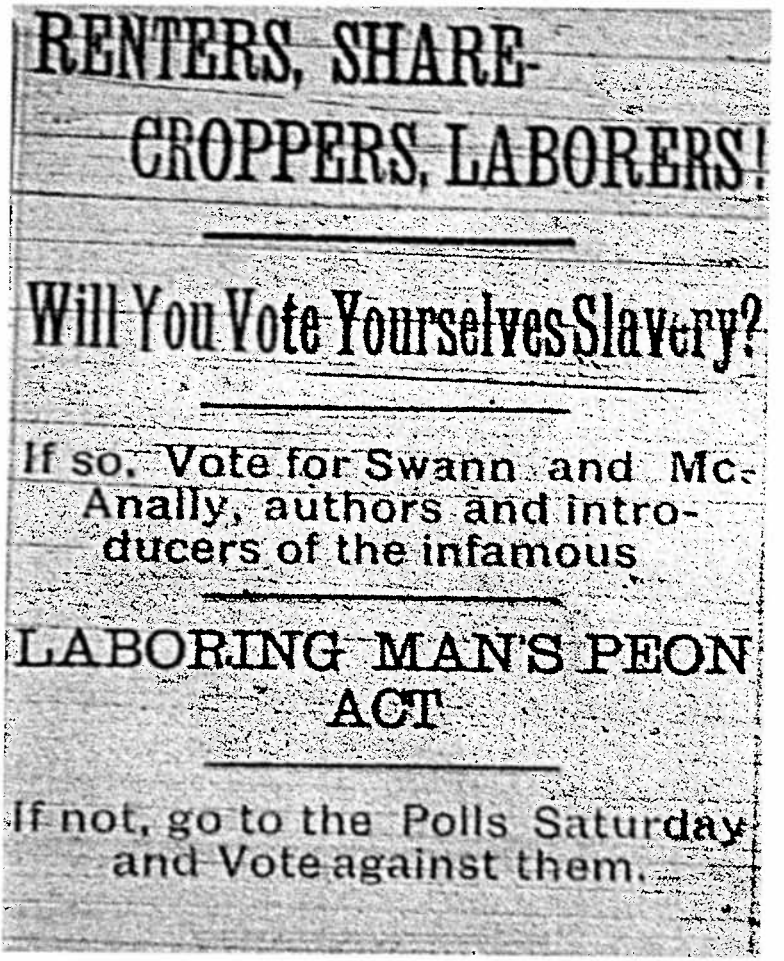
The Roots of Southern Progressivism: Texas Populists and the Rise of a Reform Coalition in Milam County

Gregg Cantrell

In the introduction to his 1997 book, *Grass-Roots Reconstruction in Texas*, Randolph B. Campbell noted that although Reconstruction had been the subject of intense academic scrutiny at the state and national levels, few scholars had "sought to determine how the issues of the era came home to people at the local level." Campbell's point about Reconstruction holds true for the subject of this essay: the political circumstances that gave rise to southern progressivism. In the past half-century, scholars have thoroughly delineated the contours of the region's progressive movement from a policy standpoint. They have pointed out that while southern progressivism shared many features with its national counterpart, the movement in the South possessed certain regional characteristics that limited the scope of its reform, most notably that it took place within the newly solidified one-party system and that it would be, in the famous phrase of C. Vann Woodward, progressivism "for whites only."[1]

Although we know a great deal about what southern progressivism looked like, persistent questions remain about who southern progressives really *were*, and how the movement arose from the chaotic political environment of the 1890s. Scholars continue to disagree over a number of fundamental issues: What role did the recently defeated Populists play in the rise of progressivism? Who really supported disfranchisement, and were poor whites as much a target as African Americans? Was the movement, as Woodward claimed, fundamentally "urban and middle-class," or did "the most potent force for southern reform," as Jack Temple Kirby argued, "lie in the frustrations and yearnings of the rural and small town masses?"[2]

Because these questions have yielded so many conflicting answers, perhaps a return to the local level can shed welcome light. No local study can provide definitive answers that are universally applicable to the state or region, but definitiveness has never been the true goal of social history.



Headline in Rockdale *Reporter*, March 2, 1902. Courtesy of Rockdale *Reporter*

As Campbell has argued, the significance of a local case study lies not in its perfect representativeness of some larger whole, but rather in the way that it "explodes facile generalizations" and illuminates subtleties that broader studies may overlook.[3] The following essay, then, offers a case study of how a progressive coalition emerged in one Texas county following one of the most tumultuous decades in the state's political history, the 1890s. By closely examining this county, we shall see how conflict among Democrats, Republicans, and Populists divided the county's citizens along lines of race, class, economic interest, and ideology, as it did in many other places throughout Texas and the South. The essay will also analyze the internal struggles that took place *within* all three political parties, and in the process of doing so, reveal the roles that local leaders, conditions, and issues played in the county's politics. The result will be a more nuanced understanding of the process by which progressivism emerged at the local level. It will also provide a model against which other locales can be compared, as historians continue to investigate the complex politics of the turn-of-the-century South.[4]

The site for this study is Milam County, situated on the west bank of the Brazos River in the heart of the southeast-central Texas cotton belt. Like so many places in the South, Milam County's economy after the Civil War was dominated by cotton, which farmers and planters grew with varying degrees of success in every precinct. By the century's end, tenancy reached alarming proportions, with nearly two-thirds of Milam's farmers working someone else's land. A significant number of these tenants were African-American, as ex-slaves and their descendants comprised about a quarter of the population.[5]

Like other southerners, the cotton farmers of Milam County were hit hard by the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century. The county had been a stronghold of the Grange during its heyday, and many of the same men had later responded enthusiastically to the Farmers' Alliance. By the late 1880s the Alliance had fifty local chapters, or suballiances, in the county. In 1887 the Alliance established a cooperative store and cotton yard in the county seat, Cameron, and by the mid-1890s this had become the largest and most successful mercantile enterprise in Milam County.[6]

Just as the county's Alliancemen embraced economic cooperation, so they also championed the political demands formulated by the Alliance. Anti-monopoly measures, such as the innovative Subtreasury Plan designed to stabilize crop prices and give debt-ridden farmers affordable credit, appealed to the impoverished cotton growers of central

Texas. They were probably better-educated in the specifics of the Alliance demands than any comparable group of farmers in the nation, for the national leader of the Alliance in the late 1880s, the brilliant if erratic author of the Subtreasury Plan, was a local man, Charles W. Macune.[7]

The county's geography greatly influenced the economic status and thus the voting patterns of its inhabitants. Milam is divided into two major geographic regions. The northern and northwestern two-fifths of the county (corresponding roughly with justice precincts 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7) possessed rich black clays that were ideal for the cultivation of cotton; most of the remainder of the county was sandy.[8] Sandy-land farmers also grew cotton, but on poorer farms.[9] The broad bottom lands along the Brazos River were the location of large estates worked by black tenants. Although almost a quarter of the adult male population worked in non-farm occupations, practically all were in some way tied to the cotton economy. Urban dwellers in the two principal towns, Cameron and Rockdale, practiced trades and professions, kept stores, worked for the three railroads that traversed the county, or were absentee landowners.[10]

On the surface, county politics seemed to epitomize the "Solid South" at the beginning of the 1890s. Since Reconstruction, the Democratic Party had held every local office and carried the county in state and national elections. African Americans, who continued to vote in significant numbers, remained loyal to the Republican Party but posed little threat to the white majority. Beneath this apparently placid surface of white Democratic solidarity, however, whites were bitterly divided. On one hand was the conservative right wing of the Democratic Party, which was dominated by large landowners on the best lands and by business interests in Cameron and Rockdale. They were challenged from the left by progressive Democrats in the Alliance, with its strong power base among the smaller landowners in the sandy parts of the county. In 1892 many of Milam County's Alliancemen broke with their traditional party, the Democrats, and joined the People's Party. When that happened, the Alliance itself became divided between those who chose Populism and others who remained in the Democratic Party. The Alliancemen who remained Democrats came to constitute a large proportion of the progressive wing of that party. Thus another element—agrarian discontent leading to third-party insurgency—contributed to the southernness of Milam County.[11]

The 1892 elections saw all three white factions represented in state-level races, and the campaign established patterns that generally held for the remainder of the 1890s. Conservative Democrats used their

considerable economic power to champion traditional causes: pro-business governmental policies, the gold standard, and white supremacy. The progressive Democrats championed moderate reform measures such as the monetization of silver and the Railroad Commission, all the while urging the Populists to surrender their heresies and rejoin the old party. The People's Party, having drawn its core constituency and most of its leaders from the ranks of the Alliancemen, preached the new gospel of the Omaha Platform with its far-reaching program of reform, including the Subtreasury Plan, government ownership of the railroads, and protections for organized labor.[12] The Populists' main tasks at election time were to mobilize that constituency and convince reluctant Democrats to leave the Democratic Party. And all factions had to wrestle with the vexing problem of race, for with whites so divided the plain reality was that blacks now potentially held the balance of power in the county.[13]

In the 1892 campaign the Populists' main theme was the betrayal of the people by the Democratic Party. At a debate in Milano in early June, a local Populist opened his speech by "charging the democratic party with being untrue to the people in advocating . . . the remonetizing of silver, abolishing the national banks, etc., in their platforms, [and then] voting against the measures in congress." Sensitive to the emotional attachment of white southerners to the Democratic Party, the Populists' strategy was to portray the move into third-party politics as having been forced on them by the corrupt leaders who had gained control of the old party.[14]

