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pete. Many farmers were seriously in debt. Then as now, the question of "fair prices" was uppermost.

From 1880 to 1895, the price of farm products dropped steadily. Corn which sold for 83 cents in 1881 sold for 28 cents in 1894. Wheat dropped from \$1.19 in 1881 to 49 cents in 1894. Alarmists proclaimed that Kansas farmers were so deeply in debt that if the state were put up for auction, it wouldn't sell for enough to pay its debts.

Today, it's estimated that 45 per cent of farmers in Kansas are in serious financial trouble, with about 10 per cent going bankrupt yearly due to low farm prices and high operating expenses.

Wheat prices have dropped from about \$5 a bushel in 1974 to a low of \$2.17 this fall, while the cost of farm equipment and fertilizer have skyrocketed.

FARMERS OF ALL AGES PARTICIPATED IN ONE OF THE LARGEST FARM PROTESTS IN THE COUNTRY BY PARADING THEIR EQUIPMENT AROUND THE STATE HOUSE. SOME DROVE THEIR TRACTORS THROUGH FREEZING TEMPERATURES FOR THREE DAYS TO BE A PART OF THE 10-MILE LONG PARADE.

FARM MOVEMENT PHOTOS BY
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itically through the Farmers' Alliance in the late 19th century. Through cooperation, many believed, they could fight and succeed in gaining a better, more just marketing arrangement.

The Farmers' Alliance started in the late '80s. It taught organization of cooperative business association for buying and selling. It had a well-defined political program. abundant literature and well-organized propaganda. The Alliance convinced thousands in Kansas and throughout the U.S. that farmers, along with many other "little guys," were the victims of a long series of unfriendly legislation, that government and big business had robbed them to build up trusts and monopolies, and that their salvation was to organize and get legislation for their common good.

The Alliance started in 1888 in Kansas and quickly spread through the state. The first state convention was held in 1889 in Newton. Over 80 delegates from 27 counties attended. The Kansas Alliance boasted a membership of over 100,000 in their first year.

In 1890, county presidents of the Alliance issued a call for a meeting of state reform organizations in Topeka to decide what actions to take in the upcoming state elections. In a historic meeting,

Again in 1892, the Populists won great victories. The entire state Populist ticket was elected and the lower house was made up of a majority of Populists. In 1896, the Populists gained full control, electing the Governor, both branches of the legislature and a majority of the Supreme Court.

Nationally, the Populists nearly elected William Jennings Bryan as President. He lost by a very close margin.

By 1898, just as some thought the Alliance should be able to force legislation through to substantially improve farming conditions, the Populist party began to decline, mainly because times were getting better. After five years of depression following the panic of 1893, business was looking up. And, the Republican and Democratic parties began to address some Populist concerns.

Even though the People's party was no more by 1900, the Populists succeeded in influencing the two main parties and in educating the public about the inequities that exist for many in the U.S.

Those who were raised on Populism and who continued to be politically active fought for more reforms. Many of the Populists' causes were eventually enacted into law.



Immediately after the People's party disbanded, other organizations took up the cause of the farmers. The Farmers' Union organized in Kansas to obtain a better and more direct market for all products of the farm and to eliminate increased expenses in supplies. They fostered scores of buying and selling cooperatives.

About the same time, the Society of Equity was started. It urged farmers to organize into a powerful union to fix prices on important crops. Equity's founder maintained:

"All he is supposed to know under the present system is how to work sixteen hours a day and the road to market. When he gets there he finds a man who tells him how much his produce is worth, and if he wants to take something home with him he is told the price of that also...This arbitrary fixing of prices destroys the independence of the greatest class of our citizens...and is more tyrannical than were the taxes imposed by George III."

In 1903, Equity initiated a wheat holding action. Growers were urged to hold wheat for \$1 per bushel. The following year, another holding action took place. Although prices weren't pushed up, Equity took credit for cushioning the fall of prices. More importantly, the holding actions boosted farmers' spirits and encouraged them to work together. It gave rise to the formation of many farmers cooperatives, that with the help of the Farmers' Union, numbered over 12,000 by 1922.

The late '20s were hard times for farmers and consequently there was also a flurry of organizing and protest. Under President Hoover, farmers moaned that there was a new 4-H club, "Hoover, Hyde (who was then the Secretary of Agriculture), Hell and Hard Times."

Farmers raised plenty of Hell, leaving their farms to picket the highways when they went on strike. Their militant actions along with their voting power, had a lot to do with the election of Franklin Roosevelt and the creation of New Deal programs to help farmers.

Today, many argue that the farmers movement doesn't stand a chance in achieving more equitable prices because as voters, they make up only 4 per cent of the total electorate.

