



The Peoples power league : a progressive organization in Montana 1911-1915
by Edrie Lee Vinson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in
History

Montana State University

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Abstract:

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Politically, the League contained Democrats, Republicans, Progressives, Socialists and laborites. None of the prominent members held state elective office at this time. Professionally, they were lawyers, judges, newspapermen, merchants, bankers, doctors, public employees, ranchers, farmers, and a large contingent of union affiliated laborers. Representing a wide ethnic variety, they also ranged from new arrivals on the Montana scene to the older pioneers who came with the first gold rush.

Although the League managed to avoid economic, political and geographic schisms when dealing with political reform, it was only partially successful in achieving broad social changes. In 1914, the League's emphasis shifted from reform of the political process to legislation of social responsibility. The League initiated a measure for farm loans to aid Montana's agriculturalists. The same year the members sponsored an initiative for workmen's compensation to fulfill a promise made earlier to the union men. League leaders believed that these two issues would build a political farmer-laborer coalition.

Rural voters supported the League on the farm measure, but deserted it when voting on workmen's compensation. The farmer, though generally of the same economic status as the wage earner, was convinced by corporate interests that labor legislation would be applied against him, for he was, after all, an employer of labor.

In 1912 the People's Power League succeeded because the issues united progressives to pass legislation dealing with political reforms that each individual felt would increase his own power. But in 1914 when the issues shifted to non-political reform favoring one faction over another, the League's unity shattered.

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Date June 9, 1976

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ORGANIZATION IN MONTANA 1911-1915

by

EDRIE LEE VINSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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of

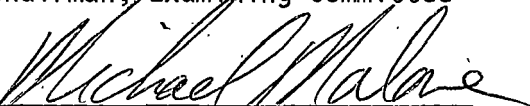
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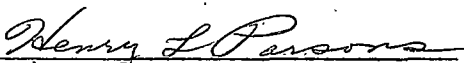
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A special thanks goes to the late Ravalli Senator Miles Romney, Jr., son of the President of the People's Power League. Miles, Jr. was only ten years old when his father organized the League, but his vivid recollections of the activity, the men who visited his home to formulate plans for the League, his father's correspondence and acquaintances, and his father's relationships with state officials were most

helpful information. Miles, Jr.'s. continued interest in the political affairs of the state gave particular authority to his assessment of the contribution of the work of the People's Power League to state government.

Mr. Charles Fox photographed the cartoons from newspaper microfilm, and Fred Vinson produced the prints and maps. The Montana Historical Society gave permission to use the photograph of Miles Romney. Numerous friends and fellow students spent hours pouring over the typed pages to help eliminate errors.

The warmest of thank yous must go to my children, Thom and Leann, for carrying the burden of mother and housekeeper while their mother took on the role of student. And to my father, the man who never doubted me or neglected to encourage me, and who gave both moral and financial support, I dedicate this work.

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ABSTRACT

K. Ross Toole, professor of Montana History, has characterized the progressive era in the state as nothing more than "sound and fury and one small tax reform." Yet in the general election of 1912 the electorate adopted four initiative measures reforming the political process. This unprecedented fact is certain evidence of the success of the progressive spirit in Montana's political history.

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INTRODUCTION

Progressivism and the People's Power League

Traditionally, historians have associated the phenomenon of progressivism with a particular socio-economic class. Leaders of progressive reform movements were customarily typed as young, idealistic professionals from upper middle-class families. In turn, the target for reform activities was usually thought of as an urban political machine which drew its strength from newly arrived immigrants and the laboring class. Within the past few decades, however, these assumptions have been undergoing scrutiny and challenge. It is no longer possible to accept them as entirely and exclusively true.¹

