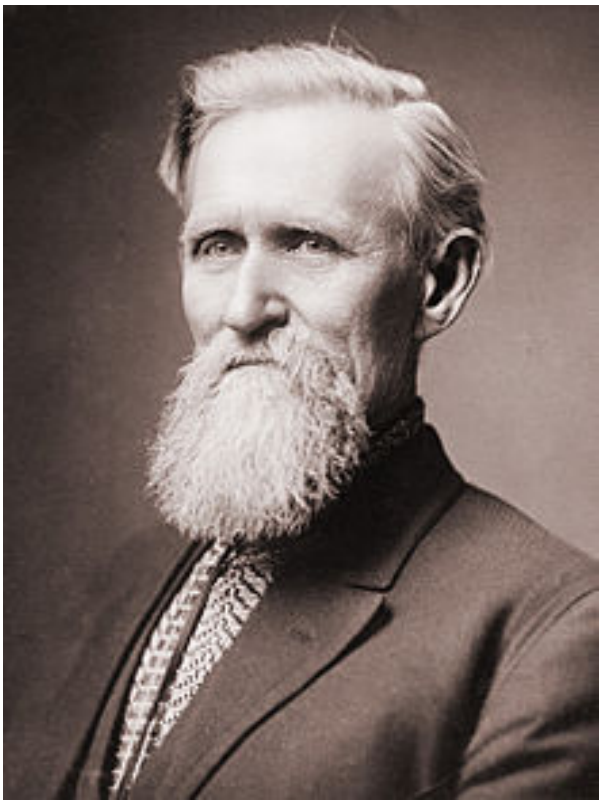
American Condescension and the Fate of the Ultimate Populist

Many Americans disavow the influence of the rich and of money in recent elections. But alternatives to wealth have not received good reviews either. Populist leaders have represented the most successful type of radical politics in American history. Both in the 1890s and 1930s, impoverished Americans desired leaders like James Weaver and Huey Long who could provide special help. Populist leaders emerged who were neither revolutionaries nor ideologues. But American culture has stigmatized them as bigots, novices, and demagogues.

Perhaps the best example of an essential populist and of our nation's in-built cultural condescension is James Cyclone Davis. I will call him the Ultimate Populist. Davis was the ultimate populist because oratory was the essential expression of populism, and he was the most consistent, and compelling populist orator. Indeed, the name 'Cyclone" appears as the first chapter of Frank Baum's allegorical populist tale *Wizard of Oz,* and the image of the cyclone symbolic of successful rhetoric. Unlike other populist leaders, Davis also had a base, a geographical region that consistently supported him and populism—Northeast Texas. Finally, Davis as the "Ultimate Populist" had a legacy. From the base which he helped establish for populism, one finds in the twentieth century one of the most singular exponents of the populist idea—Wright Patman. Thus Davis was a most, and in some ways--the most—successful,

straight-forward populist. At the same time, he is not only an utterly forgotten leader, but one whose reputation seems interminably smeared with negativity.[1]



Cyclone Davis

To understand how central oratory and Cyclone Davis were for populism and the democratic process, it is essential to understand the context. Two events: the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution changed almost everything in America. The Civil War destroyed the slave system, and diverted the rest of the world to other

cotton markets. This created run-down sections of the South like Northeast Texas that once had been prosperous, but now contained many small farm-holders and tenants living on the brink of destitution. The Industrial Revolution for the first time created incredible discrepancies in wealth, and exploitive banking, transport, and retail systems actually gouged the "plain people" even more. Five classes of people became discernable with such broad, and uneven wealth distribution. These groups were the commercial class, a high-end service working class who catered to their needs, an urban underclass, well-to-do farmers, and a rural underclass. The urban underclass was composed of many immigrants and was overwhelmingly Catholic. Led by bosses this element conveyed a need for patronage and protection. Though Democratic, they reflected little of the Jeffersonian pattern--the democratic priorities of the rural underclass; their main objective was to obtain security in a new world. Their differences in values from the longer-term American rural underclass created a dysfunctional democratic response to the remarkable adjustments of wealth. Southerners like Cyclone Davis thus appeared beaten through and through. They had lost the Civil War, and a more prosperous economic system. They had lost the race to wealth to the commercial class. They were losing further as they were separated from a natural alliance with the urban underclass. Their discontent was real. They could not be heard.

