resulted circumscribed the ability of the Humboldt Knights to act as an effective trade union on behalf of their working-class constituency. This was a major reason why, after establishing a strong presence in the county, the Knights ultimately proved to be as transitory an organization in Humboldt County as they were nationally.¹

The Knights Arise

In Humboldt County, 10 assemblies of the Knights of Labor formed between August 1884 and the summer of 1886. At their peak, in 1886, the Knights boasted 2,000 members,² and almost all the county’s towns had assemblies. In addition to three assemblies in Eureka, there were
assemblies at Arcata, Blue Lake, Bayside, Freshwater, Port Kenyon, Rio Dell, and Rohnerville. Eight assemblies were “mixed,” which generally meant that members came from a variety of occupations. For example, the Bayside assembly contained lumber workers and farmers, but the Freshwater assembly had only lumber workers. The original Humboldt assembly, although designated as mixed, was composed primarily of lumber workers.

The growth of the Knights of Labor in Humboldt County occurred during a depression that rivaled the one of the late 1870s in its severity, particularly in its impact on the lumber industry. Its effects shook the moral legitimacy of the lumber owners, especially the California Redwood Company. Many who had been unconcerned about the activities of the company began to view it in a different light.

In July 1884, the Humboldt Lumber Association ordered a 25 percent cut in production and laid off many lumber workers. Within six months the price of clear redwood lumber plummeted from $32 to $22 per 1,000 feet. During 1885, the depression deepened; most lumber companies did not commence operations in the spring of 1885. The California Redwood Company, which in June 1884 had employed 1,000 men, employed only 50 in April 1885. Unemployment in the county reached record levels. The Times-Telephone spoke of “hundreds” of unemployed men in Eureka alone. A correspondent for the San Francisco Chronicle reported that “never . . . was so much want known to exist” in Humboldt County, and spoke of “hundreds of laborers . . . bereft of the bare necessaries of life in a state of semi-starvation,” sleeping in the woods and living on shellfish.

By April 1885, the unemployed began to show signs of discontent and rudimentary organization. After a Times-Telephone editorial stating that the majority of the unemployed were not interested in finding work “unless they can dictate wages,” an indignant letter appeared in the Humboldt Standard, signed by John Larson and “350 others,” protesting the “scurrilous language published in the Times-Telephone against the workmen.” It called the letter an affront to “every honest workman now out of employment.” On May 4, 1885, a mass meeting of unemployed workers took place in Axe Hall in Eureka. A series of resolutions denounced the California Redwood Company for its massive land frauds and for luring large numbers of workers to the county when there was little prospect of employment. The final resolution asked honest businessmen and citizens to put pressure on the “infernal syndicate” to start work or abandon its claims, and threatened to present evidence to the General Land Office in Washington.

Large meetings of unemployed workers took place almost daily.
On May 10, 1885, unemployed workers and some of the county’s leading businessmen met in Eureka. Many speakers dwelt on the fact that “worthy families in our midst” were living in a state of destitution. A committee was appointed to ask the Eureka City Council if street work could be provided for the unemployed, and David Evans and Joseph Russ were delegated to approach the California Redwood Company to ascertain when work might be resumed. Finally, a committee was chosen containing two of the county’s most respected lumber entrepreneurs, William Carson and Timothy Brosnan, to raise funds for the poor.  

Although there were several incidents of alleged arson in the latter part of May, the overall effect of the meeting was to defuse a volatile situation. No further demonstrations occurred, in spite of the fact that the California Redwood Company, and most of the other lumber companies in the county, did not resume operations, and the Eureka City Council did not provide work for the unemployed.  

Leading members of the Knights and the IWA played major roles in organizing the unemployed and politicizing their discontents. Both the chairman and the secretary of the May 10 meeting were IWA members. At least two of the four men (including Alfred Cridge, the editor of the Western Watchman, the organ of the Humboldt Knights) delegated to approach the Eureka City Council about jobs were members of the Knights. In addition, two of the five men chosen to see the County Board of Supervisors were IWA members.  

The depression overlapped with the ongoing saga of the California Redwood Company and was an important factor in the birth of the Knights in Humboldt County. But the emergence of the Knights also owed much to the fact that they were able to draw on long-standing discontents over developments at the state and national levels. The diary of James Beith vividly conveys this. Beith, consumed with disappointment and indignation that both the state and national Democratic parties had failed to bring about any significant reform, especially to control the power of the railroads, drew heavily on ideas associated with the radical strands of the democratic-republican tradition:

Labor is to society and humanity what the right arm is to the body. It is the grand conservative force which develops every form of civilization ... it is the instrument by which we gather all our wealth. If this self-evident fact is conceded, why is its claims to distinguished attention, legislative action and supervision, methodical adjustment of profits, and remuneration and complete fraternisation with Capital been so long delayed?  

A year later, in 1886, Beith echoed these sentiments in an even more strident tone. He insisted that the “labor question” must be resolved “or
else we are on the eve of revolution,” and he castigated “the ingenious methods by which Capital and aggregated Capital—Monopoly—distort the proper distribution of the gains and bring about inadequate compensation for service—or toil. We are dropping into the old system of Master and Serf.” Beith berated the “upper class” for losing sight of that “Jeffersonian maxim that all men are born free and equal.”

