

E.O. MEITZEN: AGRARIAN RADICAL IN TEXAS, 1855-1906

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INTRODUCTION

The relations of labor and capital present
for solution one of the most interesting
and important questions of the day.

La Grange Journal, April 28, 1887.
La Grange, Texas

E.O. Meitzen, an agrarian radical born on April 28, 1855, in Biegel, Fayette County, Texas, to German immigrants Otto and Jenny Meitzen, played an important role in spearheading efforts to promote a political alliance of farmers and workers from the 1880s to the 1920s. E.O.'s agrarian crusade, which included organizing the People's Party in Texas in 1892, eventually took him on a path to socialism. By studying the life and political career of this blacksmith, teacher, farmer, and newspaper editor from the rise of the Farmer's Alliance in the mid-1880s to his conversion to socialism in the early 1900s, we get a clearer understanding of the ideological vision of a populist who fought on behalf of workers and farmers for an alternative, more democratic America not dominated by big capital in the industrial age of the Robber Barons.

Meitzen's father, Otto, had participated in the German Revolution of 1848, but after the failure of the revolution and the counter-revolution that followed, the Meitzens fled to the United States. German immigrant 48ers, such as the Meitzens, brought with them democratic ideals forged during the revolution, and passed them

onto their children. For many, German democratic ideals blended naturally with the Jeffersonian ideals of republicanism that envisioned a nation run by independent artisans and yeoman farmers. Many Americans in rural areas such as southeast Texas held as a matter of faith their Jeffersonian ideals. E.O. combined his parents's political views with those of the Jeffersonian South as he participated in the numerous agrarian protest movements in Texas from the 1880s through the 1920s. In testifying before the U.S. Senate's Commission on Industrial Relations in 1916, he explained the family roots of his political philosophy: "I think that I inherited some of my revolutionary qualifications. I am not responsible for them. I can not help it."¹ For him, the agrarian militancy he displayed in his political career was an attempt to fulfill the promises of the American Revolution and the German Revolution of 1848.

Meitzen began his political career by voting for the Greenback Labor Party in 1884. Following the collapse of the Greenback Labor Party, agrarian radicals such as Meitzen put their efforts into building the Farmer's Alliance in order to address their economic grievances. At first, the Alliance was politically rooted in the Democratic Party. Meitzen joined and became a regional leader of the Democratic Party in Texas. However, as the Democratic Party proved rich on rhetoric but poor on meaningful action, many workers and farmers in the South grew frustrated with the "Party of Our Fathers." Meitzen, who as a leader of the Jeffersonian Democrats was part of a failed effort to reform the Democratic Party from within, was eventually expelled from the party.

¹ U.S. Congress, *Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1916), 9143.

The failure of the Democratic Party to respond meaningfully to the poor economic conditions of the post-Reconstruction South convinced Meitzen of the need for alternative political solutions. In 1892, he, along with the Jeffersonian Democrats and like-minded insurgent radicals in the Southern Farmers' Alliance, came together to form the People's Party of Texas.²

The populist movement shook the political and economic foundations of the United States as no movement had done before or has done since then. As the agrarian crusade grew, so, too, did Meitzen's role as a statewide leader of the People's Party. He ran on the Populist ticket for U.S. Congress once, and for statewide office twice. The populist movement proved to be short-lived, however, as the Democratic Party co-opted its message, and fusion rang the death knell of the People's Party in 1896.

Though the Populist era ended, the agrarian revolt did not; in fact, the distressed economic conditions that spawned it only worsened as more and more farmers slipped into the ranks of farm tenancy. In response, Meitzen and a number of former Populists helped to found the Socialist Party in Texas to address the political and economic demands of the state's workers and farmers. Running on a socialistic platform in 1904, Meitzen won the election for Lavaca County Judge. After losing his reelection bid in 1906, he helped to build the Texas Socialist Party into one of the largest sections of the Socialist Party in the country.

The Texas Socialist Party suffered the same fate as other radical organizations in the era of the First World War, however, when the wartime administration of

² *Dallas Morning News*, April 12, 1892.

Woodrow Wilson harassed and jailed radicals across the country. *The Rebel*, a Socialist newspaper begun by Meitzen and Tom Hickey, became the first newspaper suppressed by the U.S. Postal Service. Without the organizing tool of *The Rebel*, and with the jailing of a number of its leaders, the Texas Socialist Party rapidly collapsed. In order to avoid repression, Meitzen and his son, E.R., moved briefly to Minnesota, where they joined the socialist-based farmers' protest organization, the National Non-Partisan League. After a short period, the Meitzens returned to Texas to continue the agrarian revolt and build the Non-Partisan League in Texas.

Much of the historiography of the agrarian revolt in the South does not fully acknowledge the anti-capitalist critique of many of the rank-and-file members of the populist movement, or the continuity of agrarian protest from populism to socialism that Meitzen represents. The two most important works on Populism--John Hicks's *The Populist Revolt* (1931) and Lawrence Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (1976)--fail to include a significant number of rank-and-file Populists, like E.O. Meitzen, who sought to use the People's Party, not just to reform capitalism or create a multi-party electoral system, but to attack the system of capitalism itself. Goodwyn also downplays the significant farmer-laborer collaboration during the Populist era.

Matthew Hild's recent work, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth-Century South* (2007) convincingly argues that populism was not just a farmer's revolt but instead a farmer-labor movement with a thread of continuity running back to the Greenback Party. Hild briefly mentions E. O. Meitzen to demonstrate how some Populist

leaders joined the socialist movement. Roscoe Martin's early study of Texas populism--*The People's Party in Texas: A Study in Third Party Politics* (1933)--also briefly mentions E.O. Meitzen to show how some Populists continued the struggle as socialists. Martin also uses Meitzen's nominations as a Populist candidate for state comptroller in 1894 and 1896 to demonstrate Populist efforts to gain the support of German Americans in Texas.

One must go back to James Green's *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest 1895-1943* (1978) for a more in-depth discussion of the transition of radicals from populism to socialism in the Southwest. Green devotes the first chapter of his book to the transformation of many agrarian radicals, including Meitzen, into Socialists. However, the focus of Green's book is the Socialist phase of the agrarian revolt in the southwest in general. As a result, one learns only a little about Meitzen as a Socialist. Meitzen as a Socialist also appears in Neil Foley's *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (1997), but Foley's study is primarily concerned with the failure of interracial unity in the Texas Socialist Party and focuses more on Tom Hickey than Meitzen.

To date, no full-length study of Meitzen's political career has been written. Using newspapers owned and operated by Meitzen, other Populist and Socialist newspapers, and county, state, and federal records, this study seeks to provide a more in-depth look at one of the most important rank-and-file members of the Populist movement in Texas. In particular, it examines the forces that led to Meitzen's transition from the Democratic Party to the People's Party and then to the Socialist Party of America. By studying the political evolution of Meitzen, we gain a

broader understanding of agrarian militants in Texas from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century, including their relations with urban labor and their racial views at a time when Jim Crow customs and legal segregation of the races hampered unity within their movement.

CHAPTER ONE

The Radical Roots of E.O. Meitzen, 1848-1886

Standing on the decks of the brig, *Herschel*, off the Texas coast in January, 1850, Otto Meitzen had time to reflect on what the failure of the German democratic revolution of 1848 meant for his native land and his family's future in the United States of America. As a student at the University of Berlin, he had participated in the revolutionary wave that swept across Europe in 1848. A year later, in the wake of the failed revolution and the brutal counter-revolution that followed, he and his family fled aboard a ship bound for America. Meitzen's own hometown of Breslau had served as a hotbed of revolutionary action.¹

Inspired by the revolutionary victory of a new French republic in February, 1848, German nationalists had sought to create their own united German republic from the numerous German principalities. Long oppressed by their aristocratic rulers, the German people rose in revolt, demanding public participation in government and a democratic society. Liberal demands fueled the reformist aspirations of petty-bourgeois intellectuals in the large towns and university centers. For the working class, the economic crises of the 1840s had created a sense that a

¹ "A list of Passengers arrived from foreign countries at the Port of Galveston during the quarter ending March 31, 1850," National Archives and Records Administration, film M575, Reel 3; Frank W. Johnson, *A History of Texas and Texans* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1916), 1916; Frieda Meitzen Williams, "German Pioneers in Texas," *Frontier Times* (Bandera, Texas) 13, No. 1, (1935): 70.

new political and economic system could end their years of starvation and hardship. Meitzen's Breslau in the Silesia region represented one such working-class area.⁴

The Frankfurt National Assembly became the main organ for revolutionary change in the German speaking lands. As the revolution progressed, petty-bourgeois intellectuals soon dominated the assembly. When romantic ideals took root in the assembly over specific economic demands, the more radical and working-class elements of the revolution felt snubbed, and the national movement began to divide along regional, ethnic, and religious lines. The Prussian monarchy and its aristocratic allies, having been pushed to the edge, seized upon these divisions and began a brutal counter-revolution. Frederick Engels, who participated in the revolution, wrote that, "after bloody struggles and military executions, particularly in Silesia, feudalism was restored." A wave of reaction set in; clubs and associations were prohibited, the press restricted, and the civil service purged of liberal elements.⁵

Otto Meitzen, like many revolutionary German democrats, admired the U.S. Constitution, American voting rights, and studied the works of Thomas Jefferson. In the aftermath of 1848, thousands of Germans immigrated to the U.S., Otto Meitzen and his family among them. Fearful of being a victim of the reaction, and seeing a future of submission and servitude under a feudal yoke, he made the decision to leave the land of his birth.⁶

⁴ Hans Joachim Hahn, *The 1848 Revolutions in German-Speaking Europe* (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 18-19, 64.

⁵ Frederick Engels, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1977), 54.

⁶ Hahn, *The 1848 Revolutions in German-Speaking Europe*, 143, 186-188, 197.

In fleeing Prussian oppression, the Meitzens might have been drawn to Texas because of Otto's younger brother, William, who had settled in Fayetteville, Fayette County, during the winter of 1847. William Meitzen's immigration to Texas was organized by the Verein zum Schutze deutscher Einwanderer in Texas. The Verein was a group of wealthy and aristocratic Germans, "interested in overseas colonization for economic and philanthropic reasons."⁷ For \$240 a family, the Verein provided transportation to Texas, 320 acres for each family, provisions, credit, and the promise of public improvements to the settlement area. The Verein made its profits by maintaining ownership of one-half of the land in the settlement area. Between 1844 and 1846, the Verein brought 7,380 German immigrants to central Texas. Although the Verein went bankrupt in 1847, waves of German immigrants kept coming to central Texas until World War I.⁸

William originally planned to settle in the Verein colony of Fredericksburg. Along the way to Fredericksburg from Galveston, however, he encountered Joseph Biegel, who had received a land grant from the Mexican government in 1832 in what would become Fayette County. Beginning in 1839, Biegel began selling parcels of his land to German immigrants, creating the Biegel Settlement as the second German settlement in Texas. Biegel, who convinced William Meitzen not to continue on to Fredericksburg, sold him land at the Biegel Settlement.⁹

⁷ Translated from German, Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas; Terry G. Jordan, *German Seeds in Texas Soil. Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth-Century Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

After arriving in Galveston in 1850, Otto Meitzen and his family traveled by rail to Houston. Using the little money they had after quickly selling their home in the old country, the Meitzens obtained an ox-drawn wagon and headed just over 90 miles west of Houston to Biegel. At Biegel, the Meitzens obtained some land and began to farm.¹⁰

During the 1850s, Fayette County had a flourishing plantation economy based on corn, tobacco, wool, and cotton. In 1859, Fayette County produced 12,683 bales of cotton and 320,580 bushels of corn, making it one of the state leaders in both categories. Much of this production was based on the labor of the county's 3,786 slaves. As a testament to Fayette County's growth during this time, its population skyrocketed from 3,756 in 1850 to 11,604, including 3,786 slaves, in 1860.¹¹

In leaving Prussia and settling in Texas, the Meitzens had only left one political conflict but entered another. The issues of slavery and secession had Fayette County and the surrounding area deeply divided in the years preceding the Civil War. In Fayette County, the vote for secession was defeated by a count of 528 for and 626 against. The county's newly arrived German, Bohemian, and other immigrants, numbering 2,027, who in the main opposed slavery, out of a free population of 7,818, proved to be a deciding factor. In neighboring Lavaca County,

⁹ Leonie Rummel Weyland and Houston Wade, *An Early History of Fayette County* (La Grange, Texas: La Grange Journal, 1936), 56-57; Marjorie L. Williams, ed., *Fayette County: Past & Present*, privately printed 1976.

¹⁰ Paul C. Boethel, *The Big Guns of Fayette* (Austin: Von Boeckman-Jones Co., 1965), 79; Williams, "German Pioneers in Texas," 70-71.

¹¹ "FAYETTE COUNTY," in *Handbook of Texas Online*, [database online] (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, accessed February 13, 2007), available from <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/FF/hcF3.html>; Internet.

on the other hand, which had an immigrant population of only 25 out of 4,238 free citizens, there were 592 votes for and 36 against secession. In the following decade, however, German, Austrian, and Bohemian immigrants would transform the composition of Lavaca County much as they had in Fayette County.¹²

Well-educated and a machinist by trade, Otto decided to give farming a try, although his “knowledge of Greek did not help him in his struggles with the soil.”¹³ Not aiding the struggle was the drought and near drought conditions that affected the area from 1855 till 1860.¹⁴ These initial years of settlement and farming would be especially hard on Otto, his wife Jennie Holmgren Meitzen, and their young family, as it was for most immigrant settlers during the nineteenth century. Otto and Jennie’s three young children who came with them from Germany had all died by 1857. During this time, Edward Otto (commonly referred to as E.O.) was born on April 28, 1855, at Beigel. Through the years Otto and Jennie would have a total of sixteen children, although only five would reach adulthood.¹⁵

After nine years of struggle, Otto gave up farming. In 1859, he, in partnership with his brother William, started a mule-powered cotton gin, gristmill, and saw mill in Fayetteville. In 1860, the gin was changed to steam power. The following year

¹² Paul C. Boethel, *The History of Lavaca County*, 45; United States Census, *Census Reports, Eighth Census of the United States Taken in the year 1860*, in Historical Census Browser [database online] (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, accessed March 10, 2006), available from <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>; Internet.

¹³ Williams, “German Pioneers in Texas,” 71.

¹⁴ Paul C. Boethel, *The Lavacans* (Columbus, Texas: Butler Office Supply and Printing Company, 1991), 108.

¹⁵ Frieda Meitzen Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family* (Hallettsville, TX: np, 1958), 2-4.

would be defining time for the Meitzen brothers, and Southerners in general, as the Civil War engulfed the nation. The Union naval blockade of the Gulf coast cut off area farmers from their previous markets. Business at the mill came to a standstill. A wildly fluctuating Confederate currency only made matters worse.¹⁶ As his granddaughter later recounted, Otto, who could find no work, “sat reading many hours with his rawhide bottom chair tipped back and his head against the wall.”¹⁷ After four years of Civil War, the Meitzen brothers lost their investment and their mill operations went bust.¹⁸

During these years of struggling with the land and war, Jennie Meitzen worked hard to sustain and hold her family together, though her early background could hardly have prepared her for such privations. Jennie came from a well-off family with ties to Danish aristocracy. Despite her family’s disapproval of Otto, a young man with no money who refused to be baptized, she fell in love and married him at the age of nineteen in 1838. She stuck with him through the Revolution of Forty-Eight and when that failed, according to family lore, they made “their escape to the sailing vessel one jump ahead of the emperor’s bayonets.”¹⁹

While the farm and then the mill both struggled and failed, Jennie pursued other economic options to provide for the family. She sold cigars made out of tobacco that she grew herself. Jennie also taught at a school for German language

¹⁶ "FAYETTE COUNTY," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

¹⁷ Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family*, 13.

¹⁸ Johnson, *A History of Texas and Texans*, 1916.

¹⁹ Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family*, 3, 13, 28-29.

children, riding miles on horseback in order to do so. In addition, she carried out her regular responsibilities of cooking three meals a day, cleaning, and making clothing, soap, candles, and wurst. The family also made corn whiskey, which sold at local general stores.²⁰

Perhaps another factor contributing to the demise of the mill was the brothers' conflicting stances on the issue of secession. Frank Johnson, in *A History of Texas and Texans*, points out that Otto "was a Union man and against secession, but took no active part in the war that would offend his neighbors ... Following the close of hostilities he became a supporter of the Republican party and continued to vote for it during the rest of his career." William, though, sided with his adopted South and volunteered for the Confederate Army, quickly rising to the rank of captain.²¹

By the war's end, the elder Meitzen brothers seem to have come to amends in their differences over the war, but not enough so to go back into business together. William returned to Fayetteville, where he began farming and opened another mill of his own. Otto, financially ruined by the war, was forced to sell his home and enter into tenant farming.²²

E.O. Meitzen was only six years old when the war started. As he later put it, "During the war I was brought up, jerked up."²³ His daughter Frieda would later relate that her grandfather's young family during the war lived off of fish and wild

²⁰ Williams, "German Pioneers in Texas," 71.

²¹ Johnson, *A History of Texas and Texans*, 1916; Boethel, *The Big Guns of Fayette*, 79.

²² Boethel, *The Big Guns of Fayette*, 79.

²³ U.S. Congress, *Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony*, 9143.

game. Roasted acorns substituted for coffee, and sorghum, in place of sugar, was a delicacy. “Corn bread and cowpeas, a diet a German detested but forced to become accustomed to, were staples,” she explained.²⁴

A change in the agriculture mode of Lavaca County after the Civil War encouraged many German immigrants to settle in the county. Prior to the Civil War stock raising, along with the growing of cotton and corn, made up the base of Lavaca County’s economy.²⁵ By the 1880s, increased land values and low beef prices forced cattle raisers to divide up their land and sell it to farmers.²⁶ Germans, Austrians, and Czechs moved into the county and formed their own farming communities of Breslau, Vienna, Witting, Glecker, and Moravia. However, making a living off the land proved not to be an easy task for these new immigrants.

The years following the war were years of transition for the Meitzens and the people of Fayette and Lavaca counties. At the age of fifteen, with little schooling, E.O. Meitzen proved fortunate enough to escape the poverty of his family’s tenant farm and become an apprentice blacksmith. Five years later, in 1875, he opened a blacksmith shop of his own in Cistern, Fayette County. During this time Reconstruction passed with little incident in Fayette and Lavaca counties with Federal troops only briefly stationed in both counties. By this time many poor

²⁴ Williams, “German Pioneers in Texas,” 71.

²⁵ Boethel, *The History of Lavaca County*, 94-95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

Southerners who initially supported secession had grown tired of, as a saying of the time went, “a poor man’s war for a rich man’s nigger.”²⁷

Blacksmithing was so profitable for E.O. that he and his siblings were able to help their father buy back his old home. Otto Meitzen lived most of the remainder of his days there until he died at E.O.’s home near Novohrad in Lavaca County on April 22, 1882. E.O.’s mother, Jennie, had died on March 17, 1877, in Biegel. However, after ten years of blacksmithing in 1880, E.O. received a spinal injury while “shoeing an unruly horse,” forcing him to quit the trade.²⁸

On October 21, 1877, E.O. married Johanna Whilemena Augustina Kettner, who was born on January 9, 1858, in the German land of Coswig, Anhalt. Her father was a cabinetmaker, and her family settled in southeast Texas shortly after the Meitzens. E.O. and Johanne would have a total of ten children together, with seven reaching adulthood.²⁹

While recovering from his spinal injury, Meitzen had time to in engage in a period of reading and study oft denied him as a young boy. He had been known since childhood as one with an avid desire for knowledge. He read whatever books, pamphlets, and newspapers he could obtain, but was denied a regular formal education because of the disorganization of the area school system during the years

²⁷ *The Rebel*, July, 25, 1914; Boethel, *The Lavacans*, 66.; "FAYETTE COUNTY," *Handbook of Texas Online*; "LAVACA COUNTY," *Handbook of Texas Online*; *Hallettsville Herald*, August 11, 1892.

²⁸ Johnson, *A History of Texas and Texans*, 1916; Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family*, 2; U.S. Congress, *Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony*, 9142; Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family*, 3.

²⁹ Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family*, 1-11.

of war and Reconstruction that marked his childhood. Realizing that as a consequence of his injury he would need a lighter form of work, Meitzen studied to become a schoolteacher.³⁰

After passing his teacher's exam, Meitzen then took a second grade teaching position at Novohrad in Lavaca County. As he later recalled about his exam, "In those days it was a very easy matter. It took me fifteen minutes to be examined. I was examined by a lawyer who did not care whether I taught school or not, or whether I knew anything or not."³¹ As he put it, this is when his own schooling began, and he "had a race keeping ahead of the boys who were right behind me."³²

After three years of teaching in Novohrad, Meitzen, using the money he had saved while blacksmithing, bought some land in Cistern in order to give farming a try. While farming, Meitzen kept his teaching credentials up to date when the state began to enforce more stringent teaching standards. He passed the new teaching exam and secured a first-grade teaching certificate.³³

For Meitzen and other Southern farmers still attempting to recover from the war years, the depression of 1873 hit especially hard. The growth of railroads had brought farmers into the modern world of finance and connected them to the world market. Southern yeomen began "the historic shift from self-sufficiency to cotton

³⁰ Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family 4; The Rebel*, July 25, 1914; U.S. Congress, *Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony*, 9142.

³¹ *Ibid*, 9142.

³² *Ibid.*, 9143.

³³ *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914.

speculation.”³⁴ While hoping for an increased standard of living, farmers instead were now vulnerable to world market fluctuations. Cotton prices declined 23 percent from July, 1873, to January, 1874. Before 1875, cotton prices had varied from \$.12 to \$.18 per pound. However, in 1875, cotton prices fell to \$.11 per pound. With cotton generally costing \$.05 to \$.08 per pound to produce, many farmers were now unable to meet their current needs or purchase the supplies needed for the following year’s crop. Cotton prices did not rise above the 1875 levels for the rest of the century. Many farmers fell into debt, losing their land and independence.³⁵

Meitzen was not exempt from the economic crisis facing farmers. He described his experience farming as “wonderful,” but after only three years, he found that agriculture was not profitable and that he could make a better living solely from teaching. The 1884 planting season had been particularly difficult; in fact, the first planting did not take. After a second planting, a storm caused damage to the crop. In September, 1884, Meitzen took a job teaching first grade teaching in Cistern, attempting to farm as well as teach, but he soon gave up on farming.³⁶

Teaching provided Meitzen a means to provide for his family, but it also fed his continued desire for knowledge and shaped his political thought. As he later

³⁴ Robert C. McMath, Jr, *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 39.

³⁵ Warren M. Pearsons, Pierson M. Tuttle, and Edwin Frickey, “Business and Financial Conditions Following the Civil War in the United States,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 2, Supplement 2 (July, 1920), 17; Donna A. Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Farmers Alliance and People’s Party in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 50-51; Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 123.

³⁶ U.S. Congress, *Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony*, 9143., *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914; *La Grange Journal*, May 8, June 5, September 18, 1884.

stated, “Through the school teaching profession, I became interested in various lines of thought that I never thought of before.”³⁷ These new lines of thought, which resonated with his experiences as a farmer and as the son of a tenant farmer, led Meitzen to disregard the established Democratic and Republican parties and vote for the Greenback Labor Party in the 1884 presidential election. This vote signified the beginning of his involvement in the continuous agrarian protest movements in the U.S. that would last into the 1930s.³⁸

The economic conflagrations caused by industrialization caused many like Meitzen to question the nature of democracy in the U.S. The northern bourgeoisie, in defeating the southern slaveocracy, had rallied under its banner workers, farmers, activist women, free Blacks, and freedmen. As a result of the abolition of slavery, it seemed the democratic American republic was purified and “would be reconstructed on its ideals of liberty and human equality.”³⁹ As historian Nancy Cohen has written, however,

A new set of problems and questions about society, economy, and the state arose after the Civil War: among them the first real confrontation with the implications of universal suffrage and mass democracy, the transformation of the majority of the citizenry into wage earners, the rise of the corporation as a new type of property, the devastating fluctuations of the international market economy, and the growth of the administrative capacity of the government.⁴⁰

³⁷ U.S. Congress, *Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony*, 9142.

³⁸ *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914.

³⁹ Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism*, 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

In the aftermath of war, a highly politicized electorate of workers and farmers – black and white, male and female faced a rising corporate elite, each side with rapidly diverging views on the future of democracy in the U.S. Nineteenth-century workers and farmers saw themselves as producers. Their concept of citizenship and democracy expressed itself through producerism. Producerism was based on the labor theory of value: that the producer deserves the fruits of his or her work. In Gilded Age America, however, the worker/farmer vision of a producerist society was being crushed by the rise of corporate capitalism. As historian Robert McMath explains, “In the natural order of things, farmers believed, rewards should go to the producers of goods, whose independence was thereby secured. But instead, profits were accruing not to the person who produced the crop, but to the one with capital or credit enough to hold it for speculation.”⁴¹

Workers began to see that industrial wage slavery, whether in a factory, mine, or elsewhere, was not a temporary step toward becoming an independent artisan, but something more permanent. Cohen points out, “As increasing numbers of American men and women, North and South, toiled as wage laborers from youth to death,” and “the ideal of economic independence that had been embedded in the promise of American democracy receded more and more each year into the realm of fantasy.”⁴²

For liberal reformers included in the ranks of Radical Republicans, their adherence to extreme individualism, laissez-faire economics, and social Darwinism meshed well with free labor ideals and black political equality. The individualistic

⁴¹ McMath, *American Populism*, 45, 51.

⁴² Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism*, 30.

self-made man was the model for workers, whether white or black, to emulate.

However, when workers acted collectively in trade unions, for such demands as the eight-hour day and wage increases, liberal reformers believed that “they upset the harmony that had been achieved in the United States between natural economic laws and free institutions.”⁴³

Workers and farmers, though, felt the role of government was to provide equal opportunity for all, both politically and economically. Many began to collectively organize, independent of the two-party system in order to confront trusts, monopolies, speculation, and a government controlled by corporate interests that impeded their democratic vision.