A recent study by John Buenker, for example, calls the traditional assumptions about progressivism into question by demonstrating that it was the urban "machine" politicians who saved the progressive 17th Amendment for direct election of senators from defeat by old-stock rural Republicans. Another repudiation of the conventional theory by Michael Rogin and John Shover has identified the prime supporters of California's progressive governor, Hiram Johnson, as a wave of newly-arrived immigrants. Equally at odds with the traditional assumptions is the fact that as soon as Johnson began to implement his progressive

¹Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order 1877-1920 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

ideas, those who formerly supported him, professionals from established middle-class families, now began to desert him en masse.²

An increasing number of local in depth studies of the progressive period changes our generalized overview, but still no firm agreement on interpretation is available. Richard Roeder's study of the early years of progressivism in Montana, covering the period around 1906, located progressives variously in rural farming and ranching communities, in urban civic organizations and women's clubs, in labor unions, and among the "mainstreeters." Since progressives were found to have existed in all segments of the state's society, the related question was raised: who comprised the opposition? According to the study of K. Ross Toole, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company made up the opposition. Toole further claims that a progressive element within the state was negligible in that it failed to check the "special influence" of the company.³

An understanding of the participants within the progressive movement and an evaluation of the results of their efforts are but

²Arthur Mann, ed., *The Progressive Era: Major Issues of Interpretation* (2nd ed., Hinsdale, Illinois: Dryden Press, 1975), pp. 95-107, 20-30.

³Richard Brown Roeder, "Montana in the Early Years of the Progressive Period," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1971); K. Ross Toole, "Rebuttal: When Is a Reform a Reform?" *Montana the Magazine of Western History*, XX (Autumn, 1970), p. 27; Toole, *Twentieth Century Montana: A State of Extremes*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972).

pieces of the puzzle of the progressive era. However, their goals can give us some insight into their character. Benjamin Parke DeWitt, a contemporary observer, described their proposals thus:

Corrupt special influence must be removed; the structure of the government must be modified so as to allow a greater and more direct participation by the people in the conduct of public affairs; and, finally, the functions of the government must be increased in an effort to meet industrial and social needs.⁴

Theodore Roosevelt echoed the first of these objectives in a speech delivered in Osawatimie, Kansas:

We must drive the special interests out of politics. That is one of our tasks today. Every special interest is entitled to justice--full, fair and competent--but not one is entitled to a vote in congress, a voice on the bench, or to representation in any public office.⁵

Thus, these two spokesmen of the period identify a central goal or issue of the progressive movement--to remove "special influence" and "special interest" from government power.

A revived emphasis on issues provides new guidelines in the historiography of progressivism. David Thelen's recent interpretation of American progressivism does not associate the reformist movement with any particular group or social class. He emphasizes, rather, those issues he considers to be characteristic of the early years of

⁴Roeder, p. 223.

⁵"The Progressive Creed Proclaimed by Roosevelt," Montana Lookout, September 3, 1910, p. 1.

progressivism. Thus one person may have supported many issues considered as progressive, while opposing others equally reformative in nature. Thelen's method, then, allows the issue to indicate who were progressives on any given occasion.⁶

A study of the progressive era must include personalities, issues, and documentation of the accomplishments of the movement. These historical facts are abundant, although not widely known. In 1912, the Montana electorate passed reform measures of an unprecedented nature, each of them aimed at curbing special interest in state government. The passage of this legislation, clearly the results of progressive thinking, was accomplished almost entirely through the efforts of an organization known as the People's Power League, a fact which seems to have been overlooked by students of Montana history. Until we have thoroughly assessed the role played by the League in accomplishing the reforms of 1912, our understanding of progressivism in Montana will remain only partial and inadequate.⁷

The present study must, of necessity, limit itself to a detailed account of the origins and activities of the People's Power League, particularly the crucial role this organization played in initiating reform legislation in 1912 and 1914. In pursuit of this

⁶Mann, pp. 31-45.

