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Article Summary: Analysis of local sources shows that in Seward County a mixture of social and economic factors caused the defeat of Populism. Independents did not attract the county's German immigrants. The party held little appeal for relatively prosperous farmers, and its agrarian roots made it unpopular with townspeople.

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Photographs / Images: Robert C Rhea of Milford; D D Remington of Bee; inset section of *Seward Valley Blade* declaring Republican victory, November 9, 1892; Table I: Rurality of the Party Members in Four Precincts; Table II: Ethnic Origins of Party Members; Table III: Per Cent of Nationality in Each Party; Table IV: Occupations of Party Members Outside of the Town of Seward; Table V: Occupations of Select Party Members

FORMATION AND FAILURE: THE POPULIST PARTY IN SEWARD COUNTY 1890-1892

By DAVID STEPHENS TRASK

ALTHOUGH SEVENTY-FIVE years have passed since the fever of Populism swept across Nebraska and other states of the Great Plains, historians have continued to be fascinated by the subject. Much research and writing has been stimulated by the publication of Richard Hofstadter's *Age of Reform* in which Populism was interpreted as a conservative force which fed upon bigotry and rural animosities.¹ Other historians, notably Norman Pollack and Walter Nugent, have sought to retain for the Populist movement its traditional image as a liberal, if not radical, force, one that was both militant and tolerant.²

At the same time historians have asserted the necessity of examining sources on the local level, believing that it is impossible to discover who the Populists really were and what motivated their political behavior by studying conventional evidence found in the prominent newspapers of the day and the private papers of political leaders.³ But in the main, historians have employed these local materials while examining Populism in a broader context—only rarely have studies been conducted on the microcosmic level.⁴ This article aims to contribute to our understanding of Populism by focusing on the movement in the microcosm of a single Nebraska county.

Local sources reveal the varied social and economic characteristics of local Populists and their opponents. In addition to local newspaper files, biographical material found in county histories, manuscript census records, and tax records enhance our understanding of the men involved. Moreover, social and economic relationships to voting behavior may be discovered through statistical correlations with election data.

The geographical focus of this study is Seward County, located in southeastern Nebraska, an area where the Populists were an important

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electoral force although they generally achieved their victories only through fusion with the Democrats. Although this was an anti-Populist county in an anti-Populist region of the state, the findings of this study shed light on the nature of Populism for two reasons. First, it was the failure of the insurgent party to make headway in counties like Seward which led to state-wide defeat and brought them to accept fusion with the Democrats and admit their at least momentary failure as an independent force. Second, conclusions about the nature of Populism have often been drawn from evidence found in areas of Populist dominance. Results presented here undercut some of these generalizations and call for a more general study of Populism at the local level than has heretofore been performed.

Agriculture was the main economic activity in Seward County, located immediately west of Lancaster County, the site of the state capital. According to the 1890 census it possessed a population of 16,370 persons of whom 2,108 lived in the county seat town of Seward. The only other towns of consequence were Utica and Milford, which had only a few more than one thousand inhabitants between them.⁵

A comparison of agricultural statistics of this county with others in southeastern Nebraska, an area of marked resistance to the new organization, reveals that Seward County had one of the most highly developed corn-hog economies in the region as well as in the state. Seward farmers had a greater proportion of land in the basic crops of wheat, corn, and oats than did most of their counterparts in neighboring counties. Corn, both in acres raised and in percentage of cropland, was likewise higher than most of the other anti-Populist counties. This devotion to corn takes on added significance when statistics on hog populations are considered. Seward herds were more numerous than most nearby counties and the concentration of hogs, defined as hogs per acre, was the third highest in the state. As might be expected in a corn-hog region, wheat acreages were low—less than two acres per farm.⁶ The claim of the county to membership in the corn-hog region is a solid one.

An important social factor related to Populism in Seward County was the presence of a large German population. Comprising 22.2 per cent of the total adult male residents of the county, they were an important "block" in the county's electorate. Hand in hand with the German concentrations went the Democrat party—seven of the nine precincts with the greatest concentrations were strongholds of the Democrats.⁷

The cohesiveness of this group was fostered by certain ethno-cultural issues. In 1890 a prohibition amendment appeared on the ballot. While both the Republicans and the Populists tended to favor its passage, the Democrat candidate for governor, James Boyd, came out squarely against it, a stand that found support among and was rewarded by Nebraska's Germans. The coefficient of correlation, a statistical device, reveals a strong correlation of .9 between the factors of the Germans of a precinct and the portion of the votes received by the Democrats.⁸ This group, if alienated *en masse*, could be an insuperable obstacle to victory by the Populists.