The Populists knew that Democrats would appeal to voters in the name of southern patriotism and the Lost Cause. In mid-July more than five thousand people attended a Confederate veterans' reunion in Cameron. Although the speeches and activities at the reunion were supposed to be nonpartisan, the press noted that there had been much discussion about "the refusal of the third party people to participate." In some parts of the county, it was reported, "the third party people even give barbecues to keep away any of their folds from the reunion." Why would the Populists go to such lengths to keep voters away from a Confederate reunion? Most likely they were afraid that the Democrats would use the occasion to keep veterans in the Democratic camp with powerful reminders of the South's Democratic heritage.[15]

The Populists displayed a spirit of camaraderie and enthusiasm in the 1892 campaign that the Democrats, divided into feuding factions and complacent after years of electoral dominance, lacked. Local Populist clubs met regularly to hear their party's principles explained. In June the Populists of Rockdale constructed a brush arbor with seating capacity

for a thousand people for a party rally in which James H. "Cyclone" Davis would be the featured speaker. The following month twelve hundred people attended a Populist barbecue south of Rockdale. The *Galveston Daily News* reported that "Bounteous provision was made in the way of eatables and drinkables. Between the speech-making, the feeding, the music and the dancing all who attended returned to their homes pleased with the results of the day." A few weeks later, fifteen hundred attended a Populist camp meeting on the San Gabriel River.[16]

Democrats found themselves on the defensive. Speaking in Rockdale, Democratic leader Thomas S. Henderson claimed "that the form of government that the people's party was advocating was a new thing and not thoroughly understood by the people and that if they understood it they would not want it." Forced by the obvious economic distress around him to admit the need for reform, Henderson could only contend "that all remedy for wrongs must be sought for and found inside the Democratic Party, as the only party that had given the people relief in the past." All too often Democrats simply resorted to ridicule, calling the Populists "malcontents and soreheads."[17]

Perhaps the most difficult, but necessary, aspect of the Populist campaign was the effort to capture the black vote.[18] In mid-June the press reported "that the negroes were organizing with the third party." Capt. Ben Arnold, a white Union army veteran who moved to the county in 1867 and had been a Republican leader since, advised black voters that "in county and state affairs . . . considering the fearful democratic majority, if [the Populists] were willing to join issue with the colored voter, admit him into their councils and give him representation on their ticket, he might consistently join them." To Arnold's surprise, he later learned that African Americans had in fact participated in the Populist county convention and had elected a black delegate to the state convention. Whether or not this gesture on the part of the Populists would win the support of the black masses remained to be seen.[19]

Efforts by the Populists to woo black voters intensified in August 1892. A three-day Populist rally in Cameron featured "activities for whites" at the courthouse and for blacks at the city park pavilion, featuring speeches "by eminent colored orators." Ten days later the brick warehouse of the International & Great Northern Railroad in Rockdale was "filled with white and colored people's party folks, democrats, republicans and prohibitionists, to listen to the people's party speakers." John B. Rayner of neighboring Robertson County, a powerful black orator who would later become a statewide Populist leader, delivered an

hour-and-a-half speech which was reported by the *Galveston Daily News* as being "conservative, sensible and logical, and . . . well received by all present." In September Rayner again spoke in Milam County to a mixed audience of black and white Populist "sympathizers." Ultimately, however, the only Populist candidate formally endorsed by the county's black Republicans was congressional hopeful Isaac Newton Barber. Progressive Democratic governor James S. Hogg's denunciation of lynching, and the endorsement of conservative Democratic gubernatorial candidate George Clark by the state's black Republicans, held many African Americans in one Democratic camp or the other.[20]

Despite Populist efforts, most of the Democratic candidates carried the county in 1892 by a narrow two-hundred-vote margin out of nearly five thousand cast. Although their political differences had led conservative and progressive Democrats to nominate different candidates at the state level, in county and precinct races the two Democratic factions had wisely put aside their differences. At the precinct level, the People's Party did elect a county commissioner and two justices of the peace. And in the congressional race—the one countywide contest in which the black Republicans had formally endorsed a People's Party candidate—the Populist carried the county by almost three hundred votes.[21]

Geographically the Populist strongholds were in the poorer, sandier farming regions in the southern part of the county, while Democrats ran much better in the richer black lands in the north and along river bottoms. These are trends that generally held true in 1892 and throughout the Populist revolt. Voting allegiance was also associated with the tenancy rate in rural precincts. The Democrats generally did best in areas with the highest tenancy rates, apparently reflecting the influence that Democratic landlords exercised over black and white tenants, while the heavily Populist precincts had somewhat lower rates of tenancy.[22]

From even a cursory examination of the 1892 results, it is obvious that two factors prevented a Populist sweep of the county. First, and most glaring, was the party's inability to attract urban voters. In the two major towns, Cameron and Rockdale, the Populist presidential ticket ran dead last with only 11 percent of the vote, compared to the 62 percent recorded by the Democrats and 28 for the Republicans. Results were similar in state races. If the two towns are excluded from the county totals, the Populists would have swept the county. Even in three-way races the Populists could win in the countryside, but in town they were slaughtered by the Democrats and ran far behind the Republicans.[23]

The black Republicans were the other major obstacle for the Populists. The 1892 elections underscored the necessity of winning black

votes, either by converting individual black voters to the People's Party or, more likely, by gaining the formal endorsement of Populist candidates by black Republican conventions. By the time the 1894 campaign began, black Populist clubs had been organized at Maysfield and Jones Prairie in the black-majority second precinct near the Brazos River. In August of that year the black Republicans of the Rockdale area held a mass meeting at a local church to debate their strategy for the upcoming elections. Attendance was heavy, "but outside of speeches nothing was done."[24]

The Democrats scored a major victory on September 23, 1894, when Milam County's Republicans met in Cameron and endorsed the county-level Democratic ticket "by an overwhelming vote." Local Populists were "rather blue" about this, for they had placed high hopes on a Republican endorsement. It was rumored, however, that some Republicans were unhappy with their party's actions and "that an attempt will be made to break the indorsement [*sic*]."[25]

That effort came in early October when S. S. Brewer, an African American who had been converted to Populism, called a "mass meeting of the colored people" in hopes of swinging the black Republicans into the Populist camp. Black Republicans who wished to endorse the local Democratic ticket called a similar meeting, and the two gatherings were scheduled for the same day in Rockdale. The events of that day illustrate the extraordinary importance of the African-American vote to both parties, and the abiding interest of blacks in local political affairs.[26]

African Americans from all over the county began to arrive in Rockdale throughout the morning, and at one o'clock in the afternoon both factions met separately. The Springfield Baptist Church was "packed" with African Americans who came to hear Populist speakers. Meanwhile, the main body of the black Republicans met at the Methodist Church to discuss the wisdom of endorsing the county Democratic ticket. Deliberations continued all afternoon, until a recess was taken at six o'clock. At seven-thirty the Rockdale Silver Cornet Band, "headed by leading Populists," paraded through the streets, followed by a procession of white and black supporters. The march ended at the Springfield Baptist church, where the Populist meeting was resumed. Several white and black Populists spoke, with the prominent Dallas Populist Harry Tracy keynoting. The pro-Democratic African Americans also resumed their meeting at the Methodist church, resulting in a confirmation of their decision to back the county Democratic ticket. As the vote was being taken, members of the pro-Populist faction began to arrive, and as the *News* put it, "the fun began." The Populists moved to reconsider the Democratic endorsement, "and for a short time pandemonium reigned supreme. Every negro in

the hall was on his feet gesticulating and wildly calling to Mr. Speaker, and Mr. Speaker and the secretary were both trying to hold the floor at once." The motion to reconsider was defeated, and "the objectionists" then gave up and rejoined the Populist gathering at the Baptist church. The carnival atmosphere was made complete by the attendance of a large number of African-American women, who set up stands outside both meeting places and sold food and refreshments. The white press apparently deemed it of little importance to report on the actual debates, but the result was that blacks remained divided in their loyalties. Nevertheless, the local correspondent reported that it "could not be denied" that "the third party made a good impression." "Consequently," he added, "as the time grows shorter the fight waxes hotter."[27]

The results of 1894 showed significant gains for the third party. Populist gubernatorial and congressional candidates carried Milam County, and the party again elected one commissioner and one justice of the peace. Most significant, the Populists finally won a countywide race, electing W. A. Nabours county treasurer by a 112-vote margin. Geographically, the Populists recorded major gains in the countryside and a small improvement in the towns, though they still lost the urban vote by an overwhelming margin.[28] Overall, the Populist gubernatorial candidate, Thomas L. Nugent, polled pluralities in twenty-two of the county's thirty-four voting boxes. But among black voters the Populists' success was, at best, mixed. The Democrats easily carried the black-majority Second Precinct with 54 percent of the vote, while the Populists and Republicans tied with 23 percent each. If the Populists had hoped to attract African Americans away from the other parties en masse, they were surely disappointed.[29]

The Populists' biggest failures lay in the countywide races, where Democrats won every contest except that of county treasurer. Although Milam County's Populists could now muster majorities in state and precinct races, the Democrats still won by five hundred votes in most county-level races (sheriff and county judge, for example). The most likely explanation for this phenomenon is the personal popularity of local leaders like Sheriff John H. Bickett and County Judge Sam Streetman. Party loyalty and ideology were important to the Populists of Milam County, but in these local races, many Populists put friendship, personal loyalty, and competence before party loyalty, and they considered Populist ideology far less significant when deciding who would sit in the sheriff's office or preside over the commissioners' court. The same personal loyalties also account for the success of Populist treasurer Nabours, a respected Confederate veteran.[30]