⁷Secretary of State Initiative files, 1912.

goal, the following questions will be addressed: How did the League come into being? Who were the main organizers of the League? Which groups and individuals comprised the League's opposition? Were the League's issues characteristic of those labeled as progressive? And, what were its successes and failures? This study will also attempt to locate the League's activities within the larger framework of the progressive movement in general.

CHAPTER I

REACTION TO THE TWELFTH LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, 1911

In 1911 the People's Power League of Montana organized as a group of independent volunteers for the purpose of reforming the state's political processes through direct legislation. This group formed in reaction to the failure of Congress, successive legislatures, and party committees to respond to public demands for political reform. According to the League members, powerful agents of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company generally controlled both Democratic and Republican county and state conventions. Through their control of these conventions the agents nominated men favorably disposed to company interests. Critics inside and outside of the League accused the company of financing the campaigns of its favorites to such a lavish extent that independent individuals were unable to compete against them. Those elected to the legislature through company support neglected responsibilities to the public and yielded to the demands of the special interest that placed them in office. Legislators who were successful through this company-dominated convention system refused to pass political reforms that probably would remove them from power, despite the fact that they promised such legislation in their party platforms. Since the legislature refused to jeopardize its power

by accomplishing reforms for a more representative government, the League organized to handle the reform process itself.¹

While the legislative assembly accumulated notoriety, a few of Montana's newspapers developed a strong tradition of avid, independent journalism. Although the mining interests which consolidated under the name of Anaconda owned a large portion of the state's presses, those editors who could not be bought refused to be controlled. These independent news editors, especially those speaking for the League, magnified an image of the all-powerful company to their fullest ability. But these editors adopted the theme from earlier generations rather than creating it themselves. Mining interests within the state suffered similar diatribes before the Anaconda Company arrived on the scene, and journalistic pressure against the mining interests continues today.

Contemporary critics dwelt on company control of the legislature and neglected to emphasize its real accomplishments. Historians tend to reflect these critics' views, and the "company theme" dominates most of their writing. Through exploitation of the bizarre or colorful nature of Montana's politics, such as the Clark and Daly feuds,

¹"Primaries in Missoula Run by Amalgamated . . . ," Western News, May 28, 1912, p. 1.

historians have bypassed the significant contributions of the legislature during the progressive era.²

Not all legislative sessions were devoid of accomplishments, particularly the session of 1911. Burton K. Wheeler, representative from Butte, considered that body to be one of Montana's most progressive assemblies. Yet in regard to political reform, the session failed to produce the desired laws. Critics, especially those of the People's Power League, claimed that this assembly fit the same mold of corruption and bizarre behavior cast by its predecessors.³

One of the most outspoken critics of the legislature was Jerre Murphy, a former secretary to Wisconsin's progressive Robert LaFollette. Believing that the legislators were always company controlled, Murphy rarely gave credit when credit was due. Illustrating his lack of

²See Christopher P. Connolly, "The Story of Montana," McClures Magazine, August, pp. 346-361, September, pp. 451-465, October, pp. 629-639, November, pp. 27-43, December, pp. 198-210, 1906; Connolly The Devil Learns to Vote: The Story of Montana (New York: Covici, Friede, 1938); Carl B. Glasscock, The War of the Copper Kings: Builders of Butte and Wolves of Wall Street (New York and Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1935); Merrill G. Burlingame and K. Ross Toole, ed., A History of Montana 3 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1957); Richard Brown Roeder, "Montana in the Early Years of the Progressive Period," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1971), p. 106.

³Burton K. Wheeler with Paul F. Healy, Yankee From the West (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962), p. 95; Montana Historical Society Archives, Montana Governors' Papers; Legislative Series, Box 5, Sl.

faith in the state house, Murphy warned the legislature that it was time for things to change:

If it shall happen, in harmony with the politics and methods and influences whereby alien interests and influential politicians have made Montana infamous, that the present legislature fails in performance as some predecessors have done, it will also happen that independent citizens in various parts of the state actuated by common purpose, will undertake to give the voters of Montana an opportunity to vote directly for laws which will meet the public demand and which will be framed and voted upon by the people without any amendments or compromises or "jokers" to meet the needs of foxy statesmen or lawless combines.⁴

At least in the area of important political reform the legislature failed to heed his warning.