Prior to the 1890 election, Seward County had been a Republican bastion although the Democrats came closer and closer to victory in each election from 1886 onward. In the off-year election of 1889 the Democrats achieved parity with the GOP which won by the slimmest of margins—an average of ten votes in the races for Sheriff, Supreme Court Judge, and Congressman. Indeed, the Democrats captured several electoral contests. Thus there was a well-balanced two party system at work in the county by the beginning of the Populist era. This trend toward increased Democratic strength was the result of an erosion of Republican support in all precincts. The Democrats were not wresting control of precincts away from the Republicans, but the cumulative effect of many small changes in winning margins was bringing victory nearer to reality. This trend culminated in a sweep of offices for the Democrats in 1890 when, in addition to Republican and Democrat slates, the Farmers' Alliance had fielded candidates for most offices.⁹

An outgrowth of the political activity of the Farmers' Alliance, the local Independent party was established without fanfare. As early as May of 1890 it became increasingly apparent that the Farmers' Alliance was behaving like a political party. Reports from the townships indicated that Alliancemen were contemplating some kind of fusion with the Democrats. The *Blue Valley Blade*, a Republican weekly published in Seward, saw Democratic hands at work. Either the Democrats were wooing the Alliance as a way of picking up a block of votes or else the Alliance chapters were being created by the Democrats themselves as a means of attracting farmers to the Democratic Party.¹⁰ Thus Alliancemen (called Populists after 1892) were seen as pawns of the Democrats and the Republican editor did not see any possible threat from a third party.

But this editorial attitude was myopic—support for a true third party was much stronger than Republican writers believed. On July 12, 1890,

the local Farmers' Alliance, in conjunction with the Knights of Labor, decided to expand their activities by sending delegates to the state Independent convention to be held in Lincoln.¹¹

Throughout the summer talk of fusion continued. At the Democrat county convention, Frank Slonecker, a farmer from "F" township, moved that the convention accept general fusion with the Independents. His motion was turned down by the delegates in an unrecorded vote although they did permit the Populists to support their congressional candidate. Slonecker then left the party and became a prominent Populist in the county. He subsequently sought his new party's nomination for state representative in 1892.¹²

Slonecker was not the only politician to be attracted to the new party. W. A. "Gus" Brokaw, Democrat candidate for "J" township treasurer, the second most prestigious township office, deserted to the Populists to secure the nomination for the most important post, that of supervisor. Underlying this maneuver was local displeasure over the Democrat caucus selection of Oscar Bernecker, a prominent German Lutheran farmer, for the supervisor position. The *Blue Valley Blade* reported that the so-called "Americans" in the township supported this move because they felt that a German should not receive this honor.¹³

The Republicans of "N" township likewise had to contend with the antipathy of the Farmers' Alliance. Consequently these local politicians regarded men who held membership in both the party and the Alliance with some suspicion. At the township caucus the candidates of the Republicans made an official declaration that they were "full-fledged" Republicans and out of the Alliance for good. Some Republicans did desert to the new party. After the election it was reported that Independent Jerry McCarthy replaced Robert C. Rhea as supervisor of "N" township; both had been Republicans before the election.¹⁴

When the votes were tallied after the November ballot, the results showed that the Democrats had received a solid victory in the county. Although the Populists managed to pick up only about 1,000 of the 3,600 votes cast, they took away enough votes from the GOP to help the Democrats sweep the entire county slate from top to bottom. An additional factor in this campaign was the strong support accorded the Democrats by German voters who were concerned with threats to their ethnicity in the form of the prohibition amendment on the 1890 ballot and the recent attempt of Nebraskans to require that English be the main

language used in the instruction of all students.¹⁵ Basing their reactions on past experience, Republicans overlooked both of these factors and blamed the party regulars for conducting a lax campaign against the Democrats. Post-election analysis said little of Populism.

Although 1891 was an off-year politically, there were several other prominent county politicians who shifted to the Independents. Mike Meehan, a Democrat holding the office of school superintendent, and, more importantly, editor of the Seward *Democrat*, switched parties. In the first part of August he changed the name of his publication to the *People's Rights* and espoused the Independent cause. In a simple news note it was reported that the Democratic central committee met at Sheriff Charles Adams' office and selected Oscar Bernecker as chairman of the committee in place of T. F. Pennington. Thereupon Pennington became a Populist and was the party's nominee for state representative in 1892. The Republicans also lost one of their major figures. Hiram Brisbin, temporary chairman of the 1890 Republican county convention, appeared as a member of the Committee on Resolutions at the Independent county convention of 1891 and later was permanent chairman of the 1892 meeting.¹⁶

The election of 1892 marked the arrival of the Populists as an important force in the eyes of the Republican editors of the county. The new party became the prime target of editorial attack, while the old nemesis, the Democratic party, received scarcely a line. But despite the content of pre-election rhetoric, 1892 was a closely contested three-way race.

Although there was some concern expressed over the condition of the crops, the preoccupation of the Seward county papers was the urging of farmers to buy locally. This was a common theme of the papers every year and was voiced to counteract the activities of the peddlers who took their wares directly to the farmer's front door.¹⁷ The rationale behind the idea of buying locally was well stated by the *Blue Valley Blade*, a Republican paper published in Seward:

If you want to buy a \$25 or \$30 bill of groceries, come to Seward with that amount of cash and they will sell you more and better goods than any snide Lincoln or Chicago merchant can do with two or three middlemen who get a profit from you. Spend your money at home and don't send it away where you will have no earthly chance of ever seeing a dollar of it again.¹⁸



Robert C. Rhea of Milford served as a representative in the Nebraska Legislature. He was elected in 1892.