Indeed, the Populists had never won the hearts and minds even of all reform-minded voters in Milam County. The progressive Democrats had always had a strong following in the county, and in the mid-1890s, as their disagreements with the conservatives grew more pronounced, they intensified their efforts to coax the Populists back into the Democratic Party. Some Populists, such as Macune, enjoyed warm relations with local progressive Democrats, no doubt hoping to lure them into the People's Party, instead of the reverse. Macune even briefly operated an independent newspaper in the county in 1895 with both Populist and progressive Democratic partners. Progressive Democratic speeches during the summer of 1895 sounded increasingly Populistic in their criticism of "capitalists" and "millionaires," who monopolized the nation's money and credit. Populists, however, labored to remind third-party faithful that silver coinage was "of minor importance" in the overall Populist program.[31]

The agrarian revolt reached its high point in the 1896 elections. As the Democrats carried on their family feud over silver and gold, the Populist campaign continued with enthusiasm.[32] African-American Republicans once again were the wild card in the political deck. If anything, they were even more factionalized than two years earlier, with one wing endorsing the local Democrats and the other supporting the Populists. At one point in late July a near-riot broke out during the county Republican convention at the courthouse in Cameron. In an attempt to have their respective leaders seated as convention chairman, four hundred Republicans engaged in "the wildest scene of confusion ever witnessed" in the county. A *News* reporter described the events:

> Over 400 negroes were on the floor of the court house, and they all made a grand rush for the platform. Some were trying to throw the opposing chairman off the platform, while others were trying to protect their chairman. The entire 400 became one surging, crushing and howling mob. Some weapons were drawn and canes were used freely. The whole inner space of the bar was crowded with the combatants. Some were pulled down, trampled on and belabored; others were thrown over the judge's stand into the pit below. How they escaped without fatal injuries is remarkable. The scene was one impossible to describe.

After half an hour of this, someone in the back of the room began singing "an old, familiar camp meeting song," and soon a chorus of four hundred voices was swaying to the melody of "The Sweet By and

By." "The effect," according to the reporter, "was marvelous." When the singing ended, Sheriff Bickett mounted the podium and advised the Republicans to proceed peacefully, which they did. However, the smaller, pro-Populist, faction still bolted the convention rather than acquiesce in an endorsement of the county Democratic ticket.[33]

As the 1896 elections neared, the *Houston Post* accurately reported that "confusion prevails" in Milam County. National and state politics had thrown an enormous wrench in the Populist works. The national People's Party convention "fused" with the Democrats, nominating Democrat William Jennings Bryan for president and Populist Tom Watson for vice president. Furious over such a sellout, Texas Populist leaders struck a deal with state Republican bosses, promising Populist votes for William McKinley in return for Republican support of the Populist state ticket. Milam's two delegates to the national Populist convention were dismayed over both developments. They were willing to accept Bryan *if* the Democratic Party would recognize Watson as his running mate—which, of course, the Democrats would not do. The outspoken Macune no doubt expressed the sentiments of many Populists when he announced that Populism had been betrayed and severed his ties with the People's Party.[34] The two county Republican factions finally reached an uneasy truce, endorsing the Populist-Republican fusion deal in state and national races but leaving voters free to choose between the Populists and Democrats in county races.[35] When the votes were counted, the national Democratic ticket had carried the county with 54 percent of the vote. Enough Populists had united with the Republicans to give McKinley 32 percent of the vote.[36]

The effects of the Populist fusion deals at the national and state levels were obvious in other Milam County races. Many Populists were so disgruntled over these trades with Democrats and Republicans that they simply gave up on Populism. In the gubernatorial race between Democrat Charles A. Culberson and Populist Jerome C. Kearby, in which the Republicans supported Kearby, the Democrats carried the county by more than three hundred votes. The popular treasurer W. A. Nabours again was the only Populist to win a county office.[37]

There can be little doubt that the national Democratic Party's nomination of Bryan and its adoption of a platform endorsing silver coinage, a federal income tax, and other minor Populist reforms hurt the Populist cause at the local level. As the national party became more progressive, a growing number of local Democratic leaders could now plausibly persuade Populists that nothing was to be gained by their continued political revolt. In races for county judge and state representative, progressive, pro-silver

Democrats recorded sweeping thousand-vote majorities over two of the most prominent Populists in the county.[38] The message for Milam County's Populists was clear: The day of the People's Party had passed.

Although fusion with the Democrats destroyed the People's Party as a viable party in 1896, the battle for reform, and for political supremacy in Milam County, was far from finished. The split in the Farmers' Alliance and the emergence of the Populists in 1892 had weakened, but by no means destroyed, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Many established political leaders of the 1880s who were reform-minded stayed with the Democratic Party's progressive wing. They were led by Cameron's Monta J. Moore, a lawyer, editor, and professional politician who was not yet thirty when he worked for Hogg's reelection.[39] The Populists were led by longtime county chairman J. D. Shelton. In contrast with the youthful, urbane Moore, Shelton was a grizzled veteran of Indian warfare on the Texas frontier and as a Confederate soldier had been wounded three times. For thirty years he worked as an itinerant Baptist preacher, farming on the side. His ministerial career had come to an end when, to use Shelton's own words, "they kicked me out of the [missionary] association" for calling certain local preachers a "devil called, soft place hunting, high salary grabbing, contemptible, modern priesthood." Shelton was among the most radical of Populists, but to many voters he must have seemed like a relic of a bygone era and not the sort of progressive politician suited to the era of telephones and electric lights.[40]

The conservative wing of the county Democratic Party was always smaller numerically than the progressive forces, but its members' economic power helped compensate for their smaller numbers. Most of the county's real wealth supported the conservative faction, and its leadership came from among the banking, railroad, and mercantile interests in Cameron and Rockdale, who often were also large absentee landowners. Dominating the conservative Democrats was the Hefley family of Cameron. The Hefleys sat on railroad boards, practiced law, sold insurance, operated hardware and furniture establishments, and owned extensive commercial and residential real estate. Two family members boasted a combined landholding of some 10,000 acres, which surely gave them sizable political influence over their numerous tenants, many of whom would have been African Americans.[41]

The exodus of poor farmers into the People's Party forced the progressive Democrats to share power with the conservatives in the early and mid-1890s. But in 1898 the conservatives flexed their muscles, electing Oscar F. McAnally to the Texas House of Representatives. McAnally was

the outspoken editor of the *Cameron Herald,* the mouthpiece of the conservative Democrats, and he faithfully represented the planting, banking, railroad, and mercantile interests of the Hefleys and other elite families. His presence in the state legislature was an affront to progressive Democratic leader Moore, who had previously held the seat.[42]

Although whites of all parties had tried to woo African-American voters throughout the 1890s, persuasion was not the only tool they used. No evidence survives to implicate Populists in fraud or manipulation of the black vote, but the story was quite different with the Democrats. No matter which faction won, charges and countercharges of fraud flew—not so much between Populists and Democrats, but among the Democrats. When progressive Democrats won, the conservatives cried foul. When conservative Democrats won, progressives bitterly complained. Many Democrats disliked the vote-buying used by both factions, but it had become a way of life in the county's Democratic politics. In the spring or summer primaries it determined which faction's candidates would be nominated; in the fall, vote-buying was absolutely necessary in order to defeat the Populists. After the 1896 county Democratic primary, which produced a number of progressive victories, a conservative described the election. The primary, he wrote, "developed into one of the grandest farces ever perpetrated on the Democratic Party in Milam County. Practically no test was required. Republicans, Populists, negroes and Mexicans voted, regardless of politics and pledges." Despite the fact that his side had done well in the election, a progressive editor from Cameron echoed the same sentiments: "It is a shame," he wrote, "There being no test, negroes, Republicans and Populists voting in the primaries without question, I consider the primaries a rape on the Democratic Party in Milam County." Some of this cross-voting of non-Democrats in the Democratic primary may have been a calculated attempt on the part of Populists and Republicans to send the weakest possible Democrat against them into the general election. However, most of it—especially among African Americans—was simply the result of Democratic chicanery. In any case, Milam's progressive Democrats knew that if the county party barred returning Populists from voting in Democratic primaries, conservatives would retain the upper hand. Consequently, unlike neighboring Brazos County and many other counties, Milam's progressives kept their Democratic primaries open in 1896, 1898, and 1898 to all voters regardless of past political affiliation.[43]

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1898 county Democratic primary at fifty cents a head. Following the 1900 primary, the Populist press reported that on election afternoon "the price of votes advanced and we were told by good democrats that as high as $6 [apiece] was paid for votes. . . . Negroes were voted like sheep."[44] Fraud notwithstanding, the biggest question facing Milam County politicians of all parties at the turn of the century was the future of the Populists. Although there were no *legal* impediments to Populists returning to the Democratic Party, many of them still hesitated to surrender their crusade. And as long as the Populists remained outside the Democratic Party, the conservative Democrats would maintain their powerful position and would continue to elect conservative candidates such as State Representative McAnally.

