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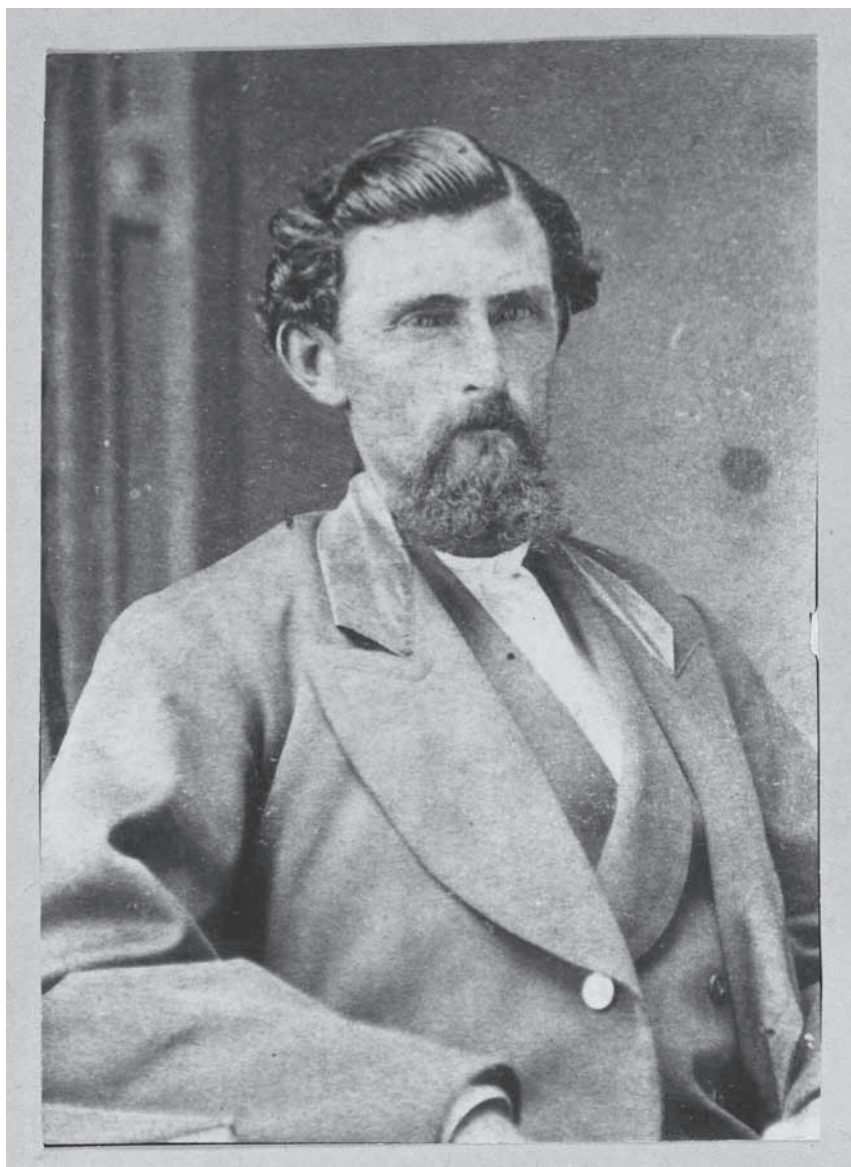
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Portrait of Sam Ealy Johnson Sr.: Civil War veteran, trail driver, Populist, and grandfather of Lyndon Baines Johnson. *Courtesy LBJ Library.*

## *Lyndon's Granddaddy: Samuel Ealy Johnson Sr., Texas Populism, and the Improbable Roots of American Liberalism*

BY GREGG CANTRELL\*

IN JANUARY 1965, PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON DELIVERED HIS FIRST inaugural address since winning a landslide victory over Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election. Johnson used the occasion to enunciate his vision for what he called “the Great Society,” an unprecedented use of government power intended to fight poverty, end discrimination against minorities and women, clean up the environment, provide health care to the elderly, and improve education. “In a land of great wealth,” Johnson declared, “families must not live in hopeless poverty. In a land rich in harvest, children just must not go hungry. In a land of healing miracles, neighbors must not suffer and die unattended. In a great land of learning and scholars, young people must be taught to read and write.”<sup>1</sup>

Most historians today view the mid-sixties and LBJ’s Great Society as the high point of American liberalism, an idealistic time when more Americans than ever before—or since—believed that widespread public problems could be addressed through public solutions. Of course, Johnson did not invent modern liberalism; LBJ himself credited Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal for having shaped his political consciousness: “If you look at my record,” he once said, “you would know that I am a Roosevelt New Dealer. As a matter of fact,” he added, “John F. Kennedy was a little too conservative to suit my taste.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 1965, in *My Fellow Citizens: The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States, 1789–2001* ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Fred L. Israel (New York: Facts on File, 2001), 333.

<sup>2</sup> LBJ quoted in Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York:

But crediting the New Deal with creating LBJ's—or America's—version of liberalism still begs the question of the true roots of that liberalism. LBJ, after all, was born in 1908 and thus was a grown man and a college graduate with two years spent teaching school and a year as a congressional staffer when FDR took office and launched the New Deal. And the congressional majority that enacted the New Deal's legislation and the millions of voters who elected those representatives surely must have had *some* political experiences that allowed them to embrace the new role of government in American society that Roosevelt envisioned. What *were* those experiences?

Political historians have sometimes located the roots—or at least some of the roots—of American liberalism in the progressive movement of the early twentieth century. Indeed, Lyndon's father, Sam Ealy Johnson Jr., was elected to the Texas legislature six times between 1904 and 1922. His career coincided with the first term of progressive governor Thomas Campbell and also included service alongside the future New Dealer and powerful U.S. House speaker, Sam Rayburn. As a legislator, Johnson championed some modestly progressive measures, including a relief bill for drought-stricken ranchers and a law regulating the sale of railroad securities. As a youngster, Lyndon sometimes accompanied his father to the legislative sessions in Austin.<sup>3</sup> But in a very real way, both Lyndon and Sam stood in the shadows of Lyndon's grandfather and Sam's namesake, Sam Ealy Johnson Sr., a man about whom surprisingly little has been written. The following essay will explore the life and career of "Big Sam" Johnson, as friends and family called him to distinguish between him and his son Sam Jr. It may be a stretch to trace a direct line between the political thought and career of Big Sam in 1890s and the architect of the Great Society in the 1960s, but I believe that it is an exercise worth doing and one that may shed some important light on the roots of modern American liberalism.

Sam Johnson's story begins with his birth in Alabama in 1838, the youngest of ten children. After a stint in Georgia, the family moved west to Texas, settling near Lockhart in Caldwell County, south of Austin, in 1846. Sam's father died when he was seventeen and his mother a year later, but he was lucky to have two older brothers, Jack and Tom, who were both resourceful and ambitious, and they had already brought young Sam into their ranching business in the hills west of Austin when Texas seceded

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Oxford University Press, 1998), 61. For a perceptive analysis of the sources of LBJ's progressive ideas, see Mitchell Lerner, "'Almost a Populist': Texas, the South, and the Rise of Lyndon Baines Johnson." *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 113 (October 2009), 236–265.