Unable to afford to print newspapers, transport delegates, rent large halls, or even keep their leaders in the same place for any appreciable length of time, the populists of the rural underclass had one option—oratory. A solo speaker, living in a Spartan manner, could travel from community to community, and address motivated crowds. The interchange unlike the newspaper—which was authoritarian, was democratic. The populist orator had to in some ways reflect the interests of congregation-sized units he talked to. The Populist appeal was the most democratic appeal. Unlike large conventions, or elite get-togethers, common people could ask questions, boo, applaud, stamp their feet, or cheer. When Abraham Lincoln spoke of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," we can imagine how he too experienced this essential taste of democracy, during his debates and small-town appearances. Though it was true that the populist orator also had to be part entertainer, without the lighter aspects he could not have drawn people from miles away. The populist orator had to be able to speak longer than the to-and-from transportation time of the people who heard them.

Oratory was central to democracy. Oratory was central to the populist movement. The Populist movement first started in south center of Texas in a county named Lampasas, and what made that town different is that they sent out lecturers. Texas subsequently became the center of the movement, and what made the state alliance unique was that it too sent out lecturers to other states. Among the Texas

orators, no one was more celebrated than James Cyclone Davis. Davis was said to have an almost messianic appeal. With a black sombrero, alligator boots, and a Prince Albert coat he would stride into a church or school filled with people. He would carry volumes under his arms—the works of Jefferson. Then he would mesmerize. Arms, voice, and face all moved in accordance with words. It was said that hours would go by, as Davis enchanted audiences throughout the South.[2]

Cyclone had a more natural connection to the base of populism than many of its other more publicized leaders. Born near Walhalla, South Carolina, on December 24, 1854, he was unlike William Jennings Bryan, the great candidate of 1896, and James B. Weaver, populism's 1892 candidate, from the beaten-down, cash-poor South. Later, his family moved to Texas in 1857 near Winnsboro in Titus (now Franklin). Again, unlike Bryan and Weaver whose fathers were politicians, Davis father actually was a small-time farmer and served in the Confederate army in 1865. Davis knew what being a member of the rural underclass meant. To be sure, he was able to study under attorney John D. Templeton for a few months in 1869. But this came only after he had fully experienced the unappreciated drudgery of farm work until the age of 22. Engaging his native skills into academics, he qualified for a teaching certificate. Davis got married to his distant cousin Belle Barton, and they had four children. One of them became a politician in Northeast Texas. Davis was elected judge

in Franklin County even before he got his law degree. A tribute to his talent, Davis was the youngest county judge in his area.[3]

Like Tom Watson, the great Georgia populist, Davis began as a Democrat. Davis campaigned for John Ireland, who was elected a Texas Democratic governor in 1882. However, at a time when Weaver was still a Greenbacker, and Bryan and Watson still Democrats, Davis switched as early as 1884, becoming a lecturer for the Farmer's Alliance. In the early days, Davis was nicknamed "Methodist Jim" although he was a member of the Disciples of Christ. This was because his oratory was so emotionally stirring and fervent. He was a political Evangelist funded by the Alliance, who carried volumes of works by Thomas Jefferson wherever he went. Davis was less apt than either Weaver or Bryan to support fusion campaigns where populists would merge with other campaigns. He did campaign for Texas Governor, Jim Hogg, because the Farmer's Alliance endorsed Hogg. Nevertheless, Davis became a fervent attacker of the Democrats, especially when President Grover Cleveland turned his back on inflationary policies.

