A Narrowing of Vision: Hardy L. Brian and the Fate of Louisiana Populism

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In the 1890s, Hardy L. Brian was among Louisiana's leading Populists. He was a key founder of the Louisiana People's Party and served as state party secretary and editor of the organization's weekly newspaper. Son of a prominent agrarian dissident from the Louisiana piney woods, Brian believed deeply in the power of an aroused populace to bring fundamental changes to American political and economic life. Over time, however, he abandoned social movement organizing in favor of conventional party politics. The climax of this journey came in 1896, when Brian joined fellow delegates to the Populist national convention to give the People's Party presidential nomination to Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan. The Bryan nomination cost the Populists their independent political identity and precipitated a collapse of their party organization. Hardy L. Brian's journey from agrarian rebel to conventional reform politician reflects a loss of faith in the power of the Populist vision. While he never abandoned the goal of fundamental change, Brian lost faith in the power of this goal to inspire and arouse. Instead, he embraced the logic of conventional party politics, and upon that logic the Populist vision foundered.

On October 2, 1891, seventy-eight delegates from seventeen Louisiana parishes gathered in the town of Alexandria for the founding convention of the Louisiana People's Party. Although but a fraction of the state's parishes were represented, the atmosphere was euphoric. Presiding over the convention preliminaries was Grant Parish's Benjamin F. Brian, a bearded preacher who had struggled for over a decade to forge an independent political movement among the small farmers of the north-central Louisiana piney woods. Grant Parish was solidly for the People's Party, the preacher boasted. "Even the negroes had organized and were ready for it," he explained. The convention delegates adopted a platform that embraced the radical economic agenda of the National Farmers' Alliance, including calls for land reform, public control of the railroads, the free coinage of silver, and the enactment of the Alliance's subtreasury plan for low-interest government loans to farmers.[1]

The Alexandria convention also issued a remarkable document entitled "An Address to the Voters of Louisiana, Irrespective of Class, Color, or Past Political Affiliations." The address was co-authored by Hardy Brian, secretary of the Winn Parish Farmers' Union (an affiliate of the National Farmers' Alliance) and son of Grant Parish's Benjamin Brian. Decrying the

[1]William Ivy Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics, 1877–1900* (Baton Rouge, 1969), 217; Colfax (LA) *Chronicle*, Oct. 10, 1891; *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Oct. 3, 1891; "Organization, Platform and Address of the People's Party," Hardy L. Brian Papers, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Collections, Louisiana State University.

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sufferings endured by "the great multitude of wealth producers" at the hands of "Monopoly, Stock Jobbery and Corruption," Brian declared the American republic to be on "the eve of a momentous political, economic, and industrial revolution." Whether that revolution would be accomplished through peaceable means none could foretell. "A revolution by violence," Brian wrote, "no matter how sacred its aims, must be accompanied by horrors and injustice at which civilized humanity shudders." A "revolution by ballot," by contrast, would "cost not a hair from the head of the guiltiest tyrant, not a single tear from an innocent victim." Brian called upon both black and white to aid the revolution by ballot. "If you heed not this appeal," he warned, "you will ere long send forth a different summons, or resign yourselves and your children to the utter bondage that is being prepared for us all."[2]

Though he was just twenty-six years old, Hardy Brian's journey to the Alexandria convention had been long in the making. Son of one of the state's leading agrarian rebels, Brian was raised in a backwoods Louisiana community that had a history of political dissent. While a young man, Hardy Brian was swept up in the Farmers' Alliance, one of the great agrarian movements of nineteenth-century America, and he quickly rose to a position of movement leadership. His own life experiences had taught him to believe in the power of an aroused populace to bring fundamental changes to American political and economic life. It was this belief that inspired the founders of the Louisiana People's Party and lay at the heart of Brian's Alexandria address. Over time, however, Brian followed a path that led him from social movement organizing back to the realm of conventional political party activism. The climax of this journey came in 1896, when Brian joined fellow delegates to the Populist national convention to give the People's Party presidential nomination to Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan.[3] The Bryan nomination cost the Populists their independent political identity and precipitated a collapse of their party organization. By the end of 1896, the Louisiana People's Party lay in ruins.

Populism was the largest and most influential in a series of late-nineteenth-century movements that challenged the emerging corporate order of the United States. Its rapid collapse in the wake of the 1896 election raises questions regarding the nature and limits of political dissent in industrializing America. For some, Populism stands as the archetype of a successful social protest movement. In his classic account of the 1896 elec-

[2]"Organization, Platform and Address of the People's Party"; The address is quoted in part in Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 218–19. The address was co-written with Bryant W. Bailey of Winn Parish. John Milton Price, "Populism in Winn Parish" (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1969), 57.

[3]*Louisiana Populist* (Natchitoches, LA), Aug. 7, 1896.

tion, Robert F. Durden argued that the Bryan campaign represented the "climax of Populism" and the "time of its greatest significance." While the People's Party itself may have expired, Durden suggested, Populist ideas lived on and helped shaped the reforms of the Progressive and New Deal eras. Elizabeth Sanders, as well, has portrayed Populists as victims of their own success. The post-1896 Democratic Party, argues Sanders, carried on the agrarian legacy of Populism and laid the foundations of the modern regulatory state. Michael Kazin's recent biography of William Jennings Bryan suggests that it was actually Bryan and his Democratic allies, rather than the Populists, who most effectively gave voice to the agrarian dissent of the 1890s. For these historians, Populism's rapid rise and fall demonstrate the ability of American political institutions to adapt and implement ideas that first emerge through social protest.[4]

As Lawrence Goodwyn has demonstrated, however, the agrarian rebels who founded the People's Party were inspired by a vision more sweeping than that of simple economic regulation. Populists sought a "cooperative commonwealth" in which a democratic citizenry would work together to insure the freedom of the individual—a freedom they believed was threatened by the country's emerging corporate order. The Populist vision, argues Goodwyn, was rooted in an egalitarian and participatory "movement culture" fostered by the Farmers' Alliance, the organization that gave birth to the People's Party. This movement culture, with its focus on economic cooperation, provided a model of the society that Populists sought to build and a practical alternative to the corporate order that they opposed. The Populist cause, Goodwyn maintains, was undermined from within by a "shadow movement" that had little devotion to the cooperative vision and that was driven by considerations of traditional political calculus rather than the egalitarian ethos of authentic grassroots Populism. The Bryan nomination, for Goodwyn, marked the victory of this "shadow movement" and the death of authentic Populism. While the established parties adopted and even implemented particular Populist reform proposals, for Goodwyn, the vision of a "cooperative commonwealth" expired along with the People's Party.[5]

The rise of Louisiana Populism is very much consistent with Goodwyn's view. The heartland of Louisiana Populism lay in the north-central part of the state, where the Farmers' Alliance and its call for economic cooperation had spread like wildfire in the late 1880s. Almost without exception, the

[4]Robert F. Durden, *The Climax of Populism: The Election of 1896* (Lexington, KY, 1965), vii, ix; Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago, 1999), 1–4; Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 2006).