In 1892 this concern took on a new dimension when the Populists established a special buying arrangement with a Lincoln firm which was designed to get the farmer a “fairer” price for the goods he consumed. *People’s Rights* editor Mike Meehan served as the local agent who sent in the grocery orders of Alliance members to Lincoln. These orders were filled and delivered weekly on the Saturday train. In this manner farmers bypassed the pockets of Seward businessmen. Meehan was sharply criticized by the *Weekly Reporter* for causing discord between the town and the country.

The slight disaffection which exists in the minds of some farmers against Seward has been fauned [sic] by him [Meehan] to the strongest extent, until he has succeeded in creating a strong sentiment of distrust and now tries to drive away the business of the men of the town whose patronage he has all the time been asking for in his newspaper. . . . It is to the interests of every farmer to do all he can to stop the senseless fight between the town and the country.¹⁹

The *Blade* corroborated this tale and admonished the farmers to keep their money in the county and to trade with those merchants who knew them and would give them credit in hard times, something which the outsiders allegedly would not think of doing.²⁰

The final chapter of this episode came in August with the creation by Al and Mike Meehan of the “Honest Front” store for farmers. Whether

this was a new business or a formalization of the arrangement which Meehan had with his Lincoln firm is not apparent.²¹ But just as it seemed that the *Blade* and the *People's Rights* were preparing for a great debate over the virtue of the local merchants, the story itself was dropped. In August this strictly local issue was superseded by the larger question of the accuracy of the Populist charge that the state was suffering economically.

Alliancemen, regarded as pawns of the Democrats in 1890, supplanted that party as the chief object of ridicule for the GOP editors in the 1892 campaign. But these men considered Populists as being more devious than regular party politicians. The "calamity craze" had arisen over bad crops, stated the *Blade*, and some had taken advantage of the situation to create a party. Although one of the goals of the Independents had been to purify politics, the Republican press announced, they found that the new party was riddled with attempts to fix nominations. The leaders of the Independent party were characterized as "mouth farmers" by Seward's highly partisan papers—that is, they were non-farmers trying to lead the farmer astray politically.²²

The month of September was taken up in political rallies in the county. Republicans, as did members of other parties, claimed that their meetings were well attended, while the other organizations they said were having trouble finding support. It was in this vein that the Independents appeared in the news notes. The usual line was that the "calamity howl," at, say, Roberts Grove, was not as well attended as in years past.²³ But despite this "whistling in the dark," the Republicans were not certain of victory.

In October the debates between the candidates took place, with each party arguing that its men vanquished their foes with the force of logic. Emphasizing the present "good" condition of the state's economy, the Republicans were at a loss to understand the rhetoric of the Populists. The candidates of this new party called their adherents slaves, said the Republicans, and called for silver and low cost loans from the government to relieve the oppression of American society.²⁴

The relationship between economic conditions and the political race is revealed in this summation of the 1892 campaign made on the eve of the election by Republicans urging support of their party:

Stand up for Nebraska by casting your vote against those men who say that this fair state is inhabited by a race of paupers and governed by a horde of thieves. The prosperity seen at every hand gives the lie to such statements which are conceived by unprincipled men in the hope of gratifying their personal ambitions.²⁵

The results of the 1892 voting prompted the Republican *Blue Valley Blade* to entitle its post-electoral editorial: "Seward County Redeemed." The Democrats, on the verge of victory in the old two party arrangement, and in office in the first years of adjustment to the three-party system, were cast into the role of third party in the county.²⁶ Adherents to Populism had brought their loose organization of Alliances into the position of major challenger to the Republican establishment. But with victory still beyond their grasp, the Independents would unite with the Democrats to oppose the GOP in future years.

Unfortunately, the political tactic of fusion, first achieved on a statewide basis in 1894, blurs the lines between the two diverse parties which sought together to defeat the Republicans. However, in 1892 the two parties and their candidates were still distinct in Seward County. It is at this point, then, that one can gain the best understanding of the failure of the party as an independent force and the best knowledge of the people who supported it.

Election results for 1892 show that Seward County's Populist returns justified the Republican treatment of them as the major opposition party. Although the Independents received only 32.8 per cent of the vote in 1892 and failed to capture a single office, they were only 6.6 percentage points behind the all-victorious Republicans, recipients of 39.4 per cent of the total turnout. The Democrats, after two years in power, found their share of the turnout had slipped to 27.6 per cent. Populism, therefore, ate into the pre-1890 support of both parties, but after all of the shifting of leaders in 1890 and 1891, the result was a return to power by the Republicans. The reassertion of Republicanism was partially due to the removal of prohibition as an issue in politics and the resultant support accorded the GOP by some Germans.²⁷ The failure of Populism, on the other hand, was the result of its inability to muster enough rural votes to offset the large but not dominant Republican bastion of Seward, the county seat. Here the GOP received more than sixty per cent of the vote. This weakness is even more evident when one examines the precincts.

