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Lawrence Goodwyn And Nebraska Populism: A Review of  
*Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* By  
Lawrence Goodwyn

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# LAWRENCE GOODWYN AND NEBRASKA POPULISM: A REVIEW ESSAY

ROBERT W. CHERNY

*Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America.* By Lawrence Goodwyn. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, appendices, index. xxvii + 718 pp. \$22.50.

Lawrence Goodwyn's book *Democratic Promise* is an important contribution to our understanding of the nature of Populism. Reviewers have termed it "brilliant" and "comprehensive" and "the new standard against which all future efforts must be measured."<sup>1</sup> Goodwyn does, indeed, provide the reader with insights into the nature of Populism that are available nowhere else. Unfortunately, his work also has serious flaws, most obviously in his handling of the Populist movement in Nebraska but ultimately pervading the entire book. The

student of Populism must be aware of the flaws but ought not dismiss the work as a whole, for its contributions are important.

The most important contribution Goodwyn makes is to be found in his thorough and sympathetic development of the origins of Texas Populism. He portrays Texas Populism as the political manifestation of an "Alliance culture" born during the mid- and late 1880s as farmers in a few Texas counties began to organize Alliances and, through the Alliances, to establish producers' and consumers' cooperatives. This cooperative experience, with its occasional successes and more general failures, radicalized the participants and produced an "Alliance culture" as shared experiences became shared understandings, expectations, and values. Ultimately the Texas Alliance organized or merged with similar organizations throughout the South and then moved northward, finally reaching forty-three

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states and territories and some two million farm families.<sup>2</sup>

Goodwyn argues that the expansion of the concept of cooperation, carried out by organizers sent from Texas, laid the basis for political Populism, for "the cooperative movement led to political education in terms of farmer-merchant, farmer-creditor, and farmer-shipper relations and . . . such education led to the . . . energizing self-perception of the farmer's subordinate place in the industrial society." Goodwyn stresses that "only the cooperative experience over a period of time provided the kind of education that imparted to the political movement the specific form and substance of the greenback heritage."<sup>3</sup> When the new party met in 1892 to nominate national candidates, however, it already had symptoms of an internal split, derived according to Goodwyn from two very different varieties of third-party activity. One variety proceeded from the Alliance counterculture and produced a Populism that Goodwyn clearly sees as "genuine." By 1892, however, there also existed what Goodwyn describes as a "shadow movement," created in imitation of the counterculture but without its cooperative experience and hence without its values. The "shadow movement" had its base in Nebraska where, Goodwyn argues, the party was "virtually issueless," subscribed to no "clearly defined Populist doctrines," and "represented little more than a quest for honorable men who would pledge themselves to forsake corrupt practices." The 1896 presidential nominating convention became the scene of the final showdown between these two factions, and the nomination of William Jennings Bryan, representing the ascendancy of the "shadow movement," marked the death of genuine Populism.<sup>4</sup>

Having presented Bryan and his supporters as "trimmers," as issueless, as motivated largely by the desire to win office, and as the precursors of twentieth-century liberalism, Goodwyn then reverses field and argues that, in 1896, "the true issues at stake went far beyond questions of currency volume, to a contest over the underlying cultural values and symbols



*William Jennings Bryan during his 1896 presidential campaign. Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.*

that would govern political dialogue in the years to come."<sup>5</sup> The two central concepts defining political debate in 1896 were those of "the progressive society" as represented by McKinley and "the people," typified by Bryan. McKinley's victory was the victory of business, of "the most self-consciously exclusive party the nation had ever experienced," of "white, Protestant, and Yankee" America, of progress and industrial expansion. Goodwyn laments, therefore, that "the collapse of Populism meant that the values of the corporate state were politically unassailable in twentieth-century America," and he returns thereby to his opening line: "This book is about the decline of freedom in America."<sup>6</sup>

Given the major role assigned to Nebraska Populism as the center of the "shadow movement" and as ultimately responsible for the triumph of shadow over substance, we must look carefully at Goodwyn's description of the Nebraska movement. Goodwyn presents the "National Farmers Alliance" (usually known as the Northern Alliance) as largely a device to promote newspaper subscriptions and never as a base to develop cooperatives.

As a result there were but few cooperatives formed in Nebraska, few farmers were radicalized, and the Nebraska Alliance never moved beyond the desire "to elect good men to public office." Goodwyn sees three forces as pushing the state Alliance into independent political action: the Custer County Alliance (based, Goodwyn says, upon a cooperative experience and hence genuinely radicalized), cooperative influences from other states, and pressures from Charles H. Van Wyck's group of antimonopolists within the state Republican party. Lacking the radicalizing influence of a cooperative experience over a period of time, the Nebraska movement was, according to Goodwyn, "organizationally shallow and ideologically fragile, . . . a fragile shadow movement unrelated to the doctrines of Populism." He claims, "Populism cannot be said to have existed there at all," for the Nebraska party had "no institutional base, no collective identity and no movement culture . . . no mechanisms for self-education, no real lecturing system, no methods for developing individual self-respect among impoverished people." At base, the "farmer movement in Nebraska had no purpose. It only appeared to have one, because of its external resemblance to the real movement which did." By 1892, Goodwyn argues, the Nebraska party was little more than "a loosely floating faction of the familiar low-tariff Democratic Party, . . . little more than a quest for honorable men who would pledge themselves to forsake corrupt practices."<sup>7</sup>