Though Weaver and Watson were renowned as populist speakers, there was only one other populist who received such rave reviews as Davis—William Jennings Bryan. As suggested by Bryan's nicknames—"Baby Demosthenes," and the "Boy Orator of the Platte," Bryan was renowned more for a studied speechmaking. Bryan had more money than Davis—indeed funded him, because the Populist Party in

Nebraska included wealthier urban elements. Bryan, in fact, lived in Lincoln, and was a dominant figure in the newspaper business. Davis, by contrast, was the fireball, and the true people's orator. "Methodist Jim" suggested a closeness to the common people. The name "Cyclone," also connoted Davis's amazing impact on the people he lectured. He acquired this nickname in a debate with General Watt Hardin in the state Capital of Kentucky in March of 1884. Judge Newman Phillips by order of court made it his legal name. According to a press reporter, Davis so demolished his opponent that it would only take one blow of the "Texas Cyclone" to be sufficient for Hardin to cancel the rest of the scheduled debates.[4]

Davis used many interesting expressions:

"I saw Salvation Army people dancing for Jesus."

"Why does Satan have all the good tunes?"

"I met a nun, I wrote, I saw a nun pass down the street. With a saintly look of St. Mary's face. I saw a godly man. I saw a reprobate."

"Corporations found ways to steal long before we learned we learned to punish them of theft."

"These fools cannot go on forever."

We note a few aspects about these phrases. Davis spoke of music and dancing, and in his speeches did a little of both. His voice inflections, and gyrations kept hearers

mesmerized for hours. Also, we note a Victorian dualism. Davis appealed to Christians of different denominations to unite against reprobates and fools.

Weaver from Iowa, and Bryan from Nebraska, came from a region that was more in favor of inflation, and even working class issues, than in direct "share-the-wealth" attacks against the rich, and complaints about money deprivation or destitution. Davis was a more essential representative of the rural underclass. He was very anti-corporate. Rich people became an abomination to him. Davis, like many rural tenants and small-time farmers like his father had a festering suspicion that the game of life was rigged. He poured out contempt for the corrupt ways of the wealthy.[5] His name-calling was legendary, referring to upper-class elements as:

"The ragging ruinous Wall Street."

"The money devils of Wall Street."

"Gold Bandits,"

"Our ribald royal rulers,"

"Our royal roosters."[6]

These were some of the creative phrases Davis would use when he gave his flamboyant speeches all over the nation. Davis captivated the audience's attention as he entertained the crowds by setting up the drama between the forces of evil, and of the people. Once the audience heard about the "Venal vampires of wall street," they were ready to believe in their ornate and successful campaign to steal "our money."

Davis would not allow the audience to forget the tie between evil greed and the wealthy, nor the rising danger to the republic posed by this snowballing cupidity. Then he would exclaim at the top of his lungs as he spoke these exuberant words: "Why did we cede the power of coin money to the federal government?"[7]

Davis was ready for a climax, to reinforce basic truths, to sear into people's memories that it was time for action:

"The greedy gang. Did the sovereign states expect these pillagers?"

"They are bonding the people." "Their money is loot." "Why can't the states get money the way the banks do?"

Why do the money marauders of Wall street…" need even more money? "What if everyone could get money on bonds?"

This would refer to Wall Street. Davis would bombard his audience with worthy thought-questions to get the minds of his audience all flowing in the same direction. Often the response was that of an uproar, in agreement to Davis' meaningful probings. In all of this, people gasped over the encroaching danger, and his call for courage. Davis was not afraid to speak his mind.[8]

Successfully the name of Populism was established through the talented oratory of "Cyclone" Davis. Populism could only get to the people through oratory, due to its financial disadvantage and could not afford doing so through newspaper or whisper

campaigns like the other parties did. Davis had also come from the true base of Populism, Northeast Texas, where people could vote for him.[9]

