Kansas Populism
Clanton, O. Gene

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THE DETERMINED AND THE DISGRUNTLED

John Leedy's administration was perhaps not as sensational as that under Governor Lewelling, but it was decidedly more widespread and persistent. Criticism came almost at the outset, when Governor Leedy began administering patronage according to the political alignment that had elected him. Disillusioned Populists immediately raised the cry of bribery and sellout. One such attack on Leedy prompted Wesley Bennington, one of the extreme antifusionists, to write a rather cavalier defense of the governor. Said Bennington, "Governor Leedy may be wrong in many things, but he is consistent. In matters of 'patronage' and 'policy,' so far as we are able to discover, he is simply trying to maintain and perpetuate that fusion which you 'marble hearts' . . . persisted in making in the face of . . . all our protests and admonitions." Bennington's advice for the disenchanted was "go behind the barn and kick yourself into Missouri for not having intelligence enough to know the legitimate and inevitable consequences of political prostitution . . . ."1

The critical eye seemed to turn upon itself with full force. Attention focused primarily upon a special investigating committee organized by the legislature, apparently at the instigation of Governor Leedy, to look into the charges of corruption that were raised in the wake of the legislative session. Thanks to this committee, which continued its work, on and off, from April to June, 1897, the opposition press feasted on sensational copy provided by the quarrelling partisans of reform.2

State Senator Andrew Jackson Titus, Populist from Anthony, became the principal figure in the exposé attempt. Senator Titus, allied with two other prominent seventh congressional district Populists, George Washington McKay and Harry S.
Landis, was already at war with a wing of the state organization—that which was controlled by Jerry Simpson in the seventh congressional district. Peevish personality issues played an important part in creating the dissension, especially in the case of the long-standing Barber County feud between Simpson and McKay, but it had its political side. Titus and Landis were both former Republicans who were thoroughly dismayed with Simpson's pragmatic fusion performance.

The affair began to unfold early in the legislative session. D. O. McCray, the same Republican newspaper correspondent who was, unknown to everyone, implicated in Mary Elizabeth Lease's war against the Lewelling administration in 1894, wrote an article for the Leavenworth Times, published on January 17, which hinted that three senators on the educational committee had been "fixed" and therefore no legislation contrary to the interests of the book trusts would be passed. Apparently McCray wrote the article out of spite, after having been refused a position as lobbyist for the American Book Company. Senator Titus, chairman of the committee, responded by attempting to get the senate to pass a resolution denying McCray access to the floor of the senate until he retracted his "libelous" story. The matter was then dropped. Later, in his testimony before the investigating committee, Senator Titus stated that former-Governor Lewelling had "taken him to a room" in a Topeka hotel for the purpose of persuading him "to introduce a substitute for the text book bill . . . ." By doing so, alleged Titus, it was intimated that he would be "financially rewarded." Senator Lewelling quickly denied the charge. He said that Senator Titus was a "stupendous liar, and a dense, stupid and ambitious puppet who has not sense enough to know that a few conspirators are making a tool of him in their own interest." It was all a "conspiracy," said Lewelling, concocted by Harry Landis, Senator Titus, and "others," for the purpose of destroying him politically.

Several days before Senator Titus made his statement about Lewelling's alleged bribery attempt, the Topeka Capital stated that Jerry Simpson, during the legislative session, had been "the busiest lobbyist on the floor, bringing every influence to bear to
defeat maximum railroad bills, mortgage taxation bills and every other hold-up Populistic scheme against corporations and people who loan money . . ." The Capital asked: "Which is the real Simpson, the sockless racter in Congress, or the conservative lobbyist in Topeka?" Senator Titus did not mention the name of Jerry Simpson in his testimony before the committee, but several months later he also charged that Simpson had lobbied against the stockyards bill. Other Simpson opponents in his district linked his name with lobbying efforts made against the maximum-rate railroad bill.

Jerry Simpson denied the charges, and nothing credible came out of the investigation. It is, of course, conceivable that a number of Populists succumbed to the lure of the lobbyists, but there is no real evidence to place before the bar of history. In the absence of such, the whole episode must be credited to lack of cohesion in the reform camp. The struggle over the railroad bill proved most conducive to the creation of discord. An honest difference of opinion concerning whether it was desirable to enact a maximum-rate schedule or to leave the matter in the hands of a railroad commission became a test of whether one had sold himself to corporate interests. Rumors fed on rumors, and persisted despite the facts, noted unexpectedly by the Topeka Capital itself, which indicated that "With all the testimony in the boodle investigation there has not been a syllable of evidence to show that any man or corporation attempted to bribe any member of the Legislature for any purpose." An editorial remark by the Capital also provided an apt partisan conclusion for the whole episode: "There is a homely old adage to the effect that when a certain class of people fall out, honest men get their dues, and it applies to parties as well as individuals." To paraphrase the statement differently, it might be said that when a group of reformers become aware of their incompatibility and part company, honest and dishonest men, alike, are likely to be tarred with the same brush.