[5]Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York, 1976).

architects of the Louisiana People's Party were, like Hardy Brian, veterans of the Alliance cooperative movement. And, like Brian, they carried that movement's vision of sweeping social change with them into the People's Party.[6] The fall of Louisiana Populism, by contrast, departs significantly from Goodwyn's script. Hardy L. Brian's journey from agrarian rebel to conventional reform politician reveals that by 1896 Louisiana Populism was indeed but a shadow of the grassroots insurgency that had given birth to the People's Party. By 1896, Populist-movement culture had largely withered in Louisiana, while the Louisiana People's Party came to focus almost exclusively on electoral politics and increasingly emphasized the single issue of the free coinage of silver at the expense of the broader Populist agenda of structural change. Yet, despite this narrowing of activity and agenda, Louisiana Populism was not undermined by a "shadow movement." On the contrary, it was agrarian radicals such as Hardy L. Brian who presided over the transformation of Louisiana Populism. It was Populist radicals, with roots in the Farmers' Alliance and its movement culture, who charted the Louisiana People's Party's "pragmatic" course. While Brian and his associates never abandoned their vision of a "cooperative commonwealth," they lost faith in the power of this vision to inspire a popular political uprising. Instead, they embraced the logic of conventional politics, and upon that logic their vision foundered.

The Making of an Agrarian Rebel

That Hardy L. Brian would become a Populist leader could hardly have surprised those in his home community of Big Creek. A settlement of smallholding farmers located in an isolated, backwoods region of north-central Louisiana's Grant Parish, Big Creek had long nurtured a culture of political dissent. In 1861, for instance, the community had opposed Louisiana's secession from the Union. During the Red River campaign of 1864, one Big Creek resident organized and commanded a Unionist partisan company. After the war, Big Creek became one of the first communities in northern Louisiana to organize a chapter of the Grange, a social and economic fraternity of farmers that reached its peak as a national movement in

[6]Goodwyn's insistence upon the centrality of the Alliance cooperative movement in the rise of Populism has been widely criticized by historians who see little evidence of such a connection outside of Texas, where Goodwyn conducted his most detailed and exhaustive research. See, for instance, James Wright, "A Populist Ideology," *Reviews in American History* 6 (Sept. 1978): 365–69; Robert W. Cherny, "Lawrence Goodwyn and Nebraska Populism: A Review Essay," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1981): 181–94; Stanley B. Parsons, et al., "The Role of Cooperatives in the Development of the Movement Culture of Populism," *Journal of American History* 69 (Mar. 1983): 866–85. While Goodwyn's model may have limited relevance to the Plains states, studies such as Robert C. McMath, Jr.'s *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (Chapel Hill, 1975) suggest that Goodwyn's approach does apply more broadly to southern Populism.

the 1870s. Explained one Big Creek Granger, "The necessity of concerted action on the part of farmers to protect their interests from the abuses of monopolies and corrupt legislation" had been "a subject of long consideration" in the community. Among the suggestions of this Granger was that the plantations of the nearby Red River Valley be subdivided and sold to the "honest workingman."[7]

In the late 1870s and 1880s, Big Creek was the focal point for an "independent" political movement that, with occasional success, challenged the Democratic machine that dominated Grant Parish politics. Among this movement's most visible spokespersons was Hardy Brian's father, Benjamin. A Louisiana native, Benjamin F. Brian settled in 1868 at Big Creek where he worked first as a blacksmith and wheelwright. Later, he obtained a modest fifty-acre farm and also preached the Baptist faith. Benjamin Brian was a perennial candidate for state senate, running independent campaigns for that post in every election between 1876 and 1888. By building a modest but loyal following among smallholding piney woods farmers and forging alliances with black Republicans in Grant Parish's plantation district, Brian was able to run competitive races, including a successful 1879 effort that earned him a term in Louisiana's state senate. Brian's political message focused on the corruption of the existing parties with occasional forays into inflationary monetary reforms that would offer relief to indebted farmers. With such a father, Hardy L. Brian had truly, as the local Democratic newspaper put it, been "rocked in an 'Independent' cradle."[8]

In 1885, at the age of twenty, Hardy Brian moved to neighboring Winn Parish (home to his maternal relatives) to pursue teaching. It was the burgeoning agrarian movement, however, that soon claimed his primary attention. In January 1887, the annual convention of the Texas State Farmers'

[7]At the time of secession, Big Creek was contained within the Mill Creek precinct of Rapides Parish, which voted unanimously against secessionists in the January 1861 election for delegates to the state secession convention; *Constitutional* (Alexandria, LA), Jan. 12, 1861. Big Creek resident William H. Willett organized a Unionist company in 1864 that was incorporated into the First Battalion, Louisiana Cavalry Scouts. D. E. Haynes, *A Thrilling Narrative of the Sufferings of Union Refugees and the Massacre of the Martyrs of Liberty of Western Louisiana* (Washington, 1866), 47; *Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from Louisiana*, National Archives Microfilm, roll 11; "Letter from Big Creek," *Caucasian* (Alexandria, LA.), June 6, 1874.

[8]Obituary of Benjamin Franklin Brian, *Louisiana Populist*, Nov. 6, 1896; Federal Manuscript Census, 1870, Grant Parish, Agricultural Schedule; Federal Manuscript Census, 1880, Grant Parish, Agricultural Schedule; *Chronicle*, Sept. 30, Oct. 28, 1876; Oct. 26, Nov. 9, 1878; Dec. 6, 1879; Apr. 12, May 3, 1884; Apr. 7, May 5, 1888; Sept. 12, 1891. Brian received significant black support in his 1876, 1878, 1879, and 1888 campaigns. In 1884, the Grant Parish Republican Party endorsed his Democratic opponent. (Black voters, who made up about a third of the parish's electorate, were able to vote relatively freely and fairly in Grant until disfranchisement in the late 1890s.) In 1878, Brian ran as a member of an independent "greenback" slate committed to inflationary monetary reform.

Alliance fired the opening salvo of the Populist revolt. Convention delegates, electrified by the vision of economic salvation through the creation of "one great giant enterprise" of cooperative buying and selling, dispatched teams of organizers across the southern cotton belt to build a national alliance of farmers. On the last day of the convention, the Texas Alliance officially merged with the Louisiana Farmers' Union, a struggling agrarian organization with chapters in a handful of Louisiana parishes, to form the National Farmers' Alliance and Co-operative Union of America. Together, the Texas Alliance men and the Union men of Louisiana launched a remarkable organizing drive.[9]

Following the merger with the Texas Alliance, the Farmers' Union spread rapidly in north-central Louisiana's piney woods. In the late nineteenth century, cotton farmers in backwoods Louisiana found themselves enmeshed in a cycle of falling cotton prices and rising debt. The Farmers' Union promised to free farmers from the debt cycle through economic cooperation. Although at the time of the merger, the Farmers' Union had no chapters in either Winn or Grant, its workings and its promise to raise farmers out of debt and "keep them out" were well known to some local farmers. In March 1887, a Grant Parish resident named A. G. O'Neal received a commission to organize on behalf of the state Farmers' Union. Over the next two months, O'Neal organized eight local unions in Grant. In late May, delegates from these eight local organizations met to establish the Grant Parish Farmers' Union. By 1889, the Grant Parish Farmers' Union had 402 members (279 men and 123 women) organized into thirteen subordinate unions.[10]

Collective purchasing and marketing were at the center of the Farmers' Union's agenda. In 1887, at the very first meeting of the Grant Parish Farmers' Union, the organization established a trade committee to investigate the possibility of negotiating an agreement with a local merchant to supply the entire trade of the parish's union farmers at reduced prices. While the committee determined that it was too late to enter into a parish-wide agreement for the current year, it encouraged its subordinate unions to negotiate individual agreements with local merchants. The following year, the Grant Parish Farmers' Union did negotiate a parish-wide trade agreement. By 1889, the parish union was entertaining competitive bids from

[9]Price, "Populism in Winn Parish," 77; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 191. For the early history of the Louisiana Farmers' Union, see Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 142–52.

