Kansas Populism
Clanton, O. Gene

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In that unrivaled manner of his, Jerry Simpson once remarked:

Did you ever see a summer storm in the country? First there comes a wind-gust, which raises the dust and sets it whirling round and round, carrying with it the leaves and husks and bits of stick that come into its path, and making a tremendous stir among inanimate things generally. Everybody cries out: “Whew, what a storm!” But that isn’t the storm. After the dust is scattered over all the piazzas and roofs, and the sticks and straws and leaves and chips of dried husk have been blown into the hedge-rows and fence corners out of sight, the thunder rolls and the lightning flashes and the rain descends, and barns are struck and burned and rivers are swollen and bridges swept away. That’s the storm; the wind-gust was only a preliminary.

It’s the same with a great political movement. The little fellows, the human chips and straws, are whirled and tossed about in the wind and dust of their own agitation and then are laid out of sight in the dark places where no man goes. It’s the fellows in command of the thunder and lightning and rain who come after and do the big work, and get the credit of it.¹

As Simpson told it, the Populists were in “command of the thunder and lightning and rain,” but the observation was not inappropriate as applied to the relationship between Populism and progressivism in the broad sense of how they found expression in and affected American society. The Populist movement was followed by a progressive movement, and the progressives succeeded
in enacting several of the state and national reforms earlier championed by the Populists. It would be foolish, however, to reason that progressivism would not have come about without the previous occurrence of Populism, but it would be even more foolish to assume that the successes of the progressives owed nothing to the Populists.

Populism in Kansas, at any rate, first of all merits an appraisal on its own account. Too often it has been adjudged a failure without serious reflection. How does one measure success or failure? Is this done by weighing the number of legislative accomplishments? If so, what may be said for the Populists? As for labor legislation, they had given Kansas an antiblacklisting law, provided an eight-hour day for all work associated with the state’s various governmental units, required the regulation and weighing of coal at the mines, enacted legislation requiring the weekly payment of wages in lawful money, and passed several measures relating to the health and safety of the state’s mine workers. For her agricultural interests, they had placed restrictions upon the alien ownership of land, provided for the regulation of warehouses and the inspection, grading, weighing, and handling of grain, placed among the statutes a one-year real-estate redemption law, adopted a measure aimed at prohibiting combinations designed to prevent competition in the buying and selling of livestock, provided for the regulation of stockyards, and established a department for the inspection and weighing of grain, as well as a board of irrigation. As for legislation in the general interest, they had created the office of bank commissioner with power to regulate the activities of the state’s banking institutions, created a school-textbook commission, adopted the Australian ballot and had taken steps to minimize corrupt practices in elections, created a court of visitation to regulate railroads operating within the state, and they had written antitrust legislation into the books.

True, several of these measures owed as much to Republicans as Populists, and some of the legislation, the antitrust and alien-land ownership measures for example, also proved ineffective, or, like the court of visitation, were invalidated by the courts. If one minimizes the odds that were stacked against them, the
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record may seem less than outstanding, but who is to say that even these measures would have been adopted within the same time period had there been no Populist movement? How does one measure the party’s impact, moreover, on the administration of state and local government? Unquestionably, the party provided a necessary outlet which enabled an aroused discontent to be channeled in a constructive manner, while at the same time providing a distraught people with hope and a new sense of identity with their government.

When it is recalled that Populists never, at any point, constituted a majority of the Kansas electorate, even their few legislative accomplishments seem remarkable; but this was not the whole of their accomplishment, probably not even their most significant contribution. Populism’s greatest bequest, on the national and state levels, was a positive educational experience, which can no more readily be measured nor denied than the influence of a great teacher.

This was the conclusion of many of the Populists themselves. As early as 1895 Annie Diggs made that observation regarding the work of the Populist congressional delegations. She stated that Populism could not have “achieved such widespread and enormous success” in its effort “to educate the people” in any “other capacity.” “Had it not been for the ubiquitous Populist in the house and the senate, ready to interject questions, ready to puncture pompous bubbles, ready to tersely and clearly state his common-sense solution of national problems—had it not been for four years of persistent, patient effort of this sort, the country would be in far darker, denser ignorance than it now is.” She went on to write that it was “most amazing how dense was the ignorance of congressmen on all theories and all facts pertaining to the newer political economy. But few members of congress had any inkling of economics later than Adam Smith, and their acquaintance with that out-of-date writer was overlapped with . . . traditions and moss-backed fallacies.”