When Stanley Parsons, Jr., studied township returns in select Nebraska counties for the 1890 and 1896 elections, he found that totally rural precincts gave the greatest support to the new party.²⁸ In Seward County for 1892 this distinction in voting behavior between rural and mixed (those possessing a village) precincts was not apparent. Rural townships gave 35.2 per cent of the vote to the new party while mixed precincts yielded a slightly higher 36 per cent for the Independents. Part of the

reason for this lies in the presence of the large German rural population, such as in "D" township, which rebuffed the Populists. The use of a coefficient of correlation clarifies this tendency of the German voters. The relationship between Populism and adult males of German origin is $-.60$ which, in simplest terms, means that the more Germans there were in an area, the fewer Populists there were in the same locale.²⁹ Thus the rural precincts which led the way to victory in 1890 for the new party in its stronghold in south-central Nebraska, according to Parsons, did not duplicate the role in Seward County in 1892. This failure of rural precincts to vote strongly Populist is also partly the result of the nature of the Seward farm economy.

Economic considerations have often been cited by historians to explain the success or failure of Populism. Over the years since the decline of the "Populist Revolt" some historians have maintained that the movement flourished in areas where the farmer devoted all of his time to the production of wheat for the market. Conversely, historians have argued that the advance of the corn belt reduced the susceptibility of the farmer to join the third party movement.³⁰ Recently two historians, Stanley Parsons, Jr. and Frederick C. Luebke, have studied the wealth of the agriculturists involved in Populism to discover if the Independents tended to be drawn from the less well to do.³¹ Luebke's study revealed that in Seward County no party was the special province of either the rich or the poor—in fact, correlations between the assessed value of farm property and votes cast for each party revealed no significant relationship between the two factors.³²

In Seward County it is also possible to test the connection between the type of farm economy and the turnout for a particular party. The assessor's records for the county for 1892 provide an opportunity to compare some crop acreages and livestock numbers with Populist strength.

Contrary to the general assumption, wheat farmers in Seward County did not flock to the Independent party. Although the county did not raise much wheat overall, it showed some variation by township in the percentage of cropland devoted to that grain in 1892. Farmers devoted from 1.7 per cent to 14.1 per cent of their cultivated acreage to wheat, although the latter figure is much higher than the others. Unfortunately crop acreages can be found for only nine of the sixteen agricultural townships.³³ Nevertheless this factor showed a correlation with Populist strength of $-.94$ —in other words, those townships which raised the least



D. D. Remington of Bee won a seat in the Nebraska Legislature in 1894.

wheat gave the largest proportion of their votes to the Populist candidates.³⁴

Corn and hogs together make up the two major elements of a type of economy that historians maintain was not productive of Populism. Data on corn production, like wheat data, lacks a complete sample. However, the resulting coefficient of correlation between per cent of cropland in corn and Populist strength was $-.48$, revealing a mild tendency of the corn farmer away from the Populist party.³⁵

Because hogs were taxed as personal property, the listing of them is more complete than for crops.³⁶ With only one township missing from the sample, the correlation between Independent strength and the number of hogs per farm for the year 1892 was a significant $-.67$. This figure is high enough and the sample complete enough so that the conclusion is warranted that the raising of hogs was an important factor working against the success of the Independents. From this evidence tentative conclusions can be offered.

The 1890 census reveals that corn was the leading crop in Nebraska; all counties grew more corn than any other crop with but one exception.³⁷ But corn acreage itself was not an important factor since corn can either be sold as grain or fed to livestock, especially hogs, and sold as meat. A study of the corn-hog cycle by Fred Shannon stated that in every year but

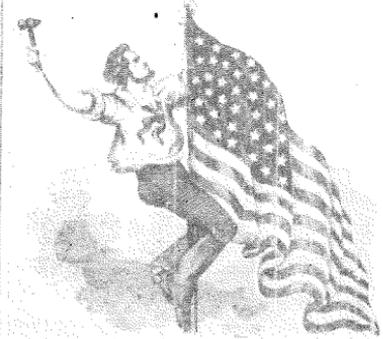
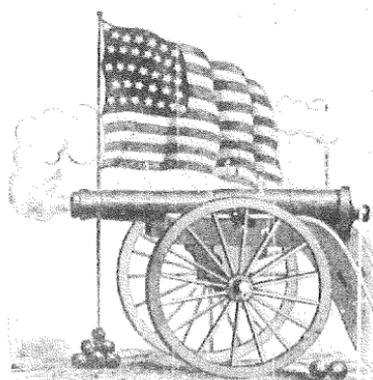
three from the end of the Civil War to 1897, the farmer who fed his corn to hogs made more money than the farmer who sold this grain directly on the market. Thus, the counties that engaged in hog raising were generally more prosperous than those that marketed their corn directly.³⁸ Applied to Seward County, this generalization suggests that those townships in which hogs were raised were likely to have enjoyed more income than those that sent corn directly to the market. This contention is supported by the coefficient obtained by associating Populist strength with hogs per farm. Where hogs were more numerous, the Populists were less successful. This conclusion is corroborated by the data of the Agricultural Census of 1890 which demonstrates that south central Nebraska, an area of Independent strength, was less committed to hog raising than the southeast, an area of Populist weakness.³⁹