The discord certainly did not augur well for the future of the fusion forces. All indications pointed to a waning cause. The party's influential state paper in the capital was itself a good example. In April, 1897, The Advocate, under William Peffer's
direction, was designated "the official state paper"; it nevertheless became increasingly less partisan. In November, 1897, the paper came under new ownership and new editorial management. Peffer stayed on the staff for a time, and by mid-December the "official state paper," which was now called The Advocate and News, had disassociated itself completely from the Populist party.14

Governor Leedy, like Lewelling and Morrill before him, also came under attack in his handling of the metropolitan police law and prohibition enforcement. Ben S. Henderson made the headlines early in 1898 with an attack on the governor on this account. Henderson, then living in Kansas City, Kansas, charged that Governor Leedy had made a deal with the liquor interests.15 The governor, neither a prohibitionist nor a resubmissionist,16 minced no words in telling his critics that he had not joined the Populist party "to hunt joints nor to fight resubmission." "If there are violations of the prohibitory law," he said, "citizens who know the facts should complain to the [local] magistrates and have the violators prosecuted."17 However realistic, such a stand failed to endear the administration to the extreme fringe of prohibition-minded Populists. By 1897 prohibition was just about the only ideological commitment that some of these people had left, which as much as anything revealed the vulnerable side of the progressive mind in its efforts to affix blame for the ills of a society increasingly perplexed by the onward march of industrialism.18

This prohibition-minded element was strongly represented within the antifusion wing which had maintained its state committee after the contest of 1896; and in the aftermath of William Jennings Bryan's defeat and the eclipse of free silver as an effective issue, the mid-roaders grew bolder, more extreme in their attack on Governor Leedy's fusion administration. On January 1, 1898, as their barrage reached a certain crescendo, the mid-road chairman, Wesley Bennington, addressed an open letter to Taylor Riddle, who had been chairman of the regular Populist organization since the preceding August.19 Chairman Riddle was working diligently to assure the continuation of the combination that had won in 1896. Bennington decried that effort, of course, and
reminded Riddle that both of them had participated in the 1894 national convention which had assigned to both old parties the blame for the nation's plight. He asked, "Who lied? When did the ballot box stuffing nigger killing Democrats of the south get good enough to become a fit associate for you? When did the Tammany ring boodlers of New York and the east become your brothers, and by what process?" 20

For Governor John Leedy, the explosion that sank the American battleship Maine in Havana harbor on February 15, 1898, was rather a mixed blessing. The diversion thus created took the administration out of the spotlight of public attack, yet the war enthusiasm and subsequent mobilization also resuscitated the Republican party, monopolized the energies of the administration, and, with an important assist from returning prosperity, relegated reform issues even further to the background. 21

American intervention against Spain in Cuba was a popular outcry among all manner of Kansans. The initial reaction of Kansas Populist leaders to the "crisis" in Cuba was mixed, though far from unfavorable to intervention. Annie Diggs, state librarian at the time, indicated that she "would not have the United States stand imposition, but before going into actual bloody war, the awful results should be carefully [considered] from the standpoint of humanity." 22 G. C. Clemens cautioned, "It is quite possible that somebody on the insurgent side blew up the Maine for the very purpose of compelling this country to intervene." Caution aside, Clemens stated, "The Cubans would not be a great deal better off under a sugar king, with a federal court attachment, than an hereditary baby monarch; but Spain is an excrescence and should be mopped off the map in order to give civilization a chance to spread." The Spanish "government belongs to the middle ages and ought to be kicked back into harmony with history." 23

In congress, Jerry Simpson, after having earlier supported the demand for war, courageously raised his voice against intervention, but the rest of the Kansas Populist delegation clamored for quick retaliation. 24 On April 12, Jeremiah Botkin stated, "Every consideration of humanity requires the United States to
issue, without an hour's delay, an imperative command to the oppressors to quit at once and forever the Western Hemisphere . . . ." 

Congressman Botkin's sentiments represented Kansas Populist feeling precisely. A war for humanity was enjoined. "The Benedict Arnolds of this period," said Botkin, "are those who . . . would sacrifice national honor, the cause of freedom, and humanity itself upon the altar of a heartless commercialism."  

No politician was more naïve in his demand for war than Jeremiah Botkin, but it seemed to be a national affliction. Americans, generally, had committed themselves to the Cuban crusade without giving due consideration to the long-run consequences. Governor John Leedy was no exception. He was an avid supporter of intervention almost from the moment the news of the Maine disaster was spread across the nation; and when the decision for war came on April 25, he was more than ready to direct the Kansas effort.  

As a war governor, John Leedy pleasantly surprised Republicans when he selected Colonel Frederick Funston to command the first of three volunteer regiments to be organized. Funston, the young son of a prominent Republican family, was without question the best possible choice; he had just returned to Kansas shortly before the Maine disaster, after a well-publicized period of service as an officer in the Cuban insurgent army.  

