

# Two Rivers and the Populist Party in the 1890's

By: Paul J. Cigler, Jr.

### Editor's Note:

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*This monograph is a small part of a much larger work titled "A History of Populism and Socialism in Two Rivers, Wisconsin" which was his masters thesis written in 1989. The reader will find Paul to be very interested in this subject and his style definitely conveys this as you read the article.*

*The editor of the monograph was Edward Rappe, social sciences teacher at Lincoln High School, Manitowoc.*

Between the years 1894 and 1896, Two Rivers, Wisconsin was the location of a strong third party movement active under the banner of the People's party. Better known as the Populists, the party's chief aim was to reverse what it saw as the negative effects of monopolies which had assumed a dominant position in the United States during

the last decades of the 19th century. The Populists believed that the people had lost control of the government to the monopolies. They wanted to restore democratic control and to also insure a greater equity in the distribution of the economic benefits of the era. The banks and railroads were the main targets of the party. Nationalization and public ownership was their solution.

Populism's greatest strength was in single crop rural midwest and western states. Wisconsin's rural communities, with a mixed agriculture production of wheat and dairy products provided little support for the party.<sup>1</sup> It was among Wisconsin's urban working-class that populism found its appeal. In cities like Milwaukee, the party was able to attract large numbers of voters. Two Rivers was unique in the state in that it was the only location where local party organization

gained control of a city government.

Located along Lake Michigan's western shoreline 100 miles north of Milwaukee, Two Rivers was a highly industrialized community by 1895; a city of 3,500 people chiefly engaged in production of woodenware. The city also had a small tannery, a large fishing fleet and its own brewery, Mueller Brothers. The population was largely native born of German origin. Other ethnic groups included Polish and Bohemian.<sup>2</sup> Religion was largely Catholic, with a Lutheran and a Congregational church.

More familiar companies such as Eggers and Hamilton Manufacturing were in operation, but the largest industrial concern was the Two Rivers Manufacturing Company, owned by the Mann Brothers of Milwaukee. The Mann Brothers gained control of two separate companies in 1861 and merged them into a single corporation. By 1883



Mann Bros. Tub & Pail Factory on Walnut Street, Two Rivers. Circa 1895. Courtesy Joseph Mann Library, Two Rivers.





*William F. Nash, publisher of the Manitowoc County Chronicle and head of the Union caucus, was also Two Rivers mayor in 1880. Courtesy Joseph Mann Library, Two Rivers.*

they owned the company outright. Leopold Mann was the manager in Two Rivers.<sup>3</sup> The company consisted of a sawmill and tub and pail factory located on the north bank of the West Twin River and a chair factory on the city's southside, along the river on either side of Monroe Street. The manufacturing was done by crews of six or seven men working under a foreman who was contracted by the Mann Brothers to fulfill orders. The turning room was so dusty that the state inspector could not see "how the men could stand working there. The chair factory also used a "jobbing out" system to finish the cane-backed chairs it produced. The work was done by about 150 girls and women. The Mann Brothers also ran a company store. The employees were paid in company script which could only be

redeemed at the company store. By 1895, the Two Rivers Manufacturing Company employed over 600 people in the community.<sup>4</sup>

Politics in Two Rivers had always been dominated by the Democratic Party. Even after the rise of the Republican Party during the Civil War, the Democratic Party continued to enjoy a wide plurality in local elections. This wide plurality was crucial for Democratic Party success in Manitowoc County.<sup>5</sup> To avoid any partisan politics that might swing votes away from Democrats in the city, local Democrats and Republicans both ran on a Union ticket, dividing nominations at a city-wide caucus. "As a result, the honors seemed to be passed around among the leading businessmen in town."<sup>6</sup>

The tasks of keeping this local political agreement intact and running the Union caucuses was handled by William F. Nash, publisher of The Manitowoc County Chronicle, the city's weekly newspaper. A Democrat, Nash was elected to the state senate from 1889 to 1894.<sup>7</sup>

Populism in Manitowoc County prior to 1895 was sporadic at best. Populist activity in the county involved an occasional speaker and

single candidates for various county or municipal offices. The Populist vote for the entire county in 1892 was only 58, with a single Populist vote cast in the city of Two Rivers.<sup>8</sup>

