



Nebraskans I Have Known, Part 2: John Holbrook Powers

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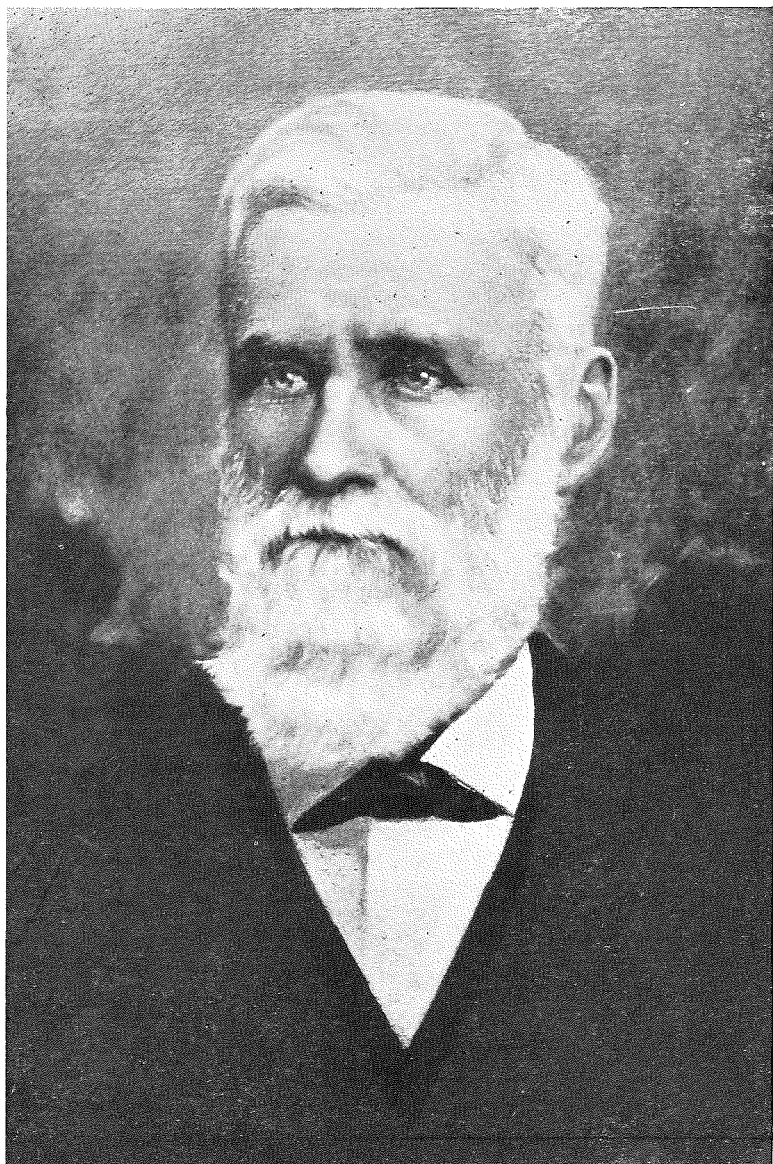
Article Summary: Sheldon accompanied Powers on a campaign trip to western Nebraska in 1981. Powers, who originally came to Nebraska as a homesteader, later led the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance and served as Labor Commissioner.

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Photographs / Images: John Holbrook Powers, Powers on his farm



John Holbrook Powers
Populist Candidate for Governor of Nebraska in 1890

NEBRASKANS I HAVE KNOWN

II. JOHN HOLBROOK POWERS

By Addison E. Sheldon

It seems altogether appropriate to follow the article upon William V. Allen, published in the last issue of Nebraska History, with a sketch of John H. Powers. These two men, widely different in physical and mental characteristics, in their training and their modes of thought and expression, were firmly united in sympathy for the common people and in a devotion to the cause in which they were natural leaders.

