

# RURAL-URBAN CONFLICT *and* FARMER-LABOR POLITICS

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## BLUE EARTH COUNTY, 1885-1886

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*Jeffrey Kolnick*

**O**n August 14, 1886, Ignatius Donnelly wrote to leaders of the local chapters of the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance and Knights of Labor, inviting them to a conference in St. Paul to effect a union of the state's farming and laboring interests. In southern Minnesota's Blue Earth County, William Webb, the first president of the countywide Farmers' Alliance, informed Donnelly that local farmers had beaten him to the idea and called their own farmer-labor convention some two weeks earlier to meet on the same day—September 1—at Good Thunder. Expressing his full sympathy with Donnelly's objectives, Webb suggested that his group was endeavoring “to give in this county practical effect to the action of the State Alliance looking to united political action on the part of the Farmers and laboring men.” He assured Donnelly, “The workmen of Mankato are in full sympathy with the movement and everything now indicates one of the largest political gatherings ever held in this county.” In September 1886 at the village of Good Thunder, Blue Earth County's Farmer-Labor party was born.<sup>1</sup>

Minnesota's tradition of farmer-labor politics has made a significant contribution to American radicalism. Most historians have seen the state's farmer-laborism as primarily a twentieth-century phenomenon, and indeed that era witnessed remarkable success. But the actions of Blue Earth County farmers and workers at the end of the nineteenth century represent an important, early first step in the development of this venerable tradition. While nineteenth-century farmer-laborism differs considerably from the twentieth-century variety, the two share many of the same problems associated with organizing farmers and workers into the same political party. A better understanding of Minnesota's earlier attempts at unity sheds important light on later developments within the state and opens new areas for scholarship on American radical politics in general.

The late nineteenth century marked an excellent opportunity for farmers and workers to join together. After the Civil War, the rapidly changing U.S. economy

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<sup>1</sup> William Webb to Ignatius Donnelly, Aug. 23, 1886, and Daniel Buck to Donnelly, Aug. 17, 1886—both in Ignatius Donnelly Papers, microfilm edition, roll 77, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; *Mankato Free Press*, Aug. 6, 1886.

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*Threshing crew pausing for photographer, Blue Earth County, about 1890*

<sup>2</sup> On late-nineteenth-century worker and farmer ideology, here and two paragraphs below, see Bruce Palmer, *"Man Over Money": The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); Michael F. Magliari, "California Populism, A Case Study: The Farmers' Alliance and People's Party in San Luis Obispo County, 1885-1903" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Davis, 1992); Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise, The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Thomas A. Woods, *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Origins of the Grange in Republican Ideology* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991).

created opportunities for some but hardship for many. The rise of a world market in agricultural commodities led to an overall decline in the prices of staple crops. This development coincided with the creation of uncompetitive systems for marketing these commodities. The farmers of the West and South reacted to these changes by forming such organizations as the Patrons of Husbandry (Grange) and the Farmers Alliance to help them survive on the land. Animated by powerful producer and antimonopoly traditions, farmers turned to politics and cooperatives to solve their economic problems. By 1890 the countryside was ablaze with radical farmers.<sup>2</sup>

While farmers struggled to come to grips with the changing economy, workers organized in the cities and towns across America. As manufacturing jobs became concentrated in fewer and fewer large firms, the old tra-



ditions of artisan production were fast becoming antiquated. The general deflation of the post-Civil War period drove real wages down, and in periods of depression, survival itself became an issue for many working-class families. Workers responded to those conditions by striking, creating and joining national unions, and turning out to vote. At least until 1890 the most powerful force for reform among workers was the Knights of Labor, a national union founded in 1869 to eliminate the wage system through the use of cooperatives, education, and the ballot. Among farmers, the Alliance stood poised to reform society. In Minnesota both of these organizations began to flex their political muscles in earnest in 1886. Within this context farmer-labor politics became a possibility.

The spread of industrial and finance capitalism clashed with the Knights' and Alliancemen's understanding of what America should be. These groups held that industrialization threatened to transfer real power in society from small, economically independent producers into the hands of greedy plutocrats. Far removed from the production of any useful good, these business leaders seemed to exercise extraordinary power in ruthless ways. Most people who joined the Knights and the Alliance believed that society was best served when all heads of households worked for themselves, doing an honest day's labor. While few Americans of this era had

any quarrel with competitive capitalism, almost all agreed that monopolies were an evil to be combated. The goal of the Knights of Labor and the Farmers' Alliance was to reclaim America from the monopolists and return it to the actual producers of wealth. In Blue Earth County, these two organizations joined together to accomplish that end.

Studying the ideas and actions of farmers and workers at the grass roots sheds light on the nature of farmer-laborism. When Blue Earth County citizens organized their own Farmer-Labor party in 1886, purely local concerns simultaneously attracted and repelled the rural and urban elements of that coalition. In the end, their shared experiences in trying to understand the rise of monopoly capitalism and changes in market relations led to a common vision. Combined with the influence of powerful national, state, and local movements, this vision helped farmers and workers overcome deeply entrenched prejudices and local divisions, if only for a brief period of time.

Blue Earth County seemed an unlikely place to spawn such a coalition. In 1885, one year before the organization of the local Farmer-Labor party, the county was torn by a fierce rural-urban conflict over a local tax measure. That episode began on March 24, 1884, on the banks of the Minnesota River in the county's principal city, Mankato. Stephen Lamm, a prominent local businessman just returned from a trip through southeast Minnesota, addressed the Mankato Board of Trade on the need for a new courthouse. Lamm argued that the current facility appeared shabby and gave strangers the impression that Blue Earth County was either behind the times or lacking in enterprise. His pitch to the board met an enthusiastic response, and his motion that the group bring this pressing matter to the county commissioners was unanimously approved. The commissioners, likewise, gave complete support to the proposal. A new courthouse in Mankato seemed inevitable for the progressive citizens of Blue Earth County. At the behest of the Board of Trade, the state legislature passed an act on February 10, 1885, allowing the county commissioners to issue \$75,000 worth of bonds to build the courthouse, subject to ratification by the voters of the county. The election was set for May 5.<sup>3</sup>

The citizens of Mankato rejoiced at this news. A city of some 7,800 people in 1885, Mankato ranked sixth among the urban centers of Minnesota. It was known around the country for its superb limestone and cement, and the county commissioners assured citizens that local labor would build the courthouse using local materials.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hughes, *History of Blue Earth County* (1909; reprint, Chicago: Middle West Publishing Co., 1977), 199.







