

## THE ELECTION OF J. Y. CALLAHAN

By Elmer L. Fraker\*

Populism was the direct descendant of the Greenback movement and inherited most of its ancestor's inflationary characteristics. By the 1890's the Populist Party had become a tremendous force in the political and economic affairs of the nation. Its theories and proposals grew out of an environment of economic depressions and financial distress that plagued the country, especially in rural areas, following the period of the war between the North and South.

Despite the danger of oversimplification, it can be said that in general the Populist concept consisted of the belief that the cure for economic distress was to be found in a program of increasing the amount of money in circulation, and thereby increasing the capacity of the people to purchase more products and articles of commerce.

Those who held to this theory quite naturally were opposed to the Federal Government's redeeming in gold the bonds and notes which it had issued to finance the Union's war machine. They also refused to believe the cause of low prices for farm products was primarily the result of the vast increase in the production of crops raised on the greatly expanded farm areas of the newly settled Midwest.<sup>1</sup> Neither did they consider the situation created by the disbanding of the great armies of both the North and South, and their personnel turning from military consumption to industrial and agricultural production. To the Populists, it was not a matter of overproduction and surplus labor, but a matter of underconsumption. With this concept in mind, their only solution to the distressing economic problems facing the nation was to recommend the expansion of the country's currency.

That the inflationary ideas held by the Populists were appealing to more and more people, as economic conditions within the nation became more severe, is shown by the fact that the People's Party candidate for President in 1892 received 1,040,886 votes out of an approximate 10,000,000 total cast. In this same election the Populists drew so heavily from normally Republican states that Grover Cleveland, the Democratic candidate, was elected over Benjamin Harrison, the Republican nominee. The People's Party at this time also won control of the state governments of Kansas, Colorado, Idaho, and Nevada. Another important showing of the Populists was in

\* Mr. Elmer L. Fraker, Administrative Secretary of the Oklahoma Historical Society, makes his first contribution to *The Chronicles* in this sketch of J. Y. Callahan, Delegate to Congress from Oklahoma Territory (1896-98).—Ed.

<sup>1</sup> A. D. Noyes, *Forty Years of American Finance*, p. 10.

the National Congress, where they won ten seats in the house and five in the Senate.<sup>2</sup>

With Kansas adjoining Oklahoma Territory on the north, in the hands of the Populists, and with 50,000 votes being cast for that party across the Red River in Texas, it is not strange that Populism was the political faith of many of the new settlers who had secured lands in Oklahoma Territory through the runs or in the lotteries. In fact, a majority of the people who had settled on the claims in the new territory had been sojourners in Kansas or Texas immediately prior to their migration to Oklahoma. Furthermore, most of the people who settled in Oklahoma Territory were in the lower financial brackets and motivated by the quest for homes and lands of their own. With crops in the first few years after settlement being less than bountiful and prices for such crops extremely low, another depressive environmental factor engulfed the strippers and 89'ers, influencing them to the acceptance of Populist doctrines.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the first political party organizational meeting held in Oklahoma Territory was that of the Populists in the Fall of 1889.

By 1894, the Populist Party had expanded its activities in Oklahoma to where it had captured a number of county governments and held the balance of power in the territorial legislature. The Republican was the dominant party, with the Democratic in second place. When election time came around, in that year, Ralph Beaumont, the Populist nominee for territorial representative, in the National Congress, ran ahead of the Democrat entrant, and placed a good second to Dennis Flynn of the Republican ticket.<sup>4</sup>

Thus encouraged, the Oklahoma Populists began to gird their loins for an all-out battle in the election of 1898. An intensive campaign of organizing at county and township level prevailed throughout the Territory. There were more than twenty-five newspapers in Oklahoma that supported the Populist cause, and some of them gave more space to People's Party propaganda than they did to the news. In counties like Woods and Pottawatomie, there were Populist organizations in practically every township.

The chief office within the electoral gift of the people was that of Congressional Delegate. Although this official had no vote in the national House of Representatives, he did have a voice and the same speaking privileges as that held by regular Congressmen. He was recognized as the official spokesman of the Territory. The Populists were exceedingly anxious to nominate some man for the office whose character, campaigning ability, and personal popularity would help carry the party to victory in the November election. For

<sup>2</sup> Edgar E. Robinson, *The Evolution of American Political Parties*, p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> *The Evening Gazette* (Oklahoma City), Jan. 6, 1894.