One of the main issues which surfaced in the 1911 session was the desire for a mechanism to give the people some voice in the selection of a United States senator. Prior to the 17th Amendment, the most highly publicized function of the assembly centered around its election of a senator. This duty usually aroused most of the complaints of bribery, corruption and special interest control. The Populist brought the first call for direct election of senators in the 1890's, but after the party folded around 1906 this portion of its platform became a part of the mainstream of politics.

Since 1893 the Montana Assembly had memorialized Congress to amend the constitution for direct election of senators or to call a

⁴"Hints for Foxy Statesmen," Montana Lookout, January 7, 1911, p. 4.

special convention to amend it. Congressional failure to respond can be partly due to a desire for self preservation or perpetuation. The legislatures, not the people, had placed each senator in Washington, and they wanted to stay there.⁵

By 1909, after Congress' repeated refusal to act on the matter, some members of the legislature decided that the state would have to adopt some alternative course of action. But the type of legislation was subject to dispute. The conservatives who opposed direct nomination proposed that party conventions select senatorial nominees. The progressives wanted to by-pass corporate controlled conventions and allow the people to nominate candidates. Either way, by law the legislature made the final choice, so the old guard saw no need for a public voice in the decision making process. The various factions refused to compromise and the 1909 legislators had no more success in dealing with the question than they had in persuading Congress to tackle it.⁶

Attempting to prevent a reenactment of these irreconcilable

⁵Roeder, pp. 106-107; Senate Journal of the Tenth Session of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Montana 1907 (Helena: State Publishing Co., 1907), SJR1, pp. 26, 329; Senate Journal of the Eleventh Session of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Montana, 1909 (Helena: State Publishing Co., 1909), HJR1, pp. 97, 230.

⁶Senate Journal of the Eleventh Session of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Montana, 1909 (Helena: State Publishing Co., 1909), SB9, pp. 16, 106, SB101, pp. 195, 280, SB122, pp. 271, 325, 380, HB43, pp. 39, 227, 279.

differences in the next session, the 1910 Democratic State Central Committee discussed the possibility of allowing voters within the party to express their choice for senator. This method could have shifted the responsibility for reform from the legislature another step down to the party level. The motion narrowly missed passage. Members favoring the motion declared that the "company" defeated it, while the opposition maintained that the airing of individual preferences might leave the party less united against the Republican candidate in the next assembly.⁷

When the 12th Assembly met in 1911 the senatorial nomination question was far from settled. In addition to conservative and progressive bills from the preceding session, the Senate provided a new "Republican" version of the bill. The Republicans finally agreed to allow voters an expression of choice, but believed that in order to maintain party purity, the legislators should be required to vote for the candidate receiving the highest votes in their own party. The House then came up with a "Democratic" bill for senatorial nomination.

⁷Editorial, Montana Lookout, July 23, 1910, p. 4; "How the People Can Select a Senator," August 27, 1910, p. 1. Murphy related the views of Ravalli Senator Miles Romney from the Western News. Romney claimed the committee failed to pass the motion because Fred Whiteside of Flathead, Henry C. Stiff of Missoula, and C. H. Crutchfield of Ravalli, and "others of similar corporate connections" held proxies to defeat it. "Letters to the Editor," September 3, 1910, p. 3, carried the retort of Mr. Stiff, affirming that he authored the motion and that Whiteside supported it. The Democrats, however, were far from united in a choice for senator in the following session.

As both of Montana's senators were Republicans, the Democrats insisted that the legislature ratify the people's choice regardless of party. This provision would make the senator responsible to the people, rather than to party bosses, and possibly help elect a Democrat to office.

