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A drawing of Texas Populist Henry Lewis Bentley. *Galveston Daily News*, July 15, 1896. Image from the Portal to Texas History, <texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph465294/m1/6/?q=%22Henry%20Lewis%20Bentley%22> [Accessed February 20, 2019].

The Last Populist: Populism, Modernity, and the Consequential Career of Henry Lewis Bentley (1847–1933)

BY GREGG CANTRELL*

IF WE ARE TO BELIEVE WHAT WE READ ON THE INTERNET, POPULISM IS ON the march globally. A quick sampling of recent headlines gives a taste of the phenomenon: “The Dangerous Rise of Populism,” reads the 2017 World Report from the group Human Rights Watch, which warns of “global attacks on human rights values” by populist regimes. From the Brookings Institution comes a story on “the Rise of European Populism and the Collapse of the Center-Left,” proclaiming it “the most important European political development of the 21st century.” *Washington Post* columnist Fareed Zakaria concurs, noting that Europe “is ablaze with populism.” An op-ed piece in the *New York Times* chronicles “The Return of Populism, Latin America Style” in Colombia and Mexico, while a *Washington Post* piece warns that “An emerging populism is sweeping the Middle East.” From Kurdistan to Thailand, from Great Britain to the Philippines, the “virus of populism,” as the *Economist* termed it, seems to be spreading. Even in normally staid Canada, the *Toronto Sun* takes note of the “rise of populism in Ontario.”¹

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¹ Kenneth Roth, “The Dangerous Rise of Populism,” Human Rights Watch, <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/dangerous-rise-of-populism>> [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018] (first and second quotations); William A. Galston, “The Rise of European Populism and the Collapse of the Center-Left,” Brookings Institution, Mar. 8, 2018, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/08/the-rise-of-european-populism-and-the-collapse-of-the-center-left/>> [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018] (third quotation); Fareed Zakaria, “I wanted to understand Europe’s populism. So I talked to Bono,” *Washington Post*, Sep. 20, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-wanted-to-understand-europes-populism-so-i-talked-to-bono/2018/09/20/55e0d82-bcf1-1e8-b7d2-0773aa1e33da_story.html?utm_term=.d862fbd3706d> [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018] (fourth quotation); Javier Corrales, “The Return of Populism, Latin America Style,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2018, <<https://>

Nowhere has the term “populist” been invoked more in recent times than in the United States, where the election of President Donald Trump in 2016 brought the word to the forefront of political discourse. Trump’s America-first nationalism, appeals to the working class, and denunciation of immigrants marked him as a populist of the political right, and indeed, most of the populist movements worldwide today are associated with that end of the political spectrum. Modern populism’s strong association with racism, xenophobia, and ultra-nationalism has reinforced widespread negative connotations of the term, although it should be noted that hostility to pluralism is not the sole provenance of the right. Trump’s criticism of establishment elites and his promise to drain the corrupt Washington swamp also could have come from a populist of the left. Nonetheless, only on rare occasions does populism still get invoked in a positive manner, as in 2017 when a liberal journalist labeled Trump a “fake populist,” declaring instead that social democrat Bernie Sanders’s liberal populism was the real thing. In the aftermath of the 2018 midterm elections, as pundits began to turn their attention to the 2020 campaign, the *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt also offered up another relatively rare positive use of the term when he advised Democrats on “The Secret to Winning in 2020: It’s the populism, stupid.”²

The term “populism” dates to the 1890s, when the third-party movement formally known as the People’s Party briefly challenged the Republicans and Democrats. This article examines the life and career of one of the original Populists³ in an attempt to refresh modern memories about the origins of the term and to further refine our understanding of what Populism, in its original incarnation, was all about. Henry Lewis Bentley (1847–1933) is almost entirely forgotten today, but he was one of the principal leaders of the People’s Party both in Texas and nationally. Moreover, a close study of his long and fascinating career not only reveals much

www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/opinion/mexico-colombia-populism.html [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018] (fifth quotation); Renad Mansour and Lina Khatib, “An emerging populism is sweeping the Middle East,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/11/what-populist-success-in-iraq-and-lebanon-says-about-todays-middle-east/?utm_term=.332fede3df4c> [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018] (sixth quotation); “British politics is being profoundly reshaped by populism,” *Economist*, Nov. 16, 2017, <<https://www.economist.com/britain/2017/11/16/british-politics-is-being-profoundly-reshaped-by-populism>> [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018] (seventh quotation); Jenny Yuen, “Rise of populism in Ontario election fuelled by economic anxiety: pollster,” *Toronto Sun*, June 8, 2018, <<https://torontosun.com/news/world/rise-of-populism-in-ontario-election-fuelled-by-economic-anxiety-pollster>> [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018] (eighth quotation).

² Daniel Marans, “Bernie Sanders Says Trump Budget Exposes President As Fake Populist,” *Huffpost*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bernie-sanders-donald-trump-fake-populist_us_5924947de4boec129d301869> [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018]; David Leonhardt, “The Secret to Winning in 2020: It’s the populism, stupid,” *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/16/opinion/democrats-2020-election-economic-populism.html>> [Accessed Dec. 18, 2018].

³ Throughout this article, “Populists” (note the capital “P”) will refer to the politicians and followers of the People’s Party.

about the true nature of 1890s Populism but provides important hints about the roots of our own era's politics, though not in the ways that those who invoke the term today might expect.

Before turning our attention to Bentley, a quick primer on the term "populism" itself seems in order. The historian Michael Kazin has offered one of the most useful definitions, calling it not an ideology but a "persuasion," a *style* of political rhetoric. In the political language of populism, "speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter." Swamp draining, then, is indeed a major part of what it means to be a populist. Still, as a term used to describe everyone from Huey Long to Marine Le Pen, it may well be the case, as the *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen has noted, that the "populist" label has become "sloppy to the point of meaninglessness, an overused epithet for multiple manifestations of political anger."⁴

The insurgent movement that gave birth to the term counted Texas as one of its principal birthplaces. Mid-twentieth-century scholars, noting the movement's rural roots, often assumed that its followers were unsophisticated rubes, an image first crafted by the Populists' contemporaneous political opponents. This view found scholarly expression at the pen of historian Richard Hofstadter, whose *Age of Reform* (1955) portrayed the Populists—or at least many of them—as backward-looking agrarian radicals who believed they were "the innocent pastoral victims of a conspiracy hatched in the distance." Their "rank in society" threatened by the new urban, industrial order, Populists succumbed to paranoid theories about Wall Street, the Bank of England, and the "money power" in general, leading them to formulate naive and fanciful policy solutions while embracing nativism and anti-Semitism.⁵

Historians soon pushed back against Hofstadter and other scholars who put forward similar interpretations, and by the time Lawrence Goodwyn published *The Democratic Promise* in 1976, the Populists' image had largely been rehabilitated. In the public imagination, however, the notion of populists as narrow-minded bumpkins receptive to the appeals of demagogues was largely cemented in place. And even though Goodwyn and other New Left historians found much to admire in Populism, there remained a sense that the Populists were somehow out of step with the

⁴ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1 (first and second quotations); Roger Cohen, "It's Time to Depopularize 'Populist,'" *New York Times*, July 13, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/13/opinion/populism-language-meaning.html>> [Accessed Sep. 26, 2018] (third quotation). Also see Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 35 (first quotation), 33 (second quotation), 46 (third quotation); Alan Brinkley, "Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform*: A Reconsideration," *Reviews in American History* 13 (September 1985): 462–480.

realities of modern America. Goodwyn, after all, had lamented that the Populist “moment” had been just that—a story of the decline and defeat of democracy at the hands of industrial capitalism. Only with the publication of Charles Postel’s *Populist Vision* in 2007 did the Populists get full credit for being forward-looking modernists. Postel stressed the modern outlook of Populists, emphasizing their comfort with science, technology, and large-scale organization, including the emerging national state, which they hoped to harness in the name of reform. He noted the presence of religious nonconformists in the movement, expanded the story of Populism to places like California, and drew clear lines from the Populists to the later progressives. Critics—most notably the dean of Populist historians, Robert C. McMath Jr.—suggested that Postel may have been too eager to discount the “venerable traditions” of Jacksonian producerism and the Protestant-inspired mutuality in shaping Populist thought. But McMath agrees with Rebecca Edwards, Ronald Formisano, and others who nevertheless place the Populist Revolt in the context of a “Long Progressive Era” and thereby integrate it more thoroughly into the mainstream of American political history.⁶

Bentley offers an important test case of these interpretations. His background gives little indication of a future career as a Populist. He was born on July 14, 1847, on a four-hundred-acre plantation near Huntsville, Alabama, where his father, William Field Bentley, owned twenty-seven slaves. Sometime in the 1850s the family moved to Danville, Virginia, in the south-central part of the state near the North Carolina line. By 1860 William Bentley owned only one slave, although the census still indicated that he was a farmer and owned property worth \$32,000. When the Civil War began, thirteen-year-old Henry was a student at the Danville Military Institute. Too young to fight, he continued with his studies until early 1864. His mother, Sarah DuPré Bentley, a devout Baptist who prayed for the soul of her apparently insufficiently devout husband, died in January, and immediately thereafter his two older brothers, William and Daniel, enlisted in the Confederate service. Later that spring, Henry, now sixteen, enlisted in his local home guard and was detailed to guard federal prisoners. By early 1865, however, he had joined his two brothers in Company B of the Thirteenth Virginia Light Artillery, popularly known as the Ring-

⁶ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Robert C. McMath Jr. in Worth Robert Miller (ed.), “*The Populist Vision: A Roundtable Discussion*,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 32 (Spring 2009): 18–45 (first quotation on p. 30, second quotation on p. 32, third quotation on p. 33); Robert C. McMath Jr., “Another Look at the ‘Hard Side’ of Populism,” *Reviews in American History* 36 (June 2008): 209–217. The most important book-length sources on Populism in Texas are Roscoe C. Martin *The People’s Party in Texas: A Study in Third Party Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1933) and 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). Of all the works that prominently discuss Texas Populism, only Martin, in two brief references (pp. 172 and 274) mentions Bentley.

gold Battery, which by that time was attached to Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Bentley's action with the unit appears to have been limited to the defense of Richmond in the last weeks of the war and the final retreat toward Appomattox. He later occupied several major leadership positions in the United Confederate Veterans' (UCV) organization. He always publicly downplayed his wartime experiences, saying with some accuracy that "it was a very small record, and while I tried to do my duty my service was brief and not of sufficient importance to justify special mention."⁷

After the war Bentley moved westward to the hamlet of Glade Springs in southwestern Virginia near the point where the state lines of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee converge. There he apparently farmed for a while. By 1867 he had relocated three hundred miles westward to the central Tennessee town of Lebanon, where he enrolled in Cumberland University's law program, taking courses in literature and the classics on the side. He graduated in 1869 with high honors. A Nashville newspaper article from June 1869 reveals the twenty-two-year-old's accomplishment as a budding lawyer. In an end-of-term moot-court competition, judges assigned Bentley the unenviable task of defending Tennessee's recently passed Republican suffrage law, which granted the vote to African Americans. The *Nashville Union* reported that despite "the disadvantage of having not only the unpopular, but also the wrong side of the case," an "undaunted" Bentley delivered "one of the finest arguments it has ever been our good fortune to hear." He delved immediately into "the discussion of the legal principles involved, without straining at all after outside effect," and with "ingenious, and analytical, argument" defended the hated (by white Democrats) statute. The judges declared that Bentley's "argument would have reflected the highest honor upon its author, even in the Supreme Court of the United States," and the newspaper edi-

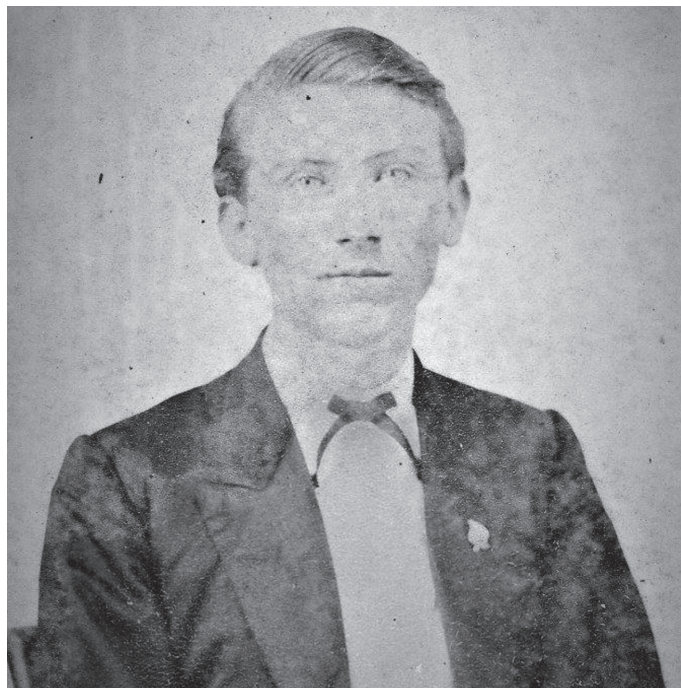
⁷ *Alabama Beacon* (Greensboro), Nov. 8, 1845; US Census, 1850, Madison County, Alabama, District 34, p. 330; US Census, 1850, Slave Schedule, Madison County, Alabama, District 34 (entry for Wm F Bentley); US Census, 1860, Pittsylvania County, Virginia, Southern District, p. 157; US Census, 1860, Slave Schedule, Pittsylvania County, Virginia, Southern District, p. 66 (all U.S. Census data accessed via Ancestry.com); Texas Death Certificate No. 38980, Aug. 23, 1933, <<https://www.fold3.com/image/75659677?terms=henry%20bentley>> [Accessed Oct. 9, 2018]; Sarah DuPré Bentley to William Field Bentley, Sep. 9, 1850, letter in Bentley Scrapbook (in possession of Frank Cox, San Rafael, Calif., copy in possession of the author; hereinafter referred to as "Bentley Scrapbook"); n.a., "Corporal Henry Hogue Bentley: The 'Unknown Soldier'," *Southern Historical Research Magazine* 1 (February 1936): 258–259; Service Records for Daniel E. and William F. Bentley, Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Virginia, NARA M324, RG 109, <<https://www.fold3.com/image/10294877 through 10294890>> [Accessed Oct. 9, 2018]; *Abilene Morning News*, Aug. 24, 1933; Soldier's Application for Confederate Pension, Henry L. Bentley, Alabama, Texas and Virginia, Confederate Pensions, 1884–1958, <<https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1677>> [Accessed Oct. 9, 2018]; Harry Wooding to Max Bentley, June 27, 1930, Bentley Scrapbook; "His First Visit to This City Since 1865," undated clipping from Danville newspaper, Bentley Scrapbook; *Galveston Daily News*, May 22, 1895; *Dallas Morning News*, July 18, 1896; Michael A. Cavanaugh, *The Otey, Ringgold and Davidson Virginia Artillery* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, 1993), 57–70, 95, 103.

torialized that “if this speech be a fair criterion of Mr. Bentley’s ability, we predict for him a brilliant and successful career in his chosen profession.” Whether this experience defending an unpopular, pro-civil-rights law shaped his later career as a political dissenter is unknown, but it is a distinct possibility.⁸

Bentley’s years in Middle Tennessee, however, were not all late nights with the law books. While at Cumberland, a young woman, seventeen-year-old Alice Green, caught his eye. The beautiful and poised Miss Green was no ordinary girl. Her father, the late Confederate major general Tom Green, had fought at San Jacinto and in the U.S.–Mexico War before being killed in action at the Battle of Blair’s Landing in 1864. When her mother died in 1866, she came to Tennessee to live with her grandfather, Judge Nathan Green Sr., a former justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court and law professor at Cumberland. Judge Green died shortly after her arrival in Lebanon, and she became the ward of his son, Nathan Green Jr., who was also on the Cumberland law faculty. Green, who compiled a distinguished fifty-year-career at the law school, placed his niece at the Corona Institute for Women, a few blocks away from Cumberland. What followed was a trying courtship; Alice’s school strictly forbade its female students from fraternizing or even corresponding with the boys from Cumberland. But a lovestruck Bentley pressed his suit, and after two years of courtship, the couple was married at her uncle’s house in Lebanon. Their marriage was a fifty-two-year-long love affair, blessed with five children and numerous grandchildren upon whom he indulgently doted. Throughout his life, whenever he traveled for business or politics, Henry’s favorite pastime was to write long newsy letters home, invariably addressed to “My Own Darling,” “Dear Little Wife,” “My Very dear little Woman,” or, when his children were old enough, “My Dear Child.” These letters invariably closed with “Love & kisses to you all, Faithfully & lovingly yours,” or some variation thereon.⁹

⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, July 18, 1896; “His First Visit to This City Since 1865,” undated clipping from Danville newspaper, Bentley Scrapbook; *Catalogue of Cumberland University at Lebanon, Tennessee. Triennial, and Annual for 1868–9* (Lebanon, Tenn.: Neal & Wade, “Herald and Register” Office, 1869), 31; *Abilene Morning News*, Aug. 24, 1933. It is unclear when Bentley enrolled in Cumberland, but the degree program in law at the time took fifteen months, so with his additional studies in literature and the classics, it seems likely that he spent at least two years there; see Winstead Paine Bone, *A History of Cumberland University, 1842–1935* (Lebanon, Tenn.: self-published, 1935), 188–189; *Nashville Union and American*, June 26, 1869 (quotations); Robert Tracy McKenzie, “Reconstruction,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, <<http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/reconstruction/>> [Accessed Sep. 20, 2018].

