Excerpt from Chapter 10

*The People’s Revolt:*

*Texas Populists and the Roots of American Liberalism*

On the eve of the election, the anxiety was palpable throughout the vast extent of the Lone Star State. All sides made the usual predictions of victory, and in an era before polling, the Populists, with Republican help, may well have believed that they would carry Texas. Dallas had been the nerve center of Texas Populism since the party’s birth in 1891, and events there on the night before the momentous election revealed the extent of the tension. As night fell, competing rallies attracted huge throngs of people to the downtown streets. Ostensibly the two rallies were devoted to national politics—a free silver/Bryan gathering and a “sound money”/McKinley event. The Bryan supporters gathered at the imposing red sandstone Romanesque county courthouse, built just four years before, to hear a reading of Bryan’s already-famous “Cross of Gold” speech. Three thousand McKinley partisans staged an impressive parade up Main and back down Commerce Street, featuring bands, floats, transparencies, and 2,500 torches whose lights created “a phantasmagoria of burning jets that lighted up the whole street and caused huge shadows to dance on the walls of the business blocks.” But the McKinley parade and rally also revealed the extent to which the oft-denied fusion between Republicans and Populists had been accomplished, at least in Dallas. Among the one hundred transparencies in the parade were ones which read, “Kearby is for Dallas. Dallas is for Kearby,” and “All Dallas for Gibbs independent of politics.” The *Dallas Morning News* estimated that 20,000 spectators—fully half the city’s population—witnessed the parade, and noted that “Men of all parties were well represented. A populist jostled a sound money democrat and a republican touched both.”

Arriving at a speaker’s stand, the crowd heard several pro-McKinley speeches, after which “a thousand yells” went up for Populist congressional nominee Barnett Gibbs, who “was received with great applause.” Gibbs delivered his speech, largely bypassing the obvious ideological differences between Populists and Republicans, but as he finished a mob from the Bryan rally arrived and raised such a din that nothing from the speakers’ stand could be heard. One of the rally’s organizers hastily assembled a band of men who charged the mob, cracking a few heads and driving the miscreants from the scene. Calls for Jerome Kearby mounted, and after some delay, he appeared on the stage to the sound of “terrific cheering and yells of welcome.”

Kearby’s impromptu speech revealed much about Texas Populism. Referring to the mob that had disrupted the rally, Kearby branded them as unpatriotic for their “attempts to repress or suppress free speech.” He then turned to the assembled throng and declared, “The men that I see before me here to-night—white and black—are patriots.” And lest anyone think that his reference to the biracial crowd was gratuitous, he castigated the Democratic mob by saying, “That gang of men out there are on a par with that class of men that burn negroes at the stake,” a declaration that was met with “great cheering.” “They constitute the ku klux and the lawless bands of Texas.”

Needless to say, Kearby’s opponent, incumbent governor Charles Culberson, did not stand before a throng of Democrats that night and declare black Texans “patriots,” nor did he denounce lynchers as “ku klux and the lawless bands of Texas.” Whatever else Populism may have stood for, whatever its shortcomings—and there were many—at its best it at least recognized the fundamental right of all citizens to life and a measure of common respect. On what would prove to be the party’s final night as a political force in America, Jerome Kearby represented Populism’s best.

The next morning, November 3, dawned fair and pleasant across the state, with temperatures climbing into the mid-seventies in most locales, a good sign for Populists who needed their rural supporters to have dry roads for wagon, buggy, or horseback trips to the polls. It was the last good sign they would have that day, as it soon became clear that the Democrats were taking no chances. Fraud is difficult to document and nearly impossible to prove, especially given the paucity of surviving Populist newspapers and manuscripts, but the few extant sources suggest that it was widespread. The experience of A.F. Nash, Populist nominee for justice of the peace in his southeast Texas precinct, probably was not unique. Nash told of appearing on the streets of Crockett in Houston County to solicit votes and being surrounded by “a mob of 75 or 100 of the toughs and hoodlums,” incited by the local “rotten ring democracy.” Rescued by the town marshal, he narrowly escaped being ridden out of town on a rail or worse, choosing instead to flee the town. “People may talk of a free country and a free ballot,” he later bitterly complained, “but this does not look like it.”

