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Women in the Texas Populist movement: Their letters to the “Southern Mercury”

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WOMEN IN THE TEXAS POPULIST MOVEMENT: THEIR LETTERS TO
THE SOUTHERN MERCURY

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
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ABSTRACT

Women in the Texas Populist Movement: Their Letters to the Southern Mercury

by

Marion Knox Barthelme

Many rural Texas women joined the Farmers’ Alliance and Populist Party, components of the agrarian reform movement in America in the 1880’s and 1890’s. Some expressed their interest in the movement by writing letters to the Southern Mercury, a Dallas-based newspaper that became the official organ of the Farmers’ State Alliance and Populist Party. These letters, over one hundred in number, give some idea of the concerns, thoughts and daily lives of ordinary women in the movement. They provide a view of women’s perceptions of their domestic sphere and their hopes and expectations for the Alliance and Populist Party. They suggest that many women found community, mutuality and a stronger sense of self through participation in the movement and in writing and reading each others’ letters to the Southern Mercury.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

To Americans of all kinds, industrialization was a painful process. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many of the nation's different groups came up with a variety of schemes in which to rework the emerging weave of American industrial society.¹ The farmers' version—the brief but powerful Populist movement—was the largest and most significant endeavor of the era.² It originated on the Texas farming frontier in 1877, when farmers, trying to improve their lot through cooperation and education, created the Southern Farmers' Alliance. In 1892, they turned to politics and formed the Populist Party. By 1896, the movement had peaked but not before it had swept like wildfire through the South and West and out into the Great Plains, igniting the hopes of one to three million farmers strong.³


Populists sought to change the developing economic structure of the Gilded Age through political and economic reform, specifically of railroad monopoly, land scarcity, mortgage foreclosures, and the U.S. monetary system based on the gold standard. They proposed far more sweeping changes than either major party accepted, and, for a moment, their movement looked as if it might alter the shape of Southern politics. But the Populist challenge had both heroic and humanistic dimensions which appealed to women as well as men. It was a moral revolution designed to lift the nation to a higher plane. The Alliance stressed the harmony of interest among producers and wished to deemphasize the spirit of competition which characterized the late nineteenth century. It promised greater democracy and “equal rights for all and special privileges to none.” It pledged to “elevate to higher manhood and womanhood those who bear the burdens of productive industry.” Productive industry meant the improvement of farming. Profitable farming required physical stamina, reliable work habits, and efficient financial management, and the Alliance hoped to shield the agrarian work unit, the family, from potential harm by teaching sobriety, benevolence, and the avoidance of conduct that would bring

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*Party in Texas: A Study in Third Party Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Bulletin, 1933), 231

4 Wagner, iv

5 McMath, 141

reproach upon an individual or his family.\footnote{Jeffrey, 75; Roscoe Martin, \textit{The People's Party in Texas: A Study in Third Party Politics} (Austin: University of Texas Bulletin, 1933), 46; King, 118-119}

Alliance and Populist Women

In agricultural pioneer states such as Texas, women often worked alongside men in the business of farming, shouldering traditionally unwomenly burdens. The Alliance recognized this and offered membership to white rural women over sixteen years of age. "Our female membership should be recognized as a very powerful element of strength," said R.A. High, president of the Farmers' State Alliance of Texas, in an annual message to the "Brothers and Sisters." "Where[ever] there is an active woman element, there is [also] found the greatest activity among the membership and the greatest prosperity of the order."\footnote{Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Women in the Southern Farmers Alliance," \textit{Feminist Studies} 3 (Fall 1975): 75, 79; Melissa Wiedenfeld, Master's thesis (Texas Tech University, 1983), 7, 16; Dallas \textit{Southern Mercury}, September 13, 1894} Significant numbers of women, perhaps as many as 25 percent, joined the Farmers' Alliance and later the Populist Party.\footnote{McMath, 67}

To encourage their participation and interest, the \textit{Southern Mercury}, the official organ of the state order and eventually of the Texas Populist Party, solicited and published letters from rural women. The many--often short-lived, rarely self-supporting--journals that grew up around the Alliance movement were critically important in the dissemination of the order's programs and other information. (In Texas alone there were at least one hundred such journals.) At the heart of this
reform press, and the least troubled of the Alliance newspapers, was the 16-page *Southern Mercury*, published weekly in Dallas under the editorship of Sam Dixon and later Milton Park.\(^\text{10}\) It was published between 1884 and 1907 (In 1887 the name changed from the *Dallas Mercury* to the *Southern Mercury*.), and in 1890, its peak year, it had a circulation of 26,000. Although most subscribers lived in Texas, the large number of letters from other states indicated that the *Mercury* had a sizeable readership in other states and territories.\(^\text{11}\)

From 1886 to 1907, with varying intensity and dedication, the *Mercury* singled out correspondence from women by devoting one weekly page (usually page two) of each issue to their letters and concerns. In 1888–89, women’s letters comprised 21 percent of all those published. The editor labelled page two the “Ladies’ Department” in 1888, “The Family” in 1889, and “Woman’s Column” in 1890. That same year the editor moved the women’s page to page six, and in 1894 it became “Our Household.” Women’s letters were not completely segregated from those of men; 11 percent of the female correspondence was published in parts of the *Mercury* other than the women’s section.\(^\text{12}\)

A prodigious amount has been written about the Farmers’ Alliance and Populist

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\(^{10}\) According to Schwarz, businessmen did not choose to advertise in what they considered radical journals. As a result, the reform editor was almost totally dependent on his subscribers for the support of the paper and frequently went broke. The columns of Alliance papers were filled with appeals to delinquent subscribers.

\(^{11}\) Schwartz, 121; Martin, 189; Weidenfeld, 30

\(^{12}\) Weidenfeld, 34
Party but until recently, historians have neglected the part played by women in the agrarian movement. Walter T. K. Nugent, Richard Hofstadter, John Hicks, and Lawrence Goodwyn have acknowledged the contributions or eccentricities of three nationally prominent leaders (Mary Elizabeth Lease, Annie Diggs, Sarah Emery), and Robert McMath’s history of the Southern Farmers’ Alliance credits women with a positive role, but the references are brief.\textsuperscript{13} Recent efforts to write women back into history have illuminated the women’s story but have also emphasized urban reform activities and concentrated on the North.\textsuperscript{14} Robert Swierenga has noted the absence of research in rural history, arguing that “as a counterpart to ‘urban history,’ it has no recognized place as yet in American historiography or academic curricula.”\textsuperscript{15}

In the 1960s, a handful of historians began to take a look at old records and to create a “new history” of Southern women, but in general, it has been slow to emerge as a recognized interest within Southern history and American women’s history.\textsuperscript{16} A decade ago, Anne F. Scott, called the history done to date on Southern women only

\textsuperscript{13} Wagner, 3, 11

\textsuperscript{14} Wagner, 4; Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp, eds., \textit{Sex, Race and the Role of Women in the South}, (University Press of Mississippi, 1983), xi; Anne Firor Scott, \textit{Making the Invisible Woman Visible}, (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 249


\textsuperscript{16} Anne Firor Scott, ed. \textit{Unheard Voices: The First Historians of Southern Women} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1993), I
a "brave beginning." Apart from a few biographical studies, the brave new scholarly work on women and rural reform in the 1880s and 1890s consists for the most part of two essays, one Ph.D. dissertation and a Master's thesis. Joan Jensen's collection of documents of women farmers, With These Hands, includes a brief overview of women in the Grange, the Alliance, and the Populist Party. In her essay "Women in the Southern Farmers' Alliance," Julie Roy Jeffrey documents the role of women in North Carolina. MaryJo Wagner's "Farms, Families, and Reform: Women in the Farmers' Alliance and Populist Party," takes a thorough, thoughtful look at women's roles in agrarian reform and focuses on national leaders

17 Anne F. Scott, "Historians Construct the Southern Woman," Joan V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp, eds., Sex, Race and the Role of Women in the South (University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 97


20 Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Women in the Southern Farmers' Alliance," Feminist Studies 3 (Fall 1975): 72-91
and on grassroots participation in Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado. Two other contributions to be mentioned are Sandra Myres' *Westering Women* and Melissa Wiedenfeld's, "Women in the Texas Farmers' Alliance." The first is an excellent view of pioneer women and women in the West although it discusses Populist women only in relation to women's suffrage. The second is an overview of Texas women's contributions to the order, with additional short biographies. It does not attempt to include the many diverse voices.

Of the Southern states, Texas women were the most active of Alliance participants and a number of them such as Fannie Moss of Cleburne, Fannie Leak, a physician in Austin, and Mary Clardy of Sulphur Springs, held offices in the order. Bettie Gay of Columbus, and Ellen Dabbs, a physician also from Sulphur Springs, represented the state at national conventions, while Bessie Dwyer from San Antonio was a staff writer for the national paper, the *National Economist*. While these women were not nationally prominent, their names are known, as are the names and histories of the more active Alliance leaders who organized, campaigned, and attended conventions. But the Alliance movement was a mass movement, a grassroots effort, made by rank-and-file "plain" people. These people were marginal farmers and their

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23 McMath, 68-69; Wagner, 42-43
families—tenants, landowners, teachers, preachers, doctors operating farms in economically depressed sections of the country. Among them were ordinary women, and their voices have been lost.

Perhaps the most serious problem facing historians of women is the paucity of available source material, and rural women, in particular those who are affected by illiteracy, long and exhausting work, and lack of leisure time, are among the least likely members of American society to keep or maintain records. When women are literate, however, they are apt to write letters, and apart from their essays, newspaper articles, and speeches, the most important sources for the study of Populist women are the Alliance minutebooks and their letters. "Since these long forgotten farm women... left virtually no other personal records, their letters...provide a crucial insight into the grassroots level of the Alliance," says Jeffrey. What are those insights? What did this grassroots movement for economic, social, and moral elevation mean to rural women? How bound were they by the idea of a domestic sphere? What did the Populist promises mean to them? "In Southern history are thickets and swamps of ill-perceived, half-forgotten myths, and many kinds of women," says Shirley Abbott in her memoir, Womenfolks. "...They bear witness to

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24 McMath, 65, 66; Merchants, bankers, lawyers and other undesirable sorts were barred, as were townsmen; Schwartz, 15; Goodwyn, vii, 3


26 Hawks & Skemp, eds, xii, 98.

27 Jeffrey, "Women in the Southern Farmers' Alliance," 75
something buried, unvoiced, powerful." 28

The women's letters to the Southern Mercury--excerpts from about one hundred and ten in number--provide a rare look at the thoughts and daily life of rural Texas women. The letters do not have the intimacy of private letters or diaries, but they are nonetheless often sensitive, open, courageous. They recount the worries, chores, joys, complexities of life in the 1880's and 1890's, how women regarded, moved through and around their separate sphere. They give us some idea of what Populism meant to rural women, a grassroots perspective. (A few of the letterwriters became small-scale leaders and stepped above the rank-and-file to attain some degree of visibility. Others seem bound in that direction, then disappear without a trace.)

Over the near-decade in which the women correspond, they undergo political and personal growth, due in part to their participation in the movement and in part to the act of writing and communicating in the Southern Mercury. The letters suggest that many of the women emerge from the experience with a greater sense of self. Their individual and collective self esteem are augmented by the act of writing and by the mutual reading of each others' written words. The letters also reveal a far greater vigor for suffrage among "conservative" rural women than has generally been attributed. 29 Scholars looking at Texas for the grassroots of the suffrage movement


29 Patricia B. Nieuwenhuizen, "Minnie Fisher Cunningham and Jane Y. McCallum, Leaders of Texas Women for Suffrage and Beyond," (Senior Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 1982), 54.
have overlooked suffrage sentiment in the countryside and have theorized that urbanization was an essential precursor. In terms of establishing a critical mass, this is undoubtedly true, but a lot of energy, fervor, and early paradigmatic shifting, or reevaluating of prior beliefs, have been missed in bypassing rural women. Once gaining a stronger sense of self, many Populist women were able to move on to the idea of self-empowerment via suffrage. They did not wish to negate the responsibilities and endowments that derived from their separate sphere, but to add to them full citizenship.

The Alliance

In the 1870’s caravans of poor—almost 100,000 a year—migrated to Texas in search of a better life and fresh farm land. From 1870 to 1890, close to 1,500,000 newcomers flocked in, some from Germany and Mexico, most from Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, Louisiana. By 1890, approximately 15 percent of the state’s population was foreign born or of foreign parentage, 22 percent was Black, 63 percent was native stock. Two-thirds of the church-goers were Baptist and Methodist. Women who joined the Alliance were part of this amalgam. In carving homesteads and farms from the unsettled forests and prairies, they and their families faced the vissitudes of uncertain rainfall, inadequate housing, vicious feuds,

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30 Elizabeth Hayes Turner, “‘White-Gloved Ladies’ and ‘New Women’ in the Texas Woman Suffrage Movement.” *Southern Women: Histories and Identities*, Virginia, Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Theda Perdue, eds. (University of Missouri Press, Columbia), 130

31 King, 109
cattle rustling, loneliness, and economic dislocation. Although Texas fared much better than many Southern states after the Civil War, its banking system was inadequate to the task of financing cotton and grain marketing. The amount of money in circulation, already inadequate, was declining.

Beginning in 1870, the price of cotton—the farmers’ economic mainstay—began to drop steadily in price. Many cash-strapped farmers turned to the crop-lien method of financing by which a furnishing merchant or landlord would advance supplies and goods to the farmer in return for a lien on the future crop. The farmer was given a certain amount of credit, legally at 8 percent interest. However, the actual rate charged was considerably higher, frequently well in excess of 100 percent annually. The effect of the crop-lien system was to establish a condition of peonage, for women as well as men. Appreciating money and diminishing returns, drought, depression, or northerners often meant loss of ownership, and the number of landless tenant farmers began to rise. Even those who fared well enough to avoid lien financing and debt bitterly complained about the agricultural depression. Some farmers formed organizations of economic self-help such as the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, a secret society that officially eschewed partisan politics but called for cooperative endeavor and state railroad regulation. Others farmers pioneered new political institutions such as the Greenback Party or the Union Labor Party.33


33 Barnes, 2-3; Goodwyn, viii, 22; Scott, 20; King, 37
The Farmer's Alliance originated in Lampasas County, Texas, in 1877 to thwart cattle-rustling. In 1880, it was moved to Parker County and chartered as the non-profit Farmers' State Alliance organization. In 1884 the Alliance fortuitously selected S.O. Daws, a Mississippian and Wise County, Texas, farmer, as its traveling lecturer. He provided the reactivated Alliance with a philosophy of cooperation and political action.\textsuperscript{34} Thereafter the Alliance experienced a dramatic, spiraling growth as a result of its determination to go beyond the cash stores of the Grange and make significant efforts in cooperative marketing as well as purchasing. By 1885, it had been forged into a cohesive system of approximately 200,000 members in over 200 suballiances. Articulate, indignant lecturers travelled the countryside talking about the exorbitant prices charged by monopolistic trusts, the evils of the crop-lien, and the salvation for farmers who would only join in cooperative buying and selling.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1886 the Alliance recruited in Louisiana. The next year, representatives from Texas and Louisiana organized alliances throughout the south. In 1888 these alliances merged with the Arkansas Agricultural Wheel and membership spread over ten states. With its frequent suballiance meetings at which the order's growing corps of lecturers spoke, the Alliance also provided an opportunity for social gatherings for families on the lonely prairies and enabled a group educational effort.\textsuperscript{36} The movement expanded into Kansas and in 1889 merged with strong state agrarian organizations in North

\textsuperscript{34} King, 36-37

\textsuperscript{35} Barnes, 3; Goodwyn, 27, 46

\textsuperscript{36} King, 39; McMath, 3-4, 9; Weidenfeld, 26
Dakota and South Dakota. Lecturers toured in Colorado and California. In December 1889 farmers’ organizations met in St. Louis to constitute a truly national alliance called the Farmers’ Alliance and Industrial Union. It attained a strength in the next four years of from one to three million members.37

Throughout its lifetime, the Alliance struggled with the issue of political insurgency versus non-partisanship. As early as 1886, a series of political demands were formulated, then modified by conservatives hoping to avoid political divisions and promote harmony. These were the Cleburne Demands, and they became the agrarian gospel that organizers preached throughout the nation. They included laws against alien land ownership, laws to prevent trading in agricultural futures, immediate forfeiture of railroad lands, removal of illegal fences from public lands, tax reforms on corporate holdings, unlimited coinage of both gold and silver, an expanded money supply based on legal tender notes issued by the federal government, passage of an interstate commerce act, abolition of convict labor, and a request that these demands be presented to state and national legislators.38

In many ways the Alliance was an ideal movement for women. “No other movement in history--not even the antislavery cause--appealed to the women like [Populism],” wrote the novelist Hamlin Garlin.39 Separate spheres gave women a

37 Hicks, 112-113; Martin, 24
Four Northern states usually designated the Northern Alliance cooperated with but refused to join the new association, disdaining the secret ritual and segregated membership. King, 39

38 Barnes, 4; Martin, 30, 47; Goodwyn, 44-51; Winkler, 293-297

39 Degler, 338
responsibility for morality and a higher purpose in life, a source which could readily be found in the order’s teachings about sobriety, morality, benevolence, and cooperation. Its constitution announced the need “to develop a better state, mentally, morally, socially and financially,” and placed much stress on the moral conduct of its members. Protection of the family was another goal. Women were a valuable component of these aims. Harry Tracy, a national lecturer, told Alliance members: “The ladies eligible must join the order before we can succeed.”

