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Review of *Principle over Party: The Farmers' Alliance and Populism in South Dakota, 1880-1900* by R. Alton Lee

Francis Moul

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Principle over Party: The Farmers' Alliance and Populism in South Dakota, 1880–1900. By R. Alton Lee. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011. 255 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95.

“During this era, farmers and workers watched as forces of wealth captured control of both major political parties, promoting the formation of monopolies. . . . In the process, the small capitalist class gained control of the great bulk of the nation’s wealth. This monetary disparity exacerbated class divisions in the country, and many worried that it would lead to violence and upheaval.” That sounds like contemporary headlines about the Occupy Wall Street movement. It isn’t. Those words in this book’s introduction describe the era from 1865 to 1894, taking in the conditions that spawned one of the most successful, yet failed, third-party political uprisings in America, the Populists. Much has been written about this rural revolution, successful primarily in the Great Plains, both north and south, but little study has been done of the Populist Party’s rise

and fall in South Dakota. Yet it is there, as R. Alton Lee makes abundantly clear, where much of the passion and development of Populism took place. It is there that electoral triumph gave Populism a chance to put principles into action. And it is there that those principles took precedence over party and winning elections, when fusion politics between Populists and Democrats spun out of control.

Local chapters of the Dakota Farmers’ Alliance began forming in 1884, as the great Dakota boom ended in poverty and bankruptcies. Henry Loucks organized one in Duell County. Just seven farmers could start a sub-Alliance, and Loucks quickly formed three more. He swiftly gained a state leadership role that soon grew to national status as the Alliance and the companion Populists rapidly spread. What follows is a detailed history of the South Dakota experience, which parallels that of the national and even international Populist movement. A rapid rise, political successes, administrative and policy failures as the Populist platform mostly failed to be enacted, and the great debate about fusion with William Jennings Bryan and the Democrats for the 1896 election. Personal grudges also entered in. Loucks preferred principle over party and chose not to dilute his Alliance ideals for political gains. It is an appealing philosophy that few other leaders have shown, then or now.

Lee illustrates—in a history that is engaging, scholarly, and uncommonly readable—what the nation lost when Populism fell apart. Thankfully, many of the movement’s policies became law in later Progressive and New Deal Eras, for they indeed showed the way. Much of the underlying problems and aches that produced Populism still remain; today’s ideological Occupiers underscore that point.

FRANCIS MOUL
Environmental Historian
Lincoln, Nebraska