The Democrats had openly courted the Populists as early as 1895. In January of that year, Macune assumed editorship of the *Milam News,* published in Cameron. He officially claimed the *News* to be nonpartisan, but he nonetheless openly supported the People's Party. By mid-1895 Macune's paper was on shaky financial footing, and several investors—including at least two prominent progressive Democrats—became partners in the venture. Soon thereafter Macune reemphasized his own personal political position by enrolling in Milam's Populist club. When conservative editor McAnally of the rival *Cameron Herald* castigated both Macune and his progressive Democratic partners for consorting with each other across party lines and betraying their respective parties, none other than Progressive leader Monta Moore stepped in and publicly defended the deal.[45] After the 1896 elections, progressive Democrats stepped up their appeals to the Populists to return to the Democratic fold. Facing hopeless odds on their own, many Populists responded positively. The only countywide Populist officeholder—County Treasurer W. A. Nabours—severed his Populist ties to seek reelection in 1898 as an independent. Since his opponent was a prominent conservative Democrat, Nabours no doubt hoped to poll the votes both of Populists and progressive Democrats.[46]

Even more significant for the progressives was the gradual conversion of local Populist newspaper editor William M. Ferguson of the *Rockdale Messenger*. Immediately following the 1898 election, Ferguson began trying gently to convince fellow Populists that nothing more could be accomplished by maintaining the local Populist organization. Progressive Democrats had embraced a number of the less radical Populist programs, including free silver and direct legislation. "[I]f the Bryan democracy makes as great a stride toward us in 1900 as it did in 1896," Ferguson argued, "We may shake hands . . . across the bloody chasm." Ferguson's

increasing receptiveness to progressive overtures was particularly significant because in 1898 he was serving on the Populist state executive committee.[47]

As the 1900 campaign season drew nearer, Populist moderates such as Ferguson and progressive Democrats such as Moore stepped up efforts to engineer a return of the Populists to the Democratic Party. In January 1900 Ferguson urged his party not to nominate a ticket for county and precinct offices. Another prominent local Populist agreed, saying, "Among the democrats we have some preference. Let it be a democratic fight in the county. Let us get our forces as near together as possible and the least objectionable man put him in the office."[48]

Despite such pleas, not all Populists agreed. County chairman Shelton spoke for the radical Populists who refused to compromise any part of the third-party platform. Never one to mince words, he described a Populist returning to the Democratic Party as a "suck-egg dog . . . whining back to the [Democrats] who . . . pat him on the head, only . . . to see him wag his tail and get down on his belly and crawl up to them like a lick-spittle, and lick the nasty political democratic snot off their feet." "I may go down to h—l," he thundered at his opponents, "but I'll never go back to you."[49]

Shelton managed to persuade his fellow Populists to field a slate of county candidates in the 1900 general election, but his task grew increasingly difficult. During that election local progressive Democrats would openly appeal for Populist support against conservative opponents.[50] After the spring Democratic primary resulted in the nomination of more conservatives, Populist editor Ferguson editorialized bitterly about the methods the conservative V. B. Hudson used to defeat progressive Democrat Moore in his campaign for district attorney. In his praise of Moore and his criticism of the conservatives' fraudulent methods, the Populist editor did everything short of actually endorsing the progressive Democrat for an independent race in the general election.[51]

With the conservatives' considerable financial resources and superior control over the black vote, it appeared they would continue defeating progressives in the primaries. What the progressive Democrats needed most was a way to clean up their party's spring elections. Securing fair elections would also play a key role in luring the obstinate Populists back into the fold. Texas Populists were so embittered over the widespread fraud used by Democrats against them that electoral reform had become one of their paramount concerns. Reforming the election process would thus serve as a show of good faith on the part of progressive Democrats

that they were serious about according the former Populists an honored place in the Democratic Party.[52] During the 1900 spring campaign, a local Populist explained why his hopes for reform were dim: "[I]f you have got plenty of money and whisky . . . you can run for office . . . [but] no man can get an office in Milam County without plenty of money."[53]

Both progressive Democrats and Populists realized that this state of affairs could be changed by eliminating black voting. Populist appeals to blacks had mostly failed, and Populists with some justification believed that the purchasable black vote had been the key to their defeat both in county and statewide elections. Although the progressive Democrats had themselves apparently profited in the mid-1890s from fraudulently cast black ballots, they, like the Populists, had increasingly suffered defeat at the hands of their own party's conservative faction through these corrupt methods. With the Populist threat now safely behind them, the progressives could lure wavering Populists back into the Democratic Party with promises of fair play and strike a blow at the conservatives by mounting a campaign to end black voting.

Populist editor Ferguson began calling for adoption of a nonpartisan white man's primary at the county level in 1898. He renewed the agitation in 1900. "A white man's union, in which any man can enter the lists and run a clean fair race without fear of boodle and boodlers [vote-buying] . . . is the solution of a long unsolved question," Ferguson argued. It would "place the expressed will of the people in the ascendancy, thereby robbing the professional schemer and politician of his power on election day."[54] That spring the progressive Democrats took up the cause of whites-only local elections and managed to place a white primary referendum on the countywide Democratic primary ballot. That was good enough for many old Populists, and with considerable help from Populists crossing party lines to vote in the Democratic primary, blacks were officially barred from participating in future primaries by a vote of 3,042 to 1,564. Only three of the ten precincts polled majorities in favor of black voting. Not surprisingly, two of these were black-majority Precinct 2 and the city of Cameron. More than any other areas, these were strongholds of conservative Democrats who stood to lose the most by the disfranchisement of blacks. With only one exception, in every precinct where Populists won or ran close races throughout the 1890s, the margin of victory for the white primary was better than two to one.[55]

Although progressive Democrats spearheaded the drive to exclude blacks from the Democratic primary, there can be no doubt that many

Populists joined the effort. Ferguson gave this account of the 1900 primary: "The best joke on the Democrats occurred in precinct No. 3. . .; the populists of that beat declared they would go in and vote the negro out. And they did so. . . . At Hamilton Chapel and Sandy Creek [two heavily Populist voting boxes in Precinct 4] almost every Populist participated." In two other Populist strongholds the editor had "heard populists say beforehand that many, if not all were going into the primaries." As it turned out, Populists in these precincts not only voted to purge future Democratic primaries of black voters but also succeeded in nominating several ex-Populists to run for local offices as Democrats in the general election. The Populist return to the Democratic Party had begun in earnest.[56]

The adoption of the white primary in 1900 had signaled the start of a new era of cooperation between Populists and progressive Democrats, but that beginning had not been strong enough to break the hold of the conservatives on most countywide offices. Now that the progressives had invited the Populists back into the reform coalition by purging blacks from the primaries, those same Democrats would have to show they were still serious about reform. In 1900 about one-third of the Populists remained actively loyal to the third party, and they still put out their own ticket in the general election.[57] Since the white primary would not go into effect until 1902, the conservatives had again managed to profit from fraud in the black precincts.

The most obvious symbol of the conservative Democrats' continuing strength in 1900 was the reelection of conservative McAnally as Milam County's representative to the legislature, a situation that galled the progressive Democrats. McAnally and progressive leader Moore had been at each other's throats since 1895, when McAnally condemned Moore for his friendship with Macune. In early 1902, with the county's first whites-only Democratic primary approaching, Moore and his allies mounted a major campaign to defeat McAnally for reelection to the House. McAnally himself provided the reform forces with the ammunition they needed. In January 1902 he introduced a bill in the legislature establishing heavy fines for farm tenants or sharecroppers who violated their written or verbal contracts with landlords. If a farmer could not pay the fine, a jail term was possible.[58]

When the bill was made public, the progressive Democratic press in Milam County exploded in anger. "It is the most henious [*sic*] monster I believe I ever saw," wrote an incensed farmer. "The measure at once establishes a class in this country." The progressive press bristled with words like "slavery," "peonage," and "serfdom" in describing the bill.

Moore harshly criticized McAnally's bill in public. On the eve of the Democratic primary, headlines asked:

> "RENTERS, SHARECROPPERS, LABORERS!
> WILL YOU VOTE YOURSELVES SLAVERY?
> LABORING MAN'S PEON ACT
> If no, go to the Polls Saturday and
> Vote against them."[59]

In the first all-white primary that March, the coalition of progressive Democrats and ex-Populists buried McAnally by a nearly two-to-one margin, electing progressive Democrat G. S. Miller.[60] And in the clearest sign yet of the successful Populist-progressive Democratic rapprochement, former Populist county treasurer W. A. Nabours won the Democratic nomination for his old office. Considering that some several hundred of the Populists (led by the obstinate radical Shelton) still opposed the dissolution of the People's Party, the turnout in the primary was a remarkable 67 percent. This was true even in the old Populist strongholds. For example, in the staunchly Populist eighth precinct, where in 1894 only 25 percent of voters had cast Democratic ballots, 65 percent of the eligible (white) voters now participated in the Democratic primary. Clearly large numbers of Populists—probably a majority—returned to the Democratic Party.[61]

That fall's general election erased any lingering doubts about the new coalition's viability. When a corporal's guard of hard-core Populists ran prominent third-party leader B. F. Williams against progressive Democrat G. S. Miller for the state representative's seat, Miller destroyed the old Populist, carrying every justice precinct and winning thirty-eight of the forty-three individual voting boxes. Even in the bastions of Populism, rural Precincts Four and Eight, Miller handily won. The Populists were able to muster only about 700 votes out of 3,500 cast.[62]

At the same time that the progressive Democrats were orchestrating a rapprochement between themselves and the Populists via the local white primary, Democrats in Austin were pressing a poll tax amendment through the legislature. Although progressive Democrats in the legislature spearheaded the drive for the poll tax—and even some Populist leaders viewed it as a reform that would purify the ballot—Milam's poor white farmers broke with their leaders and opposed it, recognizing that while it would indeed eliminate the "corrupt" black vote, it would also eliminate many impoverished whites from the electorate. Why run the risk of disfranchising poor whites, they reasoned, when those voters who

"deserved" to be disfranchised—African Americans—had already been eliminated by the county's white primary rule?[63]

In the 1902 general election the poll tax amendment was placed before voters for approval. When the vote was tallied in Milam County, it was clear that voters had perceived a huge difference between the white primary and the poll tax. Whereas the vote on the white primary two years earlier had carried easily by a two-to-one margin, the poll tax referendum had divided the county almost evenly, winning approval by a mere fifty-three votes out of 3,461 cast. Predictably, the poll tax had met its strongest opposition in those areas where Populists had done well in the nineties. Moreover, a majority of the precincts that approved the poll tax had just as strongly opposed the adoption of the white primary two years earlier.