The starting point for a critique of Goodwyn's treatment of Nebraska Populism must be an enumeration of errors. The following statement on pages 316-17 is completely erroneous:

In the fall of 1892 the shadow movement of Populism in Nebraska immersed itself in Democratic fusion—and on Democratic terms. The fusionists re-elected Omar [sic] Kem and William Jennings Bryan, giving each party a man of its choice, and supported a third "straight-out" fusionist who won. The Republicans swept the state offices from the governorship on down and won the other three congress-

sional seats and the state's electoral votes for Harrison. The ideological disarray in these proceedings caused surprisingly few internal tremors—a clear indication that the third party in Nebraska, having failed to generate a culture of reform, possessed few reform principles it considered important enough to defend.<sup>8</sup>

There was *no* state-level fusion in 1892, and limited fusion at a local level. William Jennings Bryan did *not* run as a fusionist in 1892 and he was opposed by both Populist and Republican candidates. Omer Kem did *not* run as a fusionist in 1892; he was opposed by both Democratic and Republican candidates. All three major parties—Populists, Democrats, and Republicans—had full slates in the field, contesting every statewide office. The only statewide attempt at fusion that year consisted of efforts by several prominent Democrats to swing Democratic voters in support of the Populist presidential candidate in order to deny the state's electoral votes to the Republicans. There is nothing in the record to suggest that, in 1892, Nebraska Populism "immersed itself in Democratic fusion." On the contrary, efforts toward fusion at a presidential level and—more extensively—in legislative districts were initiated by and almost entirely limited to Democrats. If any group in Nebraska "immersed itself in fusion," it was the Democrats, and they did so on Populist terms.<sup>9</sup>

The following statement on pages 290-91 is incorrect:

The Omaha *World-Herald* was purchased in 1894 and young pro-silver Congressman Williams [sic] Jennings Bryan installed as its editor. The silver men put in their own management, leaving Bryan free to campaign for silver while contributing an editorial or two each week.

This charge is repeated, with a variation in the date, on page 399:

It was at this point in his career [when the results of the 1894 legislative elections became known] that Bryan's friends among the silver magnates purchased the

Omaha *World-Herald*, which, with Bryan as its editor, promptly became an even more active advocate of free silver.

The only citation for the former statement is to Richard Hofstadter's *American Political Tradition*, and there is no citation for the latter. Hofstadter does not specifically cite a source for his statement, which reads as follows: "he turned to an ill-paid position as editor of the Omaha *World-Herald*, which had been procured by his patrons among the silver interests." A complete and detailed account of the financial transactions surrounding Bryan's position at the *World-Herald* was published in 1968; in it, Paul V. Peterson makes clear that Bryan became "editor-in-chief," a symbolic position providing little income and requiring only a weekly column, after the purchase of stock totaling less than \$10,000 by Bryan (who personally bought one-quarter of the total) and five other Nebraskans, all close political allies of Bryan. No money was raised from the silver interests. Ownership and control of the paper remained where it had been before, with Gilbert M. Hitchcock. Goodwyn also has problems with chronology, suggesting that Bryan became editor only after it became clear that he could not be elected to the Senate by the 1895 legislature (and exactly following Hofstadter in this error). Bryan began his editorial work on September 1, 1894, more than two months before the election, and as a part of his campaign for the Senate seat.<sup>10</sup>

The following statement from page 397 is totally in error:

In an atmosphere of moderate Populist-Democratic-Republican conviviality, undisturbed by references to the greenback doctrines of the Omaha Platform, the 1893 coalition of three-party fusionists selected as its judicial candidate a nominal Populist and political moderate named Silas A. Holcomb.

There was no such "three-party" fusion, nor was there fusion at all in 1893; each party nominated a full slate of candidates for all statewide offices. The platform adopted by the

Populist convention began with a statement endorsing and reaffirming the Omaha platform. The only major crossing of party lines in 1893 occurred when the Republican convention refused to renominate long-time Supreme Court Judge Samuel Maxwell and chose in his stead an alleged railroad sympathizer, an action that drove both Maxwell and Edward Rosewater, editor of the *Omaha Bee* and nominally a Republican but one with a well-established penchant for bolting his party, to endorse Holcomb. No other state-level "fusion" took place.<sup>11</sup>

Goodwyn's account of the 1894 state fusion is filled with suggestions that are without basis in fact. For example, he has the *World-Herald* endorsing the concept of fusion in 1894 and thus finally breaking away from the wing of the state party led by J. Sterling Morton. However, any student of Nebraska political history is aware that the *World-Herald* and its predecessor the *Herald* had opposed Morton's leadership within the party for more than a decade before 1894, and that, specifically, the paper had advocated some form of fusion in both 1890 and 1891. For another example, Goodwyn describes the Populists as "willing" to join Bryan in a fusion effort in 1894 when in fact the Populist convention had no say whatever in the matter. The fusion of 1894 occurred because a majority of the Democratic state convention supported, as their candidate for the Democratic nomination for governor, the person who had already been nominated by the Populist state convention some time before. The Populists had no opportunity to accept or reject this fusion; it was forced upon them by the unilateral action of the Democratic state convention. Fusion in 1894 was only partial, with the Democratic state convention taking as their own candidates some of the Populist candidates and making separate nominations for other offices in the hope that the Populist state committee would withdraw their candidates for those positions. When this opportunity to participate in fusion presented itself, the Populist state committee rejected it. There was no "top-to-bottom"

