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# SIDNEY M. OWEN

## An Editor in Politics

CARL H. CHRISLOCK

IN 1910, when Sidney Mark Owen died, he seemed to have a secure place in Minnesota history. Ex-governor John Lind, who was not by habit an effusive man, said he regarded "Mr. Owen . . . as the one man who has contributed more to the uplifting of the people's ideals than any other man" he had encountered in public life. The first of the famous Wallaces of Iowa attributed the strength of progressivism in Minnesota "largely" to the "seed sown by Mr. Owen" in the 1890s. The *Minneota Mascot* praised Owen's capabilities as editor of *Farm, Stock and Home* in exalted terms, describing that periodical as "easily the foremost agricultural journal of the Northwest, if not in America."<sup>1</sup>

These generous panegyrics notwithstanding, Owen is virtually forgotten in 1958. His name is not among those receiving praise in connection with the statehood centennial commemoration. Democratic-Farmer-Labor orators who sometimes refer to the past fail to mention him. Historians of Populism

have not completely ignored him, but most of their attention has been reserved for Ignatius Donnelly. In the long run, Donnelly's pre-eminence can no doubt be defended. But this much can be claimed for Owen: within Minnesota he successfully challenged Donnelly's leadership of Alliance-Populism. In the 1890s many who adhered to this movement regarded Owen rather than his more famous rival as their authentic leader.

Thus justice, if there is such a thing in the historiographic sense, would seem to require a re-evaluation of Owen's significance. But this is not the only consideration. The Owen-Donnelly clash was more than a personal struggle for power. While Donnelly's record for consistency on public policy questions was not remarkable, he was by virtue of authorship inseparably identified with the 1892 platform of the national People's party, better known as the Omaha platform. Among the things this manifesto endorsed, though in qualified, equivocal language, was the Alliance subtreasury plan which called upon the federal government to build warehouses for the storage of non-perishable farm crops and to lend legal-

<sup>1</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 3, 1910; *Wallace's Farmer*, February 11, 1910; *Minneota Mascot*, February 18, 1910.

tender treasury notes on the crops stored — the so-called Macune plan. The Omaha platform also characterized tariff agitation as a “sham” designed “to drown the outcries of a plundered people”; and it proclaimed that “the powers of government . . . should be expanded . . . as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify.”<sup>2</sup>

On the record Owen accepted the Omaha platform; he even lauded it. But he vigorously rejected the subtreasury plan, which Donnelly’s partisans in 1892 were not only accepting, but attempting to make the mark of Populist orthodoxy. While he did not say so, Owen probably also was unwilling to regard his own lifelong crusade for tariff reform as a “sham.” It is to be suspected, too, that he would have preferred omission of the demand for more government, for this would have made the platform’s commitment to the “equal rights to all, special privileges to none” principle stand out in bolder relief.

These issues are of more than incidental importance. They go to the heart of a moot question: As a movement did Populism have more in common with Jacksonian Democracy than with the New Deal? Perhaps some light is thrown on this question by Owen’s firm commitment to traditional agrarian radicalism, which seemed to command more acceptance within Minnesota than Donnelly’s temporary espousal of a program which did, indeed, anticipate some features of the “managed economy” of the future, but which appeared to many Populists as a dangerous leap into a dark and uncertain unknown.

OWEN’S EARLY LIFE is to a considerable extent a closed book. This is due, at least in part, to a lack of basic sources — there are no personal papers available for examination, and he did not pen his memoirs for posterity. He was forty-seven years of age when he went to Minnesota, and the established facts about his life up to that time are known only in barest outline. He

was born in Ohio in 1838, reared on a farm, educated in the public schools and at Oberlin College, and served as a first lieutenant in the 55th Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War. After the war he entered the wholesale mercantile business, first in Toledo and later in Chicago. Apparently commerce did not suit his inclinations, for in 1885 he abandoned its pursuit to accept the editorship of *Farm, Stock and Home*, which had been founded at Minneapolis by his brother, Horatio R. Owen, in 1884.<sup>3</sup>

At this point the obscurity surrounding Owen is to some extent lifted, but by no means dispelled. His *Farm, Stock and Home* editorials, as well as surviving texts of his public utterances, explicate in detail his political and socioeconomic views without, however, getting into the realm of direct self-revelation. Perhaps on the basis of what is known, a few inferences are warranted. For example, it was not strange for a man reared in Ohio in the 1840s and 1850s to employ an idiom suggestive of locofocoism; and it was not incongruous for an alumnus of Oberlin to be deeply concerned about the rights of man. Beyond this, it is impossible to go, for Owen was not in the habit of writing or talking publicly about his childhood, his student days, or the frustrations he may have encountered as a soldier and businessman.

If it is impossible to be definite about the influences which made Owen what he was, it is not too difficult to recapture the popular image of the middle-aged agricultural editor who became a leader in the turbulent reform movement of the 1890s. Among his traits was an austere reserve which did not preclude warm relationships with close friends, but which did prevent exposure of his inner being to public view.

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<sup>2</sup> For the text of the Omaha platform, see John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s Party*, 439–444 (Minneapolis, 1931). The subtreasury plan is discussed on pages 186–204.

<sup>3</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 26:135 (February 15, 1910); *Minneapolis Journal*, February 2, 1910; *St. Paul Dispatch*, February 2, 1910.

The privilege he claimed for himself in this respect was accorded to others. Although there was ample provocation to act otherwise, he usually avoided the personal attack and confined his appeal to issues. Accepted versions of his personal habits reinforced the impression of austerity. He was known to abstain from both tobacco and liquor, and intimate friends testified that he never resorted to profanity in private conversation. Needless to say, such a reputation endeared him to the many Populists and quasi-Populists among the Scandinavians who, generally speaking, assigned high priority to "demon rum" as a source of evil.

In some respects Owen did not conform to the "reformer" stereotype, for he eschewed personal attacks in political debate, deplored reformist dogmatism, which he distinguished from devotion to principle, and opened the pages of *Farm, Stock and Home* to more than one reform cause. But this forbearance and flexibility had definite limits. To him the function of politics was not so much the reconciliation of diverse interests as the promotion of righteousness. "When a thing appeared wrong to Mr. Owen," editorialized the *Minneota Mascot*, "it was wrong all through and he would have nothing of it."<sup>4</sup> Like most Midwestern radicals, he was inclined to attribute the nation's difficulties to a conscious conspiracy on the part of big business "plutocrats." Without apparent difficulty, he accepted the "Crime of '73" thesis which held that the demonetization of silver in that year was a planned maneuver to enhance the value of money and depress prices.

As a campaigner Owen was at least ade-

quate and perhaps effective. The revival techniques of many third-party orators were not for him. Passion there was in the content of his speeches and, it can be assumed, in the delivery; but his was a controlled passion which was subordinated to the marshaling of facts and statistics to support conclusions. His style was at times heavy, almost ponderous, and not calculated to arouse audiences to the ecstatic heights to which Donnelly's efforts lifted them. But if the immediate response fell short of that produced by Donnelly, the permanent impression was apparently more rewarding.