*Mankato, about 1880, from a stereograph by local photographer E. F. Everitt*

The Standard Cement Company of Mankato illustrated the public spirit of area businesses by offering to supply all the cement needed for construction at "actual cost."<sup>4</sup>

The city's people were clearly bullish on the bond measure. To the workers it meant jobs; to the business community it meant contracts. To all it would provide a grand edifice symbolizing the progressive and enterprising character of Mankato. So convinced were the city's voters about the benefits of the new building that in May they approved the bond measure by a vote of 1,461 to 2, with all but 100 eligible voters going to the polls.<sup>5</sup>

Voters in the rural districts of Blue Earth County opposed the bonds with almost equal fervor. By the

middle of April, country people were making their views public. One resident of Shelby Township, writing under the pseudonym "farmer," responded to a *Mankato Free Press* article that claimed the current facilities were "unsightly" and "disgraceful in appearance" by arguing: "Though the present structures, with their modest proportions may distress the city gazer, the farmer who visits them occasionally, to pay his tax, is not humiliated to any extent by their appearance. The farmers of the county are certainly not rich," he continued. "They live for the most part in 'unsightly' dwellings, and the only buildings that shelter their animals are very 'unsightly' straw stables. He saw the May 5 vote as the farmers' opportunity "to show their appreciation of Mankato's past liberality in county matters. We trust they will do so by voting solid against the bonds." Members of the Pleasant Mound Grange echoed these antiurban sentiments. They also felt that the election date "justly lays the commissioners open to the charge of conniving to defeat the will of the people," since farmers were unusually busy at that time. The Grangers urged all who opposed this "extravagance and ring rule" to go to the polls and defeat the measure. And they did.<sup>6</sup>

On May 5 they voted 1,905 to 338 against the bonds, thus defeating the measure countywide by 108 votes.

<sup>4</sup> *The Review* (Mankato), July 7, 1885; *Mankato Free Press*, May 1, 1885.

<sup>5</sup> *The Review*, May 11, 1885; *Mankato Free Press*, May 8, 1885.

<sup>6</sup> *Mankato Free Press*, Apr. 17, 1885; *The Review*, May 5, 1885. For farmers' opposition to taxes and its influence on populism, see John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 86; Stanley B. Parsons, *The Populist Context: Rural Versus Urban Power on a Great Plains Frontier* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973).



Blue Earth County's contested courthouse;  
1905 photograph by Albert Munson

The principal support for the courthouse in the rural areas came from a few townships adjacent to Mankato. The people of Shelby Township showed their disapproval by polling 20 more residents in this special election than they did in the 1884 presidential race, casting 151 votes against the bonds and only 7 in favor.<sup>7</sup>

By the middle of 1885, Blue Earth County was divided along rural-urban lines. A. M. Kilgore of Mankato explained to the farmers that "the payment of two-thirds of a cent per acre in taxes would have given employment to more than 100 men in furnishing materials and in work on the building. Similarly disappointed, the editor of the *Mankato Free Press* claimed, "The farmers of the county generally have got a wrong idea of the kind of men Mankato is made of. For years they have been paying out money that goes strictly for the benefit of the county, without protest, and we may say without thanks." The people of Mankato—workers and businessmen—felt betrayed by the rural districts.

Soon after the defeat of the bonds, the Board of Trade and the county commissioners reorganized their efforts. Arguing that they were bound by law to provide the county with "suitable" buildings, the commissioners in July 1885 levied a property tax on all county residents to raise \$18,000 for the new courthouse. In early January 1886, architects were invited to submit plans and specifications. The commissioners appointed a building committee, and its chairman was authorized to advertise for bids to grade the courthouse lot. As local historian Thomas Hughes later wrote: "While no formal resolution to that effect was passed, the commissioners had unanimously come to the conclusion, to begin the erection of a new Court House."<sup>8</sup> If the people would

not democratically accept bonded indebtedness, they would have no choice but to pay for the building in property taxes year after year.

At the annual township meetings in March 1886, rural voters voiced their disapproval. Shelby Township resolved:

The alacrity with which the said commissioners have proceeded to ignore the verdict and sacrifice the interests of their own constituents, the rural voters, at the instigation of the defeated city minority, and the slippancy with which they . . . discussed the matter, ought to distinguish men in responsible positions [as] being too weak to resist city dictation or too stupid to comprehend the magnitude of their offense against the whole rural population.<sup>9</sup>

The people of Vernon Center Township resolved that the commissioners' use of taxation should be characterized as a usurpation of rights "without precedent, as entirely without authority of law or sanction of the courts, and as tyrannical and despotic in its nature and inconsistent with principles of all constitutional government and destructive of the rights of free people." At least five other townships voiced similar concerns.

Despite these protests, the courthouse was built. Rather than submit to a direct tax year after year, Blue Earth County citizens approved \$30,000 worth of bonds in March 1887—by a slim majority of 73. Voter turnout was light in Mankato, only 803, "the general feeling being that if the country people did not want the building finished at once, Mankato people would not insist." The citizens of Blue Earth County ended up paying slightly more than \$123,000 for the edifice, which was finished by October 1, 1889, but not dedicated until 1989, the centennial year, when tempers had sufficiently cooled off. To this day, the county's literature reminds citizens that the courthouse belongs to everyone, not just the people of Mankato.<sup>10</sup>

While rural-urban conflict raged in Blue Earth County, the United States was engaged in a bitter dispute over the role labor would play in the new industrial order. The Great Upheaval of 1885–1886, a period of major labor unrest, provided the political milieu within which farmers and workers could form a political party, despite local tensions.

