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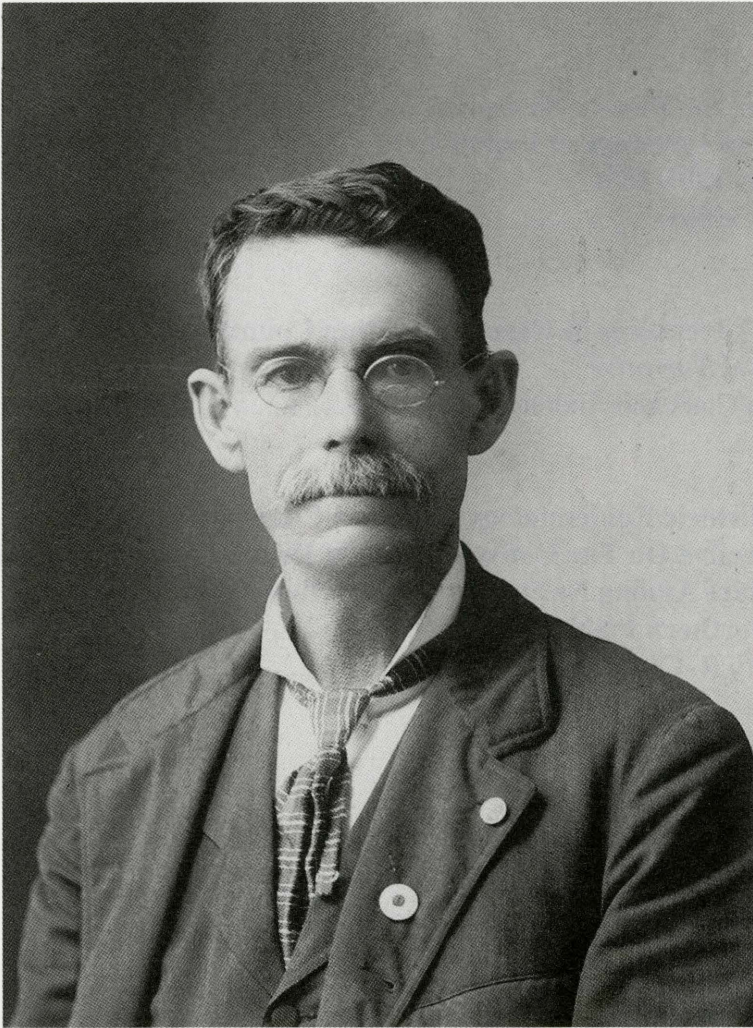


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“Sockless” Jerry Simpson

Waving the Bloody Newsprint: Partisan Coverage of Populism in Ellis County, Kansas 1891-1896

By
Brian Gribben

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, a new pugilist in the arena of democracy threatened traditional dual-party politics in rural America. What began as an agrarian lobby soon combined with the remnants of single-issue parties from the recent past and manifested itself in the Populist, or People's Party (both supporters and critics would use the two terms interchangeably). During its brief existence, the People's Party captured the imagination of both the downtrodden and idealist and made considerable gains on the state and federal level before imploding like a political nova after the election of 1896. How then did the established politicians and their acolytes react to the upstart that threatened to siphon off their voting base and challenge their ideology? In Kansas, where the People's Party made significant inroads, one can ascertain such a reaction by examining the tone, style, and frequency in which Populist activities were reported and attacked. Specifically the partisan *Republican* of Hays, edited by George P. Griffith, reflected the fortunes of its own Republican Party and the perceived menace posed by the People's Party during the latter's heyday from 1891 to 1896 in such a fashion.

The creation of the People's Party did not occur in a vacuum. Economic inequality had widened during the Gilded Age to the extent that alternatives to capitalism (or at least modifications to the current system) found an audience in the factories of the Northeast as well as the hardscrabble areas of the South and West. Particularly in the Middle West, the demand for commercial crops had prompted farmers to leverage their property in order to purchase the additional land and machinery needed to turn a profit. However, poor growing conditions, fluctuating grain prices, heavy taxation, and the railroads' high shipping rates drove most farmers into debt, including a large number of Kansans.