Some of the female membership who joined the Alliance had belonged to other third parties, had participated in temperance and suffrage societies, taught Sunday school, or served as county school superintendents. Others were enlisting for the first time. They acknowledged the order’s draft and urged each other to join. “Our moralizing influence is such that no good Alliance man ever wants to meet unless the sisters are there. That is what I have heard many other brethren say,” wrote Mary, who used no last name, from Limestone County, in a letter of May 10, 1888, to the Southern Mercury. They felt it their duty to report, often with great enthusiasm and excitement, the various local suballiance activities and growing industry. “The new Alliance and co-operative store house at Halletville is very near completed and will soon be ready for business,” wrote one woman from Lavacca County in April 1888. “My husband was sent as a delegate to the county Alliance and says it is fast gaining

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40 King, 118-119; Jeffrey, “Women in the Southern Farmers’ Alliance,” 75

41 Wagner, 9

42 Southern Mercury, May 10, 1888
members and interest all over the country, that it has twice as many members as last year. I am glad that the farmers have awoke from their slumbers and are doing something that will break the yoke of bondage they have so patiently carried for so many years.”  

The county suballiances were, essentially, the heartbeat of the organization, providing it with its prime resource—a committed, initiated membership. Ida Jones from Mansfield, Texas, understood this. In the spring of 1888, she reported: “The sisters are attending and seem more interested than at first. Let us strive to use all our influence to persuade all good farmers, their wives and daughters to join the alliance. We have slept on our rights till they are nearly gone beyond our reach; yet it is not quite so late that all hope is lost. I would not give a copper cent for a man who will object to ladies joining the Alliance.”

Men in the North Carolina Alliance discouraged female membership in subtle ways by holding meetings in public places such as a court house where women would feel uncomfortable. There is no indication that this occurred in Texas, or that Texas women would have let such behavior bother them. On the contrary, they felt needed. “We have a cooperative store in Henderson and it is just booming,” wrote Mrs. S.E. Redwise, “doing more business than two or three stores put together, although the

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43 Southern Mercury, April 19, 1888

44 Schwartz, 111

45 Southern Mercury, May 3, 1888

46 Jeffrey, 76
merchants have put their goods down to almost nothing in order to break the Alliance. I say to the sisters, attend every meeting of your Alliance. If you become disinterested you need not expect your brothers, fathers and husband to be very interested." "I think it is every sister's duty to attend as often as they possibly can," said Hannah Bryant from the Kelso Alliance in June, 1889. "If we go oftener, it would encourage the men. We must all go to work with all our might. Let us take hold and give a long pull, a strong pull and all pull together." 47

A Separate Sphere

It was not easy at first for these early letterwriters to have their words and names appear in public print. Nineteenth-century middle class American society was based on the widespread acceptance of the "ideal lady"--modest, submissive, educated in the genteel and domestic arts, supportive of her husband's efforts, physically weaker, probably mentally inferior, but morally superior to men, uncomplaining, a perfect wife and mother, and most certainly private, never public. Good women were not to be seen or heard outside the sacred confines of the family circle.48 But the traditional view of the submissive, virtuous Southern lady set apart in her "woman's sphere" had begun to crumble under the impact of the traumatic Civil and Post-Civil War conditions. As well, these were farm women who were often required for the common good to undertake tasks outside the proscribed sphere of a woman's place. Despite the Eastern literature promoting the woman's sphere, many farm women

47 Southern Mercury, June, 6, 1889

48 Myres, 7
continued to work in the fields and pasture and to exchange their domestic produce for essential goods.49 This created contradictions for them, and their letters reveal their struggles to resolve their actual roles with the idealized. Paradoxically, this separate sphere also gave them a special identification with Alliance goals.

Initially they were hesitant to appear in public. Some used pen names. Again and again, they apologized for their correspondence, their assumption of a place in the public eye, but clearly felt that it was a responsibility they had been given by the Alliance. “I have waited to see if anyone of our Union would write to The Mercury,” Ida Jones explained. “Some member could write a much better letter than I but I will see if I can inspire them.”50 The letterwriter from Lavacca County began: “As you have so kindly offered us space in your valuable paper I will try and write a few words, hoping to be pardoned for the errors that I may make as this is my first attempt to write for a newspaper. As some of our sisters have said, I have been waiting and wishing [for] our ‘big-brained’ brothers who are better able to write something that would be more instructive and interesting.”51 “I have been a member of the Alliance for over a year, also my father and two of my brothers,” explained “A Farmer’s Daughter” from Waco. “Our Alliance is on a boom. Some of the sisters and brethren haven’t written to tell how the lodge is progressing because the weather has been so bad the ladies haven’t attended regularly, but also they have not written

49 Myres, 7; Jeffrey, 85

50 Southern Mercury, May 3, 1888

51 Southern Mercury, April, 19, 1888
for want of confidence in themselves. As this is my first attempt for the press, I will
close, for fear of the waste basket." 52

Non-participation was explained away by Fay Forestelle, somewhat guiltily and at
great lengths, by the press of domestic responsibilities. In August 14, 1888, she wrote
from her home in Wilson County: "I am not a member of the Alliance although the
movement has my warmest sympathy and best wishes. Why?... I fear I should be a
dead weight because I am the mother of seven children, most of them mere babies;
we live a long mile from the place of meeting and I do not think 'twould be right to
leave my babies at home, nor yet to bring them to the lodge. My husband is a
member...since the order was first organized.... The Mercury has no more eager and
interested reader than myself." 53

The women were clearly accustomed to being part of an agricultural unit and
pulling their own weight. "Many of our ablest men are urging the ladies to take a
more decided stand in the great cause we have espoused," said Addie McCaskill,
from DeWitt County. "If by doing so we can wield a greater influence, it is our duty
to do so, and modesty never required anyone to neglect a duty." Then she added: "So
keenly do I realize my inability to write an article to be read by so many people that
nothing but a true devotion to the cause could prevail upon me to attempt it." 54 The
brave Mrs. S.E. Redwise from Henderson had begun her account, confessing, "It is

52 Southern Mercury, May 17, 1888
53 Southern Mercury, August 14, 1888
54 Southern Mercury, May 10, 1888
with a great deal of embarrassment that I attempt to write this letter, for I feel my incompetence. However, it is not my disposition to say I can't and I intend to perform every duty the Alliance sees fit to put upon me.”

As time passed, the women became less timid, less self-effacing, the painful apologies ceased. Confidence in their public stance grew. Their increasing numbers fortified them. “I have never written anything for publication but other sisters writing in the Mercury from different places, induces me to write too,” said Eddie, from Round Pound Alliance. “My mother and myself are members of the Alliance, which has forty or fifty members.” They began to relate fondly to the Mercury as a friend and mentor—“our swift-winged messenger of truth and peace,” said one letter writer from Belton County. “If you have not got the Mercury, send for one,” urged Mrs. S.E. Watkins from Centerville. “It is one of the best guides in the world to the farmer. We have no crop mortgage this year, neither any stock; so it has stirred us up and caused us to keep out of mortgaging this year.”

The women were nourished by the act of publishing. Reading enlightened articles by other women heightened their individual and collective self esteem. “Miss Lula Wade’s essay on ‘Usury and Mortgages’ is the best and most logical I have ever had the pleasure of reading from the pen of a lady,” said “Homespun Dress” from Travis County. “She is certainly a

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55 *Southern Mercury*, May 17, 1888

56 *Southern Mercury*, May 17, 1888

57 *Southern Mercury*, April 19, 1888

58 *Southern Mercury*, June 27, 1889
deep thinker. I see other interesting letters from ladies too numerous to mention. I am proud to see so much intellect among farmer's wives and daughters. I believe, according to our opportunities, we do equally as well as the men.  

Women took their voting privileges seriously and looked to the Alliance to increase their political understanding. "It is our duty to attend every meeting and give strict attention to every subject that may be presented...and study both sides of the question thoroughly that we may...vote intelligently," said "A True Sister" from Gillespie County. "The majority of Alliance members fail to express their own opinions even if they have one....If we would only speak our true sentiments either for or against anything while in convention, there is a chance, if we are holding to a wrong idea, to be corrected."  

Class Consciousness  

If there were contradictions about womanhood and women's roles, there were also contradictions surrounding the farmers' self image. The agrarians accepted the Jeffersonian view of the primacy and virtuousness of farming as the ideal and fundamental employment of man and the superiority of the farmer in society as a key figure in civilization, a crusader for truth and right. Yet, farmers of the Alliance had spent much of their lives in humiliating circumstances, locked into the fabric of the lien system, crushed by a mountain of interest. Farming people were ridiculed for

59 *Southern Mercury*, May 10, 1888

60 *Southern Mercury*, February 28, 1889

their poverty, called "hayseeds," and they knew it. As times got tougher, in an occupation noted for hard work, they worked even harder. When this failed to change the situtation, they began to feel they were being duped, that their hard work was naive.\textsuperscript{62} This concern surfaced frequently in their letters. "I hold vanity as an excellent quality," wrote "Corn Bread" from Bexar County. "It stiffens the back, holds a man up and reinforces...pride. It matters not that we be highly cultured for many a man who cannot read has more gumption than the average statesman, scientist and professor. We ought to feel our worth and weight. We are not near so smart as some but the smart ones are mostly shallow. Raw statesmen, small-bore lawyers, chronic office-seekers, snobs, toadies, fops and railroad wreckers are not as good as we though immensely more showy."\textsuperscript{63}

In \textit{The Age of Reform}, Richard Hofstadter portrayed Populists as reactionaries attempting to halt national development. He suggested that being a yeoman in theory but an entrepreneur in practice created a double personality in the farmer, that the Populist was a frustrated small capitalist attempting to recover his prestige and profits in the fact of exploitation and unfavorable markets. He contended that farmers were downwardly mobile and suffered from status resentment, were retrogressive, saw history as a conspiracy, and used anti-Semitic rhetoric.\textsuperscript{64} These women's letters do not support Hofstadter's argument of the Populist as conspiracy-minded, nativist, or

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Goodwyn, viii, 33
  \item \textsuperscript{63} \textit{Southern Mercury}, September 11, 1888
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Richard Hofstadter, \textit{The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.} (New York: Knopf, 1955); 34,-35, 40, 71; King, 283
\end{itemize}
anti-Semitic but they do suggest that farmers experienced high anxiety about their status at the same time as they felt themselves to be superior.

In the December 12, 1888, issue of the *Mercury*, Margenie in Angelina County, asked indignantly: "What is the use of poor farmers' wives and daughters buying fine clothing, trying to look as fine as those who hold the farmers' money purse? If they want to turn the cold shoulder to us and turn their noses up, or give us the back seat at church because we wear calico, five-cent lawn, or perhaps twenty-cent worsted, it should not hurt us. Let them stick their heads in a flour-barrel and put on their silk and satin and sit in church pretending to swallow every word the preacher says....Ask what the text was and most likely they don't know. But dear sisters, do not let it bother you, for there never was a bird that flew so high but it hadn't to come to the ground for water." 65

The farmers found sympathy among other laborers of low status who also held the rich in contempt. They shared some of the same hostility that the Alliance felt for the clergy, who was perceived as conservative, pro-status quo, and against agrarians being given their fair portion of material wealth and political power.66 Sally Beck, who described herself as "yet, cooking, washing, ironing and playing maid for Widow Skinner and her three fashionable daughters," wrote on May 3: "I heard Parson Small'soul say at the supper table (I fried two chickens for 'tea' that evening), that he attended the circus with a long string of school children and while they were

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65 Southern *Mercury*, December 12, 1889

66 King, 175
gazing at the animals in the menagerie, he found interest in studying the faces and appearance of the country people who clustered around the different cages. Mrs. Skinner loftily said, ‘Humph! Country people have so little style, I don’t see anything interesting about them.’ Parson Smallsoul said he didn’t doubt that it was unavoidable for her to feel that way, it being the opinion of Alexander Hamilton and great men of our own times that people are naturally divided into two classes, the one, the well born and the rich, the other the laboring people, and the laboring people are most numerous and necessarily the foundation of society, and being one of God’s shepherds he felt interest in all his flock. With that the melancholy man helped himself to a third big spoonful of peach jam which I worked so hard to make last summer.

"Sometimes my blood boils at sentiments I hear expressed by these dead souls, these butterfly, frivolous society folks who come and go, chattering like magpies," continued Sally Beck. "I often wonder do ‘hired girls’ belong even to the less considered lower class or to one even lower, too insignificant for consideration.... The complaints arising from the farmers of this land strike a responsive chord in my heart so that I find pleasure in reading of their high resolves to kick; sure evidence that their legs are not yet tied."67

According to historian Lawrence Goodwyn, democratic movements are initiated by people who have managed to attain a high level of personal, political self-respect and who are not resigned or intimidated. Their sense of autonomy permits them to view a new plateau of social possibility and to dare to change things by seeking to influence

67 Southern Mercury, May 3, 1888
others. In the growing solidarity of the Alliance, a collective self-confidence was beginning to form, an individual and group self-respect that Goodwyn calls class-consciousness.68 "Farmers may be fools and unsuspecting," said a woman from Weimar, "but we are not such fools as not to see the rottenness of a government that is scorching us to death by the sirocco breath of class legislation."69 S.L.S. Waelder from Colorado County was in agreement. "We know that our greatest public men have come from the farm and if we would have justice done the laboring class, our public men must in the future be chosen from among the common people," she said.70

In September 1888, Dianecia Jones from Dallas County challenged farmers who had not yet joined the Alliance. "It may not interest you free farmers, who never lose a day to go to a speaking or a picnic," she said. "You and Jeremiad can't see any good in the Alliance. You sit back and let the dude spit on you and laugh at you for taking it. Listen to the big bosses. 'We ain't scared; the poor old ignorant farmers won't stick together; they can't do anything.' Now come out, you farmers, and don't have that flung in your face any longer, and show them that you stick as tight as old Aunt Jemima's plaster." 71

In the August 14, 1888, issue, an essay by Mrs. H.M. Calmes of Elm Springs Alliance, Farmers Branch, Dallas County, asked: "Why have we so blindly staggered

68 Goodwyn, xix, 33

69 Southern Mercury, 9/11/88

70 Southern Mercury, July 12, 1888

71 Southern Mercury, September 4, 1888
on in darkness? Why have we so long paid such exorbitant rates to middlemen for transacting our business which we are in every way qualified to take charge of? But no longer are the ignorant farmers to be deluded, duped and gulled. We have no need of shipping our cotton and wool thousands of miles to be manufactured when we can manufacture them ourselves, no need of shipping our grain or selling at half price when we are capable of grinding it ourselves; no need of paying agent one hundred per cent on our farming implements when the material for their construction flourishes on our own land. What grander, nobler achievement can be conceived than our Alliance Exchange?"72

As farm women began to see themselves as part of a class, they expressed concern for urban working people and others such as the Knights of Labor. The Knights encouraged the participation of women in its own ranks and supported woman’s suffrage in ways not unlike the Alliance.73 The women were aware of national events, activities of the young labor movement, the Haymarket Affair. Some were radicalized and spoke of the brighter future that could be created by an organized working class. “I hope the day is not far distant when the downtrodden farmer can look back and say, ‘we have gained the victory at last,’ for if any class of people have been slaves it is the farmers,” said Ida Jones from Mansfield in May 1888. “If ever there was a time when the farming and labor elements should stick

72 Southern Mercury, August 14, 1888
73 Wagner, 20, 118, 208
together it is now."74 "A grand revolution is going on," wrote "A Western Reader" in July 31, 1888. "A remolding of social and political institutions will enable the working classes to enjoy the advantages they create, but are now wrested from them by licensed avarice. The agricultural classes, usually the most patient, have at last been touched by class consciousness, and are realizing their capacity for organized resistance. The system of competition now so generally practiced by our modern corporations is slowly murdering democracy and establishing economic slavery. The News, while applauding the New York courts in deciding that the laboring men have no right to use the boycott, should also suggest some defense for the employee of railroad corporations, against whom the blacklist is used. The domination of capital in this country with its attendant evils such as an army of Pinkerton 'thugs,' truckling satellites, a subsidized press, extreme poverty (and its inevitable sequence, intemperance) is so grave as to threaten democratic life."75