Efforts increased in 1894 as the Populists held a county convention in August, and in October Victor Berger, who would later be elected as a Socialist congressman from Milwaukee, came to Two Rivers' Kappelman's Hall and gave a speech on monetary reform. The same night two local Populists disrupted a meeting of local Democrats, challenging them to a debate.<sup>9</sup> In the November election, the Populists polled 319 votes out of a total of 6,700 votes cast. The vote in Two Rivers increased to 40; a dramatic change but disappointing in light of the campaign effort. Robert Schilling, chair of the People's Party in Wisconsin, summed up the party's effort in Manitowoc County: "Another such victory and we are undone."<sup>10</sup> Yet by 1896, the Two Rivers Populists Party would gain the majority of votes and sweep the spring municipal elections. The key to victory was their participation in a successful strike against the Two Rivers Manufacturing Company. It was the first strike in the city's his-



*Strikers at the Two Rivers Turner Hall during "Pay Day" strike against the Mann Company. Courtesy Joseph Mann Library, Two Rivers.*



tory.

On October 23, 1894, a branch of the International Machine Wood Workers of America was organized at Two Rivers Manufacturing Company. Thirty-eight workers joined, mostly from among the tub and pail turners. William Ahern was elected president, John Wilkens vice president, Fred Althen secretary, Peter Scherer financial secretary and William Boehringer treasurer. It was the first union ever organized in Two Rivers. The stated aim of the union was the establishment of the eight-hour work day, the rescinding of a pay cut in 1892 and an end to the jobbing-out system.<sup>11</sup> The union took no immediate action that fall, but organizing continued in the tub and pail factory.

On August 23, 1895, a union strike committee presented Henry Mann an ultimatum. It read in part: Sir:

...It is customary when a man works for your company, a store book is furnished him and he is supposed to buy his goods at the company store. We demand that a cash pay be established once a month and your employees be given the privilege of trading and purchasing their supplies wherever they can....

When Mann replied the company could not agree to a cash payday,

the workers voted to strike and walked out at 9 a.m. on August 29, 1895.<sup>12</sup>

The strikers, 300 strong, formed a line on Walnut Street (present day Seventeenth Street), marched down Monroe Street, crossed the river and gathered outside the chair factory. There they called for the workers to join them. Few did. The procession marched off, only to return to the chair factory during the noon break. This time, they met with success. Most of the chair employees joined the strike. The strikers from both factories, now numbering over 500, formed ranks and marched through the city.<sup>13</sup>

The strike headquarters was the local Turner Hall. Strikers met there at 6:30 a.m. and again at 5 p.m. Each time they paraded past the company properties carrying banners pledging support for the union and demanding a cash payday. Afterward, small groups of workers gathered at various street corners with small placards in their hat that said "cash payday."<sup>14</sup>

Mass meetings were held every night, one of which was covered by the Milwaukee Journal. Speeches in support of the strike were given in English, Polish, German, and Bohemian (Czech). Asked if they were satisfied with the company store policy, workers cried out "No—

No!" Some at the meetings told the reporter that to demand full cash was the equivalent of asking to be fired. When the reporter said Mann Brothers claimed they were running their factories at a loss to show their sympathy for the workers, one member of the audience intoned that, "It seems unlikely that the Mann Brothers are working their mills for charity's sake."<sup>14</sup>

A system was set up by the strikers to maintain order. A committee of union guards patrolled the company property to prevent damage. A police committee was assigned to keep large gatherings from getting out of hand and keep strikers out of saloons during the strike. Another watched for strike breakers coming into town. A dozen men brought into the city on the sixth day of the strike were "convinced of the folly of remaining in town under present conditions." In order to provide for family maintenance during the strike, a committee collected food from nearby farm communities of Mishicot, Two Creeks, Tisch Mills and Gibson.<sup>15</sup>

The strike lasted 11 days. The strikers held firm in the face of several demands from the company for partial cash payments. Finally on September 9, the strikers reached agreement with the company. All the demands were met.



Saw Mill crew sit for a picture around 1895 at the Mann Bros. factory. Courtesy Joseph Mann Library, Two Rivers.