Texas was the birthplace of 1890s populism. But the big question is why Northeast Texas remained the base of Populism and not Lampasas, Texas or the Hill Country as Goodwyn concluded in his book, *A Short history of the Agrarian revolt in America: The Populist Movement*? According to the statistics in Figures 1 and 2 below, there were five major clusters in Texas of the populist vote in two crucial elections, for James B. Weaver for President in 1892, and Barnet Gibbs in 1898: 1. Northeast Texas, 2. the Lampasas Hill Country, central counties, 3. an eastern cluster around Sabine and San Augustine counties, 4. a Western Sterlin-Jack county group, and 5. a sub-Central set whose largest contributor to the Populist movement was Gonzales County. In both the 1892 and the 1898 elections it was Davis' Northeast Texas that constituted the largest concentration of Populist voters, with over 6,000 in both elections. The upper-central cluster around Lampasas had only about two-thirds the base for Populism in both elections as Northeast Texas. [10]

Northeast Texas was a center of Populism not only because Davis was a resident there, but because it supported Davis, this very outlandish leader of the People against the Elite.[11] They demonstrated this when Cyclone Davis happened to be at the lowest point of his career. It was when the Texas Legislature charged him of forgery and fraud in 1895. The committee of the House investigated Davis. Davis was then censured,

with legislators coming to the conclusion that he was guilty of committing "a proposition that was improper or reprehensible and prejudicial to the dignity of the House." The committee passed the censure with a vote of seventy to twenty-three, but in that moment of hopeless resentment, a group of Davis' friends from Titus County in the heart of Northeast Texas decided to challenge the censure resolution. They encouraged Davis for his valiant work that he had performed for the Populist movement. Davis had many North East Texans who believed and trusted in what he did.[12]

Davis also strongly believed in prohibition. This could seem repressive. But Davis should be seen as the man who reflected that part of Texas that gave us the "father of prohibition," Morris Sheppard, author of the Eighteenth Amendment, from Texarkana. Davis would call rich people "sordid freebooters." The big-income people, the "bootleggers," were involved with liquor. "Must the people be serfs, peons and slaves to a Wall Street horde of money lords, a cruel clan of knaves," these illegal bootleggers? Davis made a comparison. Government had made killing against the law, but government didn't consider that selling this murderous liquid should also be crime:[13]

> It is a crime to kill yet the liquor traffic makes men kill by law when the government takes a fee and sets up a dram shop to make people murder, rob and kill each other. . . . God . . . Isaiah describes the old saloon with its

jamboree of vulgar song and dance. Then he says that its victims descend into HELL.[14]

American Condescension is a cluster of attitudes that is more sensitive to ethnic name-calling, than to derision based on class. Davis has been forgotten and attacked because he was mixed up with the Ku Klux Klan. But Davis agreed with what the people of Northeast Texas believed in, therefore making his tie to his base stronger.[15] The Klan was very much for prohibition, and reflected the attitudes of the people in his base. Davis was a democratic orator in this section, and has been shunned. But if 'class' is the issue, why worry so much about ethnic stereotyping? It is clear that Davis has been castigated because he tolerated ethnic bigotry, while trying to stop economic bigotry toward the poor. American Condescension typically treats economic condescension as trivial, but focuses instead on ethnic stereotyping as a major sin.[16]

Davis had to entertain rural audiences for long periods of time. He is disdained today for what he said. But again, he reflected his people. He surely was not a "machista:" his ambivalence of women was also made known throughout his speeches. Davis saw how women had power over men when he would say: "she makes him her hero and makes him her clown." In Davis's memoir, he had imprinted "The New Woman or Girl of Today" by Belle Barton Davis. In this essay, Belle, who wrote when she was at Trinity University, in Tehuacana Texas in January 3rd 1896, discussed

women's rights. She wrote from a Biblical perspective. She claimed that God had established the rights of women since the beginning. "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him, male and female, created he them." Davis, in fact, supported women's suffrage alongside his wife, Belle. Again Davis tied himself to an evangelical population, and to the women of this group. Northeast Texas became his base as he connected to the local people. He allowed for sexual differences, but kept in mind the Biblical view about the worth of all people:[17]