At first the Texas Alliance focused on economic strategies of protest. It attempted local trade agreements with merchants, local cotton bulking, and local cooperative stores which could lower the costs of goods to the farmer. In 1887, when Alliance President Charles W. Macune realized that such disjointed efforts would not improve the position of the farmer in the market, he proposed the Exchange, a Dallas-based, statewide, Alliance-owned cooperative in which farmers would unite to buy supplies, store their crops in giant warehouses, and send them to market when the

74 Southern Mercury, May 3, 1888
75 Southern Mercury, July 31, 88
price was right. The Exchange was to have the dual effect of increasing the supply of money at harvest time when it was usually scarce and granting the farmer credit at a low rate of interest, thereby breaking the grasp of crop-lien.76

It was a breathtaking vision—the largest and most dramatic effort to build a counter-institution ever attempted by a protest organization in America—and it fired the imagination of farmers across the south.77 In 1887 hope was everywhere.78 Passionate and articulate Alliance lecturers were sent from Texas to Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, to Missouri, Arkansas, Carolina, to Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, and Kansas, talking the aggressive anti-monopoly oratory of the movement. The Macune formula for a centralized buying and selling cooperative and establishing the trade store system on a county level was outlined to gatherings at hundreds of Southern crossroads from the Gulf of Mexico to the Ohio River. “The condition of the farmers is improving,” said Rural Widow excitedly from San Saba. “The very fact that farmers are aroused and organized for self-protection will have a restraining influence over the vicious legislation. We are a power in the land, and in time, our power will be properly directed for the good of the whole nation.”79

If one accepts Goodwyn’s argument that no mass movement can exist without self-respect, the women’s role of booster and supporter was vitally important. Macune

76 McMath, 28; King, 42
77 Barnes, 4; Schwarz, 15
78 Goodwyn, 73
79 *Southern Mercury*, June 13, 1889
had given the farmers a program for economic emancipation and the women would
insure participation and keep up morale. "Let's have singing in our Alliance
meetings, and have the ladies and gentlemen read essays," said Aunt Slow and Easy
from Luling. "Let's gain all the information we can, strengthen our order, stand by
our leader, beat down every obstacle, put confidence in our chosen ones so when
victory is won it will be ours as well. Let's have truth, honor, justice, and charity for
our leader, and join in the cry, 'hallelujah.'" 80

"The plundered plowmen are now feeling the strength of this great restorer,"
wrote another from Morris County, "plundered of all we have made for many years
by the monopolizing merchants. Monopoly has had a long turn at the grab game but
many will soon be at the plow handles, or make up a club of tramps. Some are selling
now at cost. We regret that any Alliance member will trade with them. I hope ere
long they will learn cooperation, and trade only through the Alliance." 81

More urging and support came "Farmer's Daughter" in Waco. "I am glad to say
that our lodge of the Concord Alliance is getting along splendidly," she offered. "I
have never seen the brethren more wide-awake to their interests, for we have been
slaves long enough for the rich, and I hope to see the day when we will be free; and
now we see a way out, let us all pull together." 82 "Keep the ball rolling," said Mary,
from Limestone County. "Your words of encouragement will assist the weary toiler

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80 Southern Mercury, May 10, 1888
81 Southern Mercury, May 10, 1888
82 Southern Mercury, May 17, 1888
to bear the burdens and crosses of life. He will feel that he stands not alone, but that other brave hearts and perhaps more fertile brains are trying to pave the way for the emancipation of the toiling men and women from slavery. If we trust our leaders and heed every call, soon we may see prosperity again smiling on our now poverty stricken people." \(^{83}\)

Farm Life

The letters, ostensibly about Alliance activities, describe much of the rural world. Some women appear fully content with farm life, waxing prosaic about its beauty and healthfulness. “What can be more pleasant than a nice country home?” asked “A Country Girl” from Belton. “There is nothing mean and debasing in farming. It leads a man forth among scenes of natural grandeur and beauty; to the workings of purest and most elevating of external influences. City gentlemen are glad to lay down their city enjoyments and wander out into the country where vegetation puts forth all its magnificence and the merry songs of the birds inspire within him an admiration...and honest, heart-felt enjoyment of country life.”\(^{84}\)

A spontaneous soliloquy on the joys of farm life was provided by Birdie from Corn Hill, Williamson County. On July 12, 1888, she wrote: “Although my last communication did not make its appearance in your columns, I will not despair, but will try again. As I am seated, pen in hand...I hear in the distance the sound of the reaper, reaping the golden grains as now and then a gentle breeze is wafting to my

\(^{83}\) Southern Mercury, May 10, 1888

\(^{84}\) Southern Mercury, April 19, 1888
window. Waft on, you are welcome this warm June evening. Oh, these perpetual showers that cause the farmer to wear a long face now that he is trying to save his grain. It rains, it showers and still it rains. No more do we hear the cry of dry weather.

"Once more bright anticipations are filling the farmer's breast of a glorious harvest and successful crops. He walks more briskly, smiles more brightly and holds his head erect. And the young men, oh, they are far more handsome; how bright and cheerful they look when they enter our lodge. I wonder how it is that the girls are smiling. Oh yes, by the way it is leap year; perhaps girls, some of us may make our fortune this year, who knows? ...I feel we should be thankful. The cool breeze is laden with the perfume of sweet flowers and the songs of birds. The Alliance here is booming, members being initiated every meeting. The ladies are coming in quite briskly, both married and single."\(^{85}\)

Texas farmers, working newer and less exhausted land, were marginally better off than farmers in Georgia, Alabama, or Mississippi. However, conditions varied. The less fortunate on the small farms in the broken country of West Central Texas or on the poor soils of heavily timbered East Texas might find themselves bankrupt, their mortgages foreclosed while those in the less-favored portions of the more prosperous counties of Central and North Texas might be going along living on credit with

\(^{85}\) *Southern Mercury*, July 12, 1888
mortgaged farms. Still others, according to their letters, had no debts and were doing well.

For Aunt Belle from Pilgrim Lake, farm life was moderately good. “We are enjoying a fine rain today,” she wrote on September 4, 1888. “Some think that cotton will make the second crop if worms do not come. Some have picked a good deal of cotton already, in spite of the extreme hot weather. Our Alliance is not so energetic in its actions as a great many others we read of in the Mercury, but we hope to do better in the near future. Our membership increases at every meeting. It seems that the ladies are taking a great interest, as they are joining rapidly now. Our alliance has about forty-five members.”

On Lucretia M. Dunn’s father’s farm in Live Oak County, Oakville, everything seemed abundant and prosperous. Sixteen-year-old Lucretia had recently joined her town’s Alliance, which the year before had thirteen members but now numbered sixty and was still growing. “Our neighborhood can’t be beaten in this state, either morally, socially or religiously,” she told the Mercury happily. “We have no lawyers, gossips or other chronic disturbers of the peace among us and harmony reigns supreme. In the first place, none of us are rich enough to excite envy, and none so poor as to create suspicion. When we go to church we take our dinners and are social between religious services as though we were at a picnic; but when the

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86 Wagner, 2; Alwyn Barr, Reconstruction to Reform: Texas Politics, 1876-1906 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971),151; Goodwyn, 181

87 Southern Mercury, September 4, 1888
hour for service arrives, we all gather into the church house and listen to the sermon; none stays outside to gossip.

"Crops, corn and cotton, are very good here; so nearly all the girls in the neighborhood don their sun-bonnets and gloves and spend the day picking cotton. Our cotton has averaged a thousand pounds per acre and there are a great many matured bolls in the patch now, but I'm sure that my cotton picking will be finished when they have opened for within the last ten days worms have appeared and completely destroyed the leaves."^88

The next year, Lucretia Dunn wrote the *Mercury* again. "I don't know of one member who has ever mortgaged his crop before it was planted, though I suppose many of them do buy on a credit," she said. "But that is not papa's plan at all; he has always made it a rule never to buy anything unless he could pay cash for it, and although there are twelve of us in the family, not one of us has ever starved to death yet. We raise almost everything we eat at home. We have lived here eleven years and our smokehouse has never been empty, nor have we bought five pounds of bacon or lard. Papa killed two pigs less than eight months ago, one weighing 205 and the other 195 pounds. I don't know whether they would be called fine hogs or not, but they are fine enough for me.

"Papa plants cotton only as a surplus crop and never more than we can gather ourselves. We have never hired a lock of cotton picked. Our land is very fertile. I don't remember that we have ever gathered less than 1,200 pounds per acre, but one year,

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^88 *Southern Mercury*, September 25, 1888
and then the best part of the crop was blown out by a storm.

"In your letter you alluded to men who go to town and spend all their money for whisky and then growl about monopolies. I can say this much for our Alliance, in fact, for the entire neighborhood. I don’t know of but one man in this vicinity who ever gets even moderately drunk. I don’t remember having seen a drunken man in my life, though I’ve always lived in a local option county, and if whisky is the horrid thing it is represented to be, I never want to live out of one.... We have had a lot of rain this winter but the ground is not muddy. Several farmers are planting corn now. The soil is mostly black sandy loam and doesn’t get very muddy. The fruit trees are in full bloom." 89

A month later, Lucretia Dunn wrote once more. “We raise corn, cotton, hay, sugar cane, both Irish and sweet potatoes, and melons of all kinds in abundance,” she said. “I don’t think small grains will do very well here; as a rule, vegetables of almost every kind thrive splendidly; plums and grapes do better than other kinds of fruit. The health of the country is unexceptional. Our timber is mostly mesquite and live oak; there is plenty of it for fuel and fencing. We depend upon tanks and wells for water; the well water generally contains so much mineral that it is used only for household purposes, though some of it is good. Fish are not very plentiful [but] they can sometimes be caught in the Nueces river. Deer and wild turkey are still to be found but not very plenifully. The county is mostly thickly settled and almost every

89 Southern Mercury, April 18, 1889
Local option meant that a community could chose for or against prohibition. It was an Alliance measure that avoided alienating Germans and other “wets.”
man has his land fenced, so you know there is not much land common.

"There are but few negroes here and they congregate in the towns. Mexicans can be found out on the ranches, wherever they can get work. The country is generally rolling and has a good supply of chaparral and various other kinds of thorny brush. Unimproved land can be bought at two dollars per acre. Crops are in fine condition, corn is tasseling, and I have seen some silks; cotton is ten inches high and forming squares."\(^{90}\)

Earlier in the year, conditions had not been quite so good in Colorado County, however. "This has been a wet, dreary winter down here in southern Texas," a stoic Mrs. Maner wrote in February, 1889. "There is some cotton to pick yet; very little plowing has been done. Many cattle have died, I think more from disease than hunger, as we lost some and ours had plenty to eat. We have corn, potatoes and pork for our own use and some to spare. We keep our cotton seed to feed the cattle, and have milk and butter all year. We have several acres of Johnson grass from which we get more hay than we need. During this gloomy weather I've been busying myself repairing old garments, making quilts and getting better acquainted with my husband, who, by the way, is not near so attractive since he sits in the house and whittles, as he was when he only came in at meal time. The sum of human happiness is made up of little things.

"Men must work and women must weep. Men will whistle and women must sweep. I'm going to have my share of happiness. I fill my lamp of love with the oil

\(^{90}\) Southern Mercury, May 30, 1889
of patience and keep it burning brightly. Last night was Saturday night. After the work was all done, Ben sat before a cheerful fire drying the dampness of his clothes. Georgia in her own corner busied herself with some lace work, while I, too tired to knit, drew my low rocker nearer the lamp and sat down to rest and read. I selected a volume of Alden’s *Cyclopedea* and read aloud extracts from the writings of Heroditus and poems by J.G. Holland.

“The Alliance has brought its knitting and come to stay,” she added. “The clicking of its needles are heard in every neighborhood. We’re winning, too. Outsiders have left off scoffing at us that helps some. Our enterprising brothers started a co-operative store here which is a sure success. We are beginning to trust God and help ourselves.”

Texas Populists lived in relative isolation from the cultural mainstream. Populist counties had few towns and those communities that did exist had small populations. Farmlife could be very lonely, a fact to which the women attest. The Alliance provided many opportunities for families to socialize at meetings, suppers, rallies, and picnics. *Mercury* readers also found companionship and comfort through the women’s page. “It is raining today, part of us are gone, myself and the smaller ones are alone,” wrote Aunt Slow and Easy from Luling. “We who have a house full of little ones and an empty purse know how hard it is to get off and when I tell you I

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91 *Southern Mercury*, February 28, 1889

92 King, 61
have been in the Alliance but once this year, you will not rebuke me but sympathize." 93

“I have been attending school at Hope Institute, Italy, Texas, for the past three years, but circumstances prevented me from attending this year,” wistfully said the eldest of six siblings, sixteen-year-old Lula Thompson, who found herself back on the family farm in Grandview, Johnson County. “I love my books,” she admitted. “I never tire of devouring their contents, while away the weary hours by reading and rereading favorite pages which brings back all the dear familiar faces of old classmates. How I would enjoy another bright season with them! Perhaps when we have gained the victory over our many oppressors, I will be able to go back to the dear old spot.” 94

Others spoke frankly of the seemingly endless work of farm life, the fatigue, the poverty. Birdie from Corn Hill asked in August: “How can we be happy when we toil so from day to day?... Fathers and brothers toil until when they come in from work they are too tired to talk or enjoy home with its softening influences. Mothers and sisters cannot bring any hope to the taxed and overworked brain. Mother thinks, how can I tell him there is no meat in the house, lard or coffee when he has no money and don’t want to go deeper into debt? She looks at the children and wonders how shall we support them, educate and clothe them? The daughter wants a new dress as she has been making out with her old one but she looks at her father and thinks she

93 Southern Mercury, May 10, 1889
94 Southern Mercury, May 17, 1888
must wait longer before she asks, and still she waits. There are hundreds of families in this condition, dear readers. What is the cause? Not idleness. What is the remedy?"\footnote{Southern Mercury, August 28, 1888}

**Womens' Concerns**

Alliance women were particularly concerned about education. It was central to the order's organizing methods; it helped bolster agrarian self esteem and relieve status anxiety. Education was considered an extension of a woman's traditional role as child rearer and moral and cultural guardian. Women were expected to shield home and family from the rapidly changing values of an increasingly materialistic society. Alliance and Populist platform demands included a uniform, inexpensive system of textbooks and free public schools.\footnote{Ernest William Winkler, *Platforms of Political Parties in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas, 1916), 282, 296, 333} The women also worried about young people leaving the land and moving to the city which fostered political corruption and personal degradation.\footnote{King, 64} Farm life was morally superior. While urban migration was not yet large, it had begun. In 1870 approximately 70 percent of all persons gainfully employed in Texas were engaged in agriculture of some form, by 1900 it was 65 percent.\footnote{Martin, 17}

In the April 19, 1888, issue of the *Mercury*, "A country Girl" from Belton wrote that the one thing farmers "could go into debt for if we cannot obtain it otherwise, is
an education. Knowledge is power." She believed children should be taught the value of an education because "they can never be swindled out of that. ...Educate the girls that they may be independent. Educate the boys that they may perform the work assigned them through life with intelligence. Then our country homes will be a paradise surrounded by the beauties of nature and enlightened sons and daughters of toil and prosperity."^99

In May the following year, P.D. Ellis from Gonzales County wrote: "Ask the farmer's son what he intends to do and he almost invariably answers, 'I don't know but certainly not farm.' Nothing is done to make the farm attractive. We must educate our sons, send them to college to learn farming as a science, all the best methods and improved implements. He should also read literature; pure, high-toned books and papers are the best educators. Do not let him complain after following the plow all day he is too tired to read or study. Give him a bath and a slice of mother's snowflake bread and golden butter and a goblet of rich buttermilk to refresh him and he will not miss from sleep the hour spent in study. Study every feature of farm life—the most free and happiest on earth in its sweet intercourse with nature. For those who crave the noise and din of the city, the close, dark counting room, there is weariness beyond expression. Those poor oxygen starved creatures would give half their life for your happy privilege of roaming carefree and contented through the cool dark woods, inhaling pure air. Stay at home with mother, who gentle hands are ready and quickly sooth your slightest pain. How can the stale bread and reeking hash of the boarding

^99 Southern Mercury, April 19, 1888
house compare to her puffy rolls, nice new eggs and savory tempting ham? Come back to mother after your college course and enjoy the happiest life on earth, on the farm." 100

In June 6, 1889, Mrs. Blanch McGarity wrote from Leesville that "each farmer ought to have his own private library and every community a circulating library and reading rooms where the best literature and information about farming can be gotten. Rouse yourself!" she urged. "Be alive, wide-awake, build up and improve constantly, not so restless and always planning to leave the farm. On the farm are modeled some of our most noble characters, instilled with the best principles. Father, see that you make the farm what it should be by honorable example of honest industry, judicious management. Mother, who can estimate your influence? Make it a cheery, joyous home, full of sunshine and pure pleasure."101

S.L.S. Waelder from Colorado County was also inspired to speak "to those poor farmer's wives who like myself, have to depend on poorly conducted public schools where we have only three or four months of school in a year... I have as much work as any woman who does all her own work, with a family of six to care for, and yet I should like to tell how I have succeeded as it might encourage some other poor mother to teach her little ones at home. My oldest one is seven years of age and in the time I have had to teach her--about a year and a half--she is writing and spelling and is ready for a fourth reader. I have heard people say they did not

100 Southern Mercury, May 30, 1889
101 Southern Mercury, June 6, 1889
wish their children to learn more than they knew. But why should we deprive our offspring of a thing so essential to their prosperity and happiness?"  