This is best demonstrated by looking at a typical Populist voting box, the New Salem box in Justice Precinct Four. At New Salem (which had voted for Populist gubernatorial candidate Thomas Nugent 142–27 over his two opponents in 1894), the vote against the poll tax was an overwhelming 64–8. New Salem was so staunchly Populist that many voters had stayed home in the Democrats' white primary referendum two years earlier, but of those Democrats and Populists who did participate, the vote had been a decisive 29–11 in favor of the white primary. Obviously some of these were old Populists, since the Democrats had never been able to poll forty votes on their own. But the 64–8 vote against the poll tax can best be assessed by comparing it to the other significant vote that took place the same day: the state representative race between the Populist Williams and the progressive Democrat Miller. In that contest, New Salem's seventy-two voters—who agreed almost unanimously on their distaste for the poll tax—gave Williams a narrow 39–33 victory over Miller. The lessons from this are clear: in an isolated, poor white farming community like New Salem, where Populism dominated in the 1890s, many Populists who remained in the electorate after the turn of the century returned to the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, voted the black man out of it, and then joined forces with the few remaining Populists to resist the poll tax.

No doubt many poor white men who had viewed the purging of African Americans from the Democratic primary as an avenue toward reform now felt betrayed by the party's attempt to exclude poor whites from the restored Democratic reform coalition. The poll tax referendum results from the black-majority Second Precinct illustrate this point; in this conservative Democratic precinct where voter turnout (with a large

black vote) had consistently been more than seven hundred during the 1890s, the vote in 1902 was 292–52 in favor of the poll tax. At two of the Second Precinct voting boxes in the Brazos bottom—Jones Prairie and Baileyville—the combined vote for the poll tax was 166–0. Now that the conservative white Democrats of the Second Precinct no longer had a bloc of black votes to manipulate, they were not about to surrender whatever power they had left to an unbeatable majority controlled by Populists and progressive Democrats.

Despite the opposition of many voters in the old Populist strongholds to the poll tax, and the correspondingly heavy support given to it by black-belt planters, the results of the poll tax referendum should not be read exclusively as an elitist counterrevolution by conservative Democrats against their more reformist neighbors. The conservatives alone could never have mustered the slender majority that the poll tax received in Milam County. They enjoyed the assistance of at least a minority of the progressive Democrats, who saw the amendment as yet further insurance against fraud from whatever source. Realizing that many in the new reform coalition (the ex-Populists at New Salem, for example) were against the poll tax, the editor of the *Rockdale Reporter,* a progressive Democratic paper, denounced as a "heretic" any Democrat who refused to support the tax. He contended that "by requiring a tax receipt secured six months or more before election, fraudulent voting can be prevented almost entirely. No sharp candidate will buy tax receipts for purchasable voters six or eight months in advance. . . . The amendment will prevent fraudulent voting. There is no reasonable doubt as to that."[64]

In all likelihood, conservative planters and reform-minded farmers alike recognized that the poll tax would only prevent the return to the electorate of the poorest of tenant farmers, black and white, and not significantly change the existing political equation. Voter turnout figures from the mid-1890s to the mid-1900s in the county certainly bear out such a conclusion. Voter participation had reached all-time highs in the mid-nineties. From 5,589 votes cast in the 1894 gubernatorial election, turnout peaked at 7,119 in 1896. Thereafter the decline in turnout had been steady: 5,646 in 1898; 4,570 in 1900; and 3,461 in 1902, when voters approved the poll tax. Thus the total number of votes cast in the last election before the poll tax went into effect was almost exactly half of what it had been in 1896. Rather than beginning a sharp decline in actual voter turnout, passage of the poll tax actually marked a stabilization in the number of citizens who voted. To be sure, the turnout in the general election continued to plummet after 1902 (2,641 in the 1904

gubernatorial race; 1,360 in 1906), but that was because almost all meaningful political decisions now took place in the Democratic primaries; the general election simply elicited little interest. On the other hand, turnout in the Democratic primaries actually increased in the first two elections after the poll tax went into effect (3,451 voted in the 1902 general election's poll tax referendum; 4,026 in the 1904 Democratic primary; 3,674 in the 1906 primary). Likewise, the number of poll taxes paid in 1904 exceeded by nearly eight hundred the turnout in the 1902 referendum that approved the tax. And by 1907 the number of men paying the poll tax had increased, despite a decline in the county's population.[65]

The white primary had eliminated black voters; the destruction of Populism had caused many whites to drop from the electorate. In other words, disfranchisement—at least measured in terms of voter turnout before and after the enactment of the poll tax—had clearly been a *fait accompli* in Milam County; the poll tax only helped to solidify and institutionalize what had already happened.[66]

The effective campaign for the white primary and the successful courting of Populist voters by the progressive Democrats set in motion the progressives' final drive to supremacy in Milam County. In the race for attorney general, the most important statewide race of 1904, the county's voters overwhelmingly supported progressive R. V. Davidson. In countywide races, the conservative McAnally, who championed the "nefarious" landlord and tenant bill and incurred the wrath of progressive Democrats two years earlier, again ran for representative in a three-man contest and finished third. A year after the election, an employee of McAnally's cut the politico's throat in broad daylight on a Cameron street (it was eventually ruled justifiable homicide). The conservative district attorney V. B. Hudson, whose corrupt electioneering in 1900 had inspired so much criticism in the progressive press, also went down to defeat. Progressive Democrat Jeff D. Kemp, one of Macune's partners in the *Milam News* in 1895, was elected county clerk. And former Populist Nabours was now so popular with Democratic voters that he ran unopposed for another term as county treasurer.[67]

In 1906, the day that Milam's progressive coalition had long awaited finally arrived. Thomas M. Campbell won the governorship and swept the progressive wing of the Democratic Party to power in Texas. In the spring primary, four candidates had run for governor. All four claimed credentials as reformers, but only two—Campbell and Oscar B. Colquitt—were original Hogg supporters; they clearly were the most progressive. The results of the election were an unequivocal statement of

the county's political sentiments. With widespread support from the old Populists who were still in the electorate, Campbell and Colquitt together polled 79 percent of all votes cast in Milam County. The most conservative candidate, C. K. Bell, who ran with the endorsement of Gov. S. W. T. Lanham, ran dead last in the county with 9 percent of the vote.[68]

The legislature elected in November 1906 has been called "the most reform minded legislature in Texas history." It outlawed speculation in agricultural futures; eased taxes on farmers while increasing the burden on banks, railroads, and other corporate interests; and passed the so-called "Hogg Amendments" prohibiting insolvent corporations from doing business in Texas, outlawing corporate contributions to political campaigns, and banning railroads from distributing free passes to politicians. Populists had played no small part in these achievements.[69]

After 1906, Populism was just a memory in Milam County. But from the ruins of Populism emerged a coalition of progressive Democrats and former Populists that triumphed over all challengers. Progressivism may have owed much of its character to urban, middle-class influences, but Milam County's experience suggests that it also enjoyed strong support from farmers, including many of those who had once supported the People's Party. Disfranchisement played a key role in the rise of the local progressive coalition. Progressive Democrats extended an offer of fair play to Populists in the guise of a whites-only Democratic primary, and many white Populists who had never been entirely comfortable with their party's overtures toward African Americans—and who blamed Populism's defeat on black voting—responded positively to that offer. They helped vote blacks out of the primaries and then returned in sizable numbers to the Democratic Party, where their desire to rein in the power of railroads, banks, furnishing merchants, and landlords found new expression in the progressive legislation of the Campbell administration and its successors. Meanwhile, the relatively small body of Populists who could not countenance a surrender of Populism's most radically egalitarian measures either drifted into the Socialist Party or quit the electorate in frustration and disillusionment. Progressivism in Milam County, like its counterparts at the state, regional, and national levels, would be a relatively tame affair compared to the rambunctious agitation of the Populist era, and it would come at considerable cost to democracy—as Milam's African-American citizens would surely have attested.