<sup>7</sup> Here and below, see *The Review*, May 11, 1885; *Mankato Free Press*, May 8, 1885. For a similar rural-urban conflict, see James B. Potts, "Farmers and Townsman: The Popocrats of Otoe County, Nebraska, 1890–1896," unpublished paper, copy in author's possession.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, *Blue Earth County*, 200–201.

<sup>9</sup> Here and below, see *The Review*, Mar. 16, 1886.

<sup>10</sup> *Mankato Free Press*, Mar. 11, 1887; Elizabeth Barta, ed., *Blue Earth County* (n.p., 1984), 4.



The Knights of Labor created real excitement in 1885 when they twice brought financier and railroad baron Jay Gould to the bargaining table. Historian Selig Perlman relates the significance of this act: "Here a labor organization for the first time dealt on an equal footing with probably the most powerful capitalist in the country. The oppressed laboring masses finally discovered a powerful champion. All the pent-up feeling of bitterness and resentment . . . now found vent in a rush to organize under the banner of the powerful Knights of Labor."<sup>11</sup>

And organize they did. Membership in the Knights skyrocketed from 110,000 in July 1885 to more than 700,000 a year later. The level of labor agitation in these two years was unprecedented in the history of the industrial world; more than 2,000 strikes occurred involving more than 500,000 workers. The perceived power of the Knights of Labor indicated to many that the time was ripe for the producing classes to seize

power. The climax of the Great Upheaval came in May 1886 with the eight-hour strikes, the Haymarket Affair, and later, with a series of losing strikes all over the nation. During this period Blue Earth County experienced three strikes of skilled and unskilled workers. Strikes were so pervasive that John C. Wise, editor of Mankato's newspaper, *The Review*, quipped while reporting on one at a quarry in nearby Kasota that they seemed "contagious."<sup>12</sup>

It was in this atmosphere of widespread excitement that an enthusiastic crowd of workingmen packed the Mankato city hall on Saturday, March 27, 1886, to hear Knights of Labor organizer C. A. Lincoln. At this meeting, and again on Monday, Lincoln told his listeners that they must organize to defend their rights, through politics and in the workplace. He proceeded to charter Local Assembly 7925 of Mankato, with a membership of about 150, and place in nomination a workingmen's municipal ticket for the city elections in April. Although the new Workingmen's party won no seats, it polled a remarkably large vote, considering it had but one week to organize and campaign.<sup>13</sup>

Why did the workers of Mankato hurry to organize their own party when a year earlier the courthouse vote showed business and labor in harmony? While Mankato's rapid commercial development during the 1880s generally benefited residents, it also created tensions among them. The city consisted of approximately one-third white-collar and two-thirds blue-collar workers (see page 38). Most of those who wore white collars engaged in sales, although professionals also made up a sizable portion of their ranks. Among blue-collar workers, the skilled slightly outnumbered the unskilled, and the building trades represented the largest percentage. Nativity seems to have played an insignificant role in determining blue-collar occupations but significantly affected access to white-collar jobs: A higher percentage of native-born people went to work in white shirts.<sup>14</sup>

Mankato's neighborhoods reflected these class and status differences. The first ward represented the most distinctive enclave, largely composed of foreign-born workers who voted Democratic. The second and third wards, located in the center of town, tended to have fewer immigrant residents, almost always backed the Republican party, and by 1885 represented a haven for white-collar types. The fourth ward became more working class during the first five years of the 1880s and was nearly split between foreign-born and native-born residents. Neither party could count on the fourth ward at election time. In all, late nineteenth-century Mankato did not resemble the one-industry towns or industrial cities studied so thoroughly by labor historians. A competitive political system emerged in Mankato, due in large part to this mix of foreign- and native-born voters. Neither workers nor businessmen could expect to dominate at either the ballot box or the workplace.

<sup>11</sup> Selig Perlman, *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 87-88. On the Great Upheaval, see Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1977), 25-50; Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895: A Study in Democracy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964); Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), 2:50-55, 83-88, 98-114; Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*. See also Ruth A. Allen, *The Great Southwest Strike*, University of Texas Publications, no. 4214 (Austin, 1942).

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers. Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), 156; David Montgomery, *Workers Control in America. Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 20; *The Review*, Mar. 30, 1886.

<sup>13</sup> *Mankato Free Press*, Apr. 2, 1886; *The Review*, Mar. 30, 1886; *Record of Proceedings of the Twentieth Regular Meeting of D.A. [District Assembly] 79, Knights of Labor* (Minneapolis: Thomas A. Clark & Co., 1887), 15, in John P. McGaughey Papers, MHS.

<sup>14</sup> Here and below, social structure compiled from U. S. Manuscript Census, 1880, Population, Blue Earth County, microfilm edition, roll 615, and Minnesota, Manuscript Census, 1885, Population, Blue Earth County, roll 21—both MHS. On ethnicity in nineteenth-century voting, see Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York: Free Press, 1970). Still, most historians have found that support for the producer movement cut across ethnic lines; see Magliari, "California Populism," 16-18. On town development and class relations somewhat like Mankato's, see Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Michael H. Frisch, *Town into City: Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Meaning of Community, 1840-1880* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); Salvatore, *Eugene Debs*.

# A CLOSER LOOK AT MANKATO'S VOTERS

The 1885 Minnesota manuscript census shows 2,170 men at least 21 years old living in Mankato's four wards. City directories listed occupations for 1,287—some 60 percent.

Another 5 percent were listed without occupations; presumably, they were either retired, disabled, or still living at home (only the father's occupation was given in this case).