UNDER OWEN'S EDITORSHIP, *Farm, Stock and Home* was soon established as a successful enterprise, and its influence expanded with the passing years. By 1894, when the paper was ten years old, a circulation of forty thousand was claimed for it. Like other "progressive" farm journals, it laid heavy stress on scientific husbandry and business management as aids to better rural living. It advocated diversification of crops, the use of soil-building techniques, and the systematic breeding and improved feeding of livestock, and sought the assistance of a growing corps of experts employed in Midwestern agricultural colleges.<sup>5</sup>

But Owen rejected the counsel of those who asserted that agricultural journalism should confine itself to the gospel of better farming and avoid entanglement in public policy issues. From the beginning of his editorial career he numbered himself with those who refused to concede that diversification and systematic adaptation to existing markets were ultimate solutions to the farm problem. As Owen said in one editorial, diversification "is all right, but those who practice it should be the recipients of its increased advantages."<sup>6</sup>

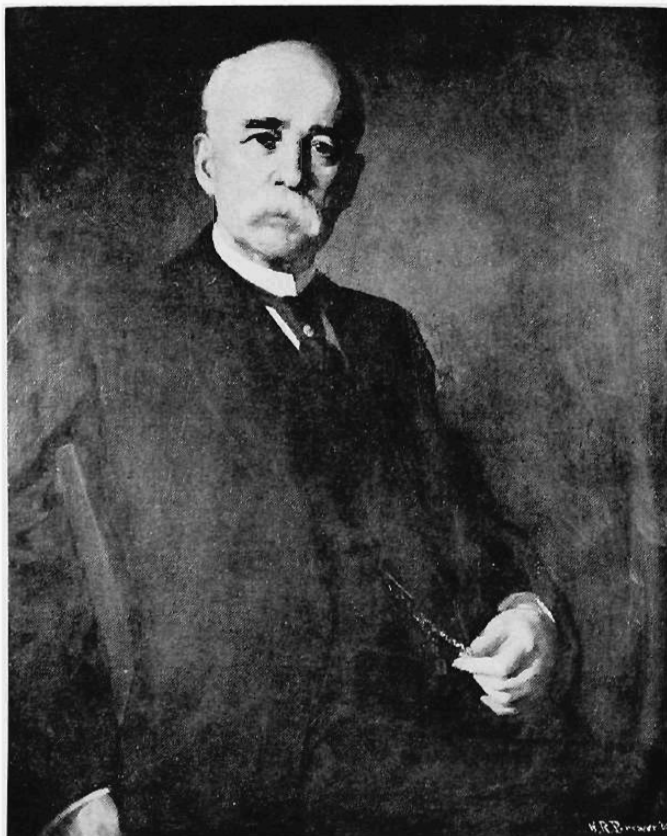
In taking this position, Owen allied himself squarely with the Farmers' Alliance, which already was a potent force in state politics when he arrived in Minnesota. But he did not become an uncritical advocate

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Mrs. H. N. Owen, August 13, 1957; *Ugeblad* (Fergus Falls), November 23, 1892; *Progressive Age* (Minneapolis), June 2, November 3, 1894; letter of Owen E. Ransom, in *Minneapolis Journal*, February 21, 1910.

<sup>5</sup> *Minneota Mascot*, February 18, 1910.

<sup>6</sup> William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3: 189 (St. Paul, 1926); Isaac Atwater, *History of the City of Minneapolis*, 379 (New York, 1893); *Farm, Stock and Home*, 10:66 (January 15, 1894).

<sup>7</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 10:316 (September 1, 1894). See also 10:101 (February 15, 1894).



SIDNEY M. Owen,  
a portrait painted in 1908  
by W. R. Brewer

COURTESY OF MRS. H. N. OWEN, MINNEAPOLIS

of every measure that found favor with Alliance leaders. Included in the baggage he took to Minneapolis were several definite ideas about what constituted sound public policy. Intellectually, he was astute enough to perceive the points at which contemporary reform proposals clashed with these ideas, and he had a penchant for consistency which did not, however, resolve all contradictions between program and theory.

His basic presuppositions were revealed with clarity in *Farm, Stock and Home* editorials which dealt with the causes of agriculture's distress. The real difficulty, as Owen's paper saw it, stemmed from conditions which compelled the farmer to pay tribute to "fictitious values." Wheat was carried to market on steel rails costing twice as much as they should. Elevators were "making dividends of 40 to 50 per

cent, when 10 per cent would be a munificent compensation." The level of "realty and rents in the paths wheat must travel . . . to market" was constantly rising. Agricultural implements, fabricated in highly protected factories, were outrageously excessive in price. At the same time, combinations for the suppression of "healthy competition" were tolerated, and agricultural property was assessed for taxation at sixty-five per cent of its value while "notes, bonds and stocks pay on but 7½ per cent."<sup>8</sup>

The source of these "fictitious values," according to *Farm, Stock and Home*, could be identified with legislative privilege. The protective tariff, land grants to railroads, toleration of stock watering and trust formation, the surrender to banks of the power to manipulate the currency were all parts

<sup>8</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 4:2 (November 15, 1887).

of a single, misguided government policy. The results of this policy were not measurable alone in depression-breeding economic imbalances. Human values were also subverted: "God . . . the rights of man and the obligations of brotherhood were forgotten."<sup>9</sup>

The language conveying these ideas was vigorous enough, but the writer did not suggest that the government should undertake permanent, comprehensive management of the mighty forces created by America's post-1865 rapid industrialization. The implication rather was that a natural order based on competition and "equal rights to all, special privileges to none" had been thrown out of gear. The first necessity was to restore this order to normal, and this could not be done until the "legislative privilege" shackles were removed and destroyed.

OWEN MADE his political debut in 1890. In that year the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance for a number of reasons decided to abandon nonpartisan pressure-group activity in favor of independent political action. The decision was reached with virtual unanimity, but the new Alliance party found itself in dire straits when its first convention tried to nominate a candidate for governor. Two factions pressed hard for their respective candidates—Ignatius Donnelly and R. J. Hall, then president of the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance. The deadlock was resolved by tendering the nomination to Owen, who was not yet identified with either faction.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 7:124 (March 1, 1891).

<sup>10</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, July 16, 17, 1890. For the history and background of the Alliance party, see Donald F. Warner, "Prelude to Populism," in *Minnesota History*, 32:129-146 (September, 1951).

<sup>11</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, July 18, 1890.

<sup>12</sup> The Republican campaign manifesto appears in the *Northfield News*, September 20, 1890. The text of one of the most important campaign speeches of Judge Thomas Wilson, the Democratic candidate for governor, is in the *St. Paul Globe*, October 1, 1890.

<sup>13</sup> *Minnesota Legislative Manual*, 1891, 554-571, 574-576. See also the author's article on "The Alliance Party and the Minnesota Legislature of 1891," in *Minnesota History*, 35:300 (September, 1957).