fusion as Goodwyn implies in the text but corrects in a footnote.<sup>12</sup>

This list of examples of errors in the treatment of Nebraska Populism might be considerably lengthened, especially if small errors of fact or spelling were added. To cite only one persistent example, the person elected to Congress from the Third District in 1890 and reelected from the Sixth District in 1892 and 1894 was neither "Omar Ken" nor "Omar Kem," but Omer Kem. The repeated misspelling of Kem's name, however, is less surprising when one realizes that Goodwyn neither cited nor, apparently, consulted either the sole scholarly biography of Kem or Kem's memoirs. Such a failure is puzzling, given the major role Goodwyn assigns to Kem as the leading representative of one of the three major forces impelling formation of a third party in 1890.<sup>13</sup>

Goodwyn's sources for his novel interpretation of Nebraska politics are surprisingly sparse, consisting primarily of the dissertations of John D. Barnhart (Harvard, 1927) and of Annabel L. Beal (University of Nebraska, 1965); Douglas Bakken's published version of Luna E. Kellie's memoirs; the (Lincoln) *Farmers' Alliance* from 1889 through 1892; the *Omaha World-Herald* for 1894; the manuscript collections of William V. Allen, William Jennings Bryan, and the Nebraska Alliance; various articles by Paolo Coletta; plus scattered references to a few other articles, books, and newspapers. There is no citation to such standard references as the narrative histories by A. E. Sheldon or Albert Watkins, nor to the important *Nebraska History* articles by Frederick C. Luebke (1969), David S. Trask (1970, 1975), Paul V. Peterson (1968), and Samuel E. Walker (1974), nor to James Olson's biography of J. Sterling Morton, nor to Luebke's work on German political behavior, nor to the theses of Clifford E. Bowman on the populist press, DeLloyd Guth on Kem, Dale J. Hart on Rosewater, or Samuel E. Walker on the state newspaper of the Populist party, nor to the dissertation of David S. Trask, nor to the manuscript collections of Jefferson H. Broady, Gilbert M. Hitchcock, Samuel Maxwell, or J. Sterling Morton, nor to the memoirs of

Mary Louise Jeffrey, John H. Powers, Arthur F. Mullen, or George Norris.<sup>14</sup> Given the great importance Goodwyn attaches to the Nebraska "shadow movement" as the antipode of "genuine" Populism, one might have expected a more thorough examination of such basic sources and histories.

Equally distressing is Goodwyn's tendency to reconstruct the Nebraska variety of Populism with reference not to the way it was, but instead with reference—implicit or explicit—to the way it "should" have been, given conclusions already drawn from the Texas experience. The section from page 317, quoted above, is directly relevant:

In the fall of 1892 the shadow movement of Populism in Nebraska immersed itself in Democratic fusion—and on Democratic terms. A modicum of success resulted. The fusionists re-elected Omar [*sic*] Kem and William Jennings Bryan to Congress, giving each party a man of its choice, and supported a third "straight-out" fusionist who won.

As already noted, this statement of events is completely erroneous. What sources did Goodwyn consult in developing this peculiar narrative? The citation for that paragraph is revealing. It includes reference to John D. Barnhart's dissertation, pages 325 and 326, to Horace Merrill's *Bourbon Democracy of the Middle West*, pages 222–25, and to Paolo E. Coletta's *Nebraska History* article on Bryan's second congressional campaign. The footnote then concludes with the cryptic comment: "Some inferences have been drawn that were not explicit in these sources." In point of fact, the entire description of the 1892 campaign must have been inferred because the misstatements of fact are "not explicit in these sources."<sup>15</sup> What could have caused Goodwyn to make such erroneous inferences? Apparently he was misled by his exposition of the Texas experience to the point where he became convinced that genuine Populism could only result from a cooperative experience. Goodwyn reveals the extent to which the Texas experience dictates

his analysis of Nebraska Populism in another footnote:

For reasons that are self-describing, the only regions of Nebraska producing a political movement genuinely resembling Populism were the handful of counties—none too far from Custer County—which had generated at least the beginnings of a cooperative movement. From such counties came authentic greenbackers, such as Mrs. Luna Kellie, a tireless reform editor, and—a sure sign of the culture of Populism—movement songs. See Douglas A. Baaken [*sic*], “Luna Kellie and the Farmers [*sic*] Alliance,” *Nebraska History* (Summer 1969).