> The singular and plural here used; likewise "male and female" show equality with essential differences in temperament and constitution out of which must of necessity arise distinct characteristics and individual duties . . . Man for ages, held in his own hand the arts, sciences, crafts and artifices which tend toward development of intellectual powers."[18]

Big-name Populists like Bryan and Weaver tried to appeal to a national audience. Davis spoke his mind. "Why in the name of God, can we not . . . [use] Jefferson's money system?" Davis would hearken to the lost Southern world, not necessarily to glorify it, but to let his listeners know he knew secrets about the one time Queen of the Confederacy, Lucy Pickens, or how people best dealt with ticks near the river bottoms. As late as 1939, pedestrians might cross paths with the white-bearded Davis on some Dallas street corner, attacking the "pimps" of Wall Street.[19]

As a sensation of the Populist movement, Davis had real enemies. He mentions this in his memoir in a section he calls "Vituperation." He showed a depth of distaste for all who opposed his people. He referred to the "press-run puppets of Wall Street" who "castigated and ridiculed me as a freak, charging that I wanted to 'swat the rich'." Davis once took the floor, answering a question in a meeting with a speech: [20]

> I can stand up with St. Paul and join in that glorious spirit he has when he said: though beaten with many stripes and twice put in prison he counted it all honor to suffer for a cause so righteous.[21]

Davis would console himself and defend the conflicts he found himself in by constantly re-combining elements of scripture and paraphrasing the Bible for his evangelical audiences:

> They may hush my voice in the chambers of death, and take from my veins the crimson blood; I'll stand in the battle where I've always stood, a battle for the weak against the strong, for the right against the wrong, for the poor and plundered against the arrogant classes; men shall have no terrors for me. I'll stand in the fray where I've always stood. No matter what results may be." [22]

Davis stood strong and bold in his speeches. But he also saw himself as a man of peace, representing the foremost interest of the people, to escape harm. In fact, above all, he wanted to be remembered as man who fought for peace. In Cyclone's memoir

he approaches peace by relating his work to a special epoch of human history: "When the stars stood vigil over a babe in Bethlehem, and heaven touched the earth to sing a christening song of the redeemer's birth. " That good will among men and peace on earth was the glorious cause of that heavenly birth." [23]

Davis opposed war at all costs. Later, when he became a Congressman from Northeast Texas, 1915-1917, he introduced a bill into Congress that would have made a fraction of a millionaires' wealth subject to the same kind of draft as men in time of war. When Senator McKinley and Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War, warned Davis he was a "marked man" and that Wall Street would spend millions of dollars to keep him out of the Congress, that did not deter him. Davis believed that most wars have been "wars of conquest." Not only did Davis oppose war, but he also viewed war from a Biblical stance, thinking of the welfare of his people. Davis was in full agreement with those in President Wilson's League of Nations who wanted to outlaw war and spread the "placid wings of peace over all the earth."[24]

Davis was an extreme Populist who saw the rich behind wars, liquor, and hard money, everything that harmed the people. Therefore one of Davis's greatest enemies was American Condescension. This was a complex of attitudes used to judge people by their appearance, possessions, and position. For example, Davis would wear old-fashioned ties and be belittled. He would wear an old Prince Albert coat, alligator