## VOTING-AGE MEN IN MANKATO, 1885

	Ward 1		Ward 2		Ward 3		Ward 4		Totals	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Census count	645	100	498	100	395	100	635	100	2,170	100
Fully listed in city directory	361	56	268	54	250	63	408	64	1,287	59
No occupation in city directory	32	5	23	4	20	5	26	4	101	5
Not listed in city directory	249	39	207	42	125	32	201	32	782	36

Several factors may explain why about 35 percent of the voting-age men counted in the census were not listed in the city directories. Many of the "missing persons" lived in boardinghouses or hotels and were usually not recorded. (Mankato's first and second wards contained all of the city's hotels, which helps explain the high percentages of men not listed from those neighborhoods.) In addition, young sons of working fathers do not appear with any regu-

larity. Finally, it is likely that about half of the missing people were the celebrated "floating proletariat," laborers who were in town at the time of the census but soon moved on. Although they swelled the ranks of blue-collar workers to approximately two-thirds of Mankato's population, they probably did not participate in local politics. The following chart accounts for the 1,287 Mankato men of voting age for whom occupations are listed in the city directories.

## OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY OF VOTING-AGE MEN IN MANKATO, 1885

	Ward 1		Ward 2		Ward 3		Ward 4		Totals	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Blue collar	273	43	132	26	120	30	226	36	751	35
White collar	73	11	133	26	126	32	168	26	500	23
Farmer	15	2	3	1	3	1	14	2	36	2

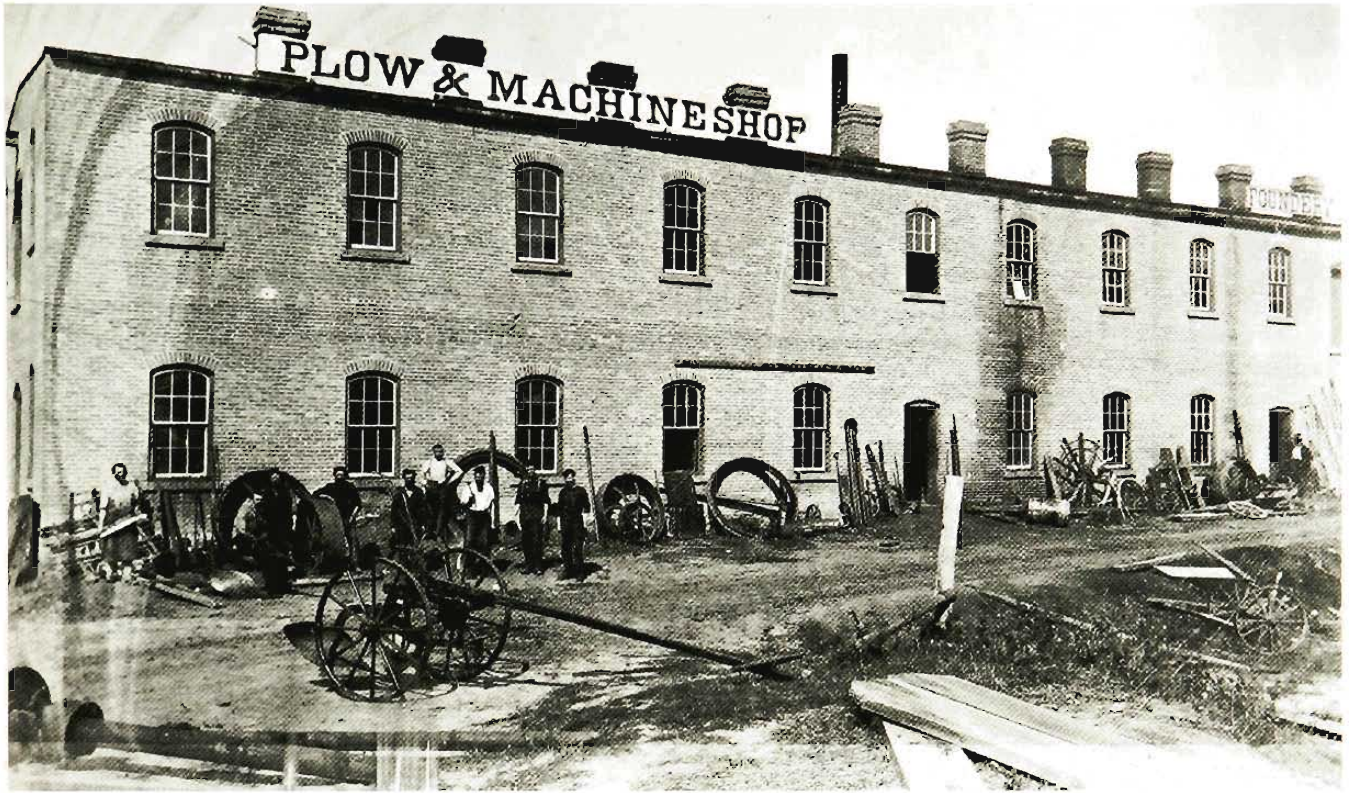
Differences over how Mankato should develop clearly emerged during the years of the Great Upheaval. In the closing days of 1884, the founding of the city's Workingmen's Association foreshadowed the divisions separating workers from their employers. Members called for legislation that would lead to workmen's compensation for injuries caused by "the carelessness of a foreman" and a mechanics lien law for workers employed on public projects. They also began discussing articles from a semimonthly paper, the *Workingmen's Friend*. These actions reveal that workers

had gained a sense of their interests as distinct from those of their employers.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the best way to explain the growing intra-urban tensions is to examine the battle waged between Mankato workers and members of the middle class over the right to run cows through the streets to undeveloped, privately held land on the out-

<sup>15</sup> *Mankato Free Press*, Dec. 12, 1884; *The Review*, Jan. 20, 1885.





*Mankato workers, about 1881, at an urban shop with rural business*

skirts of town. Having cows in the city was not being questioned; at issue was the right to use another person's land as free pasture. With free pasture a cow might profit a working-class owner handsomely; without it, cow ownership became a break-even venture at best, with profit or loss depending on the cost of hay. At stake in this conflict were questions about the meaning of property rights, the nature of class relations during the Gilded Age, and the relationship of urban people to agrarianism.

<sup>16</sup> Here and below, for the best discussion of the stock-law controversy, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Robert C. McMath, Jr., "Sandy Lands and Hogs in the Timber: (Agri)cultural Origins of the Farmers' Alliance in Texas," in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, ed., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 205–29. See also, McMath, *American Populism*, 54–56; Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmers' Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860–1897* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1945), 218 (quote); Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 73–83.