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O. Gene Clanton writes, “By 1890 over sixty percent of the taxable acres of the state [Kansas] were burdened with a mortgage, a figure exceeded by no other state.”¹ Neither the Republican Party (which had dominated the political landscape in Kansas since statehood) nor the Democrats provided any relief for their struggling constituents. Lobbying efforts by the Farmers’ Alliance (an outgrowth of the Grange and Greenback movement) failed to compel either major party to address their grievances, debt relief and government ownership of the railroads foremost among them. By 1890, this frustration culminated in the creation of the People’s Party.²

Initially, George Griffith and his *Republican* seemed hesitant to attack the People’s Party outright, choosing instead to ignore its existence as a political entity despite the election of a sizable number of Populists to the state legislature in 1890. In addition, Kansas sent Populists Ben Clover, William Baker, John Grant Otis, and Jerry Simpson to the United States House of Representatives that same year. With the legislature’s bipartisan elevation of William A. Peffer to the US Senate, Kansas became the epicenter of Populist politics.³ Instead of acknowledging this, the paper referred to the party or its adherents as representing the Farmers’ Alliance and seemingly sought reconciliation with the disaffected members. This included the printing of favorable (or at least neutral) articles directed toward the agrarian community. The *Republican* went so far as to reprint an interview Secretary of Agriculture Jeremiah McLain Rusk gave to the *North American Review* in 1891 in which the secretary appeared to defend the farmer. In addition, Rusk addressed critics of the burgeoning movement claiming, “For the past twenty five [sic] years you have been giving the farmer and his needs little or no thought: you have been letting agriculture take care of itself and him. . . . Is it surprising then, that, as the result of your selfishness, the farmer should be indisposed to trust anyone but himself?”⁴ When unable to provide news items that were conciliatory, the *Republican* attempted to weaken the People’s Party indirectly by downplaying the pervasiveness of some of its chief concerns. Often, the articles were rife with testimonials from disassociated Populist constituents or

¹ O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969), 28.

² Brian V. Tittel, “A Tempest in Prairie Politics: The Rise of Populism in Ellis County, Kansas” (MA thesis, Fort Hays State University, 1992), 4.

³ Clanton, 87-90.

⁴ *Republican*, 4 April 1891.

authoritative fallacies such as one item entitled merely "The Situation." In response to rumors that Kansas farmers were insolvent and facing ruin, the *Republican* cited former Kansas Governor Samuel J. Crawford who assured both the public and the banking industry that the loans taken out by Kansas farmers were "just as good as government bonds." Crawford concluded by dismissing calls for debt relief, asserting that members of the Farmers' Alliance (rather than Populists) were "practical farmers, and just as honest and honorable in their dealing as any other class of citizen. They would spurn the thought of not paying their debts or an insinuation that they are in favor of repudiation."⁵ As the spring wore on, the benign coverage of the Farmers' Alliance and its activities continued. The proposed cooperative purchase of a flouring mill available exclusively to members of the Knights of Labor and Farmers' Alliance, as well as to unaffiliated farmers failed to incur the wrath of the *Republican*.⁶ Only months later, the paper would likely have labeled such a project as subversive and socialist in nature.

The assuaging tone of the *Republican* shifted somewhat later that month. In late May, following the Populists' national convention in Cincinnati (which the *Republican* gleefully related was not truly national as the absence of several state delegations negated that designation), the paper announced that the People's Party's platform was "composed of such planks as free silver, the eight hour system, [and] endorses the scheme of the government loaning money on farm products at 2 per cent annum [sic]." In the words of Griffith, the platform was "a free for all and will not receive the endorsement of intelligent farmers."⁷ Considering that most partisan newspapers of the era reveled in the venomous attacks towards their political opposition, the condescending coverage of the Populist's convention seemed almost objective in comparison. However, the patronizing rhetoric of the *Republican* would soon intensify, reaching antagonistic levels more in line with the common journalistic practices of the period.

With the advent of the People's Party in Ellis County (still only alluded to as "the third party" or the more general Farmers' Alliance), coverage in the *Republican* took on a more strident edge often resorting to personal attacks. Reporting on the speeches given at a Farmers'

⁵ *Republican*, 18 April 1891.

⁶ *Republican*, 9 May 1891.

⁷ *Republican*, 23 May 1891.

Alliance picnic in June, the paper portrayed the orators as disgruntled rejects from the Republican Party unable to obtain patronage in the G.O.P. Griffith depicted one of the speakers as a seditious agitator. He wrote that a German speaker from Ellis had "said that the constitution of the United States was rotten. . . . [And] he was brought here to get the Russians stirred up."⁸ Unnerved perhaps, by the momentum garnered by its new adversary, the *Republican* laid its concerns regarding the People's Party bare for public ingestion in a rather paranoid analysis in its June 27 edition. Griffith claimed that "The scheme to steal republican votes for a third party in the republican states of the west while the democrats keep the south solid, as usual, is rather too transparent to succeed."⁹