As the women continued to write their letters and to exchange information and thoughts, support and comfort, a mutuality began to develop. Laura Oakly from San Saba expressed it well as she responded to a letter from Charitie. "This is such a rare golden afternoon that I cannot refrain from calling on you all," she said. "Our Alliance is in a prospering condition. The sisters think they have missed a grand treat if anything happens to prevent them from attending. Charitie, I want to tell you how glad I was to read your letter. I like your idea of comradeship among women. This feeling that you and I are linked together by sympathy in a mutual effort (if you will permit such an expression) goes far to strengthen the effort individually made. What has become of Rebecca? Come again Rebecca, with your brave, true words, and Charitie and Ann Other too. Dear family, we never made a greater mistake in our lives than when we judged 'Rural Widow' by her letters. I expected to meet a woman past her youth and extremely cold and haughty. What I did meet was a girl lovely in face and manners--and those blue eyes, they were beautiful enough to make captive every heart."  

Ellen D. was also moved by the same letter. "Dear Charitie, what are you doing these beautiful autumnal days," she asked. "Are your motherly cares so oppressive that you cannot find time for one of your comforting, helpful chats with

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102 Southern Mercury, July 12, 1888

103 Southern Mercury, April 25, 1889
They shared advice of all sorts and the women took many opportunities to moralize and talk temperance. Ann Other from Ennis, Texas, spoke quite severely and at length to "the boys" saying: "Where are you drifting and what kind of old man do you intend to be? I dare say you will be fully good enough for those young ladies who you think are 'sticking up their noses' at 'farmer boys' and looking for the 'ten cent dudes.' Let us consider. Are you always as choosy of your company as you would require them to be? Is there never any time when you are out with the boys smoking, drinking and indulging in low class stories...? Is your mouth always clean and the breath sweet as nature intends without the assistance of cloves and cardamon seed? Do you know that tobacco is, according to all our best scientists, to be one of the strongest leaders to strong drink? It destroys in a great degree the vigor of the mind, dulls, by its narcotic poison, the quick sensibilities for purity and virtue; makes a slave of the appetite and a filthy casket for the soul... Instead of spending forty or fifty cents for that pound of tobacco...or that 'yellow covered literature,' look instead for the 'Alta editions,' beautifully bound in blue and gold, of the lives of our greatest men, Washington, Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Clay and Webster. Look also at the books of travel, of foreign lands.

"You say, 'but I don't have the time to read.' But where and how do you spend your Sundays? Of course church, but does that last an entire Sunday? How is the rest of the day passed? ...I think there is not a clergyman in our land who would not

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104 Southern Mercury, October 23, 1890 (no location on letter)
prefer to have you stay at home and read and study...to having you attend church
simply to cast your eye over the audience to pick out the best looking girl and wonder
if Jim could cut you out with Annie since he had this new suit of clothes."

Intemperance and the errant ways of men were frequent subjects. "Is the
farmer's wife a miserable woman?" asked a writer from McKinney, Collin County.
"Not all. There are thousands of happy country homes where husband and wife work
for each other's happiness. I, for one, believe that most of those who are miserable
are to blame because they do not exercise their own common sense.

"So many are seemingly in a great hurry to get married. Girls will marry men
who are drunkards and know all along they are not going to quit. Girls will marry
men who have been at work for themselves...for years and have nothing but a few
clothes. Now if they can't support themselves, how under the sun can they support a
family? I think that the girls who marry this sort of man are the ones that plod about
in coarse shoes, go to church under sunbonnets and ride in the farm wagon with the
rusty plow gear. Farmers' wives have a great deal of work to do in the house, and it
is not a woman's place to work in the field....If they do they will gain very little."

Lettie Reynolds from Tarrant County wrote that she was glad women were
sensible and not "blindfolded by folly and fashion." She longed, however "for a
reformation in the ways of some of our country boys, who work hard all week,
probably for 50 cents per day, just for the satisfaction of sporting a cane and wearing

105 *Southern Mercury*, September 11, 1888

106 *Southern Mercury*, October 23, 1890
a Prince Albert on Sundays. If they would only save their hard-earned money and buy homes and educate themselves, we could look forward to the time when all shall enjoy equal rights with special privileges to none. O! for another Cincinnatus, that can leave the plow and rule a nation, and return again to the humble farm without any feelings of mortification.”

Rural Widow, from Harmony Ridge, had the gumption to get into the love and marriage question, although only because she was prompted. “Would that I could answer your first question, sweet Laura, but it is beyond human ken to say whether one will be happy after marriage. Love in marriage is desirable, but I don’t think positively necessary to happiness. Some of the happiest marriages that I know were among persons who were unacquainted save by a letter until a very short time before marriage. I am persuaded that if all the women who have married men who professed to love them could but lift the veil from the hearts of their husbands, three-fourths of them would find there a face not their own, on which was written ‘my idol’, in burning letters of love. Love need not necessarily be ‘woman’s whole existence’ in this day when the wife may have to work as well as the man.”

They discussed the propriety of working in the fields, an activity that conflicted with the notion of the woman’s sphere. In April 1889, Frankie Bradford from Luna Vista had written: “Spring, the most beautiful season is now here.... The farmers are busy farming. Papa has no boys large enough to help him, and therefore his girls

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107 Southern Mercury, December 12, 1890

108 Southern Mercury, February 6, 1890
must help. I am not ashamed to confess that I work on the farm, for I am sure it is no discredit to do so; and whoever thinks so, lack knowledge. I believe a girl can work in the field and be so full of grace as one that dwells in a palace.... Let those who say it is a disgrace for a girl to work in the field take heed.... A girl can live as a true Christian while working in the field as she can at any other kind of work. She may plow, hoe, plant, pick cotton, yet, have her heart full of love and grace, speaking to herself in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in her heart to the lord.” 109

The issue was apparently raised again by the Mercury’s Woman’s Page editor, Jennie Dixon, who edited the women’s page of the Southern Mercury from September to November 1890 with a somewhat prim, conservative voice. Mrs. Dixon also edited the Texas White Ribbon, the official publication of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and was the wife of Allianceman Sam H. Dixon, the Mercury’s managing editor.110 The Ribbon and Mercury often reprinted each other’s material.111

In the October 30, 1890, issue, she was answered by Alice E. Miller, from Wortham. “If I was a farmer’s daughter and had three brothers and seven sisters, you may know my education is quite limited,” said Alice Miller rather defensively. “I agree with Mrs. Dixon in regard to women working in the field, although every woman I see has been picking cotton. It seems that they are just bound to work in the

109 Southern Mercury, April 4, 1889

110 Weidenfeld, 50

111 King, 133
field to help make a support. I do not think it is a disgrace although I do not think we were made to do hard field work or we would have been as stout as men. If it gets much worse, I think women will have to take the lead in the field. This is one thing that is ruining the women's health of today as well as tight lacing. Let us work, watch and pray and perhaps we will see the day when we have more time for reading and brightening ourselves up."

In that same October issue, Jennie Dixon defended her earlier statement saying that honorable work was never disgraceful, but that she thought farm work was too heavy for delicate women. "I wish to see other employments open where they will receive equal pay for the same kind of work that men perform," she continued. "A reform of some kind is needed to improve the affairs on the farm but...I feel sure that it is not more work or better management or more scrupulous economy on the part of the farmers' wives." 113

Writing in the "Boys and Girls Department," she went on to correct a young and apparently too impetuous Maudalene from Willow Creek, who had asked if corresponding with an unknown person was proper. "We feel no timidity in stating our views on any subject," Maudalene said in its favor. "We can give our imagination unbounded sway; we can discuss books, music, and any and all sentiments of the human heart and feel no fear in treading on any personality. I have books, music, flowers, shell and rare specimens of writing which have been sent by

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112 *Southern Mercury*, October 30, 1890

113 *Southern Mercury*, October 30, 1890
persons whose faces I have never seen; Still, they are dear to me. I feel we are
kindred spirits." Jennie Dixon severely instructed Maudalene against such behavior
and in doing so passed on the insecurity that her generation felt about women writing.
"When they come to Maudalene's age, girls cannot be too particular in their
intercourse with boys whether in their company or through letters," she warned. "My
dear girls, you do not know whose eye your letter might fall under, and to have it
criticized, even the spelling, and picked to pieces by a thoughtless and may hap,
vicious crowd of boys, would cause a painful blush of wounded pride to mantle your
cheek. And oh, Maudalene, we should never give our imagination 'unbounded sway'
in writing, for sure the world is so that it will all come back to us, a mass of silly
gushing nonsense, which, like a ghost, will rise to distress us in later life. Don't do
it."

Others spoke of sickness and death, and reached out through the *Mercury* for
support from sympathetic kindly listeners. In such letters--from Ann Other from
Ennis, for example, the character and the sources of strength of the women emerge,
also the sense of helplessness as they experienced one loss after another. "Death has
visited my home circle this summer," she wrote in October, 1888. "After weeks of
patient and prayerful watching and faithful nursing, I have seen the little bud slowly
fading, fading, and feeling that its little spirit was unavoidably passing from our care
and skill; and then...to see another one of our home circle just putting forth the foot
of manhood drop its branches and fall to the ground with a crushing weight.... to go
and witness the last sad rites the living can pay to the dead, then to return and still
see the death angel perched above your door, and after another week's anxious waiting and prayer to lay another loved form in its little white casket. This calls forth the heroic strength of a Christian nature.

"We find comfort in the thought that where they have gone will be no hindrance to the full development of their beautiful minds.... They shall behold the beauty of the Lord and... who can conceive the beautiful lessons they shall learn as they wing their way from star to star, from one planetary system to another, to there drink in all the mysteries of astronomy with God's angels for guides and teachers, or to stoop to the lowly flowers of our fields and penetrate all the unacquired problems of botany and chemistry...."

"In these hopes perhaps the waiting hearts may find solace and while each token that tells of the departed--the straw hat with its broken crown through which a stray curl once peeped, the violin and harp that once awoke sweet echoes in the old home corners, the locked chest with its boyish treasures, the chest of tools with its repaired knives and other mechanical inventions with which the dear hands last worked, to school books here forever closed for the studies to be taken up higher, or the tiny shoe which baby feet never soiled and the little white robes folded away as a mother's shrine, to be replaced by brighter, fairer robes to be worn in an immortal world.

"If to any other homes of the sisters such grief has been sent, let us clasp hands over the space that separates the readers of the Mercury and with firm resolve, take up our burden and use every opportunity given us to improve our minds, realizing
that is the immortal part."\textsuperscript{114}

Laura Oakly, from San Saba, shared a similar sadness and sought consolation from her letterwriting sisters. "Since I last wrote, which has been but a short time I have been changed from a lighthearted girl who found nothing but bright, beautiful flowers in her path, to a sad, heartbroken woman," she wrote. "My mother, who was my sun by day and guiding star by night, has been taken from me after a short illness and I turn to the family for comfort. I know there are some in this large family who can sympathize with me from experience. I have three little ones left in my care and I feel that I need the prayers of every sister. Oh what a trial it is to try to fill a mother's place."\textsuperscript{115}

Religion

Texas Populists shared an essentially religious view of society and this influenced their political behavior.\textsuperscript{116} McMath maintains that the universal idiom of the rural South was neither Jeffersonian nor conspiratorial but the language of evangelical Protestantism. Among the ethnic and religious groups comprising the Alliance were Anglo Baptists and Methodists, Mexican Catholics, German Lutherans. At a time when for many of them the prevailing myths of southern and American culture were proving inadequate to explain the conditions of life and the growing maldistribution of the nation's wealth, the religious rhetoric of the Farmers' Alliance helped render their

\textsuperscript{114} Southern Mercury, October 9, 1888

\textsuperscript{115} Southern Mercury, May 16, 1889

\textsuperscript{116} King, iv
situation and their movement more intelligible. Significantly, leading churchmen used the religious tradition to support the economic and polical status quo while Alliancemen employed the same tradition to advocate change.¹¹⁷

In county after county, Alliance meetings began with prayers for the humble tillers of the soil, hymns and Bible readings, and ended in political speeches, many of them delivered by the suballiance chaplain, who frequently doubled as lecturer and organizer in spreading the new social gospel. Picnics were especially popular, and some camp meetings in the groves would last two, three, or four days. They would be filled with lectures, speeches, songs, camaraderie, lemonade. Whole families came for twilight suppers and gathered by the thousands at encampments, their long trains of wagons emblazoned with suballiance banners. Men and women listened to lecturers speaking about the "money trust," the gold standard, the private national banking system or planning the mass sales for the bulking of cotton. ¹¹⁸

Mrs. V.A. Taylor from Americus, Marion County, recounted such an event. "First there was the hurry and bustle of the morning's packing provisions, placing baskets and children in the wagon so as to consume as little space as possible for we must take in friends on the way until we are pretty thoroughly jammed," she described happily. "No inconvenience I assure you for our sub-Alliance which had been invited to join the Lasater Alliance in a day of general boom, fun and frolic must be well represented, hence the cram in all available vehicles. A drive of eight

¹¹⁷ McMath, 62-63; Barr, 243-244
¹¹⁸ Goodwyn, 34, 44
miles over rough roads, under a blazing sun did not in the least damp the ardor and enthusiasm and we arrived there with keen zest for the enjoyments of the day, meeting old friends and forming of new acquaintances under the auspices of being united in fraternal love.

“I look upon this Alliance movement as the most potent abettor of Christianity that has ever originated, but hold! I am not going to moralize just now. The program of the day was first music; second, essay on the principles, aims and possibilities of the Alliance, by your scribe; third, lecture by Brother Macready who was sent to us by Dr. Macune.... If the Dr. is as successful in running that Exchange as he is in getting hold of good material for speeches, it is bound to succeed; fourth, dinner, and that in quality and quantity all that could be desired. After dinner, music, then... a sort of ‘fill up the time talk’ by Brother D.R. Hale whose happy hits and telling anecdotes fill us with mirth and enjoyment while his unlimited zeal fires us with enthusiasm for the cause. Next, short speeches from the candidates for county office.... Less palaver this year....

“Toward the end, I allowed music and dancing to divert my attention from the graver questions of the day, but I had an excuse. I took my little ones where for the first time they might behold displays of the terpsichorean art; not that I cared to witness, oh no, but like school teachers and preachers who have to carry the little ones to circuses and menageries, sacrificed my wishes in order to please the children.

“The sinking sun reminded us of the weary miles we had to plod upon our homeward way and bidding goodbye to friends, departed with the kindest of feelings
in our hearts, our loyalty to the Alliance strengthened."

Frugality

Times got rougher as the currency contracted. Among other things, the dollar continued to appreciate, its value rising steadily, while the price level for agricultural products, especially cotton, diminished.\textsuperscript{119} The farming community, noted for its hard work and industry, worked harder.\textsuperscript{120} The women urged each other to economize, be more frugal. "We can be the most independent people in the world if we will only try," said Eddie from the Round Pound Alliance. "First, we must economize. If we want to accomplish anything, raise everything that we can at home, wear old cloths and keep out of debt.... The Alliance... may continue its onward march until the farmers all over the land can shout 'Victory.'" \textsuperscript{121}

Some sisters as well as editors of the \textit{Southern Mercury} shared tips stretching resources. "I have just learned a good lesson in economy from some Alliance people while on a trip to Galveston Bay," offered Fannie Kerley from Limestone County, who along with her husband and six children--three sons and three daughters--belonged to her county's "grand and ennobling" Alliance. "To make four pounds of coffee go as far as eight, take four pounds of potatoes chopped fine and dried, mix with an equal quantity of coffee, parch together, and the oldest Texan cannot detect the difference. Sisters, lend a hand and see if we can't help our husbands and sons out

\textsuperscript{119} Martin, 24-25

\textsuperscript{120} Goodwyn, vii

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Southern Mercury}, May 17, 1888
of the fearful bondage in which we have suffered ourselves to be placed, as slaves to
the mercantile class."

