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Prelude to Populism

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THROUGH MOST OF ITS HISTORY, Minnesota has shown symptoms of political schizophrenia. On the one hand, it was the staid dowager, as reliably Republican as its down-East Yankee sisters; on the other, it had skittish moments during which it produced a brood of third parties or helped raise the radical offspring of its neighbors. Thus we have the contradiction of numerous political-protest movements in a state traditionally, and at bottom, conservative.

An almost-forgotten link in the chain of Minnesota's agrarian radicalism is to be found in the Alliance party of 1890. This organization has fallen into obscurity, neglected because it was short-lived and was succeeded by its spectacular offspring, the People's party. Nevertheless, the Alliance party was of real importance—it kept alive the spirit of political protest, bridging the gap between the Greenbackers and the Populists; it formulated the grievances of the farmer into action; and it serves as a "case study" of local third parties, illustrating as it does the forces which generated these movements and the weaknesses which killed them.

The Alliance party did not suddenly stalk, full-grown, upon the political stage. Rather, it was the product of a slow, even a reluctant, evolution from the nonpartisan Northwestern Farmers Alliance. The steps by which this parent body transmuted itself into a political organization are of interest.

The Northwestern Alliance grew from the fertile soil of agrarian discontent in the 1880's. The Minnesota farmer of that period was beleaguered with woes. The products he sold, particularly wheat, brought low prices, sometimes insufficient to cover his costs of production. At the same time, he had to buy many goods and services from monopoly interests which charged monopoly prices. He believed, with some justice, that

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he was being systematically exploited by the railroads which hauled his produce, by the manufacturers who sold him necessities, and by the bankers who granted him loans.¹

Western farmers have never accepted abuse with equanimity, and Minnesotans were no exception. They organized the Northwestern Farmers Alliance to fight their economic enemies in the political arena by passing laws forbidding undesirable practices and by creating instruments to control private enterprise in the public interest. Alliance leaders had no intention of forming a third party, for it would be difficult to divorce the farmers from their traditional political connections and wed them to a new organization. Instead, they tried lobbying and pressure-group tactics.

Early success attended these efforts, and several Alliance-sponsored bills were pushed through the legislature of 1885. This victory encouraged the Alliance to press the initiative it had seized. Hoping to gain greater power in the state government in the election of 1886, it called a joint meeting with the Knights of Labor, formulated a statement of grievances and demands, and appointed a committee to present these demands to the conventions of the major parties.² The Republicans greeted the committee with open arms and wrote its demands into the party platform. The Democrats, however, were not intimidated. They showed scant courtesy and no compliance to the committee and its program. Despite such contrasting treatment, the choice before the farmer and labor voters was not clear cut. The Republicans had accepted the Alliance platform, but their candidate for governor was less popular than his Democratic rival. Moreover, the former party was regarded as the political representative of the monopoly interests which had plundered the farmers. So agrarian and union voters set out to punish the Republicans for the company they kept and very nearly succeeded in doing so, reducing the party's normal majority of twenty thousand to twenty-six hundred votes.³

The Alliance felt that its road to power was now clear. A majority of

¹ *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, January 5, 12, February 24, 1884, January 9, 1886; *Minnesota Tribune* (Minneapolis), January 13, 1884; *Labor Echo* (St. Paul), October 1, 1887.

² The laws of 1885, which gave the state partial control over the railroads and the grain trade, are in Minnesota, *General Statutes*, Supplement, 1879-88, vol. 2, p. 74-80, 324, 858-868 (St. Paul, 1888). In 1886 the farmers asked the legislature to pass laws reducing railroad rates, forbidding stock-watering, and punishing combinations to control markets. The Knights of Labor wanted a graduated income tax, a bureau of labor statistics, and free textbooks in the schools. *Pioneer Press*, September 2, 1886.

³ *Pioneer Press*, September 15, 22, 23, 1886; E. V. Smalley, *A History of the Republican Party*, 223 (St. Paul, 1896); Minnesota, *Legislative Manual*, 1887, Appendix, iii-lviii (St. Paul, 1887).

the newly elected legislators were farmers, sympathetic to its aims. The representatives of hostile interests, rebuked and cowed by the election returns, would hardly dare to resist agrarian legislation.⁴ Moreover, the Alliance men in the legislature were led by the great orator, Ignatius Donnelly, the "Sage of Nininger." A universal genius of the prairies, Donnelly had a national reputation as a lecturer, author, and ardent leader of politically forlorn hopes. Driven by the fires of consuming ambition and by a burning hatred of injustice, he had joined and dominated most of the state's third parties. Hence his presence and position of leadership in the Northwestern Farmers Alliance was as natural as a sunrise.

To pluck the fruits of the election, Donnelly organized the farmer and labor legislators into a bloc to push through reform measures. This organization controlled the legislature during the early days of the session and introduced a flood of bills. But its power slowly receded. In the saddle, Donnelly demonstrated his worst defect—a tendency to dominate and to ride roughshod over all who stood in his way, whether friend or enemy. He must introduce every important bill, must dominate every debate, and must dictate the course of his group to the smallest detail. He was cursed with a ready and versatile vocal armament, being equally effective with the poniard of wit and the two-handed battle-ax of invective. Soon every speech and every quip seemed to make a new enemy for him; one by one the members of his once-powerful bloc slipped away. Conservative representatives, earlier crushed in the path of the farmer-labor phalanx, revived and rushed back into the fray. By February, the tide of battle had turned.⁵ Bill after bill presented by the Alliance was smashed outright or twisted by amendment; scarcely one was passed.