A word of caution should be interjected at this point. The development in Seward County of a corn-hog economy did not prevent the success of Populism through the operation of an economic determinism. Rather, the economic factor was but one of several major factors which the politician of the 1890's considered as he charted his future political course. This study of voting behavior, then, must be supplemented by an examination of local party leadership to provide a deeper understanding of differences in party memberships.

Local newspapers permit the identification of party members and delegates to the county conventions. These may be compared with the 1885 Nebraska State Census and Seward County Assessor's records to discover personal information about them.⁴⁰

The Nebraska State Census of 1885 provides information on age, nativity, and occupation. The first two of these factors, with adjustments, can be accurately applied to the 1892 election. The third, occupation, undoubtedly changed in some cases. To offset this, a collection of county biographies compiled at the turn of the century was used as a crosscheck on some of the men involved in this political campaign.⁴¹

In general the Populists varied in their social characteristics from the members of the older parties in several notable ways. First, they were the most farm oriented of the three parties. Second, they had very few immigrant or first generation Americans as delegates at their conventions. In fact, their inability to attract Germans was one of the major reasons for their defeat in Seward County. Third, their average personal property valuation, although slightly higher than the Democrats, lagged behind that of the Republican party.



OUR FLAG IS STILL THERE.

REPUBLICANS MAKE A
CLEAN SWEEP.

The Democrats and Calamityites
Are Not in It.

BROWN AND RHEA ELECTED
TO THE LEGISLATURE.

The Republicans of Seward County scored a great victory Tuesday. They gave the entire Republican ticket a handsome plurality, from top to bottom. We go to press too early to get the official figures, but enough of unofficial figures are at hand to warrant us in stating that our pluralities will run from 125 to 1250. This is a great change since the last election, and is a surprise to all parties, as the situation was such that the Democrats could easily have won.

Publishers J. H. and E. E. Betzer crowed following a Republican victory in their Seward Blue Valley Blade, November 9, 1892.

Place of residence was a factor in partisan identification. The evidence indicates that Republicans tended to be village oriented while the Populists were predominantly rural in residence. The Democrats were evenly split between the two. Table I presents data derived from townships "C," "E," "F," and "O," each of which included a village of several hundred inhabitants. Since property in the villages was assessed separately from the countryside in these precincts, place of residence could be easily ascertained.

TABLE I⁴²

RURILITY OF THE PARTY MEMBERS IN FOUR PRECINCTS

Party	Village Members	Rural Members
Democrat	21	23
Republican	16	9
Populist	3	11

The data demonstrate that ethnic origin was also a variable of considerable importance among the politicians of Seward County. The Populists were the most "native" of the three parties with 80.7 per cent of

the 83 men studied falling into that category. Not far behind were the 103 Republicans at 76.5 per cent. But out of a sample of 112 Democrats, 53.2 per cent were either foreign born or were the sons of foreign born parents. Germans comprised 68.7 per cent of the immigrant Democrats and 60.8 per cent of the immigrant Republicans. British (English and Scotch) were the predominant group among immigrant Populists, making up 43.8 per cent of that party's foreign white group. There were only two identifiable Germans in the Independent party.⁴³ Table II shows the overall composition of the three parties.

TABLE II⁴⁴

ETHNIC ORIGINS OF PARTY MEMBERS

Party	Republican	Democrat	Populist
Sample	103	126	83
Per Cent Native	77.7	46.8	80.7
Total Number of Foreign White	23	67	16
Number of Nationality . . .	14 German 4 Scand. 4 British 1 Irish	46 German 10 Irish 5 British 6 Other	7 English 5 Irish 2 German 2 Other

Another method of organizing this data is to categorize all immigrant and first generation party members by ethnic origin to determine the susceptibility of each group toward each of the three parties.