"[We tried potatoes alone from '61 to '64]," added the Mercury.\textsuperscript{122}

In June 1888, Bettie Gay from Columbus suggested boycotting coffee until the
price fell, something that she had done during the Civil War. She had a blunt
response to a contributor's suggestion that women return to the spinning wheel and
loom. "I am in sympathy with every economical move," she said, "but...in the first
place, it is killing on any one to card and weave.... We had to do it during the war. It
will take three days to weave one yard of cloth; at twenty-five cents per day, it would
cost seventy-five cents per yard to spin and weave a yard, besides the expense of the
machinery, so you see there is no economy. It would be more healthful to raise a
cotton patch, work in the open air and buy calico or muslin for five cents per yard.
You would have more and play half the time; besides one pound of cotton will make
five yards or more of goods and you might drudge your life out and not accomplish
anything unless the men will unite and vote in a solid body to represent our interests.
You might spin, weave and work until you would faint by the roadside and the evil
would be the same.

"I saw some sister writing about dress making," she continued helpfully.

"Anyone can make a full skirt, with body or redingot, and we farmers do not care to
put on style till our independence is declared....If we are not able to buy fashionable
bonnets or hats, get a nice piece of gingham and make a neat bonnet. They are very

\textsuperscript{122} Southern Mercury, May 17, 1888
becoming.”

Others were getting tired of being instructed on money saving measures. “Why don’t you preach economy to one who has the power to economize?” asked “A True Friend” angrily from Eagle Cove, Callahan County. “So many letters crying economy. One sisters says, let us help our husbands by patching old clothes. We have been in the habit of patching as long as we could make things respectable. Another says, let us make over our old clothes. We have been in the habit of doing this also. And by the way, we have sold butter and eggs to buy the dye to color them and for a while in the spring, we got fifteen and twenty cents per pound for butter, but very soon they began to say we can’t give but ten or twelve cents. Now that is poor encouragement for we are at the cow-pen late at night, and work our butter every morning to have it nice.

“Now a farmer’s wife has a heart and wants to see her family look nice at least once a week to go to church, and if one has a flopped hat and another a patch on the knee and a third has his toes out, must we still economize and work so hard? The Alliance is to help the oppressed. Who is more oppressed than the farmer’s wife? If some good sister can tell us how to keep our house neat and clean without so much hard work, so when our husbands come in we will not be too tired to talk and can have more patience to teach our children, I think most of them would appreciate this much more.”

123 Southern Mercury, June 14, 1888
124 Southern Mercury, June 21, 1888
Mrs. Maner from Colorado County also wrote again with her thoughts on the subject. “Most women (I mean the middle class) do too much unnecessary work,” she said. “This everlasting stitch, stitch, cook, cook, wash, wash, iron, iron, is killing our women. It is costing lots of money for doctor’s bills and patent medicine; it is making women prematurely old, husbands unhappy and the young folks discontented, driving the boys away from home and making the girls want to go. When will mothers learn that there is something more beautiful in life than tucks and ruffles, lace and embroidery; something more enduring that the pleasures of the palate?

“Mothers, dress the little ones in plain comfortable clothes and do away with so much machine and laundry work.... Don’t waste your time, health and life in non-essentials. Cold bread, butter milk, tea or coffee, with a smiling mamma at the table is more enjoyable than a hot biscuit and fried chicken with a tired fretful, unresponsive mother, whose presence chills the warmth and glow of childish joy....” She didn’t mention Mr. Maner this time.125

Frugality did not change things significantly, of course, and some women reacted with depression and a sense of futility. “Justice,” a farmer’s daughter from Albany in Shackelford County, said of the workingman: “He is no longer content to do all the work and let others do his thinking. He is asking, ‘why is it I toil early and late, live on the poorest food, wear the cheapest clothing, only give my children the advantage of the free school, model my house for the least cost and shelter my stock with the heavens; yet after all this close economy, when I have lived my three score years, I

125 Southern Mercury, May, 9, 1889
shall perhaps be laid in the potter’s field, my children doomed to be hewers of wood and drawers of water and meet the same fate."\textsuperscript{126}

For others the hard times were galvanizing. The farm women, gaining confidence, began to get angry. "Corn Bread" from Bexar County said: "There is a monster in our path that is not a bugaboo but a real devourer, worse than the devilfish with thirty-foot tentacles. Protection stands before us, brazen and audacious, demanding that the poor whom it made poor shall protect the rich, the same as the lambs protect the wolves. And the working people protect the band of greedy rascals who have robbed us twenty years or more. It has hordes of gold gotten from us through unjust laws that it worked upon us through congress. Members go up to do our work, and the cunning men beguile, bribe and seduce them to give them laws to take our earnings. So brothers, be careful what you are doing at the polls when election comes off."\textsuperscript{127}

Apologizing for her "coarse language," "Poor Gal" from Red Oak, Ellis County, lashed out furiously. "I feel, see, and hear so much about the downtrodden farmer that I sometimes wish I could split myself up into a dozen men and join the Alliance that many times, and that my tongues were loose at both ends, so that I could cry out, down with monopoly and the middle men! If it came to the worst, I would have fists enough to hit extortion, strike monopoly, punch the middle dude who gets what we ought to have, plug a dart at the cotton buyers, who say, 'I will give you seven and a

\textsuperscript{126} Southern Mercury, July 5, 1888

\textsuperscript{127} Southern Mercury, September 11, 1888
half cents a pound,' and punch the ignorant farmer for letting him have it, and with
one mighty jump, leap square down on debt, doctors, and lawyers, and there hold
them like grim death to a dead nigger, until they were willing to practice for farmers
in the neighborhood of living reason.\footnote{128}

Understanding the Problem

The Cleburne Demands of 1886 and later Alliance and Populist platforms were
widely disseminated among the Alliance membership. They provided a common
language or rhetoric of needs and goals which the women's political letters to the
Mercury drew on. Some of the letters were sophisticated and specific and writers
asked important, thoughtful questions. Other opinions were abstract as indeed the
whole Populist theme could be. Sarah Emery's widely read pamphlet, Seven Financial
Conspiracies Which have Enslaved the American People, was the classic—if not
entirely accurate—explanation of the Populist belief that bad legislation caused
disastrous monetary policies, ruining farmers and urban workers alike. The Populists
spoke about economic issues in moral and Christian terms.\footnote{129} To some the "money
power" indicated very specific men—the legislators, for example who had passed the
bill for the demonetization of silver. To others the phrase became a catchall not only
for politicians on the wrong side but also for all wealthy men and corporations
including Wall Street brokers, bankers (American and British), small and large

\footnote{128} Southern Mercury, July 5, 1888

\footnote{129} Wagner, 72
business owners, railroads, mortgage companies, mine owners, and landlords.\textsuperscript{130} Frequently, passionately expressed concerns were combined with religion and traditional family values.\textsuperscript{131} Always they urged the farmers on in the struggle.

The letter of "Western Reader" was a cynical rejection of the farmers' traditional solution to problems, harder work. On May 3, 1888, she commented: "It is in the interest of our masters to keep all labor so busily employed getting a bare subsistence that none shall have time to inform themselves as to the cause of our degradation, nor study a proper method of remedies. They say to us, 'rise a little earlier, work a little harder, farmers, and don't meddle in questions concerning your political existence.'

"Farmers, ignorance and poverty are effects, effects of preventable causes!! If you continue to bind yourself to such leaders or to either one of the present two parties, to cringe when its astute leaders crack their whips, to ignore the study of politics, to try to make a cookbook out of your present organ, then you deserve to have your suffrage bought and yourselves the slaves of big-salaried law-makers who are faithful guardians of their own interests.... How can you expect the aristocrats of the Senate, the bankers, the lawyers and peacock tricksters of the House of Representatives to efface their own selfworship and be mindful of interests which you foolishly pay them to trammel and neglect?"\textsuperscript{132}

The dialogue of Annie Mims of the Wood County Alliance in Winsboro, was also

\textsuperscript{130} Wagner, 65

\textsuperscript{131} Wagner, 23

\textsuperscript{132} Southern Mercury, May 3, 1888
broad and fervent, with classical, Biblical and other allusions. "Uncle Sam, our
glorious old bird of liberty, is throttled," she said. "Like Prometheus, chained to the
barren rock, the shylocks, vulture-like, eat the beast daily, and the old eagle dead
drunk can only croak monopoly; and the whisky traffic has put us in the fix. What
Herculean power can or will cut the chains that thus binds this government and place
the proud eagle on its perch again?...The Farmers' Alliance can do it with, if need
be, the assistance of other labor organizations." 133

"We have indulged in a Rip Van Winkle nap of many years and our minds have
become so thoroughly impregnated with somnambulistic tendencies that we have
almost become indifferent to our condition," said Aunt Huldy, from Polk Creek.
"May the farmers of the Alliance grow and flourish and spread until they join hands
and with unity of action descend upon king monopoly. The more we are afflicted the
more may our noble Alliance increase and multiply, and when our infant Moses
comes to years of maturity he will lead us up out of our bondage and the sea of
monopoly will be cleft in twain by the glorious principles of our order." 134

On August 22, 1889, Mrs. Garrett from Delta County asked: "Where is the
proud American eagle? You left liberty's golden bowl unguarded at the political
cistern and your proud bird swooped down to drink; designing politicians came and
by wiles and art have stolen him and made him a prisoner in the congressional halls
of these United States, and he will remain there until the farmers and laborers rise up

133 Southern Mercury, June 7, 1888
134 Southern Mercury, July 5, 1888
in their might and demand its release. I will tell you where the gold is that should be
in circulation among the working people. Railroad kings own about ten millions....”\textsuperscript{135}

Religious rhetoric had a powerful appeal. “The great civil revolution is to be
supplemented with a great social revolution. God has so written it down,” said Mrs.
Louisa Crowder from Armstrong, Erath County, on June 14, 1888. “No man or
combination of men can stop this labor movement. Upon the white crest of it
thousands will be lifted to virtue and honor, and thousands more who are before it
will be submerged and swept away.”\textsuperscript{136}

‘Old Maid’ Sallie Beck announced her particular method of analyzing the existing
world system and in doing so employed a refreshing culinary metaphor. “A nation’s
civilization,” she said, “can be judged by the bread it eats. Liberty bread is light,
spongy, untaxed and nutritious. It always rises and is always a brown success. The
heavy black bread of the protected Russian peasant, mixed in tears, kneaded in
hopeless sadness, suggests the cruel, despairing bondage of those who subsist on it.
Tortillas engender monthly revolutions as our child-loving neighbors, the Mexicans,
will testify. Human misery will be apt to disappear with good cooking,” she added
sagely. “It is highly probable that men fed on sodden bread and watery turnips are
capable of wife-beating and conspiracies against even the democratic government of
the present day.”\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{135} Southern Mercury, August 22, 1889

\textsuperscript{136} Southern Mercury, June 14, 1888

\textsuperscript{137} Southern Mercury, June 21, 1888
Their letters reflect awareness of national events. In the late summer of 1888, Ann Other of Ennis, Navarro County, wrote: “When we see with what greed those in high places are grasping the wealth of the nation; when we see vast corporations fostered and protected by the nation; when we see the bonds issued by the nation and bought up by the capital at sixty cents on the dollar and then so protected that the nation has retained no power by which she can pay them off at their face value at such time as it may become convenient, when we see these same bonds now demanding one hundred and twenty-five cents on the dollar of the producing population; when we see this same population stifled and clogged in their efforts to alleviate some of their hardships by this same banking system that our nation is fostering, then it is time for the people to cast their eye on the rise and fall of other governments and see that theirs does not meet the same fate.”

Ann Other had sent many letters to the Mercury by this time. Having informed herself, she now began asking questions and educating. She had become at ease with the written word. “As the patronage of the government has increased,” she said, “the presidents have used it so as to enormously increase the power and prestige of the executive, while the legislative branch has been dwarfed almost to insignificance. When we see our senators voting $250,000 from the public treasury for themselves to visit Paris, it is time the common people inquire how that would benefit the people whom they pretend to represent. When we see them voting to Mrs. Garfield $20,000 of the people’s money and then $5,000 per annum besides, it is time to ask now long before we will have the aristocratic title added.
"The war is soon to be fought over again against centralization of wealth and power in government, against railroads and all other combinations, a war with ballots, not swords. Where will you fight? Will you do your own thinking or give your oppressors another four year’s hold on you?" 138

On the subject of banks, Mrs. N.I. Rankin said: "The tenth plank of the democratic state platform announces that the democratic party of Texas is opposed to rechartering United States banks. According to my understanding, there is not a single United States bank in existence and has not been since Jackson vetoed the bill rechartering the U.S. bank in 1832 and withdrew the public money from its keeping in 1833. He said it was a power too great to exist in a free government, for its wealth would become so great that it would buy, bribe and force all legislation, both national and state to act in the interest of the bank which is just what the present banking association has done.... The people are tired of paying fifty millions a year on bonds that are past due and hold our present Congress and president and secretary (of the treasury) responsible for the great robbery that is robbing our little ones of every comfort. Yet the democratic convention attempted to deceive the people by saying they were opposed to rechartering the U.S. banks knowing full well there were no such banks in existence. If my position is true, surely this is sufficient to drive all who are in favor of reform from the ranks of a party which deceives a people and which is supporting a president who, for four years, has never by word or deed

138 Southern Mercury, July 24, 1888
shown that his sympathy was with the people.\textsuperscript{139}

Because of federal restrictions against national bank loans based on land and a Texas law against state banks, farmers facing difficult debt payments could borrow funds only from a limited number of private banks and from out-of-state loan companies. Fewer of these companies operated in Texas than in the northern plains states, and they usually charged higher interest, 10 to 12 percent, because of the greater risks and the legal complications of their Texas business.\textsuperscript{140}

The following year, Ann Other wrote again about the scarcity of currency: "The laboring people...are now so crushed and crowded for money, that votes can be bought for half a dollar or a pair of shoes for the little ones. As long as our currency remains in its present contracted state and a few individual bankers can convulse the whole nation in its finances, as long as we live with our present banking laws, there is no power on earth that can destroy our railroad monopolies and monopolies of all kinds. As to issuing bonds on the counties to build our roads it seems to me no thinking man can contemplate what our national bonded debt has done for us and then authorize the issuing of still more bonds for the present and rising generation to pay."\textsuperscript{141}

The land belonged to the farmer--not the government, the speculator, the banker, London financier, or the railroad--and it was another subject that the women

\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Southern Mercury}, July 12, 1888

\textsuperscript{140} Barr, 95

\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Southern Mercury}, March, 7, 1889
addressed.  

Mary from Limestone County, said: "It is good to discuss the why’s and wherefore’s of the exceeding scarcity of money but there is another question of great magnitude," she advised. "Why is it that there are so many homeless men and women, men who would till the soil for a living, and yet there are thousands of acres of land lying idle. Why did our state officials give the railroads so much of the people’s land, and compel the poor to rent? Why did they give so much land to build a state house? Would it have not been better policy to have given that 3,000,000 acres of land to the poor renting farmer and built a less palatial house by direct taxation?"  

The women articulately summarized economic theories and financial legislation, but in their personal analyses and final conclusion, they emphasized the human aspects of poverty among all classes and its effects on the family and home. They never doubted that impersonal industrial capitalism caused family poverty and the poverty of single women.  

Aunt Slow and Easy from Luling, questioned pensions for public officials in this light. "I am very much opposed to congress allowing pensions to Mrs. Logan or Mrs. Anybody Else just because their husband figured largely in public. Our big men in congress and senate have done enough to rob the poor farmer and congress would tax our poor, half-fed and thinly-clad farmers to pay these pensions while our farmers’ wives are left helpless with large families to

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142 Wagner, 101

143 Southern Mercury, May 5, 1888

144 Wagner, 122
support and perhaps no home, are passed completely by with silent contempt, only the
tax assessor and collector gives them notice if they have anything they can tax.”