The correspondence of many Humboldt Knights evidenced the same profound concern. A self-confessed Knight and lumber worker, Robert Smith, insisted that the laborer had the right to organize “to give him a fair share of the wealth created by his labor.” He complained that employers, nationally and locally, had arrived “at a concert of action” to keep wages low. Why, he asked, “should not laboring men organize for their own protection,” at a time when “great monopolies” were “cornering lands, coal and many of the necessaries of life?” Another Knight refuted the charge that the Knights represented a violent and destructive philosophy and invoked the radical democratic-republican tradition in melodramatic rhetoric:

Is the builder likely to destroy the structure that he himself has erected by his blood, sweat, and labor, when it is the most beautiful the world has ever seen? . . . Oh, America. May God in his mercy never let you see the day that you are afraid of your workingmen, for then, indeed will your glory be departed. Again when bloody treason hurled her black flag of rebellion and slavery at that home and government we had established, who was the first to offer up themselves for the government? Was it not what was styled greasy mechanics from freedom loving Massachusetts? History says yes. . . . Yet because we take and claim the same right as Americans to meet together and consult for our benefit in our lodges, neither interfering with any persons or their property but attending to our own duties . . . do you then call us socialists? Oh, ye of little faith. Be not afraid. We, sons of toil, fight your battles, create your wealth, establish your government, keep you clothed in purple and fine linen . . . therefore why ye stand in fear and trembling? Have you robbed the laborer of just compensation for his labor?

Several Knights declared forthrightly that they were socialists. They denied advocating violent revolution and the expropriation of all private property. Socialism represented something different to them. One Knight described it as a system under which labor would receive “just and fair remuneration” and in which the government would own all the land and the means of transportation and communication “in trust for the whole people.” Another Knight asserted that Horace Greeley, Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine, Patrick Henry, and George Washington were all socialists, and stated that he was “in love with both the men and their leadership and I should always reverence the
teachings and noble deeds of those old patriotic sires that have passed on to the Social Kingdom where rent, interest and profit do not exist."  

A recurrent millennial theme appeared in the writings of H. M. Burnett, an IWA member and gunsmith who became Master Workman of local assembly 5312 in Eureka. Burnett espoused socialism and looked forward to a "peaceful Revolution from the damnably cut-throat competition of the present day, to a 'Cooperative Commonwealth' where all men would be equal and would have the right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,' pivoted in the Declaration of Independence, but never embodied in constitutions and laws."  

Franz Weyrich, a Ferndale carpenter, who became District Master Workman of the Humboldt Knights, was unperturbed when one of his townsmen accused him of being a socialist. "Socialism is the science of re-constructing society on an entirely new basis, by substituting the principle of association for that of competition in every branch of human industry," he stated boldly.  

Evidentiary limitations make it difficult to assess the social composition of the Knights of Labor in Humboldt County, but enough evidence can be gleaned from various sources to venture some informed generalizations. Undoubtedly, lumber workers joined the Knights in large numbers. As noted, the Freshwater assembly and part of the Bayside assembly were composed of lumber workers while the Humboldt assembly was the direct descendant of the Lumbermen's Union. Indeed, its first two officers, Dan Cronin and James Timmons, were lumber workers. Lumber workers elsewhere in the county joined the Knights, but in assemblies outside Eureka agricultural workers and farmers made up a significant proportion of the membership. Most of the officers in the outlying assemblies were farmers, including James Barton from Ferndale. In January 1885, only a week after his visit, Haskell reported to the Labor Enquirer that in Humboldt County "the Grangers are reorganizing as the Knights of Labor."  

Leaders of the Eureka Knights were people of relatively humble occupational standing. Aside from Cronin and Timmons, the occupations of six other leaders could be traced. There were two laborers, two clerks, one carpenter, and one gunsmith. The two men who served as official organizers of the Knights in Humboldt County also came from modest backgrounds. Millard Gardner was listed as a laborer on the voting register. Pliny Earl Davis, Gardner's successor, arrived in Humboldt County in 1882. For several years, he ran a small stationery store, and on Saturdays worked as an auctioneer. His business was not very successful, and by the time he joined the Knights, he had sizable debts.
A Trade Union or a Moral Order?

The Humboldt Knights, like the Order in many other regions, attracted people who had never belonged to a labor organization but who believed that the producing classes must organize to halt the erosion of their fundamental social, economic, and political rights. It was one thing, however, for people to agree on the necessity for self-organization and the fact that the American republic was afflicted by a serious malaise and quite another for dissenters to concur on specific strategies. The problem was that the democratic-republican tradition was based on a cluster of general political beliefs and verities. Although some of its elements—notably the labor theory of value—enabled dissenters to formulate a penetrating critique of the ills of Gilded Age capitalism, the ambiguous legacy of the tradition attracted dissenters of different stripes. Conflicts emerged when they were forced to confront specific questions that hitherto they had consigned to the realm of general abstraction. This was especially true when it came to the "labor question." Dissenters who shared a deep-seated concern that something was profoundly wrong with the American political economy could still adhere to anything from a mutualistic to a highly antagonistic conception of class relations.

Tensions and contradictions were reflected in many branches of the Knights of Labor, including the Humboldt County assemblies. At the risk of oversimplification, it is useful to distinguish between two tendencies within the Knights. On the one hand, the Knights embraced people who viewed the Order as a trade union that would look after their bread-and-butter interests at the workplace and that would, in the political realm, redeem America's corrupt and corporate-dominated institutions. Knights of this ideological persuasion invoked not only the Order's formal declaration of principles but also pointed to the important role that the Knights had played in strikes and political campaigns, especially during the mid-1880s.