In fact, Bakken’s edited version of Kellie’s memoirs contains virtually no references to the period before she became an Alliance state officer in 1894 and no discussion of cooperative activities before that time. Apparently Goodwyn is again drawing inferences based on his analysis of Texas rather than on the sources or material cited for Nebraska.<sup>16</sup>

A similar process may be seen in Goodwyn’s treatment of Omer Madison Kem. Even though Goodwyn never does spell Kem’s name correctly, he attributes to him great importance in the development of what semblance of “genuine” Populism was to be found in Nebraska. Goodwyn concentrates on the organization of a cooperative store at Westerville, Custer County, in July of 1889, and although neither Beal’s dissertation on Custer County Populism nor any other cited source indicates the following, Goodwyn pronounces:

As it had elsewhere, the movement toward cooperative buying and selling generated outright hostility from Custer County merchants, causing Alliancemen under the leadership of a relatively unknown but articulate farmer named Omar [*sic*] Kem to put a county ticket in the field for the fall elections. They followed this move by holding primaries and selecting nominees for county offices. . . . In November, the Custer independent ticket swept the field, all but one of its candidates being elected.

Kem, it should be noted, had been the Union Labor candidate for state senator in 1888 and had accepted that party’s nomination for university regent three weeks before the formation of the cooperative store. His commitment to “a special interest party . . . dedicated solely to the farmer” predated the cooperative endeavor, and a full year before the founding of the store Kem had come to view the Alliance as a potential vehicle for such a special-interest party. Kem did not participate in the formation of the cooperative store. There is no evidence of “outright hostility from Custer County merchants”; indeed, there are suggestions to the contrary in Beal’s dissertation. There is no evidence in any source of a cause-and-effect relationship between the formation of the Westerville store and the naming of an Alliance ticket in the fall election. The fact that both Kem and the Westerville cooperative store were to be found within the geographic confines of Custer County leads Goodwyn, fifty pages later, to refer to “such cooperative advocates as Omar Ken [*sic*],” despite the absence of any evidence of Kem’s advocating cooperatives, either in the materials cited by Goodwyn or in materials not cited.<sup>17</sup>

Because Goodwin credits the cooperative experience, over time, as the “animating essence” of Populism, and because he is so insistent that cooperative ventures were virtually nonexistent in Nebraska, it is of interest to list only those ventures to be found in either Barnhart’s dissertation or in Stanley Parson’s *The Populist Context*, both sources cited by Goodwyn:

1887—Founding of Farmers’ Mutual Insurance Company, Richardson County

1888—Founding of Thayer County Fire Insurance Company

January–March 1889—Alliance state executive committee unsuccessfully seeks modification of state law to allow statewide mutual insurance companies

March 1889—An Alliance member calls for establishment of an Alliance cooperative store in Hayes County





*Omer Madison Kem and his family outside their sod house in 1886. Kem was the Union Labor party candidate for state senate two years later and for university regent in 1889. He was elected to Congress in 1890 in a campaign in which he stressed his mortgaged sod house homestead. He was reelected in 1892 and 1894. Courtesy of the Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.*

July 1889—Formation of the Custer County Farmers' Alliance Purchasing and Selling Company, with a store at Westerville

Summer 1889—Effort to construct a cooperative grain elevator by Elmwood Farmers' Alliance

August 1889—Formation of Cambridge Farmers' Business Association, a producers' and consumers' cooperative that had constructed a stockyards and grain elevator by November

September 1889—Report on a cooperative grain-selling operation and on construction of a cooperative elevator by the Farmers' Warehouse Company, Arapahoe

October 1889—Formation of a business association by the York County Alliance and reports on cooperative purchasing of salt and flour

December 1889—Paxton and Gallagher, Omaha wholesale merchants, refuse to sell to an Alliance cooperative store in Oak

December 1889—State Alliance appoints a business agent

Late 1889—Effort to construct a cooperative elevator in Osceola<sup>18</sup>

Goodwyn explores none of these at any length, except for the Custer County cooperative store and except for the misleading footnote already described. It must be noted that none of the counties involved shares a border with Custer County. Custer County, to be sure, is a very large county located in almost the exact center of the state. Any other Nebraska county will not be "too far" from it. However, the closest cooperative of those listed above is a distance of something over eighty miles from Westerville. Instead of assuming, as Goodwyn does, that all these other cooperative efforts were the result of the influence of the Custer County example, it seems more reasonable to presume that all of them resulted from the efforts of local Alliancemen or of paid state organizers. Both Parsons and Barnhart indicate the rapid growth of the state Alliance in 1889, and Parsons notes explicitly,



The Alliance store was a popular remedy for the farmers' grievances, and, in nearly all of the six counties studied, the farmers attempted to use this method to lower their costs. Usually the county Alliance hired a local businessman or former clerk to manage the store or elevator.<sup>19</sup>

Although Goodwyn credits the Kansas Alliance with a strong cooperative movement, a survey of the standard sources does not indicate any significant difference between the record of cooperatives in Nebraska and the pattern in Kansas, nor does a more detailed comparison suggest significant differences in party development, in organizing efforts, in the nature of electoral support for the Populist party, or in the nature of leadership.<sup>20</sup> On the basis of all the standard sources, there seems to be little justification for awarding Kansas Populists the mantle of legitimacy and denying it to those of Nebraska.