In 1901 Annie Diggs insisted that Populism’s achievements had been “tremendous and potential.” They were “vitalizing influences which ramify throughout the entire national structure.”
The party, she added, had “hooted the tariff off the stage”; it had brought the money question to the front; and it had “furnished the country the story of the formation of trusts and combines,” helping to focus attention on that vital issue.  

Annie Diggs certainly had figured prominently in that undertaking, and she persisted in that effort until her death in 1916. In a 1907 interview she conceded that the Populist party was a thing of the past but stated that she was not sure she was “sorry.” “It wasn’t the name particularly that I cared about. It was the principles . . . we fought for. ‘Clodhoppers’ or anything would have served the purpose just as well. But have you noticed . . . the things we asked for and . . . the policies we advocated are not in the least bit dead?” The following year she was interviewed again just before moving from Kansas to New York. She was going East to live with her son and to engage in “the old line of work.” The reporter asked if this meant her efforts would again have a political outlet? She replied, rather emphatically: “Indeed no! I am done with party politics forever.” She insisted that “Real reform must come now through the education of the people. Partisan organizations are always cowardly. . . . But once a strong public sentiment is created for any reform both the old parties will jump at the chance to work them out in legislation. Well, I am going to New York to help create sentiment that will demand these reforms.” The reporter then observed that Populist principles were apparently becoming respectable, to which Annie Diggs responded: “And don’t you remember how the press denounced us as traitors and rebel sympathizers and Anarchists? How they twitted us with Judge Doster’s expression that ‘the right of the user is paramount to the right of the owner?’ and declared that we wanted to confiscate everybody’s property.” Just as quickly she stated that it was “worth all that to know now that we were right and that this good old world regards us in a different light as it comes to understand that many of the issues so crudely advocated were really safe and sane progressive measures.”  

Asked what had become of her co-workers in the reform cause, Mrs. Diggs remarked that “death had taken many” but some were still active in politics. “So far as I know all of them
are just as firm in their Populist convictions as in former days, although they are now members of some other party. 6

Old age was indeed overtaking the former leaders of Kansas Populism. The major leadership’s median age of forty-six in 1890 meant a median age of sixty-six in 1910, the point at which the progressive movement had blossomed throughout the nation. Those who survived into the progressive era and beyond were, on the whole, “firm in their Populist convictions,” as Annie Diggs observed, but there was as much diversity in interpretation and application of those convictions as there had been from the beginning.

After his defeat in 1898, Jerry Simpson had published a newspaper for a brief period, appropriately entitled Jerry Simpson’s Bayonet. This verbal sword was used most effectively by Simpson and his editorial assistants to revenge the scurrilous attack that had been waged against the congressman for eight years; it was also used, but much less effectively, to keep the issue of reform before the people and to prepare the way for Simpson’s anticipated return to politics. 6

But that day never came. Soon after attempting, unsuccessfully, to obtain a senatorial indorsement from the Fusion convention of 1900, Jerry Simpson signed on as a railroad land agent and moved to the territory of New Mexico, where he also renewed his ranching activities. He returned to Kansas in 1905, just a few months before his death in Wichita in October of that year, and momentarily became something of an attraction to the press. One reporter noted that he was the “same old Jerry. The years have mellowed him somewhat, have dimmed the fire, but he is still possessed of that wonderful vein of sardonic humor, and still enjoys keenly the discomfiture of his old-time rivals.” 7 Another recorded the following Simpson commentary: “I met some of my old Republican opponents to-day and they said to me: ‘Oh, Jerry, you ought to be in Kansas now. Kansas is all Populist now.’ Yes, I said to them, you are the conservative business men of the state, and doubtless all wisdom is lodged with you, but you are just learning now what the farmers of the state knew fourteen years ago.” 8 Several months later he was quoted as saying: “Talk about
the Populist party being dead, when we have converted Roosevelt and Taft! If Roosevelt had made the speeches he is making now four years ago he could not have been elected constable in the most ignorant precinct on Long Island. They are all coming our way. They do not call themselves Populists, but a rose by any other name smells as sweet.”

Two months after having uttered these words Jerry Simpson was dead. The young and progressive Victor Murdock, the Republican incumbent of Simpson’s Big Seventh congressional seat, who would soon make a name for himself as an Insurgent, delivered Jerry Simpson’s funeral oration in Wichita on October 25, 1905. The symbolic relationship between Populism and Republican Insurgency, thus implied, was more than just coincidental.