After the agreement was signed, the strikers paraded through the streets "with drums beating and banners flying."<sup>16</sup>

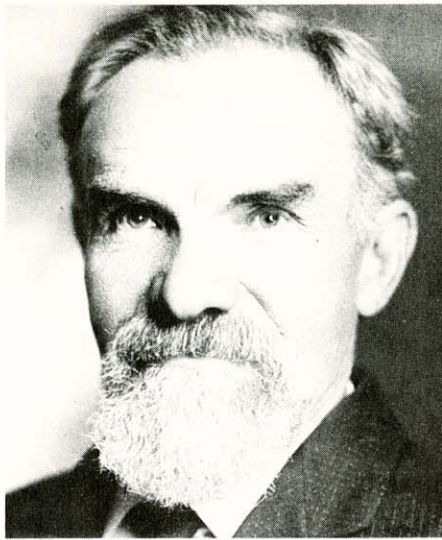
Local Populists were active in the strike. Fred Althen and Henry Kohls both served on the union strike committee. Althen, as union secretary, chaired the mass meeting. Peter Scherer and William Boehringer, along with Althen, were officials at the original union meeting in 1894. Arnold Zander, a saw filer was active in organizing the tub and pail factory. Zander and Althen were also county organizers for the People's Party of Wisconsin.<sup>17</sup>

The Populists wasted no time organizing a political movement. In October, after the strike, they formed the People's Party Public Improvement and Non-Interest Bond Club. Monthly Meetings were held throughout the fall and winter to discuss political and economic issues and to circulate Populist literature.<sup>18</sup> A speaker series was set up and the club invited "all liberty-loving people... to come and receive the light of the new civilization."<sup>19</sup>

Davis H. Waite, former Populist governor of Colorado, gave the first address speaking against interest bonds and rent. Waite's strong pro-labor stand in the Cripple Creek Miner's Strike and his statements favoring the use of force to defend the rights of the people against the interests of powerful monopolies made him a hero to Populists, and a "fanatic" to others. Nash, in the "Chronicle," called Waite an anarchist and said the local Populists "should be asked to unfurl a red flag and show their true colors."<sup>20</sup>

The Populists answered in the letter column of the Chronicle. Fred Althen wrote that populism "would again place the government in the hands of the people, whereas now it is in the hands of the monopolists, bankers, railroad magnates, men of enormous wealth." Fred Schnorr, a lathe operator, asked if the working classes were "simply for the purpose of ministering to the wants of the rich and powerful."<sup>21</sup>

Arnold Zander offered the solution: municipal ownership of utilities. Using bonds backed by the federal government municipalities could fund and own public utilities. Profits from the utilities could be used for public housing, municipal



*Robert Schilling, editor of the Milwaukee Volksblatt, and leader of the Knights of Labor. 1880-1890(?). Courtesy Wisconsin State Historical Society.*

grain elevators and a municipal dairy. Taxes could be lowered and the city could "pay good wages to present labor...working people, merchants and farmers would all benefit." Municipal ownership, not regulation, was the answer to monopolies. Zander signed his letter "A Workingman."<sup>22</sup>

In January of 1896, the Two Rivers Populists organized a county tour for Robert Schilling. He had a long reform career: founding member of the Greenback Party, state organizer for the Knights of Labor, founding member of the Union Labor Party and the People's Party. As state organizer for the Knights Schilling led the Eight Hour movement in Milwaukee in 1886. He was arrested in the aftermath of the shooting of workers by the state militia during an Eight Hour demonstration in Bay View, Wisconsin on Milwaukee's south side. From 1892 to 1900 he led the People's Party in Wisconsin and edited two reform papers, The Advance and Der Reformer. Schilling spoke at Maple Grove, Clarks Mills, Gibson and Mishicot. Arnold Zander met Schilling in Mishicot and rode with him in a carriage to Two Rivers. Schilling gave his address in German, and a second speech on government ownership in English. The meeting was "a corker; every seat in the hall was filled, and many standing up."<sup>23</sup>

After Schilling's tour, the local Populists announced they would

run a full ticket in the spring municipal elections. The People's Party Committee called for separate ward caucuses on March 17 and a city convention was held March 23. The ward caucuses were well-attended. Each ward nominated a candidate for city alderman and county supervisor. The city convention nominated candidates for city-wide office. At the Union city convention the name of the ticket was changed to the Democratic-Republican Union Ticket. Nash worried about the potential loss and hoped "those Democrats who have been led astray will return to the true political fold."<sup>24</sup>