In an interview given immediately after his nomination, the candidate of the new party pointed to three issues as the most important of the forthcoming campaign. They were the tariff, which he said was giving protection to those needing it least at the expense of everyone else; taxation, which he charged was excessively burdensome and inequitably assessed; and overcapitalization, which he asserted was imposing an enormous "tribute" on the American people.<sup>11</sup> Hostility to "special privilege," as defined by selection of such issues, did, indeed, dominate the campaign of 1890. The *status quo* was unpopular enough to discourage candidates seeking office from courting identification with it. Campaigners of all three parties agreed that a wholesale redress of grievances on behalf of the "producer" was urgently needed, and all based their claims on a superior capacity to make reform a reality.<sup>12</sup>

The election results were a severe rebuke to the incumbent Republicans. True, Governor William R. Merriam was re-elected, although by a narrow margin. His plurality over his Democratic opponent was under twenty-five hundred, and he polled less than forty per cent of the total votes cast for governor. At the same time, a solidly Republican Congressional delegation of five was reduced to one. In the contest for control of the legislature, Democratic and Alliance candidates captured enough seats to throw both houses into a three-way deadlock. The vote polled by the Alliance was strikingly impressive when it is remembered that the party had come into being only four months before the election. Owen received 58,513 votes—nearly twenty-five per cent of the total cast for governor. One Alliance Congressman was elected, Alliance votes contributed to the election of two of the three Democratic Congressmen, and the victor in the state auditor race rode into office on a "Democratic-Alliance" ticket. Approximately a third of the new state legislators were Alliance party men.<sup>13</sup>

*Farm, Stock and Home* professed gratifi-

cation at these results, which it claimed were "quite up to the expectations of those who had the best means of knowing the exact situation." And the election results of 1890 augured well for the future. Organization and education should continue; if they were pushed, the magazine predicted that in the next election the state would place power in "the hands of those classes that produce its wealth."<sup>14</sup>

After the election of 1890, *Farm, Stock and Home* continued as an "educational" force for the third-party movement, but its editor was relegated to a secondary role in organizational work. For the titular head of a defeated party, such a fate is not unusual, but in this case other developments, involving Donnelly, also played a role. The old reform leader had won election to the state senate in 1890 as an Allianceman, although his relationship with the dominant Alliance leaders had been anything but cordial. Because his party held the balance of power in the legislature of 1891, Donnelly was able to play a dominant role in the session. Shortly before it convened, he won another victory: at its annual convention the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance reversed a policy of two years' standing by electing him president. Although this did not give him technical control of the Alliance party, its dependence on the financial assistance of its "non-partisan" counterpart made Donnelly a force that party leaders could not ignore.<sup>15</sup>

Donnelly failed to use his legislative opportunity to advantage either for himself or his cause. The 1891 session produced considerable bombast and some headlines, but its lack of achievement was a cross for the third-party movement to bear. The Farmers' Alliance presidency was, however, another matter. Its value became clearly apparent in May, 1891, when the Cincinnati reform conference met to consider the feasibility of creating a new national third party. Because Donnelly had close rapport with the conference managers, he easily persuaded the credentials committee to seat

his own Farmers' Alliance delegation rather than one sent by the Alliance party. This, moreover, was not his only success at Cincinnati. When the new People's party emerged, he was named to its national executive committee and was designated a national committeeman from Minnesota. The latter post authorized him to direct organizational work in his own state. Upon returning home, he lost little time getting the Farmers' Alliance to sanction his efforts to establish a People's party in the state of Minnesota.<sup>16</sup>

These maneuvers placed the Alliance party in a desperate position. Donnelly still did not control its organization, but without Farmers' Alliance backing and recognition from the national People's party, the Alliance party faced almost certain collapse. From his driver's seat, Donnelly suggested a way out of the impasse by inviting key members of the Alliance party state committee to serve on that of the People's party. This gesture was less generous than it seemed, for the proposed arrangement assured a pro-Donnelly majority on the new committee. As a result, Alliance leaders did not greet Donnelly's offer with rapturous enthusiasm. A few accepted, but such prominent figures as J. H. Baker, former Minnesota railroad commissioner, W. W. Irwin, a well-known criminal lawyer, and Senator John Hompe of Otter Tail County persisted in a forlorn attempt to preserve the Alliance party. Their efforts, which included the calling of a state convention in July, 1892, the provisional nomination of Baker for governor, and the drafting of a lengthy platform were not finally abandoned until the campaign of 1892 was underway.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 7:10 (November 15, 1890).

<sup>15</sup> Warner, in *Minnesota History*, 32:140; Chrislock, in *Minnesota History*, 35:301, 302; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 2, 1891; *Great West* (St. Paul), January 9, 1891.

<sup>16</sup> Chrislock, in *Minnesota History*, 35:297-312; Warner, in *Minnesota History*, 32:143; *Great West*, May 29, June 19, 1891.

Although Owen was closer to Baker than to Donnelly on policy issues, he chose to accept the "peace" bid. He consented to serve on the People's party state committee; he attended the St. Louis conference of February, 1892, as a party representative; and he was explicitly critical of the effort to keep the Alliance party alive. Shortly before the Minnesota People's party convention of 1892 opened, he counseled those who feared boss domination to participate in its proceedings in order to avert machine control. And after the convention met and nominated Donnelly for the governorship, *Farm, Stock and Home* accepted its decisions with a show of gracious warmth.<sup>18</sup>

Thus Owen cast his lot with the new People's party, but not without important reservations. His paper was restrained in its praise of the Cincinnati conference of 1891, which revealed the existence of "whole volcanoes of discontent" ready to explode into independent political action because the old parties were bankrupt. However, *Farm, Stock and Home* doubted that the Cincinnati gathering was "sufficiently representative of all the people to be the legitimate parent of a true 'people's party.'" Nor was it certain that the leaders "most prominent in the pioneer work" would be "equally so in erecting the building." Also, the periodical expressed the belief that "the 'demands' made" in Cincinnati were "not necessarily those of the future new party."<sup>19</sup>

The subtreasury was one of the "demands" which Owen hoped would be abandoned. *Farm, Stock and Home* professed

<sup>17</sup> Donnelly to Thomas J. Meighen, September 1, 1891, April 27, 1892, Donnelly Letter Book, in the Donnelly Papers owned by the Minnesota Historical Society; *Minneapolis Journal*, July 5, 6, 7, 1892; *Ugeblad*, August 10, 1892.

<sup>18</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 7:294, 8:314 (July 15, 1891; August 1, 1892); interview with Owen, in *Minneapolis Journal*, July 5, 1892; *Great West*, January 29, 1892.

<sup>19</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, vol. 7, June 15, 1891, Supplement.

<sup>20</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 7:63, 8:80, 116 (January 1, 1891; January 15, February 15, 1892).