The February 28, 1889, issue contained an astute letter from Corn Bread about
the electoral process. She talked about the Haymarket Square incident in a way that
suggested unconscious ambivalence about the event, even sympathy for the anarchists.
Farmers were having to reconcile their loyalty to a country that in their view had an
increasingly unjust economic and political system. “In this government by the people,
the majority of men take no real part in governing,” said Corn Bread. “The
government is chosen by the caucuses, and people never attend the caucuses—only
professional politicians as a rule do this. The first great lesson of citizenship should
be that the caucus and not merely the polling place is the direct point of contact
between the government and the people.... Our system of government is menaced by
tremendous forces of socialism, anarchism and other disturbing elements,” she
continued. “The disciples of the systems are not...ignoramuses and half lunatics. They
are members who have made a lifelong study of the world’s social and political
problems. The anarchists recently hung in Chicago were learned men, doctrinaires,
well-drilled specialists in the social problems of the day. These men are dangerous
because they think they have found a tremendous injustice at the bottom of society,
and they are doubly dangerous because in this belief they are right. It is the duty of
all good citizens to recognize this truth early and to set about finding remedies for this

145 Southern Mercury, May 10, 1888
injustice before these dangerous men find it in the firebrand, the dynamite bomb.”

Alliance women understood the importance of the Exchange which, if successful, would have freed the farmer from the control of the local merchant-landlord and the exorbitant interest rates of crop lien. A speech by “Little” Jennie Scott Wilson was published on the front page of the Mercury. “Thousands of friends and enemies to the Alliance have prophesied that the Alliance would suicide,” she wrote. “One fearing that it would; the other, hoping and confidently believing that it would. But today the mists have cleared away and every intelligent Alliance man recognizes that it is founded upon a solid careful basis. The Alliance is fast assuming gigantic proportions whose influence is felt all over our country and the great monopolies of the land are trembling when viewing its increasing power. The Texas Alliance headquarters at Dallas already do a monthly business, I believe, of over $200,000 in filling cooperative orders. The order is now running large flouring mills and ginneries and expects to establish many more local ones throughout Texas. There are over 200,000 members in Texas today and the membership is experiencing a healthy growth.”

During its existence, the Exchange did claim have an impact on the economic status quo. According to Macune, in Texas, it reduced the farmers’ supply bill by 40 percent, produced a general 20 percent deflation, and saved farmers more than $6

146 *Southern Mercury*, February 28, 1889
147 Schwartz, 218
148 *Southern Mercury*, August 28, 1888
million. But often crops were already mortgaged and note holders determined their disposition regardless of changing market conditions. The Dallas Exchange handled its own credit operations and by March 1888, notes exceeded capital three to one. Banks refused to honor Exchange paper. As it began to falter, farmers passed hats for contributions in county meeting hall after county meeting hall. In farmhouses all over Texas, women dug into domestic hideaways for the coins that represented a family’s investment in the hope of escaping the crop lien.\footnote{\textit{Southern Mercury}, March 14, 1889}

Rena R. Scott from O’Daniel, Texas, lamented, “farmers are losing money by not dealing through the Exchange because they are told they can do better elsewhere. Let me urge you to stand up for the Alliance and be true to your obligations. I visited an Alliance not long ago and a resolution was passed where the members pledged themselves to not mortgage their cotton crop to anyone. Such a resolution should, in my opinion, be passed by every sub-Alliance in the state.”\footnote{C.W. Macune, “The Farmers Alliance” (typescript on file at University of Texas, 1920), 35; Schwartz, 218}

Some went further, took matters into their own hands, and on a level of independent grassroots activity not exercised before by Alliance women began organizing their own form of financial support for the Exchange. It began in June 1889, when Mrs. A. P. Shaw from Donalton, Hunt County, wrote: “From reading the \textit{Mercury}, it seems to me that the brethren of suballiances are not doing their duty and are afraid to trust our leaders, or they would pay off the indebtedness of the
Exchange.” She proposed “to the sisters of the Lone Star state—that we sell eggs, butter, chickens and garden stuff to the amount of one dollar by the first of July, to help pay off the debt that hangs over the Exchange. Now let me see in the Mercury how many sisters are willing to lend a helping hand to save our head; for the Exchange is our head and if our head be cut off, our body is worthless.”

Two weeks later she was joined by Mrs. Bettie Gay of Columbus. “We the undersigned sisters of the Farmers’ Alliance of Texas, agree to sell eggs, chickens, butter and garden stuff to the amount of ONE DOLLAR, to be paid by the first day of August and the total amount...applied to the payment of the Exchange indebtedness,” they pledged.

Bettie Gay urged action. “It is essential,” she said. “Let us save the Exchange. Let the lecturers at the July county meetings collect $1 from every member or fifty cents, which would more than pay the indebtedness. Also to assist in securing cotton bagging for those who cannot advance money for the present crop.... In one of our county meetings the question of taking stock in the New Braunfels mills was discussed nearly all day. Finally, one man arose and though poor, offered a dollar from his own pocket. Others followed and in less than twenty minutes, the entire amount was raised.

“Many do not read and many do not go to meetings. If it could be arranged for every county to have a barbecue or basket dinner and have a first-class business man speak and take up a collection, I wager we’d have the whole amount needed raised in

\[152\] Southern Mercury, July 6, 1889
two months. I am a woman and with many more like Mrs. Shaw, we can pay out of debt and stay out.” 153

In the next week, five more women wrote from Rodgers, Benton, and Caddo Mills Counties agreeing to sell eggs, chickens, butter, and garden stuff for the Exchange.154 In early July, four more joined the effort. By mid-July, there were yet four more, from Red Rock, New Caney, and Jewett Counties. By the end of July, some forty-seven women had committed their support.155 The financial problems were not to be solved by such efforts however. By the late summer of 1889, after twenty months of operation, the Dallas Exchange went under.156

Bettie Gay

In many ways, Bettie Gay epitomizes the ordinary Alliancewoman, the stolid, independent, strong-willed, resourceful Texas farmer, who heard the challenges of the Alliance and embraced its promises. In other ways she is different, representing a smaller group of women who were radicalized first by the movement and then by its failure to deliver its promises. In an old photograph, she is seated in a wicker chair next to her son, James Bates Gay, his wife, Juanita Green, and two grandchildren. She is wearing an apron and zig-zag-striped dress, her black hair is parted down the middle and pulled back in a bun. She has a strong, handsome face and dark eyes

153 Southern Mercury, June 20, 1889

154 Southern Mercury, June 27, 1889

155 Southern Mercury, July 14, 18, 25, 1889

156 Schwartz, 219
which stare out somewhat severely. In another photograph, accompanying her essay
on women in the Alliance in Nelson Dunning's history of the order, she is dressed in
a suit, a bow of lace at her throat. She has the same dark-eyed, direct, no-nonsense
expression.

Bettie Munn Gay was born in Alabama and moved to Texas with her parents as a
child in 1836. She married Rufus King Gay, also an Alabamian, at an early age. He
was said to be cultivated and widely travelled, someone from whom she learned
philosophy and science. Like many Southern women whose circumstances were
reduced by the Civil War, she took up the unaccustomed duties of household and field
work. In 1880 when her husband was fifty-two years old, he died leaving her with a
mortgaged farm, debts, and a half-grown son, James Jehu Bates Gay. She worked the
farm, took in sewing, sold goods at market, and managed to pay off the mortgage.
Her white clapboard, two-chimney, plantation-style home a few miles north of
Columbus, was on the stage coach road. Over the years, she took in and raised six
boys and three girls, orphaned perhaps along the stage coach road.\textsuperscript{157} She was active
in the Baptist church. In 1891 the Nonconformist reported that Gay was a "woman of
wealth and influence," and one of the largest cotton planters in Texas with a
plantation of 1,776 acres.\textsuperscript{158} Eventually she turned the management of her farm over

\textsuperscript{157} Annie L. Diggs, The Women in the Alliance Movement, \textit{The Arena}, Vol. 6,
Boston: Arena Publishing Co., July 1892, 170

Interview by author with Bettie Gay's great grand-daughter, Mrs. Betty
Becker, of Columbus, Texas, March 1992.

\textsuperscript{158} Wagner, 42
to her son, J. B. Gay, also an Alliance member.

Her first appearance in the pages of the Mercury may have been June 14, 1888, and signed “B.G.” She was urging people to boycott coffee. In June 1889, she and Mrs. Shaw proposed that the Alliance women sell poultry and dairy items for money to save the Exchange. In 1891, she angrily complained about the decline of women’s letters in the Mercury. When Nelson Dunning published his history of the Farmers’ Alliance in 1891, he included a chapter by Gay on “The Influence of Women in the Alliance” which summed up the status of women. It has been interpreted by McMath, among other historians, as accepting women’s conventional roles because Gay speaks of women as man’s companion and helpmeet.\footnote{McMath, 69} However, she did not marry again after her husband died, chose not to become someone’s helpmeet, and, read from a different perspective, her essay seems almost revolutionary. “Nature has endowed women with brains,” she wrote. “Why should she not think...why not act? If allowed to act, what privilege should men enjoy of which she should be deprived?” She looked to the Alliance to redeem woman from her “enslaved condition” and stated, “What we need is a better womanhood...acknowledging no master and accepting no compromise.”\footnote{Nelson A. Dunning, The Farmers’ Alliance and Agricultural Digest (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 308-312} Bettie Gay espoused suffrage and eventually became a Socialist.\footnote{Obituary in the Colorado Citizen, June 10, 1921; telephone conversation with Lawrence Goodwyn.}
Suffrage, Yes and No

Historians of Alliance and Populist women have found that despite the movement’s official support of expanded roles for women, the meaning of equality was constricted by and to the organization’s major goal of reviving southern agriculture. Political rights within the Alliance were not seen by women as the first step toward political rights outside the Alliance. The ideology of their roles did not change. They always emphasized their traditional place and importance in the family and on the farm.\(^{162}\)

Despite the equality of membership in the Alliance and its promise of democracy, Alliance and Populist women were not able to convert the Party to unequivocal support for suffrage. National Populist conventions consistently omitted women suffrage [and temperance] from their platforms.\(^{163}\) Only in Colorado in 1893 did women gain suffrage under a Populist administration. Success, however, is not the only criterion of importance. If an accelerating transformation of consciousness among a group of oppressed people was vital to the formation of the Alliance movement, it was to the suffrage movement as well. The first promptings of collective power are often elusive, however. “Prior to a movement’s emergence, before the initial problem of radical social change is solved, its coming into being is difficult to imagine,” writes Ellen Dubois. The early history of woman suffrage

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\(^{162}\) Jeffrey and Weidenfeld find this to be true for North Carolina and Texas Alliance women. Wagner says this is the case for Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado Populists.

\(^{163}\) Wagner, 10
vividly demonstrates this phenomenon. The movement started with a handful of mid-nineteenth-century women--scattered, isolated, and handicapped by the limited sphere of their sex--who began to demand political parity with men.164

It is precisely this moment of awakening consciousness that these rural Texas letters illustrate, the difficult-to-imagine, two-steps-forward-one-step-back emergence of scattered, isolated thinkers who dared to push outside the limits of their sphere, to question its existence. Very possibly these letters about suffrage in the Mercury, represent the first articulation of feminist consciousness for many rural women. Ann Other, one of the most frequent letterwriters, "confessed, that when I began to study suffrage, I thought women's only ambition should be to read the latest novels, work green dogs with pink eyes on cardboard and other ornamental work, keep her house and children clean and healthy and 'always meet your husband with a smile.' But now I am satisfied that with suffrage, she can benefit her country, keep her own womanly traits and have more just laws for herself and better protection for her children."165

Between April 19, 1888, and April 18, 1889, more women were stirred to write the Mercury about suffrage and women's rights than about any other topic. Fifteen percent of the women's letters focused on female suffrage or women's rights. Of the Texas letters, 56 percent were in favor of suffrage while 44 percent were against it.166


165 Southern Mercury, May 31, 1888

166 Weidenfeld, 37
The viewpoints in these and later letters are diverse. Some women are deeply ingrained with the traditional thinking of the day. It is clear that the Texas agricultural society was patriarchal. While the belief in separate spheres was perhaps less tightly embraced than in Eastern urban communities, it had an impact.\footnote{Wagner, 143} Other writers question it, however, and as the women grow in confidence, political sophistication, and experiment in direct action and express their views, their debate about their proper sphere, suffrage, and other rights becomes a compelling, occasionally heated exchange via these published letters.

In \textit{Bonds of Womanhood}, Nancy Cott suggests that by giving women a unique sexual solidarity, the woman's sphere contained a precondition for feminism. It is possible that the sentiments of mutuality and sisterhood expressed so felicitously by some of the \textit{Southern Mercury} letterwriters came from women who were discovering a world of true peers among their own sex for the first time. In valuing their peers, these women were confirming their own values and expressing a new individuality, and an ability to enter into relationships as separate, distinct rather than familiarily-linked human beings. This kind of group consciousness was one that could, and I suggest did, develop into political consciousness.\footnote{Nancy Cott, \textit{The Bonds of Womanhood} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 9, 194,197}

The men and women who met at Seneca Falls in 1848 did not have much influence in the South. Women's suffrage entered Texas consciousness briefly during
the 1868 and the 1875 constitutional conventions. In 1868, a declaration proposed by T.H. Mundine of Burleson County that electors be qualified “without distinction of sex,” was referred to committee and rejected 54 to 13. In 1875, suffrage was extended to all male persons except minors, paupers, lunatics, felons, soldiers, and sailors. A petition for female suffrage was referred to committee and tabled. Little other interest was manifest until 1888 when the WCTU began to support the idea.\textsuperscript{169} On May 10, 1888, Addie McCaskill from DeWitt County, wrote: “I notice that some who write for the \textit{Mercury} seem to be in favor of woman’s suffrage. If I am not entirely wrong we, as a sex, have no desire whatever to extend our privileges beyond what they are now. I believe in ladies attending public gatherings, going abroad, and lightening in every manner possible the burdensome cares of life; but...the home is the field in which we can wield the greatest power and influence.... Kindness is our scepter, and the human heart that cannot be reached by loving kindness is out of the reach of all power of woman’s. Let us look to the up-building of our homes, to properly rearing our children.”

“Homespun Dress,” from Travis County, held less conventional beliefs. “As I understand the Alliance, it allows the ladies equal rights with the men,” she wrote in the same issue. “This is a great inducement to them to join, as we don’t have it anywhere else, some not even at home.” She complimented some of the \textit{Mercury}’s male contributors for their “exalted opinion and high appreciation” of the female sex.

and turned to the subject of "Mother Eve." "I don't...exactly know Mother Eve's part in the garden.... However, one thing is certain; Adam obeyed Eve, whether she was put there to rule or not. Let us not, like Eve, influence our husbands to eat forbidden fruit but climb up with them, hand in hand, step by step, to a higher, nobler plane of existence."

Religion was used as a basis to both support and denounce suffrage. On June 7, 1888, Annie Mims from the Wood County Alliance, in Winsboro, Texas, published her prosuffrage essay in the General Correspondence section of the Mercury. "I am but a woman yet women have an influence, as you all well know, as in that little affair about the apple," she said. "I need not tell you I am Alliance, prohibitionist, greenbacker and know-nothing. I also believe in...suffrage. As woman has the credit of leading to the fall, when she is granted the right of suffrage she will assist in uplifting and reinstating you. Women who constitute the best and purest part of this government should have the right to make the laws under which we live, to help lift us from the oppression of class legislation, monopolies, and trust combinations."

In Women of the Grange, Donald Marti asks if hardworking rural women, uncertain that they were acknowledged to be ladies, forcefully asserted their gentility and tried to help other rural women develop ladylike graces, or did they resent the limitations that propriety imposed on them as suggested by Karen Blair, in The...
Clubwoman as Feminist?\textsuperscript{171} Certainly, Mrs. J. Morton Smith from the Bell County Alliance was intent on teaching grace. "The true history of the world is the record of the home life," said her essay which was published in the \textit{Mercury}. "It is to women we owe the little niceties of social intercourse and to her we look as the 'star of Bethlehem to light the way to a higher and better life' ... We are thankful that the vigorously demanded woman's rights have been denied us. If it were not for the restraining influences of conventionalism, woman would never have acquired the genius shown... for adorning and refining home. The cultivation of flowers, the lavish use of the painter's brush, sculptor's chisel and artist's pencil as well as the various exquisite embroideries transform the rude hut into a vine-wreathed cottage, making it a 'thing of beauty and a joy forever'... and speaks of aspirations for higher and nobler things."\textsuperscript{172}

Others were outspokenly resentful of such thinking and viewed the sphere as a straight-jacket. "Sister Rebecca, you class the decline of patriotism with the rise of the popularity of universal suffrage and 'woman neglecting her duty in her proper sphere,'" said Ann Other on May 31, 1888. "Will someone kindly tell me what is her proper sphere? I... conclude it is whatever... society dictates to her. Women used to be our bakers, brewers, dry-salters, butter-makers, cooks, dressmakers, cheese-makers, confectioners, jam and jelly makers, pickle mers, soap makers, spinners, weavers,


\textsuperscript{172} \textit{Southern Mercury}, May 10, 1888
sock makers, lace makers, embroiders, and midwives. Crowded out of her old fields by men’s intrusion and invention, she must either accept a life of idleness, and be satisfied with such as her brothers see proper to give her, or she must demand a more useful and energetic life.... Society...has so limited her sphere of usefulness in life that there is nothing left for her to do but marry.