In the first few weeks of the war, rumors circulated to the effect that Governor Leedy would resign to assume command of one of the volunteer regiments; however, if he had visions of himself at the head of a charging column, which seems probable, he suppressed them. On the other hand, the young lieutenant governor, A. M. Harvey, had no reservations about relinquishing his thankless duties for the visions of laurels to be won as a major of the volunteers. Quite likely, though, given the state of disorganization and delay that was soon to be the fate of the Kansas units, Major Harvey found occasion to relish his former position.  

Criticism of the governor, abated by the war enthusiasm and the appointment of Colonel Funston, was soon renewed by Republicans. The governor's decision to fill Kansas' troop commitment by volunteer units, while ignoring the state's three na-
tional guard regiments, was seen as a bungling political move, especially when the outfitting and training of these volunteers literally and figuratively bogged down in the mud. Criticism of John Leedy's performance as a war governor in that election year was to be expected, but the many new appointments opened to the governor by the organization of three regiments was a political blessing too great to be disguised. And from all indications, Governor Leedy used this opportunity rather effectively to heal some of the wounds in his strife-ridden party.

Although the war may have solved some of the party's problems, it just as quickly created new ones. There was no denying at the outset that most Kansas Populists joined hands with Republicans and Democrats in supporting the objective of throwing Spain out of the Western Hemisphere and freeing Cuba. They were not long in discovering, however, that the undertaking was far more complicated than they could possibly have dreamed.

Populist state Representative Isom Wright would win no prizes for writing, but in a letter of August 11, 1898, he put into words exactly what was troubling many Populists at that stage in the *Cuba Libre* movement: the war, he wrote, was leading to "some complications that were but little thought of at the beginning [sic]... I am opposed to our Government extending her Sovereign power over any colonial possession in the high seas [.] I was opposed to the annexation of the Hawaii [sic] Islands. While I do not wish the Phillipine [sic] Island returned to Spain I have no desire for them to become a part of our possessions. I do not even wish Cuba or Portorico [sic]." He went on to write, "This expansion policy means that we are to unnecessarly [sic] convert ourselves into a strong military nation which never savor of any good for the masses of the people." Moreover, it was "not in safekeeping with a Republic and our free institutions but means a grinding taxation which under the pernicious policy of the Republican party will fall on the class of people who are the least able to bear it."

There were among Kansas Populists leading advocates of expansion and the "big policy." The most characteristic position, however, was anti-imperialism. In a speech before the house on
January 30, 1899, Congressman Jeremiah Botkin deprecated the argument that “The Stars and Stripes must forever float over every land wet with the blood of an American soldier.” It was criminal aggression, he maintained, for the United States to annex either the Philippines or Cuba. Botkin, as a former minister, had also listened intently to the argument of retaining the Philippines in order to “civilize, christianize, and uplift” the natives. His answer was: “American soldiers must not be used to forcibly establish any religion or any church anywhere in this world. . . . You can not shoot the religion of Jesus into the Filipinos with 13-inch guns, nor punch it into them with American bayonets.”

While Americans had engaged in the “splendid little war” and the debate over American policy had begun to take shape, the parties held their state conventions that June and prepared for the campaign of 1898. Republicans, it was plain to see, were greatly invigorated by the post-1896 developments and confident their party would return to power in the state. Their optimism was explained in their platform where they “heartily” approved the war effort and insisted that with the national government in Republican hands “every promise has been kept and every prediction has been verified.”

At the Populist convention there were a few leading figures who preferred to dump Governor Leedy, but there was no other leader among them whose appeal was great enough to overcome the political stigma of a no-confidence maneuver of that kind. Leedy was therefore renominated, as were all the other incumbents, to run on a platform that was as radical as any before constructed by the party. The convention’s demands included initiative and referendum, “the public ownership and operation of stockyards,” and “insurance protection against fire, lightning and tornadoes as a state function, at cost.” The convention also went on record in favor of proportional representation and “the public ownership of all public utilities.” Far down the list was the waning issue of free silver.

From the point of view of the opposition, it was a platform devised simply to catch votes; extravagant promises the People’s party had no intention of fulfilling, or, better yet, promises it
would never have a chance to fulfill. Several Populist leaders, well in advance of the election, prominent among whom were former-Governor Lewelling and former-Lieutenant Governor Daniels, even conceded that the reform cause was lost.\textsuperscript{37}

So it was. Even though fusion did not break down that year as it had in previous off-year contests, the combined Populist-Democratic ticket was soundly defeated. Republicans won seven of eight congressional seats, the lower house of the state legislature by a commanding margin of ninety-three to twenty-eight,\textsuperscript{38} and their state ticket, headed by William E. Stanley, an attorney from Wichita, defeated the Leedy slate by just over 15,000 votes.\textsuperscript{39}

Despite his and his party's repudiation, however, Governor Leedy summoned a special legislative session to enact reform. The session, which ran from December 21 to January 9, managed to carry out two of the party's 1898 pledges: it repealed the Railroad Commission Act and substituted in its place a court of visitation with ample power to perform the tasks that its proponents deemed necessary; the legislature also did away with the troublesome metropolitan police law.\textsuperscript{40} The merits of this undertaking were highly questionable. It had the mark of desperation and defiance stamped all too plainly upon it. In doing away with the police law the legislature performed a service that practically all factions were willing to recognize at that point, but the repeal of the Railroad Commission Act turned out to be a rather futile gesture. The court of visitation was shortly thereafter invalidated by the state supreme court, which had been restored to Republican domination, and the state was left without any regulatory body.\textsuperscript{41}

Populism's denouement obviously was at hand. The cement of economic discontent had crumbled. Ideological conflicts that had existed within 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.

