Kansas Populism

Clanton, O. Gene

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It is wonderful that the University Press of Kansas with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation have arranged to release this digital edition of O. Gene Clanton’s *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* as part of the NEH-Mellon Humanities Open Books Program. Through the work of scholars like Clanton, Populism—the reform-oriented social and political movement that spawned the Farmers’ Alliance and People’s Party of the late nineteenth century—is now a quintessential Kansas history topic, and, as William C. Pratt, a distinguished scholar of American labor radicalism observed, “If a person were to read only one book on Kansas Populism, this should be it.”

Orval Gene Clanton was born September 14, 1934, in Pittsburg, Kansas. After three semesters at the Kansas State College of Pittsburg (now known as Pittsburg State University), he served in the U.S. Army from 1954 to 1957. He returned to Pittsburg after his military service and earned a bachelor’s degree in education in 1959 and a master’s degree in history in 1962. He taught secondary school in Lamar, Colorado, from 1960 to 1962 before returning to the Sunflower State and doctoral studies in history at the University of Kansas. He taught at Texas A&M University, then completed his dissertation and received his Ph.D. from KU in 1967. After spending the summer of 1968 as a visiting professor of history at Georgia State College in Atlanta, he commenced a long career at Washington State University that fall. He received promotion to full professor in 1978 and retired with the rank of emeritus professor.

*Kansas Populism* is a revision of Clanton’s dissertation. Donald R. McCoy, a historian of American politics, served as Clanton’s advisor. Clanton credited Robert F. La-Forte—a fellow southeast Kansan and KU history Ph.D.—with suggesting Kansas Populism as a subject. Clanton also acknowledged the earlier work on Kansas Populism by Raymond Miller and Walter T. K. Nugent. In deference to Miller and Nugent, Clanton avoided assessing the economic origins of Kansas Populism as analyzed by Miller in the 1920s and the charges of anti-Semitism and nativism leveled against the Populists refuted by Nugent earlier in the 1960s.2

The Populists of the late nineteenth century enjoyed favorable treatment among early twentieth century scholars. Influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, progressive historians Solon J. Buck and John D. Hicks viewed the Populists with sympathy and as the predecessors of twentieth-century reformers.3 The Populists’ reputation, however, received steady criticism from historians in the twenty years before Clanton published *Kansas Populism*. In *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, Richard Hofstadter presented the Populists as the harbingers of twentieth-century conspiracy theorists, nativists, and anti-Semites.4 Hofstadter prompted generations of revisionists—including Nugent and Clanton. Whereas Hofstadter relied almost exclusively on published sources, Clanton and his peers conducted extensive archival research.

Inspired by the studies of progressive leaders by George E. Mowry, Alfred D. Chandler, Otis L. Graham Jr., and others, Clanton believed a similar analysis of Populist leadership would illuminate the historiographical debate. He also saw the need for additional local studies of Populism; *Kansas Populism*, therefore, combines leadership analysis with a narrative history of Populism in the state.5

Clanton places Kansas Populism within the context of the Gilded Age calls for reform by farmers and indus-
trial workers and an ongoing national struggle between the values of anti-monopolism and individualism. He connects the Populists to traditional American democratic values of equality, freedom, and equal opportunity. “The history of Kansas during the Gilded Age was more than just a pale reflection of the frenetic activities that affected the nation at large,” he writes. “In a sense, the state served as a stage upon which the rest of the nation acted out its antagonisms, hopes, and frustrations.” After examining Populist leadership, Clanton presents a narrative history of the rise and fall of the People’s Party.

Clanton’s prosopography includes eighty-nine Kansas Populist leaders such as “elected administrative officials, congressmen, prominent leaders in the state legislature, party officials, prominent lecturers and part workers, and writers and editors of leading Populist papers.” The composite picture of a Populist leader that he presents contrasts with the clodhopper caricatures favored by their contemporary opponents or the conspiratorial hayseeds depicted by midcentury scholars like Hofstadter. Clanton’s composite Kansas Populist leader was about forty-six, from the Middle West, New York, or Pennsylvania, and had arrived in Kansas in the 1870s. Only a few of Clanton’s Populist leaders engaged exclusively in farming. They worked in a variety of middle-class professions including law and teaching. More than half of the Populist leaders graduated from college. The majority adhered to one of a variety of Protestant denominations, with a few spiritualists and agnostics among their number. They rejected social Darwinism and supported the state and federal government acting on behalf of the people.

On the national level, a near partisan equilibrium existed during the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century. The Republican Party won the presidency in three of the five elections between 1876 and 1892 despite never gaining a majority of the popular vote. The Republican Party, however, dominated Kansas politics from 1862 until 1880, when a division within the Republican Party
led to the election of a Democratic governor in 1882. The Republicans regained the governorship in 1884 and the Democrats would not hold it again until 1912. Every U.S. senator elected from statehood until 1891 was a Republican. During this prolonged period of Republican rule, Kansas saw its population and miles of railroad track rapidly increase. Most of the new population and railroads served its commercial agriculture industry and, thus, favored Republican candidates with close ties to business. Public and private indebtedness grew throughout the post–Civil War boom. Although the majority of Kansans remained true to the Republican Party, a few critics started question the concentration of wealth in the hands of the rich and urged the state and federal government to support farmers and laborers.