In his conclusion to *Grass-Roots Reconstruction in Texas*, Randolph B. Campbell urged his readers to "Be very careful in generalizing about events and developments . . . in so large and varied a state." This caveat

holds true for the preceding study. Milam County should not be assumed to be a perfect microcosm of a whole state or region, although there are reasons to believe that much of what happened there was repeated in many other places. If that proves to be the case, then future studies may sustain the contention that Populists played a significant role—both for good and for ill—in shaping the politics of southern progressivism in the twentieth century.[70]

Notes

1. Randolph B. Campbell, *Grass-Roots Reconstruction in Texas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 1; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South,* 1877–1913 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), esp. Chap. 14. Overviews of southern progressivism include Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972); Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

2. Woodward and Kirby quoted in Samuel L. Webb, "Southern Politics in the Age of Populism and Progressivism: A Historiographical Essay," in John B. Boles, ed., *A Companion to the American South* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 330.

3. Campbell, *Grass-Roots Reconstruction,* 6.

4. State and local studies that specifically examine the relationship between Populism and progressivism include: Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Michael Magliarai, "What Happened to the Populist Vote? A California Case Study," *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (1995): 389–412; Samuel L. Webb, *Two-Party Politics in the One-Party South: Alabama's Hill Country, 1874–1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997); Webb, "From Independents to Populists to Progressive Republicans: The Case of Chilton County, Alabama, 1880–1920" *Journal of Southern History* 59 (1993): 707–36; Jeffrey J. Crow, "Populism to Progressivism in North Carolina: Governor Daniel Russell and His War on the Southern Railway Company," *Historian* 37 (1975): 649–67; Gene Clanton, "Populism, Progressivism, and Equality: The Kansas Paradigm," *Agricultural*

History 51 (1977): 559–81; Robert W. Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics, 1885–1915* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981). For Texas, see Alwyn Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform: Texas Politics, 1876–1906* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); and Worth Robert Miller, "Building a Progressive Coalition in Texas: The Populist-Reform Democrat Rapprochement, 1900–1907," Journal of Southern History 52 (1986): 163–82.

5. I have taken the 1900 manuscript population census for Milam County and put into digital form the race, occupation, ethnicity, and land-owning status (whether land is rented or owned, and if it is owned, whether it is mortgaged or not) for every adult (age twenty-one and over) male in the county (9,071 total). Of those who were listed as "farmers," 63 percent rented their farms. This figure excludes those who were listed as "farm laborers," for many of these were sons and other relatives of farm owners who lived and worked on their families' farms. When farm laborers are added to renters, the proportion of people who worked on farms they did not own is 73 percent. Broken down by race, this figure was 68 percent for whites and 88 percent for blacks. African Americans comprised 26 percent of the adult males in the county. The Census Office's published figures on tenancy differ somewhat from my figures, because the census's published figures for each county are based upon numbers of *farms* that are operated by renters or owners, rather than the number of adult male *individuals* (i. e., eligible voters) who farm for a living. However, the numbers are very close: for 1900, the published percentage of Milam County farms operated by non-owners was 61 percent, compared to my 63 percent of adult male "farmers" who worked other people's land. The Census Office's published percentage of farms operated by tenants was 10 percent lower for 1890 than for 1900. See United States Census Office, *Statistics of Agriculture, Eleventh Census, 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), 186–87; United States Census Office, *Twelfth Census, 1900, Agriculture, Part I* (Washington, D.C.: United States Census Office, 1902), 128–29.

6. List of Granges compiled by the late Robert A. Calvert of Texas A&M University from master list, National Grange Headquarters, Washington, D.C., in possession of the author; *Rockdale Messenger,* June 20, 1889; *Cameron Herald,* Apr. 11, 1895. There were twenty-three subordinate Granges in Milam County during the 1870s and 1880s. On the Farmers' Alliance in Texas, see Donna A. Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion, The Rise and Fall of the Southern Farmers Alliance and People's Party*

in Texas (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Robert C. McMath Jr., *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Theodore Mitchell, *Political Education in the Southern Farmers' Alliance,* 1887–1900 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

6. On Macune's career see Charles W. Macune Jr., "The Wellsprings of a Populist: Dr. Charles W. Macune before 1886," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 90 (1986): 139–58; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise;* Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33–38.

8. William T. Carter, *et al., Soil Survey of Milam County, Texas* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, 1925).

9. I have taken a 20 percent sample of landowners (excluding those who owned only town lots) from the Milam County tax rolls for 1900 and calculated average farm size, average value of farmland, average total taxable property, and other data for each commissioner's precinct (or "beat," as they were commonly called). The best way to gauge the differential in land values between the two major geographical regions is to compare data for Beat Two, which lay almost entirely in the black-prairie region and also contained rich alluvial land along the Brazos River, and Beat Four, which lay primarily in the sandy soil of southwest Milam County. The average landowner in Beat Two owned 192 acres valuated at $7.97 per acre on average. The average landowner in Beat Four owned 157 acres valuated at $4.11 per acre. The commissioners' beats were not identical to the justice precincts described later in this essay (see FN 22), as one beat could be composed of multiple precincts.

10. Seventy-six percent of the adult males in the county were listed on the 1900 census as farmers or farm laborers.

11. For a treatment of these divisions at the state level, see Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform.* In this study I have chosen to identify the two Democratic factions by the names which are descriptively the most accurate if somewhat anachronistic: "conservative" and "progressive" Democrats. Contemporary Texans most often referred to the conservative faction as "Sound Money Democrats," "Gold Democrats," the pejorative "Goldbugs," and occasionally "Bourbon Democrats." The progressive faction was variously known as the "Silver Democrats," "Reform Democrats," or "Silverites." Despite identification of the factions with

gold or silver, it should be understood that the two factions disagreed over railroad regulation, tenant farmer legislation, and many other issues of state and local importance, and not just over federal monetary policy.

12. Major studies of Populism at the national level include John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931); Gene Clanton, *Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890–1900* (Boston: Twayne, 1991); Robert C. McMath Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877–1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); Postel, *Populist Vision*, and Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*. For Texas Populism, see Roscoe Martin, *The People's Party in Texas: A Study in Third-Party Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1933; rpt. ed., 1970); and Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion.* Surveying a wide range of sources, I have been able positively to identify ten Populist candidates in Milam County who were previously leaders in the Alliance. They are: J. M. Alexander, I. N. Barber, B. C. Barrett, C. N. Fokes, J. B. Gilliland, J. A. Kirkman, Antone Lesovsky, J. A. Lincoln, R. S. Murff, and W. A. Nabours. No doubt many, if not most, other Populist leaders also were Alliancemen before the formation of the People's Party.

13. For examples of other states where similar divisions existed and where African Americans held the balance of power, see Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and James Beeby, *Revolt of the Tar Heels: The North Carolina Populist Movement, 1890–1901* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

14. *Galveston Daily News,* May 9, June 5, 1892.

15. Ibid., July 22, 1892.

16. *Galveston Daily News,* May 24, June 3, 8, July 17, 20, Aug. 2, 5, 14, 1892.

17. Ibid., Aug. 2, 1892, Oct. 29, 1894; *Austin Statesman,* July 29, 1892.

18. There is a voluminous literature on African Americans and Populism. Major works include Lawrence Goodwyn, "Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study," *American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 1,436–56; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise;* Woodward, *Origins of the New South*; Gregg Cantrell and D. Scott Barton, "Texas Populists and the Failure of Biracial Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 60 (1989): 662–63; William H. Chafe, "The Negro and Populism: A Kansas Case Study," *Journal of Southern History* 34 (1968): 402–19; Gerald H. Gaither, *Blacks and the Populist Revolt: Ballots and Bigotry in the "New*

South" (University: University of Alabama Press, 1977); Robert M. Saunders, "Southern Populists and the Negro, 1893–1895," *Journal of Negro History* 54 (1969): 240–61; Herbert Shapiro, "The Populists and the Negro: A Reconsideration," in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *The Making of Black America: Essays in Negro Life and History* (2 vols.; New York: Atheneum, 1969), 2: 27–36; R. Jean Simms-Brown, "Populism and Black Americans: Constructive or Destructive?," *Journal of Negro History* 65 (1980): 349–60; Omar H. Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886–1900* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003): 431–40; Postel, *Populist Vision*, 173–220.

19. *Galveston Daily News,* June 16, 1892.

20. Ibid., Aug.14, 26, Sept. 13, 21, 1892. On Rayner's career, see Gregg Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Postel, 188–93.

21. Milam County Election Returns, Volume 2, Milam County Courthouse, Cameron, Tex. All of the subsequent election returns, unless otherwise noted, are from Volume 2 (1890–1898) or Volume 3 (1900–1908) of the county election returns and will not be cited individually.

22. The eight justice precincts formed the basic political units of Milam County. The Census Bureau fortunately based its enumeration districts on these precincts. In some cases, one precinct comprised one enumeration district. In other cases, up to four enumeration districts were contained in one precinct. However, each of the twenty enumeration districts lay entirely within the boundaries of one of the eight precincts. Using the 1900 manuscript census of population, I compiled a data set for each precinct containing the race and occupation of each of the county's 9,071 eligible voters (males age twenty-one or over). Enumeration districts are described in the Census Enumeration District Descriptions, Twelfth Census, 1900 (Tenth Supervisor's District, Texas), Record Group 29, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Within each justice precinct there were between two and twelve voting precincts. County commissioners were responsible for establishing sites for voting boxes and defining boundaries. New precincts were established or old ones abolished virtually every year. However, like the enumeration districts, each of the voting precincts lay entirely within the boundaries of one of the eight justice precincts. In order to match election returns with census data, the election returns from each voting box in a given justice precinct were

added together to provide justice-precinct-level returns. For purposes of analysis, the towns of Cameron and Rockdale have been considered separately from their respective precincts (1 and 4). It is possible to analyze them separately because each town had its own enumeration districts and voting boxes. Throughout this essay, therefore, when voting patterns in Precincts 1 and 4 are mentioned, unless otherwise specified I will be referring to those precincts *exclusive* of their respective towns. Essentially, this paper will divide Milam County into ten units of analysis: Precincts 1 (excluding Cameron), 2, 3, 4 (excluding Rockdale), 5, 6, 7, 8, Cameron, and Rockdale. Unless otherwise stated, in this paper the word "precinct" will mean the justice precincts plus the two towns. Descriptions of voting precinct boundaries and justice precinct boundaries can be found in the Commissioner's Court Minutes, Milam County Clerk's Office, County Courthouse, Cameron, Tex. The most consistently Populist precincts were 4 (52 percent tenancy) and 8 (53 percent tenancy), both well below the county average (63 percent). The most consistently Democratic precincts (excepting the two urban precincts, Rockdale and Cameron) were 2 (73 percent tenancy) and 7 (69 percent tenancy), both well above the county average.