Were Nebraska Populists, as Goodwyn charges, "issueless"? Were they solely concerned with the election of honest, decent candidates and unconcerned with land, transportation, and financial issues? One approach to resolving these questions would be to survey platforms drafted by conventions of the state Alliance or the state party. The first Nebraska Alliance convention platform of record dates from 1882; it called for the prohibition of railway rate discrimination, for a railway commission to enforce such laws, for a fiat definition of currency, for government issue and control of the currency and for postal savings banks (i.e., the germ of a government alternative banking system), for government ownership of the telegraph and telephone system, for the preservation of public lands for actual settlers, for the merit system in civil service, and against free railway passes. Another early platform, that of 1884, repeated these demands and added more, including a tariff for revenue only, the protection of trade unions, and the abolition of convict leasing. Well before issuance of the 1886 Cleburne Demands by the Texas Alliance (described by Goodwyn as "the first major document of the agrarian revolt"),

Nebraska Alliancemen had outlined what Goodwyn calls "the land, transportation, and financial issues that were to become the focus of Populist agitation in the 1890's." The National Union party of 1886, formed by prominent Alliancemen, nominated state Alliance leader Jay Burrows for governor and issued a platform calling for fiat money ("money is purely a creation of law") to be issued solely by the government "in quantity sufficient to effect the exchange of our products," for government operation and control of the railroads and telegraph systems, against land monopolization, against convict leasing, for prohibition, for woman suffrage, and for state legislation establishing maximum railroad rates. In point of fact, in 1886 the Nebraska agrarian radicals not only adopted a platform far more radical than the contemporary Cleburne Demands, but they then followed the full logic of this platform into independent political action. The crushing defeat of the National Union slate severely disrupted the state Alliance and no state Alliance platforms are to be located until 1890.<sup>21</sup>

In 1890, the new Independent party and the state Farmers' Alliance issued platforms calling for fiat money (through silver coinage and paper issue) to be issued by government alone, the abolition of land monopolization, government ownership and operation of the railroad and telegraph systems, state maximum rate laws, the eight-hour day, the Australian ballot, and the foreclosure of the Union Pacific mortgage by the government. Subsequent platforms from 1891 through 1895 repeated these key money, land, transportation, and labor issues and added nationalization of banking (first in 1891), a graduated income tax, nationalization of coal mines, and direct election of the president, vice-president, and senators. At a state level, they called for a maximum railroad rate law, a usury law, a mortgage foreclosure moratorium law, the formation of cooperative insurance companies, free school textbooks, municipal ownership of streetcar, electric, gas, and water systems and of coal yards, and opposed "all secret or



*The congressional nominating convention of 1890 of the Nebraska Third District. This was the body of Alliancemen and their allies that nominated Omer M. Kem. Courtesy of the Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.*

open political organizations based on religious prejudices”—a clear attack on the anti-Catholic American Protective Association. Of the four Alliance platforms issued between 1890 and 1895, two put a demand for fiat money in first place and the other two put it second. Of six party platforms issued between 1890 and 1895, those of 1890 and 1891 put the demand for fiat money first and all the others gave first place to an endorsement and reaffirmation of the Omaha Platform.<sup>22</sup>

Party platforms were a subject of intense concern at Alliance and party conventions, and both the drafting of resolutions and ordering of planks reflects the concern attached to them. By such criteria, Nebraska Populists and

Alliance were not, as Goodwyn claims, “issueless.” On the contrary, they were consistently in the advance of the agrarian movement and were similarly advanced in converting such stands into legislation. In 1891, for example, the Populist majorities in the legislature pushed through an Australian ballot law, relief for drought victims, the legalization of mutual insurance companies, the repeal of a sugar bounty, the eight-hour day, free school textbooks, and—most importantly—the establishment of maximum railroad rates. The last is a strong assertion of the power of the state to act directly on behalf of the farmers and other consumers of railway services. Efforts to pass a usury law and a mortgage foreclosure

moratorium failed, largely because of the Populists' inexperience with the legislative process. Goodwyn suggests that, in the simultaneous session of the Texas legislature, Texas radicals "wanted too much" in asking for free school textbooks, a usury law, a mechanics' lien law, and an elective railroad commission. The Nebraskans were both more successful and more direct—no railway commission to set rates for them, but a direct exercise of the legislative power itself. Although the new party got its maximum rate bill passed, the bill was vetoed (by a Democrat, not—as Goodwyn states—a Republican). The 1893 legislature, organized by a coalition of Populists and a handful of Democrats, passed the railroad rate law again and other legislation, including regulation of the Omaha stockyards. Both measures were ruled invalid, the former in *Smyth v. Ames*, the latter because of a defect in title resulting from Populist legislative inexperience.<sup>23</sup>

By any reasonable criteria, Nebraska Populists were not "issueless." Their issues—land, money, and transportation—were stated as early as 1882 and there was no retreat from them. To such economic issues they added opposition to the American Protective Association in 1893 and after. All of these issues were repeatedly stated in platforms, campaigns, and party newspapers, and were developed into legislative proposals. All of these issues grew out of the experiences of the 1870s, 1880s, and early 1890s, from railroad rate discrimination, from the widely shared experiences of mortgage debt and high interest rates and deflation, from the development of large-scale land holdings by such noncitizens as William Scully, and from repeated encounters with the seeming political muscle of railroads, insurance companies, money lenders, grain buyers, and others of the "commercial classes." The definition of these issues did, in fact, result from shared experiences, which were recalled and focused by the low corn prices of 1889 and by the apparent manipulation of Republican conventions by the railroad companies that year. This account, familiar to all readers of the histories of Nebraska Populism written by John Barnhart,

John Hicks, Stanley Parsons, and Addison E. Sheldon, allows us to understand the radicalization of Nebraska farmers without reference to a long-term cooperative experience. Historians of Kansas Populism—Raymond Miller, Hicks again, Walter Nugent, and Gene Clanton—have given us a similar picture of that state's political development.