*Kansas Populism* connects the People's Party to earlier third-party movements in the state, observing “practically all the demands of the 1890 Populist platform had been called for by earlier third-party movements.” Reform agitation in Kansas began in 1872 when a faction of Republicans cooperated with Democrats to offer a Liberal-Republican ticket. An Independent Reform Party contested the 1874 and 1876 campaigns. The Greenback Party emerged in 1878 and continued as the Greenback-Labor Party in 1880, 1882, and 1884. The Prohibition Party arrived in 1886 and the Union-Labor Party in 1888. Clanton finds that many of those who would become leaders in the Kansas Populist movement were leaders in these parties in the years leading up to the formation of the People's Party.

The Kansas boom ended in 1887–1888. Its greatest excesses had occurred in the middle tier of counties, “from Marshall to Phillips in the north, and from Chautauqua to Comanche in the south.” These counties along with extreme southeastern Kansas provided the core of support for the Populists. The state's western counties—filled with recent arrivals—saw many of the bankrupt newcomers depart, thus diminishing the region's potential Populist base. Seven counties in extreme northwest Kansas—set-
tled about the same time as the middle tier—backed the Populists.

The bust prompted those Kansas farmers with enough means to stay and fight to join the Farmers’ Alliance and reassess their political priorities. Leaders with business connections, the “bloody shirt” of sectional loyalty, and the battles over the tariff seemed less important in the face of foreclosure. The first Kansas chapter affiliated with the northern Farmers’ Alliance had organized in about 1881. The order grew slowly until 1888; however, by 1889, the more radical southern alliance dominated the state. The two state alliance organizations consolidated August 14, 1889, at Newton, with Benjamin H. Clover of Cowley County as president. Sixty-eight county alliance presidents gathered on March 25, 1890, at Topeka, called for third-party political action, and created the People's State Committee. On April 30, 1890, William Peffer, publisher of the influential Kansas Farmer, pledged to “put the Alliance before party” and, on May 14, announced opposition to Republican senator John J. Ingalls’s reelection. The first People’s Party state convention gathered at Topeka on August 13, 1890.

The formation of the People’s Party changed the pattern of Kansas politics. During the 1890s, Kansas Populists elected numerous congressmen, two US senators, two governors, and the chief justice of the Kansas Supreme Court. The dynamic personalities that shaped the movement in Kansas were central to the rise and fall of the People’s Party at the national level. Clanton identifies renewed prosperity and internal ideological divisions—particularly the debate over whether to prioritize the inflation of the currency through the coinage of silver and endorse the People’s Party’s 1896 nomination of Democrat William Jennings Bryan for president—as the causes of the Populist collapse. “The cement of economic discontent had crumbled,” he writes:

Ideological conflicts that had existed within the reform ranks from the very beginning in more or
less subdued tones were now magnified to fatal proportions. Actually, the failure of the great silver crusade had signaled the beginning of the end; with Bryan’s defeat the partisans of reform had reached the parting of the ways, and the parting created an even more interesting dialogue than that which had characterized their union.⁹

Clanton refutes those scholars that viewed Kansas Populism as a failure because of the People’s Party’s fleeting electoral success by listing the Populists’ extensive legislative successes on behalf of laborers, farmers, and the general public. According to Clanton, Kansas Populists passed the reform spirit to Roosevelt insurgents, socialists, and progressives within the Republican and Democratic Parties. Clanton rates prominent Kansas Populists high in leadership abilities and ability to diagnose societal ills and propose cures. Their greatest shortcoming, he writes, was their inability to reconcile internal differences. Reviewers—including John D. Hicks—responded to Kansas Populism with measured praise."¹⁰

Clanton devoted the rest of his long career to the continued study of Populism. He published two additional monographs—Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890–1900 and Congressional Populism and the Crisis of the 1890s.¹¹ Clanton reflected on his career in a 2000 letter to the Journal of American History written in response to a review of Congressional Populism. He writes, “From the beginning of my involvement with this subject I have attempted to restore some balance in our understanding of the movement by means of extensive original research that began at the county level, then moved on to the state, regional, and finally the national level of Populist activity.”¹²

In 2004, Clanton published a revised version of Kansas Populism. In A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854–1903, Clanton reconciles his earlier work with some of the scholarship published in the intervening thirty-five years—including
his own—and offers his opinion on some of the subsequent studies. Yet the revision falls short of Clanton’s promise of a “thorough revision and updating” of the 1969 work. In response to scholars questioning the use of the Gilded Age as useful periodization, Clanton added two new chapters to the beginning of his work on the origins of the era’s economic conflict. The rest of the 2004 book mirrors the organization of *Kansas Populism*, and the revision received critical reviews.

In both *Kansas Populism* and *A Common Humanity*, Clanton presents the Populists’ 1892 Omaha platform as “the culmination of a third-party campaign that had been under way [sic] since the mid-1870s, and it enshrined the Alliance demands as they had been perfected since 1886. Its program of economic reforms was designed to rescue an older, predominantly agrarian America from the onslaught of urban-industrial America.” This view of the Populists clinging to an agrarian past contrasts with the interpretation of the Populists as forward-looking modernizers presented a few years after Clanton’s revision by Charles Postel in *The Populist Vision* (2007).

Numerous scholars have assessed various aspects of Kansas Populism since the initial appearance of Clanton’s work; however, a reappraisal of Kansas Populism is overdue in light of developments within the historical profession—including race, class, and gender analyses and new interpretations of Populism advanced by Charles Postel and others—and in Kansas politics. Until a new synthesis is published, *Kansas Populism* remains the most thorough account of the subject.

Jeff Wells
Kearney, Nebraska
March 2020
Notes to Foreword

7. Clanton, Kansas Populism, 63.

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