⁹ David J. Langum and Howard P. Walthall, *From Maverick to Mainstream: Cumberland School of Law, 1847–1997* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 45, 49–56; Bone, *History of Cumberland University*, 112–124, 192; Alwyn Barr, “Green, Thomas,” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgr38>> [Accessed Oct. 9, 2018]; Amy H. Sturgis, “Nathan Green,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia* <<https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/nathan-green/>> [Accessed Oct. 9, 2018]; “Rites Set For Mrs. Hodgson,” undated clipping in Bentley Scrapbook; Henry L. Bentley to Alice Green Bentley, Jan. 11, 1869, Jan. 14, 1869, Mar. 16, 1869, July 26, 1871 (first quotation), Sep. 20, 1886 (second quotation), July 13, 1899 (third quotation), Apr. 30, 1889 (fifth quotation) all in Bentley Scrapbook;



H. L. Bentley as
a young man.
*Courtesy of Frank
Cox.*



Alice Green before she
married H. L. Bentley.
Courtesy of Frank Cox.

After graduating and passing the bar, Bentley moved to Union City, Tennessee, in the state's northwest corner, entering into a partnership with another young attorney. Here Bentley first displayed another one of the remarkable hallmarks of his long life: a spirit of civic-mindedness that manifested itself in an almost compulsive tendency to join and promote fraternal, benevolent, professional, veterans', and civic-improvement organizations. By 1873 he had joined his first fraternal order, the Odd Fellows, which elected him Right Worshipful Grand Junior Warden. That same year he was appointed to the U.S. Centennial Commission's West Tennessee executive committee, and he somehow managed to get himself elected vice president and director of the Western Tennessee and Southwestern Kentucky Agricultural Association. He also displayed the first evidence of his lifelong interest in combining research, writing, publishing, and boosterism when he served as an assistant editor for an ambitious reference work, the *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee*, a two-volume, 1,100-page encyclopedia of "history, geology, statistics, geography and description" which was "Prepared under the Direction" of the state Bureau of Agriculture. The picture that emerges from Bentley's immediate post-collegiate years, then, is that of a forward-looking, optimistic, energetic, thoroughly modern young man, eager to prove himself while improving the world. Even at age twenty-five, his biography belied the notion that the sort of people who became Populists were narrow-minded cranks, beset by status anxiety and longing for some bucolic, bygone rural past.¹⁰

In 1874 Henry and Alice, along with their two young children, daughter Gay and son Harry, moved to Austin, Texas, Alice's hometown. Bentley commenced the practice of law and immediately immersed himself into civic and fraternal affairs, joining the local lodges of both the Good Templars and the Knights of Honor, enlisting in the Travis Rifles militia unit, and serving in an organization created to promote immigration to Texas. He also found time to dabble in local politics. Texas was in the final stage of Reconstruction, with the Radical Republicans led by Governor Edmund J. Davis desperately trying to hold onto power. Local Austin politics reflected the bitter divisions at the statewide level, although the GOP was stronger in the capital city than it was in the state as a whole. In November 1875 he announced his candidacy for county attorney on the Democratic ticket, and in the December county convention he received

Henry L. Bentley to Gay Bentley, June 15, 1889 (fourth quotation), Apr. 30, 1889, Bentley Scrapbook; *Nashville Union and American*, Nov. 11, 1871.

¹⁰ US Census, 1870, Obion County, Tennessee, District 13, p. 18 (Ancestry.com); *Nashville Union and American*, Oct. 22, 1873, Nov. 17, 1874 (first quotation); *Memphis Daily Appeal*, June 6, 1873; Charles J. Seaman (ed.), *Catalogue of the Beta Theta Pi in the forty-third year of the Fraternity* (Cleveland: Johns & Co., 1882), 183; J. B. Killebrew, assisted by J. M. Safford, C. W. Charlton, and H. L. Bentley, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee* (2 vols., Nashville: Tavel, Eastman & Howell, Printers to the State, 1874) (second quotation on title page).

the nomination. His opponent, the sitting district attorney, ran on an independent ticket and could probably count on GOP support. The February election proved razor-thin, with no clear winner. It is unclear exactly what transpired, but months apparently passed while election authorities tried to determine the outcome. They eventually issued Bentley a temporary commission to perform the functions of the office, which he apparently did for several months. Finally, in October 1876, the district court ruled that his opponent had actually won, and Bentley had to relinquish the office.¹¹

After the election, he resumed his law practice, and with fellow lawyer Thomas Pilgrim he compiled and published the *Texas Legal Directory*, which sold for a dollar and the local newspaper described as “a most useful and carefully compiled book of reference, full of facts and figures and statistics.” But politics again beckoned, and in the spring of 1877 he delivered speeches in favor of a local prohibition ordinance and served on the executive committee of the city’s local option organization. In June he delivered a Juneteenth address to Austin’s African American citizens at their Emancipation Day picnic. The content of the speech is unknown, but his standing among both black and white Austinites apparently was sufficient to secure him not only that speaking engagement but also a place as the principal orator at the city’s Fourth of July celebration in the hall of the state House of Representatives two weeks later.¹²

Although Bentley had entered local politics as a Democrat—and as a Confederate veteran and the son of a slaveholder, he possessed impeccable credentials for a conventional career as a southern Democratic politician—something in the political environment of post-Reconstruction Texas did not sit right with him. In 1878, just two years after the Democrats’ final “redemption” of the state’s government from Radical Republican control, Bentley cast his political lot with the Greenback-Labor Party. Founded in the Midwest, the party was a response to the economic distress created by the federal government’s gold-based monetary policy. Greenbackers wanted a paper currency, issued and controlled by the government (rather than private banks), that could expand to meet the credit needs of farmers and stop the downward spiral in commodity prices. As early as January 1878 the party had spread to Texas, and Bentley took a leading role in its local Austin organization. In June he convened Travis County’s first Greenback convention, presiding over eighty-two delegates, whom the press described as “of all past party affiliations and various

¹¹ *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, May 30, Nov. 25, Dec. 6, 10, 17, 1875, Jan. 6, Feb. 22, Sep. 3, Oct. 5, 17, 25, 1876, Nov. 17, 20, 1877; *Galveston Daily News*, Apr. 9, July 31, 1875; *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, Feb. 24, 1876.

¹² *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, Feb. 3 (quotation), 18, 28, June 19, July 3, 1877; [Henry L.] Bentley and [Thomas] Pilgrim, *Texas Legal Directory for 1876–7* (Austin: Democratic Statesman Office, 1877).

shades of color.” The Greenbackers held their first statewide convention in Waco in August, and by the fall the party boasted nearly five hundred Greenback clubs, seventy of which were composed of African Americans. Like many of the era’s third-party movements, the Greenbackers often joined forces with the Republicans, who had no hope of winning elections on their own. In addition to its call for abandonment of the metallic standard, in Texas the party called for increased public-school funding, abolition of the convict lease system, and reforms in the administration of county government, all of which became Populist platform planks in the 1890s.¹³

Bentley soon announced his candidacy for Austin’s state senate district. With an eye toward attracting Republican votes as well as those of his fellow Greenbackers, he ran on an “Independent” ticket. His opponent in the race was the incumbent, prominent Democrat Alexander Watkins Terrell. The Democrats soon opened their rhetorical guns on Bentley and the Greenbackers, characterizing them as frustrated office-seekers who could not get elected as Democrats. When Texas Republicans lent their support to the Greenbackers, the Democrats blasted the white Greenbackers as traitors to their race, saying that they had made a devil’s bargain with ex-Governor “Davis and his sooty crew.” One major source of disagreement between Bentley and Terrell involved a new state jury law recently enacted by the legislature. Sponsored by Terrell, the law imposed a literacy test for jurors and mandated that they be householders, requirements that disproportionately affected African Americans. Bentley attacked the law, declaring it “not in accordance with true republican principles to exclude men from the privilege of sitting on the juries of the country, because they cannot read and write.” The Democratic press explicitly noted that the law “of course affects his colored voters.” While one editor grudgingly credited Bentley as “a man of no mean ability” who “handled his side of the subject with skill,” the district’s leading newspaper, the *Austin Statesman*, bitterly criticized Bentley and other ex-Confederates in the Greenback movement who had supported the Democratic party “through all these years of defeat and outrage and oppression and calumny only to betray and destroy” it now. The *Statesman* declared that Bentley, “wretchedly care worn, is conscious of the capital blunder perpetrated when he went

¹³ *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, Jan. 10, 1878; *Galveston Daily News*, June 30, 1878 (quotation); Jack W. Gunn, “Greenback Party,” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/wago1>> [Accessed Aug. 26, 2017]; Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 282–297; Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth-Century South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 22, 26; Roscoe C. Martin, “The Greenback Party in Texas,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 30 (January 1927): 161–177; Earnest William Winkler (ed.) *Platforms of Political Parties in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas, 1916), 187–189; Alwyn Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform: Texas Politics, 1876–1906* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 38–62.

whoring after strange gods, such as were never enshrined in Democratic temples by Jefferson or Jackson.”¹⁴

Bentley lost the election, although Terrell’s majority seems to have been not much more than a thousand votes (complete returns are not available). In Travis County, where both men lived, the vote was 2,536 to 2,149 in favor of the Democrat, suggesting that it was a reasonably competitive race. “*My vote was a white man’s vote*,” Terrell explained. “The bare-faced villainy of the *gutter snipe-tramp* & negro *element* on election day beat any thing I ever saw . . . Unless some *flank* movement can be made on the mass of ignorant negro voters, we will soon be at Sea in Texas.” In the following year’s special session of the legislature, Terrell unsuccessfully sponsored a poll tax amendment that would effectively disfranchise African Americans. He remained the state’s foremost champion of black voter suppression for the next quarter-century.¹⁵

Bentley was no civil-rights hero; few, if any, white ex-Confederates were. But he accepted the reality of black suffrage, sought to appeal to the shared economic grievances of poor black and white voters, and never engaged in the kind of demagogic race-baiting so common among southerners of his era. Even after 1900, when so many white politicians (including some Populists) scapegoated African Americans and participated in the most egregious sorts of racist persecution, Bentley never rose to the bait. Perhaps it was his naturally empathetic personality; it may have simply been because he lived most of his life in a part of the state (West Texas) where there were few people of color. But over a long, relatively high-profile public career that extended well into the 1920s, one searches the historical record in vain for a bigoted statement or act where race—or gender, religion, or anything else—is concerned.

Bentley was, by all accounts, a capable lawyer and a skilled politician, but his first love was agriculture. Indeed, he seems to have viewed the practice of law as a means of making his agricultural pursuits possible. His affinity for agriculture, however, was not the result of romantic, nostalgic, or ideological motivations—he did not long for some lost Jeffersonian world of the yeoman farmer or feel compelled to obey a biblical injunction to till the soil. Instead, he was fascinated by the science of agriculture, the challenge of determining what would grow where, of maximizing yields and making unproductive land productive. In the spring of 1880 Bentley again turned his sights westward, to the region abutting Fort Concho, in

¹⁴ *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, Sep. 5, 1878 (first, second, and sixth quotations); *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, Aug. 21, 19, 20, Oct. 10, 23 (fifth quotation), 25, 30, 1878; *Burnet Bulletin*, Oct. 23, 1878 (third and fourth quotations).

¹⁵ *Galveston Daily News*, Nov. 10, 1878; *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, Nov. 21, 1878; Lewis L. Gould, *Alexander Watkins Terrell: Civil War Soldier, Texas Lawmaker, American Diplomat* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 73–74 (quotations on p. 74). Gould mistakenly identifies Bentley as “A. D. Bentley.”

the county, Tom Green, named for his wife's father. Although the *Burnet Bulletin* reported that he intended to practice law—and he did hang out his shingle—evidently his real goal was to raise sheep. He bought land near the settlement of Ben Ficklin, and by early 1882 he had stocked it with “1000 head of fine graded ewes, together with a number of fine bucks.” On a visit to Austin in June of that year, Bentley, according to the *Austin Statesman*, looked “the picture of health. He has retired from the practice of law and now devotes himself to the acquisition of wealth, which he finds most easily in the stock business. He is already largely engaged in wool production, and contemplates introducing tens of thousands of California sheep into Texas before the end of this year.”¹⁶

His removal to the Concho country did not stop Bentley from being the consummate organization man. Apart from attending the state Greenback-Labor convention in July 1880, he attended the state gathering of the Odd Fellows in 1881 and the founding convention of the Texas Live Stock Association in February 1882. His actions at the stockmen's gathering provided new clues as to his evolving ideas about public policy and political economy. At that meeting, which elected him by acclamation as one of four vice presidents and appointed him to its committee on the sale and lease of public lands, he supported a resolution calling for the convention to lobby the legislature to reform the state's public land policy. Bentley and his committee recognized the purpose of the state's public lands: the benefit of “the children of the state and the unfortunates” in the state asylums. But he also understood that in the era of the open range, many stock-raisers had grazed their herds and flocks on the public lands without paying, and that as the state prepared to fashion laws to govern the sale or lease of the lands in order to begin deriving revenue for the schools and asylums, this “advance guard of civilization should not be submerged under a flood of speculators.” His proposed solution, then, was to give “the present occupants . . . a little time, in advance, to secure their pastures” by allowing them “to buy these lands upon a long credit, at reasonable value, with moderate interest, payable annually.” Such a policy, he argued, “roots the purchaser in the soil; and, as far as possible, makes his permanent welfare identical with that of the state.”¹⁷

Bentley's prescriptions for the administration of the state's public lands, coming at a time when a violent outbreak of fence-cutting by angry free-rangers brought the issue to the forefront of state politics, displayed the sort of pragmatic statecraft that would later mark the Populist movement. His solution—to give the free-rangers time to adjust to the new

¹⁶ *Burnet Bulletin*, Apr. 1, 1880; US Census, 1880, Tom Green County, Pct. 2, ED 119, SD 5, p. 16 (Ancestry.com); *Galveston Daily News*, Jan. 6, 1882 (first quotation); *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, June 1, 1882 (second quotation).