At the other extreme were Knights who perceived the Order primarily as a fraternal organization dedicated to the moral and educational enlightenment of its members. Knights of this persuasion agreed that America was afflicted by serious social and economic problems, but usually did not regard conflict between labor and capital as inevitable. They believed that relations between the two could and should be harmonious and viewed the strike weapon, as the Knights' leader Terence V. Powderly once put it, as a "relic of barbarism." Instead, the emphasis should be placed on the individual's capacity for self-improvement through education and temperance. Collectively, Knights could form
cooperatives to avoid entrapment in the sprawling tentacles of Gilded Age capitalism, but it was not the task of the Knights to constrain or circumscribe the logic of capitalism. Rather, the Knights should re-capture the respect for the dignity of labor and reform the system by dint of their worthy example. Knights of this ideological persuasion also drew on the formal principles of the Order for inspiration and support, and on the well-publicized pronouncements of Powderly favoring these more moderate goals. To characterize the division within the Knights in this fashion oversimplifies matters to some extent. Most important, there were many radical Knights, who while seeing the Order principally as a trade union, also viewed it as an agency of moral and educational enlightenment.

The confusion about what the Knights of Labor represented was reflected in a letter of Mrs. W. S. Johnson of Eureka to Powderly. She reported that she and her husband had many friends who belonged to the Knights and were urging them to join. She had tried in vain to obtain a copy of the Order's bylaws “so as to know what I was joining.” The picture was all the more confusing, she said, because in the two Eureka assemblies, “there is some that belong to the Order that are not much credit to the Order,” although she insisted that she was “no Mrs. Prisy body” and that she and her husband “are with the working class heart and hand.” She closed by asking Powderly for his advice and more information about the principles of the Knights.

Internal dissensions were sharpest among local assemblies in Eureka. Occupational diversity contributed to profound political differences, which were accentuated by the presence of a hard core of radical IWA members. The primary locus of dissension was Humboldt assembly 3337. Although the majority of its members were lumber workers, its mixed assembly designation and its rapid growth resulted in the inclusion of a considerable number of businessmen. According to George Speed, “it checked our work as they endeavored to use the organization for political purposes.” A bitter conflict ensued between IWA members and sympathizers and other elements in the assembly who, led principally by businessmen, attempted to wrest control from what they saw as the pernicious influence of socialists and anarchists. Charles Devlin, a Eureka shoe manufacturer and member of the Humboldt assembly, wrote to Powderly complaining that when Haskell visited Humboldt County in January 1885, he had described the Knights as only a “primary school” of the IWA and that “ever since we have had trouble and discord in our ranks.” Devlin appealed to Powderly to throw his weight against the IWA. Another account of the factional struggle came from a Eureka IWA member in a letter to the Labor
Enquirer. He asserted that many members of the Humboldt assembly who sympathized with the IWA had been blacklisted and that the anti-IWA faction had "by pouring poison in the ears of the most susceptible . . . succeeded in splitting our ranks causing many to withdraw, others to quietly drop out and deny they were members and creating the impression that those who were standing by the ship were nothing more or less than incendiaries, dynamiters, etc." On one occasion, a vigilante mob forced some members to leave town, and George Speed recalled that Dan Cronin "was one of the first to feel the blacklist."28

As the IWA correspondent to the Labor Enquirer observed, the Humboldt County press delighted in exacerbating and highlighting tensions within the assemblies of the Knights. The press made constant references to the alleged presence of incendiaries, dynamiters, and socialists in the Eureka assemblies, while lending moral support and encouragement to the more conservative Knights. An editorial in the Arcata Union, published in September 1886, stated that the Eureka assemblies contained "some of the best citizens of Eureka; men who are foremost in the education of children, first in elevating the morals of the community, true and loyal to the Government and its laws." Nevertheless, there were "quite a number of men" among the Eureka Knights who are "just as thorough Anarchists as any of the seven now under sentence of death in Chicago." The editorial berated those Knights who had given moral and financial support to striking sailors and urged the Order to expel the "dynamite element" from their ranks.30

There is no evidence that radical Knights advocated violent revolution. James Beith was present at one of the largest unemployment demonstrations in May 1885 when the radical Dan Cronin addressed the crowd. Cronin did talk of a "Coming Revolution," but he did so, in Beith's words, "with a singular degree of placidity" and argued that the revolution would not be achieved with "guns and bayonets but with intelligence and a consciousness of power to direct the force of the storm." Beith found "the attitude of the Knights is of the most commendable and laudable character—to educate the heart and head of the members; to familiarize them to all discussion of all problems of social science, the distribution of Capital and Wages; the equitable control of Corporations."31

The Knights endeavored to rectify their negative image in the local press by writing frequent letters to the press and holding special social events to clarify their purpose to the general public. On February 13, 1886, for example, the Knights held an "Invitation Social" in Eureka, which was attended by 200 people. There was an evening program of
music and dancing, and at 11 o'clock Western Watchman editor Alfred Cridge made a speech explaining the goals of the Knights to try and dispel some myths about the Order. The Humboldt Standard reported that while many "had expected to see horns, cloven feet, etc., among those classed as cranks, socialists, incendiaries, etc," the occasion had reflected very creditably on the Knights.21

The radical Knights, however, continued to be vilified by the press and subjected to blacklisting and physical intimidation. The radicals stubbornly stood their ground, but factional fights between them and the more conservative Knights limited the Order's ability to function effectively as a trade union. Crucially, attacks on the radical Knights began to take their toll in the summer of 1886, just when growing discontent on the part of lumber workers and sailors called for an aggressive trade union strategy. The more conservative Knights increasingly assumed the role of managing, and ultimately defusing, rank-and-file militancy. Reflective of this trend was the fact that the Watchman fell under the editorial auspices of William Ayres in September 1886 and became the mouthpiece of the moderate Knights. This shift, especially in the context of a growing militancy among rank-and-file Knights, exposed a glaring disparity between the lofty rhetoric of the Knights and their ability to make concrete improvements in the working conditions of their members.