IGNATIUS Donnelly

total inability to see how the Macune plan could be harmonized with the "equal rights to all, special privileges to none" principle. It was, in fact, a demand for "as huge a 'special privilege' as was ever dreamed of." And this was not the only objection: the plan would enable farmers to "avail themselves of the power the government gave to speculate"; it violated sound economic principles by seeking "artificially" to increase the price of daily necessities; and, if adopted, it would strengthen the unsound precedent of building one industry at the expense of all others. All this being true, the "scheme would be unsatisfactory to all, oppressive to many, and ultimately bring disaster to our agricultural interests."<sup>20</sup>

IN VIEW of Owen's identification with the leaders of the Alliance party, his stand on the subtreasury issue, and his popularity





EVERETT W. Fish

with those who disliked the dominant Populist leadership, it is not strange that he remained outside the Populist party's inner circle during the campaign of 1892. Outwardly, Donnelly maintained a cool but correct attitude. It was otherwise with Everett Fish, editor of the *Great West* and Donnelly's chief lieutenant in 1892. A fanatical extremist who shouted "treason" at anyone guilty of the slightest deviation from "true" Populist doctrine, Fish frequently and bitingly attacked Owen along with all third-party men who opposed the subtreasury. Repeated warnings came from the ranks that these attacks were not hurting Owen as much as they were imperiling the cause; but Donnelly was unable or unwilling to restrain the volatile Fish.<sup>21</sup>

The victim of Fish's abuse enjoyed a measure of revenge in November. Compared with pre-election expectations, the People's party vote was dismal. Donnelly polled only 39,862 votes, about nineteen thousand fewer than Owen had received in 1890 when the total vote had been about fifteen thousand short of what it was in 1892. Third-party representation in the legislature was cut in half; only one Congressman was elected, and his margin was under a hundred votes in an area which Owen

had swept two years earlier. Admittedly, the old party slates were stronger than they had been in 1890; this was particularly true of the Republican ticket, which was headed by Knute Nelson. But if there was to be a third-party movement in the state, it was absolutely necessary to hold on to the gains made in 1890.<sup>22</sup>

In the painful appraisals which followed, Fish very quickly fell from grace. The Populists firmly believed that he had been guilty, not of bad judgment, but of actual treachery. They charged that the many objectionable tactics he had employed—the intemperate attacks on Owen, the insistence on the subtreasury as the mark of Populist orthodoxy, the violation of all canons of decency in attacks on the old party opposition—were deliberately conceived to alienate voters from the People's party, and that his motive was Republican money. Even Donnelly, whose zealous defender Fish had professed to be, became thoroughly convinced that his chief lieutenant had "sold out" to the enemy. The result was a polemical exchange which must have delighted connoisseurs of vituperation. Apparently no conclusive evidence was produced to support the charge that Fish had received compensation for his efforts. But there can be little doubt that he symbolized what was wrong with the People's party campaign of 1892.<sup>23</sup>

Personally, Donnelly was overwhelmed and humiliated by the magnitude of his defeat. To close friends he proclaimed a determination to retire from active political life forever.<sup>24</sup> This was somewhat premature; he still possessed too much resilience and love of combat to keep such a promise.

<sup>21</sup> Meighen to Donnelly, May 4, 31, 1892; Swan Nelson to Donnelly, May 21, 1892; A. Van Hemert to Donnelly, June 29, 1892; L. A. Paddock to Donnelly, July 23, 1892. Donnelly Papers.

<sup>22</sup> *Legislative Manual*, 1893, 462-467.

<sup>23</sup> *Representative* (St. Paul), May 10, June 14, July 12, 1893; January 3, 17, 1894.

<sup>24</sup> Donnelly to Frank Day, December 4, 1892; to Andrew Steenerson, December 23, 1892. Donnelly Letter Book, Donnelly Papers.



His term in the senate had two years to run, and he continued to keep in close personal touch with the leaders of Populism. He kept up the battle for the old causes in the pages of his weekly paper, the *Representative*, founded after Fish and his publication, the *Great West*, were expelled from the kingdom. But apparently his aspirations did not include another try for the governorship, least of all in 1894.

Those who spoke for Minnesota Populism were satisfied with this renunciation. After the Fish matter was disposed of and the future of the party became the question of the moment, it did not take long to develop overwhelming agreement on the course to be followed in 1894. Owen was to head the ticket, and an appeal would be made to the electorate from a new base which did not include the subtreasury proposal.<sup>25</sup>

LEGEND HAS IT that Owen accepted the 1894 Populist gubernatorial nomination with extreme reluctance. Although this may be true, beginning in 1893, *Farm, Stock and Home* took an editorial line as explicitly critical of Governor Nelson's administration as that of avowedly partisan organs. Charges that the governor and the 1893 legislature were unduly subservient to the corporate interests were published as "A Caustic but Deserved Criticism." The Chicago antitrust convention of June, 1893, called at Nelson's initiative to combat a monopoly in coal, was characterized as a futile gesture which left the trusts more arrogant than ever. The pine land investigation of 1893 rated a kind word, but credit for it was given to Robert C. Dunn, one of the state legislators who had put the probe in motion.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See comment of *Freeborn County Standard* (Albert Lea), January 17, 1894.

<sup>26</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 9:189, 310, 10:35 (April 1, July 1, December 15, 1893).

<sup>27</sup> *Minnesota, General Laws*, 1893, p. 140-143.

<sup>28</sup> *Minnesota, Senate Journal*, 1893, p. 568; *House Journal*, 1893, p. 735; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 21, April 8, 1893.

At the same time, Owen and his paper became involved in the Populist battle against one of Nelson's most cherished measures—the so-called "Governor's grain bill." It sought to eliminate marketing discrimination by placing all country elevators under the jurisdiction of the railroad and warehouse commission. As a prerequisite for operation, these elevators were required to secure licenses from the commission. To obtain and hold licenses, elevators were obliged to comply with the commission's grading and weighing standards. Provision was made also for appeals from farmers not satisfied with the grade assigned at the elevator; in the event of appeal, the commission had the power to make the final decision.<sup>27</sup>

Although the bill seemed to be consistent with Populist advocacy of strengthened state police power, Nelson encountered a solid phalanx of third-party opposition to it. The vote on final passage in both houses, in fact, divided almost exactly on party lines, with Republicans solidly favoring, and Populists and Democrats, with a very few exceptions, opposing it.<sup>28</sup> The case against the governor's bill, as developed by Owen with the help of R. J. Hall and T. C. Hodgson, two prominent Farmers' Alliance leaders, rested on two major premises. First, the measure was intended to regulate someone who did not require regulating—the local elevator man. Current marketing difficulties, it was argued, were not the fault of the small grain buyer who, in fact, was presently competing in a limited way with the line elevators. To set up conditions which imperiled his continued operation was a poor reward for his contribution to the battle against monopoly. Second, according to its opponents, Nelson's proposed law violated tried and true economic principles. "How senseless is the whole matter of regulating the wheat traffic by law," editorialized *Farm, Stock and Home*. "When the law . . . has made it impossible for transportation companies to rob the public, it had then better let nature take its

course' than to smother the traffic under a multitude of enactments."<sup>29</sup>

The Populist alternative to Nelson's program did not, however, rest solely on letting (or helping) "nature take its course." True, third-party spokesmen urged a vigorous antitrust policy designed to preserve, or restore, the so-called free market. But their program went beyond this. For several years before 1893 Alliance and Populist platforms had included a proposal that the state build and maintain one or two terminal elevators. There the producer would have the right to store his grain without having it graded or mixed with grain belonging to others. Those who purchased grain for ultimate consumption—millers, brewers, and the like—could then go to the terminal and buy what they needed without dealing with the large grain exchanges. Thus, it was argued, a measure of competition would be restored to the grain trade.<sup>30</sup>