Other legislators outside these party blocs preferred to be free to support their own favorite, rather than being forced to vote for someone they personally opposed. Representatives who held considerable power within the party organization wanted conventions to do the nominating, thus allowing them to exercise their personal power in the process. On the other hand, legislators on the fringes of party power knew their influence could best be felt through the voice of the people. And, of course, the old die-hards wanted nothing to do with any of these bills and insisted on leaving the nomination and election of senators up to the legislature as the Constitution required.⁸

Possibly each of these options was a valid expression of political philosophy as well as a means of increasing personal power. Yet the critical editors believed the wrangling over the proper method of

⁸Montana Governors' Papers, Legislative Series, Box 5, S1. This series is most useful when several bills appear by the same title, as it includes the full text of each as presented to the legislature, plus amendments. HB1, SB2; "Big Fight on Direct Primary Law," Western News, January 6, 1911, p. 1. The title "primary" is misleading in our present use of the term. The law permitted voting on senatorial candidates in the general election, before the legislature made its lawful choice.

nominating a senator was but a ruse to defeat the issue. As an example, Senator Dixon wrote:

This method of defeating legislation has been resorted to time and again in legislative bodies, and the responsibility for the failure of meritorious legislation attempted to be transferred to the shoulders of someone else.⁹

Equally concerned, but with somewhat less sophistication, Jerre Murphy accused the assembly of "throwing dust in the eyes of the people for the purpose of hiding the real issue." In his typical anti-company rhetoric, the battle as he saw it was not between the House and Senate, nor the Democrats and Republicans, but the company and the people.¹⁰

A joint-conference committee took on the enormous task of sorting through the various demands of each faction and came up with a hodge-podge version called the Everett bill for senatorial nomination. As discussed above, the Republicans insisted on legislator's party loyalty when electing senators while the Democrats wanted legislators to support the popular nominee regardless of party. As a way of avoiding a likely confrontation between parties, the committee simply ignored the issue. This left an opening for further arguments in the following session. The Committee's bill aimed at meeting both party and public demands by allowing the party to nominate its candidate, yet

⁹Letter from Joseph M. Dixon, Montana Lookout, January 7, 1911, pp. 1, 12.

¹⁰"The Real and Non-Partisan Conflict," Montana Lookout, April 15, 1911, p. 15.

still leaving room for public nomination by petitions. Getting down to the practical aspects, the bill provided that the legislators themselves have a choice either to remain independent or support the people's choice of candidate. But to make this provision all above-board, the legislative candidates were to file pledges: 1) to be bound by the people's choice for senator, or 2) not to be bound. Therefore the voters would know in advance of electing a legislator where he stood on the issues.¹¹

The joint conference committee undoubtedly believed that its concoction was a masterpiece of legislation, mollifying all concerned. The assembly passed the bill, possibly just to avoid further criticism, but the progressive editors made the Everett bill the laughing stock of the 12th Assembly.

The Western News coined the bill the "primary freak" and "... the joker of the Twelfth Legislature." Romney complained that the company controlled both party conventions and would prevent the people's candidate from getting on the ballot. W. K. Harber of the River Press asserted that the Everett law was a "step backward," allowing party

¹¹ House Journal of the Twelfth Session of the Legislative Assembly at the State of Montana, 1911 (Helena: Independent Publishing Co., 1911), HB 427; pp. 625, 842. This is the bill that became law; Senate Journal of the Twelfth Session of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Montana, 1911 (Helena: Independent Publishing Co., 1911), SB192, pp. 481-82, 522, is the same as HB427, SB193, pp. 481, 485; came from the minority of the joint-conference committee.

bosses more effective control over senatorial elections. The Great Falls Leader responded

. . . . direct primary--rats! The nerve of the Twelfth legislative assembly in naming the thing put out as a "direct primary," is only equalled by the nerve of the Butte Miner in attempting to make political capital of the emasculated monstrosity.