The Populists lost one city race. Louis Zander was elected mayor; John Moseler treasurer, Fred Schnorr police justice and Peter Schroeder school commissioner. Arnold Zander was elected alderman for the second ward, Peter Schmidt in the third. Fred Schwartz and Fred Tegge were elected county supervisors on the Populist ticket. Henry Kohls and Henry Scherer were elected constables. The Two Rivers Populists celebrated the victory with a torchlight procession through the city.<sup>25</sup> Zander telegraphed the victory news to Schilling:

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah! The old twins united here to fight the advance of the people. Now they are on the run trying to hide themselves, what little there is left of them. We today elected four out of five city officers and eight out of ten ward officers. Four middle-of-the-road Populists aldermen to two Demo-Republicans in the council."<sup>26</sup>

Support was heaviest in the second and third wards, both working-class wards. The municipal candidates were also of the working class. Among their occupations were cigar maker, saw filer and metal polisher, but a majority identified themselves as day laborers.<sup>27</sup>

At the first council meeting after the election, Arnold Zander was elected council president. The council then appointed Fred Althen city clerk. Althen, a union official, secretary of the strike committee and Populist organizer, was in charge of the city's daily affairs.<sup>28</sup> Zander, Schroeder, Scherer and Kohls were also Populists who had





*Logs jamming the East Twin River at the present day Coast Guard Station on East Street. The logs were for the Mann Bros. mill factory. Courtesy Joseph Mann Library, Two Rivers.*

been active in the strike.

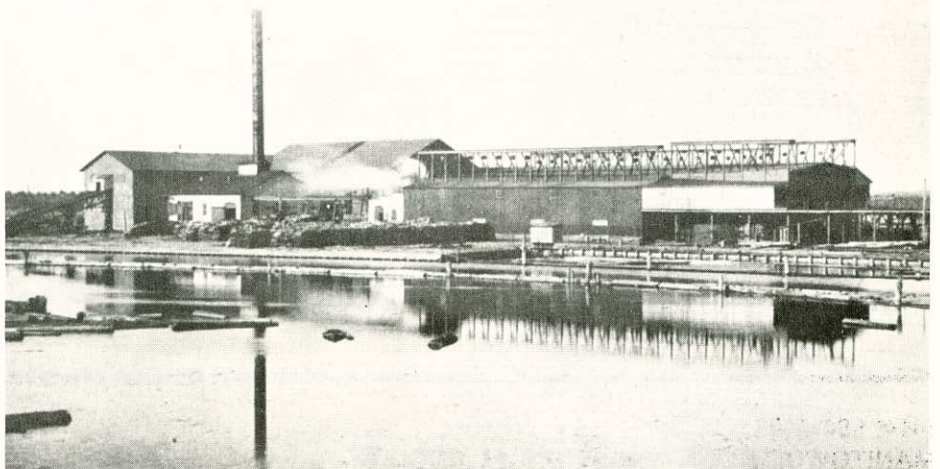
National politics interfered with the success of the local movement. During the presidential campaign of 1896 when the national Populists joined, or fused with the Democrats over the issue of free silver, the local Populists became isolated. At the fall county convention the Populists nominated an anti-fusion ticket and refused to allow a delegation of fusion Democrats to attend. They also nominated and placed a woman, county teacher Mary Hewitt, on the ballot. Hewitt, as candidate for school supervisor, was the first woman on any ballot in the county.<sup>29</sup>

At the state convention the county delegation led by Henry Stolze of Manitowoc maintained an anti-fusion position. When the Fusion Conference Committee reported, Stolze shouted "that the man who advocated fusion and then wanted an office was a traitor." When the report on fusion was adopted, the delegates from Manitowoc and Two Rivers returned home. The fall election was a disaster for the local Populists. They failed to elect a single candidate to office. Moreover, their vote total was down. Zander blamed fusion and the banks, who "in spite of the protests of the rank

and file somehow led the People's Party into the Democratic shambles."<sup>30</sup>