This defeat, as complete as it was unexpected and unnecessary, marked a turning point in Alliance history. It shattered the solidarity of the organization, opening a breach between Donnelly's followers and enemies which never was mortared by compromise or reconciliation. It also brought a change in the tactics of the Alliance. Its leaders blamed this failure upon the Republicans, who had adopted a farm and labor platform for the campaign but had blocked attempts to implement it in the legislature. The agrarian leaders decided that henceforth they must force their candidates as well as their issues upon the old parties.

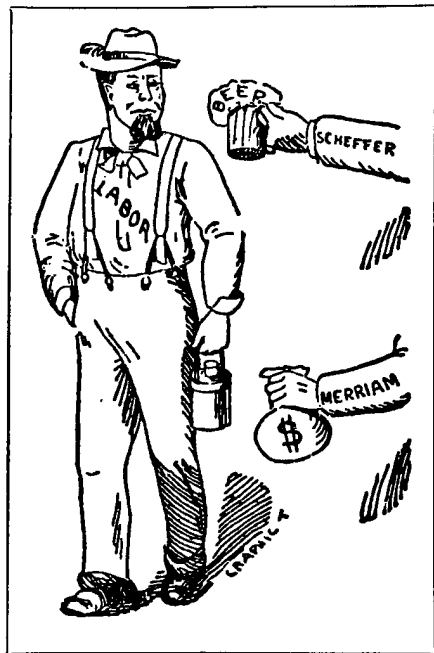
The plan was tested in the next election. A joint committee of the

⁴ *Pioneer Press*, November 9, 1886.

⁵ *Pioneer Press*, January 4, 12, February 4, 1887. More than a hundred legislators joined Donnelly's original bloc.

Alliance and labor leaders met in March, 1888, to endorse a Republican gubernatorial candidate. It first appeared that they would settle upon a prominent farmer-politician, but somewhat unexpectedly they selected Albert Scheffer, a St. Paul banker, after he agreed to seek the nomination on a reform platform.⁶

This action momentarily stunned the state. Then came a storm of denunciation. The Republican leaders thundered that Scheffer, who had supported Greeley in 1872 and Cleveland in 1884, was really a Democrat. They suspected that, if denied the Republican nomination, he would bolt and run as an independent, thereby splitting the vote and defeating the GOP. In short, his endorsement had the earmarks of a low Democratic trick. Organized laborers received the selection of Scheffer with sullen resentment and their farmer allies showed no more enthusiasm. One Alliance journal, after openly hinting that the selection of a banker, the organization's natural enemy, was the result of corruption, gave him a lame endorsement.⁷ But many local chapters of the Alliance expressed strong dissatisfaction and voiced the sentiment that an



[From the *St. Paul Daily Globe*,
August 25, 1888.]

inner ring of its state leaders, Democratic in sympathies, had contrived the result.

All efforts to overcome this sum of hostility failed, for distrust of Scheffer steadily increased. Many were alienated by the open support he received from the liquor interests. Suspicion that he was a Democrat continued, leaders of that party began to support him, and its primary in St. Paul endorsed him.⁸ Scheffer, while protesting that he was a Re-

⁶ *Pioneer Press*, March 28, 29, 30, 1888. Scheffer had played a leading role in legislative attempts to free the grain markets of monopolistic controls.

⁷ *Pioneer Press*, April 3, July 3, 8, 12, 16, August 28, 1888; *Labor Echo*, April 7, 1888. The labor members of the joint committee consistently voted against Scheffer.

⁸ *Pioneer Press*, July 27, 28, 31, August 19, 21, 29, 1888. The liquor interest hoped to repeal a license act passed by the previous legislature; it had caused the closing of some twelve hundred saloons in Minnesota.

publican, did not definitely close the door to the Democrats, and his Alliance sponsors frankly said that he must be elected, regardless of party or means. Many of the rank and file of that organization, however, were more discriminating. They had no use for a man who worked both sides of the street, and some would never commit the heresy of voting for Scheffer on a Democratic ticket if the Angel Gabriel himself endorsed him.

Thus the original mutterings against Scheffer grew into an uproar. Dissatisfied labor and Alliance leaders capitalized upon this sentiment to carry out a long-contemplated plan for independent political action. They called a convention in August, established the Farm and Labor party, nominated Donnelly to head its ticket, and drew up a statement of grievances.⁹

This action was a body blow to Scheffer, for it meant a repudiation by parts of those groups whose support he must have. It was also a tragedy for all the farmers and workers. Their hopes for success lay in bloc voting, and this schism split their most effective political lever. Thus the Alliance tottered on the brink of disaster and soon toppled in. Scheffer was badly defeated in the Republican convention, receiving only 116 of the 224 votes necessary for nomination. The successful candidate, also a St. Paul banker, was William R. Merriam, a friend of Donnelly's.¹⁰

Donnelly now remained as the sole, and forlorn, hope of farmer and labor voters. Hostility beset him. The Republicans privately urged him to desert them, but publicly attacked him. Worse still, the Scheffer men in the Alliance stalked about the state bitterly denouncing him as a fratricide, willing to knife his own kind to advance himself.¹¹ He had ruined Scheffer, and they would ruin him. When promised financial support failed to materialize, Donnelly had to pay the expenses of the campaign from his own pocket.