The tradition of "common lands" in the United States extends back to the colonial era. Unimproved farm land was left unfenced, a source of free firewood and pasturage. Rich and poor, tenant and farm owner, and in some cases even slaves had access to these lands. The high cost of fencing virtually prohibited the enclosure of all the acreage held by a farmer, and the face-to-face relationships of rural communities made easy access to unused lands seem natural.<sup>16</sup>

Fencing common lands created social conflict throughout the countryside during the 1870s and 1880s, in part fueling the agrarian revolt of the Farmers' Alliance and populism. The advent of inexpensive barbed wire made it feasible to enclose lands. Some people jumped at the opportunity, others resisted the change, and fierce political battles raged in the countryside over stock laws. Supporters on the northern plains posted signs on their fences to discourage grazing on their newly enclosed lands. One example read: "The Son of a Bitch who opens this fence had better look out for his scalp."

Grazing livestock on common lands was not an issue strictly for farmers. Throughout the early nineteenth century, animals roamed the streets of American cities. Maintaining cows or pigs provided an important source



of real income for workers. For example, until the 1840s iron workers in western Pennsylvania often expected their employers to provide a barn and pasturage for a cow. As industrial capitalism developed, workers often lost this traditional source of income. This loss led to an increasing dependence on the market for wages and threatened the goal of economic independence. The issue of common rights to pasture linked industrial workers to poor farmers during the Gilded Age.<sup>17</sup>

In Blue Earth County, workers and businessmen in the city and farmers in the countryside struggled over this issue. Beginning in the 1870s the rural townships voted on whether to fence unused lands, and by 1886 the last one had voted to “restrain beasts.” Mankato contended over the cow, with changes of policy, until 1896 when the animals were forever banned from walking the streets. In 1880 the *Mankato Free Press* complained that “the running at large of horses and cattle in this city is an annoyance to the public which is intolerable” and a hazard to property and health. These arguments were repeated again and again by middle-class elements in Mankato who linked the development and

good image of the city to abandoning archaic customs like the running of stock on city streets.<sup>18</sup>

At the bottom of this long-smoldering issue was debate over using vacant lots as pasture. Even if the land were owned by someone, workers, unlike some property owners, felt that it should be free for all to use. To hold such land in the city and deny neighbors access to it was tantamount to monopoly. And in this case, the monopoly would cut deep into the pocketbooks of working-class families and further their dependence on the wage system. As Alderman Nic Peterson stated in an 1891 city council debate, “In many cases the word cow

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<sup>17</sup> William A. Sullivan, *The Industrial Worker in Pennsylvania, 1800–1840* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1972), 59. For battles over working-class husbandry into the 1870s, see Herbert G. Gutman, *Power & Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 201–202.

<sup>18</sup> *Mankato Free Press*, May 20, 1880, June 26, 1885. The health issue concerned horses, not cows. Runaway horses posed a danger to pedestrians.

*Cows watering at Minnehaha Creek and Eighth Avenue South, Minneapolis, about 1900*



means half a living to a man, and if the proposed ordinance passed, those having pasture would monopolize it and charge poor men a high rent for it."<sup>19</sup>

One example of just how deep that cut would be was reported to *The Review* in 1881. W. H. Allen claimed his family realized a profit of \$12.28 from a cow that his wife convinced him to purchase seven months earlier. (This amount remained after deducting the cost of feed and the purchase price of the animal.) For the entire year, the Allens could expect to net \$20.00; the next year, with their cow paid for, their profit might increase to \$60.00. Likewise, in 1886 M. W. Mendenhall claimed that his two cows "yielded him \$105.00 in ten and a half months, besides affording a family of four with cream and milk." In 1885 the Mankato city assessor reported 846 cattle, 195 sheep, and 213 hogs.<sup>20</sup>

As Mankato boomed, these resources became more important. Between 1880 and 1885 the population of Mankato grew by 41 percent, from 5,550 to 7,838 people. This growth resulted in higher wages, more building, and more jobs, but it also brought higher rents and a housing shortage. In January 1883 *The Review* had commented, "There is a growing demand for small tenement houses by the laboring classes who have found work in the city, and the question is, if the supply is limited now, what will it be next Spring and Summer when the extra hundreds of men will be engaged in our stone quarries and other industries." In August 1883 the *Free Press* answered that question: "The buildings in the city are all crowded, many harboring two or more families, who are compelled to live in a crowded condition." George Clark, a local real estate dealer, estimated that a single-family home would rent from \$10.00 to \$15.00 per month. Despite constant urging by the local papers

for some "enterprising capitalist" to build more housing, the *Free Press* reported in July 1885, "In most places, the price of rents has declined, while the reverse is the fact here."<sup>21</sup> To cope with the increased cost of housing, workers clung to their traditional sources of income. The profits from keeping a cow could easily cover four months' rent.

By early July 1885, however, businessmen were so

concerned with the "cow question" that 137 of them petitioned the city council to prevent the animals from roaming the city streets. In response, two counterpetitions were submitted, signed by 263 friends of the cow. Rather than risk compromising their political futures, Mankato's aldermen abstained from settling the issue; instead, they decided to submit it to the voters in the 1886 election. Perhaps the officials remembered the town meeting at which fights

broke out over the question, a melee that resulted in the arrest and fining of some of Mankato's leading citizens.<sup>22</sup>



Widell's stone quarry, Mankato, from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1891

Other business-labor issues were also simmering in Mankato at this same time. In 1885, two quarry strikes rocked the town. Early in May, 40 men at the Empire Quarry of W. B. Craig struck over wages and the time of their payments. Craig resolved the strike by filling the quarry "with new men." Then on June 2, about 150 men at three quarries struck for a 25c-a-day raise. The strike began at Ring and Fowler's quarry and was soon joined by the men at McMullen's. By this time the strikers numbered 110, and they marched to Saulpaugh's quarry, where the owner reportedly took the tools of the workers and "made them promise not to go to work tomorrow." The *Minneapolis Tribune* put this situation in perspective when it reported: "There are over 600 men employed in the quarries . . . [and] it is very easy to see that a universal disaffection among them would lead to trouble of no small proportions." The *St. Paul Globe* ended its story on the first day of the strike by reporting, "The police are called upon to be present at 8 A.M. to-morrow. Trouble is anticipated." In the end, the owners claimed that they could not afford the demanded raise and discharged about 25 of "the turbulent ones"; the remaining strikers returned to work at the old rate.<sup>23</sup>

A year later, on June 24, 1886, a large number of laborers hired to lay tracks for a street railway struck for

<sup>19</sup> *Mankato Free Press*, June 23, 1891.