John Davis had died four years earlier; G. C. Clemens survived Simpson by only one year. Both were active to the end. John Leedy took up mining for a short time in southeastern Kansas, then he moved to Canada where he worked and participated in politics until his death in 1935. Former Congressman William Baker was completely withdrawn from politics after 1897; before his death in 1910, however, he acknowledged the similarities between the doctrines of the Rooseveltian Insurgents and the Populists, although he stated that “Roosevelt is more radical than I.” John Grant Otis founded a cooperative colony out in Washington state named Equality and apparently associated with the Socialists until his death in 1916. John F. Willits also joined the Socialist party, waging several campaigns as its nominee for congress in Kansas after 1900. Percy Daniels, with great consistency of ideas, kept up his fight, writing letters and pamphlets and involving himself in newspaper debates almost up to the time of his death in 1916.

For others only a glimpse emerges from existing records: S. M. Scott, the boy wonder of the early organization period, went off to Texas and struck it rich in oil. S. H. Snider found a gold mine in New Mexico. Carl Vrooman subsequently served as assistant secretary of agriculture in President Wilson’s administration. Grant Wood Harrington became private secretary to
Democratic Governor George Hodges in 1913 and remained fairly active in Democratic politics until his death in 1952. P. P. Elder also remained active as a Democrat until poor health overtook him in 1908; the old campaigner held on though until 1914. Jerry Botkin, always a crusader, was the Democratic party's unsuccessful candidate for governor in 1908. In 1912 the ex-congressman also waged a personal campaign against Republican Arthur Capper in the latter's bid for the governorship of Kansas. "Overwork in a revival meeting" in 1921 was said to have led to his death in that year. A few, like John Dunsmore, managed to obtain leadership positions within the Republican party on the local level; an even smaller number, like Wesley Bennington, demonstrated more clearly than ever their qualifications for membership in the lunatic fringe. Bennington persisted in his advocacy of lost causes: in 1928 he was the vice-presidential nominee of the National party, which was "devoted to free money and the single tax, with its chief aim to have 'money at cost' issued to the people by the government just as postage stamps are now issued to the people."

Several years before his term had expired in 1903, Senator William A. Harris had appealed for progressive bipartisan support in his bid for reelection; this he failed to obtain. In 1906, however, the ex-senator was the Democratic and reform nominee for governor. Harris was, as ever, a popular figure. He had demonstrated, beyond question, his attachment to progressive principles, and he publicly confessed to considerable "admiration for President Roosevelt," who, according to Harris, had "adopted a great many" of the Democratic party's "best ideas." "In fact," said Harris, "there is a good deal of Democracy permeating through the ranks of the Republican party." Harris came close to winning that election—a mere 2,123 votes was the difference. Afterward, Harris resided in Chicago where he served as president of the American Shorthorn Breeders' Association until his death in 1909. He retained his interest in Kansas politics as before. Not long before his death he was advising fellow Democrats to support Insurgent Republicans who had taken up the cause of reform.

In his campaign for governor, W. A. Harris had had no
more loyal supporter than John Breidenthal, now a successful Kansas City businessman. Certainly, Breidenthal qualified as a progressive. By 1906 the former Populist chairman was calling himself an independent and was an enthusiastic supporter of President Theodore Roosevelt. It seems likely that Breidenthal, still relatively young, would have been drawn back into the political arena had it not been for his untimely death in 1910.16

John Breidenthal had viewed the course of events after 1900 as vindication for the Populist struggle of the previous decade. This was probably the feeling of all surviving Populist leaders. For certain it was William A. Peffer's attitude. In 1903 Peffer stated: "Day by day I see our principles growing in both old parties." He commended the leadership of Bryan and Roosevelt, but he believed the president had "shown a better capacity for applying the principles of Populism . . . ."17 In 1907 he was quoted as saying: "The country now hotly demands legislation it abused me for advocating."18 With each passing year he was even more pleased with events. When he returned to Topeka from Washington, D.C., in April, 1911, after an absence of nine years, during which time he had been concerned mainly with the preparation of an index for the Congressional Record, Peffer stated that he could "derive great entertainment from the present trend of political ideals and policies." Before his death in 1912, the ex-senator proudly classified himself as an "insurgent" and said it was "refreshing to hear the leaders in Congress going over the very things we were discussing years ago."19