Under these circumstances, it appeared that a crushing defeat awaited the Farm and Labor party and the reform movement it represented. Its leaders, accordingly, waited upon Donnelly and urged him to withdraw as a candidate for governor so he might survive to fight another day. He

⁹ Of the seventy-six delegates present, all but fourteen represented unions. Their platform demanded such reforms as reduced railroad rates, a lower tariff, employers' liability, and the adoption of the Australian ballot. *Pioneer Press*, August 29, 1888; John Lamb to Donnelly, July 10, 1888, Donnelly Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁰ H. P. Bjorge to Donnelly, September 5, 1888, Donnelly Papers; *Pioneer Press*, September 7, 1888.

¹¹ *Great West* (St. Paul), May 23, 1890; John Lind to Donnelly, September 21, 1888; Donnelly to Lind, September 23, 1888, Donnelly Papers. Lind hinted that Donnelly would be well rewarded if he cast his lot with the Republicans.

was glad, and wise, to comply.¹² With less wisdom, he joined the Republicans and stumped the state for his friend Merriam. Many voters interpreted this action as a "sell-out" to the moneyed interests, and the ghost of this suspicion never ceased to haunt Donnelly's political path.¹³

The election was an overwhelming triumph for Merriam. But the sun of victory brought no warmth for the Alliance to Republican hearts. On the contrary, they were in a cold fury against the Alliance for its political adventures with Scheffer and Donnelly, which might have delivered the state to the Democrats, and the victors wished to destroy the already defeated organization. So, if Alliance members hoped they had reached their political nadir in the elections, they were soon to learn otherwise as the events of the legislature of 1889 cast them deeper into the shadows. In striving to elect a governor, they had neglected the legislative contests. A mere remnant of the farmer-labor bloc of 1887 returned to answer the roll call in 1889, and their efforts were smothered in hostile votes. The election of a United States Senator by the legislature added insult to injury. W. D. Washburn, a prominent stockholder and official in Minnesota flour mills, elevators, and railroads, who was hence anathema to the farmers, was victorious in an election over which the smell of corruption seemed to lower.¹⁴

Thus another setback was added to the long string of political defeats for the Alliance, which now faced the choice of drastic reorganization or death. Fortunately, the obvious imminence of the latter alternative frightened its members into a willingness to accept the former. Also fortunately, public indignation at the activities of the legislature of 1889 brought the prospect of new support.¹⁵ And then a miracle came to pass. The moribund Alliance of March, 1889, became within a year a strong and aggressive organization with confidence and a future. This metamorphosis resulted not only from willingness to learn the bitter lessons of defeat, but from certain positive achievements.

¹² *Pioneer Press*, October 12, 1888. Of a promised campaign fund of three thousand dollars, only eighty had been raised, according to the *Great West*, February 12, 1890.

¹³ Donnelly believed that the Republicans would reward his efforts on Merriam's behalf by supporting him for the United States Senate in 1889. He was to be badly disappointed. See Knute Nelson and D. S. Hall to Donnelly, November 26, 27, 1888, Donnelly Papers. Donnelly was often forced to explain his actions of 1888, and the repeated explanations indicate the extent to which his honesty of motive was suspected. See, for example, the *Great West*, February 21, 1890, and August 19, 1892.

¹⁴ *Great West*, October 18, 1889. Several legislators reported offers of as much as forty-five hundred dollars for their votes. An investigation was held and it seemed to establish that, without Washburn's knowledge, some of his partisans had offered bribes. The investigation was discontinued suddenly. *Pioneer Press*, January 19-24, 1889; M. C. Chamberlain to Donnelly, January 23, 1889, Donnelly Papers.

¹⁵ E. W. Fish to Donnelly, January 18, 1889, Donnelly Papers; *Labor Echo*, March 9, 16, 1889; *Pioneer Press*, March 30, 1889.

Perhaps the most important was a temporary cessation of intramural conflict. Impressed by the dangerous position of the Alliance, the pro- and anti-Donnelly factions established an unwritten and armed truce. Never reconciled, they had the good sense to refrain, for a time, from outright war. To reduce the causes of friction between these groups, the Alliance annual conventions for two successive years elected presidents who did not belong to either faction.

A period of phenomenal growth did much toward reviving the Alliance. The credit for this belonged to Donnelly. Even his enemies admitted his great abilities, and he was twice unanimously elected "state lecturer" of the Alliance with the task of recruiting new members. His work was an unqualified success; by the end of the second year, there were nearly a thousand local chapters, watched over by a tightly knit hierarchy of county and district lecturers. These men, able and inspirational leaders, were feudally devoted to their chief and constituted his grass roots political machine within the Alliance.