TABLE III⁴⁵

PER CENT OF NATIONALITY IN EACH PARTY

Nationality	Sample	Per Cent Republican	Per Cent Democrat	Per Cent Populist
German	62	22.6	74.2	3.2
British	16	25.0	31.3	43.8
Irish	16	6.3	62.5	31.3
Other	12	33.3	50.0	16.7

Although Populism drew minimal support from the immigrants, Table III shows that it attracted those who did not have a language barrier to

overcome, the English, the Scotch, and the Irish. Groups that assimilated more slowly, such as the Germans, did not seek a political home in the Independent party. One should not conclude from this statement that the Populists were nativistic. Instead, this tendency of German politicians reveals that they regarded the Populists as xenophobic despite what the attitude of the party members themselves might have been.⁴⁶

Occupation information can also be collected from the 1885 Census. First, farmers were separated from non-farmers in a sample that excluded the county seat of Seward. This was done to allow a better comparison of the Populists and their opponents in an area where the parties fought on more equal terms. It was found that the Independents had a higher percentage of farmers, 80.8 per cent, than did either of the other parties. The Democrats came second with 76 per cent and the Republicans were third with 72.8 per cent.⁴⁷

Among the non-farmers residing outside the city of Seward, several noticeable differences appear. Seven Republicans were merchants as were eight Democrats, while the Populists had only one grocer and one grain dealer in this category. Although each party had one lawyer, the Republicans had the only two bankers. At the same time almost half of the non-farm Populists were either laborers or artisans.

TABLE IV⁴⁸

OCCUPATIONS OF PARTY MEMBERS OUTSIDE OF THE
TOWN OF SEWARD

Republicans	Democrats	Populists
59 Farmers (72.8%)	76 Farmers (76.0%)	62 Farmers (80.8%)
22 Non-Farm	24 Non-Farm	15 Non-Farm
7 Merchants	8 Merchants	4 Artisans
5 Artisans	4 Artisans	3 Laborers
2 Bankers	3 Saloon Keepers	2 Millers
2 Millers	2 Laborers	2 Merchants
1 Lawyer	2 Harnessmakers	1 Lawyer
1 Postmaster	1 Lawyer	1 Teacher
3 Other	4 Other	2 Other

Inside the city of Seward the new party was not strong. It had only six partisans for whom information could be found—two artisans, one contractor, one postal clerk, one retired farmer, and an elderly jeweler. In

the county seat the Republicans tended to hold high status positions. Among twenty-five identifiable partisans, five were lawyers, two bankers, two merchants, two editors, one doctor, and a loan agent. Against this array of high status occupations, the Democrats had only two merchants and the sheriff while the rest of their town personnel were similar in status to the Populists. Of course, all saloon keepers were Democrats.⁴⁹

Another way to compare the three parties in terms of the socio-economic characteristics of their leaders is by studying the assessed valuation of the personal property of the men involved. In order to eliminate the variations in valuations that might result from different assessors, the party men were examined by precinct as well as in the aggregate. "K" and "L" townships were omitted from the study because of insufficient records.

Although comparisons of all assessed valuations of the leaders of all precincts may be less than totally accurate because of the presence, possibly, of difference in value being placed on similar articles, the comparison on a county-wide basis is interesting. The Republicans, ninety-five of them, were the wealthiest of the three parties with a mean valuation of \$290.11. One hundred forty Democrats averaged \$214.41, making them the poorest of the organizations. The Populists were very close to the Democrats, however, with an average valuation of \$216.68 for eighty-one delegates.

Turning to precinct comparisons, it is apparent there was no clear pattern of wealth in the rural townships. In six of the fifteen townships the average valuation of property held by Populist convention delegates was the highest of the memberships of the three parties. Republicans led in property valuation in five precincts and the Democrats in four. At the same time it is noteworthy that Populist leaders in six townships were poorer than the average precinct resident compared to only three instances for the Republicans and two for the Democrats. In the Republican stronghold of Seward the difference among party leaders was most pronounced. Twenty-eight Republicans averaged \$463.07 while the nine Populists averaged \$100.89.⁵⁰

A final way to study the leadership of the three parties is to isolate some of the more prominent members and compare them with similar groups from other parties and with their own aggregate membership. The criteria used for determining select leaders was membership in state, congressional, and state senatorial convention delegations. This yielded

about thirty names per party, although information could not be found for all of them.⁵¹

The major differences among the elites of the three parties were, first, the low status of non-farm Independents compared with the Republicans and the Democrats; and, second, the great margin between the property values held by the Democrat and Populist elites as compared with the aggregates of those organizations.

It is significant that in the case of each party the select leadership group was more native than the whole. For example the Democratic party, which was 46.8 per cent native in terms of delegates to the county convention, were 56 per cent native with respect to select leaders. The GOP aggregate was 77.7 per cent native while the leadership group was 84 per cent native. Among Independents the tendency was least pronounced, and their select group was less native than the Republicans. Their aggregate was 80.7 per cent native compared to 83 per cent for the elite.⁵² Thus all three parties, in varying degree, showed the tendency to limit the foreign born to the lower levels of party organization.