[10]*Chronicle*, Mar. 5, June 4, 1887; July 13, 1889. For a detailed analysis of the cotton economy of one piney woods Louisiana parish, see Joel M. Sipress, "The Triumph of Reaction: Political Struggle in a New South Community, 1865–1898" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1993), 159–70, 232–37.

merchants who desired the union trade. Meanwhile, in Winn Parish, the union took direct control of purchasing and marketing by establishing a cooperative store and warehouse. The Grant Parish Farmers' Union soon followed suit with cooperative stores at Colfax and Pineville. (The Pineville store was jointly operated by Farmers' Unions of Grant and Rapides Parishes.)[11]

The strength and vibrancy of the Farmers' Union movement lay largely in the way it integrated practical economic cooperation and political education with social activities and rituals that owed much to the tradition of American fraternal organizations. The formal business of each local union included not merely economic cooperation, but also mutual aid and discussion of political issues. Each local union was required to elect one member to serve as "lecturer" with the responsibility to "deliver or read a short address on some topic of interest to the order" at each meeting. From fraternal organizations, the union borrowed the practice of secret passwords and handshakes. New members passed through an elaborate set of initiation rites designed to impress upon them that they were joining a solemn brotherhood of farmers. Beyond its formal business, the union also became a focal point for social life. In July 1889, for instance, 300 people turned up to see the election and installation of the Grant Parish Farmers' Union's new officers. At noon, the meeting recessed for two hours to consume a sumptuous meal prepared by members of the local union. Following lunch, the crowd was treated to a period of public speaking before the delegates returned to their official business. Unlike most political and fraternal organizations of the era, membership in the Farmers' Union was open to women. While official union business was conducted by men, women played a key role in the order's social activities, including the production of the meals that were a central and much commented-upon aspect of union life.[12]

Both Benjamin Brian and his son Hardy quickly rose to leadership positions in their respective Farmers' Unions. Benjamin Brian served as a delegate from Big Creek to the Grant Parish Farmers' Union and as president of

[11]*Chronicle*, June 4, July 16, 1887; Mar. 17, 1888, Jan. 12, Sept. 14, 1889; Feb. 22, 1890; Feb. 13, 1892; "Charter and By-Laws of the Winn Parish Cooperative Association," Hardy L. Brian Papers.

[12]"Constitution and By-Laws of the Farmers' Union of the State of Louisiana," Ruston, 1888, Sidney Seth Tatum Family Papers, Special Collections, Manuscripts and Archives Department, Prescott Memorial Library, Louisiana Tech University; "Ceremonies and Rituals of the Louisiana Farmers' Union," Longino Manuscripts, Archives Microfilm No. 226, Reel 4, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Watson Library, Northwestern State University of Louisiana; *Chronicle*, July 13, 1889. For a discussion of the role of women in the Farmers' Alliance, see Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Women in the Southern Farmers' Alliance: A Reconstruction of the Role and Status of Women in the Late Nineteenth-Century South," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall 1975): 72–91. McMath discusses the role of the Farmers' Alliance as a social institution in *Populist Vanguard*, 64–76.

the Big Creek union. In neighboring Winn, Hardy Brian emerged as a key union leader. In 1887, he was elected secretary of the Winn Parish Farmers' Union. He also served as a director of the Winn Parish Farmers' Union Cooperative Association, which was chartered in 1888 to manage the parish union's cooperative store and warehouse. Hardy Brian became a vocal advocate of radical economic reforms, which he promoted through a Farmers' Union column in Winnfield's *Southern Sentinel.* "Something must be done," Brian wrote in 1887, "otherwise we shall merely be 'lopping off the branches' rather 'striking at the root' of this tree of evil. It must be admitted," he continued, "that 'capital is the product of labor,' and that 'the governing are the servants of the governed.'" Benjamin and Hardy Brian were among the first in Louisiana to advocate independent electoral action by the Farmer's Union. In 1890, they were part of a group that met with Cuthbert Vincent, a roving reporter for the Kansas-based *American Non-Conformist* who was on a Louisiana lecture tour, to discuss the formation of a third party. Shortly thereafter, Hardy Brian launched the Winnfield *Comrade*, the first Populist newspaper in Louisiana and the first, Brian claimed, in the South.[13]

As it became clear that the South's system of agricultural finance could not be overturned through cooperative marketing and purchasing alone, the union farmers of north-central Louisiana gradually began to embrace the type of independent political action that the Brians had long advocated. The spark for independent politics, in Louisiana and across the South, was the National Farmers' Alliance proposal for a federal subtreasury program to provide low-interest government loans directly to farmers. The subtreasury plan, first presented publicly at the December 1889 convention of the National Farmers' Alliance, was the brainchild of Charles W. Macune, the president of the order. Under Macune's plan, the federal government would erect a public warehouse in every county in the country that produced at least $500,000 worth of agricultural commodities. Farmers who stored their products in these "subtreasuries" could borrow up to eighty percent of the value of the crop at a guaranteed low interest rate. By promising to shift agricultural credit from private to public hands—thereby freeing farmers from the furnishing merchants who were the primary providers of credit in the cotton South—the subtreasury program raised the cooperative vision to a new and more expansive plane. The subtreasury plan aroused enormous enthusiasm in the north-central Louisiana hill country. "We will work for it," wrote one union man, "talk for it, write for it, and last but not least, we will vote for it."[14]

[13]*Chronicle*, Oct. 12, 1889; Aug. 16, 1890; *Southern Sentinel* (Winnfield, LA), Sept. 16, 1887; "Charter and By-Laws of the Winn Parish Cooperative Association"; Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 204–05, 209–10.

[14]Letter of A. J. Dunn, *Chronicle*, Sept. 6, 1890. For a discussion of the subtreasury plan

In the summer of 1890, Farmers' Union activists in the north-central part of the state launched a vain effort to dump incumbent Democratic congressman Newton C. Blanchard, a vehement opponent of the subtreasury plan. Despite a concerted effort by union activists to elect anti-Blanchard delegates, the Democratic Party's district nominating convention gave its nod to Blanchard. In response, the Winn Parish Farmers' Union called upon all the unions in the congressional district to send delegates to a special convention to nominate an independent candidate to oppose Blanchard on a pro-subtreasury platform. While union radicals were ready for a decisive break with the Democratic Party, however, they faced opposition from more moderate elements within the Farmers' Union. Of the twelve parish unions in the district, only seven sent delegates to the convention. Of the seven, two spoke out against making a nomination and then withdrew in protest. Thomas S. Adams, president of the Louisiana Farmers' Union, wired the convention and instructed them against running an independent congressional candidate. "Go forth like men and rally your entire forces to the flag of the Democracy," Adams urged. Spurning Adams's advice, the five remaining delegations nominated Thomas J. Guice, lecturer of the state Farmers' Union, and called upon all labor organizations, including the Knights of Labor and the Colored Farmers' Alliance (an African-American affiliate of the National Farmers' Alliance), to support Guice's candidacy.[15]

Guice's nomination prompted a torrent of abuse from the Democratic press. Adams, Guice's superior in the state Farmers' Union, pressured him to withdraw. About a month before the election, the Rapides Parish Farmers' Union repudiated its endorsement of Guice. Although Guice did eventually bow to the pressure to abandon the race, his abortive campaign marked a decisive break between Farmers' Union radicals and the Democratic Party.[16] Just twelve months later, the union radicals would meet in the town of Alexandria to found the Louisiana People's Party.