In the summer of 1886, the Humboldt Knights received an influx of new members who were eager to strike. A disconcerted Millard Gardner, the official county organizer, complained to Powderly that many new members did not understand the true principles of the Order, and that while "we have many [sic] good men here that we no [sic] would not do us any harm Our Boys or a good many of them only think about striking."33 The issue that most agitated the Knights was the ten-hour day. By the summer of 1886, the redwood lumber industry was one of the few major lumber regions in the United States that still operated on a twelve-hour day. The Knights had helped Michigan lumber workers obtaining the ten-hour day after a protracted struggle in 1885 and 1886. More important, many lumber enterprises on the Puget Sound had peacefully conceded the ten-hour day in the summer of 1886. The Watchman went out of its way to deny newspaper reports that Humboldt lumber workers belonging to the Knights planned a general strike for the ten-hour day the following spring.34 At the same time, the Watchman urged restraint on the part of the Knights, insisting that Humboldt County's lumber employers were as enlightened as their counterparts in the Puget Sound area and that under no circumstances should the Knights resort to striking.35
Lumber workers renewed their agitation for a ten-hour day in March 1887. The Watchman offered moral support, saying that "the twelve hour day gives no time for rest, study and self improvement... it brutalizes the laborer instead of civilizing and elevating him." Many more mill operatives would "attend lectures and other means of education," said the Watchman, if they did not have to get up at 5:00 A.M. and go to bed shortly after dinner. Throughout the spring and summer of 1887, leaders of the Knights discouraged militant action on the part of the lumber workers. For instance, when executive members of the District Assembly learned that employees of the Elk River Mill Lumber Company planned to strike on June 1, they dispatched a committee to dissuade them. Two weeks later, the Port Kenyon Knights passed a motion in favor of the ten-hour day, "could it be brought about by the harmonious action of the employers and employees." At about the same time, "Cid" wrote a letter to the Watchman strongly favoring the ten-hour day. He noted approvingly, however, that although there had been talk of a general strike, "thanks to the Knights of Labor and kindred organizations workingmen have learned that there are more effectual ways of redressing their wrongs."

Rather than sanction a strike, leaders of the Knights appointed a special committee to look into the ten-hour-day question. This committee approached most of the lumber operators in Humboldt County. Lumber employers claimed not to be opposed to the shorter day in principle. Their main objection was that it would put them at a competitive disadvantage with their counterparts in Mendocino, where the twelve-hour day was firmly in effect. Prompted largely by this response, the Humboldt Knights launched an organizing drive in Mendocino in June 1887. P. E. Davis, District Master Workman of all Humboldt County assemblies, went to Mendocino to spearhead the endeavor. Davis soon encountered difficulties "on account of the manufacturers owning whole towns and all the surrounding to their mills, and denying him the opportunity of a public meeting." Before long, however, both the Watchman and Davis were trumpeting the success of the organizing drive in Mendocino. In fact, their claims were exaggerated; notwithstanding a prolonged and costly campaign, Davis organized only one assembly in Mendocino County.

The Humboldt lumber employers, no doubt unimpressed with the results of the organizing campaign in Mendocino County, showed little inclination to concede the ten-hour day. During the summer of 1887, at a conference that apparently most Knights were unaware of until it was reported in the Watchman on October 1, Davis once again met with the Humboldt lumber employers. He confessed in his report...
on the meeting to the District Assembly that he had received little encouragement from the lumber manufacturers, although they did promise a formal response to the ten-hour-day request. In the wake of Davis's report, the Watchman criticized the lumber employers for not responding to the request. But although the Watchman lamented the "bad faith" of the employers, it concurred with the decision of the Knights' leadership not to call a strike. Indeed, the Watchman praised the "better counsels of the Knights" for prevailing in the face of a "determination to strike arbitrarily."

The reluctance of leaders of the Knights to sanction a strike may have stemmed in part from their belief that strikes were doomed to failure. The Watchman repeatedly argued that strikes rarely succeeded. Moreover, as the moderate resolution of the Port Kenyon Knights on the ten-hour question suggests, rural assemblies would probably not have supported a strike over this issue. It is unlikely that Humboldt County farmers, who worked from dawn to dusk for most months of the year, would have been prepared to support strike action to help lumber workers obtain a ten-hour day.

But, in the last analysis, the determination of the Knights' leadership to avert a strike rested not so much on an assessment of the outcome of such action as on their preference for a nonconfrontational course of action. Throughout the struggle over the ten-hour day, leaders of the Humboldt Knights placed a naive faith in the beneficence of the lumber employers. Confronted with resistance, they meekly accepted the argument that the Humboldt County lumber industry could not be competitive if it reduced working hours. (In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, Humboldt County lumber employers took such a step three years later without seriously affecting their competitive position vis-à-vis Mendocino's lumber industry.)

As an alternative to a strike, the Watchman urged the Humboldt Knights to redouble their efforts to elevate the moral and intellectual condition of their members. At the end of the 1886 logging season, and in the context of the first strike rumors over the ten-hour issue, the Watchman offered the following homily:

Organization and education is the great power which the Knights of Labor propose as a remedial agent. With intelligence arises a sense of individuality in each worker, which begets self-respect, and commands the respect of others. First organize and educate then an intelligent presentation of your case will command attention and acquiescence, for then you will have become the superior force in the social economy.

In March 1887, when sentiment for a strike resurfaced, the Watchman reiterated its message: "A thorough understanding of the principles
and theory of the Order is worth more than all strikes for when this is acquired there will be no necessity or occasion for a strike, for they will then have acquired the power to ask and enforce whatever is right.”