“Honorable gentlemen think that we women want the earth, when we only want one half of it,” she said, quoting Frances Willard. “It is further maintained that if women are given the right to vote, it will prevent their being womanly. “How,” she asked, does “a sentiment of chivalry in some good men hinder them from giving us the ballot?...It is inconceivable to me why some women, simply because they do not wish to vote, should clamor so loud against giving the right to those who do, as there would be nothing compelling any to vote who did not think they could benefit the laws by doing so.”

She responded to another writer, who she decided was a man: “You ‘fear men will lose their respect for women who assemble with them at the ballot box,’” she said. “I think those men who could think less of a woman because she took a judicious interest in the laws of her country would not be worth the while to mourn over; whether they respected her or not they would be obliged to respect her laws. When you hear men talking of women losing men’s esteem by using the highest and most sacred right of an American citizen, you can rest assured that his esteem is not worth having....If you are obliged to associate with all whom you meet at the polls, do not go there, for your soul is just as liable to be contaminated as mine.” After
this strong stand, she retreated saying she hadn't done justice to her subject as she was sick, "her physical machinery out of repair."

The subject of the black vote was raised only once, by Annea Yarbrough from Belton, Bell County. On June 14, 1888, she wrote that "in her opinion there are a great many men as well as women who should not vote. When we have officers to elect, to whom the safety of our whole nation depends, the most ignorant Negro, whose vote could be bought for a glass of beer, is perfectly acceptable."

Rural Widow, a frequent contributor from Harmony Ridge, announced: "Sisters Ann Other and Charitie have sounded the alarm—to vote or not to vote, that is the question. What will befall our republic when women become a political factor? Better no government at all than that of a republic without homes and home-keepers. Women without the right of franchise cast the mightiest vote for good is a truism we all know full well." 173

In the next week's June issue, Ann Other, her physical machinery apparently repaired, responded extensively. "A nod to Sister Rebecca, Sister Charitie and others who have supported me," she said and then spoke knowledgably about Kansas where women had municipal suffrage. "A majority of the woman in the city vote and they are the very best of society; true some of the disreputable also vote--don't the men do the same? Men are more careful in the selection of the officers for they know we vote in such affairs for the best men who will help us protect our homes. Our polls are respectable places with no loitering or peddling of tickets within fifty feet of the polls.

173 Southern Mercury, June 21, 1888
Our women come with their husbands, fathers, lovers or other friends, each casts her little slip, gives her name and passes out. Insults have been rare, if any.

"Are our southern men less courteous or noble-hearted?" asked Ann Other. "As to some objecting to suffrage because they think it incapacitates her for returning to her household duties, I would say the day Mrs. Salter [a mayor in a Kansas town] wrote me, she had been washing, and says she has seven borders and four children, and does all her own work with the assistance of a little girl twelve years old. Now I would ask if the burden of office at six hundred per year is any greater than...that."

As Populism gathered momentum, churches across the South joined their secular Democratic counterparts in denouncing the formation of a third party and the Alliance's role in it. A rift opened between Populist, Alliance and Southern white Protestant leaders. Traditional church leadership supported the status quo and remained loyal to the party of their forefathers. Political nonconformity and religious nonconformity reinforced each other. The churches took a conservative stand toward the Alliance; they apparently did as well toward suffrage. Ann Other continued her letter, pointing a long finger at their hypocrisy. "If politics are corrupting, what is the matter with our churches that our great Methodist conference refused to seat the lady delegates sent?" she asked. "Is it, too, too corrupt for women? Then to add insult to injury, one minister took up his text, 'Behold the enemy cometh in like a flood, but I will raise up a standard against him,' meaning the

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174 McMath, 133

175 King, 173
women. When church debts are to be paid or minister's salaries to be raised, then the ministers think their is no harm in woman's counsel and woman's energetic work but when it comes to admitting women delegates they fear this may prove a stepping stone to the pulpit and thus they are frowned down.

"Sister Charitie says she thinks the theory of only a certain class of woman voting not well founded. I know it has no foundation and no one claims it but those opposed to suffrage. I challenge anyone to show that more bad or ignorant women will vote than the intelligent."

One of the arguments for equal suffrage stemming from the Grangers was the "home protection" formula, the claim that women needed votes in order to guard their domestic sphere from society's corruption.\textsuperscript{176} Ann Other made that argument. "You say, 'there are homes we must make happy, our own erring husbands and sons to reclaim,'" she continued. "I know of no better way than to make laws to put temptation out of the reach of erring sons; and alas! dear sister, you seem to think that every sister in the union has a home, a husband and son. It is strange to me that some women never realize that all are not as pleasantly situated as themselves.

"You speak of our educating our girls; how many of our colleges in the Union, supported or aided by direct tax, think you, will admit our daughters within their walls if they knock for admittance, remembering woman's property is taxed just the same as man's for this purpose? I could quote enough instances of these 'just laws' to fill two columns of the \textit{Mercury} and not be half done. Don't worry about our

\textsuperscript{176} Marti, 8
'usurping the duties of the sterner sex without their consent.' They have the power and there is no danger of taking it without their consent."

Widespread support for prohibition existed among Populist women and was linked with suffrage sentiment, pro and con. "I have been reading sister Ann Other's letters and I think they're splendid," said Mary M., from Greer County in a letter of May 26. "I can't understand why some are so opposed to us ladies voting. One good sister thinks it would be a downfall to the female sex to go there among so many grades of people. Have we not got all kinds of people in our country and do we have to stop and shake hands with them? Where would whiskey have gone if women had been allowed to vote? There would not have been a drop of whisky now in existence."

Eva J. Sims of Sault Creek Alliance, Indian Territory, also blamed the failure to pass prohibition on women's inability to vote. "Now Sister Ann Other," she said, "I wish I could put my thoughts in words as you do for I am of the same belief. Some of the sisters try to make us think it is a disgrace for a woman to vote, but...I felt like voting last August for prohibition for I thought if we ever voted for anything, it would be to put down whiskey. I did not feel any more disgraced going to the polls to vote than...to any other big gathering." Ann Too from Gribble Spring Alliance held a comparable opinion. "It seems absurd to me that voting would make a woman

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177 Southern Mercury, June 28, 1888

178 King, 232

179 Southern Mercury, July 5, 1888
rough or forgetful of their duty at home," she said in the same June issue. "I don’t believe I would forget to wash the children on election day, or forget that I was a woman either, and as for going to the bar and taking a drink, I know I would not do that for I don’t love the stuff. Sister Rebecca says there are corrupt women as well as men and the vote would not be materially changed, leaving the impression that she thinks good women are in the minority....We don’t have many women [in my neighborhood] who could be bought for a drink of whiskey but can’t say about the men. I say like what Mary Ussery says. We have a hard time anyhow; don’t throw any obstacles in each others’ way." 

There were those who feared, as Myres suggests, that undertaking tasks outside their proscribed sphere might cause them to lose their claim to moral superiority, their femininity, even their looks. "Corn Bread" weighed in against suffrage with this in mind. "I have seen so much said about ‘woman’s rights,’ dear paper, I thought to say a few words. We are the housewives, the makers of the home, and the home makes the nation. It puts me all out of patience to hear some of the ladies talk about their ‘woman’s rights.’ How can any true wife and mother walk up to the polls on election day amid a crowd of gaping men, some of them perhaps drunk and some of them using slang. That is your husbands’ and brothers’ and fathers’ business, not yours. ...If you are to be a man’s equal in these things you must help to make the living. My husband is a farmer and I think I would much rather be a housewife than

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180 Southern Mercury, June 28, 1888

181 Myres, 8
be a ‘woman's rights’ woman.

“Dear ladies, do you not know why your husbands object to your going to the polls? It is because as a masculine woman you are no longer the dear little girl whom he promised to love, honor and cherish. Be contented as we are and make the home pure.”182

This was too much for Poor Gal from Red Oak, Ellis County, who in the August issue, took “Corn Bread” to task, asking “had she seen her husband and sons, if she is so fortunate as to possess the same, after spending all day in town being treated by so many friends seeking office, coming home totally unbalanced, reeling, staggering, swearing, thinking the wife and mother a robber, while she tries to get their clothes off and put them into a nice warm bed before any one outside should suspect the disgrace, I think she would say, woman’s rights out of the other side of her mouth. Vote to put down whisky, vote to keep thieves from ruling us, vote to fight the foreign moneyed cliques, vote to keep our sons from being peons; yes, she would say let me vote till I die....” 183

Then followed two very heated antisuffrage letters, the first from Rebecca, from Jefferson, Texas: “Please withhold your vials of wrath while I reassert that there are corrupt women as well as men,” she said, defying the traditional view of female perfection. “As women are neither mentally or morally stronger than men, if they are exposed to the same corrupting influences of political vice and the buying and selling

182 Southern Mercury, July 31, 1888

183 Southern Mercury, August 21, 1888
of votes as men, might we not reasonably conclude that there would be as large a per cent of corrupt women as men? These thousands of women will always flock to the polls to defeat any measure for good that may be put forth. Would our lady-like deportment and modest refinement, which suffragists say we could preserve, protect us from the low and scheming aspirant for office who sets forth upon his electioneering tour reeking with the fumes of bad whisky and vile cigars?” She raised the specter of “Lady Macbeth whose unholy ambition (I think she wanted female suffrage) caused her to suggest and help execute the murder of her king, and which finally resulted her own ruin and the overthrow of her family. Thus it is often the case when a woman obtrudes herself beyond her legitimate sphere.

“You sit with empty heart and hands, waiting for universal suffrage before you deign to consider life worth living,” she concluded. “You profess to have a longing for higher and more exalted attainments, that your sphere be widened. Have a care my sister; Mother Eve thought that by enlarging her sphere she would be wiser and happier. You know the result.” The other letter, from Rural Widow of Harmony Ridge, in a September 1889 issue, reflected a sense of inadequacy imposed on women by society. While she admitted that women’s work was “unhappily, to some extent depreciated,” she maintained that “strict justice forces the admission that women are largely to blame…. In time past, women unknowingly, I believe, did imperfect work. Her will was good but she had not gone into the fight rightly equipped; therefore she put before her employers a deficient result, expecting the

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184 *Southern Mercury*, June 28, 1888
deficiency to be supplied by consideration for her delicacy of temperament or
constitution or some other such ill defined and suitable feminine quality....

"Now women realize that if they are to receive equal compensation they must
give in all respects an equal service and this 'equal service' from the very nature of
the case, must always press harder upon the women, consume more of the precious
life-blood, make larger demands upon the brain and nerve force for speculate as we
might, the God-favored and indestructible fact remains the same. Women are weaker
than the men and less fitted for the stern and pressing work of the world....

"If we could return to the God-appointed order of things, all this talk about the
depreciation of women's work, whether it be to save the Exchange or be president,
would cease. It is the work of the plodder that is most effective in the practical world;
and a large majority of men are plodders. By contrast with the quick nervous unequal
effort of women, man gains much in power and effectiveness."\(^{185}\)

Mrs. M.E. Ussery from Lavacca also spoke against female ambition, begging
readers to "give the hours devoted to politics to the moral training of our children.
The idea of a refined lady going to the polls is absurd," she maintained. "If our good
men cannot run the government, I am sure we cannot. The true elevation of woman
and her restoration to the place she occupied in the beginning is assured to every
Christian woman and enables her to aid in restraining vice and correcting evils.
Ambition will lead women to neglect wifehood, motherhood and all the nameless

\(^{185}\) *Southern Mercury*, September 5, 1889
graces that adorn women."  

Others such as Jennie Scott Wilson were undaunted. "Some say that women have no business in the order," she said in an August, 1888 issue. "But when Columbus braved the perils of unknown seas to add America to the world, whose hand was it that fitted him for the voyage? Queen Isabell. Every effectual man who has left his mark in the world is but another Columbus for whom some Isabella in the form of a mother has laid down her comforts, yes, her chance, her jewels. I would suggest to all those who think ladies are out of their place in the Alliance and have no discretion and are given to telling all they know or hear, that they had better read up a little and be less explosive themselves in the lobbies of convention halls."  

In the same issue, Ann Other queried: "If independence of thought and action is good for the development of man, why would it not be for women? Can we have the full development of mind in children when mothers are trammeled by inconsistent laws and dictates of fashion, and society that dictates to her in dress, in thought and in action. When we see laws passed by men alone, have we any right to wonder if they are always just to the silenced element they govern? Have women an equal right (with their husbands) in law to their children? Have women a right to property acquired before marriage, and have they an equal right with the husband to that acquired after marriage?  

"Wyoming Territory has had suffrage since 1860," she continued. "In 1885,

186 Southern Mercury, July 5, 1888  
187 Southern Mercury, August 28, 1888
Governor Warren wrote that it had not lowered the grade of public officials there. On the contrary, the women consider much more carefully than our men the character of our candidates, and both political parties have found themselves obliged to nominate their best men in order to obtain the support of the women.\textsuperscript{188}

She gave a succinct analysis of the opposition to suffrage, maintaining that it was confined to three classes. The first was "that immoral element which sustains and is sustained by the drinking saloon, the gambling house," she said. "The second, a much smaller element, is the ‘high-toned’ class which finds delight in the frivolities of fashionable life. A third is the small but eminently respectable element that is bound by traditional notions of man’s superiority and ‘woman’s sphere’ and lies curled up upon itself like a chick in an eggshell who ought to hatch but doesn’t. To this last element belong those who think they read in the Bible a divine right of man to rule over women."

The remainder of Ann Other’s letter supports Maryjo Wagner’s contention that women in particular emphasized the personal effects that industrial capitalism caused on the family, on women, and on the home.\textsuperscript{189} "The condition of the 3,000,000 women in the United States, who earn their own living, should be considered in the light of the Golden Rule," she wrote. "Those who are in bonds should be remembered as if we were bound with them. I beg satisfied ladies of fortune and gentlemen who boast of the perfection of “woman’s sphere” and our Christian

\textsuperscript{188} Southern Mercury, August 28, 1888

\textsuperscript{189} Wagner, 122
civilization to imitate Christ by going among the people of want and there learn the lessons of needed change. Go to the stores and shops where the products of woman's work is sold and watch the merchants pass the lives of women over their counters in every package of ill paid work they sell. Go and learn how helpless women are driven to lives of shame and then despised by the class of persons who have lived off their labor and their tears. Then sit back in your easy chairs and cry against the ballot for fear it may sully some hands too indolent to use it for the emancipation of the down trodden.

"May the day hasten when all women shall understand the laws that govern them are also grinding the faces of the poor. May the time come when men shall intelligently understand the franchise and exercise the same in an intelligent manner. When we will no longer hear of such arguments as I heard a man make a few days ago when the subject of suffrage was broached. 'Let my wife go and pitch millet all day as I have and I will take her place in the house and she may do the voting.' Oh, depths of logic!"\(^{190}\)

For some women, the discussion had gone on long enough. "Woman's rights!" exploded Dianecia Jones from Dallas County. "Now sisters, let that question rest.... I don't think it would improve things for the ladies to vote. Let us allow the men to make laws. We can certainly live by their laws if they can. Woman's suffrage is something we will never get in this world. I say trust for our rights in a better

\(^{190}\) *Southern Mercury*, August 28, 1888
The Alliance Begins to Decline

For various possible reasons, the number of women's letters peaked during the fall of 1888 and declined swiftly thereafter. Several issues during the following few months of that year contained no letters at all from women, although there was still a woman's page. At the end of October 1888, the Mercury changed its "Ladies' Department" to "The Family" section, soliciting letters from the "good mothers and wives, the boys and girls--in short, the families of the country." However, the section was small and over the next months offered little of substance--letters from children, a cure for corns [apply liquor potassae], recipes for pickled pork, apple butter, hasty pudding, an historical account of revolutionary Vermont war hero, an article from The American Magazine concerning the proper clothes for November, a reprint from Farmer's Home on teaching boys to pick up their clothes. There was nothing from women, nothing political, nothing concerning suffrage.