Despite his relative youth, Hardy Brian played an instrumental role in establishing the Louisiana People's Party. In May 1891, Brian was one of just two Louisianans to attend the founding national convention of the People's Party in Cincinnati, Ohio. Brian carried credentials as the official representative of the Farmers' Unions of Winn, Grant, Catahoula, and Vernon Parishes. "The people of my parish are almost unanimously in favor of a new party," he told the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. "The race cry doesn't scare us," he added. "We find that we can manage the colored men in the Alliance very

and its political significance, see Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 166–72.

[15]Lucia Elizabeth Daniel, "The Louisiana People's Party," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 26 (Oct. 1943): 1077; *Chronicle*, Aug. 23, Aug. 30, Sept. 20, Oct. 4, 1890; *Daily Advocate* (Baton Rouge), Oct. 5, 1890.

[16]Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 207.

well, and we are not a bit frightened about negro supremacy." Brian returned home to begin organizing on behalf of the new party. When the Louisiana People's Party held its founding convention in October 1891, it elected Hardy Brian to be state party secretary.[17]

Shattered Optimism

The Louisiana People's Party was the creation of smallholding white farmers who had been radicalized by their experiences in the Farmers' Union—a movement from which the party inherited its crusading spirit and vision of social and economic change. The radicalized union men who founded the Louisiana People's Party shared with Hardy Brian a missionary zeal. They saw themselves not as politicians, but as makers of a nonviolent revolution that would institute rule by what they termed "the laboring class of people" and implement reforms that would exert public control over the country's transportation system, its money supply, and its system of agricultural finance. Though they were almost entirely white, landowning farmers who lived in the north-central Louisiana piney woods, the founders of the Louisiana People's Party envisioned building a movement that would unite all who labored—black and white, agricultural and industrial. They boldly predicted that ordinary Louisianans would flock to the Populist cause. One rank-and-file Populist declared that the majority of the state's black voters were "only waiting for an opportunity to support the peoples party." The call to rebellion having been issued, they believed victory to be at hand.[18]

Populist optimism, however, was soon shattered by a dose of hard political reality. The first significant blow to the Populist revolution came when the Louisiana Farmers' Union failed to endorse the People's Party. Though Populist radicalism had swept through a handful of Louisiana parishes, the majority of the state's union farmers, including the organization's conservative leadership, remained loyal Democrats. Ignoring the protests of its Populist minority, the state Farmers' Union voted to ally itself with the so-called reform wing of the faction-ridden Louisiana Democratic Party. The Louisiana People's Party thus entered the April 1892 state and local elections, its first electoral test, without the benefit of the statewide organizational infrastructure that the state Farmers' Union could have provided.[19]

Populist efforts to launch an interracial agrarian uprising also foundered when white Populists refused to accept black Populists as equal partners in

[17]*Journal of the Knights of Labor*, May 21, 1891; *Chronicle*, July 11, 1891; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 18, 1891; "Organization, Platform and Address of the People's Party."

[18]Resolutions of the Montgomery Farmers' Union, *Chronicle*, June 27, 1891; "Organization, Platform and Address of the People's Party"; Letter of S. W. LaCroix, *Chronicle*, Sept. 12, 1891.

[19]Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 201–04.

the People's Party. A crisis that rocked the Grant Parish People's Party illustrated the difficulties of interracial cooperation in a political system that had heretofore been organized largely along racial lines. In the fall of 1891, the Grant Parish Populists invited black voters to participate in a primary election to choose the party's local candidates for the April 1892 elections. The party's white leaders were shocked by the election results. By employing the time-tested strategy of casting their ballots as a bloc, black voters, who made up just over half the primary electorate, determined the makeup of the entire People's Party ticket. The handpicked candidates of the Farmers' Union, with the exception of state senate candidate Benjamin Brian, went down to defeat. The primary results, in the words of one commentator, shook the Grant Parish People's Party "from center to circumference." While all the victorious candidates were white, and most had received some significant degree of white support, the deciding influence of a bloc of black votes raised the specter of "negro rule." "We have all along warned [the Third Partyites] of the power of the colored brethren when the whites divide their forces," cackled the local Democratic paper. After a two-month debate among white Populist rank and file, the party's all-white parish executive committee cast out the primary results and named a new set of candidates. A month later, the party reinstated the original ticket. The damage to the fragile trust between black and white Populists had nevertheless already been done.[20]

An undercurrent of racial tension also marred the February 1892 state nominating convention of the Louisiana People's Party. Although Populists opened the convention to black men (at least 24 of the 171 delegates were African American), white delegates resisted the demand of some black Populists that the party's state ticket include an African American candidate. The names of two prominent black politicians, including a former superintendent of the Louisiana Colored Farmers' Union, were placed in nomination for the office of state treasurer. After a lengthy debate, both men withdrew under pressure from a group of black delegates who argued that it was not the "proper time to run for office." The state platform adopted by the convention reflected the ambivalence of white Populists toward interracial politics. "The interests of the white and colored people of the South are identical," declared the platform. "Equal justice and fairness must be accorded to each." Expressions of interracial solidarity nevertheless coexisted with assumptions of black inferiority. The same platform that promised equal justice also warned that both black and white would suffer unless "the undisputed control of our government were assured to the intelligent and

[20]*Chronicle*, Dec. 12, 1891; Feb. 6, 1892; *Louisiana Populist*, July 5, 1895; *Chronicle*, Dec. 12, 1891; Mar. 5, Apr. 2, 1892.

educated portion of the population"—words long euphemistic in Louisiana for white rule. The party, in effect, called for interracial solidarity, but under the leadership of white Populists.[21]

Louisiana's April 1892 state elections, the first in which the People's Party fielded a ticket, showed just how limited was the social base of Louisiana Populism. Populist gubernatorial candidate Robert L. Tannehill, a prominent Farmers' Union activist and former sheriff of Winn Parish, gathered only 6 percent of the statewide vote. Tannehill carried just four parishes (including Grant and Winn) and received a majority of the vote in but two. The People's Party received little support beyond its core constituency of Farmers' Union radicals in the state's north-central hill country. (Roughly two-thirds of Tannehill's total vote came from a set of ten contiguous parishes in the north-central part of the state.) The Populists elected just one member, Benjamin F. Brian, to the state senate and but three (including Hardy L. Brian) to the legislature's lower house. Despite concerted efforts to build bridges with New Orleans labor organizations, the Populists received just seventy-one votes in the city. The People's Party fared somewhat better in the fall congressional elections, in part due to a "fusion" agreement with the Republican Party that garnered Republican support for Populist congressional candidates. The fall elections nevertheless fell far short of Populist expectations. Each of the Populist congressional candidates went down to defeat by wide margins, drowned in a wave of fraudulent African American ballots controlled by the Democrats in Louisiana's heavily black plantation parishes.[22]

The political setbacks of 1892 shattered the euphoria that surrounded the establishment of the Louisiana People's Party. By the standards of conventional politics, the 1892 elections represented a healthy beginning for the Populists, particularly in light of the steep challenges facing third parties in the American electoral system. Populists, however, had not entered the electoral arena according to the calculus of conventional politics. For them, the founding of the Louisiana People's Party was to be the opening shot of a

[21] *Times-Democrat* (New Orleans), Feb. 18–19, 1892. Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 196–97, 222–23. Many historians have interpreted Populist assertions of an identity of interests between black and white as a challenge to the South's racial orthodoxy. Conservative paternalists, however, also argued that the interests of black and white were identical. In both cases, the assertion of an identity of interests was used to argue that blacks should defer political power to whites.