Hodgson, Hall, Owen, and Populists in the legislature pushed the state elevator scheme vigorously in 1893, and with Republican help it was enacted into law, though it was shortly declared unconstitutional by the Minnesota supreme court. It goes without saying that the party's support of this measure created theoretical difficulties for Populist spokesmen. How could the governor's bill and the subtreasury be opposed as "paternalistic" by those who advocated that the state go into the grain business? The dilemma was handled in several ways. Owen, who was keenly aware of the contradiction, deplored the need for state-owned elevators, but argued that the marketing problem was no less critical than a wartime situation which called for the adoption of extraordinary measures. Hodgson pointed to the "paternalism" practiced on behalf of big business, implying that the elevator was "paternalistic" only to a small degree. He also likened it to community maintenance of a public market, a practice hallowed by long tradition.<sup>31</sup>

Obviously the issue involved more than

abstractions and theory. Populism clearly represented the interests not only of farmers, but of small grain traders, who were apprehensive about their own ability to meet the standards they anticipated would be established under the governor's bill. Fear that the grain trade would use its influence with the Republican party to its own advantage was another factor. If this did not happen, it was possible that purely political appointees would administer the complex inspection system provided by the measure.<sup>32</sup>

As the campaign of 1894 approached, Populist preoccupation with the governor's bill and the state elevator abated. The latter provided no basis for attack on Nelson, who had, after all, signed the measure into law; it was the supreme court which was responsible for its demise. Perhaps assault on the grain bill was abandoned because the Populists discovered that it was not as unpopular as they had at first imagined. At any rate, it was part of a total program which went far toward meeting the demands which the Farmers' Alliance had been pushing for nearly a decade.<sup>33</sup>

Building up a case against Nelson's reform program was not the only difficulty confronting the Populists. The reputation for irresponsibility and radicalism created by the legislature of 1891 and the antics of Fish were real handicaps. Reformist dog-

<sup>29</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 9:230, 326 (May 1, July 15, 1893); T. C. Hodgson, "The Wheat Question," in *Farm, Stock and Home*, 9:187, 213, 231 (April 1, 15, May 1, 1893); Hodgson to *Representative*, June 7, 1893; R. J. Hall to *Farm, Stock and Home*, 10:180 (April 15, 1894); *Freeborn County Standard*, March 15, 1893.

<sup>30</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 8:382 (October 1, 1892).

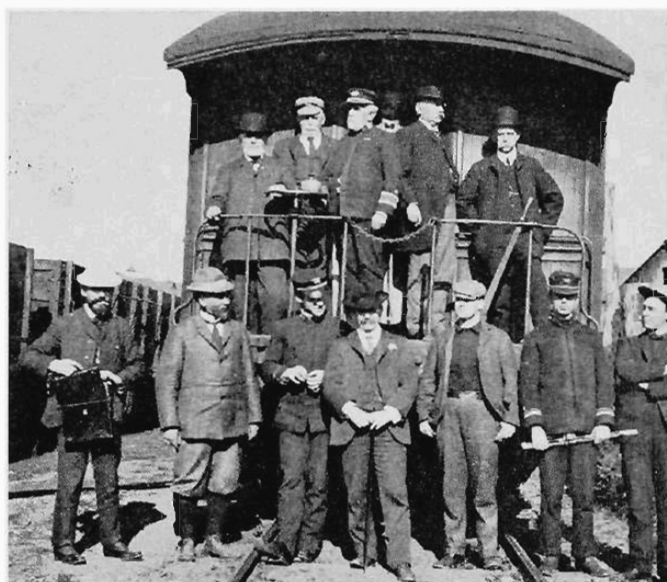
<sup>31</sup> Henry Rippe v George L. Becker et al., *Minnesota Reports*, 1893, p. 100-118; *Farm, Stock and Home*, 9:128, 311 (February 15, July 1, 1893).

<sup>32</sup> Two years later, Governor David M. Clough vetoed a bill which placed the grain department under the merit system. An investigation of grain inspection during Lind's administration proved that these fears were not entirely groundless. *Minneapolis Journal*, April 26, 1895; George M. Stephenson, *John Lind of Minnesota*, 170 (Minneapolis, 1935).

<sup>33</sup> See Folwell, *Minnesota*, 3:205-212, for a summary of the achievements of Nelson's administration.

matism within Populism's house was another. Some party members wanted to commit it to the single tax; others branded Henry George a heretic; some supported, others opposed, the strategy of capturing votes by adopting the prohibition movement's central program; there were even a few who wanted to press the subtreasury. Donnelly's sensitivity to real or imagined slights posed another danger. By early 1894 he had grudgingly assented to Owen's nomination for the governorship, but there was always the danger that Donnelly might try to march his following in another direction.<sup>34</sup>

As heir-presumptive to Populist leadership, Owen had to deal with these difficult problems. At the outset, he made an effort to establish internal unity by proclaiming a "great moral principle" which reformers of every stripe could accept: "The political power of corporate monopoly must be destroyed." Other Populist spokesmen accepted this "principle" and undertook to fit specific programs into its context. Ex-Congressman J. L. McDonald, a former Democrat and the People's party candidate for attorney-general in 1892, suggested as an acceptable program the free coinage of silver, "effective control or ownership of railroads," postal savings banks, a graduated income tax, and a national currency maintained without assistance from banks.<sup>35</sup> William R. Dobbyn, a Universalist clergyman bred in New England who edited the sophisticated Minneapolis reform weekly, the *Progressive Age*, and who was recruited into the People's party at the close of the Donnelly-Fish period, felt that the right of



KNUTE Nelson (top row at the left) touring the state in the 1890s

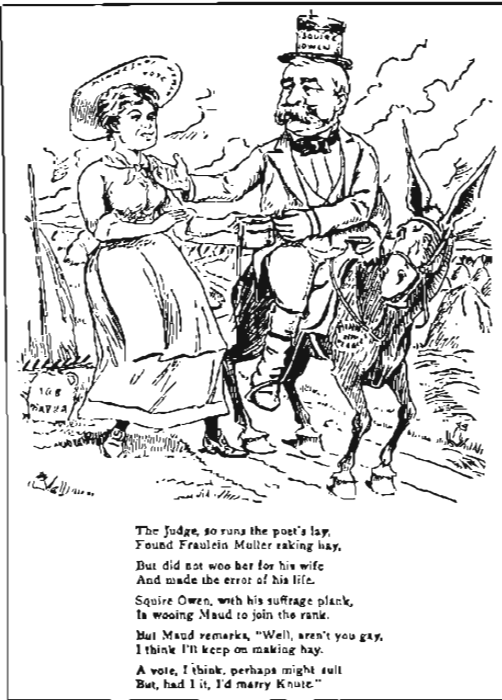
the people to rule should receive particular stress; the initiative and referendum, as well as the ballot for women, were specific planks he hoped would be included in the state platform.<sup>36</sup>