The Watchman suggested a number of means by which the Humboldt Knights might bring about the lumber workers' moral regeneration. Seasonally unemployed loggers were urged to attend classes at the Eureka Academy and Business College, instead of making "the usual run of the town during winter." In January 1887, the Knights sponsored a series of free lectures open to the general public, beginning with a well-attended lecture on astronomy. And within the confines of their own assemblies, the Knights discussed a wide range of social and political issues. Important anniversaries often served as occasions for a special celebration. The Humboldt assembly began making preparations to celebrate George Washington's birthday in January 1887. There was to be a dramatic performance followed by a light meal and liberal servings of hot coffee. Several times, the Watchman urged lumber workers to band together and establish a cooperative sawmill or shingle mill—a somewhat fanciful suggestion in view of the fact that, as the Watchman admitted, such a venture required a minimum capital investment of $10,000.

The Watchman stressed repeatedly that temperance was an absolute prerequisite if the worker was to elevate his moral and social standing. Lumber workers were urged not to waste their hard-earned savings in saloons during the winter. The Watchman boasted that the Knights could take credit for having done "more to lessen intemperance and foolish squandering of money than any one other organization." Evidently, their work was far from complete; a February 1887 report stated that "almost nightly there are bloody frays." The Humboldt assembly responded by announcing its determination to "take a hand in suppressing low whiskey dens and dance houses." Accordingly, it carried out a threat to have the names of all persons who signed a petition for a liquor license published in the Watchman. At the same time, the Watchman strongly endorsed the crusade of a newly formed branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in Eureka.

**Clerks and Seamen Join the Struggle**

The Knights of Labor was not the only representative of organized labor in Humboldt County in the mid-1880s. In 1886, three occupational groups organized in Eureka for the first time: a branch of the Coast Seaman's Union (CSU), which was founded in San Francisco in 1885;
a branch of the International Typographical Union (ITU), while the Eureka clerks formed a union to reduce their hours. There was a considerable amount of cooperation between the Knights and these new labor organizations.

The clerks had an even longer day than the lumber workers, usually beginning work at 7:00 a.m. and working until 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. The newly formed Clerks' Union proposed that from May 1 to October 1, merchants should close their stores at 7:00 p.m. and for the remainder of the year, at 8:00 p.m. Union members drew up a petition and tried to secure pledges from Eureka merchants to observe the shorter hours. Confronted with the recalcitrance of a few of the city's merchants, the union sent circulars to the Knights of Labor, the CSU, and the general citizenry, appealing for their cooperation in enforcing the new closing hours. The CSU responded by ordering its members to boycott all merchants not abiding by the shorter hours. The Knights also supported the clerks; pressure from the Knights in Ferndale resulted in all merchants there adopting shorter hours, while in Eureka the clerks founded a trade assembly of the Knights in July 1887.

The Clerks' Union obtained considerable public support, but the community and the county press did not take such a benign view of the sailors' and longshoremen's organizational activities. The reason for this was that the nature of the shipping industry dictated that militant tactics would have to be employed to establish a stable and effective union. The unskilled nature of most seafaring work, and the highly centralized hiring procedures developed by the shipowners, meant that a union's efficacy, if not its survival, depended on its ability to control hiring and, ideally, to impose a union shop. This issue was at the root of repeated conflicts between West Coast sailors and shipowners during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sailors were also among the most exploited workers in America. Wages were often as low as $20 a month and subject to sudden fluctuations. Sailors were at the mercy of boardinghouse keepers who served as employment agents for shipowners and captains. Once at sea, a ship's captain possessed autocratic powers. He could even order corporal punishment. In the words of Hyman Weintraub, the sailor's life was "a purgatory of unending hell."

At the ports of Eureka and Arcata in Humboldt County, sailors and longshoremen attempted with varying degrees of success to impose a union shop even before a CSU branch was established. Between 1885 and 1887, in a desperate effort to establish a secure foothold for the CSU in Humboldt County, prounion sailors attacked nonunion sailors for strike-breaking and for violating union wage scales. In November
1885, Louis Smith complained that he was beaten by four union sailors for not joining the union and for agreeing to sail for $20 a month, instead of the union scale of $30.\textsuperscript{61} There were numerous such incidents. One of the most dramatic occurred during a general strike by West Coast sailors and longshoremen in September 1886. Twenty members of the Humboldt CSU were arrested for rioting after they boarded a schooner in Arcata harbor and allegedly intimidated a nonunion sailor.\textsuperscript{62} Inevitably, these tactics incurred the opprobrium of most of the community. The CSU leadership in San Francisco did not condone such methods; indeed, they endeavored to restrain their zealous Humboldt County members.