<sup>3</sup> The most comprehensive account of LBJ's parentage, childhood, and young adulthood can be found in Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

from the Union in 1861. Like many twenty-two-year-old southerners, Sam answered the call to arms, enlisting for the duration of the war as a private in Company B, 26th Texas Cavalry, a regiment commanded by a French-born journalist, teacher, and politician from San Antonio and Austin named Xavier Blanchard Debray.<sup>4</sup>

For the first year in the Confederate Army, military life for Sam did not live up to the expectations of adventure and excitement that he had probably anticipated. For several months the regiment was stationed in Galveston for coastal defense, but in early 1862 orders came to join Gen. Earl Van Dorn's forces in Mississippi. Here would be the chance for real action. But before the troops could begin the march for Mississippi, word came of the fall of New Orleans, followed by news that General Henry Hopkins Sibley needed reinforcement in New Mexico. So Sam's regiment began the long ride westward, only to be halted when word came of Sibley's retreat. The men of the 26th Cavalry settled into a camp on the San Bernard River southwest of Houston and awaited their chance for action. That chance came for Sam on the night of Jan. 1, 1863, when Confederate Gen. John Bankhead Magruder decided to retake Galveston, which had fallen to Union forces three months earlier. Only a small contingent of Yankee soldiers actually occupied the city, but a force of six U.S. warships armed with heavy cannon in Galveston harbor kept the city in Union hands. Magruder's daring plan was to have a force of Confederates, under cover of darkness, cross the railroad bridge to the island on foot and attack the Union troops quartered on the wharf. This would draw the attention of the Union fleet to the action on shore, whereupon two Confederate river steamboats, armed with cannon and sporting bales of cotton for armor, would attack the distracted Union fleet. Sam's company was part of the thousand-man ground force that made the nighttime crossing over the railroad bridge and attacked the Yankees in town. The improbable strategy succeeded, and the Confederates recaptured Galveston in a matter of hours, losing only 26 men killed and 117 wounded, while the Union lost about 150 men and 2 warships. Galveston would remain in Confederate hands for the remainder of the war.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Anne J. Bailey and Bruce Allardice, "Debray, Xavier Blanchard," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fdeo2.html>> [Accessed July 6, 2013]; Xavier Blanchard Debray, *A Sketch of the History of Debray's (26th) Regiment of Texas Cavalry* (Austin: Eugene Von Boeckmann, 1884). The best overall account of Sam Johnson's Civil War career is in Edwin C. Bearss, *Historic Resource Study: Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Site, Blanco and Gillespie Counties, Texas* (Denver: National Park Service, 1971), 8–27.

<sup>5</sup>Art Leatherwood, "Red River Campaign," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qdro1.html>> [Accessed July 6, 2013]; Debray, *Sketch*, 7–9; Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15. For an overview of the Battle of Galveston and the defense of the Texas coast, see Donald S. Frazier, *Cottonclads!: The Battle of Galveston and the Defense of the Texas Coast* (Abilene, Tex.: McWhiney Foundation Press, 1998).

Although he would be one of the few Confederate soldiers who could ever actually claim to have seen action on Texas soil in the Civil War, the small engagement at Galveston was hardly the stuff of military glory. A more substantive opportunity came in the spring of 1864, when Union forces under Gen. Nathaniel Banks attempted an invasion of Texas by way of the Red River in Louisiana. Sam's regiment crossed the Sabine on April 1, and the next day they saw their first action, when, following an attack by a superior federal force, Sam and his comrades were forced to retreat. A week later the first major engagement of the campaign occurred near the town of Mansfield, with Confederate troops dealing the Federal army one of its most humiliating defeats of the entire war. Sam's regiment were held in reserve when the battle began, but were called up at the height of the action, and as the commanding officer recalled in his memoir, "took part in a bloody engagement, protracted till dark, which resulted in driving the enemy in disorder. Our losses were heavy in killed and wounded." During the night both sides regrouped, and on the next day at nearby Pleasant Hill, the Confederates sought to finish the job, with Sam's regiment mounting a reckless frontal assault on Union troops, an assault which was repulsed with heavy losses. The commander of Confederate forces at Pleasant Hill, Gen. Richard Taylor, later said, "That gallant charge was premature, and cost valuable lives, but was of use in moral effect." In the charge, which saw Sam's regiment lose a third of its men, Sam had a horse shot from beneath him, and in the thick of the battle he pulled a wounded comrade to safety. After the battle he helped the regimental surgeon hold down wounded men while their limbs were amputated. Like so many young men of his generation, he had seen terrible things in war, which perhaps enabled him to take the rest of life's challenges in stride and with a measure of good humor. He had also seen firsthand the might of the Union government, which may have shaped his political thought years later.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to Central Texas after the war, Sam joined his brother Tom on a 320-acre spread in Blanco County. Eighteen-sixty-seven was an eventful year, as Sam married eighteen-year-old Eliza Bunton, a beautiful, raven-haired girl with a "patrician bearing" whose cousin had been governor of Kentucky and whose uncle who had signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, fought at San Jacinto, and served in the Republic of Texas Congress.<sup>7</sup> That same year Sam and Tom assembled their first herd for the drive north, and for each of the next four years they made the drive up the Chisholm Trail to Abilene, Kansas, accompanied by the resil-

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<sup>6</sup> Leatherwood, "Red River Campaign"; Debray, *Sketch*, 18 (quotation); Bearss, *Historic Resource Study*, 14-25; Johnson, *Family Album*, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Baines Johnson, *A Family Album* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), 73.



A young Sam Ealy Johnson Sr with his sister Frankie Barnett. *Courtesy LBJ Library.*

ient Eliza on some of the drives. After the particularly profitable drive of 1870s, the brothers arrived back in Texas with \$100,000 in gold in their saddlebags. Sam Johnson was now the second-largest property owner in Blanco County, surpassed only by his older brother.<sup>8</sup>

Their affluence, however, proved short-lived. Thinking that the boom would last, the brothers borrowed heavily to assemble their herds for the 1871 and 1872 drives, only to find that the market for Texas cattle in Kan-

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<sup>8</sup> Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 15–16; Caro, *Path to Power*, 20.

sas had collapsed. As quickly as they had gotten rich, Sam and Tom were ruined. It was Sam's first experience with the volatility and unpredictability of world commodity markets, and though he left no written record of his reaction to it, the experience must have made a deep and lasting impression on him.<sup>9</sup>

Sam, humbled but not beaten, turned to his wife's family for assistance and managed to buy an eight-hundred-acre farm near Buda in Hays County, and he settled down to the more prosaic life of a farmer. For sixteen years Sam and Eliza worked the Buda farm but never prospered, as the 1880s witnessed a prolonged and deepening agricultural depression, with prices for cotton and wheat declining year after year, a combination of overproduction on world markets and a deflationary U.S. government monetary policy based on the de facto gold standard that caused money to be in ever-shorter supply.<sup>10</sup>

If Sam's years on the Buda farm proved less than remunerative, life still went on. Between 1868 and 1887 Eliza bore Sam nine children. His daughter-in-law Rebekah, Lyndon's mother, later remembered him as a "highly gregarious" man who "attended all the neighborhood gatherings and met his friends with a handshake, friendly greetings and a hearty resounding laugh." People were naturally drawn to this "tall, lithe, well-built, rangy man, six feet in height, with black wavy hair and blue eyes." He was known by his neighbors for his hospitality and generosity.<sup>11</sup> But Sam also nourished a keen intellect, ever ready to engage friends or strangers in arguments about politics, philosophy, or theology. His daughter Jessie recalled that "he encouraged his children to engage in games that required them to think, such as dominos, hearts, pitch, and whist."<sup>12</sup> It might be a stretch to call Sam an "intellectual," but as former trail drivers and Confederate cavalymen go, the label does not miss the mark by much.

Given his inquiring mind, it comes as no surprise that Sam was a religious seeker. Raised a Baptist, in "early manhood" he joined the Disciples of Christ, or Christian Church.<sup>13</sup> The Disciples were a "restorationist" movement, desiring to restore the purity and simplicity of the first-century church. Especially concerned with restoring the unity of the early church, they opposed the use of confessions of faith more extensive than the statement that "Jesus is the Christ" as tests of fellowship and viewed books of church discipline other than the Bible as divisive. Disciples stressed a radical version of the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and

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<sup>9</sup> Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 16; Caro, *Path to Power*, 28–30.