The women remarked again and again upon the absence of letters. It is an indication of the extent to which they had come to anticipate reading each others' contributions in the paper. Their voices are silent and they feel the loss acutely. Their letters had become more than information and descriptive discourse. They were reflections of the women themselves, evidence of their emerging strengths and abilities, their growing self esteem. "Attention, sisters! What is the matter with you

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191 Southern Mercury, September 4, 1888

192 Weidenfeld, 33, 34
all?" wrote Country Girl from Concord Alliance, McLennan County, in September, 1988. "So many of the good contributors have ceased to send in their spicy letters and we miss them so much. Come to the rescue, some of you gifted talented farmers' daughters; our page is almost half full of advertisements which will never do. What has become of Ann Other? I am afraid that she is asleep and will have one of those fearful dreams of hers. Oh, Charitie, how we miss you, Rosa Lee, and many others. Our Alliance is on a standstill, but we hope that when the weather gets more pleasant and sickness subsides it will do better."193

Later that same month, Sallie Pangle from Fanbion, Bernet County, wrote:

"Looking over the Mercury of September 18, I see only three very short letters from the sisters. Why is this, dear sisters? Is it our fault that our page is being filled more and more, each week, with advertisements? Are we getting negligent or tired of writing and reading the interesting letters written by the sisters? Indeed I am not. The ladies' department is the dearest page of all the Mercury. I read it first and then I am ready for the letters full of good advice and teeming with knowledge which our farmers have never had any credit for having. Some of our young ladies write letters full of merriment, romance, and poetry, and others write words full of wisdom showing how deep into the fountain of thought the feminine mind can penetrate."194

Ann Other also commented that the paper is no longer "spread out in the social manner it used to have when it came with so many neighbors--no Charitie, or

193  Southern Mercury, September 4, 1888
194  Southern Mercury, October 9, 1888
Western Reader, or Sister Rebecca. I am real hungry and want each of the sisters to send me something for my mental table." Ellen D. wrote: "Sisters!...I have watched the woman’s department with much pride and interest until, alas! it has completely failed to make its appearance at all. Our talented writers have deserted us...." Some students of the agrarian movement have suggested that as the Alliance became politicized, its social function declined in importance. Evidence suggests just the opposite. In the years following 1890, local Alliance leaders placed increased emphasis on recreational activities, making their meetings more socially attractive, first to counteract the decline of the cooperatives and later, in an attempt to revive the order after the divisive campaign of 1892. Perhaps women had become a vital nexus of the order, a segment of its spiritual backbone. According to Mrs. P.H. Hall from Guadalupe County, this was possible. "I have not seen many letters from the ladies," she wrote. "I think they have lost all interest in the Alliance. I am sorry to say ours is not doing much now; our regular meetings are poorly attended. When the ladies attend our meetings regularly there was a very good turnout, but they have nearly quit going and so have the men."

The *Mercury* as well as the Alliance was in crisis over the Exchange. A cryptic

195 *Southern Mercury*, March 7, 1889

196 *Southern Mercury*, October 23, 1890

197 McMath, 74

198 *Southern Mercury*, January 24, 1889
paragraph from the editors in an October issue said: "A great many of our readers are holding back the money they have saved to renew their subscription to the Mercury until everything was clear to them, or until the executive committee secured control of the paper. As the latter has been accomplished, all should renew at once."\textsuperscript{199} The reference is to the charge that Macune and other Exchange directors were incompetent, an accusation that had replaced the original explanation—merchant-banker opposition—for the failure of the Exchange. Alliance members had been warned not to put their hard-earned money into the doomed venture. The Southern Mercury, which was under private management and not under the editorial control of the state Alliance, took up this idea and by the late summer of 1888, was holding a definite anti-Exchange stance, lambasting Macune and other Alliance leaders. The paper argued that the fortunes of the Exchange and the Alliance were not inextricably linked but this was wishful thinking.

An investigatory committee fully vindicated Macune and the Exchange of any wrong doing, and Macune in turn accused the Mercury of betraying the Alliance to avoid losing advertising patronage. The reaction of the rank-and-file Alliance members to the controversy was bitter, however, and the consequences devastating. Local alliances began reporting immediate declines in membership. Although control of the Mercury passed into the hands of the state Alliance, the new editors never reversed the editorial position of the ousted editors. They simply located the failure of

\textsuperscript{199} Southern Mercury, October 16, 1888
the Exchange in the refusal of Alliance members to adequately capitalize it.\footnote{Barnes, 94-95}

The absence of women's letters might have been caused by genuine reader disaffection or by Mercury editors' reluctance to entertain further dissonant, argumentative correspondence during this conflicted period. The paper did offer some advice in a "To Wives" column. "Remember," the column said, "you are married to a man not a god; be prepared for imperfections. Once in a while let your husband have the last word; it will gratify him and be no particular loss to you.... Be a companion to your husband if he is a wise man, and if he is not, try to make him become your standard. Raise your standard; do not let his lower yours. Don't always be teasing him for money. Respect your husband's relatives."\footnote{Southern Mercury, December, 6, 1889}

To this, Mary Ussery from Lavacca County, replied: "I picked up my paper which is always so welcome. The first thing my eye encountered was two columns and a half of 'Advice to Ladies.' That was quite enough for one evening, but then I found 'A Little Advice to Wives' and threw it down in disgust. I wish the person who was so very thoughtful...as to bother his ingenious brains with writing no less than eight or ten pages of foolscap of advice for the benefit of poor women is--well, no matter where. Now, Mr. Editor, what would you incorrigible men think, if in every book, paper and magazine you took up you would find at least half the contents were articles of advice addressed to the gentlemen? ...But I am more fortunate than some of my fair sisters, as the advice does not apply to me, for I am not a wife, nor am I
likely to be until next year, or, confidently speaking, when women have their rights." 202 Is this the voice of the timid rural woman of even a year ago?

The next month the *Mercury* reprinted a *New York World* article, "The Kind of Gal a Man Wants." "Men are sick and tired of shrewdness, logic, argument and brains," it said. "They want to be amused, distracted, diverted. Good sense is tedious after the market closes and the woman who talks profit and loss, supply and demand, premium and discount in evening dress, in the moonlight or at a dinner party is a nightmare."

The failure of the Exchange led Macune to develop the most significant proposal in Alliance history. It was the subtreasury plan, and it called for the establishment of local, federal subtreasuries along with warehouses and elevators in which farmers could store certain nonperishable commodities. The government would theoretically provide short-term credit at low interest, thus giving the farmer more independence in marketing his crop. Ideally the system would end the deflationary glut of commodities on the market at harvest time and create an expanded, flexible currency that would reverse the decline of farm prices. The proposal was a watershed for the Alliance. It brought the order directly into party politics which, as many had predicted and feared, generated friction and divided the Texas Alliance. 203 It precipitated the final protest strategy of the Alliance movement--the Populist Party. The Party siphoned off Alliance energy and caused its demise. Then the Party, itself, fused with the

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202 *Southern Mercury*, December 13, 1888

203 King, 44-45
Democrats in the 1896 presidential election, lost the support of the Texas Populists who refused to fuse, and eventually died out.

In 1891 the Alliance lobbied both major parties for subtreasury support but to no avail. They refused to endorse its reform demands. In early 1892, a general conference of reformers convened in St. Louis to form the People’s Party and organize for the presidential nominating convention scheduled to take place in Omaha, Nebraska later that summer. Approximately eight hundred delegates representing twenty-two organizations—Greenbackers, Bellamy’s Nationalists, Henry George’s Single-Taxers, the Knights of Labor, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Alliancemen and women gathered in St. Louis to debate diverse priorities of the movement. Bettie Gay and Dr. Ellen Dabbs, from Sulphur Springs, came as Alliance delegates. Also present was the National Women’s Alliance (NWA), an organization of farmers’ wives and women of trades unions and wage workers who hoped use the national Alliance movement to increase women’s political impact.

Before the Populist conventions in St. Louis and Omaha, women had been excited about the potential of a new party: a party which included them, which might give them suffrage, which recognized the importance of home and family and woman’s central role, which might support prohibition, and which would solve the economic problems of the farmers. Bettie Gay, in an essay in the *National Economist*, spoke

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204 Marilyn Dell Brady, “Populism and Feminism in a Newspaper by and for Women of the Kansas Farmers’ Alliance, 1891-1894,” *Kansas History* 7, 285; Wagner, 318

205 Brady, 284
about a party which "would give us food and raiment, and pay us for honest toil." 206

Suffrage and temperance resolutions had been adopted at previous conferences of Alliance and Labor. However, in an opening speech in St. Louis, Ben Terrell of Texas urged delegates to consider only questions of "economic" reforms. "Moral reforms" should be put off until a later date while other differences between northern and southern elements in the movement were bridged. Leaders hoped to avoid antagonizing the southern delegates who were less united behind the Populist Party, and women suffrage was a fatally divisive issue and should be sacrificed for the Populist cause. 207 Many Democrats whom the Populists were wooing were against it. The other major moral reform, prohibition, was also lost. Despite widespread support in Texas for prohibition, there were Republicans, blacks, Catholics, and Lutherans who opposed it. 208 To build a consensus and win elections Populists needed support from the wets and anti-suffrage thinkers. The official platform, drawn up later that summer, on the 4th of July, at the national nominating convention in Omaha, Nebraska, restated the Cleburne Demands including the subtreasury, unlimited coinage of gold and silver, prohibition of alien landownership, and government regulation of transportation. It did not include women suffrage or temperance. James B. Weaver of Iowa was nominated for president and General James G. Field of

206 Wagner, 294

207 Wagner, 259-260, 264-265, 285

208 King, 226
Virginia for vice-president.\textsuperscript{209}

The Populists did not fare well in the 1892 presidential election against the Republican Benjamin Harrison and Democrat Grover Cleveland. In only five Southern states did the total Populist vote amount to more than one half of the Alliance's potential voting strength at its peak\textsuperscript{210} In Texas, the order was split as many moderate Alliancemen remained loyal to the Democratic party and looked to the popular young governor, James S. Hogg, for leadership.\textsuperscript{211}

The third party fared better in Kansas and Colorado, however. Both states elected Populist governors and substantial numbers of state Populist officials and legislators. Colorado passed an Equal Suffrage Bill which was strongly supported by the newly elected Populist Governor David Waite. Then Waite failed to gain a second term in office and he became convinced, despite his original support of suffrage, that if women had not voted, he would have won reelection.\textsuperscript{212} The angry letters and editorials which ensued between the women, the \textit{Mercury}, and Waite about his defeat comprise many of the remaining but dwindling letters from women which appeared in the newspaper. They also give insight into the era's attitudes about suffrage and election practices. Voting was not viewed by \textit{Mercury} editors as a right but a privilege given depending upon how one voted. Central to the discussion, however,

\textsuperscript{209} Wagner, 265; Martin, 47-54; Norman Pollack, \textit{The Populist Mind} (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), li

\textsuperscript{210} McMath, 142

\textsuperscript{211} Barnes, 144

\textsuperscript{212} Wagner, 290
emerging from the Populist struggle, was a new woman—one who had a voice, a voice that bespoke outrage and determination, whose entelechy now was suffrage. She was not to be discounted.

In the January 1895 *Mercury*, Ex-governor Waite spoke disparagingly about the Republican tactics that had defeated him. "Every vote in the state--negro, Mexican, Italian--had been brought up like cattle for $5 apiece," he said. "We know this, for the Italians, hundreds of whom we had paid the expense of naturalization, frankly told us so, and offered to stay with us if we would raise the republican bid, which we declined to do....Then 20,000 servant girls in the state, whom the populist policy of equal rights of the sexes elevated to the dignity of full American citizenship, were led to the polls by populist enemies like sheep to the slaughter only to cast their votes against their best friends." 213

A *Mercury* editorial of November 1893 repeated the theme, declaring "Texas women who are crying like John the Baptist in the wilderness...for equal rights should define the measures they propose to champion when they secure equal rights....This vote would have the balance of power, and might be wielded for good or evil. In Colorado it was wielded for evil. The populists at least desire to know whether the women of Texas are going to vote for reform or not before that party helps lift the yoke of bondage from the necks of down-trodden female humanity." 214

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213 *Southern Mercury*, January 31, 1895; According to Wagner, there is no evidence that women voted in heavy numbers against him. 291

214 *Southern Mercury*, November 22, 1892
Again in December the *Mercury* weighed in, maintaining that while some readers had taken exception to the November article, “woman suffrage had became a reality in Colorado” mainly because “the populist party of Colorado... championed the suffrage question... Despite this the women not only voted against reform and in favor of the party or parties that had brought ruin upon the country but also against the party that had championed their cause.... This, the *Mercury* states, is incontrovertible evidence that women are not sufficiently educated in the duties of citizenship to exercise the functions conferred on them by the ballot... Hereafter the party will favor a gradual advancement of women to the position of voting citizens,” letting them “vote on minor officers such as school commissioners and other non political offices first [until] they gradually grow into a knowledge of the [voters’] responsibilities. If the populists of Texas should, at one stroke, confer the right of suffrage upon 250,000 or 300,000 women in Texas, there is little doubt that they would repeat the mistakes made by the sisters in Colorado....” 215

In the December 27, 1894, issue, both Bettie Gay and Alliancewoman Dr. Grace Danforth, from Granger, Texas, responded. Both had lost their equanimity. Said Gay: “I listen to men talk sometimes til I think they ought to be disfranchised til they learn...to vote for self-protection and the protection of oppressed humanity. Talk about woman suffrage! Many of the women are better posted on political economy than many of the men. We have a nation of cowards, because our women have been

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215 *Southern Mercury*, December 6, 1894
slaves.” 216 Grace Danforth said: “What an unjust think it is to expect women in one
election to right all the wrongs masculine rule has fostered upon society! The women
of Colorado had no angels to vote for....only men and they are largely whisky-loving
animals no matter what political party they belong to.”

The Mercury maintained its position. “The ‘whisky-loving animals’ did not expect
the women to convert earth into a paradise at one election, doctor. But they did
expect them to exercise the right of suffrage in the interests of morality and
temperance which it appears they did not do.” Again it asked for the women’s
political stand should they be given the vote. Bettie Gay’s answer was one of the last
letters to appear in the Mercury. “The women have been in the wilderness for one
hundred years,” she said. “It is time for them to come out. The wise women of Texas
will yet lead the men out of darkness for they have been a failure...in governmental
affairs. We propose to have a say in the laws that govern us, as intelligent beings,
and not as idiots and criminals. We propose to elect representatives, not debauchees.
No party will give women her rights till she demands them. The time is not distant
when she will demand, and not ask.... The light is dawning and humanity will soon
assert its rights,” she warned.217

These rights were not to be delivered by either the Alliance or the Populist Party.
In 1896, the Democrats coopted the free-silver issue and nominated Nebraska’s
William Jennings Bryan for President. The national party fused with the Democrats;

216 Southern Mercury, December 27, 1894

217 Southern Mercury, January 17, 1895
the Texas Populists preferred to stay in “the middle of the road” between the major parties. Neither strategy worked. Bryan lost the election to William McKinley although he received more popular votes than Grover Cleveland had garnered in 1892. It was essentially the end of the party. The Alliance had already waned.

Strong urban agitation for suffrage had begun in Texas in 1893 when the Texas Equal Rights Association (TERA), an auxiliary of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, was formed. It is not surprising that Bettie Gay was among the rural women who stumped on from the Alliance into TERA. Joining her were Alliance sisters Grace Danforth, Ellen Lawson Dabbs, and Margaret Watson. Nor is it surprising that the rhetoric of TERA tended to be more radical on the redefinition of sex roles than that put forth by suffrage organizations which rescuscitated the movement two decades later after it had died. TERA was probably “too far in advance of public opinion,” said Jane Y. McCallam, a leader of the later renewed, more gentle and successful Texas suffrage effort.

Lawrence Goodwyn has suggested that the most important contribution of the agrarian revolt was to create “the visible evidence of community that gave meaning

\[218\] King, 50


\[220\] Sims, 35-36

\[221\] Patricia Nieuwenhuizen, “Minnie Fisher Cunningham and Jane Y. McCallam, Leaders of Texas Women Suffrage and Beyond” (Senior Thesis, University of Texas, 1982), 5
and substance to all lesser individuals." Politically, women were among those lesser individuals. But the Populist movement challenged the status quo and with the help of the *Southern Mercury*, it gave to many women community and meaning and a stronger sense of self. This undoubtedly helped break the ground for later social legislation, including that of women suffrage. By the time of her death on June 7, 1921, when Bettie Gay was eighty-four years old, the Nineteenth Amendment had been adopted.\textsuperscript{223} Time was also required for the acceptance of other Populist goals, but within forty years of the party's demise most of the platform of 1892--the subtreasury, direct election of senators, income tax, effective control of railroads, and expansion of currency--had been enacted.\textsuperscript{224}

\textsuperscript{222} Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 311

\textsuperscript{223} Weidenfeld, 57

\textsuperscript{224} Scott, 159
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