One significant part of that dialogue involved the relation-
ship between Populism and "Bryanism." In September, 1897, A. C. Shinn insisted in a letter to William Peffer in *The Advocate* that the two were "synonymous terms" that had grown "out of the same cause" and which aimed "at the same object." A. C. Shinn had been the party's unsuccessful candidate for lieutenant governor in 1890; he had been president of the state Bi-Metallic League for some time; and in 1895-96 he had been the acknowledged leader of the Silver Republicans. Though back in the party, he could hardly be classified as a radical Populist; silver was his obsession. In his letter, Shinn challenged a speech Peffer had delivered expounding undiluted Populist doctrine.42 According to Shinn, it showed that Peffer had "wandered far from the fold." The discrepancy, wrote Shinn, between the ex-senator's and his own interpretation of the meaning of Populism was "fundamental. It appears that your version of Populism means the nationalization of all the essentials of existence—land, labor, transportation and money, while my idea of Populism is that we demand a return to just laws, or 'equal rights to all and special privileges to none,' so that as in the early days of the republic the individual . . . may go on enjoying his . . . right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness [italics added]."43 Shortly thereafter, Shinn's views occasioned a reply by former-Speaker John M. Dunsmore, which perhaps came as close to capturing the essence of Kansas Populism as anything that had been written. Dunsmore wrote:

It cannot be affirmed with truth that Bryan stands for anything more than the free coinage of silver and the ascendancy of the Democratic party . . . . Populism, however, stands for something more. It demands the enactment of new laws based on the natural rights of men, and not limited by precedents and accepted theories in relation to property, when such precedents and theories do not meet the requirements of modern life. Populism does not necessarily mean "to nationalize all the essentials of existence, land, labor, transportation and money." It does mean, however, that the power of law shall control and prohibit the centralization of land titles. That labor shall be pro-
vided with all necessary legal machinery to protect itself against the unjust demands of aggregated wealth. That not only the means of transportation, but all public utilities, shall be subject to public control, and when necessary, public ownership. That money of all kinds shall be issued direct by the government, and its legal tender value regulated by law, and not by foreign bankers and money-lenders.44

The gulf between Shinn and Dunsmore had existed all along; it was now simply more apparent and more imposing. Dunsmore represented the party's progressive side; Shinn, the retrogressive. Fusion having complicated the picture, it would be difficult to say with certainty which side was dominant in 1897; but the Populist-Democratic platform of 1898 would seem to indicate that the tenor of Populism in Kansas, at least rhetorically, was on the whole still decidedly progressive.

The period 1897-98 was a time of critical decision for Populists. It was clear that fusion was to be a permanent arrangement. Many Populist leaders managed to make their peace with that situation; the futility of a go-it-alone approach was all too obvious. There were those, too, like Annie Diggs, who halfway convinced themselves that the Democratic party had undergone a significant conversion since the advent of Bryanism.45 Others, for a variety of reasons, simply could not reconcile themselves to that alliance.

A few of the more radical leaders at this point severed their connections with the party and joined the socialist movement that was just getting under way in Kansas. The Socialist Labor party of Kansas was organized at Pittsburg, Kansas, on November 14, 1897. In September, 1897, G. C. Clemens, clerk of the state supreme court at the time, began the work of organizing the Kansas Union of Social Democrats, which was launched early in 1898.46

In his personal journal, Clemens stated his rationale for leaving the party. He was convinced that Populists had been sold out by silver advocates and "led" into an "ambuscade" with malice aforethought. Since the defeat of 1896, these same leaders had "never ceased to conspire to destroy the People's party and to make
it a mere feeder for the Democratic party.” But that was not for
him. “To-day, the Republican and the Democratic party are alike
controlled by those who tenaciously and selfishly cling to the old
social system which is passing away before their eyes.” The Social­
ist party, he wrote, was the only party that would “stand for the
new social order which capitalism itself has made indispensible
if the world is to go on.” It was “a sign of latter-day capitalism’s
imbecility” to behold “how the old party leaders flounder when
the people demand some means of escape from the tyranny of the
trusts.” It was clear to him that “Socialists alone, of all mankind,
have a political philosophy which can explain modern economic
phenomena and suggest a rational cure for modern economic ills.”
Socialists recognized “that trusts are not evil in themselves. They
are among the most important labor-saving machines ever in­
vented by the cunning brain of men. In themselves they are good.
They cannot be destroyed, for heaven has sent them to provide the
way for compelling a reluctant world to be happy.” Controlled
by “selfish and greedy” owners they could indeed do great harm.
“But let society own the machine and it becomes a blessing and
not a curse. Let society operate the trusts, and the wails of a
suffering people will give way to songs of joy.”