<sup>10</sup> Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 16; Caro, *Path to Power*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Family Album*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Jessie Johnson Hatcher to Edwin C. Bearss, interview, in Bearss, *Historic Resource Study*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *Family Album*, 71.



generally disdained social hierarchies of all sorts. They believed that faith, as a response to the testimony of the Apostles recorded in the scriptures, was based in rationality. Thus they took the Bible as the only true guide to both faith and order, arguing that each person possessed the freedom, as well as the responsibility, to study the scriptures and determine God's will.<sup>14</sup>

But true to form, Sam was never entirely satisfied with the status quo, even when it came to religion. One of the signal events of his adult life took place in the fall of 1879, when a traveling minister of the Christadelphian faith visited Central Texas. The Christadelphians were an offshoot of the same restorationist movement that had given birth to the Disciples, but they parted ways with the Disciples on various doctrinal issues, including belief in the Trinity (which the Christadelphians rejected) and certain details concerning baptism and end-times prophecy. Sam's descendants later told the story that the Christadelphian preacher stopped at the Johnson farm for the night and after discussing the Bible during and after dinner, Sam arranged an all-day debate between the Christadelphian preacher and a local minister. When the Christadelphian bested the local preacher in a debate over the Book of Revelation, Sam declared the Christadelphian the winner and converted. Some contradictions in the historical record cast doubts on whether this was precisely the actual chain of events, but what *is* clear is that a Christadelphian minister, John Banta, did indeed baptize Sam in October 1879 following a meeting at Webberville, a village near Sam's farm, and Sam became a lifelong Christadelphian. Four of his six daughters eventually followed him in joining the Christadelphian church, but Sam never forced his religious views on his children, and the remaining children, including Lyndon's father, Sam Jr., chose other paths.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> James M. Seale, "Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Bloers, Anthony L. Dunnavant, and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 177–185; Samuel C. Pearson, "Disciples of Christ," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, ed. Samuel S. Hill (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1984), 256–260; Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 10–13.

<sup>15</sup> *The Christadelphian* (Birmingham, England), Jan. 1, 1880, 48; Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 20; Johnson, *Family Album*, 71; Terry Cowan, "Thomas, John (1805–1871)," in Foster et al., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 741–742; George Booker, "Texas Memoirs," unpublished manuscript in possession of the author. I am grateful to George Booker, a descendant of Sam Johnson, for sharing this memoir and other materials on Johnson's Christadelphian faith, and also to Peter Hemingway, Andrew Bramhill, Paul Wood, Scott Stewart, and Fred Higham for sharing their sources and knowledge on Christadelphian-related matters. In a 1971 interview with historian Edwin Bearss, LBJ's aunt, Jessie Hatcher, mistakenly placed the episode involving the preachers' debate and Sam's conversion *after* the Johnsons had moved back to the Hill Country in 1889, but the record clearly shows that Sam had converted to the Christadelphian faith in late 1879. Hatcher also stated that at the time of his conversion Sam was a Baptist, whereas Rebecca Baines Johnson stated he was a Disciple of Christ. Rebecca's version seems more credible than that of Jessie, who was demonstrably wrong on the timing of the conversion. Jessie claimed the local minister was a Baptist, but it is probable that he was a Disciple, because theological debates between Disciples and Christadelphians were common in the era, and if Sam were indeed a Disciple, it would have made sense for him to arrange such a debate.

During all the years in Caldwell and Hays Counties, Sam had never been able to get the Hill Country out of his system, and in 1889 he moved Eliza and eight of their nine children to a 950-acre ranch on the Pedernales River in Gillespie County, thirteen miles west of the site where he and Tom had built their ranch headquarters during the days of the cattle drives. (A nephew later founded the town of Johnson City on that site.) The Johnsons were not truly poor by Hill Country standards, but life was still a struggle on the thin, rocky soil—soil made thinner and rockier by erosion and the invasion of cedar and mesquite that had occurred when the introduction of cattle destroyed the region's protective blanket of lush native grasses. Moreover, the Johnsons' return to the Hill Country came hard on the heels of one of the greatest droughts in Texas history, that of 1885–87, when virtually no rain fell over a broad swath of West and west-central Texas for some fourteen months. The rains had returned by the time Sam and Eliza arrived at their new home on the Pedernales River in 1889, but the land, and more importantly its people, bore the scars for years. A sign found in 1887 on an abandoned farmhouse near Johnson City summarized life for many in the Hill Country: "250 miles to nearest post office; 100 miles to wood; 20 miles to water; 6 inches to hell. God bless our home! Gone to live with wife's folks."<sup>16</sup>

The natural inclination of Texans in the 1880s was to meet hard times with yet harder work and greater self-reliance. To fight the misery caused by the drought, churches and whole communities raised funds to relieve the suffering of the hardest-hit citizens. The *Dallas Morning News* and *Fort Worth Gazette* created a relief fund with some limited success.<sup>17</sup> Thousands of Texas farmers joined the Farmers' Alliance, a self-help organization that had first been organized in Lampasas County in the late 1870s but which had not grown much beyond a few counties in the Cross Timbers region until the mid-1880s. Now the Alliance was spreading the gospel of cooperation, urging its members to create cooperative stores, gins, mills, and cotton yards where farmers could pool their resources, cut out the middleman, and use their numbers to get better deals for supplies and prices for their crops. Indeed, just as Sam Johnson was making plans to move to his new Gillespie County farm in 1888, the Alliance, under the leadership of a brilliant and charismatic Texan named Charles Macune, proposed an ambitious statewide exchange in Dallas that would allow the entire membership of the state Alliance to combine their resources, collectively market the state's cotton crop, and provide affordable credit to impoverished farmers by pledging their collective cotton crop as col-

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<sup>16</sup> W. C. Holden, "West Texas Drouths," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 32 (October 1928): 103–123 (quotation on 107).

<sup>17</sup> Holden, "West Texas Drouths," 110–113.



Sam Ealy Johnson Sr. (center) and his family in front of their home in Gillespie County, 1890s. *Courtesy LBJ Library.*

lateral.<sup>18</sup> By July of that year, the Gillespie County Alliance, which had been founded in 1886, was making estimates of how much cotton each of the county's local lodges, or "suballiances," would sell through the state exchange and was approving a motion "to sustain our Business Agent [Macune] at Dallas" in the Alliance's efforts to mount a boycott to break up the monopoly on the material used to wrap cotton bales. Immediately upon arriving at his new home on the Pedernales, Sam enthusiastically joined the suballiance and was soon elected to represent his neighborhood at the monthly meetings of the county Alliance. His commanding physical presence, his wide-ranging intellect, and his outspokenness soon catapulted him into the county organization's leadership.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Major works on the Farmers' Alliance include Robert C. McMath, *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Donna A. Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Farmers Alliance and People's Party in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); and Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Minutes for July 12, 1888, Gillespie County Alliance Minutes, 1886–1896 (ledger book; Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin) 48, 50 (quotation).