<sup>4</sup> *The Oklahoma Red Book*, compiled under the direction of the Secretary of State, Benjamin F. Harrison (Oklahoma City, 1912), Vol. II, p. 305.

the purpose of selecting such a man and to draw up a territorial platform, delegates to the People's Party Convention met at Guthrie on August 4, 1896. The Convention was called to order in the Guthrie Opera House, and immediately went about the business of writing a platform. The platform that was adopted reiterated the statements of the national Populist platform, which asked for an expansion of the currency and a 16 to 1 ratio coinage of silver and gold; direct election of the President, Vice President, and United States Senators; graduated income tax; government ownership of railroads and telegraph; initiative and referendum; and a public works program for unemployed laborers. In looking over the list of delegates attending this convention, many names could be found of men who were later to become prominent in the affairs of the Democratic Party in Oklahoma.

Following the ever-increasing national trend of integration and fusion with the Democratic Party, the convention endorsed William Jennings Bryan for President. They held out, however, for Thomas E. Watson, the great Populist leader from Georgia, for the Vice Presidential nomination.

When the delegates got around to selecting their nominee for Congressional Delegate, the names of thirteen men were placed before the convention. On the first ballot J. Y. Callahan of Kingfisher County received 43½ votes; E. E. Bennet, Canadian County, 36½; W. O. Cromwell, Garfield, 32½; E. M. Clark, Noble, 11½; George W. Gardenshire, Payne, 21½; F. S. Pulliam, Logan, 21; W. A. Ruggles, Pottawatomie, 19½; Delos Walker, Oklahoma, 1½. On the thirteenth roll call Callahan was still leading, but had only increased his vote by 5½, giving him 49. Walker had 43. Cromwell 42, Bennett 33, Pulliam 21, and Ruggles 15. Ballot after ballot was held until the delegates began to be weary and worn from constant work in behalf of their favorite candidates. On the twenty-sixth roll call the stalemate broke with a big swing to Callahan.<sup>4</sup>

The convention had been stormy and tempestuous, with great flights of oratory in nominating speeches and in denunciations of Dennis Flynn, the incumbent Congressional Delegate and Republican nominee for reelection. W. O. Cudiff, a delegate from Garfield County, when placing W. O. Cromwell's name in nomination is quoted as saying that "a man was needed for the Delegate office whose eloquence would convince Congress that the days of the Red-skin, cowboys, mediocrity, and Dennis Flynn had passed in Oklahoma."<sup>5</sup>

J. Y. Callahan was a minister of the Methodist Church, who lived six miles north and one west of the town of Kingfisher. His claim was just over the line in the Cheyenne country. This location of

<sup>4</sup> *Peacemaker Leader*, Aug. 7, 1896.

<sup>5</sup> *The Daily Oklahoma State Capital* (Guthrie), Aug. 5, 1896.

his farm was a further attribute to him as a candidate, for any advocacy he might make during the campaign for "free homes" could not be charged as proposing something that would be of personal benefit to himself. The Cheyenne country was not included, at that time, in the "free home" agitation.

The Populist standard-bearer had come to Oklahoma from Kansas, where he had once been elected on the Republican ticket to the office of Register of Deeds of Stanton County. He was born in Deut County, Missouri in the year 1862. His parents were natives of Tennessee, his father having been a captain in the Union Army during the war between the North and South. Young Callahan moved to Kansas in 1886 and soon became active in Republic party politics at the county level. It was while he was in Kansas that he became indoctrinated and enamoured with Populist theories. At the time of his nomination in Guthrie he had been out of the Republican party for eight years.<sup>1</sup>

In his acceptance speech at the Guthrie Convention, Callahan said, "I am a preacher. If a preacher is not a fraud, he has as good a right to be in politics as anyone else; if he is a fraud, he has no right anywhere . . . . I go in clean, and propose to walk out clean." The crowd at the convention gave him a great ovation, and the expectancy of a successful and victorious campaign for the Populist cause was voiced on every hand.<sup>2</sup>

The Guthrie, *Oklahoma State Capitol*, a Republican daily, took a rather dim view of Callahan's nomination and thoroughly discounted the Populist expectation of victory in the coming election. The headline story telling of Callahan's nomination boldly stated, "Reverend Callahan. The Man to be Slaughtered for Congress on the Populist Ticket. He Prayed for the Pie. The Great Convention Turns Several Good Statesmen Down and Selects a Man as Innocent of Business as a Babe."<sup>3</sup> An unbiased observer could not help but wonder which ones of the candidates the *Capitol* considered statesmen, and as to whether it would have considered any one of such men as a statesmen had he received the nomination.

