

History of the Agrarian Movement in Washington State

By: Bill Olson

The Tilth Newsletter

V.1 no.9 Jan.1976

"Farmers and farm movements," Ralph Nader stated recently, "have produced most of this country's political and economic innovations in the past century." This was especially true in the history of the Pacific Northwest where farmers helped shape one of the most progressive political traditions in the history of the United States. And their influence can still be felt today.

Things were pretty tough on the American farm during the last 30 years of the nineteenth century, with prices declining generally and farm debts mounting. Per capita income of farmers was far below that of industrial workers. Farmers had absolutely no control over the prices of their own commodities or the things they needed to produce them. Large corporations controlled farm financing, transportation and marketing. Things were pretty tough in the State of Washington too. Although the completion of the transcontinental railway in 1883 brought a flood of immigrants and a land boom in Washington the lot of the farmer remained precarious.

An 1890 census showed the State of Washington ranked sixth nationally in per capita indebtedness. An eastern financial group had locked up control of the Northern Pacific railroad and the railway portages around the Columbia River falls, giving that group a virtual monopoly on the transportation of farm produce. Many farmers were compelled to mortgage their crops before they could market them. And interest rates were often as high as 18 percent. Mortgaged farm property was charged up to 36 percent interest. Settlers who were buying land from the railroad, which had been granted large tracts of land free by the federal government had to sign very stringent contracts.

If for example they couldn't meet payments and accrued interest, or if they failed to pay their taxes when they were due, the land could be totally repossessed by the railroad without any thought of equity. In the words of a school teacher who had moved to Dayton in 1885 "Sometimes a man who had 10 thousand bushels of wheat would find, after he hauled it off, that he had a few dollars left. Some men who had three-quarters of the best land, preemption and a tree claim for 430 acres found it hard to buy shoes for the children."

The psychological effect of this situation was described this way by historian Harriet Ann Crawford of Washington. "So long as each individual farmer faced his failing alone, he could only believe that he, himself, was somehow to blame. He had made this or that mistake of judgment. Or he had had bad luck. After years and even generations of such experience, the farmer came to accept himself as an inferior person somehow deserving of the ridicule and scorn heaped upon him openly or slyly implied by the gags and jokes played at the expense of the country hayseed."

The day of farmer leadership in the planter South was gone and the agriculturalist had no voice in national or state affairs. Unless he could save his confidence in himself by moving West the farmer was on his way toward accepting a permanent subserviency.

As we all know, this changed. But how? Well, the changes began with consciousness raising - encouraged by a secret organization founded in 1867 by a Minnesota farmer named Oliver H. Kelley. The new organization admitted women at full and equal membership and consistently

campaigns for women's equality. It was designed to improve the lot of the farmer through cooperation and social improvements. The organization called itself The Patrons of Husbandry, The Grange.

The Washington state Grange was founded in 1889 when Washington changed its status from territory to state. And the results were far-reaching. Again, in the words of Grange historian Harriet Ann Crawford, "The advent of the Grange changed the psychological relationship of the farmer to his environment. Farmers met and compared notes. They discovered that their failure to get ahead could not be an individual matter since it was duplicated by the experience of hundreds of others all around him." The consciousness awakened by the Grange blossomed into social activism as the farmers organized politically and economically.

Economically speaking, the impact of this period can be seen today in the number of cooperatives which dot the countryside. The most influential political organization of the era was the Farmer's Alliance along with its political wing, the People's Party.

The Farmer's Alliance began in the South. In 1879 in Texas, a statewide Farmer's Alliance was created out of several clubs formed to promote farmer's interests. At first the Texas Alliance stressed buying and selling cooperatives. But in 1886 the organization went further, formulating demands for higher taxes on land held for speculation, laws regulating interstate commerce and heavier taxes on railway property. The next year the Texas Alliance united with the Louisiana Farmer's Union to form the National Farmers' Alliance and Cooperative Union of America - the Southern Alliance.

From that point on, the organization grew with the speed and intensity of a prairie fire. The agrarian movement took on a political role and became a serious factor in national politics.

In the election of 1890, Populists carried a dozen western and southern states with the result that twenty or more Populist senators and representatives were sent to Washington, D.C. In 1892, representatives of the various alliances met in Omaha to formally establish the People's Party. The preamble to their platform was written by agrarian reformer Ignatius Donnelly. "We meet in the midst of the nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin," he said. "The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes unprecedented in the history of the world, while their possessors defy the republic and endanger liberty."

With farm prices down and farm debt up, and with corporate control of farm financing, transportation, and marketing, a good many Washington farmers were angry. This anger found concrete expression in December of 1891 when the Farmer's Alliance and several Washington labor organizations formed the Washington Populist Party. The party's first state campaign in 1892 surprised a good many of the state's professional politicians. A Whitman County Populist, Cyrus Young, polled nearly a quarter of the state's votes.

The following year was a bad one for farmers with an unprecedented rainy season bringing crop failures throughout most of the state. In the wake of such economic troubles, Populist strength grew. In the 1894 elections, one-third of the votes cast in the state were for the Populist Party. The state Democratic Party virtually collapsed, and the Republican Party became divided over free silver coinage and the regulation of railroads. The effect was to put the Populists in a strong political position for the 1896 gubernatorial election.

In the 1896 national election, the national Populist Party fused with the Democratic Party under its nominee William Jennings Bryan. After considerable debate, the Washington Populist Party followed the lead of the national party and fused with the state Democratic Party and with the dissident wing of the Republican Party. The coalition's nominee for governor that year was John Rogers. The new party won a total victory at the polls that year and put the state in Bryan's column as well. In another breakthrough, the Populists selected a black man from Whitman County as a presidential elector.

The Washington Populist platform demanded a reduction of salaries for government officials, control of transportation and communications rates, free school textbooks, women's suffrage,

initiative and referendum, penalties for government officials who accepted special favors, and debt relief.. Unfortunately for the Populists the newly elected Populist-dominated legislature lacked the experience and discipline to fully carry out its program. The party itself was a coalition and a series of intense struggles erupted over various issues during the legislative session.

Despite these difficulties there were some successes. In the words of historian Thomas Riddle, "The legislators wasted less time in its election of a senator than had any of the previous sessions. And they passed more reform legislation. They enacted a rate regulation bill which reduced rates between ten and twenty percent. They passed several debt relief bills, they consolidated the administration of state institutions, and they cut government spending in half."

But the nature of coalition politics eventually split the Washington Populist Party permanently. A dissident radical faction led by Whitman County formally condemned Rogers for giving patronage to other parties. It denounced the idea of fusing with other parties, abandoned the demand of free silver, and endorsed socialism. By 1898 the radical faction had been ousted and the Populist Party had lost much of its momentum. It lost at the polls that year and by 1900 it had collapsed completely.

Despite its demise, Washington's Farmer's Party established a tradition which lasted and has given impetus to many of the reforms Washingtonians now take for granted. And in the areas of social justice, sexual and racial equality and popular participation in government, the farmers clearly led the way.