[22] Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 225–26. For election results, see Daniel, "The Louisiana People's Party," 1126–29. Hair attributes Tannehill's poor showing in New Orleans, in part, to electoral fraud. The Populists received 9,792 votes in the 1892 gubernatorial election. In the fall of 1892, the Populists ran candidates in four of Louisiana's six congressional districts. The Populist congressional candidates received a total of 14,634 votes representing 18 percent of the vote cast in the four districts.

political revolution that would rapidly overturn the existing monied parties and sweep the laboring classes into power. In reality, Louisiana was not on the threshold of such a revolution. While white farmers in a handful of north-central Louisiana parishes had embraced alliance radicalism, elsewhere the Farmers' Union and its movement culture had left little mark. Frustrated and disappointed, Populists retreated from their bold vision of economic cooperation and abandoned the effort to forge an interracial agrarian movement. Instead, they focused on winning new white converts through a program of moderate economic reform. In 1893, a severe economic depression shook the United States and breathed new life into Louisiana Populism. By then, however, Populism had undergone a transformation from a social movement to a conventional political party.

The Rise of Free Silver

The federal elections of 1892 were a smashing Democratic victory that delivered the party control of both branches of Congress and thrust Democrat Grover Cleveland into the presidency. Just after the election, Howard G. Goodwyn, a Democratic newspaper editor in Grant Parish, wrote that "for the first time in thirty-two years, after the 4th of March, 1893, the Democrats will have control over all departments of government, and may justly and consistently be held responsible for incorrect administration." Given the catastrophe soon to strike the United States economy, Goodwyn may have regretted his words. Shortly after Cleveland's inauguration, a Wall Street financial panic set in motion an economic contraction surpassed in intensity only by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Cotton prices, steady since 1886, reached new all-time lows in 1894. A committee of the United States Senate reported that at prevailing price levels, cotton could no longer be grown profitably. The Democratic administration of Grover Cleveland, whose policies convinced millions of American farmers and workers that he was insensitive to their plight, paid the political price for the depression of the nineties. The president staunchly resisted demands of farmers for an inflationary monetary policy that might relieve the burden of farm debt by boosting the prices of agricultural products. Cleveland's decision to break the 1894 Pullman railroad strike with federal troops confirmed suspicions that the president was a servant of the "money power." Louisiana Populists exploited the president's weakness to their own advantage. "Two years ago the Populist said a change in administration from Republican to Democrat would not make times any better," the *Louisiana Populist*, the official state party paper, crowed in 1894. "The Democratic speaker said it would. Who was right?"[23]

[23]*Chronicle*, Nov. 19, 1892; James L. Watkins, *King Cotton* (New York, 1908), 31; Matthew

Although the Populists rushed to exploit the political opening created by the economic crisis and the unpopularity of President Cleveland, the movement that they led had by then changed fundamentally. The Louisiana People's Party was born of the Louisiana Farmers' Union and inherited from it a democratic ethos and participatory vision. By 1894, however, the Farmers' Union and the cooperative movement were all but dead. In February 1892, the Winn Parish Union Cooperative Association, suffering under the weight of low cotton prices, closed all of its stores after failing to meet its obligations to its creditors. Less than a year later, the Grant Parish Union Cooperative Association was dissolved and its assets auctioned at a sheriff's sale. Statewide, the Louisiana Farmers' Union faced collapse. In September 1893, the order's state president issued a desperate circular urging "brothers of the Farmers' Alliance" to stand by their colors. "Reorganize your defunct sub-unions," he wrote, "reinstate your parish union with the state union." All efforts to revive the dying organization proved vain.[24]

While the People's Party was democratic in form, it lacked the participatory culture of the Farmers' Union. Unlike the union, which sponsored a set of ongoing social, political, and economic activities that were fully integrated into the life of the community, the People's Party, including its local branches, served primarily as a vehicle for election campaigns. And election campaigns simply were not sufficient to sustain ongoing grassroots involvement. A few months before the 1894 congressional elections, for instance, party clubs existed in fewer than half of Grant Parish's voting precincts. Several Populist strongholds remained unorganized. Exasperated Populist leaders bemoaned the lack of rank-and-file participation. "The People's Party clubs are meeting elsewhere and beginning to hustle," read the announcement for one party meeting. "We have business to attend to and will not impose it upon a few leaders any longer." While Farmers' Union chapters were of, by, and for their local members, Populist clubs served largely as transmission belts for decisions made by higher-level party leaders. The head of the Grant Parish party urged Populist clubs to meet monthly "to receive instructions and People's Party news." Local club activity, he explained, "arouses the people and forces them to become interested."[25]

By 1894, Louisiana Populism had ceased to be a grassroots social movement. Although Populists remained committed to an agenda of social and economic reform, they approached their task within the framework of conventional party politics. Faced with an increasingly desperate economic situ-

Brown Hammond, *The Cotton Kingdom: An Essay in American Economic History* (New York, 1897), 169; *Louisiana Populist*, Oct. 5, Nov. 9, 1894.

[24]*Chronicle*, Feb. 13, 1892; Dec. 17, Dec. 24, 1892; Sept. 30, 1893.

[25]*Louisiana Democrat*, Aug. 24, Sept. 7, 1894; *Mail* (Montgomery, LA), July 7, 1894.

ation and an unpopular president, they soft-pedaled their more radical and visionary proposals and instead searched for an issue around which they could mobilize disgruntled voters, particularly disaffected Democrats alienated by the policies of the Cleveland administration. They found such an issue in the free coinage of silver, an inflationary relief measure popular among the farmers of the South and the West.

The free coinage of silver was not, as some have maintained, a bogus issue or panacea. Nor was it merely symbolic in nature. On the contrary, free silver's power as an issue flowed precisely from the fact that it offered a real measure of relief to the country's indebted farmers. The stubborn adherence of the federal government to a gold-based currency had contributed to a deflationary spiral that depressed farm prices and magnified the debt burden of farmers. The free coinage of silver, advocates argued, would increase the country's money supply, raise the prices received by farmers for their goods, and relieve the crushing burden of farm debt. Yet, despite the tangible material significance of the issue, the free coinage of silver lacked the broader, structural implications of such Populist reform proposals as the subtreasury plan and public ownership of the railroads. Although the abandonment of the gold standard would have marked a profound reorientation in federal monetary policy, it would have left the basic structure of America's emerging corporate economy intact. Nevertheless, fueled by pamphlets like *Coin's Financial School*, a free-silver tract by W. H. Harvey published in 1894, silver agitation reached a fever pitch across the South and West by mid-decade. Meanwhile, western silver mine operators pumped thousands of dollars into the American Bimetallic League, a nonpartisan organization that united silverites from all three parties.[26]

While the free coinage of silver was a longstanding Populist demand, until 1893 it remained secondary to more sweeping structural reform proposals such as the subtreasury and public control of the railroads. In the wake of the national economic collapse, however, free silver came to dominate the Populist message. In the 1894 congressional campaign, Louisiana's Populists concentrated their fire on the unpopular policies of President Grover Cleveland, including his support for maintaining the gold standard. In the state's Fourth Congressional District, the People's Party nominated a Winn Parish Farmers' Union activist named Bryant W. Bailey and adopted a plat-

[26]For a good brief discussion of the silver issue, see Gene Clanton, *Congressional Populism and the Crisis of the 1890s* (Lawrence, KS, 1998), 55–58. See also John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and People's Party* (Minneapolis, 1931), 301–20. At times, even scholars sympathetic to the free-silver cause downplay the real material significance of the issue. In his sympathetic biography of William Jennings Bryan, for instance, Michael Kazin stresses the symbolic power of the silver issue for farmers ill at ease with the abstractions of modern finance; Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 50.