¹⁷ *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, July 1, Nov. 24, 1880, Feb. 16, 23 (quotations), 1882; *Austin Daily Statesman*, Feb. 8, 1881; *Galveston Daily News*, Feb. 15, 1882; *Dallas Weekly Herald*, Feb. 23, 1882.

capitalist order and easy terms on which to purchase land—balanced the interests of the landless cattle- and sheep-grower with the state’s interest in promoting economic development, the education of young people, and the protection of those housed in state asylums. In short, it proposed using the positive power of the state to promote the general welfare. At another point in the convention, Bentley proposed yet another resolution, addressing another problem common in the livestock industry. In it, he called for “the appointment of a special commission by the United States government, to be charged with the duty of thoroughly investigating the various diseases to which stock are subject, with a view to the recommendation by said commission, of the proper measures to prevent and cure said diseases.” Once more, he displayed the sort of political thinking that later led him into the Populist movement. Providing public solutions to widely shared public problems—in this case, diseases which livestock could carry across state lines and which could affect the health and safety of all—seemed to Bentley a legitimate function of the federal government. The type of sustained scientific research needed in such cases was beyond the capacity of individuals or private organizations, and states were unlikely to cooperate with one another and equitably share the burden.¹⁸

Bentley got another opportunity to press his views on the land question four months later, when the state Wool-Growers’ Association met in San Antonio. The *San Antonio Light* reported that he “came near paralyzing” the convention “with his fervid eloquence,” particularly when he declared it “high time the stockmen were asserting their rights and electing men who go to congress and the legislature pledged to protect their rights.” But in a gathering exclusively of sheep raisers, another issue took center stage: protectionism. Bentley admitted that he had always been a free-trader, but now that he was in the wool business, he favored tariff protection for American-produced wool. More significant, however, was his advice to his fellow sheepmen about organization and using the political process: “To protect themselves they must organize and become united,” he urged, “and he was in favor of having the State thoroughly canvassed for this object, so at the next legislature they could go and demand to have their interests attended to and enforce their demand. The convention should appoint experienced wool-growers to write essays to be read to the convention on wool-growing. Wool growers should support only those newspapers who supported their meetings.” In his ringing call for effective political organization, activism, and public relations, he drew a blueprint for the sort of modern political organizing that he would bring to the Populist movement a decade later.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, Feb. 23, 1882.

¹⁹ *San Antonio Evening Light*, June 9, 1882 (first, second, and third quotations); *Galveston Daily News*, June 8, 1881 (fourth and fifth quotations). For a fuller explanation of Bentley’s position on protectionism vis-à-vis the wool industry, see his lengthy essay a decade later in *Texas Live Stock Journal*, Mar. 19, 1892.

In the meantime, Bentley expanded his sheep operation in San Angelo. In June 1882 the *Austin Statesman* reported on his plans to introduce “tens of thousands of California sheep into Texas before the end of this year.” By August he had traveled to California, where he apparently made arrangements to buy quality sheep and to investigate the possibility of bringing Chinese herders to Texas. There is no record that he actually procured the herders, but he did order a shipment of 1,440 “fine California ewes.” Immediately upon his return, however, he accepted a position as editor of a Fort Worth-based industry newspaper, the *Texas Wool Grower*, a move that allowed him to mix his interest in research, writing, editing, and acting as chief booster for a favorite cause. But no sooner had he accepted the position than disaster struck. A massive flash flood roared down the South Concho River, wiping out the town of Ben Ficklin, the new county seat of Tom Green County, and drowning sixty-five residents. Bentley’s ranch sat in the path of the flood, and the people there, including Bentley’s sister-in-law Laura Green, “barely escaped alive.” Bentley apparently was not there, but the catastrophic flood surely was a major financial setback, as it wiped out his entire flock of sheep. Fortunately, the 1,440 California ewes he had purchased did not arrive until October.²⁰

Bentley clearly needed income, and the following year, 1883, an unusual new employment opportunity presented itself. A group of investors based in Fort Worth incorporated the Texas Investment Company, a brokerage firm dealing in “all kinds of real estate and live stock,” but specializing in West Texas ranch lands. Bentley became vice president of the company. The firm purported to have established branch offices in San Antonio, Austin, Colorado City, Gainesville, St. Louis, Chicago, New York, London, and Glasgow. Alfred M. Britton, a prominent Fort Worth banker who had co-founded the Matador Land and Cattle Company a few years earlier, led the company. Britton was also president of the company that published the *Texas Wool Grower*, among other publications, which may have been how Bentley came to his attention. Other principals of the company included George B. Loving, Boardman Buckley Paddock, and John Peter Smith, all prominent Fort Worth businessmen. Bentley’s legal skills, his knowledge of livestock, and his experience in West Texas must have impressed Britton and the Investment Company’s directors. But perhaps most important was Bentley’s willingness to take on his principal assignment: representing the company in Europe. In June 1883 Bentley resigned his editorial position with the *Texas Wool Grower*, packed up ten-year-old Gay, nine-year-old Harry, and Alice, who was pregnant with their

²⁰ *Galveston Daily News*, Aug. 18, Oct. 14 (first quotation), 1882; *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, June 1, Aug. 31 (second quotation), 1882; *Texas Wool Grower*, Jan. 18, 1883; Katharine T. Waring, “Ben Ficklin, Texas,” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvb38>> [Accessed Oct. 12, 2018].

third child, and departed for London. They settled into a row-house on Ainger Road in the Primrose Hill neighborhood of north-central London, and in September they welcomed their third child, whom they named Hampstead, after the London suburb in which he was born.²¹

Relatively little is known about Bentley's business activities in Britain. Ever the promoter, he penned a lengthy essay on "Life in Texas," which he published in the *London Globe*. In 1907 a Fort Worth reporter published a story from Bentley's time in London, related by Fort Worth businessman and mayor B. B. Paddock, a partner in the Texas Investment Company. Paddock, the story goes, had instructed Bentley to "interest English capital in the company and, if possible, to secure the prince of Wales as president of the concern." According to Paddock, Bentley "did the next best thing: he visited Windsor Castle and secured Lord Hurley, the queen's high treasurer, as the president." Paddock's story got some facts wrong; there was no Lord Hurley in Queen Victoria's administration. But in March 1884 the Texas Investment Company consummated a deal with a new British company, the Consolidated Land and Cattle Company Ltd., whose chairman, Baron Thomas John Hovell-Thurlow-Cumming-Bruce, the Fifth Lord Thurlow, was a lord-in-waiting in Victoria's government in 1883 and later British paymaster-general. He must have been the British lord Paddock erroneously referred to as Lord Hurley in the 1907 article. The company was capitalized at £750,000, and Alfred Britton and John Peter Smith were appointed "consulting directors in Texas." George Loving, the Fort Worth rancher, banker, editor, and general manager of the Texas Investment Company, was named the company's "manager in America."²²

It is unclear whether the consummation of this deal, which took place in March 1884, meant that Bentley had accomplished his mission in London, if he was simply ready to come home, or if other business considerations dictated the decision. In any case, by May 1884 the Bentleys had returned to Texas. Bentley resigned from the Texas Investment Company

²¹ *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, June 7, 1883; *Dallas Weekly Herald*, June 28, 1883; *El Paso Times*, June 2, 1883; *Fort Worth Gazette*, July 16, 1883; *Texas Wool Grower*, Jan. 18, 1883; *London Globe*, Aug. 14, 1883; England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837–1915, for Hampstead Bentley (July-Aug-Sep 1883), p. 40, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/interactive/8912/ONS_B18834AZ-0026?pid=31545862&usePUB=true&backurl=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2Fcgi-bin%2Fsse.dll%3Fqh%3DMu1EK4RevYBN6g8Vel7fjQ%253D%253D%26gl%3D34%26gss%3Dsf28_ms_f-34%26new%3D1%26rank%3D1%26msT%3D1%26gsfn%3Dhampstead%26gsfn_x%3Do%26gsln%3Dbentley%26gsln_x%3Do%26MSAV%3D1%26uidh%3D1p5> [Accessed Oct. 13, 2018].

Other officers of the Texas Investment Company included secretary W. A. Garner, editor of the *Texas Live Stock Journal* (and later the *Fort Worth Mail-Telegram*), and treasurer B. B. Paddock, former editor of the *Fort Worth Democrat* and future president of the Fort Worth and Rio Grande Railway Company and mayor of Fort Worth.

²² *London Globe*, Aug. 14, 1883 (first quotation); *Fort Worth Morning Register*, Apr. 25, 1907 (second and third quotations); *London Standard*, March 26, 1884 (fourth and fifth quotations); *London Times*, Feb 21, 1895, Mar. 16, 1916.

and moved his family to the new town of Abilene, laid out just three years earlier when the Texas and Pacific Railroad arrived. He immediately had a new journalistic project, however, as the *Fort Worth Gazette* (owned by the same group as the *Wool Grower* and the Investment Company) commissioned him to direct the production of a special edition of the paper intended to boost “the material resources and capabilities” of the state and touted as “the most comprehensive and valuable September edition ever issued by any Texas newspaper.” Bentley, the *Gazette* stated, was “specially qualified by reason of his long residence in the state, a thorough identification with its interests, a large experience in such work and ability of high order.” The paper planned to print 250,000 copies of the issue, which would enhance “the material resources and capabilities” of the state. It also planned to send copies to every county in the United States and to Europe. No copies of the issue have been located, but as in the case of the similar work he did on the Tennessee reference book a decade earlier, the project indicates his keen interest in the world around him, his interest in editing and publishing, and his eagerness to boost his home region.²³

In Abilene, Bentley established a law partnership with thirty-four-year-old John Bowyer. Drawing on his recent experience with the Texas Investment Company, he also founded the firm of Bentley Brothers & Company, advertising itself as brokers in “Ranch Land and Live Stock.” Bentley touted the firm’s “business relations with leading brokers in our line in the cities of London, Liverpool and Manchester, England; Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee, Scotland; Dublin, Ireland, and in the principal cities of the United States.” Bentley’s partner in this enterprise, his older brother William Field Bentley Jr., had also worked for the Texas Investment Company in Fort Worth as manager of its sheep department. Henry Bentley’s various enterprises of the previous few years had not made him wealthy; indeed, he had borrowed money against land that his wife had inherited, and he spent much of the mid-1880s struggling to pay off those debts. The need for a steady income likely motivated him to run for district attorney in 1886. Sources are meager on the race, so it is not known whether he ran as a Democrat, an Independent, or something else, although the press did report that almost every county in the district put forward a candidate. Confident of victory, however, he told Alice, “You see I am so sure of election that I am counting on it as certain, & I will hear to nothing short of my wife traveling my circuit with me.” Sure enough, he won the race—his first and only elected office—and served the people of the sprawling West Texas district for the next two years. Several months into his tenure, he received a glowing review from the editor of the *Comanche Chief*, who noted that although Bentley was “an

²³ *Galveston Daily News*, May 6, July 30, 1884; *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, May 14, 1884 (quotations).

entire stranger” to Comanche County when he took office, he had proven “worthy and qualified.” The editor noted that “Mr. Bentley is courteous to all, yet he unflinchingly defends the interests of the State. He has a state reputation as a criminal lawyer and his pleadings at our bar has shown that he is a fearless prosecutor and at the same time he has too much uprightness about him to stoop to anything base.” An Abilene paper paid him a similar set of compliments, saying that he had “shown a marked degree of talent and zeal in the discharge of his duties” and that if not all of the cases he tried resulted in convictions, “it was because of a preponderance of evidence in favor of the defendants.” Bentley, according to this account, was “not the man to have a man hounded down simply because he is accused of something. His course is to maintain the same relation between the accused and the State as between man and man. His course has won for him a large number of new friends.”²⁴

As usual, though, he could never be satisfied with just one vocation. Keeping one foot in the journalistic world, in 1887 he joined with his other brother, Daniel, in a new enterprise, the *Cattle Grower and Flockmaster* magazine. Daniel served as editor of the El Paso-based publication, which he billed as “an international stock journal,” and Henry served as associate editor and correspondent. His hometown paper, the *Abilene Reporter*, predicted great things for the journal, noting, somewhat hyperbolically, that Henry Bentley’s “reputation as a writer of great force and ability is both state, national and international.” The publication, however, apparently proved short-lived, as there is no record that it lasted beyond 1887. In its short life, however, it apparently sounded a rather populist tone, declaring, in one issue, that “refrigerators, packing houses, horn and glue factories and ice manufactories in the southwest are the weapons with which to break the backbone of the dressed meat ring of Chicago.”²⁵

Bentley’s brokerage venture with his brother did not last long, either, as William died in 1886. Henry kept a hand in the land business, however, by becoming vice president of the newly created Abilene Investment Company in 1888. The scope of this firm was considerably more limited than his last two ventures, which had promised services as far away as London and Edinburgh. This entity dealt only in “Lands, Farms and Ranches in the Abilene Country” as well as “City Property and Live Stock,” although it also offered insurance, made loans, and handled collections. The president of the firm, Theodore Heyck, doubled as president of the Abilene National Bank, so evidently it was no fly-by-night enterprise. Bent-

²⁴ *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Aug. 25, 1883, Nov. 14 (first and second quotations), 1884; Henry L. Bentley to Alice Bentley, Sep. 20, 1886, in Bentley Scrapbook (third quotation); *Taylor County News* (Abilene), Sep. 16, 1887, quoting the *Comanche Chief* (fourth, fifth, and sixth quotations); *Taylor County News*, Oct. 7, 1887 (seventh, eighth, and ninth quotations).