At the Populist state convention of 1894, held the second week in July, the party leaders encountered little difficulty in carrying through their plans. Owen was nominated for governor with a ticket made up predominantly of men experienced in public life. The platform was tailored to fit the McDonald-Dobbyn specifications: the free coinage of silver was warmly endorsed; woman suffrage was advocated along with the initiative and referendum; government savings banks, a graduated income and inheritance tax, and government ownership of railroads were commended to Congress as worthy measures; and a proposal for "nationalization" of the liquor industry and its "management by the state without profit" was included. The governor's grain bill was not mentioned. In fact, planks on grain legislation did not go beyond the old Alliance demand that monopolistic combinations should be broken up and "an abso-

<sup>34</sup> Owen's opposition to Donnelly's re-election as president of the Farmers' Alliance caused some difficulty in early 1894. See Hodgson to Donnelly, February 2, 1894; Owen to Donnelly, February 5, 1894; H. G. Day to Donnelly, February 23, 28, 1894, Donnelly Papers. Donnelly sets forth his complaints against Owen in a letter to Day, February 24, 1894 in Donnelly Letter Book.

<sup>35</sup> *Representative*, January 24, 1894; McDonald to *Farm, Stock and Home*, 10:110 (February 15, 1894).

<sup>36</sup> Virtually every issue of the *Progressive Age* of early 1894 advocated these reforms.



lutely free market for . . . cattle, wheat and other products" restored.<sup>37</sup>

ALTHOUGH SECTIONS of the Republican press complimented Populism on its ticket and platform, both of which were interpreted as giving the party a new look, neither the candidates nor the program—not even the free silver proposal—became the crucial issue in 1894.<sup>38</sup> Instead the campaign was dominated by public revulsion to the turbulence which branded 1894 as a memorable year.

Although the Pullman boycott was the most famous of the year's disorders, it did not occupy the field alone. In April a strike was called against the Great Northern Railroad. The issue was a double one: the demand of Great Northern employees that a wage cut of the previous year be repealed, and recognition by management of the right of the American Railway Union, which had been founded by Eugene V. Debs in 1893, to participate in the negotiations. The strike was successful, since the workers were granted a substantial wage increase, and

Debs did participate in the arbitration proceedings which resolved the issues between labor and management.<sup>39</sup>

While news of the Great Northern strike was unfolding, "General" Jacob S. Coxey, a Populist and Greenback reformer of Massillon, Ohio, was leading his "army" of unemployed to Washington, D.C., in order to demand that Congress enact a gigantic public works program to be financed by a huge legal-tender issue. Although the "army's" march to the Capital was made ridiculous when Washington police arrested the leaders for disobeying an ordinance to keep off the grass, the accessions of strength to Coxey's ranks as he moved across the country aroused deep public apprehension.<sup>40</sup>

The Pullman boycott originated in a dispute between employees and management of the Pullman Corporation of Chicago, a company which manufactured sleeping cars. The scope of the dispute broadened on June 26, when a convention of the American Railway Union voted, against the personal counsel of Debs, to support the employees by boycotting the Pullman Corporation. Shortly thereafter, the General Managers' Association, an organization of railroad employers, resolved to oppose the boycott. The result was a railroad strike which virtually paralyzed traffic between Chicago and the West and seriously crippled transportation from Cincinnati to San Francisco.

Accompanying the spread of the strike, was a succession of events which made the Pullman affair an extremely important milestone in American labor history. On July 2 a federal court injunction issued in Chicago

<sup>37</sup> *Freeborn County Standard*, July 18, 1894; *St. Paul Globe*, July 12, 1894.

<sup>38</sup> See editorials in the *Globe* and the *Journal*, July 12, 1894. Robert C. Dunn, Republican candidate for state auditor, was quoted by the *Freeborn County Standard* of July 25 as saying: "Owen is neither a demagogue or a crank and nothing is to be gained by underestimating his vote-getting qualities."

<sup>39</sup> Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs*, 103-107 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1949); Harry Barnard, *Eagle Forgotten: The Life of John Peter Altgeld*, 282 (New York, 1938).

<sup>40</sup> Barnard, *Life of Altgeld*, 275.

ordered the men on strike not to take any action which would prolong the stoppage. On the grounds that the movement of mail trains was being impeded, and without benefit of a request for intervention from Governor John P. Altgeld of Illinois, President Grover Cleveland ordered federal troops into the Chicago area on July 3. Two days later Altgeld dispatched a protest to Cleveland challenging the constitutionality of the presidential order. On July 10 Debs and his chief lieutenants were arrested on the charge of conspiracy to obstruct the mails. In the meantime, serious disorders had broken out, and public excitement had mounted to a high pitch.<sup>41</sup>

The Minnesota Populist convention, which began its deliberations on July 10, met in the shadow of these events. Understandably, the proceedings could not be immunized from the excitement which conditions in Chicago were arousing throughout the land. Nor is it surprising that the Populists were disposed to sympathize with Debs and Governor Altgeld. After brief debate, several resolutions relating to the boycott were passed. One declared that support of the American Railway Union was compatible with devotion to law and order. Another condemned resort to violence as a means of securing justice, but exonerated organized labor of responsibility "for the acts of the mob element with which a hireling press has falsely sought to connect it." The arrest of Debs was called "an unwise and unjust step, and a dangerous encroachment of the federal judiciary upon the rights and liberties of the people."<sup>42</sup>

In espousing the cause of the American Railway Union, the convention was not, it may be assumed, influenced solely by a desire to be on the side of the angels for the sake of righteousness alone. The labor vote which despite union representation at pre-



OWEN was compared by a cartoonist of 1894 to Mrs. Partington, an imaginary figure who tried vainly to mop back the ocean

vious Populist conventions had failed to manifest much enthusiasm for the People's party, was one consideration. Then, too, it may have been calculated that Debs' cause was arousing public sympathy instead of terrified hostility. Because the convention was so close to the Pullman affair in point of time, the delegates probably were influenced more by the pattern of public reaction to the Great Northern strike than by the terror currently developing. In short, it may have been considered politically wise to be identified with the American Railway Union.

There had been evidences of public support of the strikers during the Great Northern affair. A strike benefit ball at Breckenridge raised three hundred dollars for the union — a fairly substantial sum for a small community to contribute in 1894.<sup>43</sup> The *Martin County Sentinel* of Fairmont, then edited by state Senator Frank Day, asserted in its issue for April 27, 1894, that public sympathy was "with the strikers, and justly so." Railroad wages, said the

<sup>41</sup> Barnard, *Life of Altgeld*, 280-317; Ginger, *Biography of Debs*, 121-151; *Dictionary of American History*, 4:381 (New York, 1940).

<sup>42</sup> *Globe*, July 12, 1894.

<sup>43</sup> *Globe*, April 25, 1894.

*Sentinel*, were at the level of bare subsistence, and "so long as they [*the workers*] tamely submit . . . so long will the heartless corporations continue to grind them down."