Allen and Powers were the two first leaders of the People's movement in Nebraska. There was a multitude of other leaders—Holcomb, the first Populist governor; McKeighan, keenest student and most torrential speaker upon the platform; Jay Burrows, strongest editorial writer, and many others. But the logic of the years makes it more and more clear that to John H. Powers and William V. Allen belong the most enduring places in the roll of first leaders in the People's movement in Nebraska.

My first personal contact with John H. Powers was in the "off year" campaign of 1891. At that time we held in Nebraska a general state election every year. In the odd-numbered years we elected District and Supreme Court judges, university regents and county officers. In the even-numbered years we elected the principal state officers, members of congress and members of the legislature.

After the historical election of 1890 when the People's Party first appeared on Nebraska ballots; the fiery controversy over the prohibition amendment; the first great battles in the Nebraska legislature between the rising People's movement and the conservative control

of the Republican Party and a section of the Democratic Party, the campaign question which arose was how far the new People's Party could draw to its standard the progressive members of the Republican and Democratic parties in numbers sufficient to win the state election. About the only Populist lawyer in the state when the Farmers' Alliance began was J. W. Edgerton ("our Joe") of Osceola, father of Mrs. Maud E. Nuquist, at present member of the State Board of Control. Edgerton was the nearly unanimous choice of the People's Party convention for the office of justice of the Supreme Court. He was a plain country lawyer, without any town frills, who could talk to the cornfield farmers in their own dialect; who dressed in cornfield clothes and used his own grammar when deeply stirred.

The Democratic Party in Nebraska was in a divided condition with young William Jennings Bryan just elected to congress, but the older conservative Democrats like J. Sterling Morton and George L. Miller in control. The Democratic convention nominated J. H. Broady, a strong lawyer, an upright judge and popular where he was known. It was clear that the election lay between Edgerton, the Populist nominee, and Judge A. M. Post of Columbus, the Republican nominee. Judge Broady was a Democrat in sympathy with the People's movement. He withdrew from the ticket, and the Democratic committee having authority left the place blank. It was the idea of leading Democrats of both factions that the bulk of Democratic votes would go to Edgerton and elect him. A very unfortunate mistake was made in the campaign by a virulent, scandalous personal attack upon Judge Post. Whatever truth there was in the attack, one effect was to drive thousands of votes to Judge Post who was known as an able judge. Edward Rosewater and the Omaha Bee strongly opposed and denounced Edgerton as unqualified for the office. At the election the vote was as follows:

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| A. M. Post | 76,447 |
| J. W. Edgerton | 72,311 |

John H. Powers, Frugal Campaign Speaker

I received word from the Populist State Committee that John H. Powers would make several speeches under my sponsorship in northwest Nebraska in the campaign, and that he would arrive in Chadron about a certain date. The Northwestern passenger train from the east arrived in Chadron at a very early morning hour. As I was not sure Mr. Powers would be on that train, I slept the sleep of a hardworking country editor. At early breakfast time I received a telegram that Mr. Powers would arrive on the train which had come and departed while I slept. Immediately I started to find him. There were two good hotels in Chadron. He was not registered at either one. I bethought me of a second-rate, dollar-a-day place sometimes frequented by wandering laborers or drouth-stricken homesteaders. Sure enough John H. Powers, elected governor by the honest voters in 1890, had gone to this place to save expenses, as he explained to me. This was characteristic of Mr. Powers. There was no style about his clothes; no flamboyant oratory in his speeches. I took him in charge and together we visited several People's rallies in our region. I came to have for this quiet, sunburned farmer and country preacher the highest regard I have ever had for any man. He was not only a student—he was a scholar in the wide realm of literature, human history and government. He began his speeches in a very quiet key, with a voice set upon its lower tones, yet distinctly audible. He spoke with a clear logic, an earnest, sympathetic emotion, rising to real bursts of homespun eloquence. In later years many people made objection to Mr. Powers because he was not a showy speaker. He was one of the most persuasive and effective campaigners I have ever traveled with.