In July 1889 the county Alliance elected Sam assistant lecturer, a minor post that he held for the next two years.<sup>20</sup> By then the state Alliance Exchange in Dallas had collapsed, following the refusal of large banks and merchant houses to accept members' pledged crops as security for their purchases. In the spring of 1890, even as his fellow Gillespie County Alliancemen continued to debate the best means of continuing the Alliance's program of cooperative self-help, Sam took the floor at the quarterly meeting in Fredericksburg to deliver a lecture on a radical new idea: the Subtreasury Plan. The product of Alliance president Charles Macune's fertile brain, the plan had been unveiled at the Alliance's national meeting in St. Louis in December 1889. The idea was for the federal government to establish warehouses, or "subtreasuries," across the nation where farmers could deposit nonperishable crops like cotton and receive low-interest government loans payable in paper money—currency not backed up by precious metal, effectively taking the nation off the de facto gold standard and easing the deflationary pressure that had caused interest rates to skyrocket in recent years. Farmers could then use the loans to finance the coming year's operations, and the stored crops could be released onto world markets in an orderly fashion, preventing the harvest-time collapse in commodity prices that had become an annual source of grief and consternation to struggling farmers. It was a creative solution to the problems of wildly fluctuating crop prices, astronomical interest rates, and a descending spiral of debt and dependence that had impoverished millions of American farmers of Sam's generation. But it also required an expansion of government unprecedented since the United States had marshaled federal power to win the Civil War.<sup>21</sup> For a man who had seen capricious market forces wipe out his cattle fortune and who had slaved for a decade to make a living farming only to see himself poorer with every passing year, the advantages of the Subtreasury Plan were plain to see. For a man who had seen the power of the federal government used to put down secession and end slavery, using public power to address such a widespread public problem must have seemed not only workable but reasonable, notwithstanding what southern and Texan politicians had always said about the virtues of low taxes and limited government. Sam buttressed his arguments by reading to his fellow Alliancemen long passages from the *National Economist*, the newly established national newspaper of the Alliance, edited by Charles Macune in Washington, D.C.<sup>22</sup>

Texas Alliancemen were still not prepared to take the momentous step of severing their ties to the Democratic Party and making the fateful move

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<sup>20</sup> Minutes for July 12, 1889, Gillespie County Alliance Minutes, 1886–1896, 62–64.

<sup>21</sup> For a succinct explanation of the Subtreasury Plan, see Postel, *Populist Vision*, 153–155.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes for Apr. 11, 1890, Gillespie County Alliance Minutes, 1886–1896, 71.

into third-party politics, but they were growing more and more political. And in his little corner of the Texas Hill Country, Sam Johnson was in the forefront of that movement. At the same meeting where he explained the intricacies and advantages of the Subtreasury Plan, Sam and his fellow Alliancemen adopted a resolution “Realizing the facts of oppression by cooperative influences”—by which they meant “corporate” influences—and pledged to “support no Lawyer or Banker for Legislator or State Senator.”<sup>23</sup> A year later, at the county Alliance’s July 1891 meeting, Sam helped draft resolutions endorsing the Texas Alliance leaders who were pushing the organization toward third-party action. The resolutions went on to “condemn all the subsidized press who are working in the interest of monopoly, and the money power, and against the labor organisations [*sic*] of the country.” Sam was elected county lecturer “by acclamation” and delegate to the next statewide Alliance meeting “by a rising vote.”<sup>24</sup>

When the state convention met in Dallas later that month, Sam was there.<sup>25</sup> But the Alliance meeting was only the prelude to the more important event planned for Dallas that week; not coincidentally, the day after the Alliance meeting ended, the founding convention of the Texas Populist Party was set to begin. Former Alliance state lecturer William Lamb gavelled the meeting to order and made an opening speech in which he sketched out the broad outlines of the policies he believed the party should pursue along with some tactical suggestions for organizing the party. He offered the opinion that “it would be a very great mistake to put in men [on the party’s district and state executive committees] who have recently affiliated with the republican party, not that they would not do good service, but we have to refute the charge that our movement is the work of the republican party to break up the democratic party.” Lamb understood that memories of Reconstruction ran deep in the minds of white Texans and that any third-party movement that put ex-Republicans in positions of leadership would conjure up images of the alleged “dark days” of “Negro-carpetbagger rule.” The People’s Party of Texas was scarcely an hour old, and already its leaders were engaging in the delicate racial balancing act needed to challenge the Democrats. Accordingly, Lamb concluded his speech by noting that “the colored people are asking admission [to the party], promising that they will put their speakers in the field and battle for the cause,” and he asked the white delegates to “give their claims consideration.”<sup>26</sup>

This ignited a heated debate about the role of African Americans in

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes for July 11, 1891, Gillespie County Alliance Minutes, 1886–1896. 80–83.

<sup>25</sup> *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Aug. 27, 1891.

<sup>26</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 18, 1891.

the new party. Black delegates warned the white Populists about ignoring the black vote and discriminating against blacks in the party's councils, whereupon Lamb replied that he "disclaimed drawing distinctions." The African Americans were not convinced, and later in the day, white Populist leader H. S. P. "Stump" Ashby, now in the chair, assured the black delegates that "the colored people should have representation" on the state executive committee. It was only a question of how it was to be done. "You are approaching a battlefield in which many errors have been made in the past," Ashby warned the white delegates. "The democrats have never given those people representation; they have said they would buy enough of their votes with liquor and money. The republicans have left the negro without a party. If he has a friend it is we, and he can be our friend. . . . I am in favor of giving the colored men full representation." This elicited applause from the convention, whereupon Ashby added, "We want to do good to every citizen of the country, and he is a citizen just as much as we are, and the party that acts on that fact will gain the colored vote of the south."<sup>27</sup>

At this point Sam Johnson rose and was recognized. The grandfather of the man who would sign the Voting Rights Act seventy-four years later now proposed a scheme whereby each congressional district chairman would "appoint one colored man to co-operate" with the white committee. A black delegate objected. "We do not propose to be appointed by chairmen," he emphasized, demanding that the convention itself must *elect* blacks to full membership on the executive committee. He warned that the Populists would lose "in spite of the devil and high water" if they failed to treat Negroes fairly. At this juncture another white delegate—a former Confederate captain and state senator from Fort Worth named Sam Evans—spoke up, proposing that blacks be elected by the convention to at-large seats on the state executive committee. The satisfied white and black delegates alike, and two African Americans were elected to the party's seventeen-man governing body. Sam Johnson was also chosen to represent his district on the executive committee.<sup>28</sup>

Sam's brief moment in the spotlight at the first Texas Populist convention in many ways exemplified the overall Populist approach toward the issue of race. Sam realized the injustices that blacks had suffered at the hands of Texas Democrats, and he wanted the Populists to chart a new course that would extend the hand of political cooperation to African Americans. But there were also limits to how far he was willing to go, as demonstrated by his proposal to only have blacks appointed to "cooper-

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 18, 1891; *Fort Worth Gazette*, Aug. 18, 20, 1891. On Evans, see Aragorn Storm Miller, "Evans, Samuel," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fev32.html>> [Accessed May 16, 2014]; *Dallas Morning News*, July 7, 1888; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Jan. 2, 1905; *San Antonio Express*, Jan. 3, 1905.

ate” with white leaders rather than putting them in places of authority. But when Sam’s halfway measure met with opposition from the black delegates, he thought better of it and acquiesced in serving on the state committee with two black members. Compared to the Democrats, who would have never dreamed of placing blacks in leadership positions, the Populists’ act was truly progressive. If it stopped far short of a ringing endorsement of black equality—which it certainly did—it was nonetheless as close as any political party in the South would come until the Civil Rights Movement of Sam’s grandson’s day.