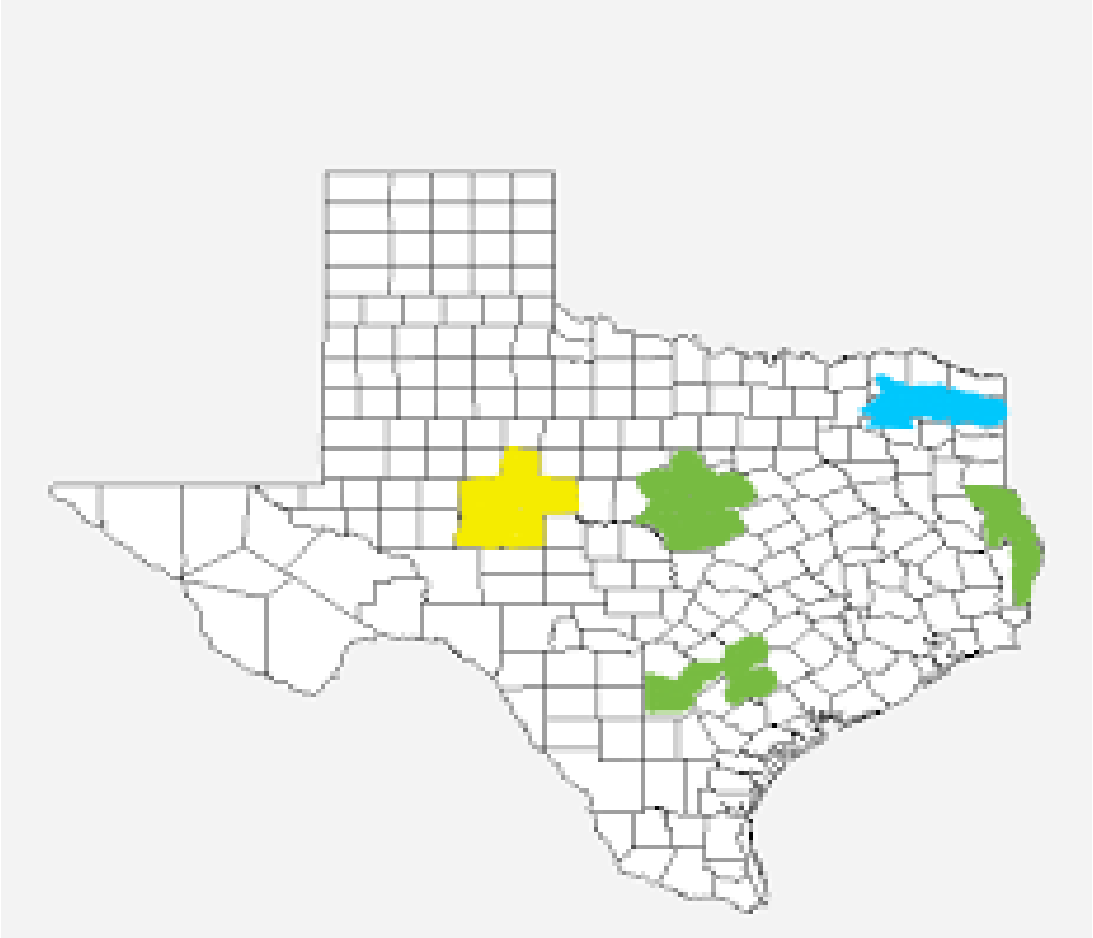
boots, and a sombrero and find his enemies snickering. Davis was aware of the attitude that "if you are not printed you are not important." Because books and newspapers were expensive, Davis was belittled for being poor.

As many enemies as Davis had, he also had admirers who believed in what he did, like the group of friends from Titus County. Davis being the Quintessential Populist had a disciple by the name was Wright Patman. Davis left his legacy by handing the baton to Wright Patman. Patman was from Hugh Springs in Cass County, just a few miles southeast of Titus County. Patman campaigned against chain stores, tight credit, hard money, and anything that would cause the rural poor, destitution. He too suspected the rich, Wall Street, and, in a new twist, the Federal Reserve which he felt discriminated against the poor. Patman remained a Congressman from Northeast Texas, fighting for these principles until the 1970s. Patman used his power in the House of Representatives to launch the first inquiry into the money trail that led to President Nixon's Watergate scandal. Davis was important for Populism because of his legacy. Bryan, Weaver and Watson lacked such a legacy.[25]

Davis had a complicated relationship with the man most people associate with Populism, William J. Bryan. Davis wrote about Bryon, a Populist democratic fusionist who was a Presidential candidate in 1896 in his memoir to show his admiration. Even though many extreme Texans hated Bryon because he had mixed the Democratic Party with Populism, Davis admired him for his contributions to the people.[26]