The Populist Campaign of 1892

The Populist state Convention of 1892 was held in Kearney in a big tent supplied for the occasion. There was a large attendance, nearly every county in the state

being represented. There was a genuine rivalry for the nomination for governor. Senator Charles H. Van Wyck, who had been a candidate before the Populist convention of 1890 where Powers was nominated, was strongly urged as the most likely candidate in the campaign. Van Wyck was a wealthy man, probably worth \$250,000. He had served six years in the United States senate. He had many friends in the Republican and Democratic parties. It was urged that he could secure votes which Mr. Powers could not, and this proved the most effective reason for his nomination. Van Wyck had commanded a regiment in the Union army. Mr. Powers had marched as a private in an Illinois regiment. Each had a good Union army record and the Grand Army was then a strong force in Nebraska politics.

It was the plan of Van Wyck's friends to nominate John H. Powers for state auditor, that being the next best place on the ticket after governor. Mr. Powers firmly but quietly refused the nomination. He felt and his most ardent supporters felt that he had once been elected and counted out and that he would be a stronger candidate than Van Wyck. In the campaign which followed the Democrats nominated J. Sterling Morton for governor. This was part of the plan of leading Republicans and Democrats to beat Van Wyck. The Republican candidate for governor was Lorenzo Crounse, of Fort Calhoun, father-in-law of Gilbert M. Hitchcock of the *World Herald*. Edward Rosewater of the *Bee* was the leading champion of Judge Crounse. He had formerly supported Senator Van Wyck upon the Republican ticket. The campaign which followed was chiefly noted for lambasting attacks of Morton upon Van Wyck. Morton's main object was to beat Van Wyck. He succeeded, although in Otoe county where both candidates lived, Van Wyck ran ahead of Morton.

Sensational Election of 1893

The sensational contest in the legislature of 1893 has already been related in the story of W. V. Allen. John

H. Powers had a large majority of the People's Independent caucus and was made the candidate in the legislature. He never could secure the support of some Democrats, and after long balloting the Populist caucus substituted W. L. Greene of Kearney as its nominee. The final event which resulted in the selection of Senator Allen was a great strategic victory for the People's cause, since Allen carried a strength to Washington in combats on the floor of the senate which John H. Powers could not have done.

Campaign of 1894

In the Grand Island convention of 1894, friends of John H. Powers, Charles H. Van Wyck, Edward Rosewater and Gilbert M. Hitchcock were united upon Judge Silas A. Holcomb of Broken Bow as the strongest possible Populist candidate. There was the promise of victory in the air, for the Republicans had nominated Colonel T. J. Majors of Peru, had gloriously turned down Edward Rosewater, and had prepared an atmosphere for the union of all the progressive elements in the state for the election of Judge Holcomb. John H. Powers and his friends agreed that he would accept the nomination for state treasurer, which was given him by unanimous vote. An active and enthusiastic party went away from the convention.

The campaign which followed was one of great popular excitement. The corn crop of 1894 was a complete failure—only about 11,000,000 bushels of corn harvested instead of 200,000,000. There was plenty of time for candidates' rallies, and thousands of people assembled in great gatherings over the state. The Bryan Democrats secured control of the Democratic party in a most dramatic state convention. They joined their Populist friends for the most part, while the bolting gold-standard Cleveland Democrats marched out of the convention and put up a bogus ticket to fool some of the voters.

The Bryan Silver Democratic convention endorsed the Populist candidates for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, land commissioner and state superintendent. They did not endorse Populist candidates for secretary of state, auditor and state treasurer. In the case of auditor, James C. Dahlman of Chadron, Democratic nominee, withdrew in favor of John W. Wilson, Populist nominee, and Wilson was placed on the Bryan Democratic ticket.