In September, 1877, a group of farmers pressed hard by economic difficulties gathered in Lampasas County, Texas, to discuss what could be done to alleviate their plight. This meeting would signify the beginning of the Farmers’ Alliance and the agrarian revolt that came in its wake. Farmers came together for a number of reasons. Some believed that governmental policies on land, transportation, and currency had caused their troubles, and they desired independent political action. Democrats in the organization sharply disagreed, insisting on the need to reform the Democratic Party. Still others argued the Alliance should stay out of politics all together and focus on education and economic cooperative endeavors. All agreed that something had to be done, and in the summer of 1878 plans were made to launch a statewide “Grand State Farmers’ Alliance.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid , 40.

With no unifying ideology, the Farmers' Alliance grew rather slowly. In 1880, the political differences within the organization came to a head over whether the Alliance should endorse the independent Greenback Labor Party. The split caused the Alliance to stagnate and then decline for the next four years. By 1884, local alliances existed in only 12 of 254 counties in Texas. However, the revitalization of the Farmers' Alliance the following year coincided with the beginnings of Meitzen's political career.⁴⁵

Greenbackers had organized nationally through a series of conventions from 1874 to 1876, with the expressed purpose of taking direct political action by forming a party and running candidates for office. According to Greenbackers, the country's economic woes had been caused by a shortage of government-issued paper money. This shortage, they believed, deflated prices and raised interest rates. Greenbackers advocated the issuing of more currency and the remonetization of silver to back up the expanded currency. In 1876, they ran their first presidential candidate with little success. Greenback candidates received a total of roughly 80,000 votes.⁴⁶

Running primarily on currency issues, the Greenback Party had limited appeal to the nation's workers and farmers. However, following the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the condemnation it received from both the Democratic and Republican

⁴⁴ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 51.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

⁴⁶ Irwin Unger, *These United States: The Questions of Our Past, Volume II since 1865, Fifth Edition* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992), 560; Roscoe Martin, "The Greenback Party in Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* [article online] (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, accessed April 28, 2006), Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 161-177, available from http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/publications/journals/shq/v030/n3/article_3_print.html; Internet, 2.

parties, many workers saw the need for independent political action and looked to the Greenback Party. During the strike, many workers, farmers, and small businessmen had aided the strikers due to their joint hatred of the railroad trusts. These three groups came together politically through a series of mergers beginning in August, 1877, in Pennsylvania, with the fusion of the Greenback Party with the United Labor Party. Across the country, Greenbackers merged with formally independent Workingmen's Parties, and with support from the Knights of Labor formed the Greenback Labor Party.⁴⁷

The 1878 electoral platform of the Greenback Labor Party (GLP) reflected its synthesis with organized labor. This is the same year the GLP made its appearance in Texas. The platform adopted by the GLP of Texas at Waco on August 8, 1878, included calls for an increase in paper currency, the cessation of government bonds, abolishing the national bank, halting Asian immigration, ending convict labor, preventing state governments from giving land and special privileges to railroad companies, fighting government bureaucracy, establishing free public schools, and a graduated income tax. The platform demanded "cheap capital and well paid labor in place of dear capital and cheap labor." The 1880 platform added planks in favor of "a radical change in our cumbersome and expensive judiciary system," and emphasized that "The Greenback Labor Party everywhere denounces the attempted disfranchisement of citizens as a crime, whether committed by Republicans in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, or Bourbon Democrats in Texas, and denounce all laws restricting the right of suffrage or impairing the secrecy of the ballot box."

⁴⁷ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 224-225.

Included among the 140 delegates at the 1880 convention were 20 African-Americans.⁴⁸

The 1882 Texas GLP platform distinguished itself from previous platforms by directly addressing the demands of the state's agrarian working class. The platform condemned the state government's granting of land to railroad companies and exempting them from taxes. These land grants issued by state governments across the South fueled real estate speculation, drove land prices up and as a result pushed more small farmers into sharecropping. In a reference to a move by the state government to give a Chicago firm most of the Texas Panhandle in return for constructing a new capital building, the platform accused the state government of establishing "gigantic land monopolies in our midst by granting to four Chicago capitalists 3,000,000 acres of public domain to build a state house." The platform further complained that the state government "has inaugurated a system of class legislation in favor of the rich by refusing to sell the public domain in tracts less than 640 acres, thus depriving her men of the opportunity to acquire homes in our State."⁴⁹ Though missing the call for the eight-hour day contained in the national GLP platform, the platform of the Texas GLP marked the beginnings of an inter-racial workers and farmers coalition in Texas.

In retrospect, the Texas GLP achieved only a limited amount of success. In the 1878 elections, the GLP elected ten representatives to the state legislature, and George W. Jones, of Bastrop, served two terms in the U.S. House of

⁴⁸ Martin, "The Greenback Party in Texas," 3; *The Texas Capital*, May 23, 1880; *The Texas Capital*, July 4, 1880; *The Texas Capital*, July 11, 1880.

⁴⁹ *Galveston Daily-News*, July 1, 1882.

Representatives. This, however, proved to be the high point of the GLP's electoral success in Texas. Unfortunately, the national GLP was a party in rapid decline. In 1880, the GLP's State House representation dropped from ten to three. Although the GLP would continue to run candidates through 1884, none won election and the party quickly dissipated.⁵⁰

A number of factors contributed to the demise of the GLP. First, outside forces such as the Anti-Monopoly movement drew away the conservative elements of the party by focusing on regulating business behavior. Second, the more radical working-class elements called for more direct trade union action and opposed the GLP's anti-communism. Finally, by the early 1880s, both the Democratic and Republican parties had recognized free silver wings within their parties. This allowed for the silverites within the GLP to return to the fold of the two major parties.⁵¹

While some were discouraged by the demise of the GLP, many others such as Meitzen gained their first taste of independent political action and looked toward continued protest. In 1885, Meitzen joined the Grange at Colony, Fayette County, six miles from his home in Cistern. Formally known as the Patrons of Husbandry, the Grange predated the Greenback Party, having been founded in 1867 by government clerks at the Agricultural Bureau in Washington, D.C. The Grange

⁵⁰ Martin, "The Greenback Party in Texas," 2-6; *La Grange Journal*, November 10, 1880.

⁵¹ Martin, "The Greenback Party in Texas," 8; *The Texas Capital*, May 23, 1880; Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 227.

formed as a means to assist farmers in addressing economic challenges by educating them in new scientific methods of farming.⁵²

The Grange spread to Texas in 1873. Serving as a mutual aid organization and a social outlet for rural people, the Grange rapidly grew to 45,000 members, including 6,000 women by 1877. As the economic crisis of the 1870s deepened, the Grange sought to create a system of cash-only cooperative stores to aid farmers. For cash-starved farmers, however, the Grange stores provided little relief. Many Southern farmers had already fallen into another trap of the Southern land tenure system, that of the crop lien.⁵³

Due to the fall of world cotton prices, many farmers after harvest were left without the monetary means to purchase the materials necessary to plant the next season's crop. The collapse of the Southern economy after the war had left many areas without a bank from which farmers could procure a loan in an area of the country already historically lacking in banks. This is where the furnishing merchant stepped in. The merchant would furnish to a farmer the necessary supplies in exchange for a lien on the crop. More often the case than not, the crop did not yield enough to pay off the lien, which would be extended year after year, until the farmer was forced to pay the lien by turning over his land to the merchant. As a result, the merchant became landlord, and the farmer a sharecropper or a tenant farmer in many

⁵² *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914; Roscoe Martin, "The Grange as a Political Factor in Texas," *Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly* Vol. 6 (1925/1926), pp. 363-383, 366-367.

⁵³ Martin, "The Grange as a Political Factor in Texas," 367; Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: a Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 32.

cases across the South. The Grange stores sought to become an alternative to the furnishing merchants.⁵⁴

The Grange, besides promoting a system of cash-only stores, also adhered to a principle of non-partisanship and refused to endorse any political campaign or candidate for office. For many farmers who came to see collective political action as an essential part of obtaining better economic conditions, the Grange's supposed non-political stance became an obstacle. As A.J. Rose, Master of the Texas State Grange, insisted, "The grange has not nor never will take a political stance, as a body." Many Grange leaders, however, belonged to the Democratic Party and encouraged their members to vote as such. Though still not breaking from the Democratic Party, revered by many as the 'Party of Our Fathers,' many farmers believed that in a democracy their collective voice should be heard.⁵⁵

For an example of collective action in 1885, Texas farmers needed to look no further than to the of the Knights of Labor (KOL), which took on railroad tycoon Jay Gould's Southwestern rail service, including the Texas & Pacific line that crossed the entire state. The strike against Gould's Southwestern system began in March when rail workers in Sedalia, Missouri, struck over wage cuts and the firing of longtime employees. With solid community backing in Missouri, the strike rapidly spread into Texas. In Texas, the KOL and the previously dormant Farmer's Alliance organized joint rallies, picnics, and mass meetings in support of the striking workers. Gould backed down and the strikers won. National membership in the KOL during

⁵⁴ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 21-22.

⁵⁵ *La Grange Journal*, June 17, 1886.

the next year jumped from 100,000 to 700,000, including 30,000 members in Texas. Farmers meanwhile began flocking to the revitalized Farmers' Alliance.⁵⁶

Economic hardship alone proved not enough for farmers to join either the Grange or Alliance. Before 1887, the cooperative marketing and purchasing plans of both the Grange and Alliance were nearly identical, as both promoted the establishment of either Grange or Alliance-run cooperative stores. However, what differentiated the Alliance from the Grange in the following years was the Alliance's development of a movement ideology. This movement ideology would be best expressed through S.O. Daws.⁵⁷

In late 1883 the state Alliance hired Daws to the newly created position of "Traveling Lecturer," with the power to appoint suborganizers in every county. The thirty-six-year-old Daws had developed a radical ideology as a Mississippi farmer trapped in the crop-lien system before moving to Texas. In the spring of 1884, he began to travel around the state with a political-economic message that denounced furnishing merchants, railroads, trusts, and capitalists. At the end of his lectures he implored farmers to join the Alliance.⁵⁸

A number of factors had now come together to transform agrarian unrest into an organized agrarian protest movement. In 1886, cotton prices hit a new low at \$.081 per pound. Many farmers were now growing cotton at a loss. Corn prices were equally depressed. The economic crisis was no longer seen as temporary but more

⁵⁶ McMath, *American Populism*, 74-75; "GREAT SOUTHWEST STRIKE," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

⁵⁷ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 39.

⁵⁸ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 26-27.

permanent, unless something was done to change the situation. Joining a protest organization became a risk more were willing to take if it meant an improvement in their condition. Through traveling lecturers, Alliance newspapers, and the cooperative store plan, farmers began to see the commonality of their plight and developed what Lawrence Goodwyn has argued was “a mass expression of a new political vision ... a movement culture.”⁵⁹

The conflict between labor and also capital intensified in 1886. Gould, still bitter over the defeat he suffered at the hands of organized labor on the Southwest railroad lines, the year before, provoked a strike by firing a union leader in Marshall, Texas. The KOL responded by calling a strike that spread across the Southwest. When strikers began blocking rail traffic and occupying switch junctures, Gould used scabs to replace strikers and Pinkerton detectives to violently attack them. Texas Governor John Ireland further aided Gould by using the state militia and Texas Rangers to suppress the strike and ensure its defeat.⁶⁰

Many historians have viewed the Southwest strike of 1886 as a major defeat for the KOL that doomed significant participation in the coming Populist movement. Historian Matthew Hild disagrees, arguing that the KOL continued to work with Alliance members toward common political goals well into the 1890s. For Hild, “The Southwest strike of 1886 seems to have marked more of a beginning than an end to farmer-labor coalitions in the South.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 34, 52; Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 33.

⁶⁰ "GREAT SOUTHWEST STRIKE," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

On July 16, 1886, A.J. Rose traveled to La Grange in order to address the Fayette County granger's picnic. At the picnic, Rose, as reported in the *La Grange Journal*, declared "that neither politics nor religion could be tolerated in the order; that its membership embraced men of all political parties and religious denominations."⁶² This message must not have sat well with Meitzen and other more politically minded farmers and their allies. Shortly after Rose's visit, Meitzen became a charter member of the local Farmers' Alliance in Cistern. With the Farmer's Alliance taking root at this time and beginning to seek political as well as economic solutions to the plight of farmers, farmers left the Grange en mass for the Alliance. At its height, the Grange numbered 45,000 members in Texas. By 1887, the number had fallen to 5,000 and the Grange ceased being a factor in Texas politics. In late October, 1886, a countywide Farmers' Alliance was organized in Fayette County and Meitzen was elected as secretary of the Fayette County chapter at the founding meeting.⁶³

⁶¹ Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth Century South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 74, 77-78. In the 1870s and 1880s, Gould and other U.S. industrialists consolidated their plans for control over rail lines in both the U.S. and Mexico. Maintaining labor servility along Gould's Texas lines was a key component in connecting Texas to the railroad concessions gained in Mexico through Mexican president and dictator Porfirio Diaz. Though not fully realized yet, the Mexican and Texan working classes now shared common oppressors in the form of U.S. industrialists and their backers in Washington and the Texas state house that directly affected the Mexican Revolution and the building of the Texas Socialist Party in the years preceding World War I. John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: the Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 132-135.

⁶² *La Grange Journal*, July 22, 1886.

⁶³ *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914; Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 39; *La Grange Journal*, November 4, 1886.

Meitzen was not just a product of his times. He responded to and participated in the great issues of his day. Industrialization and the rise of finance capitalism had rapidly transformed the American political and economic landscape. The agrarian crusaders of Meitzen's type were not the reactionary farmers searching for the "lost agrarian Eden" Richard Hofstadter has made them out to be.⁶⁴ They did not fear the new technological advances in communication and transportation. Instead they believed that these advances should be used for the betterment of society as a whole, and they called for the nationalization of the railroad and telegraph industries. What people like Meitzen were reacting to was the redefining of American democracy in which one million dollars seemed to hold more power than one million votes. In creating an agrarian protest movement to address their grievances, agrarian radicals like Meitzen were simply following in their belief in a tradition of protest that had originally won the U.S. its independence. Meitzen, as the elected secretary of the Fayette County Farmers' Alliance, assumed a position of leadership in this agrarian protest movement that he maintained until near the end of his life.

⁶⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 62.

CHAPTER TWO

The Path to Populism, 1886-1892

All that is lacking to bring about the proper reform, is a platform built by a united labor organization big enough and broad enough for all to stand on.

M.E. Ussery, Lavaca County
Southern Mercury, July 21, 1888.

The Farmers' Alliance in Texas brought together farmers and their allies into a single large organization in order to address their economic grievances against monopolies, abusive railroad practices, high tariffs, and land speculation. Members of the Alliance, though, were far from unified as to what approach to take in order to achieve their desired reforms. While many advocated working within the existing power structure through the Democratic Party, others sought an independent farmer-labor movement and the creation of a new party that represented their interests. These political differences eventually tore the Alliance apart and resulted in the formation of the People's Party in the early 1890s. Meitzen, as a leader of the Alliance, was directly engaged in this struggle, first as an active member of the Democratic Party, then as an agitator for independent political action. Using mainly local newspapers, this chapter explores the political path that in the years between 1886 and 1892 took Meitzen from a county leader of the Democratic Party in

southeast Texas to a statewide leader of the insurgent populist movement. By 1892, he was convinced that farmers needed their own political party, one that would also reach out to urban workers to build a viable alternative political movement.

The political split within the Texas Farmers' Alliance originated in the position that individual Alliance members and local sub-Alliances took toward the Great Southwestern Strike of 1886. William Lamb, the state Alliance's purchasing agent for their cooperative stores and a member of the Knights of Labor (KOL), favored an alliance with labor and the KOL during the strike. As state-wide purchasing agent, Lamb witnessed first-hand the limited effect that cooperative stores had on bettering the lives of farmers, because of the monopoly the corporate world held over the money supply and credit. Lamb favored a national farmer-labor coalition to transform the American political landscape. To this end, the Montague County Alliance, with Lamb as president, issued a boycott in support of the KOL.⁶⁵

The boycott call of the Montague County Alliance brought an immediate rebuke from state Alliance president, Andrew Dunlap, who complained that Lamb did not have the authority to issue such a boycott. The Dunlap-Lamb conflict revealed a deeper conflict between the conservatism of the Alliances' top officials and the more radical outlook of the rank and file. Dunlap, who feared the attacks that a partnership between the Alliance and the controversial KOL would invite from the pro-business press and large farm owners, believed that such a partnership would also interfere with the workings of commerce and business by more experienced men and violate the non-partisan stance of the Alliance. Lamb, on the other hand,

⁶⁵ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 36.

considered a farmer-labor political alliance as a necessity if farmers were to achieve their vision of a cooperative commonwealth. Many rank and file Alliance members agreed with Lamb. They saw the same corporate interests allied against them as were allied against the KOL and urban labor. As a result of this internal split, the newly revitalized Farmers' Alliance stood on the verge of collapse.⁶⁶

Daws, the state lecturer most responsible for the Alliance's recent growth, advanced a third position to solve the Dunlap-Lamb conflict. He stated, "There is a way to take part in politics without having it in the order. Call each neighborhood together and organize anti-monopoly leagues ... and nominate candidates for office."⁶⁷ A few Alliances followed Daws's advice and organized farmer-labor coalitions to select candidates for office. The most successful of these coalitions took shape in Comanche County, where the "Human Party" elected a full slate of county officials. Though organized outside of the Alliance, these coalitions were made up largely of and led by Alliance members, who thus gained valuable political experience. As Robert C. McMath, Jr., writes, "The question was no longer whether, but how the Alliance would exert political pressure."⁶⁸

As delegates gathered in Cleburne, Texas, in August, 1886, for the state Alliance's first official state convention, the movement stood deeply divided. The conservatives led by Dunlap opposed Alliance involvement in independent politics, while the more radical elements led by Daws, Lamb, and Evan Jones represented the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 37-39.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 43.

⁶⁸ Robert C. McMatch, Jr, *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmer's Alliance* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1977), 25.

continuity of the Greenback critique of capital and vision of a farmer-labor coalition. With state legislative and congressional elections approaching in the fall, the radical elements composed a platform that expressed their views. This platform became known as the Cleburne demands.⁶⁹

The Cleburne demands were far from original in that they were adopted from much of the KOL's Reading platform of 1878. The demands called for the recognition of trade unions and co-operative stores, equal taxation of land, a ban on foreign ownership of land, ending convict labor, the creation of a National Bureau of Labor Statistics, and wage protection for laborers. Not included in the Reading platform, but included at Cleburne, were demands to create an Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate railroads, outlaw trading in futures of agricultural commodities, remove illegal fences, increase the money supply through the coinage of both gold and silver, and to convene a national conference "to discuss such measures as may be of interest to all laboring classes." The platform was adopted by a vote of 92 to 75, but only after much debate and opposition from the Alliance's conservative elements led by Dunlap.⁷⁰

Into the schism between the Dunlap officialdom and Alliance radicals stepped Charles Macune, a thirty-five-year-old farmer, physician, Methodist preacher, newspaper editor, and lawyer who had impressed convention delegates with his oratorical skills and creative economic mind. Upset over the adoption of the Cleburne demands, the conservatives and Dunlap took steps to form a rival "Grand

⁶⁹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 51; McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 26; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 86.

⁷⁰ Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 3-4, 86; McMath, *American Populism*, 79-80; *Galveston Daily News*, August 8, 1886.

State Farmers' Alliance," taking with them the treasury of the regular Alliance. Macune brokered a truce between the factions in which Dunlap remained president of the Alliance. To satisfy the radicals, Macune advocated the expansion of the Alliance by merging with progressive farm organizations in other states.⁷¹

The truce did not last long. Dunlap resigned from the Alliance shortly after the Cleburne convention, and Macune stepped into the state presidency of the Alliance with the treasury safely secured. The state Alliance also switched its official newspaper from the conservative Jacksboro *Rural Citizen* to the state's leading anti-monopoly paper, the *Mercury* (soon to be called the *Southern Mercury*), which was based in Dallas. Despite this split, the positive response by farmers to the Cleburne demands resulted in spectacular growth for the Alliance. By year's end, the Alliance numbered over 200,000 members. It was during this rapid rate of growth that the Fayette County Alliance was chartered with Meitzen chosen as secretary.⁷²

When the Alliance met in convention in Waco in January, 1887, members still carried with them the divisions of the previous convention, even though Dunlap had resigned. Though the Alliance had rejected the non-partisan stance of the previous leadership, and favored a move into politics, this did not translate into an endorsement of third-party or independent politics. The majority of the membership still held true to the party of their fathers, the Democratic Party, hoping that it could be transformed into a party of laborers and farmers. Advocates of independent

⁷¹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 51-52; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 86.

⁷² Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 52; "SOUTHERN MERCURY," *Handbook of Texas Online*; *La Grange Journal*, November 4, 1886, and April 28, 1887.

political action had rejected this stance, arguing that the railroad corporations controlled the Democratic Party.⁷³

In order to united the contending fractions, Macune put forth a plan of action that united the Alliance by confronting a problem faced by most farmers, that of credit. Macune proposed a central statewide Farmers' Alliance Exchange. By acting as the main purchasing and marketing agent of the cotton crop of Alliance members, and by offering savings on farm equipment through buying in bulk directly from the manufacturer, the Exchange would free members from the crop-lien system. Macune also saw the need to unite the entire cotton belt in order to confront the economic monopolies that currently controlled Southern agriculture. The Texas Farmers' Alliance merged with the Louisiana Farmers Union and became the National Farmers Alliance and Cooperative Union at the Waco convention.⁷⁴

Imbued with the spirit of the cooperative vision of Macune, Meitzen and members of the Fayette County Alliance met on April 1, 1887. At that time, the county had 750 Alliance members and 26 sub-alliances. As Goodwyn points out, "The central educational tool of the Farmers' Alliance was the cooperative experiment itself."⁷⁵ The cooperative experiment included not only the statewide Exchange but also cooperative stores, warehouses, mills, and gins. As secretary, Meitzen recorded the Fayette County Alliance resolution that called for "the erection of factories at home, on the cooperative plan, to include the money and influence of every laboring white man, seems to us a sore necessity to relieve the southern cotton

⁷³ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 43, 53.

⁷⁴ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 78-80.

⁷⁵ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 66.

farmer from that financial pressure, with which he is struggling more and more every year.”⁷⁶

The cooperative plan gave the struggling farmers of Fayette County, and their allies, concrete objectives to fight for. Once again at their July, 1887, meeting, the Fayette County Alliance endorsed the state and national Alliance’s plans to establish cooperative stores and factories, in particular the plan to establish a mill at Marble Falls in Burnet County. They also called for cheap textbooks in local schools. In the fall, an Alliance store was established in La Grange. Unlike the Grange, which also called for cooperative enterprises, the Alliance did not shy from politics. At the July meeting, the Fayette County Alliance passed the following resolution: “Resolved that we believe that the only security the people have for their future welfare is the ballot box. We suggest that the ballot box be guarded by electing men to make our laws, whose interests is identical with ours.”⁷⁷

Armed with the ideas of cooperative producerism, Alliance lecturers spread across the South in 1887. By the fall, solid state Alliances had been established in Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, the Indian Territory, and North Carolina. In Arkansas, the leading farmers’ organization was the National Agricultural Wheel. In December, 1888, the Wheel and the Southern Farmers’ Alliance began the process of consolidation, which resulted in the Farmers’ and Laborer’s Union of America.

⁷⁶ *La Grange Journal*, April 14, 1887, and November 3, 1887.

⁷⁷ *La Grange Journal*, July 7, 1887.

Not included in this expansion were African-American farmers. Bowing to the racial norms of the era, the original Cleburne convention determined that Alliance membership was open only to someone who was “a white person and over the age of sixteen.” This racial restriction was reaffirmed at the Dallas convention in August 1888.⁷⁸ Barred from the white Alliance, African Americans founded their own Colored Farmers’ National Alliance, which originated in Houston County, Texas, in 1886, after the Cleburne convention. As African Americans embraced the vision of a cooperative commonwealth, the Colored Alliance grew to perhaps around a million members across the South by 1890.⁷⁹

As the Farmers’ Alliance spread across the South, Meitzen made an important move of his own. At a meeting of the Fayette County Alliance on October 7, 1887, Meitzen handed in his resignation as secretary. He had accepted a teaching position at Witting in neighboring Lavaca County, where he would base his future populist and socialist electoral campaigns. After he resigned as secretary of the Fayette County Alliance, his younger brother, Ernest August, or E. A., won the election to replace him as the county’s new Alliance secretary. E. O., upon moving, became a member of the Lavaca County Alliance.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 58; McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 43; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 122; Grand State Farmers’ Alliance, *Constitution and By-Laws of the Farmers’ State Alliance of Texas. Adopted at Cleburne, 1886*, (Dallas: Dallas Print Company, 1886), 7; Grand State Farmers’ Alliance, *Constitution and By-Laws of the Farmers’ State Alliance of Texas approved at the session held at Dallas, Texas, August 1888*, (Dallas: Southern Mercury Printing, 1888), 8.

⁷⁹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 119; Jack Abramowitz, “The Negro in the Populist Movement,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (July, 1953), 257.

⁸⁰ U.S. Congress, *Senate Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony*, 9143; *La Grange Journal*, October 13, 1887.