Davis was downgraded and belittled because of American Condescension, a cultural pattern that belittles the impoverished. This became his greatest enemy, wiping out the memory of his attainments after this death. And for that reason Davis had gone down in history as just simply another radical Jeffersonian, a flamboyant-one-man-circus, who cynically made his living out of Populism. This criticism misses the fact that democracy depended most on oratory rather than print journalism. Davis had a great address system that fell in with the people, a harmony with the people he served, and a will to protect them. The Ultimate Populist, more than any of the other more nationally known populists, also had a geographic base of people who supported him, and a legacy that lasted far into the twentieth century.

Figure 1: Presidential Election of 1892



Key:

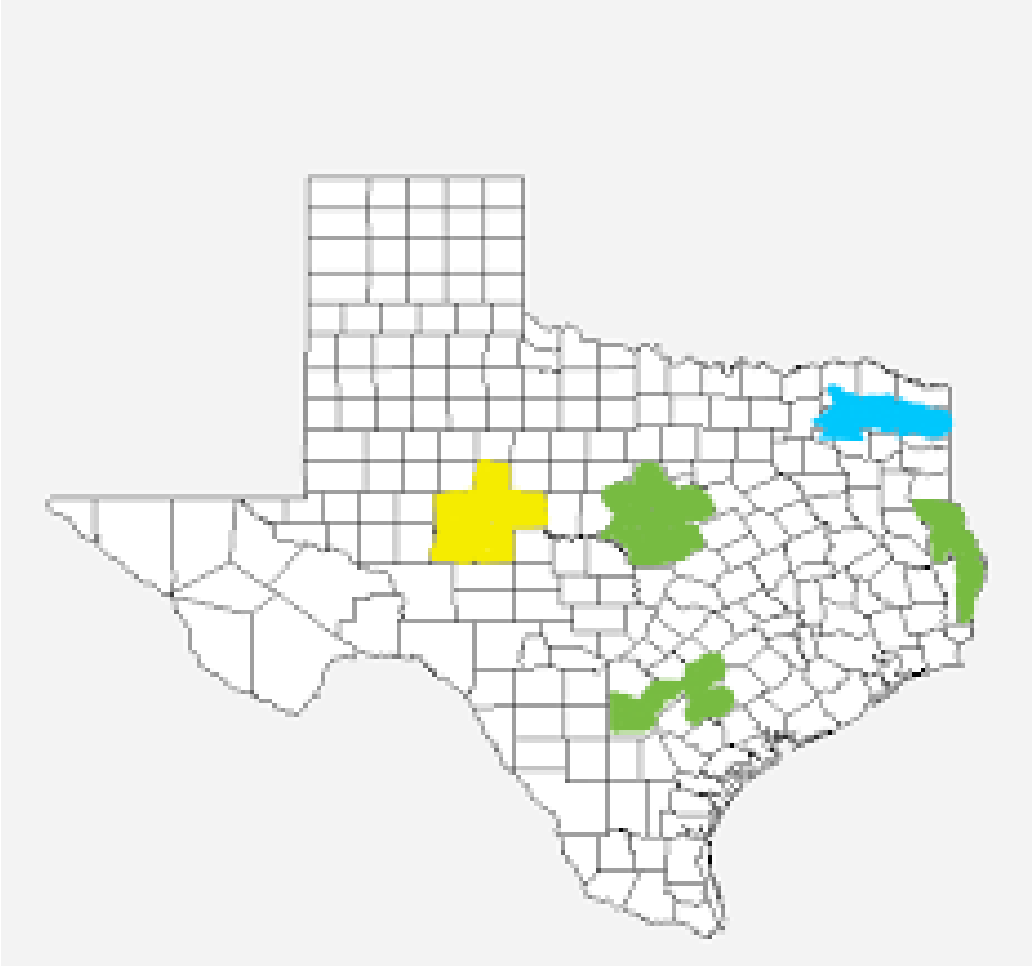
6,000 or more Populist voters

2,000 to 5,000 Populist voters

1,000 to 1,999 Populist voters

Source: Mike Kingston et. al. Political History of Texas: (Austin: Eakin Press, 1992), 66-60, 76-79.