²⁵ *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Apr. 2, 1887, quoting the *Abilene Reporter* (first and second quotations); *Austin Weekly Statesman*, May 19, 1887, quoting the *Cattle Grower and Flockmaster* (third quotation).

ley remained affiliated with the firm for the next two decades, eventually becoming its president. His many business ventures, although none was ever particularly successful, clearly indicate that people like him who became Populists were not necessarily hostile toward capitalism. Indeed, it seems that their main complaint against capitalism was that it doled out its awards capriciously, regardless of ability or effort.²⁶

As a lawyer, Bentley certainly witnessed the reckless speculation that characterized the economy of Gilded Age America. If anything, such speculation proved worse in frontier areas than in more settled regions. After his term as district attorney ended, he spent much of his time traveling the state (and beyond) pursuing his legal business. His legal partnership with John Bowyer ended, and Bentley for the first time hung out his shingle alone. An 1889 letter to Alice written from Austin suggests the nature of his life in these years: "My dear Wife," he wrote, "I got here 2 hours ago—made a quick trip you see. I attended to all my business in Dallas yesterday before noon. & at 1 pm started for Corsicana. Got through everything there by 9 pm took train for Austin & got in here this morning & already have attended to some business. I find I am going to be kept here fully 10 days. since while in Corsicana I got five new land cases involving 10,000 to 15,000 acres of land in Jones & Fisher Counties & I will have to work them up while I am here." In a letter that same year to his daughter Gay, who had been sent back to Tennessee for schooling, he elaborated on his personal financial situation: "I have been kept very busy for some months past & have had fine success with my cases. And I have made some excellent fees recently. But money is very scarce in Texas & I find it very difficult [to] collect." To make matters worse, the family house burned to the ground in a catastrophic fire a few months earlier, a loss only partially covered by insurance. He warned his daughter that he probably would not be able to afford boarding school for the coming year.²⁷

The demands of his land-related legal business forced him temporarily to abandon his day-to-day law practice in Abilene, as he spent weeks in places like New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut attending to the tedious affairs of absentee landowners and their long-distance litigation. But after a lifetime of rootlessness, Abilene had become home. In a city that was itself only a few years old, he could claim to be a pillar of the community as readily as anyone else. He was briefly a candidate for the state senate in 1888, but he withdrew from the crowded field on the twenty-

²⁶ *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 11, 1886; *Abilene Reporter*, Aug. 2, 1888 (quotations); *Abilene Semi Weekly Farm Reporter*, Oct. 26, 1888; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Mar. 17, 1904; *Abilene Reporter*, May 31, Aug. 30, 1907; *Worley's Directory of Abilene Texas, 1909* (Dallas: John F. Worley Directory Co., 1908), 79.

²⁷ *Taylor County News* (Abilene), July 22, 1887; *Abilene Reporter*, Dec. 23, 1889; Henry L. Bentley to Alice Bentley, Apr. 30, 1889, Bentley Scrapbook (quotations); Henry L. Bentley to Gay Bentley, June 15, 1889, Bentley Scrapbook; *Dallas Morning News*, Feb. 25, 1888.

first ballot. In 1889 he belonged to a group of boosters calling itself the Progressive Committee, the first of many such organizations he joined over the next few decades. The committee's official aim was "to promote all public enterprises and work out our destiny." He remained active in fraternal organizations such as the Odd Fellows and the Order of United Workmen. When Taylor County needed a display for the Texas Spring Palace exhibition in Fort Worth in 1890, he stepped forward with "no less than twelve fine varieties of wheat" that he had grown on his 160-acre farm in neighboring Jones County. When Abilene's former Confederate soldiers organized their first camp in what soon became the United Confederate Veterans, Bentley was elected its first president. And in January 1891, he plunged into yet another journalistic enterprise and accepted a position as associate editor of the *Texas Live Stock Journal*, another publication owned by the publishing company headed by Alfred Britton. Reporting on this latest venture, the *Abilene Reporter* editorialized that Bentley "is well known as an able newspaper writer on any and all subjects, and especially will his work be appreciated by the sheepmen, many of whom will remember his efficient work in their behalf, some eight years ago while editor of the *Texas Wool Grower*, which was confessedly the best journal of its kind ever published. Col. Bentley is not only an able writer, but having had many years of practical experience, and being a close observer and an industrious student, is perhaps one of the best posted sheep and wool men in the state." A year later, as a consequence of his role with the *Journal*, Bentley's fellow journalists elected him second vice president of the West Texas Press Association.²⁸

By 1892 Bentley had established a new law partnership, this time with thirty-one-year-old Augustus Hilbert Kirby, who was embarking on his first legal practice. Whether this move permitted Bentley more time to devote legal matters in Abilene, or more time to travel, is not clear. Whatever his motivations, Bentley, for all his protestations about wanting to stay home, remained incurably curious about the world around him, and he could never stay put for long. In the spring of 1892 this restlessness led him make an extended trip to the West Coast. Armed with his credentials from the *Life Stock Journal*, he set out for the National Editorial Association's convention in San Francisco. He had also arranged with his hometown newspaper, the *Abilene Reporter*, to contribute a series of reports chronicling his travels. Traveling with a group of newspapermen by rail through

²⁸ Henry L. Bentley to Alice Bentley, Jan. 2, 1890, Bentley Scrapbook; *Abilene Reporter*, Dec. 23, 1889 (first quotation), Mar. 14, Apr. 18, 1890, Jan. 9 (third quotation), Aug. 29, 1891; *Dallas Morning News*, Apr. 23, 1886, Jan. 29, Apr. 28, 1892; *Taylor County News* (Abilene), Apr. 30, 1886, Feb. 26, 1892; *Austin Daily Statesman*, Jan. 28, 1892; John R. Rose, *The Texas Spring Palace* (Fort Worth: Texas and Southwestern Railway, 1890), 49 (second quotation); land deed from David D. Davis and Eliza J. Davis to Henry L. Bentley, Nov. 19, 1887, Jones County Deed Records, vol. 6, p. 48 (Jones County Courthouse, Anson, Texas).

New Mexico and Arizona, he posted his first letter from Ontario, California, just east of Los Angeles, on May 17.²⁹

Over the next six weeks he visited Los Angeles, Fresno, Stockton, Sacramento, San Francisco, Palo Alto, the Napa Valley, San Jose, Portland, Tacoma, and Seattle, among other places, and contributed six letters that varied between one and two thousand words each. The *Reporter* gave him free rein to write about whatever subjects he wished, and his choices reflected his own eclectic interests, although agricultural topics, not surprisingly, dominated. Much of his reporting centered on the crops grown in California and their potential adaptability to West Texas. One letter focused primarily on irrigation; another on viticulture and wine-making. In one letter, after visiting Fresno in the state's Central Valley, he waxed enthusiastic about the quality and quantity of wine produced there. No doubt aware of the prohibitionist sentiments of many of the folks back in Abilene, he wryly alluded to the proclivities of the journalists with whom he was traveling, noting that "newspaper men are notoriously and proverbially temperate, hence there were no headaches as the result of wine drinking, though there was a good deal of drinking. In other words, we all paid the hosts the compliment to look upon the wine when it was red, or white, as the case happened to be; and having looked we sampled it, and finding it good we were much too polite not to do full justice to it." He devoted one entire essay to a visit to a famous racehorse-breeding stable in Santa Clara County, showing, despite his modest disclaimers to the contrary, that he knew a great deal about horses. (He did let slip that he had served as secretary of the Texas Jockey Club.) Another letter dealt entirely with his visit to the newly established Stanford University, where he was awestruck by the educational institution built with railroad magnate Leland Stanford's fortune. Throughout the letters he displayed his fascination with science and economics as he analyzed climate and topography, calculated the profits to be made from a lemon orchard, or recounted the effects of a recent earthquake. He repeatedly exhorted his fellow Texans to embrace new ideas. "I know there are a lot of calamity howlers (pessimists) in our section who are always ready to swear that every experiment is bound to prove a failure," he wrote, but his optimism also seemed boundless: "I am persuaded that there are dozens of enterprising men amongst us who are willing to experiment nevertheless." Time proved him to be one of those men, a quality he shared with many of his fellow Populists.³⁰

Politics, however, was rarely far from Bentley's mind in 1892. Just before leaving for the coast, he had attended a Populist "speaking" in

²⁹ *Abilene Reporter*, Jan. 29, 1891, May 19, 22, 1892. Bentley held his associate editor's position with the *Texas Live Stock Journal* until June 1892, when he took the reins of Thomas Nugent's gubernatorial campaign; see *Texas Live Stock Journal*, June 24, 1892.

³⁰ *Abilene Reporter*, May 19, 22, June 17 (first quotation), 24 (second and third quotations), July 8, 15, 29, 1892; *Abilene Morning News*, Apr. 28, 1891.

Jones County, the first recorded evidence of his interest in the new third party. In his May 26 letter from San Francisco, he noted that the California state Democratic convention had recently adjourned and sent a delegation to the upcoming national convention that strongly supported the conservative ex-president Grover Cleveland. The *Abilene Reporter* was a Democratic paper, but Bentley could not help but remind his readers what those who knew him personally probably already realized: “I don’t happen to be able to enthuse over the ‘stuffed prophet,’” as he called Cleveland. His visit to Stanford provided an irresistible opportunity to regale his readers with his own populist opinions. If, he wrote, men “who accumulate millions would do as Mr. Stanford is doing with his money, there would be less said and heard of the evils of accumulated wealth in the hands of the few. But how few of the rich men of this world use their wealth for the good of others than their own kith and kin. As a rule they pile up millions on millions for the mere pleasure of growing richer; spend vast sums for display and to gratify their vitiated appetites, and when they see they can no longer enjoy it, seek to compromise with God Almighty by making a show of doing good to suffering humanity.” But Bentley believed that the citizens of Texas should themselves learn from Leland Stanford’s example: “I wish also to add in this connection that in my opinion no money was ever better invested than that put in institutions of learning, to say nothing of the benefit to the boys and girls who in the years to come must control the destinies of the nation. It pays any community, as a business venture, to richly endow and liberally support schools.” These were not the opinions of a wild-eyed radical, but they did reveal a man who believed that in a wealthy democracy, the least among us deserved the opportunity to realize the potential of his—and notably, *her*—talents, and that “the community” had a role to play in making that opportunity possible. Two years earlier Bentley had appeared at the annual meeting of the state Farmers’ Alliance (which he could not join because lawyers were ineligible for membership) and proposed that the Alliance establish a network of “Industrial Institutes” across the state, one per congressional district, “intended primarily for the practical education of the sons and daughters of the industrial classes.” The Alliance endorsed the plan, but of course, no private organization—especially one comprised of poverty-stricken farmers—could ever hope to accomplish such an ambitious goal. If there were not enough philanthropists like Stanford to provide for the education of the masses, and if even the hugely popular Farmers’ Alliance lacked the wherewithal to undertake such a program, then the task would naturally fall to government, *if* government were truly responsive to the public’s weal.³¹

³¹ *Abilene Reporter*, May 6 (first quotation), June 17 (second quotation), July 15 (second, third, and fourth quotations), 1892; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Aug. 28, 1890 (fifth and sixth quotations), Feb. 26,

By the beginning of the 1890s the Texas Farmer's Alliance, which counted some 150,000 members at its height, had grown increasingly impatient with the Democratic Party. Problems first arose over the party's refusal to endorse the Alliance's Subtreasury Plan, an innovative proposal for solving the problems of farm credit and falling commodity prices through the use of government-built warehouses and low-interest federal loans to farmers made in paper money, and then over its refusal to give the Alliance representation on the state's new Railroad Commission. In June 1891, dissident Alliancefolk, joined by members of the Knights of Labor and many veterans of the previous decade's Greenbacker and independent campaigns, finally broke with the Democrats, creating the Texas People's Party. Other states had already done so, or soon would. Bentley clearly sympathized with the movement, although there is no evidence that he joined the party at its inception in 1891. He apparently made no effort to keep his sympathies a secret, however, because no sooner had he arrived back in Texas from his California trip than he agreed to manage the campaign of gubernatorial nominee Judge Thomas L. Nugent. The *Fort Worth Gazette*, whose owners and editors knew Bentley well—they had been his partners in the Texas Investment Company—but who opposed the People's Party, voiced a near-universal opinion about the party's choice. Bentley, the *Gazette* opined, "is in every way qualified to get the best possible results out of a political fight. Fertile in resources, quick of perception, cautious, trained in the science of belligerent politics, and himself one of the best stump speakers in the state, Col. Bentley is a foe-man worthy of [D]emocratic steel."³²

Near the end of his Pacific Coast sojourn, Bentley declared that "I am getting very tired of it all and anxious to be again at home and at work in my office. When I do get home again I intend to remain there." Instead, upon his return he immediately relocated to Fort Worth, hometown of the standard-bearer Nugent, and established the party's state campaign headquarters at the Powell Building on Main Street. By August 12 the *Dallas Morning News* could report that the headquarters was the scene of "great bustle and activity" as Bentley was "engaged in sending campaign literature into the far-away parts of the state." The Populist campaign centered on four main tactics: the establishment of grass-roots Populist clubs, the deployment of speakers, the work of the Third-Party press, and the

1891. In 1890, Bentley had also delivered an address to the local Abilene Literary Society on the subject of "Industrial Education," no doubt discussing his educational ideas on that occasion; see *Taylor County News* (Abilene), Mar. 7, 1890.

³² *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 3, 1892, quoting the *Fort Worth Gazette*. By 1891, Alliance membership had declined significantly from its height of 150,000 in the mid-1880s as a consequence of the failure of the Alliance Exchange and the organization's overt move into politics, but it remained a potent political force; see Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 83, 98–99. For overviews of the Alliance's role in the creation of the Texas People's Party, see Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion*, 108–135.

staging of large rallies and camp meetings. Populists understood that they could not tap into the coffers of railroads and corporations the way that the Democrats could, so they would depend on these four elements for fundraising and disseminating the party's message.³³

The basic building blocks of the party were the Populist clubs, and Bentley recognized them as the party's best hope. Typically, a county executive committee tried to identify a capable man in each of the county's voting precincts. That man would then publish a call in the local newspaper for interested persons to meet at a local schoolhouse or other "convenient places," elect a president, secretary, and treasurer, and formally organize the club. The clubs collected meager dues—perhaps a quarter or fifty cents—and sometimes admitted women as honorary members. The club would then meet regularly, discuss the issues, listen to members or invited guests make speeches, pass resolutions to be forwarded to the county party or published in the local reform newspaper, and plan campaign events such as picnics, rallies, or camp meetings. Clubs were supposed to remit a portion of the money collected at their meetings to the state campaign office, but the poverty of many Populists was so great, and the amounts raised so small, that the state organization rarely saw any of it. After the election, party leaders bemoaned the fact that the entire amount raised by the state party from all sources was less than \$1,800.³⁴

But if fundraising proved difficult, reports on the organizational front were nonetheless encouraging. By summertime, following Bentley's lead, Populists were establishing clubs by the hundreds. In June the *Galveston Daily News* reported that two thousand Populist clubs had been established in Texas. By September Bentley claimed 2,800 clubs statewide, with 160,000 members, prompting the *Dallas Morning News* to describe him as "simply hilarious in his gleeful pleasure at what he terms a certainty of success in November." Especially heartening were the reports of black Populist clubs organizing in various parts of the state. By the week of the election, Bentley boasted 3,170 Populist clubs in the state, with "compact organizations in 213 counties." Even allowing for considerable exaggeration, it was a remarkable organizational achievement in such a short time.³⁵

Bentley also successfully organized speakers. As soon as he took command of the campaign in August, he issued a notice calling on Populist speakers "to call in their appointments for dates later than August 25th, and report to this office the time thereafter they are willing to devote to

³³ *Abilene Reporter*, June 24, 1892 (first quotation); *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 12, 1892 (second and third quotations); *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Aug. 18, 1892.

³⁴ *Dublin Progress*, June 17, 1892 (quotation); *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Dec. 22, 1892.