The reasons given why the Bryan Democrats did not endorse the whole Populist state ticket were these: In the first place, they thought the Populists ought to withdraw part of their ticket and endorse some of the Bryan Democrats. Another reason was that they wanted to have some Bryan Democrats run to show that they had a majority over the Cleveland Gold Democrats, who nominated a full state ticket.

In the very heated election which followed, the Populist candidate for governor, with Bryan Democratic endorsement, was the only Populist elected, by a narrow plurality of 3,302. In the case of John H. Powers, Populist candidate for state treasurer, some of the Bryan Democrats were not friendly to him. Among these, I regret to say, was R. L. Metcalfe, the most effective political writer of that time.

Another element was involved in the contest for state treasurer: Already there was a deficit in the state treasurer's accounts, caused by loaning money to political friends. This was concealed and denied, but some of us were sure it was true. The Republican candidate, Joseph S. Bartley, was a shrewd politician. He had the support of many Democrats as well as Republicans. State funds had been loaned to both Democrats and Republicans. This was an influence working against the Democratic vote for John H. Powers.*

The writer of this story in the campaign of 1894 charged the Republican state treasurer with misuse of school funds. It was not until January, 1897, that, as a member of the legislature, I was able to make this charge

good by moving for an investigation of the state treasurer's office. That investigation disclosed a defalcation of over \$500,000. If John H. Powers had been elected treasurer in 1894 there would have been a "show-down" and a part of this defalcation would have been prevented.

John H. Powers as Labor Commissioner

The election of Judge Holcomb as governor put within his appointing power a number of state positions. John H. Powers was still strong in the hearts of the new party members. There was only one office in the appointing power of Governor Holcomb which Mr. Powers was willing to accept—that of State Labor Commissioner. It was urged that the appointment should go to a leader in the union labor ranks of industry, but Mr. Powers pointed out that the Farmers' Alliance was a labor organization, by far the strongest in the state; that recognition of farmers as a labor element of the foundation industry was proper recognition.

Thus John H. Powers became labor commissioner of Nebraska. Chief clerk of the department was J. E. Edgerton, political writer and poet, cousin of Joe Edgerton.

The joint work of these two men is a volume of 350 pages with maps, containing a preliminary soil survey of Nebraska by counties and sections, a description of farming conditions; a history (with statistics) of Nebraska labor unions and conditions; proposals for improved farming and marketing. This volume has long since been superseded by later scientific surveys and re-

*Following are the official figures in the vote for State Treasurer:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| Joseph S. Bartley, Republican | 96,514 |
| John H. Powers, Populist | 69,402 |
| G. A. Luikart, Silver Democrat | 16,684 |
| Luke Bridenthal, Gold Democrat | 13,172 |
| D. L. Pond, Prohibitionist | 5,114 |



John H. Powers on His Farm

The camera that seems so alien to this cornfield was used by A. E. Sheldon in 1916 in taking a "movie" of Mr. Powers against the background of his farm near Trenton. After the movie was made, a photograph (used for above cut) was also taken to include the motion-picture camera—then a comparatively new instrument in Nebraska photography.

ports, but stands as an important historical document in the history of Nebraska.

At the end of his service as labor commissioner and later as adjutant at the Grand Island Soldier's Home, Mr. Powers returned to his sod house homestead in Hitchcock County, where he lived simply and usefully until his death on May 15, 1918, at the age of 86 years.

In the annals of Nebraska John H. Powers has a permanent place as a typical representative of the homesteading farmer; a student of books and documents relating to farm questions; an organizer of men and ideas; a man whose personal integrity and patriotism were of the highest order; and who had the confidence of his fellow-men throughout his life. He was a simple plain speaker, not an orator or great debater.

In manners and attire he was simple and inconspicuous. He earned the title of "Honest John Powers" and wore it without vainglory. His character, even more than his ability, made him the leader and president of the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance and the logical first candidate for governor in the Peoples' Party. He was the only man elected governor of Nebraska and counted out under a defective elective system.