<sup>20</sup> *The Review*, Aug. 9, 1881; *Mankato Free Press*, Apr. 2, 1886; Blue Earth County Assessor, Assessment Rolls, City of Mankato, 1885, Minnesota State Archives, MHS.

<sup>21</sup> *The Review*, Jan. 16, 1883; *Mankato Free Press*, Aug. 3, 1883, July 3, 17, 1885.

<sup>22</sup> *The Review*, June 23, July 7, 1885.

<sup>23</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 5, June 3, 5, 1885; *St. Paul Daily Globe*, May 5, June 3, 1885; *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 4, 6, 1885; *The Review*, June 9, 1885; *Mankato Free Press*, June 5, 1885.



a 25¢-a-day raise, which would have increased their daily pay to \$1.50, the average for a Mankato laborer. The contractors refused to grant the raise and suggested that those workers who did not want work at \$1.25 per day "could look elsewhere for a job."<sup>24</sup>

The strikes, the courthouse controversy, and the dispute over running cows in Mankato during the Great Upheaval illustrate the complexity of economic growth in small towns during the Gilded Age. Workers were willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with the local business elite to create jobs, like building the courthouse. But they differed with their bosses over how to allocate the profits that development brought and what purposes it should serve. Workers were not prepared to accept middle-class plans for development if it meant complete dependence on wages by ending free pasturage for urban cows.

These tensions came to a head in the municipal election of April 1886. The Workingmen's party shared the ballot with the Democrats and the Republicans and polled a substantial portion of the city's working class, garnering most of its support in the first and fourth wards. Mankato voters also decided the cow question that day. The vote was close; 671 to 611 favored maintaining the current "wide-open policy." The strength of this support followed exactly the strength of the Workingmen's party: The first and fourth wards cast large majorities in favor of the cow, while the second and third wards, where white-collar workers and businessmen set the political tone, overwhelmingly opposed the urban bovine.<sup>25</sup>

**T**he workers of Mankato had asserted themselves politically by forming the Workingmen's party and sustaining the right to run cows through the city. They seemed certain to exercise some strength in the November elections. This development was welcomed by the Blue Earth County Farmers' Alliance, which in August 1886 called for a "mass convention of farmers and laboring men" to meet at Good Thunder on September 1 and nominate a slate of candidates for county office.<sup>26</sup> In so doing, the Farmers' Alliance openly courted the very workers its members had opposed on the courthouse issue a year earlier.

The history of farmer movements in Blue Earth County suggests a tendency toward farmer-labor cooperation. The Farmers' Alliance had come to Blue Earth County in 1881 and grew rapidly. A year later, 11 local chapters met in Mankato to nominate a slate of candidates for office. Also present at the convention were representatives of the Pleasant Mound Grange, four towns, and the city of Mankato, whose delegation was headed by F. B. Bonsall, later a member of the Workingmen's Association executive committee. The convention adopted a platform that called for the restoration of "equal rights to all" by restraining "giant

monopolies and railroad companies [that] have conspired together to defraud the people of their rights and liberties."<sup>27</sup>

Of particular concern to the Alliance in 1882 was the railroad-and-wheat combination. In December 1881 representatives of the railroads, wheat buyers, and millers met in Minneapolis to "devise some means so as to get a uniform grade and a fair price." They established standard tests for grades and agreed upon prices. They also called for a committee with the power to designate the prices paid at every railroad station in the state. In effect, they sought to eliminate competitive bidding on wheat among the largest buyers in Minnesota, "practically plac[ing] the wheat market in the power of two or three men," according to *The Review*. The newspaper's editor concluded, "Such a combination is so repugnant to every instinct, impulse, and principle of a free people, that it will not be quietly submitted to."<sup>28</sup>

The farmers did not submit quietly. In February 1882 a call went out for the nine separate Blue Earth County alliances to form a countywide group. If the wheat men were determined to speak with one voice, then so too were the farmers. In its first set of demands the county Alliance denounced the railroads of Minnesota for their "system of rebates and discriminations . . . whereby independent buyers are driven from the market" and demanded that the legislature pass "a stringent law" compelling railroads to grant equal access to all buyers and sellers. The Alliance also opposed the wheat combination and strongly urged that "action cannot too soon be taken to control by law the inspection of wheat."<sup>29</sup>

In their earliest struggles against monopoly, Blue Earth County Alliancemen were mindful that, while they represented the farmers of the county, "the evils" of which they complained were "general in nature." Therefore, they invited help from "all who believe with us that the encroachments and exactions of corporate power is such a menace to free government as to demand the most positive and vigorous action on the part of all patriotic people." On April 15, 1882, the group resolved that "the war which the farmers of this county are waging against monopoly and oppression is one in which the laborer, the mechanic, the artisan, the merchant and the professionable [*sic*] man are equally interested with ourselves, and that in our opinion, they should be invited to work in the same ranks as us."<sup>30</sup> Of

<sup>24</sup> *Mankato Free Press*, June 25, 1886.

<sup>25</sup> *The Review*, Apr. 13, 1886.

<sup>26</sup> *Mankato Free Press*, Aug. 6, 1886.

<sup>27</sup> *The Review*, Sept. 26, 1882.

<sup>28</sup> *The Review*, Dec. 20, 1881.

<sup>29</sup> *The Review*, Feb. 28, Mar. 14, 1882.

<sup>30</sup> *The Review*, Mar. 14, Apr. 25, 1882.

course, this position only opened the door to debate about how nonfarming comrades would be included.