The upsurge of Populism in Oklahoma Territory brought considerable dismay to the Democrats. They had already accepted many of the Populist proposals as elements in their programs and platforms. When their territorial convention met in El Reno on September 3, they were more concerned with defeating the Republicans and Dennis Flynn than they were in electing a candidate of their own. They were well aware of the fact that the combined votes for the Populist and Democratic nominees for Delegate in 1894

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Earl Lucas, daughter of J. Y. Callahan, Kingfisher, personal interview.

<sup>2</sup> *The Daily Oklahoma State Capitol*, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 6, 1896.

had greatly exceeded the vote for Flynn. Under these circumstances it was natural for the leaders of both the Populist and Democratic parties to consider the matter of fusion. As has previously been stated, this was already taking place at the national level, with the Democrat, Bryan, being endorsed for President by the Populists. Not to pass up any opportunity, Callahan and his chief advisers were in El Reno when the Democrats opened their convention.

The delegates to this convention were split into fusionists and non-fusionists. Speeches and arguments were heard on both sides. Finally it was decided to request the Populist candidate for Delegate to appear on the platform for questioning. A committee was appointed to contact Callahan and escort him into the hall.

When Callahan reached the platform, the "Convention went into a perfect storm of applause." This ovation seemed to indicate that the temper of the majority was for fusion. Most of the questions that were put to Callahan before the entire convention were made by Roy Hoffman of Oklahoma City, W. S. Denton of Enid, and M. L. Bixler of Norman.

Denton asked the Populist candidate's opinion about the maintenance of separate schools for whites and negroes. This question was probably instigated from the knowledge that Callahan's father had been a Union soldier, and at one time the present Populist candidate had been elected to a county office in Kansas on the Republican ticket. Callahan's poised manner in answering his questioners immediately endeared him to the delegates of the convention. His answer to Denton's question was direct and in a manner of restraint and dignity. He said that his wife was the daughter of a Confederate veteran, and that he "would never allow her children and mine to go to school with colored children." He emphasized, however, that he had no desire to deny educational privileges to children merely because of their color.

Another question asked by another delegate wanted to know if he would support Bryan for President. His answer was a definite "Yes." Then he was questioned as to whether he was a prohibitionist. His answer was that he was not a political prohibitionist, but a personal one and that he did not consider the prohibition question a political matter.<sup>14</sup>

After minority efforts had been made to block any endorsement of Callahan by the convention, Dan Peery, a delegate from El Reno, jumped on a chair, secured the attention of the presiding official, and moved that Callahan be endorsed as the Democratic candidate for Congressional Delegate. At the conclusion of his motion, all bedlam broke loose, "amidst the wildest enthusiasm." It was impossible to take a roll call, and Callahan's endorsement

<sup>14</sup> *Tecumseh Leader*, Sept. 11, 1896.

was made by a tremendous roar of voice votes. Fusion had won and Callahan became not only the standard bearer of the Populists, but also of the Democrats.<sup>11</sup>

Following the close of the convention, committees consisting of Populists and Democrats were formed to work out plans for carrying on the campaign of the fusion ticket. By the latter part of September Callahan buttons were blossoming on the lapels of Populists and Democrats throughout the Territory. These buttons could be ordered from a firm in Guthrie at 5 cents each or \$2.00 per hundred.

That Callahan had the adaptability of changing from pulpit sermonizing to political exhortation was soon demonstrated in the battle he waged against Dennis Flynn, the Republican nominee. He soon launched an extensive speaking tour that carried him throughout the Territory. Most of these trips were made by train, but where such facilities did not exist, buggy and carriage afforded the transportation.

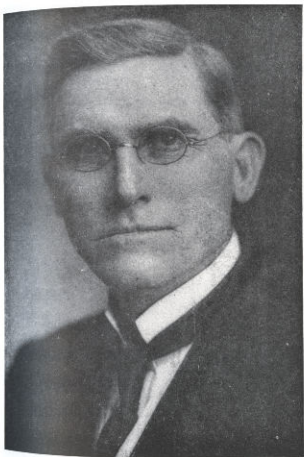
Late in October Callahan arrived in Oklahoma City for a speech. A milling crowd was at the railway station to greet him. As the Populist leader stepped from the train a mighty roar of acclaim went up from the multitude jammed around the depot. Bells played, bells were rung, and locomotive whistles blasted and screeched. Hundreds of old time Republicans were seen wearing the white badges of Callahan. At the corner of Main and Broadway Callahan delivered an address to approximately 3,000 people. The candidate appeared worn out from weeks of intensive campaigning. He was exceedingly hoarse and asked the crowd to be as quiet as possible while he was talking.<sup>12</sup> Poor Callahan, and the other candidates of his day, had to use their own unaided voices when speaking. Today the mouse-voiced talker can be made to roar like a lion by the help of that mechanical device known as the "loud speaker."