form that savaged Cleveland for his opposition to the free coinage of silver. Although Democratic candidate Henry W. Ogden tried to distance himself from Cleveland by endorsing free silver, the Populist campaign nevertheless linked Ogden to the unpopular president. Cleveland, maintained candidate Bailey, "has done more to make Populist converts than Populist orators ever did."[27]

By 1894, Louisiana's Populists had also abandoned their efforts to construct an interracial agrarian movement. Instead, they sought to reassure white voters that the People's Party was a reliable "white man's party." Chastising the Democrats for casting fraudulent black ballots to defeat the majority of white sentiment, the *Louisiana Populist* declared, "If you want white supremacy join the Populists." Seeking to avoid a repeat of the 1892 congressional elections, in which their candidates fell victim to Democratic ballot stuffing, the Populists challenged the Democrats to a white primary in the Fourth Congressional District. The proposal called for the loser of the primary to bow out of the race in favor of the victorious "white man's candidate." Fearing that Bailey would defeat Ogden in such a contest, the Democrats refused the challenge. The Populists cried hypocrisy.[28]

Although the Populists failed to elect a single member of Congress from Louisiana in 1894, the free-silver strategy did bear fruit. In the three congressional districts where they ran serious campaigns, the Populist share of the total vote increased from 19 percent in 1892 to 27 percent in 1894. Bryant W. Bailey received fully one-third of the Fourth Congressional District vote, as officially reported. One Democratic paper in Shreveport admitted that, given a free vote and a fair count, Bailey would have certainly been elected. Populists believed that in a fair election, they would have elected their candidate in the Fifth District as well. Louisiana Populists could also take heart from the success of the People's Party elsewhere in the South. In 1894, a Populist-Republican coalition took control of North Carolina's state government. Populist-Republican fusion tickets nearly carried Alabama and Georgia, as well. Nationally, Populist congressional candidates racked up almost a million and a half votes in 1894—a 42 percent increase over the 1892 Populist presidential ticket.[29]

Heartened by the election results, the Populists built a new political strategy around the free-silver issue. In Louisiana, the chief architect of the party's new course was state party secretary Hardy L. Brian, who in December 1894 became editor of the *Louisiana Populist*. Convinced that the

[27]*Louisiana Populist*, Aug. 31, Oct. 19, 1894; *Chronicle*, Oct. 27, 1894.

[28]*Louisiana Populist*, Aug. 24, Aug. 31, 1894.

[29]Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 242. Louisiana election results in Daniel, "The Louisiana People's Party," 1128–31.

old parties were hopelessly controlled by "gold-bugs," Brian used silver as a wedge to detach disgruntled Democrats from their existing party loyalties. "If a man wants silver he must vote the People's ticket," wrote Brian, adding, "A vote for silver in the Democratic Party is a vote thrown away." At no point did Brian or the Louisiana People's Party renounce the broad Populist agenda. On the contrary, Brian vigorously opposed all efforts to replace the party's national platform with a single free-silver plank. For him, the silver issue was a means to advance the full Populist reform agenda by broadening the political base of the People's Party. "While favorable silver legislation is not half the financial reform and relief that the country must and will have," he wrote, "yet it is a beginning that will surely lead up to the other lines of reform, and break the barriers of ignorance that are now blocking the road to other wholesome reforms in land ownership and railroad management." Yet despite his commitment to the broad Populist reform agenda, the logic of Brian's political strategy required him to emphasize the free coinage of silver to the growing exclusion of other issues. By 1895, radical financial reforms, such as the subtreasury plan, had virtually disappeared from the pages of the *Louisiana Populist*. In March of that year, Brian wrote that the free-silver platform of the American Bimetallic League "does not differ in any essential point, or even detail from the Populist money plank." In September, he declared "white supremacy, free silver, ballot reform, and honest politics" to be "the cardinal principles of Populism." A Louisiana voter might reasonably conclude that the free coinage of silver was Populism's defining issue.[30]

Fueled by the Louisiana Democratic Party's rigid opposition to free silver, smallholding white farmers began to desert to the Populists in droves. In Louisiana's April 1896 state elections, Populist legislative candidates received over 32,000 votes, double that obtained by Populist congressional candidates in 1894 and more than three times the tally of the People's Party's 1892 gubernatorial nominee. Populists increased their representation in the lower house of the state legislature from four to sixteen and elected two members to the state senate. A joint Populist-Republican state "fusion" ticket, headed by a free-silver Republican, nearly toppled the administration of incumbent Governor Murphy J. Foster, a goldbug Democrat and outspoken supporter of President Grover Cleveland. Despite a Democratic campaign of fraud and terror, aimed at both Populists and Republicans, the fusion ticket received 43 percent of the vote, as officially tallied. A free vote and a fair count would have elected the fusionists.[31] In Louisiana, the free-silver issue had brought the Populists to the threshold of power.

[30]*Louisiana Populist*, Mar. 8, Sept. 13, 1895; Dec. 7, 1894; June 7, Mar. 1, 1895; Jan. 1, 1896.

[31]Daniel, "The Louisiana People's Party," 1134–36. For an account of the 1896 Louisiana state elections, see Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 248–67. Hair demonstrates persua-

At the national level, the leadership of the People's Party adopted a strategy that mirrored that of the Louisiana Populists. Like Hardy Brian, the national leaders hoped to use silver as a "wedge" to win over disaffected supporters of the old parties. North Carolina's Marion Butler, for instance, urged Populists to focus on those issues, such as silver, that would "draw from the old parties the greatest number of voters whose interests are identical, or nearly akin, to those who already compose the People's Party." For Butler, however, as for Brian, silver was merely an "entering wedge" that would open the way for the broader Populist reform agenda. Believing both the Democratic and Republican parties to be firmly committed to the gold standard, Butler and other national leaders believed that the People's Party could ride the free-silver wave to victory and perhaps even supplant the Democrats as the country's second party.[32]

Between 1894 and 1896, Populist leaders both at the national level and in Louisiana brilliantly played the game of conventional electoral politics. By identifying an issue (free silver) that distinguished them from the two existing major parties and that resonated among those whom they identified as their natural constituency, the Populists had in just two short years taken a fledgling third party and brought it to the brink of a national political breakthrough. Populist leaders, however, had fatally underestimated the ability of existing political institutions to co-opt dissent. In the summer of 1896, in a dramatic about-face, the Democratic Party embraced the cause of free silver. By doing so, Democrats robbed the Populists of the issue that had been responsible for the spectacular growth of the People's Party. The results were fatal for Louisiana Populism.

Co-optation and Collapse

The 1896 national elections were to be the culmination of the Populists' free-silver political strategy. Believing both the Democrats and Republicans to be unalterably committed to the gold standard, the Populists declared the free coinage of silver to be the central issue of that year's presidential and congressional campaigns. Expecting both the Democrats and Republicans to nominate presidential candidates committed to the gold standard, the Populists issued repeated calls for the unity of all silver forces, assuming that such unity could only happen under Populist leadership. Hoping to win over disaffected silver advocates from the old parties, the People's Party sched-

sively that fraudulent black ballots in a dozen plantation parishes provided the Democratic state ticket with its margin of victory.