Not surprisingly, African American Populists faced the most concerted, and the most deadly, efforts to deprive them of their votes. Nowhere in Texas were they better organized that in Robertson County, the home of John B. Rayner in the rich cotton-growing district of the Brazos Valley. There a coalition of Populists and Republicans had elected candidates for years, including numerous blacks. On election morning armed men began to arrive in the county seat at Franklin, where they “quietly deposed” the black town marshal before the polls opened. Forty men armed with Winchester rifles then stationed themselves around the courthouse, allowing only Democrats to enter to vote. A few miles to the west, a company of black voters had assembled in the Brazos bottoms with the intention of marching to Hearne to cast their votes. Accompanied by a brass band, they were accosted on the Little Brazos River bridge by an armed posse of Democrats, which threw the instruments in the river and dispersed the marchers. Meanwhile in Hearne “a great number of pistol shots were fired in front of the polls when the negroes from the bottom came in to vote,” and as a consequence that box polled six hundred fewer votes than in 1894. Elsewhere in the county, at one heavily Populist box, the election judge reported that “a masked man” took the box and the returns, presumably at gunpoint. In another precinct the Democratic candidates for sheriff and tax collector held off black voters with a gun and a club. At mid-afternoon Democratic County Judge O.D. Cannon arrived at the polls in his home precinct with his pistol in his hand. “I went down to the polls and took my six-shooter,” he proudly recalled years later. “I stayed there until the polls closed. Not a negro voted. After that they didn’t any more in Robertson County.” The details of of episodes like this virtually never made it into the press. The *Galveston Daily News*’s one line of coverage was typical: “Robertson county seems to have out-Harrisoned Harrison county this year.” Texans who followed politics knew precisely what that meant.

More subtle tricks probably accounted for most of the fraud. Among the most common was the manipulation of ballots. Populists alleged that in Fort Bend and other black-majority counties, ballots were handed to voters containing the names of the Republican presidential electors and all of the Populist state candidates, with the exception of the line on the ticket where the governor’s name went. There Democrat Charles Culberson’s name was inserted in place of Kearby’s. Only the most careful voter was apt to notice the deception, and illiterate voters stood little chance at all. Jerome Kearby did as good a job as anyone at summarizing the Democrats’ methods: "The moment the ring discovered that there was danger they inaugurated a campaign of slander, defamation, intimidation and fraud. The negro vote in many sections was manipulated by fraud, intimidation and open bribery; the ignorant were preyed upon by slander and falsehood; the vicious and purchasable were hired by campaign funds raised to debauch the elector. All manner of devices to deceive, mislead and impose upon the voter were resorted to on election day to compass the defeat of the people’s party."

In the end it likely would not have mattered. When the votes were counted, Kearby lost to Culberson by a vote of 298,528 to 238, 692, and the Democrats swept all statewide offices. The Bryan-Sewall presidential ticket carried the state with fifty-four percent of all votes cast, and no Populist congressional candidate won, despite strong showings in five districts. An estimated 40,000 of those who had supported the Populists in 1894 returned to the Democrats, a swing of 80,000 votes, enough to cost Kearby the election. Despite appeals to African American voters and Populist cooperation with the state Republican leadership, estimates reveal that the official black vote was almost evenly divided between the Democrats and Populists. How many of those black votes were stolen will never be known.

In the weeks and months to come Texas Populists would struggle to come to terms with their loss. Many urged a renewed effort to reorganize and reinvigorate the party, arguing that Populists had learned a valuable lesson about the evils of fusion, both on the national and state levels. With Bryan decisively defeated, they believed that the People’s Party could return to the “middle of the road” and resume its crusade to bring a new vision of government to America. But many other were not so sure. They knew that the thousands who had followed Buck Walton back into the ranks of the Democrats would never vote Populist again, and the feeling that the Populist revolt was over was palpable. Jerome Kearby no doubt expressed the feelings of many when, six weeks after the election, he wrote, “The opportunity was lost. I trust it may appear again; I fear not. I can afford to speak freely, for I am done with politics.”

Copyright © 2015 David Gregg Cantrell. All Rights Reserved. Not to be quoted, cited, or otherwise used without permission of the author.