Goodwyn does allow that Nebraska Populists may have taken stands on issues, and he specifically denies that they were "ideologically uninformed." Indeed, he suggests that "their truncated movement was too exclusively 'ideological'; it concerned *only* policies and 'politics'—expressed essentially in the desire to win the next election." Thus, when he speaks, as he repeatedly does, of Nebraska Populists as "issueless" or having no "program," it is clear that he means one thing only: the state leadership did not focus solely or even primarily on cooperatives as the *raison d'être* of the organization. As a result, "In terms of shared experience and shared hope, the twin legacies of the cooperative crusade, the farmer movement in Nebraska had no purpose." Is this conclusion an accurate description of what we know about the movement at the grass roots? The answer must be negative. It is clear from memoirs, local newspapers, and manuscript collections that the social and educational aspects of the movement, as well as its cooperative aspects, were all very similar, whether in Kansas, South Dakota, or Nebraska. By all accounts, Nebraska Populism had as broad and deep a base as did the movement in neighboring states.<sup>24</sup>

A survey of the social and emotional nature of Alliance radicalism, of Alliance cooperative efforts, and of the issues of the Populist party, from the mid-1880s through 1895, based upon both primary sources and the works of all previous historians, fails to uncover any clear dimension along which the Populist parties of the Middle Border states can be readily differentiated. A recent study of the extent of cooperatives in eleven states (not including Nebraska) over the period from 1885 through

1891, based on R. G. Dun credit records, concluded that, outside Texas,

the cooperatives were never a determining element in the dynamic stages of the Alliance-Populist movement . . . rather than the cooperative "movement culture" producing populism, a good case can be made for the exact opposite.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that the Texas Populists were different, especially in the scope of their cooperative programs and in their last-ditch opposition to the nomination of Bryan in 1896. But this should not necessarily lead the historian to label the one as "genuine" and all others that fail to correspond exactly as being without substance.

It is necessary to add a brief comment on the nature of Goodwyn's evidence and method. With regard to Texas, he seems to have explored all available sources and historical analyses with great care. Outside Texas, the exploration seems less thorough, and local sources (such as newspapers and memoirs) are largely absent. His methodology is wholly qualitative, almost antiquantitative, and he seems to suggest that efforts to understand Populism through quantitative analysis are doomed to failure.<sup>26</sup> Weakness in the handling of statistics in the narrative is also reflected in a very weak treatment of voting behavior after the Civil War. Goodwyn suggests that there were eight "constituencies" after the Civil War (Northern farmers, Northern workers, Northern men of commerce, Northern Negroes, Southern farmers, Southern workers, Southern men of commerce, and Southern ex-slaves) and that seven of these eight tended to vote "their wartime sympathies," with the sole exception being the Northern urban workers, whom Goodwyn describes as "largely immigrant and overwhelmingly Catholic." He also describes the politics of the period from the end of the war to the 1890s as "issueless," one of his favorite pejorative epithets. This survey of political behavior over the period from 1865 to 1890 unfortunately ignores (except for a footnote) the crucially important work of Samuel P. Hays, Richard Jensen,

Paul Kleppner, Frederick C. Luebke, and others who have employed quantitative methodologies and social-science forms of analysis to explore the relationships between social patterns, voting behavior, and other forms of political behavior.<sup>27</sup> These historians have given us a picture of Northern politics that is filled with issues (albeit largely local issues of an ethnocultural nature) and in which voters behave in a far more rational fashion than that with which Goodwyn credits them.

Although Goodwyn's treatment of Texas agrarian radicalism is thorough, well-developed, and convincing, his attempt to judge all other varieties against the Texas model leads to a misunderstanding of the complex nature of Populism, both in Nebraska and elsewhere. This tendency to judge all other varieties of Populism by the Texas model is an example of a reductive fallacy, in that a large, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon is evaluated by a single, simple—even simplistic—criterion, the presence or absence of a cooperative movement over time. This reduction prevents the development of a treatment of Populism outside Texas that is as thorough, well-developed, and convincing as the treatment of the Texas movement. The degree to which Goodwyn's reductive approach discounts the "genuineness" of other radicalizing experiences must also be the measure of the degree to which he falls short of realizing his two goals. The one goal, obviously, is historiographical, a major reinterpretation of the nature of Populism. The other goal is clearly political, expressed in the quotation with which he introduces the book: "The people need to 'see themselves' experimenting in democratic forms."<sup>28</sup> One can applaud the goal of increasing popular understanding of the past in order to stimulate a questioning of contemporary economic, social, and political assumptions. The people, however, also need to know that past politics were often as complex and multifaceted as those of the present, and that efforts to reduce complex problems to simple paradigms usually fail.