Sam returned home to the Hill Country and took up the work of promoting the Alliance and the People’s Party, which in that part of the state had become one and the same. When the Gillespie County Alliance gathered for its April 1892 meeting, Sam again led the members in adopting resolutions commending the actions of the newly elected Kansas Populist congressman Jeremiah “Sockless Jerry” Simpson and senator William A. Peffer. They also formally endorsed the abandonment of the de facto gold standard and the enactment of the Subtreasury Plan, and condemned the government’s violent suppression of strikes using the Pinkerton strike-breaking agency.<sup>29</sup> Two months later Friederich Striegler, the president of the Gillespie County Alliance, reported that “We have organized several People’s party clubs which are daily increasing in numbers. Bro. Johnson is doing good work in that direction.”<sup>30</sup>

In June Sam attended the Populist congressional nominating convention for the Twelfth District, where he served on the committee on permanent organization. The *Galveston Daily News* commented disapprovingly of Sam’s committee’s actions, reporting that “Blanco’s delegation furnished one negro and one Mexican delegate. The negro and Mexican looked lonesome, yet they occupied conspicuous places in the convention, and seemed to be well cared for. This party has by its action in this matter removed the barrier from between the two races, and taken the step towards placing the races on an equality, or equal footing.” The *Daily News*, however, believed that “since the negroes and Mexicans are being admitted as delegates,” the Populists were apt to lose white voters, since “many Third partyites say they cannot stomach so large a dose.”<sup>31</sup>

When the county Alliance met for its July 1892 quarterly meeting, Sam was not reelected lecturer, but it was not because his fellow Alliancemen had lost faith in him; rather, it was because they had more important tasks in mind for him.<sup>32</sup> In addition to his work organizing Populist clubs, Sam was being urged to run for the state legislature. On August 27, the nomi-

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<sup>29</sup> Minutes for Apr. 11, 1892, Gillespie County Alliance Minutes, 1886–1896, 90–92.

<sup>30</sup> *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), June 16, 1892.

<sup>31</sup> *Galveston Daily News*, June 24, 1892.

<sup>32</sup> Minutes for July 22, 1892, Gillespie County Alliance Minutes, 1886–1896, 94–96.

nating convention for the 98th House District met in Blanco to choose candidates for the upcoming election. The district was an unusual one in which four counties—Blanco, Comal, Hays, and Gillespie—elected two at-large candidates to represent them in Austin. It was understood that each of the major parties would nominate two men, and the top two vote-getters overall would be elected. Nominated alongside Sam Johnson was Desha Bunton of Hays County. The forty-six-year-old Bunton, also a prominent Allianceman, was the first cousin of Sam's wife Eliza.<sup>33</sup>

The race turned out to be even more of a family affair than this. Prior to the Populist nominating convention, the district's Democrats had met in Kyle to choose their candidates, and as one of their two nominees they chose Clarence W. Martin, who was the husband of Sam's daughter Frank and lived just down the road in Blanco County. So in the four-candidate race for representative, Sam would be running *with* his Populist first-cousin-by-marriage, and *against* his own Democratic son-in-law!<sup>34</sup> This vaguely incestuous nomination process set the scene for an even crazier general election.

Only scattered newspapers survive from the isolated Hill Country district, but these, along with interviews conducted decades later, allow us to reconstruct the general contours of the campaign. The race took place against the backdrop of one of the most famous gubernatorial elections in Texas history. In the face of the Populist insurgency, the state's Democratic Party had itself split in two, with the modestly progressive incumbent, James Stephen Hogg, being challenged by the conservative railroad attorney George Clark. The African American-dominated state Republican Party, in an act of perverse gamesmanship, had declined to field a candidate and instead endorsed the conservative Clark. The split in the Democrats, along with the sudden emergence of the Populists, energized down-ballot races like the one for the 98th District House seat and forced the candidates to campaign more vigorously than usual. The Populists must have been encouraged when the Democrats nominated Clarence Martin and his Democratic running mate George McGehee, because both men were staunch Clark Democrats, standing firmly on the gold standard and backing the vastly unpopular Democratic president, Grover Cleveland. Sam Johnson and Desha Bunton surely hoped that the Democrats' nominations would push wavering Hogg Democrats over into the Populist column.<sup>35</sup>

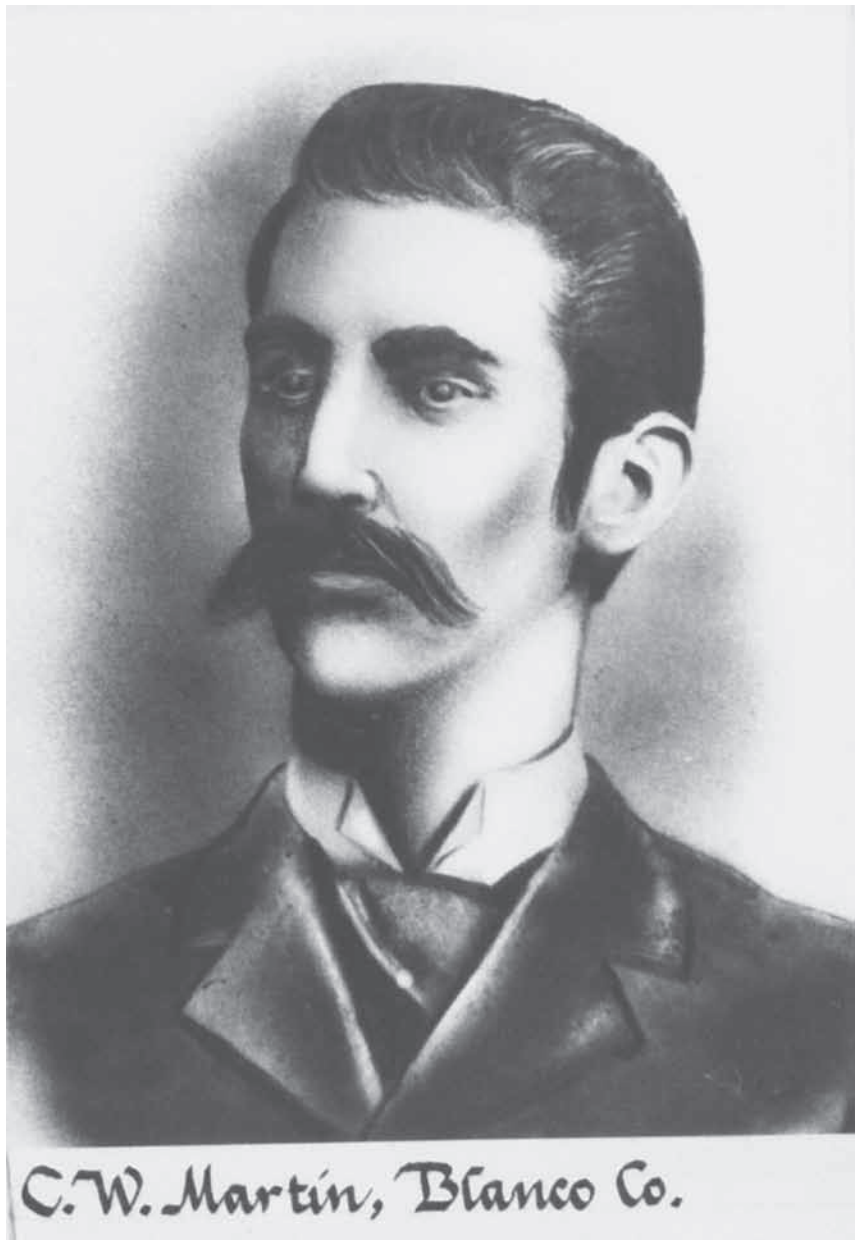
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<sup>33</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, Sep. 2, 1892; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Sep. 15, 1892. Desha Bunton was the son of John Wheeler Bunton, which makes him a nephew of Robert Holmes Bunton (Lyndon Johnson's great-grandfather) and first cousin of Eliza Bunton Johnson; see "John Wheeler Bunton Family Tree," Star of the Republic Museum, <[http://www.starmuseum.org/signers\\_descendants/Bunton/rr\\_toc.htm](http://www.starmuseum.org/signers_descendants/Bunton/rr_toc.htm)> [Accessed May 17, 2014].

<sup>34</sup> *Galveston Daily News*, July 6, 1892.

<sup>35</sup> Alwyn Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform: Texas Politics, 1876–1906* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 125–137; *Galveston Daily News*, July 30, 1892.