Another imperative for survival was a unified political policy. The members of the Alliance were not unanimous in agreeing what that policy should be; but they did agree that when a majority of the organization had selected a line of action, all must unite behind it, whatever their previous views. The lesson taught by the election of 1888 had been learned.

Of importance also in rehabilitating the Alliance was its acquisition of a newspaper. Previously it had been unable to carry its message to a wide audience because the important dailies in the state were hostile to it and the sympathetic weeklies were erratically scattered about and local in influence. As a veteran politician, Donnelly knew the value of a vigorous journal. Accordingly, he brought Dr. Everett W. Fish to St. Paul to found the *Great West*, a weekly devoted to Alliance news and interests. A professor of medicine turned journalist, Dr. Fish added a bright splash of color to the local picture. He was a vine-ripened fanatic to whom the world and the people in it were a simple study in pure black and white, without shadings. To him, the interest of the farmers was the cause of the angels, and he ceaselessly attacked those who devilishly opposed it. His only method of fighting was to cut and slash violently; the beauties of subtlety and indirection were lost upon the doctor. When he was angry, which was quite often, the columns of the *Great West* were an awesome sight, for adjectives and adverbs spluttered from his pen and ran into epic, if sometimes incoherent, diatribes. He was delightfully catholic in his choice of victims, never hesitating to attack an Alliance man who departed from the straight path which Fish

conceived to be the party line of the organization. Many an agrarian partisan, guilty of some minor departure, yelped in pain as a flaying editorial in the *Great West* nipped out a piece of his political hide. Only Donnelly, Fish's patron and hero, was immune; and Donnelly had to spend much time soothing those of his friends and followers whom the editor had scourged. This was an endless task, for the good doctor was as unpredictable and as difficult to control as a forest fire; when smothered in one spot, he was apt to blaze forth in another. Yet, with all of his faults, Fish was a tower of strength to the Alliance. His brisk prose revived the waning spirits of its members and his evangelical fervor converted thousands to the cause.

Thus the Alliance spread its gospel, hid its dissensions, and rallied from its defeats. As the months slipped by, it quietly grew in strength and in confidence until, by 1890, its convalescence was over. It was well that the Alliance was again strong, for its internal peace was nearly at an end. To preserve the peace, the ambitious Donnelly, although aspiring to leadership, had gracefully accepted the election of a compromise president in 1889. The repetition of this action in 1890 strained his geniality. The truce between the factions, always as brittle as ancient paper, was finally crumbled in the spring of 1890 by the irrepressible Fish, who launched violent attacks against the anti-Donnelly group. At first Donnelly remained virtuously aloof from this unseemly squabble, but his wrath flamed up when he learned that the supposedly neutral president of the Alliance, R. J. Hall, was consorting with his enemies. The Sage of Nininger then erupted in a letter to Hall which nicely compounded rage and pomposity. He concluded: "I was a man of eminence and influence before the alliance was born, and will be when it is dead. . . . I have fought lions in my day, and I am ready now to go on the war-path against jackals or jackasses."¹⁶

Members of the Alliance fortunately gave little heed to this strife, for they had more important matters to consider. As the election of 1890 approached, the Alliance must decide its political tactics. Some members were convinced that the halfway measures of working to control the old parties had failed. Independent political action was the solvent for agrarian problems and the time was appropriate for such action, since the performance of the legislature of 1889 had shaken the traditional political allegiance of many farmers. Others disagreed strongly with this view. They felt that the Alliance had bungled its attempts to work with the Republicans by trying to dominate the state conventions and to dictate gubernatorial nominations instead of controlling local conven-

¹⁶ The letter is printed in the *Great West*, June 20, 1890.



ALL AT SEA.

A CAMPAIGN CARTOON OF 1890
[From the *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 2, 1890.]

tions and selecting legislative candidates. This faction also condemned the proposals for a third party, contending that the Alliance was too weak to win an election and that the only results of such a policy would be to waste its strength and to arouse the hostility of the old parties.¹⁷

The members of the Alliance discussed these issues freely, and by the spring of 1890 it was obvious that the majority favored independent political action. Of the leaders, only Donnelly was opposed to this alternative.¹⁸ Accordingly, the executive committee called a special convention to meet July 16 and found a new party.

A total of 505 delegates, representing both the Alliance and the labor unions, assembled, and by a vote of 394 to 28 created the Alliance party. This formality was followed by a real struggle over the nomination of a candidate for governor. Hall had hoped to effect a real coup at the expense of the Republicans by naming their popular and liberal ex-Congressman, Knute Nelson, to the first place on the Alliance ticket. Nelson declined the honor, and a scramble ensued with Hall and Donnelly as the leading contenders.¹⁹ Feeling ran high, and it seemed likely that a victory for either would result in the bolt of the other and a loss for all. A compromise candidate was imperative, and he was found in the person of Samuel J. Owen, who was presented by the Hall faction and accepted by an overwhelming vote.