Also, the system that 19th century farmers charged as being unfairly stacked against the small farmer, is just as unfair today. The farmer's enemy is still big businesses who have monopolistic control over marketing, middlemen who reap great profits and the government which works for agribusiness interests.

Farmers in the 1890s and the 1920s were able to make some changes and their success came through mass demonstrations and through party politics.

The Alliance succeeded, in part, by linking up with the Democratic party. Farmers in the late '20s allied with labor and small business interests to help elect FDR.

More importantly, farmers were able to gain more control over prices for the goods they bought and sold through cooperative organizations; stores, grain elevators, marketing associations.

The strength of the American Agriculture movement today lies in efforts to form a permanent organization that will be able to give farmers necessary information to plan ahead, and an organization that can participate in planning the federal farm program.

The key to altering a system that has periodically subjected farmers and small operators and individuals to economic ups and downs is a political alliance of farmers and consumers. Above all, the American Agricultural movement needs to convince consumers that it is not the farmer who is to blame for high food prices, and that food and food politics are of concern to us all.

Farmers of the 1890s had faced drought and depression before and would have gone on with hope for better times if they had believed that the game was being fairly played. But the same old explanation for low prices caused by overproduction when there were underfed people in nearby cities, didn't suffice. The farmers blamed much of their plight on an unfair system of interchange that left them with no control over the prices they sold their goods at nor control over the prices for equipment and supplies. Farmers saw their condition as being "fleeced both coming and going."

Today, President Jimmy Carter contends that a lot of the suffering farmers now are experiencing is due to drought and he believes that with better weather will come better times for farmers. But the same analysis that farmers of the 1890s came to, has now penetrated the minds of today's farmers. Like farmers of the past, those active in the American Agriculture movement are vehement against monopolies and middlemen, and they know that government and big business are not their best friends.

What a Kansas historian wrote of farming conditions in the 1890s sounds remarkably like what AA supports maintain:

"Poverty is bearable if everyone is poor, but the farmer's discontent was aggravated by the extravagances of the 'idle rich' which the press flaunted in his face, and by the tales of fortunes being piled up by capitalists. A little investigation showed that these fortunes were in all cases, traceable to monopoly of some essential thing--land, transportation, trade, money or credit..."

Desperate for change, farmers for the first time organized pol-

delegates from the Alliance, the Grange, the Knights of Labor, the Farmers' Mutual Benefit Association, and the Single Tax club formed a third major political party, the People's party.

The Populists, as they eventually were called, successfully waged some of the most intense and spectacular campaigns the state and the nation have ever witnessed. There was great enthusiasm for the People's party. In the early 1890s newspapers reported only small crowds at Republican party gatherings, but crowds of over 10,000 and lines of farmers' wagons two miles long were reported at Alliance meetings.

Mrs. Mary E. Lease, a fluent talker and active Populist leader, urged farmers to fight: "The thing for farmers to do is raise less corn and more hell." And, farmers proceeded to do so in party politics.

In the election of 1890, the Populists won an astonishing victory with a campaign that was clearly anti-capitalist and pro-socialist. The Populists attacked the "money power" and advocated such radical ideas as public ownership of transportation, communications and land. They elected 60 per cent of the county and township offices, the attorney general, five U.S. Congressmen, and enough state legislators to give them clear control in the state house.

Nationally, the Alliance elected over 40 Populist candidates to Congress and several Senators from Southern states.

Kansas had elected five of the Alliance candidates in the Congress, the largest number in any one state, causing Kansas to be regarded as the center of the movement. Kansas and Populism were considered one and the same.

One of the most influential spokesmen for the Populist cause and a proponent for better farming conditions was President Theodore Roosevelt who was elected on a platform that sounded more populist than Populism itself.

As a direct result of the organizing efforts by Kansas farmers, the federal government, under the leadership of Roosevelt began to offer help to the farmer.

Roosevelt had a great interest in providing farmers with equitable prices and good living standards. In 1908 in an address to Congress he said:

"...The farmers have hitherto had less than their full share of public attention along the lines of business and governmental life. I am therefore anxious to bring before the people of the United States the question of securing better business and better living on the farm, whether by cooperation between farmers for buying, selling, and borrowing; by promoting governmental advantages and opportunities in this country; or by any other legitimate means...It is of the greatest consequence that the people of the open country should learn to work together, not only for the purpose of forwarding their economic interests and of competing with other men who are organized, but also to develop themselves and to establish an effective community spirit. This effort should be a genuinely cooperative or common effort in which all...share proportionately in its benefits."

He appointed the Country Life Commission to push for the formation of cooperatives to shore up the economic low spots of country life, to establish prices and to control production. The years that followed his administration were some of the most prosperous for farmers.