³⁵ *McKinney Democrat*, June 2, 1892; *Dallas Morning News*, May 11, June 24, Sept. 12 (first quotation), Nov. 2 (second quotation), 1892; *Galveston Daily News*, June 8, July 11, 1892; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), May 5, 25, June 23, 1892. For an extensive discussion of Populist clubs, see Martin, *People's Party*, 146–148.

our cause, to the elections, and the number of speeches per week they are willing to make.” Utilizing much of the infrastructure (and many of the same personnel) of the old Alliance lecturing system, Bentley managed the speaking schedules of dozens of orators, including some working virtually full-time for the party. Notices in the *Southern Mercury* and the rapidly expanding network of local Populist newspapers kept the electorate informed of their whereabouts. Naturally, he distributed Nugent’s speeches for reprint in the partisan press, and he presumably worked to arrange the personal appearances of the candidate, who was in great demand across the vast state but whose health was fragile due to diabetes.³⁶

Nugent faced not one but two Democrats—the regularly nominated incumbent governor, James S. Hogg, who represented the progressive wing of the old party—and George W. Clark, a conservative railroad attorney who ran on the libertarian slogan “Turn Texas Loose” (that is, loose from government regulation). A divided Democratic Party might seem to have bade well for Populist chances, but in an era before polling, no one knew where the various candidates stood. The conservative Clark received a major boost when the African American-dominated Republican Party offered its endorsement. Recognizing the importance of the black vote, Hogg responded by coming out in favor of a state anti-lynching law. Some observers believed that the GOP endorsement of Clark would hurt the Populists, but Bentley, whose glass always seemed to be half-full, tried to put it in the best possible light, arguing that it enabled the Populists to refute the common charge that the third party secretly worked for the Republicans. As the election neared, Bentley published optimistic charts that laid out his estimates of the vote, based, presumably, on his correspondence with local party functionaries and his own political prognostications. The biggest divide, in his estimation, came not along partisan or even ideological lines but in the urban-rural split. Believing that the Populists would overwhelmingly carry the “country” vote, he predicted a narrow People’s Party victory.³⁷

As election day approached, Bentley began to focus on the voting process itself. Concerned—and rightfully so, given Texas’s history—about fraud, he had the party distribute detailed instructions to party workers on how to comply with the state’s arcane election laws and guard against the opposition’s dirty tricks. He also provided specific guidance for local party officials on how to print the party’s ballots (each party in those days printed and distributed its own ballots, or “tickets,” to voters at the polling places, except in cities with populations exceeding ten thousand, which used a ballot more like a modern secret ballot). “We may expect all sorts

³⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 13, 1892; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Aug. 18, 1892 (quotation).

³⁷ Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform*, 125–141 (first quotation on p. 131); *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Sep. 29, 1892 (second quotation); *Wise County Messenger* (Decatur), Oct. 1, 1892.

of tricks to be resorted to, and it will be well to caution our friends to look out for them,” he warned, giving a number of ways that the ballots could be manipulated. Despite these concerns, he believed that “there is a large silent vote that will be case this year,” including 30 percent of the German vote and “a large number” of black Republicans who he believed would buck the wishes of their leaders. Bentley also had the most important election laws published, along with a sample ballot and an exhortation to “Watch! Watch!! Watch!!!”³⁸

Victory was not to be. Texans went to the polls on November 8 and reelected Hogg governor by a vote of 190,486 to George W. Clark’s 133,395 and Thomas L. Nugent’s 108,483. After the election, Bentley, Nugent, and party chairman H. S. P. “Stump” Ashby jointly issued a public postmortem on the election. The statement praised the “106,000 noble men [who] stood in our ranks to the last and voted their convictions,” adding that “no party movement ever encountered greater difficulties,” including widespread voter fraud and a state campaign fund that “never aggregated the sum of \$1800.” Optimism aside, however, Bentley and his colleagues candidly noted the two greatest tactical failures in the party’s ongoing efforts to forge a winning electoral coalition. First, they conceded that the Populist coalition in 1892 was “composed almost entirely of white men,” although the leaders gave “full recognition of the fidelity and devotion of that comparatively small number of colored men, who, with rare courage, stood with us in the fight for principle.” Second, they acknowledged the party’s failure to attract urban laborers in sufficient numbers. Nevertheless, the leaders predicted that in the next election, “farmer and artisan linked together in the ties of true fraternity will stand side by side in the perilous places, to deliver the last shot and wield the last blow in defense of the common cause.”³⁹

Whatever hesitance Bentley initially may have felt in joining the party in 1891 evaporated after the experience of the 1892 race. He was all in. In February 1893 a group of Populists led by Thomas Nugent chartered a company to publish a statewide party newspaper in Fort Worth called the *Advance*. The group bought three papers—the *Fort Worth Evening News*, the *San Antonio Truth*, and the existing *Fort Worth Advance*—and consolidated them into the new entity. Bentley would serve as editor. To manage its financial affairs the group turned to George B. Loving, son of the legendary cattleman Oliver Loving and himself a rancher and the editor of both the *Fort Worth Gazette* and the *Texas Live Stock Journal*. Bentley had worked with Loving on the latter publication, and Loving had managed the Texas Investment Company when Bentley was associated with it a decade earlier.

³⁸ *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Oct. 13, Nov. 3 (quotations), 1892.

³⁹ *Biennial Report of the Secretary of State of the State of Texas, 1892* (Austin: Ben C. Jones, 1893), 98; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas) Dec. 22, 1892 (quotations).

One prominent Populist editor averred that Bentley's editorship alone was "enough to insure its success," but the *Austin Statesman* noted that the paid-in capital of \$30,000 was "hardly a drop in the bucket" for a daily paper.⁴⁰

The *Statesman's* pessimistic prediction proved true; the paper lasted less than two years before the *Southern Mercury* took it over. Bentley's tenure with the paper lasted less than two months, although the circumstances of his departure are not known. It is possible that Alice Bentley put her foot down and demanded that he spend more time in Abilene, where their family had grown to include five children, including four under the age of seventeen. But if anyone thought that Bentley's exit from the *Advance* would bring some semblance of routine to his life, they were sorely mistaken. In early 1893 the United Confederate Veterans appointed him inspector general for the western half of Texas, a post that required him to organize "camps, regiments and brigades" throughout the region. In May, the same week he left the *Advance*, a deadly tornado tore through the town of Cisco, fifty miles east of Abilene, damaging or destroying almost every structure in the city and killing twenty-eight people. The people of Abilene immediately leapt into motion, creating a committee of forty citizens headed by Bentley. Soon the committee had collected a train car full of groceries, clothing, tents, bedding, and other supplies, as well as five hundred dollars in cash, and dispatched Bentley and a dozen men to the town. The men took horses and patrolled the city and adjacent countryside, offering assistance and protection to those in need. The *Galveston Daily News* editorialized that "without exaggeration, every man, woman and child in this city of desolation blesses the name of Abilene and Col. Bentley and his generous comrades are everywhere welcomed with tears and thanksgiving." Historians who have argued that the "ancient habits of mutuality" inherent in southern Protestant culture help explain Populism need to look no further than Bentley's actions in Cisco for evidence to support their thesis, although his actions do not necessarily preclude a modernist outlook in terms of political economy.⁴¹

Similarly, scholars who have emphasized the theme of Populist "producerism"—that is, the idea that Populists were primarily motivated by a traditional, pre-capitalist American belief, dating at least back to Jacksonian times, that labor is the source of all wealth and that the laborer "is worthy of his hire"—might find evidence of such a belief in the Popu-

⁴⁰ *McKinney Democrat*, Feb. 23, Mar. 16 (first quotation), 1893; *Austin Daily Statesman*, Feb. 20, 1893 (second quotation); *Dallas Morning News*, Mar. 26, May 3, 1893; *Galveston Daily News*, Feb. 21, 1893; *Brenham Daily Banner*, Mar. 3, 1893; *El Paso Herald*, Feb. 23, 1903.

⁴¹ Bruce Palmer, "Southern Mercury," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ees12>> [Accessed Dec. 17, 2018]; *Dallas Morning News*, Jan. 4, 1893 (first quotation); *Galveston Daily News*, May 2, 1893 (second quotation); Robert C. McMath Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 44 (third quotation).

lism of Henry Bentley. Unfortunately, no full texts of an 1890s Bentley stump speech or essay on political economy survive. It is doubtful that he would have disagreed entirely with the producerist position; it was a given with most Populists and was essentially boilerplate text in their platforms. Perhaps the best clues to his position on producerism, however, came in the official statement jointly issued by Bentley, Thomas Nugent, and Stump Ashby to the state's Populists in the immediate aftermath of the 1892 election. Whether Bentley himself wrote the statement (and it sounds very much like him), he certainly would have provided significant input and readily signed on to it. In the statement, Bentley and his colleagues paid homage to "laboring men" and lauded the solidarity between "farmer and artisan" in the Populist movement. But the statement noted that when Populism triumphed, "equal and exact justice" will re-establish order, not in the antagonism of the old, but in the equities of the new era, and merchant and farmer, lawyer and artisan, each in his own sphere of active usefulness without the disturbance of a single right, shall find self-interest consistent with the interest of all, as each partakes of the all-pervading prosperity." In this coming Populist millennium, the statement announced, "labor and capital shall dwell together, not as warring enemies, but as kindly friends, joining willing hands in the beneficent work of production." This brand of producerism—if indeed that is the word for it—was hardly pre-capitalist or anti-capitalist, and though it foretold harmony between labor and capital, it bore little resemblance to the "cooperative commonwealth" that some scholars have claimed to be the goal of Populism. In Bentley's version of Populism, the goal of government was the liberal project of establishing "equal and exact justice"—that is, the rule of law—thus allowing capital and labor to pursue their own "self-interest consistent with the interest of all."⁴²

With the 1892 campaign behind him, Bentley in July 1893 assured a Fort Worth reporter that he was "attending strictly to professional business this year." That was a flat-out lie. Apart from his charitable and veterans' activities, he continued to devote much time to the People's Party. That same month the *Dallas Morning News* reported that Bentley had spoken "throughout the state" on the party's behalf, and referred to him as "the third party state organizer." Later that month he delivered six Populist speeches in six days in Jack County. In October he campaigned as far north as Amarillo and as far west as El Paso. He returned to Fort Worth in December, where a local paper reported that "The colonel's law practice is good." That claim was surely open to question.⁴³

⁴² *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Dec. 22, 1892 (all quotations except for "cooperative commonwealth"). Goodwyn is the most prominent champion of the "cooperative commonwealth" theme, titling an entire section of his book "To Build the Cooperative Commonwealth"; see Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 109.

⁴³ *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, July 28 (first quotation), Dec. 14, 1893; *Dallas Morning News*, July 17, 1893 (second and third quotations); *Jacksboro Gazette*, July 27, 1893; *El Paso Daily Times*, Oct. 20, 1893.

As these events unfolded in 1893, the already-bad economy took an alarming turn for the worse. In May the stock market crashed. Banks and businesses failed in unprecedented numbers, and unemployment soared. The whole country now joined the nation's long-beleaguered farmers in the worst depression yet in the nation's history. The ever-optimistic Bentley naturally saw a political silver lining in these dark clouds. In February 1894 he told a reporter that he believed the Democratic president's record would drive many Texas Democrats into the arms of the Populists. "There is an element in the Democratic party in sympathy with the laboring classes," he declared, "and that element will never indorse or consent to a union with those who uphold the national [D]emocratic administration and its hurtful policies." By the time the Populists met for their state nominating convention in Waco in June, Bentley had cemented his standing as one of the party's major leaders. He was elected to one of the two at-large seats on the state executive committee (a position he shared with the only African American member, John B. Rayner). He was also appointed to the five-man state campaign committee. The party again nominated the revered Nugent, with whom Bentley had now become close friends, for governor. When the votes were counted in November, the Populists showed remarkable growth, but fell short of victory. Nugent lost to Democrat Charles A. Culberson by a vote of 207,167 to 152,731. Nugent's vote had not doubled as some Populists predicted, but it *had* grown by nearly 50,000 votes over 1892. Culberson polled only 49 percent of the overall vote (the Republicans fielded their own ticket), a sobering tally for a supposedly unified Democratic Party.⁴⁴

Populists looked to 1896 with a mix of anticipation and trepidation. Thomas Nugent asked what many of the party faithful wondered: "Shall 1896 witness the complete enslavement of labor, or prove to be its year of jubilee?" Nugent would not live to learn the answer; he died shortly after the election. In the course of eulogizing the fallen leader, Bentley offered a candid and insightful analysis of what he considered the virtues and hallmarks of the People's Party. First, he laid out the basic principle Populists were fighting for: "the effort to make conditions easier for the poor." All new political parties, he explained, attract "men with hobbies who have failed of recognition in the older parties, and who have seized on any sort of political agitation to further their own views," and such men have often found their way into the leadership of the parties. The "People's party bears no exception to the rule," he admitted. Moreover,

⁴⁴ R. Hal Williams, *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 21–39; *Galveston Daily News*, Feb. 23, 1894 (quotation); *Texas Advance* (Dallas), Aug. 18, 1894; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), June 28, Oct. 4, Nov. 14, 1894; *Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 14, 1894; *Biennial Report of the Secretary of State of the State of Texas, 1894* (Austin: Ben C. Jones, 1895), 252.

he acknowledged that the party “has had to contend with the usual number of cranks.” But he also contended that “no new party in this country has ever had so large a percentage of conservative, unselfish and zealous leaders,” and that with men like Nugent, and presumably himself, leading it, the party now “stands well to the front as the best representative on this continent, of well-balanced conservatism and zealous patriotism, with but little, if any, of the impetuosity and want of morale that so often characterizes new political organizations.” Bentley’s use of the word “conservatism” to describe Populism may strike modern readers (and some contemporaneous ones as well) as strange, perhaps even oxymoronic, but it was a word that Texas Populists often deployed as a self-describing adjective. To their thinking, preserving equality of opportunity for ordinary working Americans in the face of the new industrial capitalism was an eminently conservative cause. What was radical was turning the newly giant corporations and their robber-baron leaders “loose”—to use the Democratic slogan from 1892—to ride roughshod over workers and farmers. What was radically different in the America of the 1890s, Bentley and the Populists believed, was the massive gap between the few rich and the many poor.⁴⁵

Reelected to the party’s state executive committee and to the state campaign committee for the 1896 election, Bentley continued the activism of the previous two cycles. He began to appear on various short-lists for high office, including governor and congressman, although he seemed content to be the consummate party insider. Nonetheless, when the Populists of the Third Congressional District met to choose a candidate, Bentley emerged as the clear choice. West Texas, where railroad and large ranching interests dominated the economy, seemed to rest safely in the hands of the Democratic Party. Bentley surely knew that he stood little chance in the sprawling, seventy-nine-county district, which stretched from just west of Fort Worth all the way to El Paso, encompassed the entire Panhandle, and enjoyed the well-deserved nickname the “Jumbo District.” Only a truly dedicated Populist would have agreed to mount a campaign there. The Democratic *Abilene Reporter*, in noting Bentley’s nomination, complimented him as “a man of splendid attainments, a scholar and withal a gentleman,” acknowledging that “perhaps no other man in the district of his political faith has to the same extent the respect and esteem as does Col. Bentley.” While the *Reporter* knew that no Populist could win in the district, it admitted that it had “no disparaging comments to make against the character” of the Populist nominee. Populists, of course, expressed confidence that they would win with Bentley on the ticket, and the *Dallas Morning News* sounded a note of caution when it reminded Democrats