As G. C. Clemens wrote these words, Kansas was entering
a new period of ferment and awakened social consciousness. By
February, 1898, the circulation of the socialist Girard weekly Ap­
peal to Reason had risen to a reported 40,000 copies. A few months
later, midway through the campaign of 1898, Charles M. Sheldon’s
social gospel novel, In His Steps, was selling at the rate of more
than a thousand copies a day. At the same time, the Topeka
Advocate and News announced that it was “avowedly a Socialistic
paper.” As such, so it maintained, it was merely following in the
steps of the late Dr. Stephen McLallin. The same paper was
convinced that the reception given to Eugene V. Debs when he
spoke to a gathering in Topeka early in February, 1898, “illu­
strated sharply the recent growth of socialistic tendencies.” Just a
few years back the socialists “would have been allowed to hold
meetings only under police surveillance; last week Topeka’s chief
of police donated $5 towards defraying the expenses of Mr. Debs’ address."

The trend was of course not universally proclaimed. Many Populists, men who were neither enthusiastic about the prospects of a Socialist party nor a Fusion party, were momentarily without any political home. William Peffer, for one, argued that Populism’s undoing resulted from an affliction of “anaemia” which resulted from taking in “too much Democracy.” In June, 1898, Peffer consented to head the Prohibition ticket in Kansas; by 1900 he had returned to the Republican fold. Undoubtedly there were numerous other former Republicans among the Populists who simply could not reconcile themselves to close cooperation with the Democratic party; loyalties and antipathies born of as great an ordeal as the Civil War were not easily erased, as the record of the reform movement had demonstrated on numerous occasions. Many of these individuals soon made their way back to their original political home.

William Peffer would have much preferred a new party if that were possible; that was Percy Daniels’ preference as well. In April, 1898, the ex-lieutenant governor published an open letter stating his resignation in Populist defeat and his refusal to work with a Fusion party. The Populist party, he wrote, had had “a grand opportunity, but it is gone. It has been frittered away in petty quarrels and recriminations; in senseless jealousies, and in the success of wire pullers in fastening on the new party the methods and practices of the parties we have abandoned in search of something better.”

Daniels’ reform zeal was undiminished though. After noting some facts and figures demonstrating the alarming rate at which the distribution of the nation’s wealth was widening the gulf between the rich and the poor, he stated: “What idle balderdash—what kindergarden nonsense for any one to talk of free silver as a remedy for such a wrong; or any financial legislation except such as will appropriate some of these fabulous piles of treasure for the employment of the idle, and thereby raising the wages of all who labor.” But how was this to be accomplished, he asked? Lincoln Republicans had championed “noble princi-
pies,” but “the party that promulgated and sustained them is dead and the cadaver stinketh.” And those who wear its “purple” lacked sense enough to realize that they have not “inherited its virtues.” Jeffersonian Democracy had been “a grand creed”; but the party that had given life to its principles had “been among the mummies of political history for years . . . .” He who “wears its toga,” said Daniels, “has been feted and duped by the Borgias, dosed by the Bourbons and drugged by the beasts and money changers of Tammany till he is too dumb to distinguish money except by the jingle.” And what of the Populist party and its mantle, asked Daniels? Well, “the child was precocious”; however, it “got bow-legged and wobbled,” and tripped “on his mantle” and “fell down stairs.” In falling, he acquired “some bad rents in his mantle of promise; and his guardians, with a variety of patches, have tried to conceal even from themselves its true condition.”

As Daniels saw it, Populism’s “great weakness” had been its “failure” to advance measures to accomplish its proclaimed purposes. He then made his usual plea for a graduated tax and called for the creation of a new reform party.55

There was of course no chance that the various reform elements would respond to the call; their incompatibility had been abundantly demonstrated. In an interview reported in September, 1898, ex-Governor Lewelling acknowledged the party’s plight but expressed his belief that success would eventually come to the reform movement. It takes time, he said, to introduce “great changes.” The various reform factions among Populists, Socialists, and others, were not now sufficiently united for successful national action. But that would “come some day. It may not be as Populists, the name may be changed; but it will come and the principles involved will be identically the same.”56

The defeat of the fusion forces in the 1898 campaign accelerated the dismantlement of an already debilitated reform machine. Much soul-searching took place. John Breidenthal, who obviously entertained thoughts of salvaging the leadership for himself from the wreck, reasoned that the defeat indicated the need for getting back to “first principles.” He pointed to the “large vote” cast for
Mayor Samuel M. "Golden Rule" Jones in the Ohio gubernatorial contest as an independent candidate on a "public ownership platform" as clear indication that "the people are ready for the change from corporate to public ownership of public utilities." He was convinced that the "party which will not only declare in favor of this policy, but [which] will show its good faith by making a vigorous campaign on the issue, will ... secure the support of the laboring classes of all the large cities." Said Breidenthal, "The idea of public against corporate ownership of public utilities and natural monopolies has been a fundamental principle of the Populist party, but of late years it has ceased to agitate for this principle, and just in proportion to its lack of agitation has it failed to meet with success at the polls."^57