Bitterly disappointed, Donnelly complained that the convention had robbed him of his just compensation for years of work on behalf of agrarian interests. He realized that he was reaping the crop of ill will sown in 1888 and later by opposing independent political action. Many in the Alliance feared that, if he were nominated, he would again withdraw in favor of Merriam, who was certain to be the Republican nominee.²⁰ Nor did it sweeten the defeat for Donnelly to realize that the selection of Owen was an example of the unpredictability of American political conventions. The candidate was an able editor who sympathized

¹⁷ For samples of various opinions, see the *Great West*, December 20, 1889, February 7, 1890; the *Pioneer Press*, March 4, 1890; and J. Stewart and H. E. Cooke to Donnelly, April 17, June 14, 1890, Donnelly Papers.

¹⁸ On June 1, 1890, Donnelly wrote to Merriam that a third party would be formed, adding, "I regret the condition of affairs. . . . I want to help you, but do not see how I can break with the Alliance." Donnelly Letter Book.

¹⁹ *Pioneer Press*, July 17, 1890; Smalley, *Republican Party*, 234. To avoid confusion, the earlier Northwestern Alliance will henceforth be referred to by that name. There were two distinct organizations, although they were allied with some elements of an interlocking directorate.

²⁰ *Great West*, July 25, September 5, 1890; H. A. Swain to Donnelly, December 22, 1890, Donnelly Papers. For the best accounts of the convention, see the *Pioneer Press*, July 17, 18, 19, 1890, and the *Great West*, July 25, 1890. Donnelly blamed his defeat on the labor delegates, who were still bitter over his actions in 1888, and voted consistently and unanimously against him.

with the Alliance and had had the good sense to remain neutral in its internal wars. At the same time, however, he lacked political experience and was almost unknown in Minnesota, having resided there less than six years. In oratory, he was a pygmy beside the gigantic Donnelly, for Owen seemed to unload speeches rather than deliver them. In short, able and estimable though he was, Owen was a political accident pushed to the top by the internal boilings of the Alliance.

The decisive battle of the convention thus ended with the routing of Donnelly. The convention then proceeded to fill out the rest of the ticket and to construct a platform which called for such reforms as lower tariffs, reduced railroad and interest rates, free grain markets, an employers' liability law, and the prohibition of child labor. Donnelly received another smart blow when the convention selected a state central committee which not only consisted entirely of his enemies, but was given complete control of the party and its campaign.²¹

Donnelly's position was now precarious, for his enemies apparently had robbed him of his influence in the Alliance and placed him on the horns of a dilemma. If he remained within the organization, he would be a powerless factor in its ranks; if he bolted, he would leave behind him all hope of regaining political leadership of the Minnesota farmers. The anti-Donnelly group was secure in its control of both the Northwestern Alliance and the Alliance party, and it made no further attacks on him, but simply ignored him. He was not asked to speak or to work for the party during the campaign of 1890, and when he did so, he received neither publicity nor recognition for his efforts.²² The *Great West* was given the same treatment, and the *St. Paul Daily News* became the official campaign organ.

Many in the Alliance party, fearing that such treatment might drive Donnelly and Fish into the opposition camp, urged a reconciliation based upon the admission of representatives of the Donnelly faction into the state central committee. The controlling clique rejected all such proposals, probably realizing that Donnelly could not afford to leave the Alliance. In fact, he never considered doing so, and prevented Fish, who fumed with rage at the situation, from attacking Owen in his paper. Donnelly bluntly told the fiery editor that such a course would ruin them both. They must support the party during the campaign and clean it out after the election. Accordingly, the *Great West* grudgingly en-

²¹ *Great West*, August 15, 1890.

²² Donnelly to L. Cook, August 26, 1890; to W. W. Erwin, October 4, 1890, Donnelly Letter Book. Donnelly did some speaking on behalf of the Alliance party, but he fell far short of his normally vigorous campaigning program.

dorsed Owen, and Fish worked out his frustrations by covertly sniping at the clique which controlled the Alliance party.²³

Despite the lack of aid from Donnelly and his newspaper, it was obvious that the Alliance party would poll a large vote. Many farmers, angry over their wrongs, needed neither oratory by Donnelly nor editorials by Fish to drive them to register their protest at the polls. They had no real prospect of victory for their state ticket after a projected Alliance-Democratic coalition fell through; but they did have hopes of securing a respectable representation in the legislature. Spurred by these hopes, the Alliance waged an excellent fight. Local campaign committees and slates of candidates were set up. Alliance speakers blanketed the state with their oratory, concentrating their efforts in the southern and western counties, where the Northwestern Alliance was strongest.

Their work was well rewarded by the election returns. Owen polled nearly sixty thousand votes, reducing the 1888 totals of the Republicans and Democrats by a third and a fourth respectively, and he carried twenty-four counties comprising nearly the entire western and southwestern sections of the state. The Congressional and legislative results were equally gratifying. One Alliance party candidate, Kittel Halvorson, was elected to Congress from the Fifth District, and a second, General James Baker, narrowly missed carrying the Second District. Fifty-three of eighty-one Alliance legislative candidates were successful.²⁴

The Alliance men were elated; in fact, there was only one note of discord in the harmony of their rejoicing. The election returns were sour to Donnelly. If the Alliance party could do so well without him, he was dispensable and political oblivion yawned before him. Yet Donnelly was not daunted by this latest blow; galled by a long series of defeats, he had already decided that the time for drifting was past and the time to fight for his rightful place in the Alliance had come. He reached this decision shortly before the July convention, when he wrote to Fish, "We must either control the next annual meeting or organize a new society. Let it be war to the knife and the knife to the hilt." Donnelly's first step was to conduct a thorough campaign to secure the presidency of the Northwestern Alliance. During the fall of 1890 he sent many letters to local leaders asking their support. He also took to the road, visiting county chapters and securing the election of convention delegates who were pledged to vote for him. The response was almost entirely favor-

²³ *Great West*, August 22, September 12, 1890; P. H. Rahilly to Donnelly, August 30, 1890, Donnelly Papers; Donnelly to Fish, October 3, 1890, Donnelly Letter Book. Donnelly received numerous letters begging him not to desert, and others which threatened to "expose" his past iniquities if he did so. See his papers for August, 1890.