⁴⁵ *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Jan. 24, 1894 (first quotation); Catharine Nugent (comp.), *Life Work of Thomas L. Nugent* (Stephenville, Tex.: privately published, printed by Laird and Lee, Chicago, 1896), 42–43 (second through seventh quotations).

that he was “admittedly one of the strongest campaigners in the peoples party in this state.”⁴⁶

Bentley, however, could not focus his undivided attention on his congressional race. He remained on the party’s five-man Central Campaign Committee charged with overseeing the state campaign. The party also dispatched him to St. Louis as a member of Texas’s delegation to the Populist National Committee. There Populists faced an existential problem: To the great surprise of most observers, the Democrats had just nominated for president the Nebraska congressman William Jennings Bryan, who endorsed several Populist policy positions, including the coinage of silver, the graduated income tax, and greater regulation of pools and trusts. Great support existed among Populists outside of Texas for the People’s Party to “fuse” with the Democrats and nominate Bryan. Bentley would have none of that. “The past record of the democratic party shows it to be thoroughly unreliable as to platform promises,” he declared. “We do not believe in [d]eath-bed repentance.” Bentley and the 103-man Texas delegation opposed fusion to the bitter end, understanding that it would likely spell the death of their party. But in the end, the best they could do was to engineer a reversal of the order of nominations, moving the vice-presidential nomination ahead of the presidential vote. They hoped that if the convention nominated a Populist running mate, Bryan would decline the nomination, which would then open the door to the party nominating a true Populist for president. The tactic, apparently suggested by Barnett Gibbs of Dallas, failed; cleverly, Bryan neither refused nor accepted the Populist nomination. Bentley and the other Texas delegates returned home to a hero’s welcome, dubbed “the immortal 103” by their fellow Texas Populists for their principled stand against Bryan at the convention. Still, rank-and-file Texas Populists remained bitterly divided over whether to support Bryan or not, and the divisions did not bode well for the upcoming elections.⁴⁷

One of the final acts of the Populist convention in St. Louis had been to elect a new national committee. Each state was allotted three members, and the Texans chose Bentley, along with Harry Tracy and Stephen C. Granberry, to represent them on the committee. When the new committee met prior to the convention’s adjournment, Bentley was one of five nominees for national party chair. He lost to Senator Marion Butler of

⁴⁶ *Galveston Daily News*, Sep. 23, 1896 (first quotation); *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), June 28, Oct. 4, Dec. 13, 1894, Mar. 12, 1896; *Abilene Reporter*, June 26, 1896 (first, second, and third quotations); *Dallas Morning News*, July 22, 1896 (fourth quotation).

⁴⁷ *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), July 23, 1896 (first and second quotations); *Galveston Daily News*, July 9, Aug. 5, 1896 (third quotation). For a contemporaneous account of the Texans’ maneuver at the St. Louis convention, see *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 2, 1896.

North Carolina, although he remained one of Populism's most prominent national leaders for the remainder of the party's existence.⁴⁸

Two thousand Populists descended upon Galveston in August for the party's state nominating convention. Many among the party's leadership, including most of the African American delegates, thought they should repudiate the national convention's nomination of Bryan and instead strike a fusion deal with Texas Republicans, offering Populist support for GOP nominee William McKinley in exchange for Republican support for the Populist state ticket. The problem was that such a course would undoubtedly alienate many Populists who either liked Bryan, loathed all Republicans, or both. Recognizing the delicacy of the situation, the delegates on the first day of the gathering elected the judicious, pragmatic Bentley to chair the convention. The Abilenian soon had his parliamentary skills tested, when a Smith County delegate introduced a controversial resolution calling for the repudiation of Bryan. This instantly threw the convention into an uproar, but Bentley deftly referred it to the resolutions committee, a maneuver that displeased the losing side but successfully buried the proposal. Throughout the remainder of the convention, Bentley, assisted by party leaders Jerome Kearby, Stump Ashby, Harry Tracy, Barnett Gibbs, and Charles H. Jenkins, strove to contain the divisions that threatened to tear the party asunder. Their ultimate success in minimizing these divisions was due, in no small measure, to Bentley's leadership. As a final accomplishment, he succeeded in having his close associate and fellow Abilenian Joseph S. Bradley, editor of the *West Texas Sentinel*, elected state party chair for the next two years.⁴⁹

The ensuing campaign was one of the most acrimonious in the state's history. When the votes were counted in November, the Populist state ticket polled 44 percent of the vote. As expected, Bentley lost his congressional race by a 62 to 38 percent margin in the heavily Democratic district. In the aftermath of the election, many Populists, disillusioned and discouraged, either returned to the Democratic Party or simply dropped out of politics, but not Bentley. He remained upbeat and optimistic and predicted that Populists would unite while reform-minded Democrats, chafing under their party's control by self-dealing conservatives, would desert the Democratic Party for Populism. In 1898 the People's Party repaid Bentley's many services by nominating him for commissioner of the General Land Office. In the meantime he had assumed the editorship of the *West Texas Sentinel*, the Abilene Populist paper founded by Joseph Bradley, which gave him an entrée into the Reform Press Association, a critical adjunct to the People's Party. As the 1898 campaign got under

⁴⁸ *San Francisco Call*, July 25, 1896; *Atlanta Constitution*, July 26, 1896.

⁴⁹ *Galveston Daily News*, Aug. 6, 1896; *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 7, 10, 1896.

way, a reporter from the small town of Dublin reported on an encounter he had with “a prominent Democrat of Dallas.” Referring to Bentley, the Democrat avowed that “though he is a populist and I a democrat, I intend to cast my vote for him for land commissioner. He is the most enthusiastic man I ever saw about the possibilities of the future for Texas and an earnest advocate of everything that tends to build up the state. . . . [H]e is one of the best and most conscientious and able men I ever met.”⁵⁰

The election results that year signaled to many Populists that the third-party revolt was effectively over: The People’s Party received only about one-third of all votes cast. Bentley presumably could take some personal satisfaction over the fact that he outperformed all the other Populists on the state ticket, including gubernatorial nominee Barnett Gibbs. After 1898 Populists in Texas and the nation fell into bitter recrimination and division, mainly over the question of whether to give up on the party’s organization altogether and merge with the Democrats, or to continue the fight for reform as a separate organization. Bentley supported the latter view, but as a major leader at both the state and national levels he worked in vain to harmonize the views of the party’s opposing wings, an objective that was impossible to accomplish. In 1899 he held the evidently self-appointed post of “state organizer” for the party, and he continued to travel widely through the state trying to recapture some of the organizational magic of 1892 and 1894. After a July 1899 swing through Waco, Hillsboro, Waxahachie, and Dallas, he reported to his wife from McKinney that he had “found the populists *very much disorganized*,” but he had “succeeded in getting the party workers awake and they will get down to work without delay.” Ever optimistic, he expressed his belief that “there will be a live organization in this county for 1900.”⁵¹

Few organizations materialized, at least not to the extent that could revive Populism. Still Bentley remained dedicated to the idea of grass-roots organization. It was not just a tactic to him but the essence of Populism—the idea that government of the people, by the people, and for the people should originate *with* the people themselves, as it seemed to have done in the halcyon days of Populism in the first half of the 1890s. So

⁵⁰ *Biennial Report of the Secretary of State of the State of Texas, 1896* (Austin: Ben C. Jones, 1897), 64, 68; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Apr. 14, 21, 1898; *McKinney Democrat*, Apr. 14, 1898; *Lampasas Leader*, Aug. 5, 1898; *Dublin Progress*, Aug. 19, 1898 (quotations). Bentley had had some sort of affiliation with Bradley’s *West Texas Sentinel* as early as 1895, as he was listed along with Bradley as a representative of the paper at the Texas Reform Press Association meeting of that year, but it is not clear what his role was then; see *Dallas Morning News*, May 30, 1895; *Galveston Daily News*, Aug. 5, 1896. In the 1898 state convention Barnett Gibbs initially declined the nomination for governor in favor of Bentley, but the delegates nominated Gibbs by acclamation anyway; Bentley then received the land commissioner nomination by acclamation; see *Dublin Progress*, Aug. 5, 1898.

⁵¹ *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Dec. 29, 1898, June 22, July 6, Aug. 17, 1899; Henry L. Bentley to Alice Bentley, July 13, 1899, Bentley Scrapbook (quotations). For a good example of Bentley’s efforts to resist fusion while holding the party together, see *Rockdale Messenger*, May 10, 1900.

although he remained a member of the Populist National Committee all the way until its final demise in 1908 (and served on the state executive committee and as a presidential elector in 1904), he concentrated his efforts at grass-roots organizing. He held the post of state organizer at least through 1905, when the press noted that he “is making herculean efforts to reorganize the scattered forces of reform throughout the state and writes us that he is working night and day to the end that he may form community organizations in every county of the state as quickly as possible.” In 1906 the national executive committee recognized his efforts. It authorized Bentley “to continue the work he had individually pursued for sixteen years of originating People’s party clubs throughout the United States,” and named him president of the National Federation of People’s Party Clubs. In 1908 the remnant of the party that opposed fusion with the Democrats nominated Populist hero Tom Watson of Georgia for president, and Bentley corresponded with him throughout the quixotic campaign about his grass-roots efforts to reorganize the party. In the August 1908 state Populist convention—the last the party would ever hold—Bentley’s fellow Populists accorded him what must have been little more than a symbolic honor, electing him state party chairman, although the convention did not bother to put out a state ticket. Populism disappeared from Texas after the 1908 elections. By 1915 it had become a matter of nostalgia; when a Central Texas newspaper ran a story giving a rundown of old Populists and where they were now, it said that “H. L. Bentley, though getting aged, still lives in Abilene. He still claims to be a populist. Has never voted in the [D]emocratic primary since leaving the party thirty years ago.”⁵² If anyone could claim to be the last Populist, it was Henry Lewis Bentley.⁵³

⁵² *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Apr. 28, May 12, 19, June 23, July 21, 1904, Feb. 9, 16, 23, 1905; *Galveston Daily News*, Aug. 11, 1904; *Dublin Progress*, Mar. 24, 1905 (first quotation); *Abilene Daily Reporter*, Mar. 27, 1905, Mar. 20, 1908; *San Antonio Daily Express*, June 29, 1906, Dec. 8, 1907, Aug. 12, 1908; *Dallas Morning News*, June 6, July 1, 1906; *Bryan Morning Eagle*, June 30, 1906 (second quotation); *Cameron Herald*, Apr. 29, 1915 (third quotation). An extensive correspondence between Bentley and Tom Watson, spanning the years 1905–1908 and including more than forty letters, can be found in the Thomas E. Watson Papers #775, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (available online at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/watson/>). Three additional Bentley-to-Watson letters from 1905 are in the H. L. Bentley Letters, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁵³ During the editorial review process for this article, an anonymous referee for this journal called attention to the fact that a 2002 article carried a title that shared the “Last Populist” trope. In “The Last Populist: George Washington Armstrong and the Texas Gubernatorial Election of 1932, and the ‘Zionist’ Threat to Liberty and Constitutional Government,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 40 (March 2002): 3–16, Kenneth E. Hendrickson Jr. unintentionally reinforced several of my interpretive points regarding Henry Bentley. Hendrickson’s putative “Last Populist,” Armstrong, was a raving right-wing anti-Semite, conspiracy theorist, racist, and demagogue, fitting—in spades—many of the stereotypes of Populists as propagated by Richard Hofstadter and others. The only problem is that Hendrickson was applying the “populist” label to a man who was never an actual capital-P Populist. In the 1890s Armstrong had been the *Democratic* county judge of Tarrant County, undoubtedly a sworn political enemy of real Texas Populists like Bentley.

But Bentley was not prepared, in the poet's words, to go gentle into that good night. He was, however, prepared to give the lie to another literary adage about there being no second acts in American lives. For even as the Populist movement began its inexorable decline, Bentley was thinking of other ways to make good on the assessment of him as "the most enthusiastic man I ever saw about the possibilities of the future for Texas and an earnest advocate of everything that tends to build up the state." Populists' claims to be "conservatives" notwithstanding, Bentley, above all else, was a modernizer; he saw Populism as a vehicle not just for reform but for bringing the nation—and especially the nation's farmers—into the modern world. The Populists' plans to reorganize the country's systems of banking and agricultural finance, protect organized labor, and regulate monopolistic industries formed only a part of that modernizing agenda. Bentley and other Populists understood that in the turn-of-the-century United States, the complex problems created by the new, large-scale, industrial-capitalist order required solutions beyond the reach of rugged individuals. Bentley, although not given to public philosophizing, undoubtedly would have agreed heartily with his fellow West Texas Populist Charles H. Jenkins, who said, "I have never been frightened by that scarecrow, strong government. I believe in a government strong enough to protect the lives, liberty and property of its citizens."⁵⁴

Bentley found Populist ideals, including the belief in an activist government, prospering in an unlikely and decidedly unflashy place: the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). As the national economy improved in the years after 1896, farmers saw little of the alleged return of prosperity. In Texas, moreover, farmers faced a dire new danger in the boll weevil, which devastated cotton crops. Responding to the plight of farmers and mindful of the danger of another Populist-style agrarian revolt, representatives in Washington began devoting more resources to the USDA. Starting around the turn of the century and continuing for the next three decades, a quiet revolution was launched in the halls of the USDA and in the land-grant colleges, state legislatures, and countless farm communities that it served—a revolution that would give new life to Populist ideas.⁵⁵

Back in 1887 Congress had passed the Hatch Experiment Station Act, which allowed the USDA to provide federal funds to the states for agricultural research. The existing agriculture departments at the Land Grant

The only political tenet Armstrong seems to have shared with 1890s Populists was his opposition to the gold standard. So it is with a cordial nod to my friend Ken Hendrickson that I appropriate the title of his excellent article and attach it to a man to whom I think it more properly applies.

⁵⁴ *Dublin Progress*, Aug. 19, 1898 (first quotation); *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Aug. 9, 1894 (second quotation).

⁵⁵ Gary Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government from the Founding to the Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 190–197.

colleges, including Texas A&M, were the main means of implementing the state programs. Beginning around the turn of the century, the experiment station system and support staff in the USDA itself grew steadily. The decentralized nature of the program made it acceptable in the era of William McKinley and “limited government.” In that era, states still had far more sweeping powers—if they chose to use them—than the federal government. Funneling federal funds for agricultural research and education to states and counties was both constitutionally feasible and politically wise, because it addressed farmers’ issues *and* steered them away from more radical remedies.⁵⁶

In Bentley’s region of West Texas, ranchers faced their own set of problems: a severe drought that followed years of overgrazing. In 1898 the USDA responded to the crisis with the decision to establish the nation’s first Grass Experiment Station, intended to research methods to improve the drought-ravaged and overgrazed pasturelands of the region. Although the records do not indicate how the agency identified him, it turned to Henry Bentley as its point-man on the ground in Texas. First, two USDA scientists from the agency’s Division of Agrostology traveled from Washington to Abilene. There, with the assistance of Bentley, whom they appointed “special agent in charge of grass experiments,” they leased a 640-acre tract and designed the experiments. Over the next three years, with a missionary-like zeal, Bentley meticulously conducted fifteen hundred experiments on range restoration techniques and tested dozens of different varieties of grasses, including native varieties and species from Italy, Japan, Siberia, Africa, Australia, and India. In addition to the work at the experiment-station plot, he maintained a garden at his home in town where he grew 148 varieties of grasses and forage plants. He published four technical treatises relating to the work, including *Grasses and Forage Plants of Central Texas* and his profusely illustrated final report, *Experiments in Range Improvement in Central Texas*, which required a lengthy trip to Chicago to oversee the production of the bulletin’s photographs, engravings, tables, and maps. His research concluded that with proper husbandry and conservation techniques, including scientific plowing, the cultivation of the correct native grasses, and periodic resting of pastures, grazing capacity on the depleted lands could more than double. In a letter to Alice written from Chicago, he expressed his fervent hope that the publication would be “a great educator.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 190–192.

