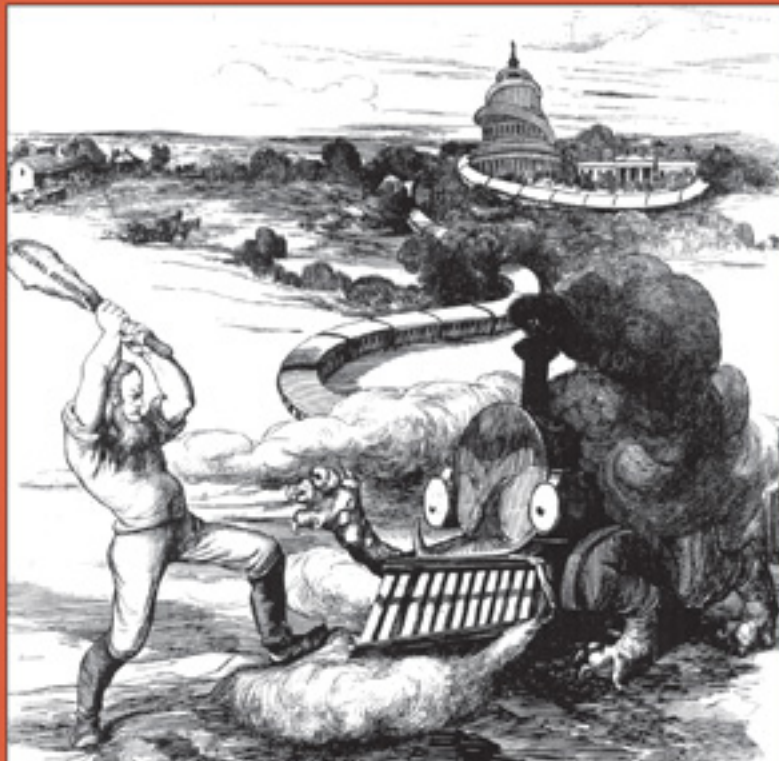


History
UNFOLDING

THE POPULIST REVOLT



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

Contents

Introduction	2
Lesson 1	The American Farmer in an Industrial Age	4
Lesson 2	Populist Discontent, Populist Protest.	8
Lesson 3	The Campaign of 1896.	12
Lesson 4	The Fate of Populism	16
Appendix	Image Close-ups	21

Introduction

Agrarian Unrest in the Gilded Age

Up to the end of the last century, the United States was still an agrarian nation. Even its early Industrial Revolution was largely shaped by its agricultural markets. Roads, canals, and railroads grew up mainly to get settlers to new farm lands and to get their crops to new markets.

Then suddenly, in the late 1800s, a new urban and industrial America emerged. Transcontinental railroads tied the country together into one huge national market. Powerful new corporations enjoying near-monopoly power came to dominate many industries. Farmers often felt left out of this new, more organized industrial society. And the more productive these farmers became, the greater their problems seemed—such as steadily falling prices for crops and livestock, rising debts, steep costs for storing and shipping produce, and more. Out on the vast prairies, the isolation of farm life only added to the farmer's loneliness and sense of helplessness. Farmers often felt trapped in the grip of a conspiracy of powerful corporate interests. This discontent led to organizing, and, in time, to political action. The result was the Populist revolt. After 1896, this uprising faded rapidly. Yet it had lasting impact on the political life of the United States.

The twelve illustrations in this booklet focus on several aspects of the story of Populism. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The American Farmer in an Industrial Age

The illustrations for this lesson set the American farmer in the context of an emerging industrial nation. Mechanization in agriculture took pace as huge corporations and transcontinental railroads turned America into a single nationwide marketplace

Populist Discontent, Populist Protest

In the new industrial order, farmers often felt at the mercy of economic forces far beyond their control. The illustrations in this lesson focus on this problem, and on some forms of agrarian organization and protest that farmers developed to deal with it.

The Campaign of 1896

The People's Party emerged as a significant force for reform in the early 1890s. In the election of 1896, the Democratic Party gave the Populists an even more powerful voice. But in so doing, it may also have helped to weaken the movement's long-term staying power.

The Fate of Populism

After 1896, the return of prosperity and the U.S. victory in the Spanish-American war seemed to take the steam out of the Populist revolt. And yet many reforms first demanded by the Populists soon became a part of the progressivism adopted by the two major parties. In this sense, then, the agrarian revolt of the late 1800s did have a lasting impact on the nation.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The Populist Revolt***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand the problems American farmers faced as the nation became more industrial and urban.

The American Farmer in an Industrial Age

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

In the 1800s, millions of farmers moved to the Midwest and the prairies of the Great Plains. Many arrived with little money and only a few simple tools. However, most of them hoped to produce crops for sale. And they wanted to be as up-to-date as they could. By the late 1800s, all kinds of new machines began to make farming more modern. This drawing of a huge, mechanized wheat farm presents a favorable view of this change. However, not all farmers could afford new machinery, railroad charges, or other costs of modern agriculture. Most had to borrow heavily to pay for these things. As their debts mounted in the late 1800s, farmers came to doubt that the new industrial order would help them that much.

Illustration 2

In the late 1800s, a truly national economy emerged as railroad lines, telegraphs, and canals linked every part of the U.S. New large-scale businesses were now able to use the latest industrial techniques to sell goods all across America. Some businessmen earned huge fortunes from companies that enjoyed near-monopoly power. Among them was John D. Rockefeller, shown in this cartoon. Others were J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and Cornelius Vanderbilt. Many Americans admired these men for helping to make the nation the wealthiest on earth. But many also feared them because of the economic and political power they enjoyed. This cartoon shows Rockefeller as a giant with enormous power compared to the puny White House in the palm of his hand and the Capitol Building labeled “Standard Oil Refinery.”

Illustration 3

Many farmers felt left out of the new, more organized industrial society that developed in the late 1800s. To buy machinery, grow crops, and find markets in which to sell their produce, farmers had to deal with many businesses—railroads, banks, grain elevator operators, etc. Most farmers felt these producers had more control over prices and markets than they did. Yet these producers all needed what the farmer provides. Why should they have so much control? In this illustration, a larger-than-life farmer is surrounded by all kinds of other people, both productive and unproductive. The suggestion is that these people all need the farmer far more than the farmer needs them.

Lesson 1 – The American Farmer in an Industrial Age

Illustration 1



Courtesy of Dover Publications

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Discussing the Illustration

1. This is a large wheat farm in the Dakota territory in 1878. In the center of the drawing is a hugethreshing machine. What part of farm work does a threshing machine do?
2. The use of modern farm machinery in the West became more common in the late 1800s. In part, that was because of the flat lands of the plains. How might this have made it easier for farmers to begin using modern farm machinery?
3. Machinery helped farmers in the West produce much more than ever before. But the growing supply of crops actually hurt many farmers, since it pushed down the prices they could earn for their crops. Can you explain why a big increase in the supply of a product often pushes down its price?
4. Do you think this drawing presents a mostly favorable or a mostly unfavorable view of the changes taking place in farming in the late 1800s? Explain your answer.

Follow-up Activities

1. Use your library to learn more about changes in farming tools and techniques in the 1800s. Find out more about the following:

- Jethro Wood's plow
- John Deere's steel plow
- Mechanical seeders
- The McCormick reaper
- Mechanical threshers
- Combines
- Tractors

As part of your research, make photocopies of drawings of these tools and the ways the farmers of the western plains used them. Create a bulletin board display called "The Industrial Revolution on the Plains."

2. Barbed wire was one simple but very important invention in the history of the West. Read more about this invention and write a brief essay about its effect on farming and ranching in the West.