



Life on the Farm

This little house on the prairie is constructed of sod walls and a dirt roof. It is one of the few pioneer dwellings still standing in the Badlands today.

A homestead at last! Many eastern families who longed for the opportunity to own and farm a plot of land of their own were able to realize their dreams when Congress passed the **HOMESTEAD ACT** in 1862. That landmark piece of legislation provided 160 acres free to any family who lived on the land for five years and made improvements. The same amount could be obtained instantly for the paltry sum of \$1.25 per acre.

Combined with the completed transcontinental railroad, it was now possible for an easterner yearning for the open space of the West to make it happen. Unfortunately, the lives they found were fraught with hardship.

Money Problems

There were tremendous economic difficulties associated with Western farm life. First and foremost was overproduction. Because the amount of land under cultivation increased dramatically and new farming techniques produced greater and greater yields, the food market became so flooded with goods that prices fell sharply. While this might be great for the consumer, the farmer had to grow a tremendous amount of food to recoup enough profits to survive the winter.

New machinery and fertilizer was needed to farm on a large scale. Often farmers borrowed money to purchase this equipment, leaving themselves hopelessly in debt when the harvest came. The high tariff



forced them to pay higher prices for household goods for their families, while the goods they themselves sold were unprotected.

The railroads also fleeced the small farmer. Farmers were often charged higher rates to ship their goods a short distance than a manufacturer would pay to transport wares a great distance.

A Harsh and Isolating Environment

The woes faced by farmers transcended economics. Nature was unkind in many parts of the Great Plains. Blistering summers and cruel winters were commonplace. Frequent drought spells made farming even more difficult. Insect blights raged through some regions, eating further into the farmers' profits.

Farmers lacked political power. Washington was a long way from the Great Plains, and politicians seemed to turn deaf ears to the farmers' cries. Social problems were also prevalent. With each neighbor on 160-acre plots of land, communication was difficult and loneliness was widespread.

Farm life proved monotonous compared with the bustling cities of the East. Although rural families were now able to purchase mail-order products through catalogs such as Sears and Roebuck's and Montgomery Ward, there was simply no comparison with what the Eastern market could provide.

These conditions could not last. Out of this social and economic unrest, farmers began to organize and make demands that would rock the Eastern establishment.

The Growth of Populism



The Grange borrowed heavily from the Freemasons, employing complex rituals and regalia.

Organization was inevitable. Like the oppressed laboring classes of the East, it was only a matter of time before Western farmers would attempt to use their numbers to effect positive change.

Farmers Organize

In 1867, the first such national organization was formed. Led by Oliver Kelley, the Patrons of Husbandry, also known as the Grange, organized to address the social isolation of farm life. Like other secret societies, such as the Masons, Grangers had local chapters with secret passwords and rituals.

The local Grange sponsored dances and gatherings to attack the doldrums of daily life. It was only natural that politics and economics were discussed in these settings, and the Grangers soon realized that their individual problems were common.

Identifying the railroads as the chief villains, Grangers lobbied state legislatures for regulation of the industry. By 1874, several states passed the Granger Laws, establishing maximum shipping rates. Grangers also pooled their resources to buy grain elevators of their own so that members could enjoy a break on grain storage.

Farmers' Alliances went one step further. Beginning in 1889, Northern and Southern Farmers' Alliances championed the same issues as the Grangers, but also entered the political arena. Members of these alliances won seats in state legislatures across the Great Plains to strengthen the agrarian voice in politics.

Creating Inflation

What did all the farmers seem to have in common? The answer was simple: debt. Looking for solutions to this condition, farmers began to attack the nation's monetary system. As of 1873, Congress declared that all federal money must be backed by gold. This limited the nation's money supply and benefited the wealthy.

The farmers wanted to create inflation. Inflation actually helps debtors. If a farmer owes \$3,000 and can earn \$1 for every bushel of wheat sold at harvest, he needs to

sell 3,000 bushels to pay off the debt. If inflation could push the price of a bushel of wheat up to \$3, he needs to sell only 1,000 bushels. The economics are simple.