⁵⁷ H. L. Bentley, *Cattle Ranges of the Southwest: A History of the Exhaustion of the Pasturage and Suggestions for Its Restoration* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898); H. L. Bentley, *A Report Upon the Grasses and Forage Plants of Central Texas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898); H. L. Bentley, *Progress of Experiments in Forage Crops and Range Improvement in Abilene, Tex.* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Division of Agrostology, 1899); H. L. Bentley, *Experiments in Range Improvement in Central Texas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902); Juanita Daniel

Agros. 26.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.

FARMERS' BULLETIN No. 72.

CATTLE RANGES OF THE SOUTHWEST:

A HISTORY OF THE EXHAUSTION OF THE PASTURAGE
AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ITS RESTORATION.

BY

H. L. BENTLEY,

Special Agent in charge of Grass Station at Abilene, Tex.



WASHINGTON:
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE.
1898.

Title page of H. L. Bentley's *Cattle Ranges of the Southwest: A History of the Exhaustion of the Pasturage and Suggestions for Its Restoration* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898). This is but one example of the many works he published on agriculture as a "special agent" with the USDA.

Populists like Bentley vocally supported the growing federal role in agriculture. In his final report before the experiment station closed in 1901, the always upbeat Bentley noted that “the book farmer” had traditionally been “looked upon by the regulation or orthodox farmer as ‘a crank,’ a visionary sort of creature to be respected for his enthusiasm, but to be avoided in matters of business.” He could have added that Populists, with their penchant for innovation and experimentation, had themselves long been dismissed as “cranks.” Bentley contended, however, that in the modern world, “the farmer who reads, studies, experiments, and adopts scientifically correct methods is no longer sneered at by those who are less advanced than he.” Although the world was “slow to adopt anything new,” if it could “be demonstrated that it pays to do so . . . no people are more ready to take hold than are the farmers and stockmen of the United States.”⁵⁸

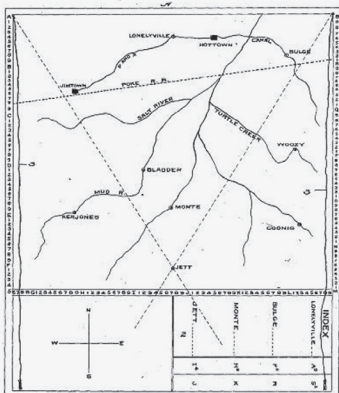
Bentley’s modernist bent surfaced in a side project he pursued around the turn of the century. Perhaps as a result of his work with the experiment station, he developed an interest in maps and how to improve them. Specifically, he thought it should be easier to locate features on a map. In 1899 he devised what he described as “a simple and convenient system by which names and localities on maps, drawings, and analogous articles can be readily and accurately ascertained.” It involved the placement along a map’s edges of “distinguishing marks . . . in the form of regularly progressing numerals, the alphabet, or, in fact, any sign or symbol.” These would be referenced in an index, and “cords or tapes” would be included “which when moved to the distinguishing marks will indicate at their point of crossing or intersection the place desired to be located.” Minus the cords, the system bore a resemblance to the ones later used in modern Mapscop or other highway or atlas-type maps. Bentley sold a quarter-interest in the project to raise money to obtain a patent, and in 1900 the U.S. Patent Office issued him Patent No. 648,913 on the idea. “I hope to make the scheme go,” he told Alice as he pursued the patent. He certainly had fun with the project, inventing place-names like “Lonelyville,” “Woozy,” and “Kerjones” for the prototype map that he submitted with his patent application. Like most inventors, Bentley never got rich off his patent, but it stands as further evidence of his inquiring mind and his penchant for innovation. It also provides further evidence to refute those who have described Populists as backward-looking rustics, angry at the modern world and hostile to capitalist enterprise.⁵⁹

Zachry, “Range Conservation Experimental Station At Abilene,” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ncro1>> [Accessed May 18, 2018]; *El Paso Daily Herald*, June 29, 1899, May 25, 1900; *Houston Post*, Sep. 27, 1901; *Caldwell News-Chronicle*, Oct. 11, 1901; Henry L. Bentley to Alice Bentley, Apr. 19, 1901, Bentley Scrapbook (quotation).

⁵⁸ Bentley, *Experiments in Range Improvement*, 11–12.

⁵⁹ H. L. Bentley, Letter Patent of “a map, drawing or similar device provided with an index,” May 8,

No. 648,913. H. L. BENTLEY. Patented May 8, 1900.
 B.A.P. (Application filed Sept. 21, 1899.)
 (No Model.)



Invented by H. L. Bentley
 Attest: H. L. Bentley
 H. L. Bentley

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

HENRY LEWIS BENTLEY, OF ABILENE, TEXAS.

MAP.

SPECIFICATION forming part of Letters Patent No. 648,913, dated May 8, 1900.
 Application filed September 21, 1899. Serial No. 731,212. (No model.)

To all whom it may concern:

Be it known that I, HENRY LEWIS BENTLEY, a citizen of the United States, residing at Abilene, in the county of Taylor and State of Texas, have invented certain new and useful Improvements in Maps; and I do declare the following to be a full, clear, and exact description of the invention, such as will enable others skilled in the art to which it appertains to make and use the same.

The invention relates to maps. The object of the invention is to provide a simple and convenient system by which names and localities on maps, drawings, and analogous articles can be readily and accurately ascertained.

To this end the invention consists in printing, placing, or pasting upon or near the edges of the map, drawing, &c., a number of distinguishing-marks, such as numerals or letters, together with an index of the localities on the map with corresponding distinguishing marks, and providing the map with two indicators, which are preferably in the form of cords or tapes, which when moved to the distinguishing-marks will indicate at their point of crossing or intersection the place desired to be located.

Referring to the accompanying drawings, in which I have represented my invention in plan, A denotes the map, having along its sides and lower edge distinguishing-marks which may be in the form of regularly-progressing numerals, the alphabet, or, in fact, any sign or symbol. In the present instance I have shown numerals arranged in rows progressing from "1" to "9," each row being separated by a letter of the alphabet. Arranged at a convenient place on the map is an index 2. This index comprises the names of all the places on the map and is provided with two columns of distinguishing characters, one marked "R" and the other "L," designating right and left hand.

3 denotes cords or tapes, in the present instance shown as two in number, one secured

to the upper right-hand corner of the map and the other to the upper left-hand corner. Assuming that it be desired to locate the town of Jett, the index is consulted, and it is observed that the right-hand cord is to be moved to the distinguishing character "I" and the left-hand cord to the distinguishing character "J." In dotted lines I have shown these cords moved to these points, and it will be observed that at the place of crossing or intersection will be found the place named "Jett."

Where it is desired to apply the invention to maps now in use, strips containing distinguishing characters may be attached to the maps, and an index may be printed and also attached to the maps. It is therefore evident that my invention is not limited to a map with indexes and distinguishing characters printed thereon, as the same may be readily applied by pasting strips properly lettered or numbered to the map and also pasting thereto indexes.

Having thus described the invention, what is claimed, and desired to be secured by Letters Patent, is—

As a new article of manufacture, a map, drawing or similar device provided with an index with the names of places or localities designated thereon, each name of a place in the index being accompanied by two distinguishing characters, rows of distinguishing-numbers arranged along the edge or edges of the map or drawing or similar device, and an indicator secured to each upper right and left hand corner of the map and adapted to be crossed and indicated at their point of crossing the place desired to be located, substantially as and for the purpose set forth.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand in presence of two subscribing witnesses.

HENRY LEWIS BENTLEY.

Witnesses:
 J. P. DANIEL,
 J. E. ROBINSON.

Letter patent for H. L. Bentley's map system. Texas Patents, UNT Libraries Government Documents Department. Image from the Portal to Texas History at <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph513548/> [Accessed June 5, 2019].

In the years after 1896, even as he tinkered with his map project, administered the experiment station, and continued his work on behalf of the state and national People's Party, Bentley remained almost obsessively involved in civic and fraternal affairs in and around Abilene. The list of organizations he joined is exhausting: president of the Pecan Valley Benevolent Association; orator for Abilene's Fourth of July celebration; featured speaker for Old Settlers' Day; recruiter and consul commander for the Woodmen of the World; representative of the Supreme Lodge of the United Benevolent Association; member of the Abilene Carnegie Library board; secretary of the Abilene lodge of the Fraternal Aid Union; chair and founding member of the Abilene Fair Committee. In an era of boosterism, he was surely one of his hometown's most tireless advocates: He led efforts to have both a veterans' home (unsuccessfully) and a state epileptic asylum (successfully) located in Abilene. Over the years he joined at least five booster organizations: the Abilene Central Committee, which he chaired; the Civic Improvement League; the Abilene Progressive Committee, whose stated mission was "to Promote all Public Enterprises and Work Out Our Destiny"; and the 25,000 Club, which had the lofty goal in 1907 of quadrupling Abilene's population. The latter organization, forerunner of the city's Chamber of Commerce, asked Bentley to address its annual meeting in 1907; he selected an unsurprising topic, the "Benefits of Commercial Club Work to the Agricultural and Horticultural Interests." Not content to restrict his boosterism to Abilene, he also acted as "a prime mover" in arranging a regional convention of Central West Texas Commercial Clubs, and he represented Abilene at the meeting of the 25,000 Club's statewide counterpart, the Five Million Club. A reporter who interviewed him when the Five Million Club met in Fort Worth declared that Bentley was "full of ideas to show that his chosen home leads all other cities of the size in the state." However, "instead of quoting cotton receipts and wholesale business figures," Bentley chose to emphasize the quality of its citizens, saying, "Abilene has more educated and cultured people living within its limits than any other city of the size I ever saw." If ever there were a person whose proverbial glass was perpetually half-full, it was Henry Bentley.⁶⁰

1900, United States Patent Office (Washington, D.C.), University of North Texas Libraries, *The Portal to Texas History*, <<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph513548/>> [Accessed Dec. 18, 2018] (first, second, third, fourth, sixth, seventh, and eighth quotations); H. L. Bentley to Alice Bentley, July 13, 1899, Bentley Scrapbook (fifth quotation).

⁶⁰ *Abilene Reporter*, Dec. 23, 1889 (first quotation); *Abilene Daily Reporter*, Sep. 24, 1897; Nov. 19, Dec. 10, 1897, Feb. 24, Dec. 23, 1899, Nov. 30, 1900, May 19, Sep. 14, 1905, Aug. 1, Sep. 3, Nov. 14, 1907 (second quotation), Mar. 20, 1910, Aug. 3, 1911, Jan. 1, 25, 1924; *Taylor County News* (Abilene), Nov. 19, 1897; *Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 17, 1897; *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), July 21, 1898; *Abilene Semi-Weekly Farm Reporter*, May 2, 1905, Aug. 20, 1907; *Abilene Weekly Reporter*, June 28, 1907; *Fort Worth Telegram*, June 14, 1907 (third, fourth, fifth, and sixth quotations); *Abilene Reporter-News*, Dec. 30, 1928; Tracy Shillcut, David Coffey, and Donald S. Frazier, *Historic Abilene: An Illustrated History* (San Antonio: Historical Publishing Network, for the Abilene Preservation League, 2000), 27, 29.

As previously noted, Bentley became a state and national leader in the United Confederate Veterans, an avocation that might seem to confirm modern associations of populism with white nationalism. In 1892, he was appointed to the organization's newly created Historical Committee, which ensured that southern history, including slavery and the Civil War, was represented fairly (from an ex-Confederate viewpoint) in the nation's textbooks. The committee got off to a slow start, but in 1894, under the new chairmanship of Gen. Stephen Lee, it began work in earnest. At that year's UCV reunion in Birmingham, Alabama, the committee issued its first report, in which it took northern textbooks to task for misrepresenting southern history. Curiously, Bentley did not sign the report. There is no record that he actually attended the meeting—the 1894 Populist campaign was in full swing in Texas at the time—and there is no way to know what role, if any, he actually played in drafting the report. The following year, the UCV held its annual reunion in Houston, and the committee produced another lengthy report, which largely reiterated the previous one. This time, though Bentley's name appeared among the signers of the report, he did not actually attend the reunion, citing "business" obligations. Lee reportedly considered Bentley one of the committee's "ablest" members, but by 1898 he no longer served on the committee, although he remained active in the UCV for many more years. The Texan may well have been an avid ideological apologist for the so-called Lost Cause, but apart from his seemingly lackluster role on the UCV Historical Committee, he left no record of it. For someone who devoted so much time and effort to the veterans' organization—and whose activities on its behalf garnered frequent newspaper notice—it seems unusual that the historical record would be silent on the question. Bentley appeared more interested merely in organizing his fellow veterans and enjoying their fellowship at reunions than in Lost Cause propagandizing. For someone like Bentley, the quintessential organization man, organizing his fellow veterans would have come naturally. He well may have believed that the Confederate cause was a noble one and secession a constitutional act—most veterans did—but he never seemed to dwell on these questions. Bentley enjoyed the camaraderie of his fellow ex-Confederates, but he did not live in the past.⁶¹

⁶¹ *Galveston Daily News*, May 20, 1895; *Houston Daily Post*, July 31, 1909; *Minutes of the Third Annual Meeting and Reunion of the United Confederate Veterans . . . April 8th and 9th, 1892* (New Orleans: Hopkins' Printing, 1892), 175; *Report of the United Confederate Veteran Historical Committee . . . April 25, and 26, 1894* (New Orleans: Schumert & Warfield, 1894), 3–12; 12–15; *Minutes of the Fifth Annual Meeting and Reunion of the United Confederate Veterans held at Houston, Texas . . . [1895]* (n.p., n.d.), 12–25; *Minutes of the Eighth annual Meeting and Reunion of the United Confederate Veterans Held in the City of Atlanta . . . 1898* (New Orleans: Hopkins' Printing), 44–52; Fred Arthur Bailey, "The Textbooks of the 'Lost Cause': Censorship and the Creation of Southern State Histories," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75 (Fall 1991): 507–533. As late as 1926 Bentley was still active in the UCV, accepting an appointment as aide-de-camp to the national commander; see *Abilene Reporter*, Apr. 4, 1926.