The neighbors and friends of Callahan, in the Kingfisher community, lent much encouragement and help to his candidacy. Young women of that locality formed a "Callahan Glee Club" and sang at many of his meetings. On one occasion this glee club went to Wichita, Kansas and appeared at a "Sockless" Jerry Simpson rally.<sup>13</sup> There was an occasional fly in the Populist ointment, however, for Flynn Partisans were wont to chide Callahan as a renegade Republican—one who had formerly held office as a member of that party. Out at the country school, where the Callahan children attended, the sons and daughters of Republican claim holders derisively told the young Callahans that Flynn would surely win. But the young-

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oct. 31, 1896.

<sup>13</sup> Mrs. W. S. Nazworthy, daughter of J. Y. Callahan, Enid, personal interview.



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sters never for a moment doubted that their father would be found the winner on election day.<sup>14</sup>

Flynn supporters were astounded at the enthusiasm and momentum of the Callahan campaign. It began to look as though the Republicans, for the first time, were to fail in the election of a Congressional Delegate. The Populist up-swing, however, was temporarily slowed down by a mysterious injury to Spencer Sanders, Callahan's campaign manager. He fell from a Rock Island train while riding between Hennessey and Dover and suffered a severe concussion. The usual prejudice and bitterness engendered by an intense political contest caused many Populist followers to believe that Sanders had met with foul play from political adversaries.<sup>15</sup>

At last, election time rolled around and Callahan returned to Kingfisher for the closing address of his campaign. It was the day before the ballots were to be cast. The whole countryside turned out to welcome the Populist nominee. A gaily bedecked and decorated carriage, pulled by prancing horses, brought Mrs. Callahan and her several children down to the depot to meet the distinguished husband and father. The children were all agog, for they had scarcely seen their father since he had taken to the stump. When the train pulled in, the Populist adherents put on a demonstration similar to the welcome accorded the return of an all-victorious football team in a college town. Men rushed the candidate and lifted him to their shoulders. Through the seething and cheering crowd, they carried him to a van which in turn bore him to the place downtown where he was to deliver his speech. The Callahan children were sorely disappointed because they thought their father would get to ride with them in the parade.<sup>16</sup>

The campaigning, button-holing, and speech-making were done. As the political columnist tritely puts it, "Now the voters will have their say." And the Oklahoma Territorial voters did have their say with the result that their composite voice made Callahan the Congressional Delegate by a vote of 27,435 for him to 26,297 for Dennis Flynn, the Republican. Thus did the Populist tidal wave strike Oklahoma.<sup>17</sup>

That Flynn had run an exceedingly strong race in the face of the combined forces of the Populists and Democrats cannot be denied when it was observed that Callahan's margin of victory was only 1,138 votes. Callahan's lead over Flynn was much less than the total vote received by both the Democrat and Populist candidates two years previously. The Populists carried sixteen counties while the Republicans led in seven. The counties carried by the Populists

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *The Oklahoma Red Book, Vol. II, p. 365.*



were: Oklahoma, Cleveland, Canadian, Payne, Kingfisher, Washita, Roger Mills, Day, Lincoln, Pottawatomie, D. Kay, Grant, Woods, Pawnee, and Greer. Flynn carried Logan, Blaine, Beaver, Custer, Woodward, Garfield, and Noble. Pottawatomie and Cleveland Counties were the banner Populist centers. Callahan carried Pottawatomie by 686 and Cleveland by 657.

Some of the Republican papers and leaders were slow to admit defeat. On November 4, the day after the election, the *Oklahoma State Capitol* of Guthrie carried a headline on the first page, "Flynn All Right." The next day the headline announced, "McKinley A Sure Winner," but nothing about Flynn or Callahan. On the 6th a front page story featured the election of McKinley and over on page 8, a story maintained that Flynn had the lead. When the 7th arrived, the *Capitol* advised its readers in the gambling fraternity to "let bets stand." This was on page 7. Finally, on November 12, this rock-ribbed Republican newspaper gave a left-handed admission of Flynn's defeat by quoting an interview with Congressman Curtis of Kansas, in which that gentleman was quoted as saying that "the defeat of Flynn would prevent the securing of free homes by the people of Oklahoma Territory."