Clarence Martin. *Courtesy the State Preservation Board, Austin, Texas.*

Interviewed seventy years later, when he was president, Lyndon Johnson told journalist Ronnie Dugger the stories he heard about the race when he was growing up: "Sam and Clarence would ride together to a speaking, Sam would cuss his daughter's husband as 'a reactionary so-and-so' and Clarence would cuss Sam as a wild radical, but then they would happily 'get back on the double buggy on the front seat and ride to the next speaking.'" <sup>36</sup> We have no independent verification of this story—it was not unheard of for Lyndon to embellish a tale for good effect—but neither Sam nor Clarence seem to have taken their political differences personally. Whatever the personal dispositions of the two candidates, the political emotions among the candidates and their would-be constituents nevertheless ran high. The only firsthand account of a joint campaign appearance comes from a local newspaper, describing a debate that took place near the end of the race: "We had lots of speaking here last Thursday night," the *Blanco County News* reported. "Clarence Martin, democratic nominee for representative and Mr. Sam Johnson, people's party nominee for representative held a discussion . . . Clarence Martin held his own . . . very well. He gave them some arguments which could not be refuted. Mr. Johnson stated in his speech that if the people's party did not win at the polls there would be war. This no doubt sounds nice from a speaker but how does it look on paper?" The paper went on to report that Johnson stated "that Cleveland ought to be hung." <sup>37</sup>

It is impossible to know whether Johnson really engaged in such hyperbolic language or whether his remarks were taken out of context; the highly partisan press of the era, on all sides, rarely missed opportunities to distort a candidate's words or to cast him in the worst possible light. But we do know that the bitterness of the campaign was real. Clarence Martin was reported in the Democratic press to be "a hot debater" who "bears down heavy in telling the truth." The *San Antonio Express* noted that "His father-in-law is one of his opponents, and it has been said that he [Martin] generally burns him [Johnson] hard." <sup>38</sup> Matters finally came to a head two weeks before the election, at a campaign event in a dance hall at the settlement of Twin Sisters on the Little Blanco River in Blanco County. Martin delivered a stump speech to a crowd said to be composed almost entirely of Populists. Hooted down by hecklers in the crowd, he was unable to finish his speech, upon which he seized the lead heckler and began choking him. This affray was quickly broken up, and as Martin engaged in more

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<sup>36</sup> LBJ, quoted in Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 54. Dugger conducted extensive interviews with LBJ.

<sup>37</sup> *Hays County Times and Farmers' Journal*, quoting the *Blanco News*, Nov. 4, 1892 (microfiche: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin).

<sup>38</sup> *San Antonio Express*, Oct. 28, 1892.

"hot words" with another bystander, a sixteen-year-old boy named Moses Tobin "Tobe" Milam came up behind him and "plunged his knife into Martin," after which "the latter was carried out in an insensible condition." Blanco County sheriff A. W. Cox, a Populist, arrested Milam but then "turned him over to his brother Jim Milam for safe keeping." Clarence Martin was taken in to the town of Blanco and placed under the care of doctors there. It was reported that he was "dangerously wounded," the knife having entered the abdomen and created a wound about three inches long.<sup>39</sup> The *San Antonio Express* added that "The hooters, as well as the cutter, were pretty well 'corned.'"<sup>40</sup>

The *Express* subsequently speculated that the stabbing would "probably" be "fatal" and sought to make a political point of it by stating that the incident constituted the "first fruits" of an intemperate statement recently made by ex-governor Richard Coke, who had said that Clark supporters (of whom Martin was one) "ought not be permitted to live." In response, a local Hogg paper called the *Express* "the chief of champion liars and slanderers" and branded its statement "an infamous libel" which was "conceived in infamy, born in pollution and nurtured in prejudice."<sup>41</sup> Sheriff Cox subsequently came under heavy criticism for not arresting young Tobe Milam, and the rationale for the boy being remanded to the care of his older brother was never explained.<sup>42</sup> There is no evidence in the Blanco County or district court records that he was ever charged or brought to trial. Shortly after the stabbing, Milam's family, poor tenant farmers, moved to Hunt County, never to return to the Hill Country.<sup>43</sup>

Fortunately for all concerned, it turned out that Tobe's knife missed any vital organs, and the initial predictions of Clarence Martin's demise proved greatly exaggerated. Sam at first indicated that he would continue campaigning but apparently thought better of it and returned home. The stabbing took place on October 22; on the 31st, Martin's doctors told him that "by exercising due caution" he could leave his bed by November 3, five days before Election Day. The wounded candidate "seemed overjoyed" at this news and immediately scheduled two speeches, one at San Marcos and another at New Braunfels. "I know that I am running a great risk to be out so early," he admitted, "but I have entered this race to fight it out on the Democratic line. I've been lied about in Hays county and must

<sup>39</sup> *Austin Weekly Statesman*, Oct. 27, 1892 (quotations); *San Antonio Express*, Oct. 26, 27, 1892.

<sup>40</sup> *San Antonio Express*, Oct. 27, 1892. "Corned" implies the men were drunk on corn liquor.

<sup>41</sup> *Galveston Daily News*, Nov. 2, 1892, quoting the *San Antonio Express* and the *Kyle Star-Vindicator*.

<sup>42</sup> *San Antonio Express*, Oct. 28, 1892.

<sup>43</sup> According to family tradition, Tobe Milam met his end in about 1905 when, riding a horse across a plank bridge, a loose board flew up and hit him in the head, killing him instantly. I am grateful to Milam family members Rick White, Matt White, and Devin Pipes for sharing genealogical materials and family lore with me.

go there. I only regret that I could not canvass the county. Then, I feel that I am duty bound to address the good people of New Braunfels one time at least before the election, in the old court house where I was nominated. They will have to cut deeper or burn up all the sticking plaster [adhesive bandages] if they down me in this Democratic fight.” Martin then referenced Sam Johnson: “My father-in-law has gone home,” he noted. “He is a slim man and one good lick might finish him.”<sup>44</sup> It is hard to say whether this last dig was made in good humor, or if it carried more of a serious edge. But clearly the twenty-three-year-old Martin was eager to resume the canvass. In fact, his health did not allow him to keep the San Marcos and New Braunfels engagements, and there is no evidence that either candidate returned to the campaign trail before Election Day.<sup>45</sup> On November 8, voters of the 98th House District went to the polls and gave Clarence Martin and his fellow Democrat George McGehee a nearly two-to-one victory over Sam Johnson and Desha Bunton.<sup>46</sup>

The Populists won no statewide races that year, but their gubernatorial candidate, Thomas L. Nugent, made a strong showing in the three-man race, polling over 100,000 votes, or about 25 percent of the total cast. Sam Johnson never ran for elective office again, and for reasons unclear he did not remain long on the Populist state executive committee. But he remained a committed Populist and Allianceman, even serving another stint as Gillespie County Alliance lecturer as late as 1895, when the Alliance as an organization was on its last legs.<sup>47</sup>

Sam also remained something of a countrified Renaissance man. His children recalled that the multiple newspapers that he subscribed to were so important to him that he forded the Pedernales on horseback every other day to go to the post office in Stonewall to pick up his papers.<sup>48</sup> In 1893 the subject of one of his lectures at the quarterly meeting of the county Alliance was “The Importance of Mental Culture,” an early form of psychology.<sup>49</sup> An 1883 treatise on the subject defined the “object of

<sup>44</sup> *San Antonio Express*, Nov. 2, 1892.

<sup>45</sup> *San Antonio Express*, Nov. 5, 8, 1892.