Between the incessant, uncompensated travel that his fraternal and political pursuits necessitated and the demands of a large family, money always remained a concern. The fifty-dollar monthly salary that he earned from the USDA during the years of the experiment station provided a welcome supplement to his income, and he presumably received some sort of compensation for his work as editor of the *West Texas Sentinel* (a position he held until 1903) and from his small farm in neighboring Jones County. Nevertheless, until about 1910 he maintained both his law practice and his brokerage firm, the Abilene Investment Company, partnering in both enterprises after 1900 with Egbert Newell Kirby, who served as Abilene's mayor from 1907 to 1919. But even in his professional, pecuniary pursuits, Bentley could not resist the call to join, to volunteer, and to organize. During his years as a newspaperman, he belonged to the Texas Press Association, the West Texas Press Association (where he served as vice president), the Texas Reform Press Association (where he served on the executive committee), and the National Reform Press Association. In the waning days of the Populism, he even promoted the idea of creating an International Reform Press Association. In his capacity as a land broker, he became deeply involved with the state's principal real-estate industry group, the Real Estate and Industrial Association of Texas, which elected him vice president. He frequently spoke at the association's state conventions on such subjects as "Importance of Land Owner, Land Agent, and Railroad Working in Harmony" (1904) and "the Development of the State" (1906). Populists in the 1890s had been fond of saying that they lived "in an age of organization and co-operation" and that farmers and laborers needed to adopt the organizational methods that had made the corporation such a power in the land. It was a lesson that Bentley never forgot.⁶²

Bentley's work with the experiment station proved to be only the opening scene of the second act of Bentley's already eventful life. Another scene began to take shape in 1913, when he was sixty-six, an age most people of that era were considered well into old age. The ex-Populist's keen interest in agriculture had never waned. Few people—especially lawyers—could match the variety of his experience: After growing up on a

⁶² *Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1900* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), 66–67; *N. W. Ayer & Sons American Newspaper Annual* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer & Son, 1901), 805; *Rowell's American Newspaper Directory* (New York: Geo. P. Rowell & Co., 1902), 917; *Rowell's American Newspaper Directory* (New York: Geo. P. Rowell & Co., 1903), 934; *Abilene Daily Reporter*, Mar. 17, Apr. 29, 1904, Jan. 29, 1907; *Abilene Reporter*, May 31, 1907; *Worley's Directory of Abilene* (Dallas: John F. Worley Directory Company, 1909), 88, 146; *Dallas Morning News*, Jan. 21, 1892, Apr. 21, 1907; *Omaha Bee*, June 15, 16, 19, 1898; *Houston Chronicle*, Sep. 17, 1903; *Fort Worth Telegram*, Feb. 12, 1904 (first quotation); *Fort Worth Morning Register*, Feb. 12, 1904, Nov. 22, 1906 (second quotation); *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), Dec. 4, 1890 (third quotation), Mar. 17, 1904; *San Antonio Daily Light*, Dec. 2, 1906. Egbert N. Kirby, Bentley's business partner after 1900, was the younger brother of Augustus H. Kirby, who had been Bentley's partner in the 1890s. On E. N. Kirby, see *Abilene Reporter-News*, Jan. 13, 1949.

southern plantation and farming immediately after the Civil War, he had engaged in large-scale sheep ranching, edited two livestock-industry journals, experimented with multiple varieties of wheat on his 160-acre farm in Jones County, and operated the experiment station. He had cheered the Farmers' Union, created in 1902 and led by ex-Populists, as it spread from Texas to become a national organization, even though as an attorney he could not join. In 1904 he served as a "special contributor" to a short-lived Farmers' Union newspaper, and he sometimes spoke at the Union's meetings. (After inviting him to speak in West Texas in 1910, a local Union president noted that Bentley was always "a good drawing card.") When the Texas Conservation Congress, a statewide meeting that focused attention on issues important to progressive farmers, met in Fort Worth in 1910, Bentley apparently wanted to attend so badly that he had himself credentialed by the United Confederate Veterans as their representative.⁶³

Times had improved for Texas farmers in the years after 1900, but many problems remained. Levels of debt soared, as did the number of farms operated by tenants. Even though the USDA, state departments of agriculture, and the land-grant colleges were gradually increasing their outreach to farmers, the combination of poverty and ignorance kept many mired in primitive, unproductive farming practices. Rural men and women lagged badly behind town- and city-dwellers in their access to modern conveniences and cultural attractions. In 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed the Country Life Commission, a blue-ribbon panel charged with investigating rural condition and suggesting remedies. When the commission completed its efforts in 1910, it recommended further surveys of rural conditions, the creation of a nationwide system of extension, and a "campaign for rural progress," which would include local, state, and national conferences to increase awareness and stimulate interest in rural revitalization. It would rely on local leadership and initiatives. Texans responded enthusiastically. The Texas Commercial Secretaries and Business Men's Association established a state-level Country Life Commission, and hired Peter Radford of Parker County, a former Populist state representative and president of the state Farmers' Union, to manage the effort. When the state group met, it identified "the encouragement of a co-operative marketing plan and the institution of a rural credit system"—causes straight out of the Populist playbook—as "the two chief phases of its work."⁶⁴

⁶³ *Abilene Reporter*, June 23, 1904 (first quotation); *Abilene Semi-Weekly Farm Reporter*, Apr. 8, 1910 (second quotation); *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Apr. 3, 1910; *Dallas Morning News*, Apr. 6, 1910; *Fort Worth Morning Register*, June 22, 1911.

⁶⁴ *Report of the Commission on Country Life* (1911; reprint, New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1917), 28–31, 112–113, 120–130 (first quotation on p. 29); Betty Carol Clutts, "Country Life Aspects of the Progressive Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1962), 120–123, 129, 171–178; *Amarillo Daily News*, Dec. 4, 1912; *Houston Post*, Dec. 12, 1912; *Waco Morning News*, Jan. 5, 1913 (second and third quotations).

All along, the USDA, Texas A&M, individual counties, and the state Department of Agriculture (after its founding in 1907) had gradually been increasing the amount of extension work and the number and scope of agricultural experiment stations in the state. The Country Life movement helped to accelerate this work. Henry Bentley followed these developments with great interest. In June 1913 Abilene-area farmers founded the Taylor County Farmers' Institute. At that meeting, Bentley, sounding very much like the national organizer of People's Party's clubs, "gave in detail a plan, which he himself originated and which he has submitted to a large number of the prominent men of this state, and the Department of Agriculture at Washington, whereby organizations could be effected all over the country for the study of the problems of the farm. This plan will be submitted to the State Department of Agriculture, and it will be pushed." Later that summer, he traveled to College Station for the meeting of the statewide Texas Farmers' Institute, where he was named to that entity's education committee. By March 1914 the Texas Farm Life Commission had "arranged with Col. H. L. Bentley . . . to take in charge and vigorously push the work [of farmers' institutes] in Central West Texas." In April he undertook an ambitious speaking tour of twenty-one appearances in area schoolhouses.⁶⁵

That same year, 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, which for the first time provided large-scale federal matching funds for states to extend cooperative extension services. The bill jump-started the kind of work that Bentley had long championed. In early 1915 the state agricultural commissioner, Fred Davis, appointed Bentley as a lecturer and state organizer of farmers' institutes, giving the Abilenian the state-mandated authority (and salary) to do the work that he had already been doing on a piecemeal basis.⁶⁶

With his characteristic energy and enthusiasm, Bentley threw himself into the department's work, drawing upon his reputation as "a recognized expert on several agricultural subjects" and utilizing the statewide network of friends and acquaintances he had made during his years as a Populist

⁶⁵ Irvin M. May Jr., "Texas Agricultural Extension Service," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ampw>> [Accessed May 19, 2018]; Steve Hill, "Texas Agricultural Experiment Station," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kct14>> [Accessed May 19, 2018]; Valerie Crosswell, "Texas Department of Agriculture," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mctwc>> [Accessed Dec. 10, 2018]; Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion*, 194–196; *Abilene Daily Reporter*, June 12, 29 (first quotation), 1913, Mar. 31, 1914 (second quotation); *San Antonio Express*, Aug. 1, 1913.

⁶⁶ Irvin M. May Jr., "Texas Agricultural Extension Service," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ampw>> [Accessed May 19, 2018]; Steve Hill, "Texas Agricultural Experiment Station," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kct14>> [Accessed May 19, 2018]; Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion*, 194–196; *Austin Statesman*, Mar. 20, 1915; *Galveston Daily News*, Mar. 20, 1915; *Waco Morning News*, June 16, 1915; *Abilene Daily Reporter*, July 9, 1915.

organizer. The work was varied and interesting. In his role as organizer, he planned, publicized, and assembled the speakers for local and district farmers' institutes. When not orchestrating institutes, he traveled as a lecturer, delivering solo public addresses to "the public and especially the farmers on subjects of interest to them." It is not clear what all of the specific subjects of his speeches were, although at one state institute he was appointed to the committee on animal diseases, and he was involved in pest-eradication education at other institutes. His topic at another local institute was "How Shall Agriculture be Taught in the Public Schools?" In 1916 the Department of Agriculture initiated a program to establish junior farmers' institutes for rural boys and girls, a project Bentley embraced. In December the *Abilene Reporter* announced that in barely five weeks he had organized twenty-five of the junior institutes of west-central Texas with a membership of about twenty-five hundred. When the United States entered World War I, Bentley toured widely to promote the Agriculture Department's "food and feed" program, a wartime initiative aimed at persuading farmers to increase production of food and livestock-feed crops. He maintained a grueling schedule during these years. Between May 17 and July 24, 1915, he gave speeches in thirty-eight towns, ranging from Sterling City, northwest of San Angelo, to Hearne, three hundred miles to the southeast. In 1917, three weeks after his seventieth birthday, he delivered twelve speeches in fourteen days.⁶⁷

By 1918 his role with the Department of Agriculture seems to have narrowed; the incessant travel and lecturing came to an end, but he remained involved in farmers' institutes and other department business. The records for the department for these years have not survived, but a 1919 Abilene newspaper article listed him as "representative of the State Department of Agriculture for this section," and another identified him as the department's "District Director." In 1920 he acted as a liaison between the department and the local Farmers' Institute and attended the state institute in Austin. As late as April 1921, Bentley, "representing the State Department of Agriculture in this section," helped to organize the Taylor County unit of the newly created Texas Farm Bureau Federation. In July of that year he was listed as secretary pro tem of the Taylor County Farmers' Institute, the last such mention of him in any official capacity in agricultural affairs. At age seventy-four, the Last Populist finally retired.⁶⁸

Bentley's twilight years were happy. In 1918, with their children all grown, Henry and Alice downsized their residence on N. Second St. in

⁶⁷ *Galveston Daily News*, Mar. 20, 1915 (first quotation); *Austin American*, May 8 (second quotation), June 13, 1915, May 9 (fourth quotation), Aug. 1, 1917; *Austin Statesman*, May 27, 1916, Jan. 21, 1917 (third quotation), *Abilene Semi-Weekly Reporter*, Jan. 26, 1917; *Albany News*, Nov. 3, 1916; *Abilene Daily Reporter*, Dec. 17, 1916, Jan. 6, 1917; *Waco Morning News*, June 16, 1915; *Houston Chronicle*, Aug. 1, 1917.

⁶⁸ *Abilene Daily Reporter*, May 7 (first quotation), July 2 (second quotation), 1919, Sep. 5, 7, 1920, Apr. 17 (third quotation), July 20, 1921.



H. L. and Alice Bentley at home in their later years. *Courtesy of Frank Cox.*



Abilene, building a “modern five-room bungalow” to replace the rambling two-story stone house they had lived in since the 1880s. Their youngest son Max, a successful journalist, returned to Abilene in 1926 to assume the managing editorship of the *Abilene Reporter-News*, so the elder Bentleys had family close at hand, including three granddaughters, to dote over in their old age. Henry continued to participate in local fraternal activities, the Chamber of Commerce, and veterans’ affairs, and two weeks after his eighty-sixth birthday he occupied a place of honor on the stage at Taylor County’s annual Old Settlers’ Reunion. One month later, on Aug. 23, 1933, Bentley died from complications arising from a fall in his home. The Episcopal bishop of North Texas traveled to Abilene from Amarillo to preside over the services at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, which Bentley had helped to found nearly half a century earlier. Burial followed in Abilene’s Masonic cemetery.⁶⁹

Like most Populists in the years after 1900, Bentley rarely spoke of the People’s Party or Populism. But it is hard to deny that he was, in many ways, the quintessential Populist. As the party’s state campaign manager, executive committee member, editor of its official newspaper, congressional candidate, state convention chair, land commissioner nominee, presidential elector, state and national organizer, and state and national committeeman, he probably held more official posts with the People’s Party than any other Texan and maybe any other American. Moreover, he stood by the party long after its day as a viable political force had passed, and he never returned to the Democratic Party, even in the face of great political pressure. When he still claimed to be a Populist in 1915, long after the party had ceased to exist, he was the rare politician who put principle over party.

But what of those principles? Bentley had become a Populist because, as he put it, he wanted “to make conditions easier for the poor.” In an era that had witnessed the triumph of large-scale corporate capitalism, he concluded that the only chance for the increasingly out-muscled and powerless working classes was for them to harness the only power available to such people in a democracy—a democratically controlled government. The People’s Party might have lost the chance to empower the people through its instrumentality after 1896, but Bentley found elements of Populism alive and prospering in the USDA-led efforts to improve the lives of small farmers and ranchers. Through his work as an agricultural

⁶⁹ *Abilene Daily Reporter*, Mar. 8, 1918 (quotation); David S. Castle, architect’s plans for Bentley Residence, Abilene, Texas, Jan. 8, 1917, *The Portal to Texas History*, <<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph806493/>> [Accessed Dec. 11, 2018]; *Abilene Morning Reporter*, Sep. 27, 1925; *Abilene Morning News*, Nov. 12, 1926, July 20, 1929; *Abilene Daily Reporter*, Aug. 11, 1921, Nov. 9, 1924, Apr. 4, 1926, July 21, 1933; *Abilene Reporter-News*, Sep. 12, 1926, Aug. 8, 1959.

scientist, writer, lecturer, and organizer, he kept up the fight to impart dignity to the lives of ordinary people of his adopted state and region. His selfless devotion to civic, fraternal, and charitable causes suggests that on a personal level, he practiced what he preached.

Bentley, of course, was just one Populist, and due caution must be made in extrapolating from a case study of one individual to an entire movement. Still, he rarely seemed like an anomaly in the ranks of Texas Populists. For one thing, it seems improbable that his fellow Populists would have trusted him with so many weighty responsibilities and accorded him so many honors if he had not embodied values and ideals that they respected and admired. Those values and ideals flatly contradict what many people today think of when they hear the word “populist.” Broad-minded and tolerant, forward-thinking and optimistic, keenly interested in science and innovation, devoted to family and community, empathetic with—and trusting of—the common man and woman, Henry Bentley bore scant resemblance to the rabble-rousing, pitchfork-wielding radicals that Populists’ opponents branded them as in the 1890s. He bears no resemblance whatsoever to the conspiracy-peddling, fear-mongering demagogues who have been given the “populist” label in the years since.

Henry Bentley certainly would be dismayed at what often passes for a populist today, but he would have argued that the movement’s ideals were timeless and worth struggling for, no matter the odds. In 1895 he asked a vexing question: “Most men can fight vigorously and effectively when they feel that their efforts are going to be crowned with victory; but how few are capable of really heroic efforts when no such incentive is urging them?” Bentley surely knew the answer: It was a rare man or woman who would continue fighting for a cause that seemed hopeless. Bentley, however, was the exception. His efforts on behalf of the People’s Party were not “crowned with victory,” but his faith in democracy never wavered. How did the Last Populist keep his confidence that what he called “the grand, glorious battle for human rights” would ultimately triumph? His answer might provide inspiration for those who despair of the politics of our own time: “no fight entirely for principle,” he declared, “can ever be absolutely unavailing.”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Nugent, *Life Work of Thomas L. Nugent*, 42.