23. The results of the presidential vote in Cameron and Rockdale (combined) were: Democratic, 62 percent; Republican, 28 percent; Populist, 11 percent. In the gubernatorial contest between James S. Hogg, George Clark, and Thomas L. Nugent, Hogg received 47 percent of the urban vote to Clark's 42 percent and Nugent's 11 percent. The Populists did better in two-way races where there was no Republican ticket, but they still lost by substantial margins in the towns.

24. *Galveston Daily News,* Aug. 20, 1894.

25. Reportedly only seven votes were cast in favor of endorsing the Populist county ticket; see *Galveston Daily News,* Sept. 24, 26, 1894.

26. Ibid., Sept. 26, Oct. 5,1894.

27. Ibid., Oct. 14, 16, 1894.

28. In 1892 the Populists won 11 percent of the town vote and 45 percent of the country vote; in 1894 they polled 13 percent of the town vote and 53 percent of the country vote (these comparisons are of 1892 presidential race and 1894 gubernatorial race—the only major races in which all three parties placed tickets in the field).

29. Even more distressing for the Populists was their failure to carry Precinct 2 in any of the two-way races between Democrats and Populists. If black Republicans were voting Populist in those races, it was not in large enough numbers to affect the outcome.

30. W. A. Nabours won election to the county treasurer's office in 1894 by a narrow 112-vote margin. The following year, the Milam County Bank, in which Nabours had deposited a large sum of the county's funds, went broke. Rather than leave his bond-signers to pay the bill, Nabours and his brother sold their farms and repaid the county out of their own pockets. In acknowledgement of this extraordinary gesture, the voters re-elected the Populist treasurer with a staggering 89 percent of the vote. I am grateful to two relatives of Nabours, Frances Baldwin of Cameron and Shirley Z. Gall of Gage, Okla., for sharing biographical information on him. Also see *Cameron Herald,* Apr. 11, 1895.

31. *Cameron Herald,* July 11, 25, Aug. 1, 1895; *Galveston Daily News,* Aug. 5, 6, 30, 1895.

32. The two Democratic factions of Milam County were badly divided in 1896, holding separate primaries and nominating conventions and engaging in much harsh rhetoric. See, for example, *Galveston Daily News,* Aug. 5, 6, 31, 1895, May 9, June 20, July 17, Aug. 6, Sept. 3, 1896; *Houston Post,* Oct. 28, 1896.

33. *Galveston Daily News*, July 27, 1896.

34. Ibid., Aug. 10, 1896.

35. Ibid., Sept. 22, Oct. 1, 28, 1896.

36. Fourteen percent of the county's voters stayed with the Bryan-Watson Populist ticket, even though it had no chance of winning.

37. At the precinct level, the Populists elected one justice of the peace, two constables, and either one or two county commissioners (the party affiliation of the victorious commissioner in Precinct 3 is unclear from the records).

38. In the county judge race, progressive Democrat W. M. McGregor defeated Populist L. N. Barber, 4,044 to 2,970; in the 62nd District State Representative race, progressive Democrat Nat H. Tracy defeated Populist A. C. Isaacs, 4,013 to 2,949.

39. For a biographical sketch of Moore, see L. E. Daniell, ed., *Personnel of the Texas State Government, with Sketches of Distinguished Texans* (Austin: Press of the City Printing Co., 1887), 202; *Cameron Herald,* Apr. 11, 1895. Perhaps more influential, but less active in progressive Democratic affairs, was Rockdale's Nat H. Tracy, a lawyer, farmer, and merchant who had also been a Confederate captain. For a biographical sketch of Tracy, see *History of Texas Together with a Biographical History of Milam, Williamson, Bastrop, Travis, Lee and Burleson Counties* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing, 1893), 843–46. Tracy was the brother of prominent Populist leader Harry Tracy of Dallas.

40. Shelton's account of his life appears in the *Rockdale Messenger,* Nov. 3, 1898. Despite his stature in the Alliance, C. W. Macune rarely played a leading role in Populist politics in his home county, even though he returned to Cameron in the mid-1890s and for a while publicly supported Populism. The other major Populist leader was A. C. Isaacs, a gray-bearded Tennessean in his seventies who had practiced medicine with mixed success before eventually becoming a prosperous farmer. Isaacs had served one term in the state legislature in the 1880s. For a sketch of Isaacs, see *History of Texas Together with a Biographical History,* 759–80. Also important in Milam Populist circles was William M. Ferguson. Ferguson never sought public office but as the editor of the *Rockdale Messenger* and member of the Populist state executive committee in 1898 he wielded considerable influence. Ferguson was an old Greenbacker from the 1870s and a Grange lecturer. His role in county politics will be discussed later in this study.

41. One Hefley brother, John M., was president of Cameron's First National Bank. Another, James S., was described in this manner by a contemporary: "The subject of this sketch is a money-maker. His right to be so designated is unquestioned." See *History of Texas Together with a Biographical History,* 375–76, 423–26, 501; *Cameron Herald,* Apr. 1, 1895.

42. The progressive faction managed to elect Monta Moore and Nat Tracy to represent the county in the state House of Representatives in 1894 and 1896, respectively. Conservatives held a number of county and precinct offices. Among these was the important post of county sheriff, which was held by John H. Bickett from 1893 to 1897. In 1895 Bickett served as chair of the eleventh senatorial district's "Sound Money" (i.e., conservative) Democrats. See *Galveston Daily News,* Aug. 31, 1895.

43. In some Texas counties after 1896 conservative Democrats prevented a return of the Populists to the Democratic Party by passing test oaths that barred anyone who had not voted Democratic in the past from voting in future Democratic primaries. This was done in adjacent Robertson County; see *Kosse Cyclone,* Sept. 23, 1897. Such an oath was never passed in Milam County. In 1896, 1898, and 1900 no tests were required for voting in the primaries. After the adoption of the white primary in 1900, the county Democratic Party required the following oath: "I am a white man and a Democrat, and I hereby pledge my honor that I will support the nominees of the Democratic Party from Constable to Governor." This would not have been satisfactory to either Democratic faction before 1900. The conservatives would have opposed it because

it eliminated critical black votes; progressives would have opposed it because it would have eliminated wavering Populists who might want to vote for some progressive Democrats in the primary while reserving the right to vote for some Populists in the general election. See *Rockdale Reporter,* Jan. 23, 1902.

44. *Rockdale Messenger,* Apr. 12, May 10, 1900.

45. *Cameron Herald,* July 11, 25, Aug. 1, 1895.

46. Ibid., Nov. 3, 1898; *Galveston Daily News,* Aug. 31, 1895, June 4,1896. W. A. Nabours lost the county treasurer's race in 1898 to the conservative Democratic ex-sheriff John H. Bickett, but by 1902 Nabours rejoined the Democratic Party and won three more consecutive terms as county treasurer. *See Rockdale Reporter,* Mar. 27, 1902, July 21, 1904, Aug. 9, 1906, all from original editions in the *Reporter* offices, Rockdale, Texas.

47. *Rockdale Messenger,* Nov. 17, 1898.

48. Ferguson and the *Messenger* also began to support those wings of the state and national People's Party that advocated fusion with Bryan Democrats. See *Rockdale Messenger,* Feb. 15, 22, 1900.

49. Ibid., December 15, 1898. J. D. Shelton and a corporal's guard of diehard Populists still maintained the party organization as late as 1904; see *Rockdale Reporter,* June 2, 1904.

50. See announcements by A. J. Lewis, L. C. McBride, and W. J. Porter in *Rockdale Messenger,* Mar. 1, 8, Apr. 12, 1900. After 1900 the Democrats would be opposed in general elections only by a Populist-dominated Independent ticket, which never won.

51. *Rockdale Messenger,* May 31, 1900.

52. Miller, "Building a Progressive Coalition," 172–73.

53. *Rockdale Messenger,* Apr. 12, 1900.

54. *Rockdale Messenger,* June 29, 1898, Mar. 8, Apr. 12, May 17, 1900. The precedent for an all-white primary had already been established in Milam County. Cameron and Rockdale had recently established a white primary for municipal elections. Significantly, the white primary in Rockdale in 1900 resulted in the election of progressive Democrat Nat H. Tracy as mayor.