When Congress met in the winter of 1897, Callahan was installed as the delegate from Oklahoma. At this time he had ten children and all, except the oldest son, accompanied him and Mrs. Callahan to Washington. It was a happy family led by a hopeful father. But Callahan's pathway in the nation's capitol was not strewn with roses. He found himself a member of the minority group in Congress, seeking favors from an administration and a Congress strongly hostile to his economic views. Not only was this true, but the Governor of the Territory which he represented was a Republican appointee. Callahan could expect but little co-operation from either the national or territorial administrations.

During the campaign Callahan had stressed the 16 to 1 silver idea. Both he and Flynn had advocated free homes for the settlers. There was no hope of his making any contribution to the free silver cause in Congress, so he used his energies toward securing the union of Oklahoma and Indian Territories and the granting of free homes. On January 6, 1898, he introduced a measure providing for the joining of the two territories together as a step toward statehood. The measure was attacked from two sources: from those who opposed union of the territories at any and all times, and from those who did not believe in immediate statehood. Needless to say, nothing came of Callahan's bill.

In his efforts to secure free homes, Callahan met with a similar lack of success. In the previous session of Congress, Flynn had introduced such a measure, but had been accused of not making any great effort to secure its passage. When Callahan's bill to provide

free homes was brought before the House, one of Callahan's daughters, from the House balcony, observed Flynn, as a lobbyist, going from desk to desk of the Congressmen. Then and afterwards, she always believed Flynn was trying to block passage of the measure, so that her father would not get credit for securing that piece of legislation most sought after by Oklahoma settlers.<sup>18</sup> At any rate, Callahan's efforts in Congress for union and free homes came to naught.

In still another matter the Oklahoma delegate found himself supporting a losing cause. This was his opposition to the warring of war against Spain. He believed that President McKinley desired to avoid the war and publicly declared that he was with the President in respect to that question.<sup>19</sup>

When election time in 1898 arrived, Callahan was to be found back in Oklahoma doing his bit for the Populist cause, but not as a candidate. He seemed to have lost most of his zest for being a delegate. This may have been the result of his realization that the cards were stacked against anything proposed or sponsored by a Populist in the Congress. Members of his family, however, maintained that the deciding factor in his determination not to seek re-election was the poor health of Mrs. Callahan.<sup>20</sup> There was none acquainted with Callahan but that regarded him as more interested in his family than in his career in public life.

Regardless of causes, Callahan did not seek renomination, and the fusion groups selected Judge James R. Keaton as their standard bearer. Flynn was again the Republican nominee. A group of die-hard Populists refused to join the fusionists and nominated a man by the name of Hawkins. In a speech at Choctaw City, Callahan urged the election of Keaton, declaring that, "If we fail to elect Mr. Keaton, the fault will lay at the Populist door."

Flynn was out to regain his place as delegate, and the contest waxed warm. Keaton continuously challenged Flynn to joint discussions or debates, but the latter avoided such meetings. Eventually, however, they met on the same platform at Perkins. A seemingly biased newspaper account gave Keaton all the better of the argument, stating that Flynn became too rattled to answer Keaton's charges.

As the hackneyed stories of political writers have it, "Elections are not decided on the platform but at the ballot box." And the election of 1898 was no exception. On November 9, *The Daily Oklahoman*, a partisan of Keaton's, front paged a story with the headlines that "Keaton Is Safe." Election returns were slow in coming

<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Lucas, personal interview.

<sup>19</sup> *The Daily Oklahoman*, Sept. 7, 1898.

<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Lucas, personal interview.

is, but on November 11, this newspaper reversed itself with a small, first page paragraph, giving the information that Flynn was the winner by over nine thousand. Such was the announcement of the beginning of the ebb tide of Populism in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma Populism had reached its high-water mark in the election of Callahan. Never again was it to be a dominant factor in the political life of the Sooner Territory. Populists and Democrats fused again in 1900 and were able to collect 35,529 votes, but this was not enough to stop the Republicans, who again elected Flynn, giving him a vote of 38,253. In 1902 there was no Populist ticket in the field. In after years, when occasional Populist candidates appeared, little attention was given to them.

Populism, as an active movement, passed from political existence in Oklahoma and elsewhere, but the years in which it was engrafted on the Democratic Party left evidences of that union which are obvious to this day.