While the more radical elements of the Alliance served as traveling lecturers to establish Alliances across the South and plant the seeds of independent political action, Meitzen and a larger section of Alliance members began their reform-oriented agitation within the Democratic Party. Meitzen, shortly after moving to Lavaca County, became an Alliance activist in the Democratic Party. In May, 1888, he was elected to represent Witting at the party's Lavaca County convention. Convention delegates then elected Meitzen as a delegate to the Democratic State Convention in Fort Worth.⁸¹

Though united behind Macune's cooperative economic proposals, reform activists in the Democratic Party such as Meitzen found themselves on a different political path from the one taken by radicals who favored the creation of a farmer-labor party. While the Democrats met in Fort Worth, a separate non-partisan convention of Laborers, Farmers, and Stockraisers convened in Waco with around 280 delegates from sixty-one counties "for the purpose of considering what steps, if any, should be taken in the approaching campaign." Alliance men made up a large portion of the convention, but KOL members controlled much of the convention's proceedings. The convention adopted a platform containing much of the recognizable Greenback demands but recessed without naming any candidates.⁸²

Alliance members not only made up the majority of delegates at the Waco convention, but they also made a sizable showing at the Democratic convention in Fort Worth. Partly to placate the large number of Alliance members, including

⁸¹ *Hallettsville Herald*, May 10, 1888.

⁸² Quoted in Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 112. See also *Hallettsville Herald*, May 24, 1888, and *Galveston Daily News*, May 16, 1888.

Meitzen, and to hold the loyalty of Texas farmers, the Democratic convention passed a resolution emphasizing “that we condemn the pools and trust combinations of financial power which are now organized and on a gigantic scale threaten with ruin every legitimate industry involved by them, and we commend the efforts being made in congress to expose and correct them.”⁸³ At this time there existed such a large number of Alliance leaders in the Democratic Party that non-Alliance Democrats feared an Alliance take-over of the party. After making such a large presence at both conventions, the Alliance made its customary statements to advocate the organization’s non-involvement in politics.⁸⁴

While rival sections of the Farmers’ Alliance engaged in separate political activity, the Alliance faced the larger problem of a faltering state Exchange. The hope had been that the Exchange would be funded by a \$2 assessment fee from each of the Alliance’s 200,000 members in Texas. By April 1888, however, the Exchange had ordered goods totaling \$108,371 yet had collected only \$20,215 in fees. Unable to secure loans from banks hostile to the Alliance, the Exchange stood on the verge of collapse as the bills came due in May for goods ordered. To address the problem, the state Alliance Executive Committee issued a call to save the Exchange by holding courthouse rallies across the state to gather support for the Exchange and to collect money on June 9th.⁸⁵

⁸³ Reproduced in *Hallettsville Herald*, May 24, 1888.

⁸⁴ *Hallettsville Herald*, May 31, July 19, 1888.

⁸⁵ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 83-86.

County Alliances across the state responded to the call for courthouse rallies with the same grassroots zeal that had propelled the Alliance to its current strength. Rallies numbered in size from a few hundred to over a thousand. Both Fayette and Lavaca counties had successful rallies. W. H. Turk, president of the Lavaca County Alliance, observed, "We can truly say it was a gala day for the Alliance of Lavaca County, ... And I must say never in life did I see a body of men assemble that worked as harmoniously and in unison ... Brothers and sisters, let the work go bravely on."⁸⁶

Though the courthouse rallies gave the Alliance another powerful dose of "movement culture," the Exchange could not be saved in the end. Evidence suggests that many poor farmers trapped in the crop-lien system simply could not afford the \$2 assessment, and that other farmers who at one time might have been able to contribute had already been tapped dry by having previously contributed to the Alliance's numerous other cooperative ventures. Once again, a purely economic plan had failed to alleviate the dire plight of southern farmers.⁸⁷

The failure of the state Exchange contributed to the political divisions within the Alliance. As part of a continuing effort to seek a political solution to the economic conditions of financially strapped farmers, a second convention of Laborers, Farmers, and Stockraisers met in Fort Worth on July 3, 1888, a few days before the Texas Union Labor Party (ULP) was to meet in the same city. Chaired by William Lamb, the convention adopted a platform similar to their May platform,

⁸⁶ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 86; *La Grange Journal*, June 14, 1888; *Hallettsville Herald*, June 14, 1888.

⁸⁷ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 86-87.

with an added plank calling for term limits, and this time nominated candidates for office. State Farmers' Alliance president, Evan Jones, received but turned down the nomination for governor. Although he was an advocate of independent political action, he feared that his candidacy would further fracture the Alliance. Meeting after the convention of Laborers, Farmers, and Stockraisers, the ULP adopted the candidates nominated by the previous convention, with Prohibition Party candidate Marion Martin replacing Evans. The ULP endorsed the national ULP ticket and platform, except for the woman's suffrage plank. According to historian Matthew Hild, this campaign of the ULP in 1888 was the last link of farmer-labor independent political action in the tradition of the earlier Greenbackers before the creation of the People's Party in 1892.⁸⁸

With third party advocates beginning their campaign for the ULP, Meitzen and many Alliance members continued their attempts to reform the Democratic Party. Meitzen continued his rise through the ranks of the Alliance and Democratic Party in Lavaca County. At the July, 1888, meeting of the Lavaca County Alliance, attended by 1,000 people, he was elected to the same position he had held in the Fayette County Alliance, that of county secretary. Meitzen also began to serve as the Democratic Party's precinct chairman in Witting and as a delegate to the party's senatorial convention in Gonzales.⁸⁹

The faltering of the state Exchange on the eve of the state convention of the Farmers' Alliance held in Dallas in August, 1888, brought into question the viability

⁸⁸ *Hallettsville Herald*, July 5, 1888; *Southern Mercury*, July 12, 1888; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 113-114.

⁸⁹ *Hallettsville Herald*, July 5, 19, 1888.

of the co-operative economic enterprises fostered by Macune. With the Alliance's official newspaper, the *Southern Mercury*, leading the criticism of the Exchange, local alliances reported significant losses in membership. Some even questioned the future existence of the Alliance. However, the spirit that had ignited the hopes of farmers across Texas would not dim so easily. The delegates to the convention proved loyal to Macune and pledged their continued adherence to the cooperative vision. As Meitzen, who represented Lavaca County at the convention, insisted, "The few weak-kneed brothers and outsiders who imagined the Alliance is about 'ausgespielt' were never worse mistaken in their lives."⁹⁰

After the convention ended, Meitzen and other delegates went home to their local alliances committed to reinvigorating the membership through the cooperative economic proposals of Macune. Meitzen and members of the Lavaca County Alliance held particularly true to the cooperative vision. Right before Meitzen had left for the state convention, he was elected to the board of directors of the Alliance store in Hallettsville. Shortly after the convention, Lavaca County Alliance president, W. H. Turk, expressed his view that people only needed more education on the cooperative system in order for it to work. In a good-natured teasing of Meitzen, he praised his renewed commitment to cooperative principles in the pages of a local newspaper: "Well, he was a good Alliance man before he went off [to the convention], 'but Jah!' You ought to see him now. He not only looks alliance but he talks 'liance, walks 'liance and even smells 'liancy."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Meitzen quoted in *Hallettsville Herald*, August 30, 1888; Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 94.

⁹¹ Turk quoted in *Hallettsville Herald*, September 6, 1888; *Hallettsville Herald*, August 9, 1888.

As Lavaca County's white farmers were reaffirming their commitment to cooperative principles, the county's black farmers also began to organize. On August 4, 1888, African Americans organized a county alliance of the Colored Alliance in Hallettsville to join in the struggle for the same economic goals as those of their white neighbors. At times, the two alliances would act together and at others, separately. The formation of the Colored Alliance held out the hope of biracial political cooperation but invited the threat of repression from those committed to maintaining white supremacy.⁹²

Heading into the fall of 1888, the Lavaca County Alliance continued to educate its members on the principles of cooperation against the credit system. Alliance leaders did some soul searching to explain the failure of the cooperative experiment so far. As Turk acknowledged, "Candor compels us to admit that one of the prime causes for this opposition to the Alliance can justly be laid at the Alliance door."⁹³ During the following weeks, the "Alliance Corner" column of the *Hallettsville Herald* became a vehicle for educating the public on the merits of cooperative enterprises as a means to alleviate the desperate economic plight of farmers. On October 2, the county Alliance adopted a resolution, authored by Meitzen, denouncing "the course of the *Mercury*, or its present management toward the State Exchange, at Dallas and its manager C.W. Macune." A week later, the state Alliance took over editorship of the *Mercury* and through the pages of the *Mercury*, blamed the failure of the Exchange on the anti-Exchange and anti- Macune stance of the

⁹² *Hallettsville Herald*, August 16, 1888.

⁹³ *Hallettsville Herald*, August 23, 1888.

newspaper's previous editors. At the beginning of November, Meitzen reported that the Alliance co-operative store in Hallettsville was doing well.⁹⁴

The November election returns in Lavaca County proved the strength of the cooperative-based reform movement inside the Democratic Party and validated at least temporarily the political strategy of Meitzen and other Alliance leaders in the county. The Democratic candidate for governor, Lawrence S. Ross, carried the county with 2343 votes, compared to Marion Martin, the ULP candidate who received only 656 votes. In Witting, where Meitzen served as Democratic Party precinct chairman, Ross received all 83 votes cast. Nevertheless, there were signs of discontent in the county over the strategy to back the Democratic Party. The sub-alliance in Granberry passed a resolution, for example, supporting Martin for governor prior to the election. The National Farmers' Alliance was able to skirt the touchy issue of the election because of a yellow fever epidemic in Meridian, Mississippi, where a national meeting was to take place right before the election on October 10. The meeting was rescheduled for December, safely after the election.⁹⁵

The problems that plagued co-operatives in 1888 taught Texas Alliance members valuable lessons and raised their consciousness about the political system. According to Goodwyn, "The discovered truth was a simple one, but its political import was radical: the Alliance cooperative stood little chance of working unless fundamental changes were made in the American monetary system."⁹⁶ Radical

⁹⁴ *Hallettsville Herald*, October 4, November 1, 1888; Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 94-95.

⁹⁵ *Hallettsville Herald*, September 20, 27, and November 15, 1888.

⁹⁶ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 84-87.

greenback doctrines, which had shaped the dominant ideology of the agrarian movement, now mixed with the crusade for co-operatives. If co-operatives were to survive, farmers needed control over the federal government to change the monetary system. The question now stood as to whether Alliance members would take the reform path of Macune or the third party path of Lamb.

Though the Hallettsville cooperative Alliance store was reportedly doing well at the time, other nearby Alliance stores were not. By March, 1889, the stores at La Grange and Schulenburg in southern Fayette County had failed. Alliance members were encouraged to buy stock in the Hallettsville store in order to keep it from failing as well. But as one Alliance member declared in a letter to the *Mercury*, "One of the greatest hindrances to the Alliance is the individual indebtedness of the membership." Poor debt-ridden farmers simply could not afford to buy stock in all the Alliance's various financial schemes. In 1890, Meitzen would move his family to Hallettsville in order to run the Alliance store as a full-time job.⁹⁷

As the Alliance's financial conditions worsened, its overall membership numbers declined. The economic plight of poor farmers had changed little, and the agrarian revolt led by the Farmers' Alliance seemed to lose momentum through the winter and into the spring of 1889. At that time, however, came a call from the Georgia Farmers' Alliance to boycott jute bagging for cotton.⁹⁸

The Great Jute Boycott was the last major economic strategy of the Farmers' Alliance. Jute fiber served as baling material for the marketing of cotton, which

⁹⁷ Quoted in *Hallettsville Herald*, November 15, 1888. See also *Hallettsville Herald*, March 7, 14, 1889, and August 11, 1892.

⁹⁸ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 98; *Hallettsville Herald*, April 11, 1889.

required six and one-half yards per bale. In August, 1888, jute manufacturers combined to form a jute trust that raised the price of jute from \$.07 per yard to \$.11 and even \$.14 per yard in some places. When this increase went into effect in 1888, it was too late into the season for farmers to react with a readily available jute substitute.⁹⁹

In May, 1889, Alliance leaders convened in Birmingham, Alabama, to discuss the jute issue. Out of this meeting came a resolution calling for the boycotting of jute and its replacement with cotton bagging. With Alliance membership numbers in decline, the jute boycott became an important test for the future of the Farmers' Alliance as a protest organization.¹⁰⁰

Alliance members across the South, including Lavaca County, responded with fervor to the jute boycott. Lavaca County leaders regarded the boycott as the most important issue that had confronted the Alliance. As farmers refused to buy jute bagging, some even wore outfits made of cotton bagging as a form of protest. The jute boycott also served as a unifying force in the South as local and state alliances discussed the pending merger of their state Alliances and Wheels into a single national organization. At their July meeting, the Lavaca County Alliance voted continued support to the jute boycott and endorsed the proposed merger. Meitzen was also reelected as secretary of the county Alliance, and W. Tarkington as its new president.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 99, 106; Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 88.

¹⁰⁰ McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 54; *Hallettsville Herald*, May 30, 1889.

The results of the jute boycott were mixed at best. In the summer of 1889, jute producers backed off their drastic price increase and set the price of jute at \$.09 per yard. The switch to cotton bagging also proved to be more complicated than originally thought. Cotton bagging weighed less than jute bagging, thus upsetting the established weighing practices of cotton exchanges. While the New York and New Orleans cotton exchanges agreed to compensate for the weight adjustment, the cotton exchange in Liverpool, England, refused to accept the cotton baling. The refusal of the Liverpool cotton exchange to accept cotton baling was significant in that Britain was the largest market for U.S. cotton. As these complication developed, Alliance farmers decided to stick with jute bagging. Though the price increase had been successfully beat back, the Alliance failed in its ultimate goal to destroy the jute trust.¹⁰²

After the end of the jute boycott, as Donna Barnes writes, “The curtain closed on the major economic strategies of the Farmers’ Alliance.”¹⁰³ Cash-poor, debt-ridden farmers trapped in the crop-lien system could not compete with the financial power of merchants, bankers, and robber barons of corporate America. Recognizing the failure of its economic strategies, the Alliance began a move to enter electoral politics.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Sociologist Donna Barnes points out that “the boycott had become a symbol of the consumers’ ability to control corporate America.” Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 102; Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 88; *Hallettsville Herald*, May 23, 30, and July 18, 1889.

¹⁰² Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 102-106.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 106.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

Heading into their December, 1889, convention in St. Louis, the Alliance sought numerical growth in order to expand their reach into politics. At the convention, a merger was sought with the northern Alliance, the KOL, and the Farmers' Mutual Benefit Association, an organization akin to the Alliance in Illinois and neighboring states. While a national merger of all participating organizations did not result from this convention, the stout Kansas and North and South Dakota Alliances joined the southern Alliance to form the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union (NFA&IU). The Alliance also decided to seek organizational growth in the Midwest and West and chose former Confederate officer Leonidas L. Polk, of North Carolina, a leading advocate of sectional reconciliation, as president.¹⁰⁵

The most significant development coming out of the St. Louis convention was a broad agreement on the need to actively engage in politics. The convention adopted a seven-point platform that contained many of the familiar greenback demands dating back to the 1870s, this time calling for the nationalization of railroads. The one new addition to these familiar demands was the inclusion of Macune's subtreasury plan.¹⁰⁶

The subtreasury plan called for the federal government to establish a system of warehouses in the agricultural areas of the country. The warehouses, or subtreasuries, would allow farmers to store their nonperishable crops until market conditions became favorable to sell. In the mean time, the federal government would

¹⁰⁵ McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 86-89; McMath, *American Populism*, 109.

¹⁰⁶ McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 109.

provide low-interest loans, with the crops as collateral, in order for farmers to get by until the crops sold. Alliance members, particularly those in the South, responded to the plan with great enthusiasm as something that could democratize the market place, and they began to campaign for its enactment.¹⁰⁷

McMath views the subtreasury plan as “the issue that propelled the Alliance into politics, first in an effort to commit the southern Democracy to its enactment and, failing that, in an effort to establish a new party.”¹⁰⁸ Before the subtreasury plan, though, serious efforts were already underway to establish a third party in the tradition of the Greenback Labor Party by individuals such as Evans and Lamb. What the subtreasury plan and the failed efforts to achieve its enactment did was to educate a great number of farmers on the ineffectiveness of working within the two-party system to improve their economic and social conditions. The educational experience of the subtreasury plan created the critical mass necessary for a third party to become a viable alternative to the twin parties of big capital.

The campaign to get reform Democrats behind the St. Louis platform politicized the Farmers’ Alliance, and demonstrated that the farmers of Texas were an important political force to be reckoned. The “Alliance yardstick” served as the determining factor as to whether or not Democratic candidates would receive Alliance support in the 1890 election.¹⁰⁹ As early as the fall of 1889, Alliance Democrats began to promote Texas Attorney General, James Stephen Hogg, as a

¹⁰⁷ McMath, *American Populism*, 109; McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 88.

¹⁰⁸ McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 88.

¹⁰⁹ Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 136.

candidate for governor. Samuel Dixon, editor of the *Southern Mercury*, was an ardent Hogg supporter, frequently publishing Hogg's speeches, trumpeting his campaign, and proclaiming, "The people have long regarded him as a friend and fearless advocate of their rights."¹¹⁰

Hogg earned this reputation by advocating anti-monopoly policies in Texas, particularly against railroads. The anti-monopoly legislation pushed by Hogg allowed the Hogg-Swayne Syndicate and other Texas interests to challenge Standard Oil after Spindletop, through the creation of the Texas Company (Texaco), moved Texas from a rural state to an emerging economic and political powerhouse with interests stretching from New York to Mexico.¹¹¹

Hogg received Texas Alliance support, despite his clear opposition to the subtreasury plan. Alliance leaders reconciled this by touting Hogg's support of a state Railroad Commission that would regulate railroad corporations in Texas. Though Alliance leaders had abandoned the yardstick principle, many rank-and-file Alliance members did not, demanding that their candidates support the subtreasury plan. As Barnes notes, "The potential impact of the subtreasury, however promising it might have been for tenant and yeoman farmers, was threatening to three powerful interest groups: bankers, agricultural commodity speculators, and profiteers of the crop-lien system of finance."¹¹²

¹¹⁰ McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 99; *Southern Mercury*, January 9, 1890; *Southern Mercury*, May 3, 1890.

¹¹¹ Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico*, 150.

¹¹² Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 121; *Southern Mercury*, April 10, 1890.

As a result of these struggles, Meitzen underwent a transformation from a local Democratic Party leader to a statewide leader of the emerging populist movement. He was elected as one of eight delegates from Lavaca County to the Democratic convention in San Antonio in August, 1890. He and other Alliance Democrats meant to make their presence felt at the convention. The *Galveston Daily News*, which regarded them as “extremists,” reported that they had captured control of the convention, but they were unable to prevent the subtreasury plan from being rejected as part of the state Democratic Party’s platform. Meitzen, “disgusted with the drunken antics of the Donk [Democratic Party]” at the convention, headed back to Lavaca County as a disgruntled Democrat and die-hard advocate of the subtreasury plan.¹¹³

The *Mercury* continued to campaign hard for Hogg, using the railroad commission issue as “a symbol of the struggle of the people to control the increasingly powerful corporations.”¹¹⁴ Hogg won the governorship and easily defeated the Republican candidate in Lavaca County by a margin of 2543 votes to 485.¹¹⁵

Immediately after the Texas Democratic Party’s rejection of the subtreasury plan, Alliance leader and long-time third-party advocate, William Lamb, began an extensive campaign to educate Texas farmers on the necessity of the subtreasury plan. In Lamb’s view, the subtreasury issue made a clear distinction between the

¹¹³ *Galveston Daily News*, March 10, August 13, 1890; *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914.

¹¹⁴ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 119.

¹¹⁵ *Hallettsville Herald*, November 27, 1890.

Democrats and a third party that would advance programs to help farmers and laborers. Through the subtreasury education campaign, Lamb sought to transform the NFA&IU into the People's Party.¹¹⁶

When the national Alliance met in Ocala, Florida, in December, 1890, representatives of the Colored Alliance and KOL also attended. Both of these organizations as well as western Alliance members were now firmly behind the push for independent political action and the creation of a new political party. However, the battle for a third party would be fought in the South, where Alliance members remained hesitant to launch a national People's Party. Macune compromised for the southern Alliance by proposing a conference of industrial farmer and labor organizations to meet in February, 1892, to revisit the issue of whether to create a third party. The Ocala convention adopted a platform similar to previous conventions and officially endorsed the subtreasury plan, which had now become a third-party issue. The question now was clear: Would southern Alliance members remain true to the subtreasury plan or the party of their fathers?¹¹⁷

The subtreasury plan was more than a simple economic plan; it represented something greater in the minds of farmers and laborers. For farmers in a rapidly industrializing country increasingly controlled by corporations, the subtreasury plan held out the hope of a more democratic market place. The cooperative crusade allowed farmers to envision a future free from the chains of the crop lien system and the furnishing merchant. Farmers yearned to be the independent yeomen once

¹¹⁶ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 148.

¹¹⁷ Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 137-138.

idealized by Thomas Jefferson. The Democratic Party, though claiming to be the “party of the people,” was proving to many farmers to be the party of big business.¹¹⁸

In Texas, Hogg angered many Alliance members by making members of the railroad commission appointed rather than elected. He further alienated them when he refused to appoint an Alliance member to the commission. On the other hand, the railroad commission did lower shipping rates within the state for grain, meal, flour, and cotton, and Hogg approved an anti-alien land bill to prohibit aliens from acquiring land titles in Texas. These actions and a future promise to prevent land corporations in Texas kept many farmers in the Democratic camp.¹¹⁹

For Alliance members such as Meitzen, however, Hogg’s actions were not enough. They demanded complete adherence to the Alliance platforms adopted at St. Louis and Ocala. In order to win converts to the subtreasury plan, the Alliance began an extensive educational campaign across the state. Alliance lecturers spoke at encampment meetings that resembled religious revivals and numbered into the thousands at times. These encampments became a hallmark of the insurgent agrarian movement in Texas that continued through its populist and, even later, its socialist phases.¹²⁰

In 1891, the Texas Alliance split into pro- and anti-Hogg factions. This split led to the formation of the People’s Party in Texas in August, 1891. From this

¹¹⁸ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 157-159.

¹¹⁹ *Hallettsville Herald*, February 5, 1891; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 164.

¹²⁰ *Hallettsville Herald*, July 30, 1891; Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 124.

factional struggle, Meitzen, who distinguished himself during this period as a capable defender of the subtreasury plan, rose from the ranks to become a statewide subtreasury leader.¹²¹

Throughout the month of April, he engaged in an extensive written debate in the pages of the *Hallettsville Herald* over the principles of the subtreasury plan. By September, his written defense of the plan appeared in the *Galveston Daily News*, a major daily newspaper of the time.¹²²

The split within the Alliance took a dramatic turn on March 4, 1891, when the Alliance friends of Governor Hogg issued what became known as the *Austin Manifesto*. The *Austin Manifesto* denounced the Alliance's legislative committee, complaining that it was taking the Alliance into politics and toward a union with the growing third-party movement. From this point forward, the Alliance was divided into two antagonistic wings, neither of which was willing to compromise.¹²³

At the April meeting of the Lavaca County Alliance, resolutions were passed denouncing the *Austin Manifesto* and endorsing the Ocala platform, including the subtreasury plan. Though denouncing the *Austin Manifesto*, the county Alliance had yet to take the third-party path. After the county meeting, the *Hallettsville Herald*, after interviewing "a number of well-informed" Alliance members, reported: "The *Herald* has not found a general third party sentiment in this section. The opinion

¹²¹ *Hallettsville Herald*, August 27, 1891.

¹²² *Hallettsville Herald*, April 9, 16, 23, 1891; *Galveston Daily News*, September 22, 1891.

¹²³ Roscoe Martin, *The People's Party in Texas: A Study in Third-Party Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1933), 36-37.

rather obtains that the best policy is to affect their purposes by influencing the present political organizations. But the order is essentially political.”¹²⁴

Although Lavaca County Alliance members thought it best to pursue a strategy of working within the Democratic Party, the party’s actions caused them to re-think their loyalty to the party of their fathers. For example, Hogg proposed that surplus money from public land sales be loaned to railroad corporations rather than placed in a public school fund. Former president of the United States, Grover Cleveland, the party’s likely candidate for president again in 1892, came out against the subtreasury plan and the free coinage of silver. Actions like these caused Lavaca County Alliance member W.P. Laughter to ask, “What is the Democratic party that we are required to sacrifice everything on its altar? ... We feel our hearts going out to our brethren of the north, and the hold the Democratic party had upon us begins to slip...”¹²⁵

The Ocala conference had compromised on the question of a third party by deciding to hold a conference on the issue in February, 1892. At this conference, third party activists, acting on their own, called for all reform organizations to meet in Cincinnati in May to form a new national party. In May, 1891, the Cincinnati conference adopted a familiar greenback critique platform, elected a national executive committee, and adopted the “People’s Party” as the name of the new party.

¹²⁴ *Hallettsville Herald*, April 16, 1891.

¹²⁵ *Hallettsville Herald*, April 9, 30, and May 7, 1891.

The Cincinnati conference received prominent coverage in newspapers across Texas, including Hallettsville.¹²⁶

As People's Party activists continued their work, Democratic leaders in the Alliance, such as Meitzen, pushed forward on their subtreasury education campaign. The Alliance encampment remained the main educational tool. One such encampment in July at Sulphur Springs drew 6,000 people. Though not touted as such, newspapers described the meeting as "strictly a third party affair."¹²⁷

Spirited on by the enthusiastic response that workers and farmers in Texas were giving to the creation of the People's Party in Cincinnati, Lamb called for a founding convention of the People's Party in Texas to take place in Dallas on August 17, 1891. Lamb, having been elected to the National Executive Committee of the party in Cincinnati, issued the convention call in person at a meeting of the Texas State Federation of Labor in July. That Lamb made such a call at a meeting of the State Federation of Labor, which was struggling to organize at the time, shows the continued alliance of workers and farmers after the Great Southwestern Strike. The People's Party convention met as planned, elected a state executive committee of seventeen (including two African Americans), and selected a platform committee.¹²⁸

Despite the creation of the People's Party in Texas, Lavaca County Alliance members remained within the Democratic fold. The *Hallettsville Herald* reported in October, 1891, that earlier enthusiasm for independent political action had given

¹²⁶ McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 107; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 139; *Hallettsville Herald*, May 21, 1891.

¹²⁷ *Hallettsville Herald*, July 30, 1891.