Notwithstanding the lack of public support, the CSU succeeded in organizing most of the sailors and longshoremen in Humboldt County. By 1887, the CSU branch in Eureka had 113 members; only one man was not a union member. Ship captains were recruiting through union headquarters instead of through boardinghouses.\textsuperscript{63} A deeply felt sense of grievance plus the comparatively homogenous makeup of the workforce facilitated the CSU's growth. Scandinavian-born sailors made up a high proportion of the labor force and played a vital role in founding the union. Many officials of the international union, including Andrew Furuseth, who served as president from 1887 to 1938, were also of Scandinavian descent. The role of the Scandinavians was especially important in Humboldt County. In 1880, when they constituted less than 3 percent of the county's population, 36 percent of the sailors were Scandinavian by birth.\textsuperscript{64} During the 1880s, as Scandinavian emigration to Humboldt County swelled, they played an even more important role in the county's seafaring trade. Charles Peterson, who spent much of his life working in the Humboldt lumber industry, recalled that during the 1890s, "the lumber fleet" was known as the "Scandinavian Navy."\textsuperscript{65}

The Eureka Knights lent the CSU considerable support in the first precarious months of its existence in Humboldt County, especially during the general strike on the West Coast in September 1886. The Watchman carried several articles vividly depicting the plight of the sailor. George Speed, chairman of the Executive Board of the Humboldt County Knights, called out all members of the Knights employed in ancillary occupations, such as longshoring and catering.\textsuperscript{66} An official notice appeared in the Watchman warning Knights not to "assist or aid in any way vessels which are connected with present difficulty."\textsuperscript{67} At least one assembly levied an assessment to support the strikers.\textsuperscript{68} H. M. Burnett stated that "no sailor can truthfully say that the comrades of Eureka let one of their members go hungry or without shelter."\textsuperscript{69}
The radical wing of the Knights was responsible for mobilizing support for the sailors and longshoremen, but the radicals paid a heavy price. Whenever union sailors were alleged to have been involved in a violent incident, the press held the “dynamite element” of the Knights responsible. The Arcata Union used the mass arrest of sailors in September 1886 as an occasion to call on moderate Knights to purge extremists from their ranks. Burnett repudiated the sailors’ use of violence and asserted that the incident that led to the arrest of 20 union sailors had cost the strike and the labor movement considerable public support. The hostile climate of community opinion aroused by the radicals’ support for the sailors exposed them to the vindictiveness of their enemies. Many Knights who had actively supported the sailors were discharged from their jobs and blacklisted, including radical leader George Speed. This was a blow from which the radical Knights never recovered, and it paved the way for the ascendancy of the moderate and conservative Knights.

In the aftermath of the sailors’ strike of 1886, the Humboldt Knights’ support of the CSU became more qualified. Xavier Leder, local agent of the CSU, reported in June 1887 that after talking with Eureka Knights, he learned that “the former proceedings of the Eureka branch of the CSU are looked upon with slight disapproval on account of the rash and apparently reckless action taken by members of our organization on certain occasions in days gone by.”

The Knights and Politics

The participation of the Humboldt Knights in local politics corresponded with the period of greatest nationwide political activity by the Knights. Before 1886, the Knights of Labor played a relatively minor role in electoral politics, preferring to concentrate on lobbying efforts to influence congressional legislation. The Knights’ disastrous defeat in the strike against the Gould railroad empire in the Southwest and the rapid expansion of the Order in 1886 encouraged Knights to play a more active role in local politics. The Humboldt Knights did not participate in local politics until 1886. The sorry saga of the Greenback Labor party in Humboldt County produced cynicism and apathy among potential third-party supporters, and many Knights believed that political activity would be diversionary and divisive. Alfred Cridge was a strong political abstentionist. He insisted that people had to be "energetically educated" to dismiss the “bogus ballot delusion," which was like “the old man of the sea squatting on the shoulders of the labor movement.”

The Rise and Fall of the Knights · 91
Cridge's departure from Humboldt County, an influx of new members during the summer of 1886, and the success of the Knights' political ventures elsewhere prompted the Humboldt Knights to reevaluate their antipolitical stance. The Eureka Knights were the main force behind the launching of a Citizen's party to contest local Eureka elections in June 1886. The party's platform was moderate in tone and content. It promised a "just, honest and economical administration of our municipal government" and the enforcement of all state laws and local liquor laws. The final plank of the platform stated: "We believe that dance houses and all other places of iniquity are demoralizing in their tendencies, degrading in their morals and are not legitimate elements of honest industry, and we therefore demand their immediate abatement."75

The Knights' venture into local politics was a success. The mayor, a majority of the City Council, and the police chief were Knights. The successful candidates reflected the Knights' diverse social composition and included the perennially elected city assessor, who became mayor, a merchant, two blacksmiths, and a harnessmaker. The significance of the victory should not be exaggerated. The Knights maintained a low profile throughout the campaign, viewing themselves not so much as the political arm of an organization articulating a program of radical social transformation but as part of a broad, nonpartisan citizens' coalition to rationalize city government and legislate the moral edification of the citizenry. As the Arcata Union commented, although the election was "carried principally by the Knights of Labor, it must be remembered that the ticket had the support of the religious and temperance element, and that there was no politics connected with it."76

The Knights played a more conspicuous role in county and state elections in the fall of 1886. They were the leading force behind the establishment of a People's party in August and constituted at least one-third of the delegates at the founding convention, which adopted a 13-point platform highly reminiscent of that of the Greenback Labor party. The platform called for the establishment of a national monetary system that would ensure an adequate supply of money and demanded recognition of the "national issue" as full legal tender in the payment of all debts. The government was not to establish or recognize any banking corporations. Another plank advocated government ownership of all telegraph and telephone services, railroads, and other vital means of transportation. Additional planks included a demand for a graduated income tax, a law "to secure both sexes equal pay for equal work," immigration laws to exclude the Chinese permanently, legislation to
make all public offices elective, and the holding of a referendum on the “regulation of the liquor traffic.”