[32]James L. Hunt, *Marion Butler and American Populism* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 83–84. Like Brian, Marion Butler was a veteran Populist with deep roots in the agrarian movement. Butler worked his way up through the ranks of agrarian politics, beginning as the lecturer and later the president of his local county Farmers' Alliance. For an analysis of national Populist leaders' use of free silver as a "wedge" issue, see Durden, *The Climax of Populism*, 6–13.

uled its national convention to follow those of the Democrats and Republicans. If all went according to plan, the Populists would be positioned to wage a national campaign on the free-silver issue that would establish them as a major national party and perhaps even win them the presidency.[33]

In Louisiana, indications that the Populist strategy might go awry began to emerge as early as the spring of 1896. Still reeling from its near-catastrophic defeat in the April state elections, the Louisiana Democratic Party abandoned its longstanding support for the gold standard and elected a free-silver delegation to the Democratic national convention. The very success of the Louisiana People's Party in mobilizing voters around the free coinage of silver had forced the Democrats, as a matter of sheer survival, to concede the issue. Even before the April elections, some panicked Democrats in the north-central part of the state had begun to argue that the political cost of the party's goldbug position was far too dear. In the wake of the April elections, such arguments finally carried the day. One Democratic editor, an unrepentant goldbug from the heart of north-central Louisiana's Populist country, declared that the Democratic Party "to be in the act of swallowing up the Populist Party, after first soaping it with a free silver lather." Free silver, heretofore a Populist wedge issue, was now to serve as the instrument through which newly minted Populists were to be herded back into the Democratic Party.[34]

At the national level, the Democratic Party underwent a free-silver transformation that mirrored developments in Louisiana. This transformation reached its climax in June 1896, when the Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan for president on a free-silver platform. Bryan, a former two-term Nebraska congressman, was the rising star of the Democratic Party's agrarian-reform wing. First elected to Congress in 1890 on a fairly conventional political platform, Bryan had broken with the conservative forces that dominated the Nebraska Democratic Party. By championing the cause of free silver and forging alliances with Nebraska's incipient Populist movement, Bryan eventually toppled the state's Democratic old guard and established himself as the state's undisputed Democratic leader. His fiery congressional floor speeches on behalf of the free coinage of silver made him a national leader of the silver cause. With his departure from Congress in 1895, Bryan embarked upon a series of national speaking tours on behalf of free silver and began positioning himself for a possible bid for the 1896 Democratic presidential nomination. The delegates to the 1896 Democratic

[33]Durden, *The Climax of Populism*, 12–14; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 471–72.

[34]Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 269; *Louisiana Populist*, Jan. 3, 1896; *Chronicle*, June 13, June 20, 1896.

National Convention, desperate to distance themselves from the unpopular policies of President Grover Cleveland, embraced free silver and chose Bryan as their nominee.[35]

By blurring the distinctions between Populists and Democrats, the nomination of William Jennings Bryan wrecked the Populists' national political strategy. In addition to his commitment to the free-silver cause, which was by all indications sincere, Bryan also had longstanding and close political relationships with Nebraska's Populist leaders. Indeed, Bryan had played a pivotal role in the 1893 election of Nebraska Populist William V. Allen to the United States Senate. "Our national alliance," Bryan had written at the time, "is with the Independents [Populists]." Populists, in turn, generally thought well of Bryan. In his hard-fought 1892 re-election bid, for instance, Bryan had received support from a number of high-profile national Populists, including Mary Elizabeth Lease of Kansas, and Populist presidential candidate James B. Weaver. Bryan, however, was not a Populist. Bryan refused repeated entreaties to join the People's Party, including one 1893 invitation from the Populist congressional delegation. And though Bryan did speak on behalf of some Populist reform measures (including the direct election of United States Senators and the graduated income tax) he did not embrace the more radical Populist proposals, such as public ownership of the railroads or the subtreasury plan.[36]

The Democratic nomination of William Jennings Bryan threw the People's Party into turmoil. The party's national leaders generally argued that, having repeatedly called for the unity of all pro-silver forces, Populists had no choice but to endorse the Democratic presidential ticket or risk appearing as hypocrites for betraying the silver cause. And indeed, the logic of the Populists' own position and rhetoric seemed to require an endorsement of Bryan. So-called middle-of-the-road Populists, on the other hand, feared that a Bryan endorsement would cost the People's Party its identity as an independent political organization. Mid-roaders called for an independent Populist ticket and an aggressive national campaign. Mid-roaders were particularly appalled by the thought of endorsing Bryan's vice-presidential running mate, a wealthy Maine banker named Arthur M. Sewall who epitomized the eastern Democratic establishment. The two weeks between the

[35]For accounts of Bryan's early political career and rise to prominence, see: Kazin, *A Godly Hero*; LeRoy Ashby, *William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy* (Boston, 1987); Robert W. Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Boston, 1985); and Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1971). Lawrence Goodwyn provides a critical view of Nebraska "fusion" politics and Bryan's role in the agrarian movement in *Democratic Promise*, 388–401. For a discussion of evolving scholarly views of Bryan, see Robert W. Cherny, "William Jennings Bryan and the Historians," *Nebraska History* 77 (Fall/Winter 1996): 184–93.

[36]Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 36, 41–42; Koenig, *Bryan*, 109, 116, 126–27.

Democratic and Populist conventions were filled with desperate political maneuvering by the pro- and anti-Bryan factions of the People's Party and furious debate among Populists in general.[37]

Like many Populists, Louisiana's Hardy Brian was left confused and disoriented by the Bryan nomination. In the aftermath of the Democratic convention, Brian's *Louisiana Populist* was filled with seemingly contradictory statements regarding the national political situation. Brian had few kind words for the Democratic Party itself. Free silver, he declared, was the only redeeming feature of an otherwise wretched Democratic platform. "The Democratic platform adopted at Chicago, on the seventh," wrote Brian, "does not contain a single word about fair elections. Perhaps if it did, it wouldn't be Democratic." Nevertheless, Brian announced that he could not have selected a man whom he would rather see as president than William Jennings Bryan. The Democrats, Brian added, had "come as near the Populists as they perhaps could without changing names." The editor wrote openly of his fears that a Populist endorsement of Bryan might damage or even destroy the People's Party. Yet he suggested that if the Democrats made concessions that would allow the Populists to preserve their organization (such as the replacement of Arthur Sewall with a Populist vice-presidential candidate, for instance), then the Populists might support Bryan.[38]

When the Populist convention assembled in St. Louis in late July, the party was still deeply divided between mid-road and pro-Bryan factions. In the end, neither faction could claim a complete convention victory. Party leaders who hoped to engineer an endorsement of the entire Democratic national ticket faced a revolt from rank-and-file delegates who refused to accept the vice-presidential candidacy of Arthur M. Sewall. By a narrow margin, the convention voted to choose a vice-presidential nominee *before* casting ballots for president and proceeded to grant the party's vice-presidential nomination to former Populist congressman Tom Watson of Georgia. Yet despite this victory, the middle-of-the-roaders were unable to derail the Bryan nomination itself. By an overwhelming vote of 1,042 to 340, the delegates declared Democrat William Jennings Bryan to be the Populist candidate for president.[39]

Hardy L. Brian and the other members of the Louisiana convention delegation clearly sympathized with the middle-of-the-road position. Fifteen of the sixteen members of the delegation (including Brian) supported the effort to place the vice-presidential nomination first on the convention's order of business. By a similar margin, the state's delegates favored Georgia

[37]Durden, *The Climax of Populism*, 23–30; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 474–79.

[38]*Louisiana Populist*, July 17, July 24, 1896.

[39]Durden, *The Climax of Populism*, 33-49; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 479-92.