¹²⁸ *Hallettsville Herald*, June 11, 1891; Martin, *The People's Party in Texas*, 40-41.

way to “a spirit of moderation and caution” after national Alliance lecturer Ben Terrell, visited and gave speeches in the county. Terrell, according to the *Herald*, “unequivocally expressed himself as opposed to the formation of a new party, advising his hearers to seek redress through the Democratic Party.”¹²⁹

The subtresury split within the Democratic Party reached cataclysmic proportions shortly after Terrell’s lecture. The split would propel the subtresury Democrats such as Meitzen into the People’s Party. In late October, N. W. Finley, Chairman of the State Executive Committee of the Texas Democratic Party, issued a letter in which he argued that since the state convention of 1890 had rejected the subtresury plan, Alliance Democrats “should not be allowed to participate in Democratic primaries.”¹³⁰

Finley’s “ukase” enraged Alliance members, who now faced an ultimatum: either resign from the Alliance or quit the Democratic Party. In response to Finley, a secret conference of prominent Alliance members was held on November 14, 1891, in Dallas. Meitzen, who had become a recognized subtresury leader, attended, along with state Alliance president, Evan Jones, Alliance legislative committee head, Harry Tracy, and other state leaders. Upon returning to Hallettsville, Meitzen emphatically proclaimed, “We do not propose to be read out of the Democratic party by the dictum of one man. We are Democrats and Mr. Finley’s letter cannot change the fact.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ *Hallettsville Herald*, October 22, 1891.

¹³⁰ Martin, *The People’s Party in Texas*, 39-40.

¹³¹ Quoted in *Hallettsville Herald*, November 19, 1891.

On November 24, the Alliance leaders who met in Dallas issued what might be called the *Subtreasury Manifesto*, directed against Finley. The manifesto asserted their rights as “freemen having full possession of and control over [their] own conscience.” Calling themselves “true and loyal democrats,” they decided to support the subtreasury plan for the benefit of the people:

We believe in common with the great mass of laborers and producers, that during the past thirty years, if not ever since its formation, our federal government has been administered in the interest of capital, to the prejudice of labor. The tillers of the soil, the producers and property owners generally, and all other values, have submitted for many years to systematic robbery by the government, for the enrichment of capitalistic classes. . . to the details of the subtreasury plan we are not wedded . . . but upon the principles of the subtreasury plan we remain inflexible . . . without taking the advise of some ‘boss.’¹³²

In the midst of the factional struggle in the Democrat Party and the emergence of the People’s Party, the workers of the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railroad went on strike on December 28, 1891, demanding higher wages. The strike affected 680 miles of line across south and southwest Texas, including Hallettsville. In Hallettsville, the strike caused a cessation of mail delivery and rail travel in and out of the city, and hampered business operations. In keeping with the Farmers’ Alliance’s past support of the Southwestern Strike, the Lavaca County Alliance once again came to the aid of striking workers, passing a resolution expressing “heart-felt sympathy with the employees,” and supporting their calls for a wage increase. The few trains that ran through town were manned by strikebreakers and protected by well-armed U.S. Marshals and Pinkerton detectives. Area strike supporters tried but failed to get local hotels to refuse service to scabs, but did succeed in convincing

¹³² Manifesto reproduced in *Dallas Morning News*, November 25, 1891.

some would-be strikebreakers to seek employment elsewhere, instead. The strike ended on January 21, 1892, with the strikers failing to gain a wage increase but maintaining their former jobs. Though the strike failed, it demonstrated that the ‘movement culture’ of agrarian insurgency included workers as well as farmers.¹³³

As the People’s Party of Texas organized for its coming convention in February, 1892, Meitzen and the Subtreasury Democrats held a conference on February 10 in Dallas. The two hundred delegates in attendance, who constituted themselves as Jeffersonian Democrats, elected an executive committee that included Meitzen, and adopted a set of principles. The principles advocated the Ocala platform and included the by-now characteristic demands concerning land, transportation, and finance. The conference ended by calling for the creation of Democratic clubs to carry out the demands. Asked to comment on the Dallas conference, William Lamb, chairman of the executive committee of the People’s Party of Texas, retorted, “I expect no reform under neither of the old parties.” Lamb also expressed a concern that a deceitful Democratic Party might absorb the Democratic clubs being organized by the Jeffersonians.¹³⁴

As the national labor conference proposed by Macune to take place in St. Louis approached, the NFA&IU had alliances in thirty-six states and well over a million members. J. W. King, editor of the “Alliance Corner” in the *Hallettsville Herald*, began to promote the coming conference. When the conference convened in St. Louis on February 23, Alliance members far outnumbered representatives of

¹³³ *Hallettsville Herald*, January 7, 14, 21, 1892.

¹³⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, February 11, 1892.

other organizations, including the KOL and the Colored Alliance. After a rowdy conference at which opponents of a new party failed to derail the movement, a platform similar to that of the NFA&IU was adopted. More significantly, the conference urged all citizens who support the conference platform to organize public meetings on the last Saturday of March to ratify the demands and elect delegates to a national People's Party nominating convention in Omaha on July 4. The People's Party had now all but formally absorbed the NFA&IU.¹³⁵

After the St. Louis conference, a *Hallettsville Herald* reporter who interviewed Meitzen reported, "Mr. Meitzen while he questioned the wisdom of the action taken at St. Louis, yet said very emphatically that a decision meant a third party in Texas, and that in due time county and minor organizations would be formed wherever the Alliance had a membership sufficient to justify it." Meitzen had been slow to abandon the Democratic Party, but the Alliance came first. If furthering the work of the Alliance now meant leaving the Democratic Party, he was ready to take that step. On March 11, 1892, he and eleven other Alliance members in Lavaca County issued a call "To every lover of our country residing in Lavaca county irrespective of former political affiliation" to join them at a meeting in Hallettsville on March 26, 1892, to organize the People's Party in Lavaca County. Their appeal drew on the heritage of the American Revolution: "Bear in mind the noble ancestry from whom we descend. Follow the example set you by the patriots of 1776."¹³⁶

¹³⁵ *Hallettsville Herald*, January 14, 21, and February 11, 1892; McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 106, 130-131.

¹³⁶ *Hallettsville Herald*, March 3, 1892; *Hallettsville Herald*, March 11, 1892.

CHAPTER THREE

E.O. Meitzen and the People's Party, 1892-1896

With five hundred fellow citizens, the majority of them farmers, gathered before him, Meitzen ascended the platform in front of the Hallettsville courthouse on March 26, 1892. Gripped in his hand was a copy of the St. Louis platform. Loosening the paper from his hand, Meitzen, full of determination, read aloud the platform denouncing monopolies, demanding land reform, and calling for direct democracy, abolition of the national bank system, and the nationalization of transportation. After finishing, Meitzen read the same again, this time in German. Then someone else read the platform in Bohemian. Upon completion a show of hands was called for to approve the platform. The assembled crowd, as the *Hallettsville Herald* observed, “crossed the dead line that separated them from the party of their fathers and of their youth and manhood without regret, and with the enthusiasm of new converts some even administered a parting kick at its intangible corpus.” In this manner, the St. Louis platform gained approval and the People's Party of Lavaca County was formed.¹

The mass meeting elected Meitzen as chairman. Meitzen accepted the honor and acknowledged that it would be “no soft job.” Those gathered then went about

¹ *Hallettsville Herald*, March 31, 1892.

selecting the remaining officers and an executive committee representing the various communities in the county. Meitzen's younger brother, E.A., was elected to represent the town of Shiner. Meitzen, recognizing the large number of African Americans present, suggested they choose chairmen of their own to represent the county's black population. The meeting approved Meitzen's proposal, and African-American sections of the People's Party were organized in eight communities of Lavaca County. Another county convention was called for April 16, to elect delegates to state and district conventions.¹³⁸

The final act in leading subtresury Democrats into the People's Party came on April 11, 1892, in Dallas. There, in the Farmers' Alliance building, as the *Dallas Morning News* related, was "found a new infant, perhaps a giant at that. The child is the result of the marriage of the people's party and Jeffersonian democracy." Seven representatives each from the People's Party and the Jeffersonian Democrats met and upon agreeing on the need for relief measures from six-cent cotton and debt-ridden farms, merged their organizations into the People's Party in order to present "a solid front in the name of the farmers and laborers of the state." A convention was then called for June 24 in Dallas to create a permanent state organization and choose candidates for state offices.¹³⁹ The Farmers Alliance, though maintaining its independence as a separate organization, had become an appendage of the People's Party.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, April 12, 1892

As Lavaca County populists went about the business of organizing their new party, Meitzen was struck with a personal tragedy. On April 23rd, his brother, E.A., was found dead under a tree. He had shot himself in the heart with a shotgun. E.A., although he had joined his brother in the new party, had also recently become a successful businessman in Shiner. Described as a trustful and jolly man, E.A. was apparently too trusting and allowed others to steal his new-found wealth. A note found next to him under the tree, complained of “vultures who had fled beyond the law with his wealth.”¹⁴⁰

Undoubtedly still mourning the loss of his younger brother, Meitzen set about the task of organizing the People’s Party. Meitzen began a series of speaking tours across the region that did not let up until the November election. As the Hallettsville People’s Party elected to send fourteen whites and seven African-Americans to the upcoming Lavaca County convention, the new party spread into neighboring Gonzales and Fayette counties and nearby Brazoria County. On the same day his brother was found dead, Meitzen was in Frelsburg, Colorado County, as citizens organized the party in that county.¹⁴¹

The Democratic Party, having been initially caught off guard by the emergence of the People’s Party, quickly reorganized and went on the attack. The area point man for the Democrats was state representative J.W. Kirk. After the call for the first People’s Party convention in Lavaca County, Kirk called for democratic unity, believing that nine-tenths of the Alliance men were opposed to a third party. He

¹⁴⁰ Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family*, 4; *Hallettsville Herald*, April 28, 1892.

¹⁴¹ *Hallettsville Herald*, April 14, 1892; *Hallettsville Herald*, April 28, 1892.

vowed that the Democrats would take on Standard Oil and other trusts. Meitzen responded in the pages of the *Hallettsville Herald* by noting the Democratic Party's failure to respond to the repeated reform demands of labor organizations and its culpability in the rise of trusts and monopolies. "Therefore," Meitzen wrote, "I say cut loose from both old parties, drop our prejudice, let's come to the conclusion at last that the war is over, and let all who favor a government of, for and by the people, and not by and for political bosses and wirepullers, unite in one common cause." Meitzen further noted that if, according to Kirk, true Alliance men were opposed to a third party; Kirk must be the only true Alliance man in the county.¹⁴²

The Kirk-Meitzen exchange continued at the April 16th People's Party convention of Lavaca County. After the election of officers, Kirk requested and received an hour to address the convention. He then "proceeded to tell the audience that their only hope for alleviation of the burdens that oppressed them was in adhesion to the Democratic party." After Kirk continued in this vein for thirty-five minutes, the chairman declared that his time was up. The crowd then called for Meitzen, who went about rebutting Kirk's arguments. When Kirk began questioning Meitzen the chair declared Kirk out of order and warned that his interruptions would be tolerated no further.¹⁴³

Kirk settled the score with Meitzen when the two debated on May 28th at Hackberry. At the debate Kirk explained that hard times were simply a result of the cycle of natural laws. As Meitzen got up to speak, the steam whistle at the nearby

¹⁴² *Hallettsville Herald*, March 18, 31, 1892.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, April 21, 1892.

gin began blowing, so that in Meitzen's words, "I had to get into the middle of the crowd and exert myself to the utmost to make them hear me. Upon asking Mr. Kirk if that was a sample of his democracy, he replied sarcastically that the miller had a big head of steam to blow it off. This is absolutely the first time I had to debate against a steam whistle." The "steam whistle debate" remained a source of contention between the opposing sides for weeks to come.¹⁴⁴

While juvenile disruptive tactics remained a feature on the campaign trail, Democrats also attacked Populist loyalty to the South. The Democratic party in the South was firmly associated with the 'Bloody Shirt' of the Confederacy. Some felt it intolerable to those who came home maimed from the Civil War that Meitzen, "with his never tiring lungs," routinely called Democrats "bushwhackers," "grand rascals," and their party "a rotten old party."¹⁴⁵ As part of waving the "Bloody Shirt," Democrats also attacked the so-called Twelfth Plank of the February St. Louis conference. The Twelfth Plank called for Union soldiers to be paid the difference on their pensions between the depreciated currency they received and gold. Southern Democrats seized on this to claim a northern bias within the People's Party. Meitzen rebutted by pointing out that the issue in dispute was passed as a resolution, not a demand of the official platform, and that "the demands only mentioned money, land and transportation, but after the 200 old rebel soldier delegates and the 200 Yankee delegates met and shook hands across the bloody chasm and by a strong resolution

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., June 2, 30, 1892.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., June 9, 1892.

buried that dirty old rag, 'the bloody shirt,' together with the hate and prejudice engendered during the war."¹⁴⁶

After three months of relentless organizing across Texas, the People's Party state convention convened on June 23rd in Dallas. Lavaca County sent Meitzen, along with four other delegates, including Ben Bailey, an African-American from Hallettsville. At the convention the nearly eight hundred delegates approved the St. Louis national platform and an additional state platform. The Texas People's Party platform was the synthesis of nearly three decades of farm-labor insurgency in the state. The platform made the usual demands concerning land ownership and government ownership of railroads. In an effort to reach out to the state's laborers, the platform included demands for the eight-hour day, the regular payment of railroad workers, the establishment of a state bureau of labor, and the end of convict labor. The platform also included demands for an effective system of public schools, free text books in the public schools, and the use of the Australian, or secret ballot, in elections. After adopting what the *Dallas Morning News* called "anti-corporation ideas," the convention nominated Thomas L. Nugent, a Christian socialist District Judge from Stephenville, for governor and Marion Martin, for lieutenant governor. Nugent had been the ULP gubernatorial candidate in 1888.¹⁴⁷

Almost two weeks later, the national People's Party convention met from July 2nd to July 4th in Omaha. The convention adopted a platform similar to that approved in Texas with a few notable additions. At the top of the platform was the demand for

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., May 26, 1892.

¹⁴⁷ *Hallettsville Herald*, June 23, 30, 1892; *Dallas Morning News*, June 24, 1892.

the free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold at the ratio of 16 to 1, and for an increase in the amount of circulating currency to \$50 per capita. The rationale behind these demands was that an increase in money supply would result in an increase in prices for agricultural products, thus benefiting farmers. The platform also called for a graduated income tax and the nationalization of the telegraph and telephone industries.¹⁴⁸

In choosing national candidates, the fledgling People's Party faced a more difficult challenge. NFA&IU president L.L. Polk, the consensus choice as the party's presidential candidate before the convention, had died at the age of fifty-five on June 11. Lacking a clear candidate, the party nominated the old Greenback war-horse and Union general from Iowa, James B. Weaver, for president. In order to balance the ticket, ex-Confederate general James G. Field, of Virginia, was nominated for vice-president. The selection of a former Union general for president led to more waving of the "bloody shirt" across the South.¹⁴⁹

While the national convention met and concluded its business, Meitzen continued his vigorous speaking tour around central and east Texas promoting the People's Party. By the end of July, he had spread the word of populism across the counties of Colorado, Austin, Fort Bend, Wharton, and Brazoria. An account of the Colorado County People's Party convention described Meitzen as "perhaps the best political economist in the state."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ *Hallettsville Herald*, July 7, 1892.

¹⁴⁹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 171-172; *Hallettsville Herald*, July 7, 1892.

¹⁵⁰ *Hallettsville Herald*, August 4, 1892; *Dallas Morning News*, August 1, 1892.

As early as the Fayette County People's Party convention in June, Meitzen's name had surfaced as a possible candidate for Congress in the tenth district that stretched from Hallettsville to Galveston. In August at the People's Party congressional convention, he did receive the nomination for Congress. Upon accepting the nomination, Meitzen resigned as chairman of the Lavaca County People's Party in order to continue campaigning.¹⁵¹

One group that Populists hoped to win to their cause was African Americans. The new party did attract a limited number of African-Americans, as indicated by their presence at the local founding meeting in Lavaca County and at the state convention in Dallas. At the largely symbolic People's Party primary election on August 27th in Hallettsville, one-half of the one hundred votes cast came from African Americans. However, populism at this stage did not attract enough African Americans to constitute a wholesale break from the Republican Party. For example, a report indicated that after many efforts in Wharton County to win African Americans over to the third party, Populists failed to make much progress. Many African Americans still held deep-seated loyalty to the party of Lincoln. Also, some African Americans supported Hogg because of statements he made condemning lynching. This in effect split the African-American vote three ways in the 1892 election in Texas.¹⁵²

Populists also put a lot of time into recruiting laborers. Meitzen traveled specifically to Galveston to court the labor vote. Galveston served as the major port

¹⁵¹ *La Grange Journal*, June 16, 1892; *Hallettsville Herald*, August 11, 1892.

¹⁵² *Hallettsville Herald*, August 18, September 1, 22, 1892.

along the Texas coast, employing a large number of rail and dockworkers. On September 4, 1892, the *Galveston Daily News* reported, “Meitzen is known throughout the Tenth as the ‘learned blacksmith.’” Meitzen, describing his campaign, noted,

I ... have spoken wherever I could find a crowd to listen, and have talked with whomever would argue with me ... If I drove by a store and saw five or six or more men there I would jump out and talk with them and explain the People’s party teachings. Then I would leave them a lot of circulars and would drive away, having made several converts. This I did on every occasion. If I met a man in a crowd of Democrats who wanted to discuss the political problems with me I always discussed with him – on the corner or anywhere else – and so I made converts among the listeners if I did not convert my opponent ... We are making a good fight, and we are the only party representing organized labor.¹⁵³

Meitzen’s Galveston campaign trip coincided with the state’s second Labor Day celebration. He rode in a Farmers’ Alliance-sponsored carriage behind a contingent of KOL organized bakers. Following the parade, Meitzen and Nugent, along with area labor leaders, addressed a large crowd of three thousand made up of labor organizations and area Alliance members.¹⁵⁴

By September, according to the *Fort Worth Gazette*, the People’s Party in Texas had 113,000 members and 2,800 clubs across the state. The campaign in Lavaca County concluded with a three-day encampment in Weimar’s Pleasure Park from October 28th till October 30th. Speakers included Nugent, “Cyclone” Davis, Meitzen, Ben Terrell, women’s rights advocate and future socialist Mrs. Bettie Gay,

¹⁵³ *Hallettsville Herald*, September 15, 1892; *Galveston Daily News*, September 4, 1892.

¹⁵⁴ *Galveston Daily News*, September 6, 1892.

and Stump Ashby. The encampment also included refreshments, music, and balls each night with “dancing to entertain those that are fond of the ‘light fantastic.’”¹⁵⁵

Although the encampment appears to have been a success, as noted in the *Dallas Morning News*, the local *Hallettsville Herald* gave the event little coverage. As long as the local Farmers’ Alliance was firmly rooted in the Democratic Party, the *Herald* gave prominent coverage to Alliance happenings. Once the Alliance went further down the third-party route, however, the pro-Hogg bias of the *Herald* tainted its reporting of the adversary party. A lack of newspaper coverage was not the only handicap faced by the populists. In Comanche, Populist newspaper editor Thomas Gaines had his printing office destroyed by a mob of Hogg supporters. The mob then moved to his home. After they failed to burn it, they smashed the windows out with his family inside. Meitzen experienced the wrath of Hogg supporters during another trip to Galveston in November before the election. While Meitzen and Harry Tracy attempted to speak on the corner of Market and Tremont streets, a group of Hogg men surrounded and prevented them from speaking.¹⁵⁶

The People’s Party faced a difficult task in challenging the Hogg machine around the state. Hogg realized the large role Alliance support played in propelling him to the governorship in 1890. As a result, the 1892 Hogg platform was designed to win over possible third party converts. The platform included populist demands of free silver, a graduated income tax, the abolition of the national banking system, and maintaining the railroad commission. However, the platform also specifically

¹⁵⁵ *Hallettsville Herald*, September 29, 1892; *Hallettsville Herald*, October 13, 1892; "GAY, BETTIE MUNN," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

¹⁵⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, November 2, 6, 1892; *Hallettsville Herald*, November 10, 17, 1892.

denounced the subtreasury plan and government ownership of communication and transportation. For some old-guard democrats, the Hogg platform conceded too much to reform demands and stood in direct conflict with the national platform particularly on free silver. In opposition to Hogg, a Democratic faction split from the state convention and nominated George Clark for governor. The Republican Party, not wanting to enter an already crowded race, endorsed Clark for governor.¹⁵⁷

The November election registered impressive gains for the new party, but not enough to stop Meitzen from being soundly defeated in a three-way race with the old parties. In the nine-county district Meitzen received 4297 votes compared to 13,017 for Democratic railroad executive Walter Gresham, and 9453 votes for Republican A.J. Rosenthal. However, Meitzen did win a plurality in Gonzales County. The county's high farm tenancy rate of over forty-one percent perhaps contributed to the Meitzen vote. Meitzen finished second in his own Lavaca County with 1050 votes to 1725 for Gresham. Meitzen did rather poorly in the remaining counties, including Galveston. Rosenthal won Colorado County, which had strong Black Republican voters dating back to Reconstruction.¹⁵⁸

Hogg won with 43.7% of the statewide vote, Clark finished second with 30.6%, and Nugent third with 24.9%, representing 108,483 votes. The 108,483 votes received by Nugent only amounted to half of the Alliance membership at its peak. Many workers and farmers remained loyal to the party of their fathers and feared the consequences of an openly pro-corporate Clark victory. The urban areas with their

¹⁵⁷ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 138-139.

¹⁵⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, November 11, 1892; *Hallettsville Herald*, November 17, 1892; "GONZALES COUNTY," *Handbook of Texas Online*; "COLORADO COUNTY," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

larger concentrations of laborers all went with Hogg. The workers and farmers of Texas decided to give Hogg another chance to back his populist sounding rhetoric with action. The Populists did elect one member to the senate and eight representatives to the one hundred and twenty-eight member House of Representatives.¹⁵⁹

In the state's presidential returns, the Populists did not fare any better. Weaver totaled 23.5%, or 99,418 votes. Cleveland carried the state with 56.6% of the vote. Weaver's total did surpass the Republican vote of 19.3% for Harrison. Nationally, Cleveland won with 46% of the vote, followed by Harrison with 43%. Weaver finished a distant third with 8.5%, winning only five mainly western states.¹⁶⁰

When the Texas People's party executive committee met at the end of November, however, they did so with an air of optimism. They took heart that one out of every four voters in Texas went populist, a good number for a party in its first election. The committee also made accusations of voter fraud by claiming that the People's Party in many places was denied representation on the boards of election managers that counted the votes, and "that every sinister and corrupt expedient known to practical politics was resorted to break our ranks and the fidelity of our people, and that in certain localities many of our votes were not counted, ..." They also pointed to the "specter" of the force bill (a law that would have used Federal marshals to enforce black voting rights) pushed by northern Republicans and the

¹⁵⁹ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 142; Martin, *The People's Party in Texas*, 210-211.

¹⁶⁰ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 144; Unger, *These United States*, 961.

image of Federal troops possibly returning to the South, as a factor in keeping many southerners in the Democratic camp.¹⁶¹

In evaluating their campaign performance, the state executive committee acknowledged the lack of support they gained from labor. “Our people crowded to the front in the late campaign; up bearing the banner of labor’s cause, but alas! they did not always find the city laborer where the shadow of that banner fell upon the uprising host. Yet he will be there when the next battle is joined, and when the farmer and artisan link together in the ties of a true fraternity, will stand side by side in the perilous places, to deliver the last shot and wield the last blow in defense of the common cause.”¹⁶²

The role of labor has garnered much debate in the historiography of populism. Lawrence Goodwyn pushes the prevailing view on labor and populism in his work *Democratic Promise*:

At the moment the People’s Party appeared, the urban American labor movement, while increasingly “aware” in economic terms, had developed no means of spreading a corresponding political consciousness to the huge working class ghettos of the nation’s cities.... Thus in a fundamental cultural sense, the American labor movement was simply not yet ready for mass insurgent politics.¹⁶³

However, a counter to Goodwyn could very well argue that the labor movement during the populist era had a political consciousness (though flawed as was the populist) that, if anything, equaled and in fact predated the Populists.

¹⁶¹ *Hallettsville Herald*, December 1, 15, 1892.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, December 15, 1892.

¹⁶³ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 176.

In 1890, the movement for the eight-hour day culminated on May 1 with mass demonstrations and strikes across the country. This “unprecedented show of force” had the effect of elevating May Day into an international workers holiday across the world. Surely May Day, 1890, could be viewed in more than equal terms with the Farmers’ Alliance courthouse rallies of June, 1888. Just as the numerous workers’ strikes of the era out numbered the jute boycott of 1889. Organizationally the Alliance had sub-alliances and the labor movement had union locals, through which flowed the grass-roots activism of the agrarian and labor movements. The Alliance got its start in 1877, the same year as the Great Railroad Strike that crippled most of the nation’s railroads. The Great Southwestern Strike of 1886 witnessed farmers and laborers working together and provided the agrarian movement in Texas with invaluable experience.¹⁶⁴

Rather than dismissing the labor movement, as Goodwyn does, the question to be asked is why did labor not flock to the Populist banner? On the surface, Goodwyn is correct in noting how “the courts, the press, the National Guard, governors, legislatures, and the Pinkertons all worked in harmony to defeat workers...”¹⁶⁵ Government repression, alone, however, does not explain why workers did not vote for The People’s Party. The answer to this goes back to the 1870s and a counter argument to Goodwyn that views the labor movement as more politically experienced and conscious than the populist movement.

¹⁶⁴ Farrell Dobbs, *Revolutionary Continuity: The Early Years, 1848-1917* (New York: Monad Press, 1980), 78-79.

¹⁶⁵ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 175.