A chance to test members' commitment to principle came shortly thereafter. In late August 1882, Alliance leaders met to discuss the practical issues associated with calling their nominating convention in September. The Alliancemen had to decide whether to include delegates from Mankato. J. McGiven favored "putting a ticket in the field by the farmers, believing that those who sympathized with the order would give it their hearty support." But J. G. Thompson objected, fearing this plan would "antagonize" voters in Mankato, who, after all, held one-third of the county's votes.<sup>31</sup>

At this point, Lysander Cook, one of the most respected men in the county, argued that if the principles of the Alliance were to succeed, "we must open our doors." He suggested that there were "merchants, business men, and mechanics whose sympathies are with us." *The Review* reported, "He would almost say that the alliance movement did not deserve to succeed if we ignore this element." Cook reminded his brothers that when he was elected to the state legislature by the Granger movement, an open convention was called and "the people did attend and took part in a mass convention." He then "ridiculed" the idea that the only "manipulating politicians" were in the city and moved that a committee be appointed to make the call for the convention. The committee proposed, and the meeting adopted, a call for an open convention with each organized alliance and "each town or ward in this county who are in sympathy with the Alliance movement" getting three delegates apiece.

Thus, Blue Earth County farmers had established a tradition of rural-urban harmony that dated back to the 1870s and was reinforced with the birth of the county-wide Farmers' Alliance in 1882. This tradition was based on firm support for producer values, a staunch commitment to antimonopoly legislation, and the shared experience of struggle with the new economic order. At the local level, the Knights of Labor and the Farmers' Alliance existed as neighbors. Still, members of the different organizations might have seen their struggles as separate fights against different enemies. And the ongoing feud between city and country over the courthouse might have blinded the neighbors to the larger causes that bound them. As it turned out, though, local capitalists came to the aid of the emerging farmer-labor coalition by bringing the monopoly issue home to both city and country dwellers.

<sup>31</sup> Here and below, see *The Review*, Sept. 5, 1882.

<sup>32</sup> *The Review*, Mar. 9, 1886. For an insider's account, see Vernard E. Lundin, *The Hubbard Milling Company, 1878-1978: A Past to Remember—A Future to Build* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison & Co., 1978); incorporation, see 31-32.



*Mankato merchant and store, displaying bags of locally milled Hubbard flour, about 1881*

In early March 1886 *The Review* complained about the emergence of a wheat monopoly organized by the Hubbard mill at Mankato. R. D. Hubbard & Co., or the "Big Mill" as it was known locally, incorporated in 1878 at a value of \$80,000 and managed to exercise considerable control over the Mankato wheat market. It was one of 15 signatories to the 1881 agreement among the millers, wheat buyers, and railroads. *The Review* quoted at length a report by the state railroad commissioners on the wheat market in Mankato which claimed, "There seems to be three buyers [of wheat], but there was in fact but one, for Hubbard & Co. dictated prices, grades and dockage, and got the wheat." Local farmers agreed that the "Mankato wheat market is as represented in the report." There was a general sentiment to boycott the Mankato market when practical and to build a cooperative farmers' warehouse outside the city.<sup>32</sup>

*The Review* debated this matter with George M. Palmer, Hubbard's secretary-treasurer. Palmer wrote forcefully that the mill paid all it "could afford"; anyone who believed he could make money paying more was welcome to try. Palmer claimed that the rather sticky





## R. D. HUBBARD & CO., MERCHANT MILLERS,

—MANUFACTURERS OF—

Choiceest Roller Flours—Superlative and Mankato Brands.

Be sure to get it, and after one trial you will use no other. It will make BETTER BREAD, WHITER BREAD, CHEAPER BREAD and more of it than any other.

Directions for Making Bread.

To one quart of milk or water add two-thirds of a teaspoonful of yeast; add sugar to the thickness of batter and let it rise over night, then add flour enough to knead forty twenty minutes, or until it will not cling to the board, as it requires much more kneading than Winter Wheat Flour. Let it rise in the pan, then make into small loaves, and let it rise again. Bake in a moderate oven. Do not add salt till it stands in the oven after it is done, and we will promise you a most beautiful, sweet, white bread.

Directions for Making the Best Yeast.

Boil a handful of hops in two quarts of water ten minutes. Then strain, and to the liquor add six good sized grated potatoes, one cup of sugar and one tablespoon of salt. Let it simmer one-half hour, when take warm, add one cup of good yeast, and let it rise. Keep in a covered jar in a cool place.

—Farmers Exchange on the most liberal terms.—

*Advertisement from The Review, July 14, 1885,  
promising farmers "the most liberal terms"*

prices paid by the various buyers stemmed from the information Hubbard & Co. provided off its wire to the different railroad stations and markets along the line. In response, *The Review*, an ardent defender of free competition, called for an independent buyer to enter the Mankato wheat market. "When one man or a firm is vested with [monopoly] power, they are not expected . . . that they will pay as high prices as when there is free, open and honorable competition." The blame for this sad state of affairs rested with the "business men of Mankato." *The Review* suggested that these entrepreneurs combine to put a buyer on the market who would "pay an advance over what is now paid." It was not too late for those businessmen with a sense of fair play and civic pride to rescue Blue Earth County from its home-grown monopoly.<sup>33</sup>

Little seems to have come of this suggestion, and the county's farmers continued organizing to get for themselves what the business elite of the city failed to provide. But as the summer of 1886 approached, the Hubbard mill began to exercise extraordinary power over the city's flour market. *The Review*, which had kept a watchful eye on the company, discovered an attempt

by the mill, in combination with the Grocers' Association, to exclude all other brands of flour from Mankato. Ultimately the goal was for local retailers to sell only Hubbard flour in return for a commission from the mill. The plan failed when three or four merchants refused to participate. *The Review* made the connection that, had the scheme succeeded, the grocers and mill would have established a "monopoly whereby the price of flour could be advanced at the whim of one individual just as the price of wheat is now controlled."<sup>34</sup>