## NOTES

1. For examples of laudatory reviews, see R. A. Rosenstone, *Progressive* 41 (1977): 56-57; Charles A. Cannon, *Journal of Southern History* 43 (1977): 471-72; Henry C. Dethloff, *Agricultural History* 52 (1978): 216-17; Robert C. McMath, *American Historical Review* 82 (1977): 753-54; and Walter Nugent, *Journal of American History* 64 (1977): 464-65. For more critical reviews, see Gilbert C. Fite, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 69 (1978): 137-78; H. Wayne Morgan, *Business History Review* 51 (1977): 242-45; Theodore Saloutos, *Pacific Historical Review* 47 (1978): 149-51; and Norman Pollack, *Historian* 40 (1977): 132-34. In this essay, all references are to the full, unabridged edition, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, rather than to the shorter version published in 1978 under the title *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

2. *Democratic Promise*, chapters 1-5, with quotes from pp. 80, 81.

3. *Ibid.*, chapters 5-8, esp. pp. 110, 208.

4. *Ibid.*, chapters 8, 9, 13-15, esp. pp. 312, 314, 388, 396, 400, 427, 512-14.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 522.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 537, vii.

7. *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 178, 181-82, 202, 204, 207, 209, 210, 388, 400.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 316-17.

9. DeLloyd John Guth, "Omer Madison Kem: The People's Congressman" (M.A. thesis, Creighton University, 1962), esp. p. 117; Annabel L. Beal, "The Populist Party in Custer County, Nebraska: Its Role in Local, State, and National Politics, 1889-1906" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1965), esp. pp. 57, 62; Paolo E. Coletta, "The Nebraska Democratic State Convention of April 13-14, 1892," *Nebraska History* 39 (1958): 317-34; Coletta, "William Jennings Bryan's Second Congressional Campaign," *Nebraska History* 40 (1959): 275-92, esp. 287, 290; John D. Barnhart, "The History of the Farmers' Alliance and of the People's Party in Nebraska" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1930), chapter 6, esp. pp. 309, 324; Marie U. Harmer and James L. Sellers, "Charles H. Van Wyck—Soldier and Statesman," *Nebraska History* 12 (1929):

3-36, 81-128, 190-246, 322-73, esp. 322-73; David Stephens Trask, "A Natural Partnership: Nebraska's Populists and Democrats," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 419-38, esp. 425-28; Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Co., 1913), 3:242-43; A. E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), 1:718-19; James C. Olson, *J. Sterling Morton* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1942), esp. pp. 340-45; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 4, 5, 31, and September 3, 1892; James E. Boyd Manuscript Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, box 2; see also relevant portions of the William Jennings Bryan Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, and the Jefferson Broady Manuscript Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

10. Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 196; Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 1:100-1, 104; Paul V. Peterson, "William Jennings Bryan: *World-Herald* Editor," *Nebraska History* 49 (1968): 349-72, esp. 360, 367.

11. John G. W. Lewis, ed., *Nebraska Party Platforms: 1858-1940* (Lincoln: Works Projects Administration and University of Nebraska, 1940), pp. 181-84, 186-87; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, 1:734-36; Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 3:254-55; Olson, *J. Sterling Morton*, pp. 381-83; Coletta, *Bryan*, 1:87-89; N. C. Abbott, "Silas A. Holcomb," *Nebraska History* 26 (1945): 187-200, and 27 (1946): 3-17; Johannes M. Klotsche, "The Political Career of Samuel Maxwell" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1928); Samuel Maxwell Manuscript Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, box 5; Barnhart, "Farmers' Alliance," p. 358.

12. *Democratic Promise*, pp. 397-99; Trask, "Natural Partnership," esp. pp. 429-31; Klotsche, "Samuel Maxwell"; Abbott, "Silas A. Holcomb"; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, 1:745-53; Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 3:256, 259, 698-99; Coletta, *Bryan*, 1:100-2; Olson, *J. Sterling Morton*, pp. 384-85; Barnhart, "Farmers' Alliance," pp. 362-78; *Omaha World-Herald*, September 27, 1894; Bryan MSS, LC, box 3; *Omaha Bee*, August 16, 24, 30 and October 20, 22, 1894.

13. *Democratic Promise*, pp. 202-7, 209, 262; Guth, "Kem"; Omer M. Kem memoirs, Claud J. Kem, Cottage Grove, Oregon.

14. In addition to those sources cited in previous notes, see the following: Gilbert M. Hitchcock Papers, Library of Congress; Charles H. Van Wyck Papers, University of Kansas; Mary Louise Jeffrey, "Young Radicals of the Nineties," *Nebraska History* 38 (1957): 25-43; Arthur F. Mullen, *Western Democrat* (New York: Wilfred Funk, 1940); John H. Powers, *Autobiography* (Trenton, Nebr.: Register, n.d.); Frederick C. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969); Earl G. Curtis, "John Milton Thayer," *Nebraska History* 28 (1947): 225-38, and 29 (1948): 55-68, 134-50; Luebke, "Main Street and Countryside: Patterns of Voting in Nebraska during the Populist Era," *Nebraska History* 50 (1969): 257-76; Paul V. Peterson, "William Jennings Bryan, *World-Herald* Editor," *Nebraska History* 49 (1968): 349-72; David Stephens Trask, "Formation and Failure: The Populist Party in Seward County, 1890-1892," *Nebraska History* 51 (1970): 281-302; Samuel Walker, "George Howard Gibson, Christian Socialist among the Populists," *Nebraska History* 55 (1974): 553-72; Clifford Ernest Bowman, "The Populist Press of Nebraska, 1888-1896" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1936); Dale J. Hart, "Edward Rosewater and the *Omaha Bee* in Nebraska Politics" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1938); David Stephens Trask, "The Nebraska Populist Party: A Social and Political Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1971); Samuel Emlen Walker, "Populism and Industrialism: The Ideology of the Official Organ of the Nebraska Populist Movement" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1970).