Predictably, perhaps, Mary Elizabeth Lease hopped aboard the progressive bandwagon in New York as it gained momentum. She had been looking for a Napoleon "to liberate" the "industrial world" ever since 1895.20 In 1904 she seemed to have found him. In an interview she indicated that she saw Theodore Roosevelt as a "man of destiny, an instrument in God's hands, to send the gift of human liberty to the far off islands of the sea and to give America the proud place of the foremost of the nations that inhabit the face of the earth."21 Obviously, it was President Roosevelt's aggressive foreign policy that had won Mrs. Lease's admiration; she had long since abandoned any real commitment
to social reform. But by 1914 the impulse had become irresistible; she had to speak out. Progressives, she stated, have "adopted our platform, clause by clause, plank by plank." To prove it, "Note the list of reforms which we advocated which are coming into reality. Direct election of senators is assured. Public utilities are gradually being removed from the hands of the few and placed under control of the people who use them. Woman suffrage is now almost a national issue. Prohibition, thank God, is spreading across the country like wildfire." Then, in that unmistakable Lease style, she said: "Brother, the times are propitious. The seed we sowed out in Kansas did not fall on barren ground."

Whether the former Kansas spellbinder took to the hustings again is not clear. She did live on to 1933. During that period of time, with few other former Kansas Populist leaders around to contradict her, she made several rather bold claims concerning her role in the Populist movement.

By surviving until 1933, Mary Elizabeth Lease ranked with Frank Doster; but in practically all other categories the judge left the famous lady way behind. Right up to the very end Frank Doster reveled in playing the role of gadfly. As always, he was the seeker of new ideas; eager to puncture pompous bubbles; intent on solutions he believed would induce to the betterment of humanity.

Judge Doster's opponents (with not a little help from the judge himself) had created such a distorted and unrealistic image of him before he became chief justice that they were unjustifiably shocked and impressed by the sensible manner in which he performed his duties from 1897 to 1903—so much so in fact that there was some Republican support for his reelection in 1902. Not enough for victory, however, and the judge left the court in 1903 to become an assistant attorney for the Missouri Pacific Railroad.

Undoubtedly, Frank Doster moderated his views while on the court, but the change he experienced was not nearly as great as that in the public acceptance or tolerance of the point of view which his position represented. This was best demonstrated in the reception given an address he delivered to the Washburn College graduating class in Topeka in 1901. Among other things, the
judge stated that he would concede that "the animating spirit of many of the promoters and managers of the enterprises of the age is selfish, brutal, tyrannical in the extreme, and unchecked, it would speedily involve us in industrial serfdom, but the methods of combination, organization and system which it must of necessity adopt are the methods of social integration which will inevitably widen and strengthen into the legalized state called collectivism." He went on to say that he had "no fear of the permanency of trusts and combinations. The most valuable and comforting lesson that has been taught us was that they were heterogeneous elements which would presently coalesce into the perfect state." The editor of the Topeka Capital liked the tone of Doster's address but deplored its "socialistic implications." As the Capital saw it, Doster had taken "high ground." In this address, it continued, "There is no appeal to meanness, selfishness, prejudice, passion or any of the lower class of sensibilities." Frank Doster had never employed the "lower class of sensibilities"; the tone was basically the same; the public ear had simply become more attuned to the particular note he had sounded.

Frank Doster affiliated with the Democratic party after he left the state supreme court. Unlike many of his former Populist colleagues, the judge remained for some time quite skeptical about the extent of the G.O.P.'s conversion to reform. In a letter written in 1908, he stated that "the Republican Party has not broken its alliance with the predatory wealth of the country. Its pretensions in that respect are a mere lip proclamation. Among all the influential leaders of the Republican Party, those who have declared their independence of the special interests may be counted on the fingers of one hand." Only "one conspicuous Republican," President Theodore Roosevelt, had "even made the pretense of throwing down the gauntlet to the buccaneers of industrial life . . . ." Beyond that, only "one other man of more than local or secondary prominence and influence has volunteered for a tilt in the tournament with the knights of commercial outlawry—Senator LaFollette." All the others who affected "a desire to be arrayed in their class" were merely "timid" imitators. "With the two exceptions named there is not one of them who for effectiveness of warfare
has armed himself with more than a squirt-gun and who is not peering furtively around the corner to assure himself of safety.”