The specter of a local monopoly incurred the wrath of urban and rural people and provided fertile soil in which to sow the seeds of farmer-laborism. Thus the call for the farmer-labor convention to be held in Blue Earth County on September 1, 1886, found eager participants. Moved by the events of their times and encouraged by the state leadership of Minnesota's Farmers' Alliance and Knights of Labor, some 500 farmers and workers crowded into the meeting hall at Good Thunder to found the Farmer-Labor party of Blue Earth County. The assembled delegates, most of them members of the Knights and the Alliance, endorsed a declaration of principles that called for a graduated income tax, abolition of child and convict labor, recognition of unions, new and better laws regulating railroads and grain elevators, condemnation of the organization of grain dealers, forfeiture of all unearned railroad land grants, the reservation of public lands for actual settlers, and abrogation of those laws that favored monopoly over the interests of the common good.<sup>35</sup>

The air was thick with the radical rhetoric of producerism and antimonopoly, language familiar to both farmers and workers within the reform tradition. The delegates denounced "the rapid accumulation of the wealth of the country in the hands of a comparatively few men" who used their power to "corrupt or intimidate the people in the exercise of their political rights." So serious was this problem that, in an age of unprecedented political partisanship, the convention rebuked the "old parties" and felt it "necessary for the people to organize in their own defense." Just before the unanimous ratification of their platform, one farmer referred to the impending farmer-labor alliance as a "wedding." For a brief moment, the producing classes of Blue Earth County overcame deep divisions in an attempt to seize power from the monopolists and their corrupt politicians.

The convention went on to nominate candidates for the November election. To gain the backing of the Farmer-Labor party, candidates pledged to support the resolutions passed that day. County Republicans and

<sup>33</sup> *The Review*, Mar. 16, 23, 1886.

<sup>34</sup> *The Review*, Sept. 28, 1886.

<sup>35</sup> Here and below, see *The Review*, Sept. 7, 1886.

Democrats met after the farmer-labor convention and endorsed many of the Good Thunder contenders. In November, Farmer-Labor candidates captured three out of four county seats in the state legislature and secured the election of the county treasurer, auditor, clerk of the court, probate judge, coroner, and superintendent of public schools. Generally, though, only those endorsed by a major party won. The Farmer-Labor party could count on only about 600 straight votes; approximately 2,600 votes were needed for election to countywide office.<sup>36</sup>

**T**he success of Blue Earth County's Farmer-Labor party in rallying voters and in influencing the major parties was remarkable, especially given the rural-urban conflict that rocked the county from 1885 to 1887. To account for this, we must first remember that party members were also members of the Knights of Labor and Farmers' Alliance. Without these groups organized at the grass-roots level, a successful coalition would not have been possible. Their common agenda, based on their common struggle with the new industrial society, was a second major factor in the party's success. Finally, the Great Upheaval created the conditions that allowed local people to transcend their differences and unite around larger issues.

Two additional points are pertinent here. First, the statewide organizations of the Knights and the Alliance encouraged the formation of local farmer-labor parties. When William Webb of the Blue Earth County Alliance wrote Ignatius Donnelly to express his regrets regarding his absence at the state conference, he suggested an exchange of greetings by telegraph on the day of the conventions. Donnelly agreed, and when Webb informed the St. Paul conference of Blue Earth County's demand for independent political action, Donnelly wired back the support and good wishes of the state organizations.<sup>37</sup> Webb's experience with issues above the county level gave him a broader political perspective. The union of farmer and labor leaders at the state level helped convince those at the local level that they too could find common ground.

Second, the statewide organizations encouraged local coalitions at just the right moment. While the people of Blue Earth County remained largely untouched by the events of the Great Upheaval, these labor con-

frontations across the country indicated that, if they failed to act at this crucial time, their fate might be decided by the likes of a Jay Gould or a James J. Hill. Until the Good Thunder convention, Blue Earth County's participation was limited to three unsuccessful strikes and the fielding of the Workingmen's municipal ticket in April 1886. The formation of the Farmer-Labor party represented greater willingness to take part in the Great Upheaval.

Even while being forged, however, the coalition was tenuous. As the Good Thunder convention came to a close, L. F. McKibben of the Pleasant Mound Grange offered resolutions claiming that "the influence of city politicians has too long been dominant in the affairs of the county" as evidenced in the "most extravagant and offensive form, of the defeated courthouse measure, which is now being carried out by illegal taxation." His resolutions were adopted "by a decisive vote." (The rural districts could outvote the city at the convention, 94 to 20.) The reemergence of the courthouse controversy at this gathering reveals that the marriage between rural and urban producers would require much counseling. The same issue of *The Review* that reported on the convention also printed a statement by "the executive committee of the labor organizations of Mankato," which made clear that members "do most emphatically oppose so much of the resolutions passed at the Good Thunder convention, opposing the completion of the court-house, are not in favor of abandoning the work [and] as a body opposed it at the convention, and will not by any means be bound by it."<sup>38</sup> Despite last-minute convention bickering, however, the Alliance-Knight coalition of 1886 succeeded.

In 1890 and again in 1892, farmer-labor politics reemerged in Blue Earth County. In the twentieth century, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party was so successful that it temporarily put the Democratic party out of business at the height of Franklin D. Roosevelt's popularity. Part of the legacy of the Midwest to the history of radical politics is the farmer-labor tradition. By looking more closely at local conflict within this tradition, historians can deepen our understanding of the difficulties of uniting rural and urban voters. The desire of workers for cheaper food and farmers for fair commodity prices cannot fully explain the failure of the Knights and the Populists to achieve a lasting coalition. Systematic study of faltering local coalitions throughout the country will reveal much about the nature of rural-urban conflict and the failure of American radical politics.



<sup>36</sup> *The Review*, Sept. 7, Nov. 9, 1886. On third-party politics during the Gilded Age, see Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> Webb to Donnelly, Aug. 23, 1886; unidentified St. Paul newspaper clipping, Sept. 4, 1886, in Scrapbook, McGaughey Papers, MHS.

<sup>38</sup> *The Review*, Sept. 7, 1886.





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