<sup>46</sup> The final vote for the four-county district was: Johnson, 1558; Bunton, 2373; Martin, 2952; McGehee, 3317. The county-by-county breakdown is: Gillespie County: Johnson, 387; Bunton, 347; Martin, 846; McGehee, 864; Hays County: Johnson, 773; Bunton, 1158; Martin, 729; McGehee, 1070; Blanco County: Johnson, 365; Bunton, 833; Martin, 483; McGehee, 504; Comal County: Johnson, 33; Bunton, 35; Martin, 894; McGehee, 879. The sources for returns are as follows: Gillespie County: *San Antonio Express*, Nov. 13, 1892; Hays County: *Hays County Times and Farmers' Journal*, Nov. 11, 1892; Blanco County: *Galveston Daily News*, Nov. 13, 1892; Comal County: Election Returns, Vol. 1, p. 51 (Comal County Elections Coordinator's Office, New Braunfels, Texas).

<sup>47</sup> Minutes for Jan. 14, 1893, 101; July 15, 1893, 106; Jan. 13, 1894, 111; Oct. 15, 1894, 117; Apr. 13, 1895, Gillespie County Alliance Minutes, 1886–1896, 119.

<sup>48</sup> Bearss, *Historic Research Study*, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Minutes for July 15, 1893, Gillespie County Alliance Minutes, 1886–1896, 106.

mental culture” as being “the fullest development and highest activity of the faculties of the mind.” The book went on to compare the mind to “a field, and mental culture like the culture of the soil. Left to itself, a farm may be overrun with weeds and briars, while if subjected to the careful culture of the husbandman, it will teem with golden harvest. So the mind, if left to itself, may waste its energies and acquire incorrect habits of activity; while if subjected to the guiding hand of culture, it may develop in normal strength and vigor, and bring forth rich harvests of precious knowledge.” Equating the brain to a muscle, the book warned against the onset of “mental flabbiness,” recommending instead “a constant and judicious exercise” of one’s mental “faculties.”<sup>50</sup> Sam Johnson would never be caught with a case of mental flabbiness.

Sam’s retirement from statewide Populist leadership and from elective politics may have also been influenced by his church. The Christadelphian creed explicitly states that members shall neither serve in the military nor “take part in politics,” although the decentralized nature of the denomination would have left it to an individual congregation to enforce that discipline.<sup>51</sup> A December 1889 Christadelphian publication featured a report from a congregation on the Pedernales River in nearby Blanco County—which may well have been Sam’s home congregation—in which the correspondent complained that they had recently lost members “by their joining the Farmers’ Alliance and giving up the truth.”<sup>52</sup> If Sam’s Alliance activities cast suspicion on him with his fellow Christadelphians, his active political career would have been an even more blatant violation of church doctrine. Tradition among Sam’s Christadelphian descendants suggests that on at least one occasion Sam “was disfellowshipped for his political activities, and then—a bit later—reinstated into fellowship,” though there is no documentary evidence of this.<sup>53</sup> True or not, Sam remained both keenly interested in politics *and* devoted to his Christadelphian faith till his dying day.<sup>54</sup> Whether he simply defied his church’s teaching on the politics issue or partially accommodated it by withdrawing only from the most public aspects of his political career, either option would have been consistent with his independent-minded personality.

Clarence Martin served one term and part of another in the legislature before resigning to go into private law practice with his father in Ker-

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<sup>50</sup> Edward Brooks, *Mental Science and Methods of Mental Culture* (Lancaster, Pa.: Normal Publishing, 1883), 1, 36–38. On Populists and mental science, see Postel, *Populist Vision*, 243, 260–261.

<sup>51</sup> “Documents to be Rejected,” Christadelphia Worldwide, <<http://www.christadelphia.org/reject.htm>> [Accessed Jan. 4, 2014].

<sup>52</sup> *Christadelphian Advocate* 8 (March 1892): 69.

<sup>53</sup> Booker, “Texas Memoirs.”

<sup>54</sup> For evidence of Johnson’s active membership in the Christadelphian church, see *The Christadelphian* 38 (1901): 460; 41 (1904): 527; 42 (1905): 191.

rville.<sup>55</sup> Around the turn of the century Clarence and his wife Frank moved to Gillespie County; they eventually bought land and an old German farmhouse five hundred yards up the Pedernales River from Sam Johnson's, and Sam and Eliza, now in their sixties, moved in with their daughter and son-in-law and lived there till they died. Decades later, after Clarence's death, Senator Lyndon Johnson would purchase the property from his Aunt Frank and when he became president the much-expanded house where the two one-time political opponents had lived would become the Texas White House.<sup>56</sup>

In 1902 Clarence was elected to the first of four terms as state district judge in Fredericksburg. Two years later the holder of Clarence's old seat in the Texas legislature, Democrat Joseph W. Baines, chose not to seek reelection, and Sam, with help from his son-in-law Clarence, urged his eldest son, Sam Jr., to run for the seat that he himself had been denied twelve years earlier. On what must have been a very proud day for his father, Sam Jr. won. He would later marry Rebecca Baines, the daughter of the man who had preceded him in the office. By now Populism was but a distant memory, the party having collapsed in the aftermath of the 1896 election. Many old Populists gradually, grudgingly made their peace with the Democrats—their old enemies—rejoining the party and trying to move it in populist directions. Of course the old political coalition with black Texans—imperfect though it may have been—would have to be forgotten, and sweeping public programs like Sam's beloved Subtreasury Plan would be unthinkable until the Great Depression came along. But Sam Jr. managed to pursue progressive legislation whenever he could, including a relief bill for drought-stricken ranchers and a law regulating the sale of railroad securities. He sponsored the bill whereby the State of Texas purchased the Alamo, ironically working closely with his cousin, Judge Clarence Martin, who came to Austin to lobby for the bill and helped to raise funds for the purchase.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Sister Francis Xavier Brannen, "Martin, Clarence White," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fma58>> [accessed May 19, 2014]; "Martin, Clarence," Vertical Files (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin).

<sup>56</sup> Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate*, 421–423. Caro erroneously states that Clarence Martin had purchased the ranch in 1906; the actual purchase date was June 22, 1909; for a definitive history of the property, see Edwin C. Bearss, *Historic Structure Report: Texas White House, Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park, Texas* (Santa Fe: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1986), 1–7. The 1900 census reveals that by 1900 Clarence and Frank Martin, who had lived in Blanco County at the time of the 1892 race, had moved to Gillespie County, and Sam and Eliza were already living in the Martin household. The original owner of the future Texas White House property, William Meier, is listed in the census two households prior to the Martin/Johnson household. This suggests that Martin may have bought Sam's original farm first and moved in with his in-laws, and later, when he bought the Meier property, they all moved up the river to the Meier place. In any event, Sam and Eliza were clearly living with the Martins by 1900, and certainly by 1909 the Martins and Johnsons were occupying the old Meier property. See United States Twelfth Census, 1900, Precinct 1, Gillespie County, Texas, series T623, roll 1638, p. 28, s.v. "William Meier," "Clarence Martin," "Samuel E. Johnson."