²⁴ *Minnesota Legislative Manual*, 1891, p. 554, 555, 560-571, 574-576. For governor, Merriam received 88,111 votes; Wilson, 85,844 votes; and Owen, 58,513.

able; before the convention met, it was apparent that the Donnelly machine would easily control it.²⁵

It is difficult to understand why the organization which had spurned Donnelly in July should embrace him in December. It may be explained by the fact that in the interval Donnelly had waged his first thorough campaign for office in the Alliance, and that a strange apathy had fallen upon the anti-Donnelly faction. Obviously weary of fighting after the strenuous Owen campaign, this group made only a faint show of opposition. It suggested Kittel Halvorson as its candidate to oppose Donnelly, and also attempted to silence the galling fire now poured upon it by the *Great West* by setting up a counter-battery, the *Alliance Advocate* published at Henning. These attempts to stop the Sage of Nininger were stillborn. Halvorson hastily declined the dangerous honor thrust upon him, and the *Advocate*, planted in high hopes, was allowed to wither.²⁶ No further measures were attempted. Possibly the anti-Donnelly faction felt that it had secured the real prize when it obtained control of the Alliance party, and thus could afford to allow Donnelly to console himself with the presidency of the Northwestern Alliance.

At any rate, the convention gave Donnelly a strong push along his comeback trail, electing him by an overwhelming majority.²⁷ If his enemies expected that this victory would fill the cup of his ambition, they were badly deceived. Donnelly was determined to control the Alliance party as well as its parent body. The 1891 session of the legislature soon offered him an opportunity to take the first steps in that direction. Neither of the old parties had a majority in either house, and the new third party held the balance of power in both. In November, 1890, Donnelly wrote to each Alliance member of the legislature, explaining the situation and suggesting that they exploit it by forming a bloc and forcing Republicans and Democrats to bid competitively for its support.²⁸ This simple logic was persuasive. Before his enemies on the Alliance party's state central committee awoke to what he was doing,

²⁵ Donnelly to Fish, July 20, 1890, Donnelly Letter Book; *Pioneer Press*, December 13, 1890; *Great West*, December 12, 19, 26, 1890. For samples of campaign letters, see Donnelly to Baker, November 11, 1890, and to A. M. Morrison, November 12, 1890, in the Donnelly Letter Book. Donnelly's papers from September to December, 1890, include many letters from prominent leaders who pledged their support.

²⁶ R. J. Hall to Charles Brandborg, December 17, 1890; Frank Hoskins to Brandborg, December 17, 1890, Brandborg Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. Hoskins was editor of the *Advocate*. Donnelly bluntly threatened to oppose Halvorson in his campaign for re-election to Congress in 1892 if Halvorson opposed him for the presidency of the Northwestern Alliance. Donnelly to Halvorson, December 21, 1890, Donnelly Letter Book.

²⁷ Donnelly received 542 votes as compared with 105 for his nearest rival. *Pioneer Press*, December 31, 1890.

²⁸ See, for example, Donnelly to E. T. Champlin, November 26, 1890, in Donnelly Letter Book.

Donnelly had adroitly organized its legislators under his own leadership.

Having wedged his foot in the door, Donnelly pushed hard to improve his position. When the legislature met, the Alliance men caucused together and Donnelly began to bargain with the other parties for a coalition to control the organization of the house and senate. Wearisome haggling ensued, but the Alliance and the Democrats finally reached an agreement to work together. The latter paid a heavy price for this arrangement. The Alliance received six committee chairs in the senate, including those of the vital railroads and grain and warehouse committees, and the speakership and chairmanship of half of the committees in the house.²⁹

Donnelly crowed loudly over this triumph and his followers tried to press their victory by presenting a long list of reform bills, confident that most of them would pass. Two were placed on the must list by Donnelly: a proposal to reduce the legal rate of interest from ten to eight per cent, and a measure to regulate the railroads more closely. The former seemed certain to pass, since both the old parties had endorsed it in their platform. But history repeated itself. Donnelly, exuberant with victory, again donned his arrogance. As in 1887, he held the floor almost continuously, introduced the important bills, and browbeat Alliance men who did not meekly fall into line.³⁰ As friction developed, the once smoothly running Alliance machine ground to a halt, deserted by many of its passengers. The interest bill was pushed through the house, only to perish in the senate. Then Donnelly suffered the humiliation of seeing his railroad measure side-tracked in order to clear the way for a milder substitute offered by Senator John Hompe, an Alliance member who had deserted the bloc in disgust at Donnelly and had become a leader of a group opposing him. Again the promise of victory had turned into the reality of defeat; the Alliance party did not turn into law a single plank of its 1890 platform. Twenty-nine members of its bloc admitted this in a manifesto issued at the end of the session, but concluded that "we were defeated but not disheartened."³¹

This setback left the situation unchanged in the agrarian organizations. Donnelly kept a tight grip on the reins of the Northwestern Alliance, though his second failure to achieve results with legislative leadership left his enemies more solidly in the saddle of the Alliance

²⁹ The negotiations are described in minute detail in the *Pioneer Press*, January 4 to 11, 1891.