It was not the end of the third party activity in Two Rivers. As early as 1898, those active as Populists were running as candidates on the Social Democratic ticket. The list of candidates was almost identical to the last Populist ticket.<sup>32</sup> And from the initial electoral successes of the party came municipal ownership of the city's waterworks in 1900. A bonding referendum for a new waterworks was amended at a mass meeting to include municipal

ownership. The vote was 541 in favor and only 87 opposed.<sup>33</sup> The referendum was a legacy of Populist activity. Lessons learned during the strike of 1895 and the municipal elections of 1896 were drawn on by the activists to continue what they considered a struggle for justice. As socialists, this core of working class activists continued for the next three decades to champion industrial unionism, equity in the community for its working people and a commitment to electoral politics.<sup>34</sup>



*Mann Bros. saw mill, circa 1895, West Twin River, Two Rivers. Courtesy Joseph Mann Library, Two Rivers.*



# Footnotes

1. Robert C. Nesbit, "The History of Wisconsin" Vol 3. 1985, page 289. For a general view of Populism see: John D. Hicks, "The Populists Revolt, the History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party," University of Minneapolis Press and Gene Clanton, "Populism: The Humane Preference in America 1890-1900," Boston, Twayne Publishers. For Wisconsin, see Roger E. Wyman, "Agrarian or Working Class Radicalism? The Electoral Basis of Populism in Wisconsin." Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 89, Winter, 1975-76.
2. "Census Enumeration of State of Wisconsin," 1895, page 113; "Report of Inspection, Governor's Messages," Democratic Printing, Madison, 1895, page 117a.
3. Louis Falge, "History of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin," Vol. I, Chicago, 1912, page 413.
4. *Ibid.*, page 138; Census, 1895, page 119; "Report of the Commissioner of Labor," State of Wisconsin, Madison, 1892, page 117; and 1895, page 165, "Milwaukee Journal," June 15, 1895.
5. Ralph G. Plumb, "History of Manitowoc County," Brandt Printing, page 236.
6. Ralph G. Plumb, "Recollections of an Amateur Politician," Manitowoc, Wisconsin, 1959, page 33.
7. "Dictionary of Wisconsin Biographies," State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1960, page 264.
8. Wisconsin Blue Book, 1892, page 416.
9. "Manitowoc County Chronicle," August 21, September 18 and October 23, 1894.
10. "The Advance," (Milwaukee) November 10, 1894.
11. "Manitowoc County Chronicle," October 23 and 30, 1894.
12. "Milwaukee Journal," September 5, 1895.
13. "Manitowoc County Chronicle," September 3, 1895.
14. "Milwaukee Journal," August 31, September 2 and September 4, 1895.
15. "Manitowoc County Chronicle," September 3, 1895, "Milwaukee Journal," September 3, 1895.
16. "Milwaukee Journal," September 9, 1895.
17. Robert Schilling Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin-Madison, Book of Workers of People's Party-Wisconsin.
18. "Manitowoc County Chronicle," October 8, 1895.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, December 31, 1895; Clanton, "Populism," page 117.
21. *Ibid.*, December 30, 1895.
22. *Ibid.*, January 7, 1896; Zander to F. Ryan Duffy, Arnold Zander Papers, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Area Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.
23. Gary M. Fink, "Biographical Dictionary of American Labor Leaders," Westbrook, CN, Greenwood Press, page 310; "Advance," February 8, 1896.
24. "Manitowoc County Chronicle," March 10, 1896.
25. *Ibid.*, April 14, 1896, "Manitowoc Pilot," April 7, 1896.
26. "Advance," April 11, 1896.
27. "City Directory," Two Rivers, 1895.
28. "Manitowoc County Chronicle," April 14, 1896.
29. *Ibid.*, September 22, 1896; "Milwaukee Sentinel," September 4, 1896.
30. "Zander to Yeats," Arnold Zander Papers; Wisconsin Blue Book, 1897, page 436.
31. *Ibid.*, August 4, 1896; October 6, 20, 1896; February 15 and March 23, 1897.
32. "Manitowoc Pilot," October 20, 1898.
33. "Manitowoc County Chronicle," January 30, February 6, 1900.
34. Arnold Zander Papers, Notes for speeches — ON BONDS — "justice is what we want, money or no money."