By 1910 Doster’s views on this subject had changed.

Take the present day insurgent Republican, or as he likes to style himself, “progressive” Republican. I should think he would be ashamed to look an old-time Populist in the face. Excepting some of the Populist propositions for currency reform, and those are not now matters in issue, and excepting public ownership of the railroads, there isn’t a plank in the Populist platforms of the 90s but has been bodily and brazenly appropriated as cardinal tenets of faith by the Kansas insurgent Republicans . . .

The truth of the matter is, said Doster, “We have been sandbagged” and by “men who for twenty years had been professing lofty scorn of our political possessions.”

He hastened to add that he did not want anyone to misinterpret his meaning. “I am not condemning this tardy acceptance of Populistic doctrine by Republican leaders and platform makers. On the contrary, I rejoice in it.”

Doster went on to state that he observed “an occasional, though grudging, acknowledgment that the Populist party was a sort of John the Baptist to the new faith, but it is generally coupled with some animadversion tending in the whole to discredit rather than praise.” In particular, said Doster, the new champions of reform were saying that Populist leaders had not been sincere and had not made an honest effort to enact these reforms. His answer to that was: “it is a lie, put forth to break the force of the fact that every article in the [Insurgent] Republican creed of today is of Populist origin, and would have been enacted into law but for that campaign of ridicule, vilification and abuse without parallel in the political history of the state, that was waged by many of the very men who now profess belief in the same principles.”

Doster overstated his case, but he made a valid and meaningful observation regarding Populism’s misfortunes. The ridicule, vilification, and abuse he mentioned did occur, and it was devastating. Why it occurred and why it was effective cannot of
course be explained in a few sentences. The answer really includes the whole of this study and more. The primary obstacle to Populist success, however, in Kansas and probably even more so throughout the nation, had been what for lack of better terms must be called a negative climate of opinion. The most antagonistic part of that prevailing attitude would have to be that complex of ideas designated as social Darwinism, which applied the "kiss of death" to this agrarian movement from the beginning by enabling or causing it to be stigmatized as retrogressive.

It was all but axiomatic among the influential, business-minded segment of late nineteenth-century society that nothing progressive could possibly emanate from the laboring classes of the farm or factory. The Populist party leadership in Kansas was severely handicapped by that attitude, despite the rather extraordinary quality and predominantly middle-class origins and associations of that leadership.

But of course Kansas Populism's difficulties cannot all be attributed to this one factor. Although by no means unrelated, there were formidable problems deriving from the character of the leadership and the followship itself. The greatest handicaps afflicting the rank and file stem from its third-party minority status and the spasmodic motivation of economic discontent. As for the leadership, it rated high by most tests of leadership characteristics. Exceptions have been noted, but as a group the Populist leaders in Kansas demonstrated a high degree of sensitivity to the direction of social and industrial tendencies of their society; they were acutely perceptive in gauging the possible courses of community action; and they were unsurpassed in their ability to give dramatic expression to the sentiments or interests of a significant segment of the Kansas populace. Their greatest shortcoming would have to be their inability to reconcile divergent groups in pursuit of common goals. In all fairness, though, it must be said that these leaders were laboring under extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

As political innovators the leaders could make no great claims for themselves. But for them there was innovation aplenty in the implementation of the nation's unfulfilled democratic ideals in the new industrial age of the late nineteenth century. These
leaders did indeed concern themselves with this problem, and in the dialogue which they conducted, in the program which they advanced, they assisted in launching a progressive quest that continues into the twentieth century.

In the context of their period of origin, it was not Populist principles that were retrogressive—merely the fact that they were championed by and in the name of farmers and laborers. The path to reform could be made much smoother almost overnight if these same principles were embraced by urban, middle-class spokesmen and championed in the name of the middle class. That this change did indeed occur was never more aptly demonstrated within the context of Kansas politics than by this William Allen White editorial that appeared in the December 14, 1906, edition of the Emporia Gazette:

Ten years ago this great organ of reform wrote a piece entitled “What is the Matter with Kansas?” In it great sport was made of a perfectly honest gentleman of unusual legal ability who happened to be running for chief justice of the Supreme Court of this state, because he said in effect that “the rights of the user are paramount to the rights of the owner.” Those were paleozoic times; how far the world has moved since then. This paper was wrong in those days and Judge Doster was right; but he was too early in the season and his views got frost bitten. This is a funny world. About all we can do is to move with it.
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