55. The third precinct to support black voting was the small, isolated, staunchly Populist Precinct 8. In this precinct, 71 percent of those who voted chose to continue allowing blacks to participate in the primary. Several possible scenarios could account for this anomaly. Perhaps the few Democrats in the overwhelmingly Populist precinct were afraid of a Populist resurgence if the Democrats' black "allies" were disfranchised.

It is also possible that the ninety-nine votes against disfranchisement came from Populists who crossed party lines to vote in the Democratic primary. Precinct 8 was one of the most solidly Populist precincts and these voters might have harbored such resentment against progressive Democrats that they wished to see the progressives continue to be cheated by the conservatives. Finally, it is always possible that someone, for some reason, fraudulently manipulated the returns. Whatever the case, only 140 of 640 eligible voters in the precinct actually voted (a turnout of 22 percent), and this minuscule turnout seriously reduces the statistical significance of the pro-suffrage vote there. For the returns of the 1900 Democratic primary, see *Rockdale Messenger,* May 17, 1900.

56. *Rockdale Messenger,* May 10, 1900. To give a better indication of Populist support for reentry into the Democratic Party, it is useful to examine more closely the Hamilton Chapel and Sandy Creek voting boxes. In the 1894 congressional race between Populist L. N. Barber and Democrat George C. Pendleton, Pendleton polled a total of forty-five votes at the two boxes. In the 1900 Democratic primary vote on disfranchisement, the combined vote of the two boxes was 108–65 in favor of the white primary. While this does not prove conclusively that significant numbers of Populists in these precincts entered the Democratic primary in 1900 and voted for disfranchisement, it is highly suggestive of that result. (Note: this 108–65 figure includes returns from a third voting box—known as the Hord box—carved out of the Hamilton Chapel precinct between 1892 and 1900.) Significantly, Populist crossover votes only seemed to affect the white primary referendum; conservative Democrats still won most of the party's nominations in the primary. Apparently Populists were willing to help progressive Democrats exclude blacks from primaries, but they were not yet prepared to vote for candidates of the progressive Democrats. Returns are from the *Rockdale Messenger,* May 17, 1900.

57. The Populist ticket in 1900 was led by Allen Lewis, the party's candidate for sheriff. Lewis polled 1,188 votes; other Populist candidates polled somewhat fewer votes. In 1894 and 1896 the People's Party had polled about 3,000 votes in Milam County.

58. The text of the bill can be found in the *Rockdale Reporter,* Feb. 13, 1902.

59. *Rockdale Reporter,* Feb. 13, Mar. 6, 1902; *Cameron Herald,* Feb. 13, 1902.

60. Oscar F. McAnally received 36 percent of the votes cast. In Cameron, Rockdale, and the black-majority Precinct 2, he polled 58

percent of the votes. His combined total for all other precincts was a mere 26 percent. For election returns see *Rockdale Reporter.* Mar. 8, 1902. Progressive G. S. Miller of Gause won the race with 55 percent of the vote. A third progressive candidate, T. V. Weir, received 9 percent. McAnally charged that Monta Moore and Paul Keith, editor of the *Rockdale Reporter,* had conspired to defeat him. "The plan," wrote McAnally, "appears to be (Monta managing) . . . to keep one of these candidates at home and out of view of the voters, while the other is to make a still hunt in the southern portion of this county, with instructions to say all the mean things possible about me." Whether or not this was indeed the plan, the result was a resounding defeat for McAnally. See *Cameron Herald,* Mar. 6, 1902.

61. The 25 percent figure for Precinct 8 was the Democratic share of the vote in the 1894 gubernatorial election. There were approximately 6,757 eligible white voters in the county, of whom 67 percent voted in the 1902 Democratic primary. In each of the three precincts that consistently returned Populist majorities in the mid-1890s, the turnout was greater than 50 percent (of eligible white voters). Turnout was, of course, greater in the traditionally Democratic precincts, suggesting the Populist return to the Democratic Party was far from complete. Clearly, some Populists were still heeding chairman J. D. Shelton's pleas to Populists to stay out of the Democratic primaries. Estimates of the number of eligible voters (and hence voter turnout) in each precinct for 1892–1898 were derived in the following manner: first, the total population for each precinct and the two towns was taken from the 1890 and 1900 censuses. Then a straight-line interpolation was used to produce an estimate of total population per precinct for the years 1892, 1894, 1896, and 1898. Using these figures, the population of each precinct for these four years was expressed as a percentage of the 1900 population [e.g., the population of Precinct 2 was 6,974 (in 1900) and 6,592 (interpolated estimate for 1898), so the 1898 population figure was 95 percent (or .95) of the 1900 figure]. These percentages (for each precinct, 1892–1898) were then multiplied by the actual number of eligible voters per precinct in 1900 to obtain the estimated of eligible voters per precinct for 1892–1898 [e.g., using the .95 figure in the example above, .95 was multiplied by 1,605 (the estimated number of eligible voters in Precinct 2 in 1900) to produce an estimated 1,517 estimated eligible voters in Precinct 2 in 1898]. Thus the accuracy of the estimates of eligible voters for each precinct for the years 1892–1898 is subject to two assumptions: the estimates assume a constant rate of population growth in each precinct between 1890 and

1900, and they assume a constant ratio of eligible voters/total population. The first of these assumptions will have relatively little bearing on the years closest to 1890 and 1900 (i.e., 1892 and 1898) but will make middle-year estimates (1894 and 1896) somewhat less accurate. The second of these assumptions is very valid and should have little effect on the accuracy of the estimates. Overall, this method should produce very accurate estimates of the number of eligible voters in each precinct for each year between 1890 and 1900. For 1902, the 1900 figures have been used. The population of Milam County changed only slightly between 1900 and 1910 (there was a 7 percent decline in the population), and this change was not dramatic enough to affect significantly the analysis conducted in this study.

62. Even in the five voting boxes that B. F. Williams carried, the vote was close. Four of those boxes were in the sandy, isolated countryside outside of Rockdale, the candidate's home.

63. Miller, "Building a Progressive Coalition," 173–74; Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888–1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 272–81.

64. *Rockdale Reporter,* Oct. 30, 1902.

65. For poll tax payment figures see *Rockdale Messenger,* Feb. 9, 1905; *Cameron Herald,* Feb. 7, 1907.

66. J. Morgan Kousser has analyzed the post-disfranchisement turnout in the eleven ex-Confederate states, comparing turnout in the primaries with that of the general election, and has found very little overall difference between the two. Generally speaking, the primaries brought out more voters than the general elections in the Lower South states while the general elections continued to attract the most voters in the Upper South and Texas. Kousser thus concludes that the "substitution of intra- for inter-party competition after institution of the Democratic primary amounted to much more than a mere change of name." This generalization does not hold for Milam County, where by 1906 the turnout in the primary was nearly three times that of the general election. Milam's experience more closely resembles that of the Deep South states such as Georgia and Mississippi, where the primaries attracted many more voters than the general elections. This significant difference between Milam County and the state of Texas as a whole underscores the tremendous regional variations in disfranchisement patterns. See Kousser, *Shaping of Southern Politics*, 226–27 (esp. Tables 8.1 and 8.2).

67. R. V. Davidson polled almost a thousand more votes than his nearest opponent. The 1904 Democratic primary returns can be found

in the *Rockdale Reporter,* July 21, 1904. Positive identification of individual candidates with one faction or the other is very difficult at the county level. However, the races mentioned in this paragraph unquestionably resulted in conservative defeats. On Davidson's progressive credentials, see Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform,* 225–26, 234. For Oscar F. McAnally's murder, see Dallas *Southern Mercury,* Jan. 4, 1906; *Bartlett (Tex.) Tribune*, May 4, 1906, May 24, 1907; *Dallas Morning News*, May 12, 1907. Events at the state level paralleled those in Milam County. The composition of the legislature shifted dramatically as a result of the 1902 elections, as counties like Milam replaced conservative legislators with more progressive ones. Of 125 House members who took office in 1901, only 43 returned in 1903. These changes soon bore fruit. In 1903 and 1905 the Texas legislature approved the Terrell Election Laws, which reformed the state's corruption-prone election machinery. The legislature enacted much-needed tax reforms aimed at making corporations shoulder a more equitable share of the tax burden, and the Standard Oil monopoly was effectively barred from the state. See Miller, "Building a Progressive Coalition," 178; and Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform,* 229–36.

68. In Milam County, Oscar B. Colquitt polled 43 percent of the vote to Thomas M. Campbell's 36 percent. This division of votes between two progressives probably reflects a disagreement in the county over an increasingly important issue: prohibition. Campbell's prohibitionist sentiments were well known, although he publicly declared liquor to be a non-issue. Colquitt was equally well known as a foe of prohibition. Of the two more conservative candidates, Micajah M. Brooks was an avowed prohibitionist while C. K. Bell, like Campbell, tried to avoid the issue. Thus the massive majority polled by Campbell and Colquitt cannot be attributed to prohibition sentiment in the county, for the two losing candidates' stands on the measure mirrored the two winners' positions. Election returns for the 1906 Democratic primary can be found in the *Rockdale Reporter,* Aug. 9, 1906. For discussions of the candidates and the statewide campaign, see Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform,* 236–40; Miller, "Building a Progressive Coalition," 178–81. For information on the 1906 gubernatorial race in Milam County, see *Gause Gazette,* June 8, 22, Aug. 11, 1906; *Cameron Herald,* July 5, 19, 1906.

69. Miller, "Building a Progressive Coalition," 164, 181.

70. Campbell, *Grass-Roots Reconstruction*, 220.