The workers movement went through a political lesson with electoral politics in the 1870s. Militant workers had experienced limited electoral success through the Workingmen's Party of the United States and National Labor Union in the late 1860s and early 1870s. After the defeat of the 1877 Railroad Strike, many of the independent labor parties that spontaneously appeared during the strike merged with the Greenback Party in 1878, resulting in the formation of the GLP. As noted by Hild, the GLP in Texas served as a proto-Populist Party, providing much of the platform and leadership for the People's Party. In 1880, the GLP ran Weaver for president and in the process subordinated labor's demands to currency reform issues. Weaver made a poor showing, receiving only around 300,000 votes compared to the over 4.5 million for winning Republican candidate James Garfield. Why would workers support Weaver in 1892 when their experience in 1880 resulted in futility?¹⁶⁶

After the election, Meitzen accepted an appointment as assistant state lecturer for the Farmers' Alliance. The Lavaca County Alliance, realizing the large amount of time Meitzen would be spending as he lectured across the state, decided to close down the Lavaca County Mercantile Co-op, of which Meitzen had been general manager for the past two years. Meitzen spent much of 1893 lecturing in German and English across Texas on the topic of "Hard Times and the Way Out."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Dobbs, *Revolutionary Continuity*, 58-59; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 11.

¹⁶⁷ *Dallas Morning News*, January 8, 1893; *Hallettsville Herald*, February 23, May 11, August 3, 1893.

As political scientist Roscoe Martin observed, “The keynote of the People’s Party peace time campaign was *education*.”¹⁶⁸ At the start of the new year, the Texas People’s Party made an effort to establish party organs throughout the state, regarding further education of the public on the party’s platform as a key for success in the next round of elections. Foremost of the papers established was the *Texas Advance*, of Fort Worth, which in a short period moved to Dallas. After a few years of struggling due to organizational and financial difficulties, the *Texas Advance* ended its run in 1894. At this point, the *Southern Mercury*, the main organ of the state Farmers’ Alliance, became the official organ of both the Alliance and People’s Party, a more than symbolic example of how the Alliance was rapidly losing itself in the new party. A joint state leadership meeting of the Alliance and People’s Party in August, 1893, furthered this trend when each endorsed the other’s demands and launched a joint educational campaign. At this point, as McMath observes, the Alliance “was virtually a paper organization.”¹⁶⁹

Taking their cue from state leaders, the Lavaca County People’s Party met in August and decided to establish an official organ in Lavaca County. The funding came from inducing stockholders of the defunct Alliance co-operative store to reinvest in a Populist paper. In November, Meitzen, along with four other Populists, purchased the *Hallettsville New Era*. Meitzen, who was named editor, vowed, “The basis of my editorial views will at all times be the principles of the present platform of the People’s party.” Meitzen, a former teacher, in his words now “became an

¹⁶⁸ Martin, *The People’s Party in Texas*, 162 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶⁹ *Hallettsville Herald*, January 5, August 31, 1893; Martin, *The People’s Party in Texas*, 191-192; McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 148.

educator of the grown-up people,” or as local historian Paul Boethel put it, he became a plague on “the Establishment.” From 1892 to 1895 the number of Texas reform papers grew from twenty-one to eighty-five. By 1914, however, the *New Era* remained “the only populist paper that stayed alive and never went back to the old parties.”¹⁷⁰

As the People’s Party set upon an ambitious educational campaign in 1893, the nation was hit with its worst economic depression until the 1930s. Cotton sales dropped by 25%, iron sales by 38%, and dry good sales by 20%. During the year, 15,000 businesses failed, causing widespread unemployment and financial hardship. Among industrial workers, unemployment reached 20%.¹⁷¹ With the country in a full-blown depression, the populist message struck home to the nation’s workers and farmers.

Key events during the election year of 1894 further convinced Populists of the righteousness of their crusade. Beginning in March, a group of unemployed workers began a protest march to Washington, D.C., from Massillon, Ohio. The group, led by Jacob Coxey, and popularly called Coxey’s Army, desired to draw attention to the predicament of unemployed workers and called for a federal government works program. When the marchers, numbering around five hundred, reached Washington, Coxey and other leaders of the march were arrested for walking on the Capitol grass without their grievances being heard. Coxey’s arrest served to underline the populist

¹⁷⁰ *Hallettsville Herald*, July 27, November 9, 1893; *Dallas Morning News*, August 5, 1893; *Texas Advance*, November 18, 1893; Martin, *The People’s Party in Texas*, 193; *The Rebel*, July, 25, 1914; Paul C. Boethel, *LaBaca* (Columbus, TX: Butler Office Supply and Printing Company, 1997), 37; U.S. Congress, *Senate Commission on Industrial Relations*, 9143. Unfortunately, issues of the *New Era* before March, 1899, have been lost to history.

¹⁷¹ *Hallettsville Herald*, January 4, 1894; McMath, *American Populism*, 181.

contention that Congress represented the interest of Wall Street and not the people.¹⁷²

Of greater magnitude than Coxey's Army was the Pullman strike that began outside Chicago in May, when 3,000 workers struck the Pullman railcar company over wages, high rent in the company town, and union rights. The strike, backed by Eugene Debs and the American Railway Union, soon spread and rail service out of Chicago was paralyzed. Utilizing the new strike-busting weapon of the court injunction and the tried-and-true use of National Guard troops, the rail bosses and their allies in the government fought back. Debs and other union leaders were arrested and without approval from the governor of Illinois, President Cleveland sent in 2,000 federal troops to crush the strike. After months of struggle, the strike went down to defeat in August, after the American Railway Union was destroyed and twenty-five workers were killed. To many workers and farmers raised on the ideals of the American Revolution, it seemed that something was fundamentally wrong with the capital-dominated government on all levels. As the *Texas Advance* stated, "The colossal power of the United States government is now being used to place the necks of all American laborers completely and permanently under the grinding heel of organized corporate greed, and for the avowed purpose of crushing the last spark of patriotism, independence and manhood out of every American who eats his bread in the sweat of his face."¹⁷³

¹⁷² Unger, *These United States*, 576.

¹⁷³ Samuel Yellen, *American Labor Struggles, 1877-1934* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2004), 114, 125, 136; *Texas Advance*, July 14, 1894.

Texas Populists continued to seek the support of labor when they met in convention on June 20, 1894, in Waco. The convention adopted planks that called for the eight-hour day, abolition of convict labor, a state bureau of labor, the creation of a state board of arbitration to settle disputes between workers and corporations, and government ownership of railroads and telegraph service. Debs expressed populism's growing appeal to labor: "I am a populist, and am in favor of wiping both the old parties out so they will never come into power again. I have been a democrat all my life and am ashamed to admit it. I want every one of you to go to the polls and vote the populist ticket." A mass meeting of Dallas labor organizations in August would also endorse the populist ticket.¹⁷⁴

In the nomination speeches of Nugent for governor and Martin for lieutenant governor, the *Dallas Morning News* reported, "Negro and white man, ex-slave and ex-master, from the same chairs gave thanks that the barriers of race prejudice have been smashed and that hereafter at least in Texas all men of whatever political conviction can vote according to their judgment and not according to color, race or previous condition of servitude."¹⁷⁵ The color line seemingly was shattered. The hopes of a biracial alliance of workers and farmers, and its ramifications for society at-large, were now tied to the People's Party.

Meitzen, now recognized as a state leader because of the strong campaign he ran for Congress against "the greatest aristocrat in Texas, Walter Gresham," was nominated for the office of state comptroller. The issue of prohibition played a large

¹⁷⁴ *Texas Advance*, July 7, 1894; *Southern Mercury*, August 30, October 25, 1894.

¹⁷⁵ *Dallas Morning News*, June 22, 1894.

role in the nomination of Meitzen, a German-American, for statewide office. Many German-Americans believed that the People's Party favored prohibition because of the influence of prohibition leaders in the party. Martin, for example, had joined the Populists from the Prohibition Party. To ease anti-prohibition fears, the convention adopted a plank in favor of local self-government, suggesting that communities could decide for themselves issues such as prohibition. German voters strongly opposed prohibition, seeing "Sunday Beer" as a right of hard work. German-language Democratic newspapers came out hard against Meitzen, whose nomination they viewed as pandering to German voters. The *Texas Vorwärts* called him a "German worm dangling from the political fishhook of the Populists to attract German bites."¹⁷⁶

While rank and file Populists pushed the labor planks of their platform, the silver issue began to draw more attention. The silver issue achieved national prominence after President Cleveland called Congress into a special session in August 1893 in order to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890. After months of public debate, Congress repealed the part of the act that required the government to purchase silver on a monthly basis. As McMath explains, "The silver issue had become in the eyes of some farmers and other debtors, a panacea for increasing the money supply and (they believed) for reversing America's long deflationary slide." The government's repeal of the purchasing clause of the Sherman Act was thus viewed by these elements as a major cause of the financial depression, and as stated in the Texas populist platform, part of the "persistent

¹⁷⁶ *Texas Advance*, April 7, June 30, 1894; Martin, *The People's Party in Texas*, 107-108; *Dallas Morning News*, June 22, 1894.

efforts of the favored classes to force the legal enactment of the gold standard, efforts which leave no doubt of the existence of a wider conspiracy in England and Europe to dominate the finances of the world.”¹⁷⁷

The rise of the silver issue to the detriment of other Populist demands did not happen on its own. Goodwyn calls the silver issue a “shadow movement” within populism. If silver was a “shadow movement,” it was one that overshadowed everything the Populists did for the next few years. The debate over free silver took place anywhere but in the shadows, it stood out as one of the major issues of the 1890s. Free silver created a conflict within the populist movement that brought about the effectual end of the People’s Party.

The debate over silver within the populist movement also revealed fundamental differences in how various reformers viewed the economic crises of capitalism. On September 8, 1892, an article in the *Galveston Daily News* by Judge Hans Teichmueller, of La Grange, discussed these differences. One perspective stressed that the economic problems of capitalism were the result of political corruption and mistakes. According to this view, political remedies were needed to solve a temporary economic problem. At the same time, Teichmueller warned about a more dangerous, road to reform, one that was based on more hostile attitude toward capital and an underlying view of economic crises as part and parcel of the capitalist system. This analysis warned Teichmueller might lead to the rise of

¹⁷⁷ McMath, *American Populism*, 183; *Hallettsville Herald*, August 24, November 2, 1893.

socialist ideals. The silver debate within the People's Party helped to infuse socialist ideology into the ranks of populism.¹⁷⁸

With the rapid national expansion of the Farmers' Alliance and its blending into the People's Party, the populist movement incorporated individuals accustomed to a different brand of politics than the more insurgent-minded Texans. Foremost among these individuals was national chairman of the People's Party, Herman E. Taubeneck. According to Goodwyn, Taubeneck and those of his ilk, including Weaver, came from a political experience in which they represented small pressure groups rather than a mass movement. As a result, they took a brokerage approach to politics that sought to achieve their goals through accommodation with the two major parties. The economic depression that began in 1893 also made professional politicians such as Taubeneck and Weaver, desperate for political office, with a fixed salary, and access to the spoils of office.¹⁷⁹

To Taubeneck and a significant number of other national leaders, the silver issue allowed them to put into practice their brand of accommodationist brokerage politics. Sizable silver wings existed in both the Democratic and Republican parties. From 1889 to 1890, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Washington, Idaho, and Wyoming were granted statehood, thus adding twelve senators to Congress that bolstered the power of silver-mine owners who backed free-silver candidates. In the West, Populists had achieved electoral success in many states by fusing with either free-silver Republicans or Democrats. Taubeneck worked to fuse on a national level

¹⁷⁸ *Galveston Daily News*, September 8, 1892.

¹⁷⁹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 179; Robert F. Durden, *The Climax of Populism: The Election of 1896* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1965), x.

all of the reform forces into one party through the issue of free silver. This plan had disastrous consequences for the future of the People's Party.¹⁸⁰

With the financial backing of silver-mine owners, free-silver became the most talked about issue of the day. Silver interests backed the publication of William Harvey's pro-silver *Coin's Financial School*, making it a national bestseller. Democrats who desired to distance themselves from the disastrous 'goldbug policies' of Cleveland became silverites. William Jennings Bryan was made editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*, which was owned by silver interests, and he began actively campaigning for silver. When the American Bimetallic League met in Chicago of August, 1893, it claimed to be the "biggest non-political convention ever held in America," with eight hundred delegates from forty-two states. Taubeneck, wanting a part of the spoils, sought campaign contributions from silver mining interests.¹⁸¹

In his 1894 campaign for comptroller, Meitzen stumped across the state on the issues of government ownership of the railroads and free silver. The *Hallettsville Herald*, edited by Democratic biased C.F. Lehmann, gave only scant coverage to Meitzen's campaign. Lehmann wrote, "The *Herald* does not vilify those who do not belong to the democratic party. Chastisement is not the proper remedy for an erring child." The *Herald* had reported on Meitzen's 1892 campaign for Congress.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Unger, *These United States*, 577.

¹⁸¹ McMath, *American Populism*, 200; Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 217-218; *Hallettsville Herald*, August 10, 1893.

¹⁸² *Hallettsville Herald*, June 7, September 13, 1894.

The Texas People's Party in the 1894 election increased its vote total over the number of votes received in the election of 1892. State populist chairman Ashby declared on the day after the election that Nugent had won, but the official count gave Democrat Charles Culberson 49% of the vote, followed by Nugent with 36%. This showed a 25% decline for the Democrats since 1892 and an 11% increase for the Populists. Nugent won fifty-nine of Texas's two hundred and twenty-nine counties. Populists won twenty-two seats in the state House and two in the state Senate.¹⁸³

Other than Nugent, Meitzen received more votes than any other statewide populist candidate with 149,859 votes. This was not enough to beat the 216,240 votes of his Democratic opponent R.W. Finley. The "German worm" did not attract as many "German bites" as hoped for. Lavaca County was the only county with a large German population that went populist. In the county results Meitzen out polled Finley by a margin of 2,134 to 1,682 votes. The people of Lavaca County also favored Nugent over Culberson by 426 votes and elected a populist-backed county judge, James Ballard. The local populist campaign attacked the Democratic establishment by claiming they were allowing the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railroad to avoid paying its county taxes.¹⁸⁴

Despite the gains of the 1894 election, Populists had reason to believe that they were the victims of widespread voter fraud. On November 20, Meitzen attended an

¹⁸³ *Dallas Morning News*, November 8, 17, 1894; *Galveston Daily News*, November 15, 1894; Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 156

¹⁸⁴ *Galveston Daily News*, December 22, 1894; Martin, *The People's Party in Texas*, 106; *Hallettsville Herald*, October 25, November 22, 1894; Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Lavaca County Election Results, 1894, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

emergency meeting of the People's Party state executive committee in Waco. The committee claimed, "There has been frauds, intimidation, miscounts and open violations of the election laws." Populists contended that county commissioner courts controlled by local Democrats were responsible for widespread ballot miscounts. Democrats also used the White Man's Union in many African-American strongholds to maintain white supremacy and Democratic rule through harassment and buying of black votes. Populist efforts to prove voter fraud in order to change the election results went for naught. In order not to lose momentum from the election, the Texas Populist leader decided to begin the 1896 election campaign right away, using education as the main vehicle to convince voters, both black and white, of the need to vote populist.¹⁸⁵

Nationally, Taubeneck tried to use the populist electoral gains to make the People's Party the party of free silver. The few populist-backed candidates elected to the U.S. Congress had done so through fusion on the issue of free silver. Taubeneck called a conference of populist leaders to meet on December 28, 1894, in St. Louis in order to eliminate the entire 1892 Omaha platform except for the silver plank. The purpose of the St. Louis conference was well-known as Taubeneck made his intentions clear to the press that he intended the People's Party to stand on the silver plank alone. If Taubeneck thought a majority of populist leaders would approve of his new course, he found out otherwise in St. Louis. As the *Southern Mercury* reported, "The effort of a few would be leaders of the people's party at the St. Louis

¹⁸⁵ *Hallettsville Herald*, November 15, 1894; *Dallas Morning News*, November 22, 1894; Martin, *The People's Party in Texas*, 178, 236; *Southern Mercury*, December 6, 1894.

conference to commit the party to silver to the shelving of the balance of the Omaha platform utterly failed.”¹⁸⁶

At St. Louis, a coalition of Texas radicals and Chicago socialists headed by reform editor Henry Demarest Lloyd beat back the silver plans of Taubeneck and Weaver. This coalition began a working relationship in defense of the Omaha platform that climaxed at the 1896 national convention of the People’s Party. The collaboration between the two groups over the next two years began a slow process in which a number of Texas radicals made a transformation from populism to socialism, among them E.O. Meitzen.

With Taubeneck’s plans derailed in St. Louis, the struggle between the fusionists and the middle-of-the-roaders (as the anti-fusionists called themselves, refusing to take either the Democratic or Republican side) intensified. *The National Watchman*, a Taubeneck-backed populist journal that worked with the Democratic silver lobby, complained that “the wicked and foolish surrender to the Chicago socialists by the St. Louis meeting has cost the populist party too much already.” Milton Park, editor of the *Southern Mercury* and recently elected national president of the National Reform Press Association, called such talk “nonsense,” insisting that if they were socialists so is the U.S. Constitution.¹⁸⁷

In between the national conventions, the national and numerous state reform press associations served as the organized opposition to Taubeneck’s fusion plans. The National Reform Press Association meeting, held in Kansas City in February,

¹⁸⁶ *Southern Mercury*, December 6, 1894, January 3, 1895.

¹⁸⁷ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 218, 241; *Southern Mercury*, February 7, March 7, 14, 1895.

1895, voted unanimously to preserve the Omaha platform. Park put the fusionists on notice: “Taubeneck and Weaver had better practice wrestling with a cyclone before they undertake to sidetrack the Omaha platform.”¹⁸⁸

As editor of the *Hallettsville New Era*, Meitzen attended in May the meeting of the Texas Reform Press Association in Dallas, which passed a resolution “That we unhesitatingly oppose any fusion or alliance with any faction or party at the sacrifice of a single principle enunciated in the Omaha platform.” Other resolutions passed at the meeting denounced the sale of government bonds and called for a national income tax.¹⁸⁹

Expressing the political mindset of Texas populists was the People’s Party state executive committee’s address to the reform press meeting. Jointly authored by Meitzen and eight other populist leaders on behalf of the executive committee, the address shows an evolving class-consciousness and antagonism towards finance capital:

The doctrines of vested rights and the sanctity of private property, so dear to the Anglo-Saxon heart, have been perverted to build bulwarks of defense around the unjust acquisitions of the rich and to break down the barriers once erected around the possessions of the poor. Thus the wealth produced by labor has been taken to fill the overflowing coffers of the indolent rich, while the agencies of the most powerful government on the globe have been employed to put shackles upon the laboring man.

The address blasted the corporate take-over of government, a recent U.S. Supreme Court’s decision against the income tax, and the denial of habeas corpus and jailing

¹⁸⁸ *Southern Mercury*, March 7, 14, 1895.

¹⁸⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, May 30, 1895.

of Eugene Debs for asserting the rights of workingmen. The address also cautioned against the growth of rampant militarism across the nation as the U.S. prepared to intervene in the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain: “Thus does plutocracy in times of peace prepare to repress the rising spirit of freedom among the masses and provide itself with the means of perpetuating those unjust advantages which have enabled it to absorb so much of the country’s wealth.” In confronting the divide-and-conquer attempts of the pro-corporate press which claimed that the predominately protestant People’s Party supported the anti-catholic American Protective Association (APA), the Texas executive committee’s address declared that “no populist should champion the cause within the party lines of the A.P.A. order, ...” The duty of populists, according to the address, was to focus on the principles of land, transportation, and financial reform.¹⁹⁰

In order to more effectively reach the German speakers of Texas, Meitzen advocated with Harry Tracy the need for a German-language populist paper. The Reform Press Association agreed to start one in San Antonio, but for some reason the paper never got off the ground. Meitzen then took upon himself the responsibility of publishing a German populist newspaper. On January 31, 1896, *Der Deutsche Anzeiger*, run by Meitzen in Hallettsville, made its appearance as the first German-language populist paper in Texas. Meitzen and other Texas populists continued to spread the populist message to as wide an audience as possible.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, May 30, 1895.

¹⁹¹ *Dallas Morning News*, May 30, 1895; *Hallettsville Herald*, February 6, 1896.

In an effort to reach African Americans in early 1896, Meitzen printed in the *New Era* a letter from J.B. Rayner to the African Americans of Lavaca County. Rayner, the state's leading populist African-American orator, urged the county's black citizens to "not make promises or pledges to any democrat," and stressed that the Democratic party was an enemy to all blacks in the south. The Democratic *Hallettsville Herald* responded by printing a letter from a local African-American, W.J. Stevens. Stevens, in the same vein of Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" which was delivered three months earlier, replied by chiding Rayner to mind his own affairs, Stevens emphasized that blacks in the county had always lived under a democratic administration, "and we have nothing very serious (all things considered) to complain of." Furthermore, Stevens recommended that Rayner should keep his addresses limited to the black journals of Texas, and that blacks should tend to their own business and be thankful for what they have.¹⁹²

As the reform editors continued their campaign to educate farmers and laborers on the principles of the Omaha platform, Taubeneck increased his fusion efforts. Using money donated to help defray the expenses of the People's Party national executive committee, Taubeneck, Weaver, and their lieutenants traveled to the numerous state and congressional district conventions of the party in order to promote fusion plans and see that pro-fusion supporters were selected as delegates to the coming national convention. The representation of each state was also fixed in order to ensure a solid pro-fusion convention. Texas, which claimed 178,000 straight populist votes in the last election, was given only 103 delegates, while the pro-fusion

¹⁹² *Hallettsville Herald*, January 16, 1896.

North Carolina with 46,000 populist votes was allowed 95 delegates. New York, with less than 8,000 votes received an allotment of 54 delegates, and Kansas, with 127,000 votes, obtained through fusion, was allowed 95 delegates.¹⁹³

Taubeneck also made sure that the date of the populist national convention played into his fusion plans. Middle-of-the-roaders favored an early convention in order to stake their claim as the party of true reform. Taubeneck argued for a convention date after both the Democratic and Republican conventions, since it was unlikely that either party would nominate a pro-silver candidate, and lead to the fusion of old party silverites fusing with the populists. If one of the parties did nominate a silverite, the populists could then join in a united campaign for free silver. The Taubeneck-controlled national committee thus chose the date of July 22, 1896, to hold the populist convention in St. Louis, two weeks after the Democratic convention. To further facilitate a fusion of silver forces, the American Bimetallic League, which politically and financially backed Taubeneck's efforts, created a fourth party, the National Silver Party, and decided to hold their convention at the same date and place as the populists' convention.¹⁹⁴

Rank-and-file populists and reform editors began to see Taubeneck's convention plans as a trap. The *Southern Mercury* reacted by running an article entitled "Is There Danger Ahead? – The plans are already laid to capture the populist convention." Particularly disturbing were the plans to hold the convention during the same time and location as the silver convention and Taubeneck's own statement that

¹⁹³ *Southern Mercury*, November 12, 1896.

¹⁹⁴ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 170; McMath, *American Populism*, 202; Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: the Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 462.

“A great deal will depend on the action of the bimetallic league.” Old guard insurgents feared their party would suffer the same fusion fate that befell the Greenback Labor and Union Labor parties, just as it seemed the People’s Party stood on the verge of a national electoral break-through.¹⁹⁵

Articles and letters attacking fusion became a regular feature of the reform press across the nation in the months leading up to July. For example, Meitzen wrote to the *Mercury*, “I am fully convinced that there is something rotten in our national committee. They are sending out free silver literature to many of the reform papers. Don’t be deceived brethren: the plot will unfold in due time. The fight will come off July 22 at St. Louis. Stand to your guns, and we have nothing to fear.” Further middle-of-the-road militancy, typical of letters printed by the *Mercury*, was expressed by one William Whiteside of Voca, Texas: “I am 75 years old and near the end of my journey of life, but I can use a gun yet. If it is necessary to get our rights under the constitution, I am ready to do all I can physically or otherwise to drive our enemies from power. If we permit our enemies to win in 1896, we may never have an opportunity to assert ourselves.”¹⁹⁶

Joining the single-issue silver debate on the side of anti-fusion was the recently established newspaper in Girard, Kansas, the *Appeal to Reason*. Started by Julius A. Wayland in August, 1895, the *Appeal*, according to historian James Green, “became the most successful venture in the history of American left-wing journalism and the

¹⁹⁵ *Southern Mercury*, March 26, 1896.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, July 9, 1896.

principle catalyst for the early Socialist movement in the Southwest.”¹⁹⁷ Originally from Indiana, Wayland first gained notoriety as the editor of a populist-labor paper in Pueblo, Colorado. In 1890, he became a socialist. Though a socialist, Wayland campaigned for populism in 1892, despite criticism from the SLP’s Daniel DeLeon. Wayland realized the real recruiting ground populism provided for socialism with its legions of small farmers filled with the anti-corporate vision of a Cooperative Commonwealth. Many Texas populists later credited the *Appeal* in their conversion to socialism.¹⁹⁸

As the *Appeal* advocated for socialism within the populist movement, the *Mercury* reflected the continued collaboration between Texas radicals and Chicago socialists. The *Mercury* routinely ran articles from Illinois populists, speeches from Henry Demarest Lloyd, and covered Debs’ battle with the courts over his role in the Pullman strike. Seeing the need for labor’s support to secure a populist electoral victory, the *Appeal* openly championed Debs as the People’s Party’s presidential candidate, “If the populists want the laboring people to vote for them, they should nominate a laboring man. Lawyers and played-out old party politicians will not create any enthusiasm. There are men whose hands are on intimate acquaintance with manual labor who have better heads and hearts than those who, while seeing the wrongs, have always succeeded in living on the sweat of other men’s faces. There is

¹⁹⁷ *Appeal to Reason*, August 31, 1895; James R. Green, “Socialism and the Southwestern Class Struggle, 1898-1918: A Study of Radical Movements in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1972), 7.

