Farmers and the Populist Movement

BEFORE YOU READ
In the last section, you read about life for thousands of farmers trying to make a living on the Great Plains. In this section, you will read how these farmers organized and fought to improve their conditions.

AS YOU READ
Use this chart to take notes about the causes of the rise of the Populist Party and the effects the party had.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAUSES</th>
<th>EFFECTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>farmers felt cheated</td>
<td>strong showing in the presidential election</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Farmers Unite to Address Common Problems (pages 425–427)

How did farmers fight back?

Farmers faced serious problems after the Civil War. The prices they could sell their crops for kept going down. This was because the United States was withdrawing greenbacks—money printed for the Civil War—from circulation. The decline in prices also meant that farmers had to pay back their loans in money that was worth more than when they borrowed it. Farmers urged the government to increase the money supply. But the government refused.

Meanwhile, farmers continued to pay high prices to transport grain. Often they paid as much to ship their crops as they received for them. Many farmers were on the brink of ruin. The time, it seemed, had come for reform.

Many farmers joined together to push for reform. In 1867, a farmer named Oliver Hudson Kelley started an organization that became known as the Grange. Its original purpose was to provide a place for farm families to discuss social and educational issues. By the 1870s, however, Grange members spent most of their time and energy fighting the railroads.

The Grange gave rise to other organizations. They included the Farmers’ Alliances. These organizations included teachers, preachers, and newspaper editors who sympathized with farmers.
Alliance members traveled throughout the Great Plains. They educated farmers about a variety of issues, including how to obtain lower interest rates and ways to protest the railroads.

1. What steps did farmers take to address their concerns?

---

**The Rise and Fall of Populism**

*pages 427–429*

**What did the Populist movement hope to achieve?**

Alliance leaders realized that to make far-reaching changes, they needed political power. So in 1892, they created the Populist Party, or People’s Party. This party was the beginning of Populism. This was a movement to gain more political and economic power for common people.

The Populist Party pushed for reforms to help farmers. It also called for reforms to make government more democratic. These reforms included direct election of senators and a secret ballot to stop cheating in voting.

Most Americans thought the populists’ beliefs too radical. However, the party appealed to many struggling farmers and laborers. In 1892, the Populist presidential candidate won more than a million votes. That was almost 10 percent of the total vote. In the West, Populist candidates won numerous local elections. While not as strong as the two major parties, the Populist Party had become a political force.

Then, in 1893, the nation faced an economic crisis called the Panic of 1893. The causes of the panic started in the 1880s. During that decade, many companies and individuals had borrowed too much money. But starting in 1893, many of these companies went bankrupt because they were not making enough money to pay back their loans. Many people lost their jobs.

The panic continued into 1895. Then political parties began to choose candidates for the 1896 presidential election. One important issue was whether the country’s paper money should be backed with both gold and silver.

The central issue of the campaign was which metal would be the basis of the nation’s monetary system. On one side were the “silverites” who favored bimetallism, a monetary system in which the government would give people either gold or silver in exchange for paper currency or checks. On the other side were the “gold bugs” who favored the gold standard—backing dollars solely with gold.

“Gold bugs” favored gold because using the gold standard would keep prices from rising. Silverites favored bimetallism because it would make more dollars available and therefore prices and wages would rise.

Republicans were “gold bugs.” They elected William McKinley for president. The Democrats and the Populists both favored bimetallism. Both parties nominated William Jennings Bryan. At the Democratic convention, Bryan delivered an emotional speech, known as the “Cross of Gold” speech, in support of bimetallism.

But on election day McKinley won. McKinley’s election brought an end to Populism. The movement left two powerful legacies: a message that poor people and less powerful groups in society could organize and have a political impact, and an agenda of reforms many of which would be enacted in the 20th century.

2. Which groups did the Populists appeal to most?