³⁰ "Circular Letter of the Executive Committee of the Northwestern Alliance," February 2, 1891, in *Great West*, February 6, 1891; *Fergus Falls Weekly Journal*, March 5, 1891; D. W. Hixon to Brandborg, March 7, 1891.

³¹ Hompe to Brandborg, April 3, 1891, Brandborg Papers; *Great West*, March 6, 1891; *Pioneer Press*, April 20, 22, 1891; *Fergus Falls Journal*, April 23, 1891.

party. The Sage did not relax his efforts to gain political leadership, but he did seize an opportunity to change his tactics from open assault to mining operations. Other third parties in the western and southern states had enjoyed a measure of success which led them to consider amalgamation into a national organization. A convention was called at Cincinnati in May, 1891, to discuss this question, and the Minnesota branch of the Northwestern Alliance was invited to send a delegation. Generously, Minnesota sent two. The Alliance party, as the political wing of the agrarian movement, selected a representative from the anti-Donnelly ranks. As president of the Northwestern Alliance, Donnelly headed a conflicting delegation. The Alliance party men then made a serious political error. Confident that their claims to representation were obviously superior, they sent only one delegate to Cincinnati. Donnelly was well known to many at that meeting and easily persuaded the convention to seat his delegates as the official representatives of Minnesota. The convention then founded the People's party, also known as the Populists, and empowered Donnelly, who was named national committeeman, to organize and direct the new party in Minnesota.³²

This was a decisive event, for it gave Donnelly a chance to achieve a personal victory. His plan was clear and simple. Since he had been unable to unseat the leaders of the Alliance party, he would lead their followers into the new party he dominated. This strategy was sound and his tactics were faultless. He made no frontal attacks and did not hoist the "no quarter" flag to his enemies. Instead, he called a meeting of the executive committee of the Northwestern Alliance and persuaded it to endorse the People's party as its political wing. He then recommended the men who should be named to the party's state central committee. A majority were his own followers, but he carefully included several of his enemies who were leaders of the Alliance party. This was the work of a master craftsman; it left the control of the new party in Donnelly's hands, yet it appeared to the public as good sportsmanship and as a sincere bid for peace in the agrarian ranks. His enemies recognized, but did not appreciate, his adroitness. On the other hand, Fish did not sense the gentle poison of subtlety, and he stormed at Donnelly for his "weakness" and compromising spirit in dealing with dangerous enemies.³³

Donnelly was now on the verge of victory, for he had placed his

³² *Fergus Falls Journal*, April 30, 1890; *Pioneer Press*, May 16, 1891; *Great West*, May 29, 1891. Donnelly was urged to work with the Alliance party in Minnesota. *Alliance Advocate*, July 9, 1891.

³³ *Alliance Advocate*, July 16, 1891; Donnelly to Fish, July 11, 1891, Donnelly Letter Book.

enemies exactly where they had put him nearly two years earlier — impaled on the horns of a dilemma. If they entered the People's party, they must serve in secondary roles under Donnelly; if they rejected his invitation and kept the Alliance party alive, he could accuse them of acting as the tools of the moneyed interests by splitting the agrarian vote. In either event, it seemed likely that many of the rank and file of the older party would desert to the new.

The state central committee of the Alliance party met in May, 1892, to attempt to solve this riddle. Its members decided to make a peace offer in the form of a manifesto predicting that the farmers would win the election of 1892 if they were united and offering to meet with "all others" to achieve such union.³⁴ Specifically, they wanted a "combined operations" campaign in which each party would preserve its identity but would join the other in setting up a joint state central committee to campaign for a joint state-wide ticket.

The Populists rejected the olive branch so gently waved before them, suspecting that poison ivy was cunningly woven into it. Donnelly particularly feared that the Alliance party men might be able to seize control of a joint state committee and undo all his work.³⁵ His rejection, however, was neither brusque nor final. Donnelly, the political sleight-of-hand artist, kept one hand busy with further negotiations in order to divert attention from the activities of the other. That hand was quietly attempting to undermine the Alliance party in the Fifth Congressional District, which had always been its citadel. He was successful in creating there a fifth column by taking control of the district convention of the Northwestern Alliance and pushing through an endorsement of the People's party, thus stunning the Alliance party leaders.³⁶

Ringed by enemies and battered by defeat, even in their own country, the Alliance party leaders saw only one more straw at which to clutch — threat of an open break with the Populists, a move they had been avoiding. They hoped that party might be induced to pay a price to forestall a split of the agrarian vote. Accordingly, the Alliance party called a convention to meet July 7 and name a state ticket, though some of the leaders recognized that this was a desperate gamble.³⁷

³⁴ *Fergus Falls Journal*, May 5, 1892.