<sup>57</sup> Brannen, "Martin, Clarence White." In another ironic twist, in 1941—fifty years after the Martin-

Another proud day in the extended Johnson family came in 1908, when, after giving birth to four daughters, Rebekah Baines Johnson presented her husband with a son. Many years later, Lyndon Johnson claimed that upon hearing the news of his birth, his grandfather leapt upon a horse and galloped through the neighborhood shouting, "A future United States Senator was born today—my grandson."<sup>58</sup> The story is probably apocryphal, but we do know that Big Sam wrote friends to tell them his new grandson was "smart as you find them," confidently predicting, "I expect him to be United States Senator before he is forty."<sup>59</sup> When three months passed without the proud parents being able to decide upon a name for the infant, Sam Jr. proposed naming the child "Clarence" after his uncle the judge. Rebekah vetoed that choice, and they settled on "Lyndon" instead.<sup>60</sup>

For the first five years of his life, young Lyndon and his parents lived just half a mile down the road from the house shared by his Aunt Frank and Uncle Clarence and his grandparents Eliza and Big Sam. Some of Lyndon's fondest memories involved walking along the banks of the Pedernales to that house, where his grandfather would give him a stick of peppermint candy or an apple, tell him stories about the Civil War or the cattle drives, and then climb up on his big gray horse and return the boy to his worried mother. But some of those earliest memories of his grandfather also involved politics. Lyndon remembered "hearing my grandfather talk about the plight of the tenant farmer, the necessity for the worker to have protection for bargaining, the need for improvement of our transportation to get the farmer out of the mud." He would have continued to hear those stories after the family moved into Johnson City in 1913, since the family owned a car and the old farm out on the Pedernales was still in many ways the geographic anchor of the close-knit family's world. Lyndon recalled how on visits to his grandparents he would sit "beside the rocker on the floor of the porch, thinking all the while how lucky I was to have as a granddaddy this big man with the white beard who had lived the most exciting life imaginable."<sup>61</sup>

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Johnson race—Clarence's son Tom Martin, who of course was Sam's grandson, announced his intention to run for Congress against Sam's other grandson, Lyndon Johnson, but Tom Martin apparently changed his mind and Lyndon was reelected without opposition in 1942; see *Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 27, 1941.

<sup>58</sup> LBJ often used this story in press releases; see Haynes Johnson, "The LBJ Story—Huckleberry Finn With Stretchers," *Lakeland (Florida) Ledger*, Jan. 23, 1973. For other examples, see Booth Mooney, "Johnson's Star Set for Senate at Birth," *Mansfield (Ohio) News-Journal*, Dec. 16, 1963; "Energy, News Making Mark President and Family," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Aug. 22, 1964.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, *Family Album*, 18–119; Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 32. For a perceptive analysis of these stories, see Larry King, "Bringing Up Lyndon," *Texas Monthly*, January 1976, <<http://www.texasmonthly.com/story/bringing-lyndon/page/0/4>> [Accessed May 19, 2014].

<sup>60</sup> Caro, *Path to Power*, 66; Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 31–32.

<sup>61</sup> LBJ, quoted in Dugger, *The Politician*, 55.



The extended Johnson Family, c. 1912. A very young Lyndon Johnson (around four years old) is standing in front of the automobile. Sam Ealy Johnson Sr., with a long white beard, is visible near the center. *Courtesy LBJ Library.*

Sam Ealy Johnson Sr. died from pneumonia in 1916 at age seventy-six, when he grandson was only eight. As he lay dying, he “spoke to his loved ones, assuring them of his complete readiness to meet his Maker and of his sustaining hope of eternal life.” His grave lies only steps from that of his son-in-law and former political opponent, Clarence Martin, in the Johnson family plot at the LBJ Ranch.<sup>62</sup>

As historians, what are we to make of Big Sam Johnson and his influence, if any, on his famous grandson? In a perceptive analysis of this question, LBJ biographer Paul Conkin argued that

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<sup>62</sup> Johnson, *Family Album*, 71.



one must not suggest easy or simple explanations for his personality or for policies. Some of his personality traits seemed present even when he was a very young child, suggesting the controlling role of genetic endowment. And many aspects of his personality, including the sense of insecurity, the desperate, lifelong battle for justifying achievement and self-worth, seemed rooted in the dynamics, possibly the pathology, of his immediate family. At the very least, one must look carefully to his youth, to all the hazards of growing up in a particular family and community, to begin to decipher, always by reflection from a very opaque mirror, the unyielding secrets of LBJ.<sup>63</sup>

Conkin's caveats are well taken. And they could be extended to encompass the pitfalls inherent in tracing direct lineages of political parties or ideologies to those of previous eras. Yet there are unmistakable echoes of 1890s Populism in what we came to call liberalism in the twentieth century. Populists had called for the Subtreasury Plan; the New Deal brought farm programs that accomplished many its goals. Populists demanded a flexible paper currency controlled and issued by the federal government; the Federal Reserve System gave us that. Populists called for the government to own and operate the major interstate railroad lines; the Interstate Highway System embodied much of the spirit of that idea. Populists wanted the government to regulate monopolies; we got the Federal Trade Commission and "trust-busting." Populist demands for a federal income tax became the law of the land with the passage of the Sixteenth Amendment. The direct election of senators, voter registration, and the secret ballot became law in the twentieth century, as did Populist labor demands, including the eight-hour workday and collective bargaining rights. At the state and local level, Texans and other Americans embraced Populist causes such as greater funding for public schools and free textbooks. And the Populists' efforts to reach out to African Americans—halting and imperfect as they were—foreshadowed the push for minority voting rights in the post-World War II era. With very few exceptions these policies came to be accepted by both of today's political parties. Only on our political fringe can you find those who wish to return to an era without a Federal Reserve, without interstate highways, without labor unions, without public schools, and without voting rights for African Americans.

But beyond specific programs, it was really the basic *idea* of twentieth-century liberalism that was first embraced by Populists like Sam Johnson in the 1890s: the belief that there are certain public problems that by their very nature simply cannot be solved by strictly private solutions. Modern Americans may disagree about which problems these are, about where that line should be drawn, but few of us doubt that the line exists. Governor Rick Perry—not a figure widely associated with liberalism—may

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<sup>63</sup> Paul K. Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 14–15.

believe that Obamacare is a bridge too far, but when a hurricane hits Galveston or drought-ravaged West Texas experiences devastating wildfires, he does not doubt the appropriateness of federal emergency aid.<sup>64</sup> He may list the federal Department of Education as an agency that should be abolished, but he has never proposed abolishing public education altogether.<sup>65</sup> Conservatives may decry “big government,” but the reality is that in fundamental ways modern Americans have nearly all embraced the basic tenets of liberalism. When Tea Partiers are spotted at rallies carrying signs saying, “Keep your government hands off my Medicare,” it seems clear that liberalism as a *concept* has carried the day.<sup>66</sup>

History is full of ironies, and one of the greatest is the fact that rural West Texans, people whose descendants number among the most conservative of Americans today, helped to pioneer many of the basic ideas of modern liberalism a century ago. That Sam Johnson—a man who had fought the Yankees, driven herds up the Chisholm Trail, and raised a large family on an isolated frontier farm—would number among those pioneers of liberalism seems most improbable. But the very fact that we so rarely stop to question where our modern ideas about government came from suggests how thoroughly the Populists’ ideas ultimately triumphed. Thomas Jefferson in his first inaugural address famously said, “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.”<sup>67</sup> With apologies to Jefferson, and with a nod to Sam Johnson, I will close with this thought: We are all Populists.

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<sup>64</sup> See for example Office of the Governor, “Gov. Perry: FEMA Denies Presidential Disaster Declaration for Wildfires,” May 3, 2011, <<http://governor.state.tx.us/news/press-release/16071/>> [Accessed May 21, 2014]; “Gov. Perry Urges HUD to End Delays on Texas Hurricane Recovery Funding,” Nov. 17, 2009, <<http://governor.state.tx.us/news/press-release/13942/>> [Accessed May 21, 2014].

<sup>65</sup> Kevin Hechtkopf, “Rick Perry fails to remember what agency he’d get rid of in GOP debate,” Nov. 10, 2011, *CBS News*, <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/rick-perry-fails-to-remember-what-agency-hed-get-rid-of-in-gop-debate/>> [Accessed May 21, 2014].

<sup>66</sup> As of May 2014, a simple Google-image search of the phrase “keep your government hands off my Medicare” reveals more than a dozen instances of such signs at Tea Party rallies.

<sup>67</sup> “Thomas Jefferson First Inaugural Address,” Mar. 4, 1801, *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*, <[http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/jefinau1.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp)> [Accessed May 21, 2014].