Cabalist theories aside, throughout the summer the *Republican* featured reports of infighting within the People's Party, members of the Farmers' Alliance gaining Republican nominations for political office, and, on occasion, actual critiques of the Populist platform (although radical accusations often replaced specific details regarding Populist policies). In reference to their proposal for government ownership of the railroads, the *Republican* claimed that such an endeavor would burden the United States with a debt of five and one half million dollars. In addition, such an undertaking would entail the creation of two million bureaucratic positions, all of whom, the paper claimed, would be beholden to the party that instigated their formation. As such, the *Republican* warned, "The party in power when this stupendous change occurred could perpetuate itself forever."¹⁰ For the remainder of 1891, the *Republican* continued to predict the imminent demise of the People's Party citing, "They are failing to convince the farmers that the land loan and sub treasury schemes are what they need."¹¹ Despite his assertions to the contrary, based on the ferocity and frequency of his attacks, as well as his stated belief that populism was a Democrat ploy meant to weaken the G.O.P, Griffith certainly believed that the People's Party posed a significant threat to Republican dominance in Kansas.

Griffith's contempt for the People's Party and his contention that they were in league with the Democrats did not wane with the onset of 1892. As the Populists edged closer to establishing a truly national

⁸ *Republican*, 13 June 1891.

⁹ *Republican*, 27 June 1891.

¹⁰ *Republican*, 4 July 1891.

¹¹ *Republican*, 5 September 1891.

party, the *Kansas City Star's* coverage of their St. Louis Conference (as published in the *Republican*) presented a bleaker picture. Rather than report that the delegates had chosen a committee to help plan the Party's national convention in Omaha, critics instead exaggerated the structured chaos that usually accompanied such events, substituting pandemonium for enthusiasm and implying that the convention ignored issues of reform in favor of seeking financial benefaction. The *Star* wrote, "The two 'old parties' must be maintained for some time longer. The country cannot do without them while such palpable frauds as this St. Louis combination exist."¹²

Months after the conference, Griffith perpetuated this corrupt interpretation of the People's Party by finally elaborating on his long touted conspiracy theory. In the June 11 edition of the *Republican*, its editor claimed that Populist representatives had met with leaders from the Kansas Democratic Party in Kansas City earlier in the week. During their clandestine meeting, Griffith reported that "the 'fixers' [agreed] to swing the [People's] party into line with the democrats." In the coming election, he explained, the two parties would divvy up the congressional, judicial, and statewide offices at the expense of the Republican Party.¹³ Although not as nefarious and widespread as Griffith suggested, there appears to be some basis for his allegations as later events seemed to prove. A Democratic operative, David Overmeyer, maintained that he had met with leaders from both parties in Cottonwood Falls the week in question and devised a similar strategy designed to reduce the Republican's electoral votes in the state.¹⁴ Regardless of its authenticity, the alleged scheme would play out to mixed results.

As the election of 1892 neared, the *Republican's* inflammatory rhetoric towards the People's Party increased exponentially. Often, Griffith utilized the words of former members to discredit the party and convince its rural supporters of its corruption. In July, the newspaper published a portion of former Farmers' Alliance President Frank McGrath's resignation letter in which McGrath voiced his disillusionment with the alliance and the People's Party. The letter read in part, "The people's party has absorbed the alliance and nullified its usefulness. The evidences [sic] are numerous in the conventions held this year that the middlemen, jackleg lawyers and town loafers are more influential

¹² *Republican*, 27 February 1892.

¹³ *Republican*, 11 June 1892.

¹⁴ Clanton, 114-6.

in directing and controlling the people's party than farmers."¹⁵ The *Republican's* attempts to dissuade Ellis County voters from supporting what it deemed "the combination" would prove for naught. Shortly after the election, the paper announced Grover Cleveland's victory as well as the likelihood that the Republican Party had lost the governorship, the state senate, and three congressional seats. Griffith attributed the losses to the diluted G.O.P. base, faulting the People's Party and the Prohibitionist Party. The newspaper's election analysis was terse and reeked of Midwestern stoicism. It read, "Cleveland is elected and the county gone to the combination. The REPUBLICAN will continue to circulate and its politics will remain the same."¹⁶

Following the election, controversy erupted in the state legislature. Both the Populists and the Republicans claimed they held a majority in the House of Representatives citing discrepancies in certification. While the Kansas State Supreme Court decided the matter, both parties operated their own House. Tensions ran high as attempts to elect a new senator resulted in an altercation between the two presumptive legislative bodies. On February 15, the Republican delegation evicted the Populists from Representative Hall, taking possession of the building. The state militia, called out by the Populist Governor Lorenzo Lewelling in response to the occupation, consisted of loyal Republicans and refused to evict their brethren. Lewelling eventually mediated an end to the standoff that sufficed until the court ruled in favor of the Republicans on February 28.¹⁷

As the drama unfolded in Topeka, the *Republican's* coverage of the incident as well as the performance of the newly elected congressmen remained decidedly biased. According to Griffith, the Republican members of the State House were hard at work and ready to extend their hand across the aisle, while the Populists (including Governor Lewelling) remained idle and indecisive.¹⁸ Meanwhile in Washington, the paper claimed, Populist congressmen lined their pockets with funds allocated toward their official correspondence. The alleged malfeasance prompted Griffith to declare that through the actions of its agents the reform movement had "surpassed the point when it was merely farcical and had become a barefaced imposture."¹⁹ However, the validity of

¹⁵ *Republican*, 2 July 1892.