³⁵ Donnelly to Thomas Meighen, April 27, May 1, 1892. Meighen was chairman of the People's party state committee.

³⁶ Ole Hoff to Donnelly, May 4, 1892, Donnelly Papers; *Fergus Falls Journal*, May 26, 1892. There is some evidence that many in the Fifth District joined the Donnelly forces simply to be on what they expected would be the winning side.

³⁷ *Fergus Falls Journal*, June 23, 1892; R. J. Hall to Brandborg, June 23, 1892, Brandborg Papers; Fish to Donnelly, June 19, 1892, Donnelly Papers. Donnelly was fully aware of the Alliance party strategy.

The response was a disappointment to those who issued the call. Two hundred and eighty delegates were expected, but only fifty-eight, representing thirteen counties, appeared. With such thin ranks, it was obviously unwise to declare war on the Populists. Halfway measures were again adopted. The convention "conditionally" nominated General Baker as its candidate for governor, and left the rest of its ticket open. A committee was chosen to visit the forthcoming Populist convention, persuade it to endorse Baker, and fill in the rest of the ticket with People's party candidates for a joint slate and campaign.³⁸

The committee duly waited upon the convention and sent to the platform its eloquent spokesman, W. W. Erwin, whose spellbinding oratory had anesthetized opposition more than once in the past. This was not Erwin's lucky day. He was just getting well under way when a member of the convention arose and loudly called him a liar. This subtle impeachment released a pandemonium and, during the uproar, the visiting statesmen were ushered from the hall. When quiet again prevailed, the Populists voted down the proposal to co-operate with the Alliance party and unanimously elevated Donnelly to serve as their candidate for governor to oppose Knute Nelson, the Republican nominee.³⁹

The rude bellowing of this convention was the dirge of the Alliance party. Even the die-hards now abandoned the fight, and the state committee announced Baker's withdrawal, but urged local committees to keep their candidates in the field and to prepare for 1894. Only the Otter Tail County organization heeded this advice. Its reward was bitter, for all its candidates ran last in their respective races and polled less than ten per cent of the vote.⁴⁰

The Alliance party leaders soon had a bit of balm to rub on their wounds—the crushing defeat which Donnelly suffered at the hands of Nelson. Although fifteen thousand more ballots were cast in 1892, Donnelly's popular vote fell eighteen thousand short of Owen's, and he carried only six counties while Owen had won in twenty-four. Many factors united to produce this debacle, but it is certain that an important one was resentment over Donnelly's destruction of the party which had served so well in the election of 1890. The third-party vote declined most in counties which had gone most strongly for Owen.

Thus the ephemeral Alliance party died, and there were few to mourn it. It had, however, made important contributions. They were not direct, for the party had not produced a single reform; yet indirectly it had a

³⁸ *Pioneer Press*, July 7, 8, 1892; *Great West*, July 8, 1892.

³⁹ *Pioneer Press*, July 12-15, 1892.

⁴⁰ *Alliance Advocate*, August 11, 1892; *Fergus Falls Journal*, November 17, 1892.

real record of achievement. Perhaps its most significant accomplishment was to keep alive the movement of agrarian political protest, and it deserves a share of the credit for the total achievement of that movement. More specifically, it paved the way for the Populists and, by its strong showing in 1890, it compelled the Republicans to place Knute Nelson at the head of their ticket in 1892. Nelson was not beloved of the bosses of his party, who had shelved him earlier, but they had to accept him to hold the state. His election was actually a triumph for the farmers, for his administration was marked by as much reform as could have been accomplished by Owen or Donnelly.

In the final analysis, the brief history of the Alliance party is a red lantern of warning, marking the pitfalls of third-party politics—errors of inexperience, such as the creation of the Farm and Labor party; a deficit of party discipline and a surplus of selfish personal ambition, as reflected in fierce factional struggles; a hankering after dangerous coalitions; and a narrowness of appeal which made the party the vehicle of the wheat farmer and the union laborer to the exclusion of other classes and of many sections of the state.

The Alliance party was born of adversity, lived in adversity, and died in adversity at the hands of those who should have been its friends. Its career was short and stormy, but it did not live in vain.



The first two volumes of the *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, covering "The Years of Preparation" from 1868 to 1898, have been issued under the editorship of Elting E. Morison (Cambridge, 1951). For Midwesterners, the many letters written from Roosevelt's Dakota ranch in the 1880's have special interest. There are, too, occasional letters from Minnesota, like that of June 8, 1884, from St. Paul, penned while en route to Dakota. While in St. Paul he was interviewed regarding Blaine's nomination for the presidency. Of the reports appearing in Eastern papers, he wrote on June 17: "the St. Pauls despatch was made up out of the whole cloth; it was very annoying; I had not spoken a dozen words to any reporter." That he favored Blaine's nomination was implied in the reports; but Roosevelt's actual attitude is expressed in the St. Paul letter: "Of all the men presented to the convention as presidential candidates, I consider Blaine as by far the most objectionable."



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