John Breidenthal was forgetting that Kansas was rather short on large cities. He was also discounting the fact that a general decline in reform fervor had taken place—despite an undeniable awakening in the urban centers, as represented by a small but growing socialist movement. Economic and social issues were now apparently secondary to the majority of her citizens. In May, 1899, the Topeka Mail and Breeze asked the Republican members of the 1899 legislature what they thought would be "the most important issue" in the 1900 campaign. The only issue upon which there was substantial agreement was "expansion"—or, as their opponents would have phrased it, imperialism and anti-imperialism. Forty-five of one hundred and two Republican legislators rated expansion as the most important issue; significantly, only three members listed "sound money," or free silver, as the primary issue.^58

A remarkable increase in the number of trusts, nationally, intensified interest in that issue; actually, the trust question was ranked second in importance among the Republican legislators (six ranked that issue first; twelve ranked it second). In November, 1899, ex-Governor Lewelling, state senator at the time, was asked if he believed it were possible to control the trusts by legislation. His reply was representative of one significant segment of Populist opinion on that question. "Probably not," he said. "We can destroy them by taxation, but it is not the trust itself that is
harmful, but the abuse of the power derived from organization.” Lewelling went on to say that it was his candid opinion that “no political party acting under our present form of government will ever be able to cope with the trusts. Relief may come through a change in the methods of trade, but I can conceive of nothing except some form of co-operation between producers and consumers, which means some sort of socialism, though it will be called by some other name . . . .”

Perhaps the most talented Kansas Populist critic of the trusts, at this point, was a young man by the name of Carl Schurz Vrooman. By 1898 this twenty-six-year-old Harvard- and Oxford-educated farmer-economist, who was a member of a most prominent family of reformers, had made quite a reputation for himself in the Populist camp. Governor John Leedy had appointed him to the board of regents which had brought about the reconstitution of Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan. Vrooman had had considerable to do there with the fight to introduce into the curriculum the “new political economy,” for that had been his specialty while a student at Oxford. He was, in fact, an excellent representative of the group of Populists who had made their peace with fusion and who were endeavoring to convert the Democratic party to Populist principles.

Late in 1899 Carl Vrooman gave expression to his politico-economic thought in a widely circulated pamphlet which he entitled Taming the Trusts. Drawing upon the background of Populist experience and thought and a wide familiarity with noted economists of the new school of thought, Vrooman’s work was, in a sense, a summation of at least one element of Populist thought, blended with some original insight that one would expect of a gifted and highly educated young man.

At one point in his discussion, Vrooman referred to the work of an economist friend, with whom he agreed, to make a distinction between “natural” and “unnatural” monopolies. Government ownership, he stated, was not the proper remedy for “unnatural” monopolies; they should and could be dealt with through government action that would “‘remove the special privileges, which alone sustain their life.’” The “natural” monopolies
could be dealt with in one way only, "'they must be democratized, transformed into government monopolies.'" As for the bogey of paternalism, he insisted, as Populists had done before on many occasions, "The people are the government, and the government is the people in their united or corporate capacity. Therefore, whatever the government does for the people they are really doing for themselves, this makes all such help 'self-help,' not 'paternalism.'" 

Vrooman's observations in the pamphlet regarding what he thought was the important distinction between the Populist party and the Democratic party also provided a significant insight into the motives of individuals, like himself, who had elected to pursue Populist ends by means of the fusion course. "The Populist party," he wrote, "did nothing more nor less than take good old Simon-pure Democratic principles, as enunciated by Jefferson and Jackson, apply them to present-day conditions, and carry them to their logical conclusions. Populism is nothing more nor less than Democracy up to date." As soon as the Democratic party comes to a "full" understanding of the "problems" of modern society, and begins to devote "all its energy and brains to their solution" along lines that are in harmony with "the fundamental principles" of Jefferson and Jackson, "the Populist party will have accomplished its destiny as a distinct and separate political organization, and willingly will become an aggressive wing of the victorious hosts of the rejuvenated Democracy." 

By 1900 it was clear that the trusts, if reformers could make them so, would be a major campaign issue; it remained to be seen whether the Democratic party would consent to being brought "up to date."

Although he professed a desire to retire from politics, John Breidenthal was "persuaded," as he put it, to head the Fusion ticket in 1900. The campaign that followed had many curiosities. G. C. Clemens headed the Socialist ticket, and ex-Governor Lewelling, who, interestingly enough, was at that time a land agent for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Company, came out in support of Clemens, after charging Breidenthal with a history of treachery. At a Wichita rally in July, Lewelling
introduced Clemens by saying: "Mr. Clemens is an old friend of mine and I am glad to say that I am very much interested in the cause of which he is the principal champion in Kansas. The Socialist principles are much superior in many respects to those of the Populists." After he had made his testimonial, the press pursued the former governor, seeking to confirm rumors that he had abandoned the Fusion party for the Socialist. A few days before he was stricken with a heart attack and died while on a trip to Arkansas City on September 3, 1900, Lewelling stated: "I have always had socialistic tendencies. So have we all. We must all come to it. I am not particularly affiliating with them [Socialists], though I admire many of their tenets."67