¹⁶ *Republican*, 12 November 1892.

¹⁷ Clanton, 133-6.

¹⁸ *Republican*, 21 January 1893.

¹⁹ *Republican*, 11 February 1893.

Griffith's accusations remained indiscernible and obviously stem from his political affiliation.

Victories in the county elections of 1893 seemed to boost the confidence of Kansas Republicans, exhibited by Griffith's assertion that Populist influence was on the decline. In Ellis County, Republicans won four of the county offices (sheriff, treasurer, register of deeds, and county commissioner). Surprisingly, the *Republican* made little note of the nation's economic state and merely attributed the panic to the Cleveland Administration without engaging in its usually hyperbole. However, the paper did make bold predictions for its party's success the following year, linking electoral gains with certain financial rejuvenation.²⁰ That November, Kansas voters fulfilled Griffith's prophecy, at least in part.

In all probability, anger and frustration stemming from the financial panic contributed to the Republican landslide in 1894 more so than the quality of their candidates or the ineptness of the Populist-Democratic incumbents. Griffith did wage a personal campaign against Lewelling over charges of alleged graft, although its impact on the governor's race seemed negligible. At any rate, the editor was able to declare "Kansas Redeemed" as the *Republican* celebrated victories in the gubernatorial race, five out of Kansas's six congressional seats, and a distinct majority in the Kansas House of Representatives.²¹ While the People's Party still controlled the state senate, infighting erupted in 1895 over the Populists' relationship with the Democratic Party and the proposed endorsement of a Free Silver plank in their party platform.²² During the unrest the *Republican* engaged in its usual mockery of the party but, realizing that the pendulum had swung back in the Republican Party's favor, did so with a less acerbic tone. The Populists had enough to worry about as the party's future lay in doubt. Fearing that Free Silver would overshadow other issues and thus narrow the appeal of the People's Party, the *Topeka Advocate*, itself a Populist newspaper, wrote, "If Populism means nothing more than free coinage of silver, there is no excuse for the existence of such a party."²³ The summer of 1896 proved to be a decisive moment in the short history of the People's Party.

After William Jennings Bryan accepted the Democratic Party's presidential nomination and endorsed bimetallism in such an eloquent

²⁰ *Republican*, 11 November 1893.

²¹ *Republican*, 10 November 1894.

²² Clanton, 178-80.

²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

and Biblical fashion, the Populists had little choice but to follow suit and endorse the Nebraskan or risk losing the Free Silver faction of their own party. In Kansas, the People's Party and the Democrats agreed to nominate the same slate of candidates for the upcoming election, save for the vice-presidential slot. The nomination of Bryan and subsequent collusion solidified the alliance between the People's Party and the Democratic Party. However, Clanton suggests that the People's Party lost its identity in the process, if not its designation as a political party.²⁴

As the presidential election drew near, the *Republican* reverted to its old habits and attacked the Democrat-Populist contingent with renewed vigor. Throughout September, Griffith rallied against the "idiocy" of the "silverites," but in fairness provided a lengthy, well-reasoned repudiation of the issue in addition to his usual verbal barrage.²⁵ As for Bryan himself, Griffith asserted that the popularity of the "Boy Orator of the Platte" stemmed from the fanaticism of anarchists and socialists as opposed to the common working man.²⁶ William McKinley's defeat of Bryan and the Democrat-Populists in November softened the *Republican's* verbiage as Republican victories so often had in the past.

The tactics and style utilized by George Griffith in the *Republican* did not stand out from the other partisan newspapers operating during the apex of Kansas Populism. In a politically charged atmosphere where journalistic integrity was an uncommon notion and took a backseat to party loyalty, such partisanship is understandable if not desirable. Personal attacks, innuendo, backroom gossip, and outright lies were simply part of the landscape. However, in the case of the *Republican*, the prevalence of such tactics often reflected the strength of the People's Party or corresponded inversely to the G.O.P.'s own fortunes. Those on the receiving end of such attacks likely gave as well as they got. The real losers were the Kansas voters who were misinformed by party dogma or misled by unscrupulous party hacks.

²⁴ Clanton, 185-7.

²⁵ *Republican*, 5 September 1896.

²⁶ *Republican*, 10 October 1896.

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