And the righteously indignant Billings Gazette replied:

When the people asked for bread they were handed a sackful of chaff from which every kernel of wheat had been extracted. They thought they were getting a measure whereby a recognized evil would be abated, and instead they got the "merry ha, ha."¹²

The cut-and-paste law to reform the senatorial election process failed to heal the breach between parties and conservatives and progressives, but the actual process of electing a senator in the 1911 assembly proved to be even more of a fiasco.

The Democrats held high hopes of choosing a successor to Senator Thomas H. Carter, the one-time Daly sponsored conservative Republican. But Carter wished to keep the seat he had claimed since 1895. When agents of the company failed to get a Republican majority elected to the legislature to support Carter, they turned their charm to Democratic members. Butte's Democratic representative Burton K.

¹²"Today's Ballot Shows Little Change," Western News, March 3, 1911, p. 2; "For Popular Government," River Press, March 29, 1911, p. 4; "For Which Honor is Due Nobody," Great Falls Leader, as in Montana Lookout, April 1, 1911, p. 6; "Played With the People," Billings Gazette, as in Western News, April 11, 1911.

Wheeler claimed vote buying was extensive in the session, but especially in regard to the senate election.

Originally, the two parties expected a showdown between the aging Senator Carter and Thomas J. Walsh, a Democrat and acclaimed favorite of the people. Several legislators remained uncommitted expecting former Democratic senator and copper magnate W. A. Clark to throw his hat into the ring. Once W. G. Conrad, a third Democrat entered the race, no one candidate could accumulate a majority vote.

The senatorial election provided the assembly with a carnival atmosphere. Even the town folks joined in the hullabaloo. A Butte mainstreet pool room posted odds on the election. The clientele favored former Senator W. A. Clark in the betting at 6 to 5, with Carter running close at 7 to 5. Walsh supporters placed his chance at 2 to 1, while Conrad trailed at 3 to 1. This "senatorial handicap" made a debauchery of legislative responsibility, but what actually took place behind those granite capitol walls was an even worse mockery.

Balloting for senator continued for over two months. The insertion and deletion of various new names increased the confusion. During the closing hours of the session Montana had no man to fill Carter's seat. After the seventy-ninth ballot someone threw in the name of Henry Lee Myers, Democrat and District Judge from Ravalli County. At this critical moment Walsh and Conrad threw their support



"Incorporated Horse Owner--If you think you are carrying too much weight to win with Amalgamated in this race, Tom, we have another acceptable Jockey willing to ride."
 Montana Lookout, January 28, 1911, p. 1.

to Myers in order to prevent either the re-election of Carter or sending no senator to Washington at all. Though Walsh believed Myers was independent and honest, ironically, the "company men" supported him too. Myers received a unanimous vote for senator on the 80th ballot, only five minutes before the legislature adjourned.¹³

Myers had played a secondary role in Fred Whiteside's exposure of W. A. Clark's alleged bribery of the legislature for a senate seat in 1899. During the twelve intervening years the people apparently forgot him. In the aftermath of the session, reporters, the public, and legislators alike busied themselves trying to identify the newly elected senator. The Western News bemoaned the event, claiming that one legislator thought he voted for Myer, manager of the Helena Hotel. Another colleague assumed that he voted for a State Senator Meyer of Carbon County. The legislative correspondent told the editor that "it was about the worst mixed up mess I ever saw . . ." The editor of the Harlem News, attempting to clarify the situation, wrote that ". . . he is a prominent sheep man of the Bitter Root Valley." "Not

¹³Wheeler, pp. 87-88; Connolly, The Devil Learns to Vote, p. 298; Western News, January 24, 1911, p. 1; James Leonard Bates, "Senator Walsh of Montana, 1918-1924: A Liberal Under Pressure" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1952), p. 20; "Odds on Senators Posted in Butte," Western News, January 17, 1911, p. 4.