Another one-time Wichita Populist of note, Mary Elizabeth Lease, entered the picture again during that campaign in a new role. Early in 1896 the tempestuous lady had gone back East to lecture. Apparently she had not meant to make the move permanent, but New York gradually became her home. Her reputation was such in the East that she had an appeal which, without too much exaggeration, might be compared to that of "Buffalo Bill" Cody of an earlier time. By April, 1897, according to her, she was working for Joseph Pulitzer, on special assignment for the New York World. She had made several visits to Kansas since her departure, and these Lease visits were a reporter's delight. Visits of March and April, 1897, provided some colorful copy. When asked what she thought of the Kansas situation, she said she feared "there is no hope for Kansas and her farmers. This state is hopelessly in the grasp of the railroads and under the heel of the eastern money lenders." As for her own beliefs, she stated quite emphatically, "I am a full-fledged Socialist! Any person who honestly accepts the teachings of the Divine Master must be a Socialist. In other words, socialism is the practice of christianity." She also revealed that she had taken up theosophy since becoming a New Yorker.68

During the 1900 campaign the ever-changeable Mrs. Lease was "sent," as she put it, to Nebraska by Mark Hanna in behalf of the Republican party to fight William Jennings Bryan and her old Democratic enemies. She touched Kansas briefly. In one interview
she explained that she was with the Republicans now because “as I take it the issue has resolved itself into the old issue of copperheadism versus Republicanism, and as the daughter of an old Union soldier I feel that my place is with the Republican party.” Mrs. Lease also stated that the “anti-expansion or alleged imperialism policy” of the Democratic party represented, to her mind, the “most unpatriotic, un-American, unwise issue” that has ever come before the American public, with the exception of the issue of secession.69

G. C. Clemens was no threat to anyone, but he had his answer for the kind of campaign the Democratic and Republican parties were waging that year. In one of his speeches, he told his audience to get out the Omaha platform and they would see where it accused “the two old parties of fighting a perpetual ‘sham battle’ to drown the cry of misery. Has that charge proved false? It was never truer than in this very campaign. What is all this pretended fight over ‘imperialism’ and ‘militarism’ and ‘hauling down the flag’ and the Constitution following the flag . . . ?”70

But John Breidenthal’s campaign was not a sham; he faced the issues squarely. Privately he even sympathized with the Social Democrats. In one letter, written not long after the election, he wrote that he had learned much from his association with them. The “end they desire to attain is the ideal and in time will become a permanent system in this country . . . .” He wanted no abrupt changes, however, for that would be “disastrous.” His object was “to see the machinery set on the right combination and the engines started in the right direction,” but he wanted to “progress slowly to the end that each step taken should be one in advance.”71

Before launching his campaign, Breidenthal stated that the principal issues to be discussed would revolve around the questions of money, transportation, antimonopoly, public ownership, imperialism, and militarism. These issues were discussed, and there was no hedging. On the transportation question, for example, Breidenthal stated that the Populist position had “always been that government ownership [of the railroads] is the only solution of this great problem . . . .” The government, he argued, was the only agency that could or would “establish and maintain
just and equitable rates.” Populists had been “disposed to try the expedient of regulation,” but it was now “apparent” that that was a failure and “government ownership is the remedy.” The same conclusion, he said, “applies with equal force to the telegraph, telephone and express business.” In a speech at Emporia on September 22, Breidenthal reemphasized his contention that regulation was insufficient in dealing with the trusts. “You might as well try to regulate a coyote or a rattlesnake,” he said. “You cannot supervise them and you cannot control them. My remedy is to allow the people to run these businesses themselves, but you say this is socialism. Well, maybe it is.”

On the issue of socialism, apparently a number of Populist leaders spoke out unequivocally in that campaign. Annie Diggs, who was then being referred to by the opposition press as the “Lady Boss” of the Fusion forces, stated in an interview that she was a socialist, but not a socialist “of the old world”; not a socialist of the school of Karl Marx or Ferdinand Lassalle. She described herself as “an opportunist socialist” and explained that by this she meant that she “would apply socialistic principles to everyday conditions as fast as the conditions would warrant; taking a little today, adding a little more tomorrow and so on.”

Perhaps the most notable feature of the whole campaign was the degree of tolerance that existed relative to such pronouncements. It was here that Populism’s influence was most discernible. Less than a decade earlier, this Breidenthal campaign would have been besieged in the most caustic way imaginable; in 1900, the Populist-Democratic case was given a generally fair hearing. If they had accomplished nothing else—and they indeed had accomplished more—Populists had contributed mightily to an expansion of the conventional wisdom such as was conducive to a much more creative social dialogue.