15. *Democratic Promise*, note 8, p. 660. The section cited in Barnhart, "Farmers' Alliance," pp. 325-26, deals generally with the election results and does not include any of the errors. The section cited in Horace S. Merrill, *Bourbon Democracy of the Middle West, 1865-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953), pp. 222-25, is another general account of the elections of 1890 and 1892, but with none of the errors.

Coletta's article on Bryan's second congressional campaign indicates the extent to which Democrat Bryan sought to secure support from Populists and is equally clear that the Populists ran a candidate against him.

16. *Democratic Promise*, note 47, p. 646; Douglas Bakken, ed., "Luna E. Kellie and the Farmers' Alliance," *Nebraska History* 50 (1969): 185-206.

17. *Democratic Promise*, pp. 202, 262; Guth, "Kem," pp. 47, 60; Beal, "Custer County," pp. 22, 29, 31-32, 35, 53-54. The index to *Democratic Promise* cites Kem as follows: "leads local level cooperative movement in Nebraska, 202-7," p. 711.

18. Stanley B. Parsons, *The Populist Context: Rural versus Urban Power on a Great Plains Frontier* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), pp. 68-71; Barnhart, "Farmers' Alliance," pp. 37, 100, 139-46.

19. Parsons, *Populist Context*, pp. 68-71; Barnhart, "Farmers' Alliance," chapter 4, esp. pp. 200-2.

20. For Kansas, see Raymond Curtis Miller, "The Populist Party in Kansas" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1928); Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1969). For Nebraska, see the various sources already cited, especially Barnhart, Parsons, Olson, Trask, Luebke, Sheldon, and Watkins. For both, see John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), which remains, despite all claims to the contrary, the most complete and accurate account of the Alliance and the Populist party.

21. Lewis, ed., *Party Platforms*, pp. 97-98, 104-6, 122-23, 127-28; Barnhart, "Farmers' Alliance," chapter 3, esp. pp. 154 ff.

22. Lewis, ed., *Party Platforms*, pp. 149-50, 158-59, 163-66, 174-76, 183-84, 191-93, 201-2.

23. *Democratic Promise*, pp. 234, 209; Parsons, *Populist Context*, pp. 132-41; Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 3:230-37, 247-53; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, 1:696-708, 725-28; Hicks, *Populist Revolt*, pp. 183-84, 281-84; Barnhart, "Farmers' Alliance," pp. 273-77,



343-50; Eric Monkkonen, "Can Nebraska or Any State Regulate Railroads: *Smyth v. Ames*, 1898," *Nebraska History* 54 (1973): 365-82.

24. *Democratic Promise*, p. 210; for accounts of the social and educational aspects of the Alliance, see the various memoirs listed in note 14, esp. those by M. L. Jeffrey, A. F. Mullen, and J. H. Powers; see also Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 3:229-30; Barnhart, "Farmers' Alliance," chapter 3; Parsons, *Populist Context*, chapter 5; Elton A. Perkey, "The First Farmers' Alliance in Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 57 (1976): 242-47.

25. Karen Toombs, Beverly Burgers, Walter Killilae, and Stanley B. Parsons, "The Role of Co-operatives in the Development of the Movement Culture of Populism" (paper presented at the Mid-Continent History Conference, Springfield, Mo., September 21, 1978), esp. pp. 13, 20.

26. *Democratic Promise*, pp. 314, 394, note 39 on pp. 651-53. Goodwyn's presentation of statistical materials is sometimes embarrassingly weak. The most glaring example is on page 29, where Goodwyn characterizes a decline in credit from \$916.63 to \$400 as "a drop of well over 100 percent in [the farmer's] standard of living." This is actually a decline of 56 percent in the value of items charged with the furnishing merchant, which may or may not reflect accurately the farmer's standard of living, depending on the amount of food, fuel and other necessities the farmer produced himself. Another example may be found on page 13, where

the wheat farmer's situation is so simplified that the example becomes totally meaningless.

27. *Democratic Promise*, pp. 5-10, notes 1 and 8, pp. 615-17; there is no careful consideration of the work of Paul Kleppner (*The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Mid-western Politics, 1850-1900*, New York: Free Press, 1970), indeed, no consideration whatever beyond a "see also" footnote. The centrally important work of Samuel P. Hays is completely ignored, including his "Political Parties and the Community-Society Continuum," in *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, edited by William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). Although published since Goodwyn's book appeared, Kleppner's *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) is a detailed exposition of voting behavior in the period that indicates the inadequacy of Goodwyn's eight "constituencies." See also Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, and Richard J. Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

28. *Democratic Promise*, p. ii. A recent article suggests that Goodwyn's treatment of Texas Populism may have overemphasized the role of cooperatives. See James Turner, "Understanding the Populists," *Journal of American History* 67 (1980): 354-73.