Having resuscitated the Greenback Labor party’s platform, the People’s party proceeded to repeat many of the mistakes of its predecessor. Most notably, the party demonstrated poor judgment in selecting its nominees. Many people on the ticket had recently held office under Republican or Democratic party labels and were, as the Arcata Union snidely put it, “recent converts to the Workingman’s cause.” In fairness to the People’s party, two of its nominees had been Greenback Labor party candidates in 1882, and the most important nomination went to P. E. Davis, who was selected to contest a seat in the state assembly. Davis appears to have had the full confidence of the Humboldt Knights, for in the summer of 1886, Powderly received several letters from assemblies in the county urging that Davis be appointed official organizer. Davis also succeeded Cridge as editor of the Watchman until his candidacy in the fall elections forced him to relinquish the position in September 1886. But Davis’s nomination proved disastrous. Within three weeks of accepting the nomination, Davis attended the Democratic party convention where he also received the nomination for a seat in the state assembly. Davis’s move took everyone by surprise. He was ridiculed and denounced by most of the county press as an opportunist and a hypocrite. The press recalled the many occasions on which Davis had pilloried the Democratic party. One wag commented that Davis was “now the People’s party–Democratic party–Greenback party–Knights of Labor–Independent nominee for the assembly.” Davis protested that he had always been loyal to the Democratic party, only to have it revealed that in 1884 he had signed the local Blaine–Logan roll and supported the Republican party.

As the elections drew closer, the Watchman exhorted the Knights to support the People’s party ticket and described those Knights still opposed to getting involved in politics as “tools” of the old parties. The People’s party, however, did not perform well in the elections. Davis lost to his Republican opponent by a substantial margin (1,314 to 919 votes), and the only People’s party candidates elected were two men who had recently held offices under the Democrats and Republicans.

Disappointed at the outcome of their venture into state and county politics, the Knights consoled themselves with the fact that they controlled the Eureka City Council. It was soon evident that the platform of the Citizen’s party was not a smokescreen for a program of radical social transformation by the Eureka Knights. Between 1886 and 1888, the Eureka City Council embarked enthusiastically on a program of civic improvement that presaged many Progressive era reforms. The
council had a comprehensive survey of the city undertaken by an eminent municipal engineer from Oakland. Extensive improvements were made to the city’s sidewalks and sewer system, and steps taken to improve the quality of the city’s paved roads—accomplishments proudly recalled by Millard Gardner almost thirty years later. After the council had been in power for only six months, the Watchman boasted that the City Council had been transformed “from a sort of neighborly affair” that did most of its business on the “mutual admiration plan” to a council run on sound and efficient principles.82 During the 1888 election campaign, the Watchman drew voters’ attention to the “marvellous change in the general appearance of our streets and sidewalks” that had taken place under the new council and noted that, in spite of the civic improvements, the municipal tax rate had fallen from $1 to 65 cents per $100 of assessed valuation.83

The Eureka City Council also endeavored to elevate the moral fiber of the citizenry. Knight and council member W. L. Mercer introduced several resolutions calling for stricter enforcement of the liquor and red-light ordinances. Accordingly, liquor license fees were raised substantially. This measure did not attract universal support in Eureka. From the late evening of July 3 until the early morning of July 4, 1887, Mercer’s house was pelted “with a fusillade of bombs and other missiles” by a mob that the Watchman described as “the lower order of saloon men.”84 Incensed that two officers called to the scene simply stood on the sidewalk laughing, the Watchman accused one of the officers of being a ringleader.

The Citizen’s party was defeated decisively at the 1888 Eureka municipal elections. A lumber magnate, John Vance, was elected mayor, crushing his opponent, Josiah Bell, by 657 votes to 313. Strong anti-temperance sentiment undoubtedly contributed to the party’s defeat. Shortly before the election, the Watchman heartily endorsed a local-option law that would have instituted prohibition in Eureka and effectively tried to turn the election into a referendum on the issue. The Watchman attributed the defeat of the Citizen’s party to the efforts of the “whiskey ticket” and the general organizational collapse of the Eureka Knights.85

The Demise of the Knights

In fact, the Knights had expired as an effective organization in the county well before the June 1888 election. References to the Knights of Labor in the local press, including the Watchman, are conspicuous
by their absence during 1888. The Knights held a Thanksgiving Ball in 1887, but this is the last mention of any kind of social, industrial, or political activity on their part. Symbolically, in the following month several well-known Humboldt radicals departed to join the Puget Sound Cooperative Colony, and the Watchman offered free pamphlets to its readers on the new utopian colony. In 1890, assemblies were established in Eureka, Freshwater, and the Eel River Valley, and the Watchman claimed the Knights were experiencing a renaissance in the county.\textsuperscript{87} However, reports of the rebirth were greatly exaggerated. The born-again Knights attracted a minimal following, and none of the assemblies survived the year.

The Humboldt Knights thus vanished from the stage as abruptly as they had appeared. Their demise resulted from a complex mix of factors, some within and some beyond their control. In evaluating the reasons for their eclipse, it must be borne in mind that the fortunes of the Knights nationally began to wane at the same time as they did in Humboldt County. In the late 1880s, the influence of the labor movement receded in small communities across America, and in many cases disappeared altogether. Until the early years of the twentieth century, unionism was confined mainly to skilled workers usually affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and residing in the larger American cities. Lumber workers, who had been virtually unorganized before the advent of the Knights, helped establish at least 84 assemblies in 24 states.\textsuperscript{88} After the disintegration of the Knights in the late 1880s, almost all lumber workers were without union representation for twenty years.

Many of the factors that made it hard to sustain an organized labor movement in Humboldt County pertained elsewhere, particularly in small to medium-size, single-industry communities in which employers had immense power and could keep workers under virtual round-the-clock surveillance. In a small city such as Eureka, let alone a logging camp or full-fledged company lumber town, it was impossible for agitators like Dan Cronin and George Speed to melt into the anonymity of a metropolis, as many of their counterparts could. In the extractive industries, such as lumber, the regional predominance of an industry greatly facilitated the organization and coordination of employer resistance to unionism.