To create inflation, farmers suggested that the money supply be expanded to include dollars not backed by gold. The first strategy farmers attempted was to encourage Congress to print greenback dollars like the ones issued during the Civil War. Since the greenbacks were not backed by gold, more dollars could be printed, creating an inflationary effect.

The Greenback Party and the Greenback-Labor Party each ran candidates for President in 1876, 1880, and 1884 under this platform. No candidate was able to muster national support for the idea, and soon farmers chose another strategy.

Inflation could also be created by printing money that was backed by silver as well as gold. This idea was more popular because people were more confident in their money if they knew it was backed by something of value. Also, America had a tradition of coining silver money until 1873.

Birth of the Populists

Out of the ashes of the Greenback-Labor Party grew the Populist Party. In addition to demanding the free coinage of silver, the Populists called for a host of other reforms. They demanded a graduated income tax, whereby individuals earning a higher income paid a higher percentage in taxes.

They wanted political reforms as well. At this point, United States Senators were still not elected by the people directly; they were instead chosen by state legislatures. The Populists demanded a constitutional amendment allowing for the direct election of Senators.

They demanded democratic reforms such as the initiative, where citizens could directly introduce debate on a topic in the legislatures. The referendum would allow citizens — rather than their representatives — to vote a bill. Recall would allow the people to end an elected official's term before it expired. They also called for the secret ballot and a one-term limit for the President.

In 1892, the Populists ran James Weaver for President on this ambitious platform. He polled over a million popular votes and 22 electoral votes. Although he came far short of victory, Populist ideas were now being discussed at the national level. When the Panic of 1893 hit the following year, an increased number of unemployed and dispossessed Americans gave momentum to the Populist movement. A great showdown was in place for 1896.

Settling the Great Plains

What was the **HOMESTEAD ACT**, and what did it offer to prospective settlers?

List the four *Money Problems* the article describes. On the article itself, draw a box around each one and write a number (1-4) beside them.

1.

2.

3.

4.

What main political problem did farmers have?

Why, according to the article, were there often social problems?

What new service helped to bring some of the excitement of the eastern cities to farmers?

How did farmers respond to the many challenges and hardships they faced?

What unexpected discovery did the Grange make as a result of their planned social gatherings?

Why did the Grange specifically target the railroads early on?

How were Farmers' Alliances similar to the Grange, and what was one key difference?

What did all farmers have in common?

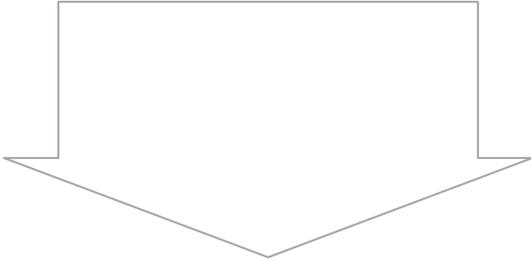
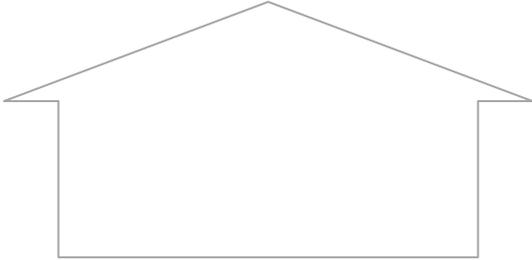
What was their proposed solution to this problem?

The Election of 1892

What eight things did the Populist Party want, as part of their platform for the 1892 election? (page 99)

<p>1.</p> <p>2.</p> <p>3.</p> <p>4.</p>	<p>5.</p> <p>6.</p> <p>7.</p> <p>8.</p>
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The Election of 1896

	“Gold Bugs”	“Silverites”
Who They Were		
What They Wanted		
Why		
Effects		
Their Presidential Candidate		