¹⁹⁸ James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 17-19; *The Laborer*, October 31, 1908.

not a clearer head or warmer heart in the nation than E.V. Debs.” The *Mercury* also endorsed Debs for president.¹⁹⁹

These efforts against fusion and a single silver plank not only brought about charges of a socialist takeover from Taubeneck, but from Tom Watson as well. Watson, a firm middle-of-the-roader, “perceived a clear conflict between socialism and individualism.” The *Mercury* responded to Watson by stating, “Tom Watson appears to be greatly troubled by the socialistic ghost. Watson will please explain how a government of the people can be formed without the socialistic ingredient. Much congressional contest has made Tom Watson flighty.”²⁰⁰

The debate over socialist influences was not just academic, but revealed a growing rift between the different class forces within the populist movement. Dating back to the Grange, the agrarian revolt had brought together both small farmers and large landowners to address the economic plight of all agriculturalists. As C. Vann Woodward observed, “It is undoubtedly true that the Populist ideology was dominantly that of the landowning farmer, who was, in many cases, the exploiter of landless tenant labor... Obviously the Populist attack did not strike at the whole system of capitalist exploitation, as did socialism, but in its time and section the Populist party formed the vanguard against the advancing capitalist plutocracy, and its fate was of vital consequence to the future.” Watson, one of the largest

¹⁹⁹ *Southern Mercury*, September 19, December 26, 1895, July 16, 1896; *Appeal to Reason*, December 21, 1895, March 14, 1896; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 466.

²⁰⁰ Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 447; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 15; *Southern Mercury*, July 9, 1896.

landowners in Georgia, had more tenants on his land than his grandfather had slaves.²⁰¹

With the economic crisis deepening in the 1890s, more and more small farmers who slipped into the ranks of tenancy made up the majority of rank-and-file populists. As the landowning class of farmers focused on currency reform to improve their economic plight, tenant farmers embraced calls for land reform and government ownership of transportation and communication. Meitzen, calling attention to reports that the U.S. government planned to own and operate a canal through Nicaragua, insisted, "Then why should it not operate our railroads for the benefit of the people?"²⁰² After the collapse of the People's Party following the 1896 election, the landowning elements within the party, including Watson, eventually found their way back into the Democratic Party, while a significant number of tenant farmers willing to continue the agrarian crusade moved beyond the greenback critique and regrouped under the red banner of socialism.

At the time, the class divisions within populism were not as apparent to all those involved. After all, Watson had without compromise fought the battles of populism from the days of the Farmers' Alliance, earning him the devotion of populists across the nation "as extreme a mid-road Populist as ever breathed or wrote."²⁰³ While populist farmers had difficulty in realizing the class differences within their movement, many laborers did not. The *Texas State Labor Journal*

²⁰¹ C. Van Woodward, *Tom Watson Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 218-219.

²⁰² *Southern Mercury*, July 23, 1896.

²⁰³ As quoted in Woodward, *Tom Watson*, 290.

declared, “If the populist party expects to maintain its reputation and standing as the representative and exponent of the workingmen, it should at once eliminate the landlord element so strong in its party councils ...” The *Mercury* responded in a baffled manner, questioning the existence of landlordism in the populist party and accusing the *Labor Journal* editor of attacking all political parties in order to keep organized labor disorganized at the polls.²⁰⁴

When it came time to select delegates to the populist national convention in St. Louis, Meitzen was chosen as one of 103 delegates to represent Texas. This would be Meitzen’s first time to leave the state. The *Mercury* offered the following words to the Texas delegation preparing to leave for St. Louis:

Don’t sacrifice one solitary principle of the party creed ...
The *Mercury* would especially warn the delegates against the seductive blandishments of the fusionists who will be in St. Louis in great force. Remember the fate of other reform parties that entered into entangling alliances. Stick to the Omaha platform as the guiding star to success. It is the voice of the people. It is the declaration of principles purified in the crucible of patient investigation and trying analysis. It is the embodiment of the will of the people which in all correct governments should be heeded as the voice of God.²⁰⁵

The cause of the middle-of-roaders in St. Louis became especially perilous after the actions of the Democratic national convention in Chicago, where the gold bugs lost and the Democrats nominated as their candidate for president the silverite William Jennings Bryan. Bryan’s nomination played into the hands of Taubeneck’s fusion plans. As the *Appeal to Reason* observed, “The [democratic] convention’s act was a bid for the people’s party endorsement. If this occurs the people’s party is a

²⁰⁴ *Southern Mercury*, July 16, 1896.

²⁰⁵ *Hallettsville Herald*, June 11, 1896; *Southern Mercury*, July 23, 1896; *Galveston Daily News*, August 8, 1896.

thing of the past. In four years the two old parties will have the field to themselves and will do as they please and if the reformers find themselves left with[out] organization to assist, they can lay the blame where it belongs – fusion and death.”²⁰⁶

Upon arriving at the convention, Meitzen and the Texas delegation immediately faced their first challenge from the fusionists. Two rival delegations from Chicago were vying to be seated as the official delegation for Cook County. One consisted of Taubeneck supporters, while the other, led by Lloyd, was composed of socialists and Debs supporters from the ARU. With the convention stacked against them, the Texas delegation needed their allies from Illinois if they stood any chance of beating back Taubeneck’s fusion plans. Throwing to the wind the possibility of being labeled socialistic, the middle-of-the-roaders campaigned for the inclusion of the ‘Debs delegates’ and won by the slim margin of 665 to 642.²⁰⁷

After the seating of delegates, mid-roaders learned that the fusionist efforts had come to such a point that they proposed that the People’s Party nominate the Democratic ticket of Bryan for president and Arthur Sewall, of Maine, for vice-president. This proposal did not sit well with those who favored a straight populist ticket. Dr. J.J. Burroughs, a delegate from Houston, voiced the concerns of the Texas delegation: “As far as I know the delegates from Texas are warm in opposition to an endorsement of Bryan. They are well acquainted with the fact that the Democrats have had a chance to remonetize silver thirteen times in the last nine years and failed to do it. That is the reason we don’t believe that if Bryan is elected, with both

²⁰⁶ *Appeal to Reason*, July 18, 1896.

²⁰⁷ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 24, 1896.

branches Democratic, we will be any nearer remonetization than we are now.” The Texas delegation was deluged with telegrams from home urging them to stay middle-of-the-road and not to fuse. Five hundred people rallied in Dallas, sending their support: “... Never surrender. Bryan means death.” The nomination of Sewall, a conservative banker was especially galling.²⁰⁸

In response to the proposed nomination of Bryan, the Texas delegation organized a middle-of-road conference at their delegation headquarters in the Southern Hotel. Delegates from twenty-three states attended the conference. The conference resolved that a straight ticket must be nominated and that no fusion should be entertained before the Electoral College convened. Fusion would be used only if a combination of Democratic and Populist electors was necessary to defeat McKinley, the Republican candidate for president. Upon fusing, the Populists and Democrats would split their tickets, with the party gaining the most votes assuming the presidency, and the other presidential candidate, the vice-presidency. This plan left Sewall entirely out of the equation.²⁰⁹

Seeing Sewall as the weak link of the fusion ticket, the mid-roaders successfully maneuvered to have the vice-president nominated first. Sewall, the antithesis of populism, was soundly defeated in favor of Tom Watson for vice-president. Further heartening the mid-roaders was their successful defense of a revamped Omaha platform for the 1896 campaign. Believing that Bryan would not

²⁰⁸ Ibid., July 21, 23, 1896.

²⁰⁹ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 22, 1896; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 478.

accept Watson or the populist platform and decline the populist nomination, the mid-rovers held out the hope for a straight ticket.²¹⁰

When the convention reconvened for the final day to nominate a presidential candidate, the St. Louis papers reported that Bryan had refused to accept Watson and would not accept the populist nomination for president. The fusionists, however, proceeded with their plan, claiming that they had received no official word from Bryan. Weaver then delivered the nominating speech for Bryan. Unfortunately for the mid-rovers, they lacked a 'big name' candidate to counter Bryan. Debs, the favorite of many mid-rovers leading up to the convention, sent a telegraph to Lloyd: "Please, do not permit use of my name for nomination." The mid-rovers thus selected the less-than-inspiring reform editor from Chicago, S.F. Norton, as their nominee for president.²¹¹

Refusing to give up, the Texas delegation repeatedly interrupted the nominating roll call to inquire if a formal communication had been received from Bryan. The mid-rovers put up the cry of "No Watson, No Bryan." In truth, word had been received from Bryan, who refused to accept Watson, but the fusion-controlled chairman of the convention kept this vital information from the delegation. At the end of the balloting, Bryan beat Norton by a vote of 1,047 to 331.²¹²

²¹⁰ Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 484.

²¹¹ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 26, 1896; as quoted in Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 158.

²¹² Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 491; *Galveston Daily News*, July 26, 1896.

The populist ballot for president shows that the radical middle-of-the-road sentiment was not just contained to Texas or southern states that had gone through the cooperative experience of the southern Farmers' Alliance. Besides Texas, which cast all of its 103 votes for Norton, the delegations of Maine, Missouri, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Wisconsin all voted in the majority for Norton. The delegations of Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington all either split their vote or cast a significant vote for Norton. Ohio also cast eight votes for Debs and one for Coxe. The former Alliance strongholds of Georgia and North Carolina went for Bryan.²¹³

The fusionist victory in St. Louis greatly demoralized the insurgent minded rank-and-file of the populist movement, especially in states where insurgent radical populism was still in its incipient stage. For example, in Indiana only 100 of the 900 expected delegates showed at the state's populist convention following St. Louis. Lacking participation from the anti-fusion rank and file, the Indiana People's Party fused with the Democrats. A similar pattern occurred in states across the nation. Though the People's Party lingered into the next century, the fusion victory at St. Louis all but ended the party's existence as a national mass party.²¹⁴

Historian Robert Durden views the events of the 1896 populist convention as the logical evolution of populism: "... the populists were not tricked into naming Bryan as their candidate and there was no 'conspiracy' at the St. Louis convention. Rather, the Populists' nomination of the Nebraskan Democrat was not only

²¹³ *Galveston Daily News*, July 26, 1896.

²¹⁴ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 28, 1896.

consistent with their principles but was essential if the party was to remain national in scope.”²¹⁵ In other words, the collapse of the People’s Party was inevitable.

Durden, in his analysis, has only identified some of the players involved. For the Taubenecks, Weavers, and Butlers, the fusion at St. Louis was consistent with their principles. Populism, however, was a broad movement containing different class forces. The debates over silver, fusion, and nationalization laid bare these class differences. As the problem of farm tenancy increased into the twentieth century and as the United States became an industrial power made-up primarily of wageworkers rather than independent farmers, the Populist Party could no longer address their grievances. For E.O. Meitzen, a new party was needed to continue the agrarian revolt.

²¹⁵ Durden, *The Climax of Populism*, ix.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thrown into the Melting Pot and Recast: E.O. Meitzen's Path to Socialism, 1896-1906

The 'Proletariat' is increasing at a frightful rate, and so-called conservative people hold their hands up in holy horror at the mention of 'Socialism.' But Socialism is growing fast, and the time is rushing us on to a decision for or against it ... but in the absence of Populism, Socialism is at hand.

T.J. McMinn, Bexar County
Southern Mercury, December 15, 1898

Reeling from their defeat at the national convention, Texas populists gathered at their state convention on August 5, 1896, in Galveston. The Texas delegation, "the immortal 103," had stood firm in St. Louis against fusion with the democrats. Accepting William Jennings Bryan, a close friend and political ally of their archenemy, Jim Hogg, as their presidential candidate was something many Texas populists refused to do. Feeling that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", one delegate stated, "The convention was evidently manipulated in the interest of spoilsmen who ran the Chicago convention, and I am now in for defeating them, and I believe McKinley is the man to do it and I shall vote for him."¹

¹*Galveston Daily News*, July 27, August 5, 1896; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 491.

On the day after the St. Louis convention, the *Galveston Daily News* reported on a proposed fusion in Texas between populists and Republicans. Republican leaders had made a proposition that in exchange for Republican support of Populist congressional and state candidates, Populists in turn would support McKinley for president. Some Populists now appeared willing to accept the Republican offer.²¹⁷

As the Galveston convention began, an air of confusion prevailed as delegates debated fusion nationally with Democrats and locally with Republicans. Contributing to the confusion was the fact that fusionist-led populist state conventions in Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado, defying the St. Louis convention, dropped Watson and placed Bryan and Sewall on their presidential ballots. Delegates were also left in the dark as to whether Bryan would accept the populist nomination, given that the new populist national chairman, Marion Butler, a U.S. Senator from North Carolina, refused to officially notify Bryan of his nomination.²¹⁸

In order to contain dissent in the ranks, Butler came to Galveston to prevent the convention from declaring on national matters. As the *Galveston Daily News* reported, “Whatever may be the desires of the leaders regarding fusion the rank and file will have none of it.” As one delegating was quoted, “The man who proposes to sell Texas out to McKinley gold men on the floor of this convention will get pitched head foremost through a window.”²¹⁹

²¹⁷ *Galveston Daily News*, July 27, 1896.

²¹⁸ Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 496-497.

²¹⁹ *Galveston Daily News*, August 5, 1896.

Believing that the St. Louis convention in nominating Bryan had also nominated Sewall, some delegates called for a denunciation of the convention. Meitzen spoke up, setting straight that the national convention had not nominated Sewall. The *Galveston Daily News* observed that “Meitzen said he also was one of the delegates to St. Louis, and while the convention’s action did not please him in all respects he favored conservatism, and he thought if the populists could give the democrats rope enough they would hang themselves. He was willing to abide the decision of the St. Louis convention. He did not want to stir up strife. He favored [e]ndorsement in a general way, but he didn’t favor hearty [e]ndorsement.” Many at the convention; however, did want to stir up strife. Early on it appeared that the convention might declare for S.F. Norton as president. In the end, though, harmony prevailed in order to keep unity in the ranks. The convention endorsed neither Norton nor Bryan.²²⁰

In the North, workers and farmers fed-up with the two major parties had the option of voting for the Socialist Labor Party (SLP). The *Appeal to Reason* encouraged populists to embrace socialism, stressing that the People’s Party “has run its course, performed its mission and helped prepare the way for a party of scientific principles – the socialist party.” The *Appeal* openly campaigned for the SLP’s presidential ticket. The SLP did not wage a “real campaign” in the South, however, and did not hold its first convention in Texas until 1898. Lacking a true champion for their cause, most Texas populists resigned themselves to lesser evilism. As J.M. Daniel, a farmer from Burleson County, stated, “I believe the democrats should

²²⁰ *Galveston Daily News*, August 5, 1896.

[e]ndorse Watson, but if they don't I am inclined to vote for Bryan anyway, believing that a half loaf is better than no loaf at all."²²¹

While not adopting the cry of "No Watson, No Bryan" as some proposed, middle-of-the-roaders in Texas expressed themselves in the selection of their state ticket and platform. Jerome Kearby, the radical lawyer who defended the Knights of Labor leaders in the Great Southwest Strike of 1886, was nominated for governor. An old Alliance radical and long-time third party man, "Stump" Ashby, received the nod for lieutenant governor, and the man responsible for much of the Farmers' Alliance's original growth, S.O. Daws, for treasurer. With a "whoop," Meitzen was nominated once again by acclamation for the office of comptroller. The convention also adopted a straight populist platform with no fusionist compromises.²²²

In the end, the Galveston convention had made no official pronouncements on statewide fusion with the Republican Party. With a member of the Republican national committee in attendance throughout, though, it appeared that some kind of arrangement had been reached. But as the *Galveston Daily News* stated, "Just how the fusion is to be brought about none on the inside can tell, and they won't."²²³

The 1896 state convention had been the largest populist convention yet, with seven hundred people attending, including one hundred and fifty African-Americans with thirty-one acting as delegates. While the convention as a whole remained silent

²²¹ *Appeal to Reason*, August 15, 1896; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 17; Ruth Allen, *Chapters in the History of Organized Labor in Texas* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1941), 25; *Galveston Daily News*, August 5, 1896.

²²² *Galveston Daily News*, August 6, 8, 1896; *Dallas Morning News*, August 7, 8, 1896; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 28.

²²³ *Galveston Daily News*, August 9, 1896.

on Republican fusion, African-American delegates did not. Meeting as a separate caucus, the African-American delegates voted 18 to 13 to vote for McKinley electors in exchange for Republican votes for populist state candidates. Although only the African-American populists openly declared for fusion, John Grant, State Chairman of the Republican Party, directed Republicans to campaign for populist candidates after the Republicans fielded no candidates of their own. The delivering of black votes into the populist column ran into an obstacle when statewide Republican African-American leader William "Gooseneck Bill" McDonald, supposedly in exchange for the position of superintendent of the Negro insane asylum, encouraged African Americans to vote Democratic. McDonald's effectiveness was widely acknowledged in aiding the populist defeat at the polls.²²⁴

Besides openly endorsing fusion, African-American delegates called for a plank in the Texas populist platform to address their needs. The resolution introduced by African-American delegate Frank W. Thomas, of Navarro County, stated that African Americans should receive full equality and justice under the law. Thomas deemed the resolution necessary on grounds that African Americans, while held accountable to the law, were denied jury duty and had been practically disenfranchised at the ballot box. Thomas also pointed to Mississippi, where a Jim Crow Constitution in 1890 had denied African Americans the right to vote. Texas populists did not approve Thomas's resolution, adopting instead a resolution stating, "We are in favor of equal justice and protection under the law to all citizens without reference to race, color, or nationality." In the years to follow, Jim Crow legislation

²²⁴ *Southern Mercury*, August 13, October 22, 1896; *Galveston Daily News*, August 6, 7, 1896; Martin, *People's Party in Texas*, 243-244.

swept the South, effectively ending the political unity of poor black and white farmers achieved during the populist era.²²⁵

The ambiguity over fusion at their state convention plagued Populists in the three months before the general election. In October, 1896, W.M. Walton, the populist candidate for attorney general, withdrew his candidacy, citing a secret fusion deal between Populists and Republicans. Populists countered, claiming that Walton was bought out by the Democrats' "Austin junta." The state secretary of the party resigned as well over the purported fusion plan. The *Southern Mercury* reported that Ashby refused a Democratic bribe of one thousand dollars if he dropped out of the race.²²⁶ When the *Hallettsville Herald* demanded that Meitzen express his opinion on fusion, he responded: "We have expressed it as our opinion that we would resign our candidacy for comptroller if a fusion of McKinley electors was arranged by the executive committee. We say so yet."²²⁷

On election day, 1896, Populist candidates in Texas received their largest vote totals to date. Kearby, the gubernatorial candidate, received over 237,000 votes, compared to nearly 153,000 votes cast for the gubernatorial candidate in 1894. Labor support helped Kearby, a longtime KOL supporter, win the Dallas and Austin vote. The total, however, proved not enough to defeat incumbent Democratic governor, Charles Culberson, who won by 11% with around 60,000 more votes than Kearby.

²²⁵ *Galveston Daily News*, August 7, 1896; Greg Cantrell, D. Scott Barton, "Texas Populism and the Failure of Biracial Politics," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (November, 1989), 659-692, 678; C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 84-85.

²²⁶ *Hallettsville Herald*, October 22, 1896; *Southern Mercury*, October 29, 1896.

²²⁷ *Hallettsville Herald*, October 22, 29, 1896.

Populist representation in the state house declined from twenty-two to six, and the number in the senate remained at two.²²⁸

Meitzen also received more votes than he did in 1894, but lost once again to R.W. Finley by a total of 311,580 to 222,009 votes. Meitzen had carried Lavaca County in 1894, but his home county did not turn his way in 1896, voting for his opponent by a margin of 2,865 to 1,846. Populist-backed Lavaca County Judge James Ballard also lost his reelection bid to Democrat D.A. Paulus by a total of 2,535 to 2,248.²²⁹

In Texas, the Bryan and Sewall ticket soundly defeated the Bryan and Watson ticket by 284,000 to 76,750 votes. If a fusion arrangement was made, it did not make a difference as McKinley received only 158,650 votes. A solid northern vote put McKinley in the White House.²³⁰

While dissention and confusion over fusion in the populist ranks, both locally and nationally, contributed to the Populists' defeat, the vote itself revealed numerous irregularities. As the *Dallas Morning News* commented in regard to the vote totals, "... in several instances there is manifest inaccuracy due to carelessness. In some cases this carelessness is so gross and inexcusable as to appear willful." The paper

²²⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, November 25, 1896; Martin, *People's Party in Texas*, 210-211; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 194.

²²⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, December 20, 1896, Lavaca County Election Results, 1894, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division; *Hallettsville Herald*, November 12, 1896.

²³⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, November 25, 1896; Martin, *People's Party in Texas*, 243.

estimated that some 10,000 votes for Daws were counted as “scattering” because returning officers reported votes for S.O. Davis instead of S.O. Daws.²³¹

More prevalent than misspelling of names was manipulation of the black voters. According to Kearby: “The negro vote in many sections was manipulated by fraud, intimidation and open bribery; the ignorant were preyed upon by slander and falsehood; the vicious and purchasable were hired by campaign funds raised to debauch the elector.”²³² Populists claimed that a trip by Hogg out East was conducted in order to collect money from the Sewall campaign fund to “save Texas by replacing the white trash vote with colored votes to be bought.” Ballot stuffing occurred in predominately African-American counties, resulting in vote totals outnumbering in some cases the number of voters. In Fort Bend County, the ballot was designed in a way that when illiterate voters thought they were voting Populist, they had actually voted for Culberson. Populists believed once again that they had an election taken from them, this time through fusion and fraud.²³³

Following the election, Meitzen called “for a state People’s Party meeting for consultation early in 1897, say at the reform press association or earlier. What say our Populist brethren?” Meitzen was not the only Populist calling for a reorganization of the party. Texas populist W.L. Franklin stated, “Let us reorganize with a national meeting in Dallas and elect a national chairman after the manner of Milton Park, Eugene Debs, or Paul Vandervoot [president of the National Reform

²³¹ *Dallas Morning News*, December 20, 1896.

²³² *Ibid.*, December 10, 1896.

²³³ *Southern Mercury*, September 17, 1896; *Dallas Morning News*, December 10, 1896.

Press Association]. Then we will move onward and upward and gain glorious victory in 1900.”²³⁴

Debs had actively campaigned for Bryan, hoping to keep the populist movement united as the “only mass-based alternative to the values of industrial capitalism.”²³⁵ This experience, along with his study of Marxism while in jail for violating an injunction against the Pullman strike, led Debs to the conclusion that labor must create its own party free from the control of corporations. To this effect Debs openly declared for socialism in January, 1897: “The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity. We have been cursed with the reign of gold long enough. Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization. The time has come to regenerate society – we are on the eve of universal change.”²³⁶ The Populists now would have to attempt to reorganize without Debs.

On February 20, 1897, the Texas Reform Press Association met in Dallas with Meitzen in attendance. The association met to elect delegates to the upcoming National Reform Press Association (NRPA) meeting in Memphis. Meitzen, along with Harry Tracy, Milton Park, “Cyclone” Davis, and several other reform editors were elected as delegates to Memphis. At the first national meeting of Populists since the St. Louis convention, the Texas delegates meant to make their displeasure with fusion known. As the *Dallas Morning News* observed, “Every delegate selected at [the] meeting is a middle-of-the-road populist, bitterly opposed to fusion in the

²³⁴ *Southern Mercury*, November 26, December 24, 1896.

²³⁵ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 161-162.

²³⁶ As quoted in *Ibid.*, 161-162.

future with silver democrats.” As one delegate put it, “They had us grabbed at St. Louis when they forced Bryan’s nomination. We are prepared for them now and it is a cinch. At Memphis we will teach the fusionists a lesson.” Immediately following the meeting, the Texas delegation boarded a train for Memphis.²³⁷

Not wanting to be taught a lesson in Memphis, pro-fusion Populists met separately in Kansas City, Missouri, while the middle-of-the-road Populists convened in Memphis. Each group claimed to be the true populist organization. This registered the first organizational split within the populist movement as a rival reform press association formed in Kansas City.²³⁸

Vandervoot called the Memphis gathering “... the beginning of a new era in the life of the People’s party.” Besides attending to NRPA business, the meeting served as an unofficial conference of populist leaders. In his opening remarks, Vandervoot denounced the leadership of Marion Butler and other fusion leaders. Illustrating left-wing Populists break from the old greenback critique of capitalism and a move toward socialism, many at the conference no longer viewed free silver as a cure-all and focused their demands on government ownership of the transportation and communication industries, as well as universal employment through government-backed public works projects. In order to prevent fusion in the future, Vandervoot proposed two resolutions. The first resolution recommended that proxies no longer be recognized in all conventions and conferences of the People’s Party, and the second reaffirmed the resolution of the Omaha convention that no office

²³⁷ *Dallas Morning News*, February 21, 1897.

²³⁸ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 24, 1897.

holders shall be eligible as convention delegations. These resolutions acknowledged the role proxy voting and office holding delegates beholden to fusion played in nominating Bryan at St. Louis.²³⁹

Meitzen spoke in favor of the resolutions. Jumping on party disorganizers, he stated, "If the Omaha convention had been followed at St. Louis, the life would not have been fused out of our party." After Meitzen spoke, "Cyclone" Davis moved against the resolutions, arguing that office holders "were usually men of discretion and wisdom." The majority of the conference disagreed with Davis, and the resolutions were adopted. Davis, a founder of the populist movement, had now begun his path back into the Democratic Party and the Ku Klux Klan. He later won a Democratic seat in the U.S. Congress in 1916. The NRPA conference ended with a call for populists to regroup at a national convention to be held in July. Meanwhile, the Kansas City conference decided to meet again in the fusionist stronghold of Omaha in February, 1898. The populist movement, once united against monopolies and gold bugs, now possessed two distinct and rival wings.²⁴⁰

Proceeding without the backing of the regular organization's leadership, over six hundred mid-road populists, including Meitzen, from twenty-eight states gathered in Nashville on July 4, 1897. The conference took a decisively anti-fusion stance and promoted the referendum and initiative as ways to wrest back the government from corporate control. The conference also created a National Organization Committee to oversee the reorganization of the party and foster

²³⁹ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 21, 23, 25, 1897.