Perhaps John Breidenthal’s success in polling forty-seven percent of the vote was just as remarkable. It was a losing percentage, to be sure, but significant, considering the kind of campaign that was waged. Breidenthal even ran two thousand votes ahead of William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic presidential
nominee, but it was the end of the line, and all but the most self-seeking or dogmatic could plainly see it as such. 75

Privately, in a letter to his friend J. C. Rupenthal, Breidenthal claimed to be "neither surprised nor disappointed" in the outcome; merely disgusted to think that "a goodly number of alleged Populists and Democrats could be influenced by the full stomach argument." He said he had "always realized that there was a considerable percentage of Populists who were influenced by temporary condition and who would be disposed to return to the Republican party wherever [whenever] the general conditions were more favorable." It was obvious to him that "Only a limited number of people will take the time to solve to their own satisfaction the public questions that have been before the people for a quarter of a century."

Looking to the future, Breidenthal then commented: "While the work of education will go on indefinitely, I am skeptical as to whether any permanent results will be secured in the near future. People will probably continue the present system until they are powerless to overthrow incorporated wealth, except by revolution." The election, he felt, had "demonstrated two things conclusively—one is that the Populist party has outlived its usefulness as a political organization and another is that the Democratic party cannot be used as an instrumentality through which to accomplish any great reform." The Democratic party had its progressive wing, he admitted; but it would not unite in a new movement. The Social Democratic party would be practically worthless except as a "propaganda organization" because it was intent on "accomplishing everything at once." He then offered this bit of political advice: "While I am a socialist, I am convinced that socialism must be a growth . . . [or an] evolution or a development, that is to say, that we cannot inaugurate a complete socialistic system at once, but that we must gradually become possessed of the different public utilities and natural monopolies." It was his belief that "a party occupying middle ground between the extreme socialist and Bryan Democracy would stand a much better show of success and would present far more practical measures than any other." 76
By 1900, professions to the contrary, John Breidenthal was more progressive than socialist; after 1900 that was even more the case. Soon after his defeat he announced his retirement from politics. The former bank commissioner then applied his considerable abilities to the work of organizing a banking trust company that was destined to become a profitable enterprise. 77

As for the Populist party itself—or what was left of it—it struggled on for a few more campaigns. Under the chairmanship of Grant Wood Harrington, as a matter of fact, the fusion wing of the party was even more highly organized than it had been under earlier chairmen, including John Breidenthal; but organization was no substitute for enthusiasm. 78 The Republican legislature of 1901 administered the coup de grâce by passing a law denying Kansas parties the right to nominate corresponding or fusion tickets.

Dismantlement of the party continued for some time thereafter. Most of the Populists who were destined to return to the Republican party or the Prohibitionist party probably had already done so by 1900; after that date, Populists either went over to the Democratic party or became Socialists or Independents. The Populist party therefore admirably fulfilled the role of a transitional medium which assisted in the creation of new and more effective political alignments.

The personal story of two brothers, Grant Wood Harrington and Wynne Powers Harrington, reveals much about this final act of Populism in Kansas. Both were relatively young; when they left the Democratic party to join the Populists in 1894, Grant was twenty-nine and Wynne was twenty-four. They had both risen to prominence in the declining years of Populism, and in 1902 Grant was chairman of the Populist-Democratic state central committee, W. P. Harrington was chairman of his district's congressional committee and also of the Gove County Populist organization—this particular story takes on added interest by noting that W. P. Harrington was destined, some twenty years later, to write one of the first scholarly accounts of Kansas Populism in a master's thesis at the University of Kansas. 79

By 1902 both saw the futility of prolonging the life of the
party, but they disagreed on how their individual efforts in behalf of reform could best be employed in the future. In September of that year W. P. Harrington wrote brother Grant that he had done all he could do as chairman of his county organization “to kill the party and clear the rubbish out of the way” for the Democratic party. W. P. Harrington indicated, however, that he could not himself affiliate with the Democratic party as Grant had elected to do, preferring instead affiliation with the Social Democrats. He added:

I can see that the Socialist movement is not being taken seriously, but it never will be taken seriously if it has to await the pleasure of those who like yourself . . . have hastened to flop into the Democratic party and are hustling for front seats in the band wagon. It will never be taken seriously till it grows, which is all the more reason why I and others should get to work to make it grow. There is nothing about the Democratic party to make me feel at home there. Sometime, maybe, it may get right but I am not going to waste the best years of my life voting for it in hopes that it will get right in the end. . . . It never will get to sound doctrine till it is forced by the growing Socialist party. I know the Democratic party has it in its power to knock the props out from [under] any third party organization whenever it chooses and the time may come when it will absorb the Socialist party; but when it takes up with Socialist ideas it will have need for the men who have been trained in the advocacy of those ideas and I'll have a chance to get into the party then if I want to.

W. P. Harrington went on to tell his brother that his party's candidate for governor was a “false alarm”; that the “whole campaign” was “a hollow sham and you are going to get licked so badly that you won’t know yourselves after election.” He ended by advising: “The Good Book says that ‘he who would save his life shall lose it’ and this text I commend to the careful consideration of those who try to discourage Socialism and tie up with . . . [unreformed Democrats] for ‘practical reasons.”
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