Reaction to the boycott against George Pullman and his company was totally different. This was not because the sleeping car magnate had a more secure place in public affection than James J. Hill and the Great Northern; quite the opposite was true. But the magnitude of the Pullman affair, as depicted by a hysterical daily press, seemed so impressive that fear of economic paralysis—and perhaps of social revolution—overshadowed all other considerations. Again the testimony of Day's paper is revealing. In July it observed that "The popular verdict among disinterested people is that the strikers are wrong in paralyzing the business of the whole country when they have no grievance of their own." A mass meeting at Madelia "heartily" approved of President Cleveland's dispatch of troops to Chicago and called upon Governor Nelson to use "all lawful means . . . to prevent the enactment of such scenes as now disgrace Illinois."<sup>44</sup>

The development of this reaction against the American Railway Union did not move Owen to modify or soften the position taken by his party at its convention. The April strike had found him in complete sympathy with the strikers. He acknowledged that the Pullman boycott involved additional issues, but they merely strengthened his previous stand. *Farm, Stock and Home* called Debs a "big-hearted, level-headed, manly man" and pointed out that he had opposed a boycott against Pullman up to the time his union ordered it. As if this was not enough, Owen invited the contempt which association with Coxey was bound to bring. The latter's detention by federal authorities, charged *Farm, Stock and Home*, was the "foulest perversion of justice this country ever saw."<sup>45</sup>

The Republicans quickly took advantage of Populism's self-identification with Debs'

cause. The *Minneapolis Journal* sounded an unofficial keynote on July 20, when it proclaimed that "Populism is disloyal to the government of the United States." The Populist legacy, editorialized the *Minneapolis Tribune* on October 25, was "ruined credit, paralyzed commerce, internal war and hopeless poverty." In its issue for August 31, the *Martin County Sentinel* remarked that "Populism and anarchy are getting to be very nearly synonymous terms."

Owen's reputation for moderation did not shield him from attacks which in vehemence equaled those directed at his party. The *Journal*, which hitherto had treated him kindly, charged on September 15 that he was "practically as far advanced toward anarchy as Altgeld." The *Tribune* of September 21 contrasted his "dignified canvass" of 1890 with the "inexcusable falsehoods" he was now allegedly uttering. Many believed that "Owen was better than his party," according to the *St. Paul Globe* of August 1, but his assertions "were as wild and unsafe as the long-haired [William A.] Peffer's," Populist senator from Kansas. Perhaps not too much importance should be attached to the campaign polemics of a decade not noted for refined political expression, but in 1894 comparison with Altgeld and association with "anarchism" carried an opprobrium not easily comprehended two generations later. The contrast between Owen's two campaigns is also instructive. In 1890 there was little disposition to charge the Alliance party with disloyalty; in 1894 every effort was made to associate Populism with anarchy and subversion.

FURIOUS as this onslaught was, it did not paralyze Owen's personal campaign. In fact, so active was his speaking schedule that some of his friends feared his health was permanently impaired. Much of what he

<sup>44</sup> *Martin County Sentinel* (Fairmont), July 6, 20, 1894.

<sup>45</sup> *Farm, Stock and Home*, 10:188, 268, 284 (May 1, July 15, August 1, 1894).

said is, of course, not on record, but it can be assumed that the most important address of his campaign, delivered at Mankato in early August, sounded the basic theme of his other speeches. It was made in reply to one delivered a week earlier at the Marshall County Fair in Argyle in the heart of the Populist country by Governor Nelson, who insisted that the farm problem would take care of itself if agriculture intelligently adjusted its role to the needs of an industrialized economy. Although the farmer had to take the initiative in making this adjustment, said Nelson, government had two important roles to play. It should encourage better farming through experiment stations, agricultural colleges, and the like, and it should preserve equal access to marketing and transportation facilities. Nelson also emphasized the necessity of avoiding policies like the free coinage of silver, which, he charged, impeded capital formation by threatening to rob one section of the population for the sake of another.<sup>46</sup>

*"DOES Minnesota Want to Try This Experiment?" asked a cartoon of 1894*

of all . . . the demonetization of silver." These factors had changed the measure of value to such an extent that it took twice as many farm products to "buy a dollar" as had been needed twenty years before. Immediate amelioration could come by revising the measure of value through an increase in the volume of money, and the most practical way to do that was to re-monetize silver.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>46</sup>The full text of Nelson's speech appears in the *Journal* for July 30, 1894.



In the mid-nineties most Midwest Populist leaders became increasingly preoccupied with the currency issue. They have been taken to task for this; it has been asserted that they gullibly, or cynically, "sold out" a genuine reform movement to the silver mine owners. However, the truth is not so simple. Not to be ignored were the powerful pressures generated by the silver cause. The free coinage proposition, which silver advocates were able to explain so simply and unambiguously, appealed powerfully to those upon whom Populism had to depend for support. In 1894 it was not yet clear what the ultimate attitude of the old parties would be on the issue; in Minnesota, for example, both the old party platforms, though equivocal, gave comfort to free silver supporters. And if both the old parties should give free silver short shrift, there was the possibility that a Silver party would be created. In either event, Populist leaders feared, the People's party following would not stay within the fold unless they, the leaders, remained more staunchly pro-free silver than anyone else.

One fact stands out about Owen's showing in the election of 1894: in both absolute and relative terms, he did better than any third-party gubernatorial candidate had done up to that time or was to do until 1918. His total vote of 87,890—approximately a third of the ballots cast—exceeded Donnelly's 1892 vote by nearly fifty thousand and surpassed his own 1890 total by nearly thirty thousand. George L. Becker, the Democratic candidate, polled 53,584 votes—about forty thousand fewer than Daniel Lawler, Becker's 1892 predecessor. Thus Owen was in second place, but he was far short of Knute Nelson's 147,943 votes.<sup>49</sup>

The gap between Owen's vote and that of his People's party running mates was wide, averaging about twenty-five thousand votes in his favor. This reflected both Owen's personal strength and Becker's weakness; the latter ran behind his ticket by ten to fifteen thousand votes. What would have resulted had the Democrats endorsed Owen

has been the subject of much interesting conjecture. Some observers have asserted that Owen would have won the election, but the facts hardly support this conclusion, since the combined Becker-Owen total fell a few thousand short of Nelson's vote. Adding the Prohibition vote to that of Becker and Owen produces a total exceeding Nelson's by a thin margin, but it is extremely doubtful that such a combination could have held together in support of a single candidate.

It is, of course, clear that Owen was supported by many Democrats. Before the campaign got underway, some influential members of that party wanted to tender him the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. His position on many issues was scarcely distinguishable from that of most western Democrats. Moreover, in 1894 Democratic prospects were extremely bleak. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in Minnesota, where an initial minority position, the "Cleveland depression," and internal disunity combined to make the Democratic situation especially dismal. Some party spokesmen were quoted as suggesting that no state ticket be placed in the race. Owen, however, was not only unacceptable to the conservative leaders who dominated the Minnesota Democratic party, but probably considerably more unacceptable than Nelson. This being so, Becker was nominated, not as a candidate who had any prospect of winning, but as insurance against an Owen victory.<sup>50</sup>

THE ROLE of *de facto* leader of the opposition held by Owen during Nelson's term

<sup>49</sup> *Legislative Manual*, 1895, p. 462, 463.