Populist Tom Watson over Democrat Arthur Sewall for the vice-presidential nomination. Nevertheless, on the pivotal issue of the convention, the question of who would be the Populists' presidential nominee, Hardy Brian and all but one of the remaining Louisiana delegates cast their ballots for Bryan. They did so, Hardy Brian explained, both to "appease" the Populists of the West, where support for Bryan was strong, and "to show our sincerity for free coinage of silver and secure it at this election." Trapped by their own insistence on the centrality of the silver issue, Brian and his fellow Louisiana delegates felt compelled to support the Bryan candidacy.[40]

The fall campaign confirmed the fears of those who warned that an endorsement of William Jennings Bryan would wreck the People's Party. At war with the Democrats at home and allied with them nationally, Louisiana Populists were thrown into confusion. They spent much of the fall embroiled in a nasty internal dispute over the degree of cooperation they should pursue with the Democrats in the presidential campaign. Meanwhile, Populist congressional candidates struggled to distinguish themselves from their free-silver Democratic rivals. Defeatism ran rampant among the Populist rank and file. Bryant W. Bailey, making his second run in Louisiana's Fourth Congressional District, received 20 percent fewer votes than he had two years earlier. Bailey and the other Populist congressional candidates were routed. With moderate free silverites returning to the Democratic fold and radical Populists frustrated and exhausted, the Louisiana People's Party simply unraveled.[41]

Two years later, Hardy L. Brian ran for Congress in a vain attempt to revive the floundering Louisiana People's Party. By then, the Democratic-controlled state legislature had disfranchised Louisiana's African American electorate. By doing so, the legislature eliminated the danger of an interracial insurgent electoral coalition, but at the cost of the Democratic Party's ability to steal elections through the casting of fraudulent black ballots. "Under the registration law now in force, the great army of tramps, negroes and dead men which filled up the rolls and furnished names with which to stuff ballot boxes in the cities and the black belts, are swept away," wrote Brian. "Stop the childish cry that it's no use. Be men, and go to the polls for freedom so long as you have a vote." By 1898, however, the Populist moment had passed, and no amount of exhortation could revive the party's sagging fortunes. Although the Democrats tallied less than half of what they had polled in previous congressional contests against the Populists,

[40]*Louisiana Populist*, July 31, Aug. 7, 1896. The sixteen-member Louisiana delegation was entitled to cast thirty-two votes at the St. Louis convention. The one delegate who failed to vote for Bryan abstained on the presidential ballot.

[41]*Louisiana Populist*, Aug. 14, Aug. 21, Sept. 4, Oct. 16, Nov. 6, Nov. 13, 1896; Daniel, "The Louisiana People's Party," 1140.

Brian could only muster a quarter of the total vote. A defeated and distraught Brian bemoaned the "childlike imbecility" of Populists who, he believed, had squandered "the greatest opportunity they had ever had to win a victory." While a handful of "brave, noble, patriotic" Populists had "fought as hard in this campaign as they did in 1892," he wrote, "the majority, like children, flopped down on the stool of laziness and said it was no use." Thus, in anger and recrimination (tinged with racial animus), expired Brian's vision of a revolution by the ballot that would empower the "wealth producers" and "toilers."[42]

As for Brian himself, he returned to Winn Parish, where he remained active in church and civic affairs. While he briefly returned to the journalistic fold in the 1910s as editor of the weekly *Winnfield Times*, there is no indication that he ever again took a prominent role in party politics.[43]

Louisiana's delegates to the 1896 People's Party national convention, all of whom save one cast their nomination ballots for William Jennings Bryan, were not members of a "shadow movement." On the contrary, the Louisiana delegation was dominated by veteran Populists with roots in the Farmers' Alliance and its movement culture. The delegation included former officers in the state Farmers' Union as well as grassroots union activists. Hardy Brian, the chief architect of the party's free-silver strategy, had been steeped in agrarian politics from his youth. He had been a leading alliance radical, and his commitment to the People's Party was beyond question. Delegate Thomas J. Guice originally gained prominence in the late 1880s as the Louisiana Farmer's Union's firebrand state lecturer. Guice's abortive 1890 independent congressional campaign had been pivotal in the emergence of Louisiana Populism. Delegate I. J. Mills had, along with Hardy Brian, been one of two Louisianans to travel to Cincinnati for the 1891 founding national convention of the People's Party.[44] Each of these individuals had made a commitment to an independent Populist party at a time

[42]"Read, Reflect, Act," Populist broadsheet microfilmed with the *Louisiana Populist* following the issue of Feb. 19, 1897; *Louisiana Populist*, Nov. 11, Nov. 18, 1898.

[43]*Winn Parish Enterprise*, Sept. 29, 1949; *Winnfield News-American*, Sept. 30, 1949.

[44]The members of the Louisiana delegation to St. Louis convention are listed in the *Louisiana Populist*, July 31, 1896. Of the sixteen members of the delegation, at least seven can be positively determined to have been active in the Louisiana Farmers' Union. One additional delegate, J. V. Lagman of New Orleans, though not a Farmers' Union activist, was a veteran Populist who had attended the founding convention of the Louisiana People's Party in 1891. The delegation did include at two relatively recent converts to Populism. According to Hardy Brian, one of these recent converts, Monroe newspaper editor A. A. Gunby, was the most ardent "middle-of-the-roader" in the delegation; *Louisiana Populist*, Aug. 7, 1896. The sources consulted in compiling this portrait of the delegation include the *Louisiana Populist*, the *Chronicle*, Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, and "Charter and By-Laws of the Winn Parish Cooperative Association."

when to do so carried great risk with little promise of immediate personal gain. As delegates to the 1896 national convention they faced two unpleasant options: either endorse Bryan and risk their party's independent political identity or spurn Bryan and consign themselves once again to the political margins. In either case, the prognosis for the People's Party was grim. Faced with a Hobson's choice, Louisiana's delegates set aside their middle-of-the-road sentiments and cast their convention ballots in a manner calculated to do the least damage to their party organization.

The dilemma faced by the Louisiana Populists in 1896 was, nevertheless, largely of their own making. Having launched five years earlier a "revolution" with unreasonable expectations of rapid victory, Louisiana Populists soon lost faith in their own movement. While never abandoning their vision of a "cooperative commonwealth," Brian and his associates lost faith in that vision's power to inspire the masses of ordinary people to political and social action. Retreating from their call for broad economic and social change, the agrarian radicals who founded the Louisiana People's Party embraced a more pragmatic and conventional political course. Believing the Democratic Party to be unalterably committed to the gold standard, Louisiana Populists such as Hardy Brian tried to use free silver as a wedge issue to win over disgruntled Democrats. They erred fatally, however, by underestimating the capacity of the old parties to make concessions to popular discontent. Once the Democrats embraced the free-silver issue, the fate of Populism was sealed. Instead of destroying the Democratic Party, as Populists strategists hoped and expected, free silver and the logic of conventional politics destroyed the People's Party.

E. P. Thompson once asserted that "most social movements have a life cycle of about six years" and that unless they make a "decisive political impact" within that "window of opportunity" they will have "little effect on the larger political structures they hope to transform."[45] The history of Louisiana Populism would seem to confirm Thompson's observation. From January 1887, when the Farmers' Union launched its mass organizing drive, until October 1891, when the Louisiana People's Party was founded, Louisiana Populism was an ascendant social movement sustained by a vibrant movement culture, a growing grassroots base, and an inspirational vision of the future. In its initial foray into electoral politics, though, the Louisiana People's Party failed to make a decisive impact on the state's political structures. By 1893, Louisiana Populism, as an insurgent grassroots social movement, was in steep decline. In its place stood a conventional

[45]Cited in Robert Korstand and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75 (Dec. 1988): 811.

political party—a party of reform, but a conventional party nonetheless. While by 1896 Populism may indeed have been "shadow" of its former self, in Louisiana it was grassroots agrarian radicals such as Hardy L. Brian who, having lost faith in the power of the Populist vision, presided over Populism's transformation and ultimate demise.