Figure 2: 1898 Gubernatorial Election



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Notes

[1] L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago: George Hill, 1899), p.1.

[2] Lawrance Goodwyn *The Populist Moment* (New York; Oxford,1978), 3-10; Roscoe Martin, *The People's Party in Texas* (Austin: State Historical Association, 1070), 120-121; Handbook of Texas Online, Worth Robert Miller, "Populism," accessed April 02, 2016, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fda41. [Accessed February 23, 2016].

[3] Handbook of Texas Online, Worth Robert Miller, "Davis, James Harvey [Cyclone]," accessed April 02, 2016, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fda41. [Accessed February 23, 2016].

[4] Handbook of Texas Online, Worth Robert Miller, "Davis, James Harvey [Cyclone]," accessed April 02, 2016, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fda41. [Accessed February 23, 2016]. Robert C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 131, 152.

[5] Davis James Harvey, *Memoir,* (The Courter Press, Sherman Texas, 1935), 239.

[6] *Ibid.,* 217-218, 241.

[7] *Ibid.,* 239.

[8] *Ibid.,* 239.

[9] *Ibid.,* 15-16.

[10] Lawrance Goodwyn *The Populist Moment* (New York;Oxford,1978); Mike Kingston, Sam Attlesey, and Mary Crawford, *Political History of Texas*, (Dallas; Dallas Morning News, 1992), 67. Elections of Texas Governors, 1845-2010, *Texas Almanac*, http://texasalmanac.com/topics/elections/elections-texas-governors-1845–2010 [Accessed April 7, 2016].Handbook of Texas Online, Donna A. Barnes, "*People's Party*," http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/wap01. (AccessedApril 07, 2016). The clusters were determined by counties that gave the Populists a plurality in 1892. The Northeast cluster included Delta, Hopkins, Franklin, Titus, Morris, Cass, Camp, Rains. The Lampasas group included Lampasas, Coryell, Burnett, San Saba, Mills, and Hamilton. The eastern county group included: Sabine, San Augustine, Newton, Shelby, and Panola. The Western cluster included: Sterling, Coke, Jack, and Tom Green, Nolan and Reynolds. The Sub-Central group included: Anacosta, Wilson, Gonzalez, and DeWitt.

[11] Davis, *Memoir*.

[12] James L. Ranchino*, The Work And Thought Of A Jeffersonian In The Populist Movement,* James Harvey *"Cyclone" Davis,* (Faculty of the Graduate School of Texas Christian University, 1964), 89-92.
[13] Davis, *Memoir*, 241,244.
[14] *Ibid*, 244, 256.
[15] Lawrance Goodwyn *The Populist Moment* (New York;Oxford,1978),
[16] Ranchino*, The Work And Thought Of A Jeffersonian*, 89-92.
[17] Davis, *Memoir*, 7.
[18] *Ibid*, 7-9.
[19] Goodwyn *Populist Moment*, 324-325; Davis, *Memoir*, 239.
[20] *Ibid.*, 158.
[21] *Ibid.,* 158.
[22] *Ibid.*, 158.
[23] *Ibid.*, 157.
[24] *Ibid.*, 137, 144.
[25] Ranchino, *The Work and Thought of a Jeffersonian, 150-54;* Handbook of Texas Online, Worth Robert Miller, "Davis, James Harvey [Cyclone]," accessed April 02, 2016, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fda41. [Accessed February 23, 2016].
[26] A measure of how Cyclone Davis has been forgotten is how he goes unmentioned in a recent biography of William Jennings Bryan: Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Knopf, 2006).