The lumber workers' vulnerability to repression was accentuated by the fact that many of their skills could be acquired within a relatively short time by an unskilled worker. Relatedly, the lumber worker's position was weakened still further by the evolution of a national labor market in the 1880s. By this time, lumber capitalists operated on a
scale that enabled them to bear the costs of advertising for men and transporting them nationally, and to take advantage of the nation’s integrated railroad network. From 1883 onward, there were recurrent complaints about the Humboldt lumber employers’ practice of advertising for labor as far afield as the Midwest and Atlantic states, and the flooding of the labor market at the beginning of the logging season. The Humboldt Knights posted warnings in labor papers throughout the nation, telling workers that the northern California labor market was being saturated.

Finally, the lumber industry and many other extractive industries were highly sensitive to cyclical fluctuations in the economy, which was not conducive to the establishment and maintenance of stable unions. It made a highly mobile workforce even more transient. Thus, during the depression of 1885, the Knights experienced a very high turnover rate. In the four established assemblies, a total of 413 people joined in 1885, but 325 left, leaving a total membership of 196 at year’s end. Humboldt assembly 3337, composed principally of lumber workers, accounted for nearly three-quarters of this turnover. Undoubtedly, other factors entered into the high turnover, but the unstable economic climate was the primary one. Many lumber workers had to migrate in search of work during hard times, and a majority of them left an area at the end of a regular logging season.

Yet the demise of the Humboldt Knights cannot be explained by these factors alone. The ideological and organizational nature of the Knights and the resultant contradictions also played a major role. The Knights were heirs to a vibrant democratic-republican tradition that provided the basis for a penetrating critique of the Gilded Age political economy. The economic and social turbulence of the mid-1880s reinforced the dissenters’ disquiet. To Humboldt County dissenters, developments in their own county, notably the saga of the California Redwood Company and the destitution of 1885, were a microcosm of events occurring across the nation. By the mid-1880s, they believed that the redemption and regeneration of America would have to be achieved through the self-organization of the producing classes, whose fundamental rights were being abrogated by rapacious monopolists in league with corrupt politicians. Such a sweeping analysis enabled dissenters to share a broad consensus but, at the same time, it masked important differences among dissenters, especially when it came to prescribing concrete action. Rant as they did about the greed, power, and selfishness of monopoly in the abstract, one wing of the dissenters could accept that the interests of labor and capital might be antagonis-
tic; this was particularly true when it came to confronting capitalism in their own backyard. It was one thing to denounce the Vanderbilts and the Goulds, and another to castigate lumber capitalists such as William Carson and John Vance, who had risen from rags to riches and whose enterprises were critical to the community's prosperity.

Paradoxically, although elements of the democratic-republican tradition—the labor theory of value and the belief that a rough state of socioeconomic reward and opportunity should prevail—pointed the way to a class analysis, many dissenters refused to believe that things had reached such an impasse. They attributed the nation's malaise to a spirit of rampant acquisitive individualism and believed in founding a more equitable and cooperative social order, but they could not repudiate all the individualistic strands of the democratic-republican tradition. They viewed the ills of Gilded Age America as an aberration deriving from a few malfunctions and, especially, from the machinations of a few wicked men. If these men could be removed and a few reforms enacted, the sum total of individual endeavors would lead to a Cooperative Commonwealth and the reaffirmation of the superiority of the American form of government. Dissenters of this ideological tendency were unwilling or incapable of seeing the Knights principally as an agency for extracting concessions from capitalism. Instead, these Knights hoped to purify the existing system and convince everyone of labor's worthy place in the sun.

This wing of the Knights coalesced uneasily with the radical faction. Generally more proletarian in their occupational backgrounds, the latter asserted a proto-Marxian concept of the social order that accepted a fundamental antagonism between labor and capital. They saw the Knights as a trade union to represent the day-to-day interests of workers and as an agency of radical social transformation. "They are instituted to meet the traffic of every day life as it occurs between labor and capital," stated a correspondent to the Watchman, attempting to characterize the difference between Knights of a trade-unionist orientation and Knights who saw their "mission... as a training school to educate a future purpose; not for present action; save as present benefit may incidentally grow out of it."

This ideological cleavage was to produce bitter factionalism among the Humboldt Knights that was heightened by the presence of a hard core of IWA members, on the one hand, and a significant complement of businessmen and farmers, on the other. In an ante mortem on the fate of the Humboldt Knights, Beith vividly described the disarray, confusion, and division:
Frequently a blend of the orders—the trade unions and kindred of that ilk, held session in the same hall with the same body—making a perfect Babel of confusion and misunderstanding. Men who were probably capable of understanding a single order were confused by this multiplicity—and in the propaganda of these measures brought the order into contempt. Anarchists, Socialists and Red Internationalists found a cordial footing on the floor and discussed their measures and modes until the poor bewildered Knight was unable to distinguish to what category he belonged. . . . Is it to be wondered that the end soon came?  

Ideological splits among the Humboldt Knights did not follow neat lines or correspond precisely to the social class of members, but, assuming the Humboldt Knights were representative, it would be misleading to view the Knights as a unified ideological entity. Such an interpretation evades serious questions about the Knights’ limited efficacy as a trade union and political organization, not to mention their ephemeral presence in Humboldt and many other regions of the country. In the light of the above contradictions, it is not surprising that, in 1889, the Eureka correspondent of the Coast Seamen’s Journal wrote that the Humboldt Knights had expired “without having accomplished anything whatever by way of bettering the condition of the labor classes.”