²⁴⁰ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 24, 25, 1897; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 559-560.

antifusionism among the rank-and-file members. Milton Park was elected to head this committee.²⁴¹

Before the Nashville conference, populists had organized across Texas to elect delegates to Nashville and voice their anger over fusion. In order to keep the momentum going from Nashville, Populists held a two-day encampment in Williamson County beginning on August 5. The event drew a large crowd, which heard a report back from Nashville by S.M. Woolsey, as well as additional addresses from J.M. Perdue, E.O. Meitzen, and G.E. Womack, who spoke on the referendum and initiative. The enthusiastic crowd presented a glimmer of hope that the People's Party could survive and grow by the next election.²⁴²

Besides efforts aimed at resurrecting the People's Party, Meitzen faced a legal attack during the summer of 1897. Before heading to Nashville, he was arrested in Austin along with O. Mundelius on a charge of criminal libel. Judge Julius Schutze, Austin editor of the *Texas Vorwärts*, sued the two for an article written by Mundelius and published in Meitzen's *Anzeiger* that reflected "severely" on Schuetze as an officer of the Order of the Sons of Herman, a German-American fraternal benefit society.²⁴³

Meitzen and Mundelius each posted bail on the day of their arrests and were released pending trial. On July 26, due to a technical variance between the indictment and the evidence, the cases against Meitzen and Mundelius were

²⁴¹ *Nashville American*, July 6, 7, 8, 1897; Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 189-190; John Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and People's Party* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 381-382; *Dallas Morning News*, July 6, 10, 1897.

²⁴² *Dallas Morning News*, August 8, 1897.

²⁴³ *Austin Daily Statesman*, July 6, 1897; *Hallettsville Herald*, July 8, 1897.

dismissed. Schuetze, determined to prosecute, immediately filed another criminal libel suit against Meitzen and Mundelius this time over a different article in the *Anzeiger*. What happened in this second case is not entirely clear, but it apparently never went anywhere either.²⁴⁴

As a populist newspaper editor, Meitzen was not alone in facing post-fusion difficulties. With what historian John Hicks called the “shifting sands” of populism at this time due to fusion and repression, the populist support base began to erode. The decline of the reform press in Texas represented this decline. In 1895, there existed eighty-five reform journals in eighty counties. By 1901, this number had fallen to thirty-six.²⁴⁵

As part of consolidating the populist press, Meitzen sought to combine his *Anzeiger* with Austin’s German-language populist paper, the *Texas Post*. To facilitate this consolidation, Meitzen leased the *New Era* to Whit Byrn, of Hallettsville, and Cyrus Pagett of Ennis. At the start of 1898, Meitzen and his family moved to Austin, where he took over the editorship of the *Texas Post*.²⁴⁶

Any hope populists held that the divisions within their movement would heal faded as they entered the election year of 1898. Continued quarreling over fusion was tearing the People’s Party apart both nationally and in Texas. In June, both wings of the populist movement met in Omaha. The resulting “Omaha contract”

²⁴⁴ *Austin Daily Statesman*, July 6, 1897; *Dallas Morning News*, July 27, 1897.

²⁴⁵ Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, 391; Martin, *The People's Party in Texas*, 194, 208. An example of violent repression during this time occurred in Waco on July 24, 1897, when J.B. Daniel, a labor leader and populist editor, was assassinated at his home. See *Austin Daily Statesman*, July 25, 1897.

²⁴⁶ *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914; *Hallettsville Herald*, December 30, 1897.

stated that national chairman Butler and his faction would refrain from promoting fusion at any level and the national organization would allow each state organization to determine which route suited them best. The final part of the contract, never fully agreed upon, stated that the People's Party would not have a national convention until 1900.²⁴⁷

Radical populists remained distrustful of the "Omaha contract," especially the stipulation that a national convention would not convene until 1900. Milton Park, as chairman of the anti-fusionist National Organization Committee, broke the "Omaha contract" and called a convention in Cincinnati on September 4, for the purpose of reorganizing the People's Party. The Cincinnati convention was poorly attended with only seventy-six delegates (seventy-two men and four women) from twelve states. Even among the die-hard middle-of-the road populists gathered at Cincinnati, divisions surfaced. To head off any possible fusion presidential candidate in 1900, the left wing of the convention sought to nominate populist presidential candidates two years before the election. Objecting to such a drastic measure, many of the northern delegates bolted the convention. The remaining delegates nominated Wharton Barker, a populist editor from Philadelphia, for president and Ignatius Donnelly, of St. Paul, for vice-president.²⁴⁸

In Texas, fusion now had an able champion in "Cyclone" Davis, who, although he had led the "immortal 103" against fusion in St. Louis, now viewed another straight populist campaign as fruitless. Texas Populists, however, still went against

²⁴⁷ *Austin Daily Statesman*, July 8, 1898; Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 190-191; Hicks, *Populist Revolt*, 384.

²⁴⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, June 18, 1898; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 6, 7, 1898.

fusion and fielded a straight populist ticket headed by Barney Gibbs, a former democratic lieutenant governor. Gibbs had provided free legal services to rail workers during the Great Southwest Strike, but had only recently converted to populism in early 1896. With a less-than-enthusiastic campaign, Gibbs received only twenty-one percent of the vote, although the Populists did elect eight members to the Texas legislature, including Ed. Tarkington, of Lavaca County.²⁴⁹

Austin, where Meitzen now resided, was not immune to the turmoil tearing at the populist movement. G.W. Mendell, who in 1894 declared himself a socialist, had led Travis County People's Party. Mendell's leadership perhaps reflected a broader form of radicalism among populists in the county, so that when fusion appeared, new organizational modes of reform were sought. Travis County's populists did not field any candidates for office in Austin or the county in the 1898 election. Instead, the area's reformers and radicals ran an independent slate of candidates.²⁵⁰

The independents of Travis County ran candidates for primarily county offices besides that of state representative. Meitzen served as the candidate for county superintendent of public instruction, pledging "to so conduct himself both in and out of office as to meet the strictest rules of conduct, thereby setting an example to the children of the county." The independent slate of candidates presented a platform that stated, "Each candidate for office pledges himself to discharge honestly and faithfully, with no regard to color or party affiliations, the duties of his respective

²⁴⁹ Martin, *The People's Party in Texas*, 246; "GIBBS, BARNETT," *Handbook of Texas Online*; Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 191; *Hallettsville Herald*, November 17, 1898; *Southern Mercury*, November 24, 1898.

²⁵⁰ *People's Advocate*, December 22, 1893; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 15; *Austin Daily Statesman*, November 8, 1898.

office.” The independent slate, however, was soundly defeated. Meitzen lost his campaign by a margin of 4,203 to 1,576 votes. The other independent candidates received similar margins of defeat.²⁵¹

With the reform movement in Austin stalled, the Meitzen family decided to move back to Hallettsville in December of 1898. It is not entirely clear what prompted Meitzen’s sudden departure, or what became of the *Texas Post*. Perhaps being an enemy of Judge Julius Schutze, a prominent German-American politician and editor in Austin, served as a hindrance to Meitzen’s economic and political future in Travis County. Returning to his support base in Lavaca County, where populism still played a role in county politics, provided Meitzen with a better opportunity to continue the agrarian crusade.²⁵²

Back in Hallettsville, Meitzen resumed control of the *New Era* in December, 1898. In securing the financial resources to do so, Meitzen sacrificed a college education for his children. Three of the adult and teenage sons, E.R., A.C., and Benjamin Franklin, received training and employment in the *New Era*’s print shop.²⁵³

After the 1898 election, the *Austin Daily Statesman* declared, “Texas Populism Dead.” In the context of their poor electoral showing, the Populists disintegrated. The party now stood divided into a fusion wing led by Davis and an anti-fusion wing led by Park. Harry Tracy now sided with fusion while Jerome Kearby stood with

²⁵¹ *Austin Daily Statesman*, November 1, 10, 1898.

²⁵² *Hallettsville Herald*, December 8, 1898.

²⁵³ *Hallettsville Herald*, December 29, 1898, May 5, 1899; Williams, *History of the Meitzen Family*, 5-10.

Park (Populist gubernatorial candidate, Barney Gibbs, returned to the Democratic Party in 1899).²⁵⁴

While the populist movement fell apart, the economic conditions that spawned it persisted. The 1890s had been particularly devastating for farmers in Texas. Soaring land values and plummeting crop prices caused many farmers to lose their land and become tenant farmers. The number of tenant and share farmers in Texas increased from 95,510 in 1890 to 174,991 in 1900. Lavaca County followed this trend. The county experienced an increase in farms from 3,062 in 1890 to 3,876 in 1900, with a farm tenancy and sharecropping rise from 1,443 farms to 1,935 farms during the same period.²⁵⁵ The boll weevil, which had plagued Mexican farmers for years, appeared in Corpus Christi in 1894 and rapidly spread across the state's cotton fields. In 1904, roughly 700,000 bales of cotton worth \$42 million were lost due to

²⁵⁴ *Austin Daily Statesman*, November 14, 1898; Martin, *The People's Party in Texas*, 246-247. While the Texas Populist Party crumbled from within, North Carolina, the last stronghold of populism, faced Democratic terrorism under the guise of white supremacy against alleged Negro domination. In 1894, the Populist-Republican fusion elected Butler to the U.S. Senate and the passage of election reform laws in 1895 resulted in a number of African-Americans being elected to the North Carolina state house in 1896. Using the specter of Negro domination, Carolina democrats in 1898 waged a campaign of outright violence to crush the populist-republican coalition and restore democratic rule in North Carolina. White supremacy would dominate southern politics for the next half-century as opposed to the populist alternative of an inter-racial alliance of workers and farmers. *Austin Daily Statesman*, November 9, 1898; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 444, 533.

²⁵⁵ United States Census, *Census Reports*, Eleventh Census of the United States Taken in the year 1890. Historical Census Browser. Retrieved [March 10, 2006], from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>, United States Census. *Census Reports*. Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the year 1900. Historical Census Browser. Retrieved [March 10, 2006], from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.

the boll weevil. Farm tenancy in Texas rose from 37.6 percent in 1880 to over 52 percent in 1910.²⁵⁶

Lavaca County farmers adapted to the boll weevil and resulting cotton losses by readjusting their agricultural output. Poultry and eggs became important. Attempts were made at tobacco farming through the Hallettsville Tobacco Company, which Meitzen invested in and promoted in the *New Era*. The tobacco was of poor quality, however, and the enterprise was abandoned after a few years. Truck farming proved to be the most successful readjustment in Lavaca County, producing cucumbers, potatoes, onions, garlic, beans, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes. Cotton, though, remained king and as late as 1930, over half the county's farmland was growing cotton. No manufacturing plants existed, except those related to agriculture.²⁵⁷

Agricultural diversification did little to halt growing tenancy and loss of land ownership. A rise in absentee land ownership and land speculation inflated land values beyond the reach of tenant farmers who wanted to own their own farms. Populism had done little to address the growing trend toward tenancy, instead calling "for the unity of rural society against northern plutocracy,"²⁵⁸ whether landed or landless. C. Vann Woodward, in his biography of national Populist leader Tom

²⁵⁶ "BOLL WEEVIL," *Handbook of Texas Online*; James Green, "Tenant Farmer Discontent and Socialist Protest in Texas, 1901-1917," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol.LXXXI, No. 2, (October 1977), 133-134.

²⁵⁷ *Handbook of Texas Online*, "LAVACA COUNTY"; *New Era*, October 14, 1904; Boethel, *The History of Lavaca County*, 104.

²⁵⁸ Green, "Tenant Farmer Discontent and Socialist Protest In Texas, 1901-1917," 133-134.

Watson, notes that for Watson, “the dichotomy between dispossessed farmers and possessing farmers was one he chose to ignore.”²⁵⁹

The populist chapter was ending, but the agrarian revolt was far from over. Evolving beyond the reform-oriented greenback critique of capitalism, many agrarian militants, schooled by populism, now began to organize themselves within the emerging socialist movement. In 1898, William Farmer, a former greenbacker and KOL member, quit the People’s Party and formed an independent Socialist party in Bonham, Texas. The following year, Debs, who was on an organizing tour through Texas, convinced Farmer to join the Social Democratic Party. Shortly afterward, Martin Irons, the old railworker who had helped lead the Great Southwest Strike of 1886, was hired to organize for the Social Democratic Party across the southwest. Milton Park, now sole editor of the *Southern Mercury*, began promoting the “sewer socialism” of Samuel “Golden Rule” Jones, mayor of Toledo, Ohio, who advocated public ownership of municipal utilities.²⁶⁰

Meitzen appears to have been greatly influenced by the *Appeal to Reason*. By using the language of Populism, the *Appeal to Reason's* brand of homegrown socialism began germinating across the South. Articles from the *Appeal to Reason* began to frequently appear in Meitzen’s *New Era*. As early as March, 1899, Meitzen printed a column in the front page of the *New Era* titled “What Socialism Is.” The column consisted of a number of dictionary and encyclopedia entries defining socialism as a cooperative system that promotes equality and identifies with

²⁵⁹ Woodward, *Tom Watson*, 404.

²⁶⁰ Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 19; Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists*, 194; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 15-21; *Southern Mercury*, November 24, 1898.

Christian ethics. Also around this time, articles advocating Populist demands such as nationalization of railroads began to be framed more in the terminology of class conflict.²⁶¹

With the national agrarian protest movement in a transitional phase, Meitzen involved himself in local county affairs. He served as president of the Friends in Need Society of Lavaca County, providing cheap life insurance to the working poor of the county. He also served as president of the Quick Relief Society and as an officer in the fraternal society, Woodsmen of the World.²⁶²

Though Meitzen had begun his transition to socialism, he had not yet abandoned populism. By 1900, mid-roaders firmly controlled the Texas People's Party. At the Lavaca County People's Party convention in May 1900, Meitzen once again assumed the position of county secretary. The county convention also recognized the mid-road Cincinnati populist convention over the fusionist-led populist convention taking place in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The Sioux Fall convention nominated Bryan for president and the silver republican, Charles A. Towne, of Minnesota, for vice-president. The mid-roaders stuck to their 1898 nominations of Barker and Donnelly.²⁶³

In Texas, the Barker-Donnelly ticket received only six percent support with 20,981 votes. These votes made up forty-one percent of their national vote total of 50,989, representing only .36% of the popular vote nationally. Bryan once again

²⁶¹ *New Era*, March 10, 1899.

²⁶² *New Era*, May 25, 1900, December 16, 1904, October 13, 1905.

²⁶³ *New Era*, May 4, 1900; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 9, 10, 11, 1900; Hicks, *Populist Revolt*, 398-400.

received the Democratic nomination and once again lost to McKinley. The gubernatorial candidate of the Texas People's Party, T.J. McMinn, gained only seven percent of the vote. Meitzen, as the populist candidate for county Tax Collector, lost soundly by a number of 1451 to 2873. The People's Party no longer served as an effective reform party.²⁶⁴

In September, 1901, a conference of reform organizations, including fusion populists, mid-road populists, Bryan Democrats, Single Taxers, Liberal Socialists, and the Public Ownership Party met in Kansas City. Those gathered resolved to hold a convention in Louisville in April of 1902 in order to create a new party.²⁶⁵

The convention in Louisville sought to gather all those "opposed to the centralization of capital." This included those who met previously in Kansas City as well as the Independent Labor Party and representatives of the Socialist Party, which had been formed in July, 1901, under the leadership of Debs and Victor Berger. The convention adopted a platform reaffirming the populist platforms of Omaha, St. Louis, and Cincinnati merging the People's Party, the Public Ownership Party and the Independent Labor Party into a single Allied People's Party. Milton Park was authorized to call a convention in 1904 to nominate the new party's presidential ticket.²⁶⁶

In commenting on the new Allied People's Party, the *Philadelphia Times* warned, "Under the name Socialist we might count their heads. They are Socialists

²⁶⁴ Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 194; *Hallettsville Herald*, November 15, 1900.

²⁶⁵ *Kansas City Star*, September 17, 19, 1901.

²⁶⁶ *Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 2, 3, 4, 1902.

and they should be plainly designated so that they may be reckoned with as Socialists.” How wide the influence of socialism was spreading comes through in a letter by Jo. A. Parker, chairman of the Allied People’s Party, to fellow Populist James Baird: “Everything seems to be turning to socialism. Everybody is talking about socialism, and I fear that we will be engulfed by the tide... [the] Socialist movement has taken our place in the public mind.” Populism had almost run its course, though its fate in the 1902 elections in Texas would not be determined by socialism, but by infighting within the state Democratic Party.²⁶⁷

In 1890, before the creation of the People’s Party, the Farmers’ Alliance had forged coalitions with Reform Democrats who shared their hostility toward northern capitalists and railroad trusts. In Texas, this coalition resulted in the election of James Stephen Hogg as governor. Once elected, however, Hogg did little to assist hard-pressed farmers, thus encouraging Texas farmers to create a party of their own.

Hogg served only four years as governor, and by 1900, conservative Democrats had regained control of the party, due in part to the exodus of reformers to the People’s Party. Though not running for office himself, Hogg reentered the political ring in 1900 to aid the reelection campaign of longtime friend, U.S. Senator Horace Chilton. In order for the Reform Democrats to regain control of the party machine, Hogg sought to revive the coalition with Populists that had won him the governorship in 1890. To do this, Hogg proposed in 1900 to add three anti-railroad amendments to the state constitution. As Robert Worth Miller has argued, “The proposals constituted an open invitation for white Populists to return to the party of

²⁶⁷ As quoted in *Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 3, 1902; As quoted in James R. Green, “Socialism and the Southwestern Class Struggle, 1898-1918: A Study of Radical Movements in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1972), 4-7.

their fathers.”²⁶⁸ By 1900, however, the Populists’ share of the electoral vote had plummeted to six percent. For some Populists, an alliance with Reform Democrats was seen as a way to rekindle Populist causes. The *Southern Mercury* thus came out in favor of Hoggs’ amendments.²⁶⁹

In order to completely facilitate the return of Populists into the Democratic fold, changes in election laws were needed. The Democratic Party had a monopoly on power in Texas and throughout the South. The Republican Party had drawn little support outside of African Americans since Reconstruction. With the rise of the People’s Party, the Democrats, seeking to maintain control of their party, required loyalty oaths and stipulated that in most cases voters must have previously voted in at least the last two Democratic primaries. These regulations kept anyone who had recently voted Populist out of the Democratic Party. Hogg pushed and got changes to the Democratic primary process. Almost every county agreed to conform to a uniform primary law and throw out restrictive party tests. The path was now clear for Populists to participate in the Democratic primary.²⁷⁰

The Democrats maneuvered to make sure that the Populists would not take over their party. Learning their lessons from the interracial black-white unity that propelled the Populists to the brink of power, the Democrats made the primary for whites only, justifying the move as one that was necessary to purify the vote. The Populists, still stinging from what they saw as a manipulation of black votes to halt

²⁶⁸ Robert Worth Miller, “Building a Progressive Coalition in Texas: The Populist-Reform Democrat Rapprochement, 1900-1907,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 52, No.2, (May, 1986), 163-182, 164.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 167

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

their success at the ballot box, acquiesced to the cruel logic of a purified vote. The White Man's Primary effectively disenfranchised African Americans from the political process. In Lavaca County, this meant that the county's 4,890 black citizens, or 17.4 percent of the population, were all but removed from the political process. To further cement this disenfranchisement, a poll tax was enacted as well.²⁷¹

When Lavaca County's Populists met on April 21, 1902, with Meitzen at the chair, they concluded that due to "the recent radical changes in the democratic primaries, which virtually changed the same to a white man's primary, regardless of past or present party affiliation, it was decided not to encourage independent candidates for county office and to aid the good work by advising all to take part in the primary election." In discussing whether or not to nominate Ed. Tarkington for the United States Congress, with such a short campaign period (the primary occurring on May 24th), the majority of Lavaca's Populists "urged that the good work of purifying county politics should be encouraged at the risk of defeat." When Tarkington decided to run, however, he ran unopposed, perhaps as a conciliatory move by the Democrats. The Hogg strategy eventually paid off in 1906, when the Hogg Democrat, Thomas Campbell, won the race for governor. For the Populists, the 1902 election proved to be their next to last gasp.²⁷²

While the use of the white man's primary yielded promising statewide results in 1902 for Hogg Democrats, it produced unexpected results for Lavaca County

²⁷¹ United States Census, *Census Reports*. Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the year 1900.

²⁷² *Hallettsville Herald*, April 24, May 29, 1902.

Democrats in 1904. Meitzen, running on a socialist platform and with the support of white populists and immigrants, won the white man's primary for the office of county judge. As Meitzen explained, "I was elected county judge by accident – slipped up on the blind side of politicians in a local fight regarding better conditions."²⁷³ Meitzen's campaign targeted the apparent graft and corruption of the residing county commissioners and county judge, C.J. Gray. The *Cuero Daily Record* observed, "It is charged that while justice of peace in [Lavaca] county, Gray tried a case in which he was actually attorney for the defendant who lost the case by a decision of Gray's. This ought, if true, disqualify him for re-election."²⁷⁴

If indeed Meitzen had "slipped up on the blind side of the politicians," some sought to remedy the situation. At the Democratic Lavaca County convention a few weeks after the primary, a resolution was introduced requiring a candidate, regardless of whether he won the white man's primary, to pledge to support the Democratic Party's candidates for local and national office in order to be placed on the ballot. This resolution was clearly aimed at Meitzen. The resolution was defeated by a vote of 50 1/3 to 38 2/3. In defeating the motion, delegates pointed out that the white man's primary had the endorsement of the statewide party, and that the resolution, if adopted, would undermine the party's statewide goals. Coming out of the convention, local Democrats resolved to make sure they had a straight ticket in the next election.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ U.S. Congress, Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony, 9143.

²⁷⁴ Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 25; U.S. Congress, Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony, 9143; *Cuero Daily Record*, May 29, 1904.

Unwilling to undermine the primary system they just started, the Democrats turned to the tried-and-true method they had used to defeat the Populists in the 1890s, that of manipulating black Republican votes. In the primary election for county commissioner for precincts two and six, the winner was the Democrats' choice, E. Gieptner. A. Gleckler, another candidate, lost by only eleven votes in a three-way race, the third place candidate losing by only eighteen. With no candidate receiving a true majority, Gleckler decided to run as an independent write-in candidate in the general election. The Democrats in manipulating the African-American-dominated Republican convention, convinced the Republicans to nominate Gleckler for county judge. This move would serve to attack Meitzen's campaign for county judge and undermine Gleckler's independent campaign for county commissioner. Meitzen was quick to reveal this Democratic scheme in the *New Era*, which on September 30, 1904, contained a letter from Gleckler urging his supporters to vote for Meitzen, not him, for county judge.²⁷⁶

Meitzen went on to win the general election, though Gleckner lost his independent campaign for county commissioner, thus returning the same Democratic-controlled county commissioners. During the campaign, Meitzen had exposed a graft scheme in which each member of the county commission was receiving \$300 a year for road supervision. Texas law did not allow commissioners to receive over \$120 a year for road supervision, but Lavaca's Democratic state Senator, D.A. Paulus, secured an exemption for Lavaca County from the \$120 limit. This exemption cost county taxpayers an additional \$180 per year for each

²⁷⁵ *Hallettsville Herald*, July 21, 1904.

²⁷⁶ *New Era*, September 16, 30, 1904.

commissioner. Subsequently, the commissioner's court gave Paulus a \$250 gift from bond sale money.²⁷⁷

With Meitzen now as county judge, the commissioners sought their revenge. Meeting on November 17, 1904, less than two weeks after the election, the commissioners court, with lame duck county judge Gray presiding, reduced the county judge's salary from \$600 a year to \$100 a year. The commissioners justified their decision by noting that since Meitzen was not a licensed attorney, the county needed to hire an attorney at \$500 a year to assist newly-elected Judge Meitzen.²⁷⁸

The commissioners' action was met with immediate outrage across the county. Letters came into the *New Era* and petitions from Moulton. Area newspapers chimed in as well, including the *LaGrange Journal*, *Moulton Eagle*, *Cuero Daily Record*, *Yoakum Herald*, and the German language *Nachrichten* and *Bellville Wochenblatt*. The Democratic-biased *Hallettsville Herald* remained silent, not printing a single article on the controversy. The commissioners, under obvious pressure, rescinded their early decision and restored Judge Meitzen's salary to \$600, opting not to hire an additional attorney.²⁷⁹

In the presidential election of 1904, the Populists decided to run their foremost leader, Tom Watson, of Georgia. The Allied People's Party of Texas endorsed Watson and campaigned for him, despite his growing vocal hostility to

²⁷⁷ Ibid , October 21, 1904.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., November 25, 1904.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., December 2, 9, 1904.

socialism. The *New Era* ran a large two-page supplement in October, promoting Watson by printing his acceptance speech in which he “Scores Democrats.”²⁸⁰

Watson campaigned hard in every part of the country, but garnered only 117,183 votes nationwide. This was more than twice the number of votes the People’s Party had won in 1900, but the returns were still a disappointment. Conversely, the Socialist Party, with Eugene V. Debs as their candidate, received 400,939 votes, up from the 87,769 votes Debs had received in 1900 as the Social Democrat Party’s candidate.²⁸¹

Shortly before the 1904 election, Meitzen, along with his son, E.R., had joined the fledgling Socialist Party and helped to organize Hallettsville Local 96 of the Texas Socialist Party. Upon his election to county judge, however, Meitzen resigned his membership in the Socialist Party in order to present an air of non-partisanship while serving as an elected official.²⁸²

Though not an official member of the party, Meitzen still promoted socialism. Before the election, the *New Era* in 1904 had contained no mention of Debs, but this changed after the election. On November 25, the *New Era* printed a letter from Debs describing the new struggle as one now between Republicans and Socialists. The next week, the *New Era* included an article on the front page about how Socialists in Germany were watching with interest the rise of socialism in the

²⁸⁰ Ibid., October 2, 1904.