<sup>50</sup> On Democratic politics, particularly the "fusion" question, see the *Journal*, August 1, 2, 6, September 5, 6; the *Globe*, April 9, August 3, 4, 5, 9, 10; and editorials in both papers for September 4 and the *Tribune* of October 26, 1894. The plight of the Democrats is well reflected in P. J. Smalley's manuscript "Memoirs," 247, which the author consulted through the kindness of Miss Flora Smalley of St. Paul, who owns the original. Smalley was a Democratic leader who served as clerk of the House in 1891.

as governor was assumed by John Lind after William Jennings Bryan's victory in the 1896 Democratic national convention cleared the way for "top-to-bottom" fusion of Populists, Democrats, and Silver Republicans. Backed by this combination, Lind nearly won the governorship in 1896, was successful in his bid for the office in 1898, and was defeated for re-election in 1900 by an extremely narrow margin.<sup>51</sup>

Owen's career as a politician did not end immediately, however. In 1896 he was the most influential member of Minnesota's delegation to the national People's party convention at St. Louis, where he staunchly supported fusion with the Democrats. In the same year he ran for Congress from the fifth district on the Democratic-Populist ticket. Had it not been for the bitter opposition of Donnelly, who felt that he had been mistreated by his Minnesota colleagues at St. Louis, Owen might have been elected. As it was, he polled 21,521 votes to Republican Loren Fletcher's 24,508. In this race, Owen ran ahead of Bryan but behind Lind, who carried Hennepin County by about three thousand votes. Donnelly, incidentally, supported both Bryan and Lind.<sup>52</sup>

The principal issue before the Populist state convention of 1898 was whether to renew the 1896 fusion arrangement and support another Lind candidacy. In leading the fight for fusion, Owen clashed with Donnelly for the last time. The latter refused to accept the convention's verdict in favor of renewal. Backed by a small band



WHEN Owen was defeated, he was lampooned as "A Disappointed Frog Catcher"

of devoted followers, he became the chief sponsor of a so-called "Midroad" Populist ticket. The miserable showing of this slate, which managed to poll a scant eighteen hundred votes for its gubernatorial candidate, proved beyond all doubt that Populism as an independent movement was dead.<sup>53</sup>

The last decade of Owen's life was in a sense anticlimactic. Although his paper continued its customary preoccupation with public policy issues, he virtually retired from partisan politics. The old causes, now eminently respectable, found new sponsors, and it is probably true that increases in daily press circulation limited the influence of periodicals like *Farm, Stock and Home*. But there still remained sufficient activity for an aging man to achieve self-fulfillment. From the day of his arrival in Minnesota, Owen was intensely interested in its state university, particularly in the school and the college of agriculture.<sup>54</sup> As a university regent from 1893 to 1901 and again from 1907 to 1910, he was able to promote this interest. He also served as president of the Minnesota state forestry board from 1901 to his death.

<sup>51</sup> Stephenson, *John Lind*, 105-129, 140-158, 177-190.

<sup>52</sup> *Legislative Manual*, 1897, p. 491; *Journal*, June 30, July 1, 20, 22, 25, 28, August 1, 3, 12, 14, 21, 26, 27, 28, 1896; *Representative*, July 15, 29, August 12, 1896. The latter paper was published in Minneapolis after April, 1894.

<sup>53</sup> *Legislative Manual*, 1899, p. 500; Stephenson, *John Lind*, 141; *Representative*, June 15, 1898; *Tribune*, June 16, 1898; *Pioneer Press*, June 16, 1898.

<sup>54</sup> When he died, Owen was widely credited with having frustrated an Alliance attempt to separate the school and the college of agriculture from the university. See especially the comments of T. L. Haecker, in the *Tribune*, February 3, 1910.

While Owen is an obscure figure today, his work had considerable long-range significance. It should be emphasized that during the years of his editorship, *Farm, Stock and Home* was an exceedingly influential journal. In the 1890s, as the *Willmar Tribune* of February 9, 1910, put it, "a weekly home paper, a bi-monthly farm journal and possibly a religious paper with an occasional magazine was about all the current literature available . . . in the more progressive homes." An editor like Owen had a "monopoly" of the minds of his readers. Unlike him, editors of farm papers of the 1950s are obliged to compete with many other media in their efforts to reach the rural reader.

*Farm, Stock and Home* was successful chiefly because it presented a message which evoked a response from its readers. In the 1880s and 1890s, financial depression was breeding a sense of frustration that was intensified by the gap between existing reality and the lofty expectations which had accompanied the settlement of the Midwest. Under such circumstances it was easy to persuade many people that equality of opportunity was being destroyed and that big business was essentially villainous. Owen sincerely believed in the soundness of a small entrepreneur economy, in the "agrarian myth," and in the values with which it was identified. He also was sufficiently skilled in the arts of communication to convince others that his point of view was correct. At the same time, he was unencumbered by those apocalyptic tendencies which so often destroyed or reduced the effectiveness of many reform leaders.

Judgment on how constructively he used his influence depends, of course, on the vantage point from which he is viewed. Today it is easy to charge him with over simplification and to point up serious contradictions between the programs he advocated and the philosophy he professed. Despite an innate kindness and a love of humanity, he was inclined to embrace a devil theory of history. The basic problems of his

time, as he saw them, were not rooted in an industrial revolution with new forces that had to be permanently directed by organized society, but in the wicked machinations of "privilege hunters" who had subverted a natural order with its own automatic controls. His sincere commitment to the "equal rights to all, special privileges to none" principle suggests an antistate bias, a distrust of big government more characteristic of today's so-called "conservatives" than of those in Owen's tradition.

Yet, his vigorous opposition to the subtreasury plan and the governor's grain bill notwithstanding, he supported the broad extension of government control. Perhaps many of the measures he advocated were considered temporary expedients designed to restore a competitive system to orderly operation. But it is difficult to see in this light such programs as government-operated transportation and communication systems, government savings banks, or state-owned terminal elevators. It can be said of him, as of most Midwest radicals of his generation, that he failed to come to terms with the necessity of "adapting Hamiltonian means to Jeffersonian ends."

That such incongruities are clearer in retrospect than they were in the 1890s goes without saying. Moreover, they should not obscure Owen's contribution as a critic of American development in the post-1865 generation. In that period, economic imbalances were threatening equality of opportunity, and a feverish preoccupation with material development was endangering other values, including the dignity of the individual. By awakening public consciousness to these truths, Owen performed a service of inestimable and permanent worth.

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ILLUSTRATIONS for this article were drawn from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society and from the following newspapers: page 116, *Great West*, August 19, 1892; pages 120, 121, 123, and 125, *Minneapolis Journal*, July 23, October 19, 26, and November 8, 1894. The cartoons reproduced herewith are the work of Charles L. Bartholomew, better known as "Bart," who was a nationally known local cartoonist of the period.



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