One allegation made by the Republican newspapers in the summer of 1892 was that the Populist leaders were mouth farmers—that is, they only said that they were farmers to lure the rural voters into giving them election support. This charge was brought by those who felt the GOP was more attuned to the “best” interests of the farmer than the insurgents. In fact, however, the Populists of the select group had a higher percentage of farmers, 75 per cent, than did either of the other parties. The Democrats drew 66 per cent of their leaders from the farm while the Republicans, with a large number of leaders from Seward, had only 59 per cent of their select leaders taken from that occupation.⁵³

Republican non-farm delegates, as was the case of the aggregate of that party, generally held high status positions, including three lawyers and three bankers. Democrats, with six merchants, likewise had many leaders of high status. Against this array the Independents had little to counter with. Their non-farm leaders were not of the same social ranking as were those of the other two parties. This is again a measure of the inability of the Populists to attract a following from the non-farm areas.

TABLE V⁵⁴
 OCCUPATIONS OF SELECT PARTY MEMBERS

Republicans	Democrats	Populists
16 Farmers (59.0%)	14 Farmers (66.7%)	21 Farmers (75.0%)
11 Non-Farm	7 Non-Farm	7 Non-Farm
3 Lawyers	6 Merchants	2 Laborers
3 Bankers	1 Artisan	1 Artisan
1 Merchant		1 Miller
1 Postmaster		1 Contractor
3 Others		2 Others

The assessor's records reveal marked differences between aggregate and select leader groups. The Democrats, lowest in average valuation in the aggregate, had the highest average value among the select leaders with a mean valuation \$443.32. Likewise the Independents show a divergence between aggregate and select groups, their average value being \$120 above the aggregate with a leader average of \$343.38. Select Republicans averaged \$350.19 compared with their overall average of \$290.11.⁵⁵ Although these figures do not take into consideration possible variations in assessment, a general trend is evident. The Democrats, and, to a lesser extent the Populists, belonged to parties whose upper echelons were occupied by men who were markedly more affluent than the average county convention delegate. In this regard the Republicans showed the greatest degree of homogeneity.

The rural-urban split of the leaders of the three parties and average ages revealed little. The division between country and village or town residents was virtually the same as in the aggregate. Both the aggregate and select groups of each party were about the same age and the difference between parties was one year.

Seward County was not a unique locale in Nebraska in the Populist era. Although it rebuffed the beckonings of the new party, many of its sister counties in the eastern part of the state did also. However, the basis of the rejection of the party in Seward County is fairly clear. The county's immigrant population shied away from the Independents. Its corn-hog economy weakened the party's appeal in the countryside. Finally, the party's agrarian appeal found little favor in the county seat.

In conclusion, one must remember that Populism was a collection of local movements such as the one in Seward County. To gain a fuller

understanding of the "Populist Revolt" many of these local political settings must be examined to learn why the farmer abandoned the realm of agriculture to venture into the political arena. Of equal importance is the study of this party's failure to attract all members of the agrarian community to the standard of the Independent party. In Seward County a mixture of economic and social factors spelled the defeat of Populism. Elsewhere attraction to or rejection of the party by the electorate may have been the product of a different set of factors. The individual who seeks to comprehend the nature of third party movements in general and Populism in particular must go beyond the pronouncements of state and national leaders to the electorate itself—since it is the electorate that determines the success or failure of most political organizations.

NOTES

1. Richard Hofstadter, *Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), chapters I, II, III.

2. Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1962). Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 231. Pollack maintains that the Populists were the true radicals of the 1890's who analyzed their condition and that of their fellow man in terms of concepts which approached Marxist theory. Nugent explicitly attacked Hofstadter's contention that the Populists were nativists by examining the record of the party in Kansas. He states that they were, if anything, more receptive to immigrants than "the average of their contemporary political opponents."

3. Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* employs a number of local newspapers which have often been overlooked by historians who focus on a few major papers in order to try to understand political developments and attitudes. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists* likewise used numerous local papers while his "Some Parameters of Populism," *Agricultural History*, XL (October, 1966), 255-270, used manuscript census records as well as newspapers. Stanley Parsons, Jr., "Who Were the Nebraska Populists?" *Nebraska History*, XLIV (June, 1963), 83-99, used the same kinds of sources that Nugent employed. Frederick C. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969) used tax lists and county biographies in addition to materials used by the above mentioned scholars.

4. Two such studies come readily to mind. Arthur F. Bentley, *The Condition of the Western Farmer as illustrated by the economic history of a Nebraska Township*, *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, Eleventh Series, VII-VIII (July-August, 1893), is a fine study of a single township in Hall County. On the other hand Annabelle Beal, "The Populist Party in Custer County, Nebraska: Its Role in Local, State, and National Politics, 1889-1906," (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1965), exemplifies the tendency of many

studies to cover their subject with a minimum of analysis that goes beyond the newspaper headlines.

5. Census Office, *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895), 234.

6. Census Office, *Report on the Statistics of Agriculture in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895), 162-174, 337-338. This material on Nebraska agriculture is summarized in a study of the state's farm economy by David Stephens Trask, "Anti-Populism in Nebraska," (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1968), chapter II.

7. Census data is summarized in Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, 85. All election returns were found in the *Blue Valley Blade*, a Seward newspaper. The second issue after each election carried an "Official Canvass of Seward County for the Election of . . ." A cross check of different contests showed that the paper was generally free of error. The ranking of precincts according to Democratic strength was determined from these statistics.

8. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, 86-87.

9. See footnote 7.

10. *Blue Valley Blade*, May 7, May 28, June 18, June 25, 1890.

11. *Ibid.*, July 2, 1890.

12. *Ibid.*, September 28, October 8, 1890.

13. *Ibid.*, October 8, October 22, 1890.

14. *Ibid.*, October 15, November 12, 1890.

15. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, 141ff.

16. *Blue Valley Blade*, May 21, July 23, August 12, August 19, November 9, 1891. Changing parties was not a new experience for Brisbin since he had earlier been a Greenback candidate for the state legislature. Biographical material on Brisbin is in W. W. Cox, *History of Seward County, Nebraska, and Reminiscences of Territorial History, Part II* (University Place, Nebraska: 2nd ed.; Jason L. Clafin, 1905), 175.

17. See, for example, *The (Beaver Crossing, Nebraska) Weekly Review*, May 19, 1892. Also *Blue Valley Blade*, June 18, 1892.

18. *Blue Valley Blade*, July 20, 1892.

19. *The Seward Weekly Reporter*, July 28, 1892.

20. *Blue Valley Blade*, July 27, 1892.

21. *Ibid.*, August 17, 1892.

22. *Ibid.*, August 10, August 17, 1892.

23. *Ibid.*, September 14, September 21, 1892. Also *Seward Semi-Weekly Reporter*, September 20, 1892.

24. *Blue Valley Blade*, October 12, 1892.

25. *Semi-Weekly Reporter*, November 1, 1892.

26. *Blue Valley Blade*, November 9, 1892.

27. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, 152-156.

28. Stanley Parsons, Jr., "Who Were the Nebraska Populists?" 92.

29. The numeral "one" represents perfect correlation, a perfect one to one relationship. Zero, on the other hand, represents a complete lack of correlation. The larger the positive fraction is, the greater the correlation between the two factors being compared. A large negative fraction means that the greater the presence of one factor, the less the frequency of the other.

The formula used in this study was the Pearson product-moment correlation

coefficient. This coefficient is derived by mathematically relating two factors, such as percentage of vote given to the Populist party and the percentage of cropland in wheat.

30. This contention is today a commonplace. Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, accepts this thesis, buttressing its argument with the study by Chester M. Destler, "Agricultural Readjustment and Agrarian Unrest in Illinois, 1880-1896" *Agricultural History*, XXI (April, 1947), 104-116. More recently this same argument has been used by Roy V. Scott, *The Agrarian Movement in Illinois* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962).

31. Parsons, "Who Were the Nebraska Populists?" Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, 117-121.

32. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, 121.

33. Assessor's Record of Seward County (Nebraska) for the Year 1892: Real Property (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society).

34. While it is intriguing that in this limited sample Populist precincts tended to be those with the least wheat, more study should be made in other areas before any attempt is made to generalize from this trend in Seward County.

35. Assessor's Record of Seward County (Nebraska) for the Year 1892: Real Property.

36. Assessor's Record of Seward County (Nebraska) for the Year 1892: Personal Property (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society).

37. Census Office, *Statistics of Agriculture*, 162-164, 337-338. The sole exception was Sheridan County in the Panhandle.

38. Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier Agriculture 1860-1897* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1945), 165-168.

39. Trask, "Anti-Populism in Nebraska," chapter II.

40. A somewhat similar study was performed by Walter T. K. Nugent, "Some Parameters of Populism." He examined the background of men elected to the state legislature as well as candidates for county offices in nine counties in Kansas.

41. *Schedules of the Nebraska State Census of 1885, Seward County* (Microfilm. National Archives).

42. Assessor's Record of Seward County (Nebraska) for the Year 1892: Personal Property.

43. *Schedules of the Nebraska State Census of 1885, Seward County*.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. This relationship between Populists and Germans is explored more fully in Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics*, 183. Luebke provides a new dimension to the study of immigrants and Populism by Walter T.K. Nugent in Kansas. While Nugent feels that the Populists, contrary to the belief of their critics, were receptive to foreigners, Luebke points out despite this attitude, many Germans tended to identify Populists as nativists and shunned the party. See Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists*, and footnote 2 (above).

47. *Schedules of the Nebraska State Census of 1885, Seward County*.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*

50. Assessor's Record of Seward County (Nebraska) for the Year 1892: Personal Property. For a precinct by precinct breakdown of this variable see Trask, "Anti-Populism in Nebraska," 109.

51. *Blue Valley Blade*, June 29, 1892. Also *The Semi-Weekly Reporter*, August 4, 1892. The sources used for this comparison were the same as for the aggregate party memberships—the assessor's records and the *Nebraska State Census of 1885*.

52. *Schedules of the Nebraska State Census of 1885, Seward County*.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. Assessor's Record of Seward County (Nebraska) for the Year 1892: Personal Property.