²⁸¹ Woodward, *Tom Watson*, 362; *New Era*, January 13, 1905.

²⁸² *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914.

U.S., echoing many of Debs's views expressed during the previous week. This article appealed to the German immigrants of Lavaca County in particular.²⁸³

On December 2, 1904, the *New Era* noted that the Socialist club held its regular Wednesday session. At the session, it was decided to have a public meeting for all those interested in socialism at the courthouse. The newspaper reported that the club had seventeen dues-paying members at that time.²⁸⁴

Emboldened by the electoral success of 1904, the *New Era* became a firebrand of socialism in 1905. Previously, the paper had only flirted with socialism. The *New Era*, following the Populist vein, had regularly attacked the railroad trusts, monopolies, and other perceived ills of northern plutocracy. The paper did follow with interest the 1904 struggle of the Western Federation of Miners, led by Charles Moyer and William "Big Bill" Haywood in Colorado. By 1905, however, the *New Era's* commitment to socialism was forthright. A column announcing that socialist Gary Miller, president of the Telluride Miners Union in Colorado, would soon be speaking in Huntsville, boldly asserted: "The Socialist Party will soon be a power in national politics, and whether you are for it, against it, or indifferent, you should come out and learn something about it and be entertained at the same time."²⁸⁵

Each week, the *New Era* filled its pages with items ranging from announcements of new socialist speakers in the area, attacks on the use of child labor at a nearby cotton mill in Gonzales, articles by Debs on the 1905 revolt in Russia,

²⁸³ *New Era*, November 25, December 2, 1904.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, December 2, 1904.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, August 19, 26, 1904, February 17, 1905.

and other articles on Moyer and Haywood, and William J. Bryan, “the counterfeit champion of the people.” With great frequency, the *New Era* ran general articles pointing out the illogic and inhumanity of capitalism. While the *New Era* attacked capitalism for the devastation it caused to workers and farmers, and promoted socialism to replace it, missing in the paper during the years 1905-1906 was coverage of specific labor disputes. In the following years, however, the newspaper would increase its coverage of labor issues as the Socialist Party under Debs and the organizing struggles of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) after its founding in June, 1905, had more of an impact on Meitzen and those around him.

Meitzen’s primary form of protest and agitational organizing still came from his attachment to the plight of farmers. At the end of April, 1905, he helped form a local branch of the Southern Cotton Association. The association’s stated objectives were to unite all southern people in one organization: farmers, merchants, bankers, lawyers, doctors and all others whose interests would be to see cotton sell at a better price “by forming a cotton holding company.” Though elected as its president locally, Meitzen’s connection with this organization seems to have been only brief. A new farmer’s organization had formed, one that more closely followed in the tradition of the old Farmer’s Alliance --- the Farmer’s Educational and Cooperative Union of America, known as the Farmers Union (FU).²⁸⁶

The FU was born in Rains County, Texas, in 1902. In 1905, the FU became a statewide organization. Given that the conditions of farmers had worsened since

²⁸⁶ Ibid., May 5, 1905; Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 150.

the days of the old Alliance, farmers flocked to the FU across the country. The FU became a national organization in 1906 with nearly a million members by 1907.²⁸⁷

Lavaca County formed a countywide FU branch in July of 1905. With state organizer O.B. King speaking in English, and Meitzen in German, locals were quickly organized in every farm community across the county. The *New Era* gleefully reported the forming of each local. Meitzen was elected as the FU's county president, and his son, E.R., who was now coming into his political own, was elected as delegate for Lavaca County to the state FU meeting in August in Waco.²⁸⁸

The FU did not shy away from the political arena. Nationally, the FU reached out to the socially conservative American Federation of Labor under the direction of Samuel Gompers. The FU expressed solidarity with labor struggles and encouraged the purchase of items marked with the union label, either trade union or FU. The FU also began to identify with the reform wing of the Democratic Party, which further facilitated the return of Populists into the Democratic Party.²⁸⁹

The Lavaca County FU promoted the union label campaign and directives to hold back cotton sales, and it agitated for the warehouse plan. Nationally and statewide, the FU mixed with the Democrats, but in Lavaca County, under the leadership of Meitzen, the mixing was with Socialists. Members of the Hallettsville Socialist Club also had memberships in the FU. On March 24, 1906, for example A. Haynes Sr. spoke on FU topics in Seclusion, Texas, but on the next night he lectured

²⁸⁷ Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, 150.

²⁸⁸ *New Era*, July 14, 28, 1905.

²⁸⁹ Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, 152.

on the doctrines of socialism in the same town. Socialism and the FU went hand in hand in Lavaca County at this time.²⁹⁰

The first cracks in the relationship between the FU and the socialist leaning Lavaca County FU appeared in September, 1905. In the September 8th issue of the *New Era*, the reprint of an article from the *Abilene Farmers Journal* denounced the appearance of Texas Democratic US Senator Joseph Bailey at a FU meeting in Gordon. At the meeting, Senator Bailey attacked several political parties and praised the Democrats, thus violating the supposedly non-partisan principles of the FU. E.R. Meitzen had developed a comradely relationship with the editors of the *Abilene Farmers Journal* when he was a delegate at the FU state convention in Waco. This relationship shows that tensions between the state FU and area locals were not isolated to Lavaca County.²⁹¹

Meitzen, besides actively promoting the FU, carried on as an activist judge as well. Meitzen pushed for reforms in how the county government operated. One of his first actions related to the collection and disposition of witness and officers fees. Previously, many unclaimed monies collected by county officials ended up in the pockets of county officials. Meitzen advocated a state law requiring unclaimed fees to be put instead into the County Road and Bridge fund. He also started a competitive bid system for county projects, requiring outside contractors. In the past,

²⁹⁰ *New Era*, March 9, 1906.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, September 8, 1905.

instead of contracts going to the lowest bidder, they instead usually went to patrons of county officials at inflated costs to county taxpayers.²⁹²

In early 1906, Meitzen stepped down as head of the Lavaca County FU because of a resolution he supported requiring that only actual farmers could hold office in the FU. This resolution came in the context of protests by area locals against the appointment of two non-farmers by the national FU to the offices of national president and national organizer. Despite Meitzen's resignation as head of the county FU, he and other agrarian radicals of Lavaca County organized FU locals, spreading socialism and campaigning for Meitzen's re-election as county judge.²⁹³

In 1903, Texas passed the Terrell election law that mandated the use of direct primaries to determine candidates in the general election. The Democrats previously had regularly used primaries, but the real authority for selection of candidates had resided in the county conventions. Thus, when the Democrats had opened their primary system up to reincorporate former Democrats-turned Populists, and Meitzen actually won their primary, maneuvers were made at the County Democratic convention to exclude Meitzen from the ballot. As stated earlier, the Democrats chose not to undermine their primary to the detriment of statewide goals. With the passage of the Terrell law, the white man's primary as it stood would directly select the candidates for the general election with second-hand exclusionary convention maneuvering impossible.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Ibid., January 20, October 20, 1905.

²⁹³ Ibid., January 12, 1906.

²⁹⁴ "ELECTION LAWS," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

Late in 1905, the Democratic newspapers *Shiner Gazette* and *Hallettsville Herald* began calling for an end to the white man's primary and for a partisan Democratic primary. The *New Era* acknowledged that having a partisan Democratic primary in lieu of a white man's primary would greatly hinder Meitzen's reelection chances.²⁹⁵

Throughout the partisan bickering racism prevailed on both sides of the electoral divide. *The Gazette* and *Herald* insisted that a Democratic primary under partisan control, in addition to the recently enacted poll tax, would keep many African Americans from voting. The *New Era* countered that Lavaca County's 4,000 legal voters included 400 to 500 black voters "who constitute a dangerous balance of power that can often defeat good men and elect rascals that scruple not to buy their way into office. This has been done and can be done again." The rural farmers who had once embraced inter-racial unity only to have it used against them, chose this time around to follow the cruel logic of a "purified vote." The racism of Texas Socialists led one northern African-American Socialist to ask if southern Socialists were for "Southernism or Socialism?"²⁹⁶

On March 10, two days before the county Democratic executive committee was to meet, a mass meeting was held at the courthouse with speakers in English, German, and Bohemian to discuss what type of primary to hold. At the meeting chaired by Meitzen, the White Man's Union and the Democratic Party decided that they would hold two separate primaries and that nominees of the White Man's

²⁹⁵ *New Era*, January 12, 1906.

²⁹⁶ *New Era*, January 12, 1906; quoted in Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 99.

Primary would be placed on the Democratic primary ballot. The white man's primary, though, did not receive official legal sanctioning from the state Democratic Party. The Lavaca County White Man's Primary would be run only as a show of public support from those whom primary officials deemed as worthy white people.²⁹⁷

Meitzen, who ran unopposed, won the white man's primary along with most of the Democrats in the race as well. By the time the Democratic primary was held nearly two months later, the Democrats had gone back on their word to place all the nominees of the white man's primary on their primary ballot. The Democrats did not change their loyalty oath. Meitzen, refusing to take the oath, decided to run as an independent, gaining ballot status at the general election by collecting the required 150 signatures. The Democrats got their partisan primary after all and nominated Democratic county chair W.R. McCutchan to run against Meitzen for county judge.²⁹⁸

Meitzen and McCutchan began in late June a series of debates that ran til the election. McCutchan continually attacked Meitzen for his socialist beliefs. Meitzen countered that socialism was not the real issue, emphasizing that he had exposed graft and was the only one on the commissioners court to vote for a raise on the county railroad assessment from \$6,500 per mile to the 1904 rate of \$7,500 per mile.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ *New Era*, March 9, April 13, 1906.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, June 15, 1906.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, July 27, 1906.

Though Meitzen claimed socialism was not at issue, Socialists were extremely active in the area during this time. Meetings were held with growing frequency, often featuring national speakers. The Socialist Party in Lavaca County also put forward candidates of their own for the first time. Albert Haynes, Sr. ran for area state representative, and J.B. Gay, for area U.S. representative. E.R. Meitzen received the nomination from the state Socialist Party convention in Dallas for Railroad Commissioner. The *Hallettsville Herald* attacked E.O. Meitzen for running as an independent while his cohorts showed their true colors and ran as socialists. Perhaps Meitzen sought to be a human bridge from Populism to Socialism.³⁰⁰

The Democrats continued their attacks on Meitzen. Efforts were made in July to prevent Meitzen campaign literature from going through the U.S. mail. The area postmaster refused to ban the literature, however. In August, Democrats tried to stir up religious prejudice against Meitzen, claiming at a large Catholic festival that Meitzen was for abolishing religion and marriage, and that he favored Negro equality. Meitzen denied the allegations. The campaign even got personal when rumors circulated that Meitzen, though married, “had been ‘running around’ with other women,” a charge Meitzen also denied. The public speaking debates continued, with twelve occurring in the month of October alone.³⁰¹

During the campaign on June 29, 1906, the U.S. Congress passed a new naturalization act. The US courts would take over the naturalization process from local courts beginning September 27, 1906. The process also would become more

³⁰⁰ Ibid., August 17, 1906; *Hallettsville Herald*, September 20, 1906. It should be noted that the FU continued to expand during this time as well

³⁰¹ *New Era*, August 3, 31, November 23, 1906.

costly and make it more difficult to secure citizenship. Meitzen, who as judge had always liberally granted citizenship, hastened the process of granting citizenship in the days leading to the federal take-over of naturalization. While the previous county judge had naturalized 16 individuals during his two-year term, Meitzen granted citizenship to 147 people, including twenty-one in a four-day “special session” before the federal government took over. In a close race, granting quick and easy citizenship would curry favor from the county’s German and Czech immigrants.³⁰²

In an election with low voter turn out, McCutchan defeated Meitzen by 137 votes, 1,163 to 1,026. Meitzen carried the German and Czech communities of Breslau, Witting, Moravia, Baursville, and Vienna. He also carried Sublime and Ezzell, which had a strong FU presence. Ezzell was a socialist stronghold, the only community that voted in the majority for Gay and Haynes as well. The less rural areas of Hallettsville and Shiner went to McCutchan. The *Hallettsville Herald*, celebrating McCutchan’s victory, ran the headline “Democracy triumphs over Socialism.” The *New Era* blamed Meitzen’s defeat on the opposition’s ability to convince voters that “Socialism stood for all sorts of terrible things such as anarchy, ‘dividing up,’ taking away farms, Negro equality, abolishment of religion and marriage.”³⁰³

Despite defeat, the *New Era* pointed out that the socialist vote in the county had increased from 45 to 100 since the last election. The newspaper proclaimed also that

³⁰² *INS Reporter*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Winter 1977-1978), 41; *Hallettsville Herald*, September 20, 1906; Lavaca County Naturalization Records, Vol. 2 1899-1903, Vol. 3 1904-1906, Vol. 4 1906, Reel #983238, Victoria Regional History Center, Victoria College/UH-Victoria Library, Victoria, TX.

³⁰³ *New Era*, November 8, 23, 1906.

Meitzen would now be “‘foot-loose’ to spread the doctrines to which he has so consistently adhered.”³⁰⁴ Meitzen, upon leaving office, rejoined the Socialist Party. The national office of the Socialist Party, noting the response Socialists were receiving in Texas, decided during the next year to send Tom Hickey down to Texas as a full-time organizer. Hickey’s efforts, coupled with Meitzen’s groundwork, helped start the red tide that soon swept the Southwest. In 1905, the *New Era* proclaimed: “We are rapidly approaching the critical period when the entire fabric of human civilization will be thrown into the melting pot and recast to emerge from the trial by fire, purified, glorious and beautiful.”³⁰⁵ Meitzen, no longer a Populist, had been recast as a Socialist.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., November 16, 1906.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., March 10, 1905.

CONCLUSION

E.O. Meitzen's political career demonstrates a direct connection between the populist and socialist movements in Texas. Trained in the school of populism, he, along with his sons E.R. and A.C., and with the rhetorical skills of "Red" Tom Hickey, built the Texas Socialist Party into one of the largest in the United States. Texas farmers, slipping more and more into the ranks of tenancy, responded to the land reform program of the Socialist Party that did not shy away from the conflict between landlords and tenants as the Populists had. As a result, the socialist movement flourished across the southwest. Socialist encampments drew tens of thousands to hear the message delivered by Hickey, Mother Jones, Eugene Debs, Oscar Ameringer, Kate Richards O'Hare, and Meitzen. Until World War I the agrarian revolt, guided by socialism, possessed a "movement culture" that stood on par with that of populism.

While the agrarian revolt of the early twentieth century divided along class lines, it stood even more divided by race. Dating back to the first mustering of the agrarian protest movement in Texas, beginning with the Greenback Labor Party, African Americans played a significant, though not proportionally equal role. The populist era, in particular, witnessed significant attempts to build a biracial coalition of workers and farmers.

Meitzen, himself, at the founding of the Lavaca County People's Party, made the proposal that African Americans choose chairmen of their own and that efforts be made to organize sections of the party in the county's African-American communities. However, Democratic terrorism and the emergence of Jim Crow laws made such efforts at biracial unity more difficult during the socialist period of Texas's agrarian revolt. How Meitzen viewed the issue of race during this period was evident in the pages of the *New Era* after his reelection defeat in 1906. In a rebuke to accusations that socialism promotes equal rights, the *New Era* stated, "Does Socialism preach equal rights for the negro, the white man and the yellow man? ... Socialism preaches equal rights only to the extent that each have the full value of what he produces – be he white, black or yellow. Because a negro perhaps would produce more than a white man does not signify that he should be permitted to eat at the same table with a white man or ride in the same car with him, etc."³⁰⁶

Though lacking a significant contribution from the state's now disenfranchised African Americans, the Texas Socialist Party picked up the agrarian revolt where populism had left off. In 1911, in order to help spread the socialist message, Meitzen created the weekly newspaper, *The Rebel*. Under the editorship of Hickey and using the language of class conflict and protestant evangelicalism, *The Rebel* became one of the highest circulating socialist periodicals in the country. Hickey's trade union past allowed his writings to bridge the gap between industrial workers and tenant farmers. The Socialist Party also had a strong following in Dallas, just as the

³⁰⁶ *Hallettsville Herald*, March 31, 1892; *New Era*, November 16, 1906.

People's Party did. The presence of I. W. W. lumber workers in the forests of East Texas helped radicalize the Socialist Party in Texas as well.³⁰⁷

While the industrial working class in Texas continued to grow, the overwhelming majority of the state's working poor remained tenant farmers. In 1911, Meitzen and Hickey created the Renters Union to directly address the demands of the growing number of tenant farmers in Texas. The Renters Union sought to follow the I.W.W. model by creating one big union for tenant farmers and called for the end of the bonus system, reduced rents, more legal and economic protection for tenant farmers, and a redistribution of land. However, membership in the Renters Union was limited to "all white persons over 16 years of age who are tenant farmers."³⁰⁸

The racially exclusive membership policy of the Renters Union did not last long. Bowing to the influence of socialist leaders Debs, Haywood, and Covington Hall, who all opposed segregated locals of the party and party-backed unions, the Renters Union eliminated the word "white" from its membership requirements and called for African Americans to organize separate local unions. Historian Neil Foley has discovered little evidence to suggest that African Americans did organize their own locals, but Meitzen and Hickey must have been surprised at the numbers of Mexican Americans drawn to the Renters Union after 1912.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 138-139.

³⁰⁸ *The Rebel*, November 11, 18, 1911.

³⁰⁹ Foley, *The White Scourge*, 96.

Just as international market pressures in the lowering of cotton prices in the 1870s spurred the economic factors that ignited the agrarian revolt, international events in the form of the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and World War I greatly affected the agrarian revolt in the 1900s and 1910s. By 1903, the repressive climate in Mexico under president Porfirio Diaz had become so severe that many Mexican revolutionaries decided to organize their activities in exile from the U.S. On January 4, 1904, Mexican revolutionaries Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magon crossed the border into Laredo, Texas. From Laredo, they hoped to establish a base of operations to ferment revolution in Mexico, organize support groups in the U.S. through the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM), and establish a newspaper. The Magons stayed only briefly in Laredo before moving to San Antonio and then to St. Louis starting a newspaper called *Regeneración*. The Magons began a process in which Mexican revolutionaries would have a radicalizing effect on labor relations in the American Southwest and influence radicals as well. The issue of land that stood at the heart of the Mexican Revolution also was paramount for the tenant farmers of Texas.³¹⁰

As historian Emilio Zamora points out, “The cause of socialist labor and PLM organizing became increasingly intertwined with the Mexican Revolution.”³¹¹ PLM activists José Ángel Hernández and F.A. Hernández became two of the leading recruiters to the Renters Union and the Land League which followed it. Mexican

³¹⁰ Juan Gomez-Quifones, *Sembradores, Ricardo Flores Magon y el Partido Liberal Mexicano: A Eulogy and Critique* (Los Angeles: Aztlan Publications, Chicano Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 1973), 23-25; W. Dirk Raat, *Revoltosos: Mexico's Rebels in the United States, 1903-1923* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1981), 20-21.

³¹¹ Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 153.

revolutionary Lázaro Guitérrez de Lara also helped build the Socialist Party in Texas.³¹²

As the Mexican Revolution grew increasingly radical, so did the tone of *The Rebel*, which opposed U.S. military intervention in Mexico: “All talk of intervention in Mexico comes from a bunch of industrial pirates who have offices in Wall Street.”³¹³ A banner headline declared, “The Land Revolution in Texas Has Begun.” Under this article ran another headline in only slightly smaller type stating, “The Land Revolution in Mexico, Confiscation of 75,000 acres of Felix Diaz land.”³¹⁴ The parallels were clear to readers that what was occurring in Mexico should be happening in Texas as well.

The increased militancy and collaboration of Mexican revolutionaries and Texas socialists in a state separated only by a river from a country engulfed by revolution would surely make those with a vested interest in Mexican capital and the current land tenure system in Texas nervous, to say the least. Increased militancy by radicals in Texas brought increased repression. Land Leaguers and socialists faced criminal sentences and served jail time on false charges. Meitzen experienced this wave of intimidation first-hand. On July 13, 1914, City Marshall O.T. East shot him in Hallettsville during an argument between the two over an embezzlement scandal

³¹² Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 137; Foley, *The White Scourge*, 110; L. Guitérrez de Lara to T. A. Hickey, March 8, 1915, U.S. Congress, Senate, *Commission on Industrial Relations*, 9272-9273.

³¹³ *The Rebel*, June 8, 1912.

³¹⁴ *Ibid*, September 20, 1913.

that Meitzen had exposed. Meitzen recovered and charges were never filed against East.³¹⁵

U.S. entry into World War I in April, 1917, proved to be the decisive factor in the final suppression of the Socialist Party (SP) in Texas. *The Rebel* had not only opposed U.S. intervention in Mexico but also U.S. involvement in the war in Europe. On May 17, 1917, Texas Rangers arrested and kidnapped Hickey from his wife's ranch in Stonewall County without a warrant, holding him incommunicado for two days. Hickey vowed to print "the real story" in the next issue of *The Rebel*.³¹⁶

The "real story" never appeared, though, because *The Rebel* became the first socialist newspaper barred from the mail by U.S. postmaster general Albert S. Burleson's use of the recently passed Espionage Act. Burleson, who earlier had been a U.S. Congressman from central Texas, was a firm defender of U.S. interests in Mexico. He was an early supporter of Woodrow Wilson in his campaign for president, and as a reward became the first Texan appointed to a Cabinet position. He was a key Wilson advisor. Burleson might also have had a personal vendetta against *The Rebel* due to the fact that it made a national story of Burleson evicting all the tenant families from his family's 4,000-acre cotton farm and replacing them with convict labor.³¹⁷

Without the organizing tool of *The Rebel*, and with the government harassment of Socialists, the Texas SP and Land League rapidly fell apart. Nationally, the SP

³¹⁵ Ibid., July 25, 1914.

³¹⁶ Ibid., June 2, 1917.

³¹⁷ *New York World*, May 5, 1917, in Albert Sidney Burleson Papers, Box 2B186, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

was facing not only government repression but internal divisions as well. Conflicting views of the war and differences over whether or not to support the Bolsheviks in Russia had created divisions that even Debs could not heal.

E.O. Meitzen and his son, E.R., sensing the pending collapse of the SP, had begun promoting a new agrarian organization, the National Non-Partisan League (NPL) in the pages of *The Rebel* before it was shut down. The NPL advocated similar agrarian reforms as the Land League and had achieved a good amount of electoral success in North Dakota and Minnesota.³¹⁸

There is evidence to indicate that the Meitzens perhaps attempted to reignite the PLM/I.W.W./SP alliance under the banner of the NPL. According to a Bureau of Investigation file (the precursor to the F.B.I.), the Meitzens traveled in April, 1917, to the Arizona mining areas of Douglas and Globe, and possibly other Arizona towns “for the purpose of assisting the I.W.W. or advising them in same way or trying to enlist them in their new party.”³¹⁹ The Meitzens, though, found the political climate in Texas and the southwest too repressive and moved to Minnesota to build the NLP there and in the Dakotas.

In Minnesota, E.O. Meitzen served as editor of the German-language edition of *The Leader*, the main organ of the NPL. He also made the rounds as a speaker for the NPL in the German districts of Minnesota and the Dakotas. Eventually the Meitzens returned to Hallettsville to build the NLP in Texas.³²⁰

³¹⁸ *The Rebel*, March 10, 1917.

³¹⁹ Bureau of Investigation, Investigation Case File, 1908-1922, RG65 Roll No. 399, File 46953.

³²⁰ E.R. Meitzen to T A. Hickey, May 9, 1917, Thomas A. Hickey Papers, 1896-1996 and

Through the early 1920s the Meitzens put their efforts into building the NPL, including publishing the *Texas Leader*. In 1920, E.R. Meitzen ran as the NPL's candidate for governor. The Meitzens also backed Robert LaFollette's progressive campaign for president in 1924.³²¹

By the mid 1920s, E.O. Meitzen's days as an active campaigner in the cause of Texas farmers and laborers were nearing an end. Johanna, his wife of nearly forty-six years, died in 1923, while E.R. moved to Texarkana, continuing the fight by actively building the Labor Party of Texas.³²²

Though his body was weakened by age, Meitzen still found the energy to write letters to the editor of the *Dallas Morning News* in 1928, denouncing railroad bosses and pointing out that Protestantism had failed in the U.S. by not opposing World War I. After selling the *New Era*, E.O. spent the next few years being moved from family member to family member as he became affected with senility. In the early 1930s, his daughter Frieda, took him into her home in Houston, where he spent his final years until death on February 24, 1935, at the age of seventy-nine.³²³

E.O. Meitzen spent his life fighting for an alternative political and economic system to replace corporate capitalism. He viewed democracy not as a façade

undated, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas; *The Red Flame*, November, 1919, January, August, 1920.

³²¹ John Meitzen, "The Meitzen Type: The Texas Socialist Party and E.O. Meitzen," unpublished paper, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 18; *Dallas Morning News*, August 22, 1924.

³²² *Dallas Morning News*, February 1, 1926.

³²³ *Dallas Morning News*, March 15, June 9, 1928; John Meitzen to Librarian, undated, Socialism File, Fiench Simpson Memorial Library, Hallettsville, Texas.

designed to hide the vast accumulation of wealth by the few from the work of the many, but instead as an instrument to provide for the needs of society as a whole.

Meitzen, whose transformation from populism to socialism represents a brand of radicalism as American as the Spirit of '76, devoted his adult life to promoting a farmer-labor movement. He did so at a time when workers and farmers across the country formed their own organizations to fight for what they viewed as the rights of the producer versus a government dominated by capitalists and their political instruments. Now, as we advance further into the twenty-first century entangled in foreign wars with the gap between rich and poor ever increasing, the example of the "Meitzen type" provides useful lessons toward solving the problems of today.³²⁴

³²⁴ *The Rebel*, July 25, 1914.

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