

Fighting Bob's Brother

William T. La Follette, Populism, and Agrarian Progressivism

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The name Robert M. ("Fighting Bob") La Follette, Sr., is virtually synonymous with American progressivism. Between 1885 and 1924, the Wisconsin Republican served in both houses of the United States Congress, as governor of Wisconsin, and as an Independent Republican candidate for president.¹ Less well known is his older brother. A South Dakota politician aligned with the Populists, William T. La Follette served as a state railroad commissioner in the late 1890s. People's Party leaders considered him as a possible candidate for South Dakota governor in 1900, the year his younger brother won the Wisconsin gubernatorial election as a Republican. William La Follette's career reveals the connection between agrarian Populism and progressivism in South Dakota and beyond and shows that his political views were an important—and overlooked—influence on his more famous brother.

The idea that Populism informed Robert La Follette's progressivism is not new. Nancy C. Unger notes that he made "many Populist reform goals his own."² His brother William's close association with the People's Party, however, has escaped the attention of most of his biographers.³ As Catherine McNicol Stock writes, the trouble with connecting

1. Robert M. La Follette, Sr., is the subject of dozens of academic works and several popular and scholarly biographies—either alone or together with members of his family. See, for example, Belle Case La Follette and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1953); Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (2000; paperback ed., Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2008); David P. Thelen, *The Early Life of Robert M. La Follette, 1855–1884* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1966), and, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976); and Bernard A. Weisberger, *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). Due to La Follette's intensity when fighting for worker and civil rights as well as against corruption, his contemporaries gave him the nickname "Fighting Bob" (Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, p. 1).

2. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, p. 108.

3. Unger notes William T. La Follette's political ambitions, his service on the railroad commission, and his 1908 campaign for lieutenant governor. She does not mention his

the Populists to Progressive Era reform “is that the vast majority of the Populists themselves did not make the journey.”⁴ William La Follette is one of the few who did. Although their positions varied on a few issues, both La Follette brothers belonged to the same strand of insurgent progressivism based on agrarian values.⁵

Elizabeth Sanders is among the scholars who see continuities between agrarian and progressive reformers. According to Sanders, “The progressive reforms of 1909–17 had their roots in programs advocated by a long succession of Grangers, Antimonopolists, Greenbackers, Farmers’ Alliance members, Populists, and Farmers’ Unionists.”⁶ Although progressive leaders frequently hailed from the urban middle class, Sanders argues that the political support for their agenda came from the southern and midwestern states where agrarian organizing occurred in the late nineteenth century. Robert La Follette fits Sanders’s description of a cohort of “relatively young, dissident, middle-class” midwestern Republicans. “These men,” she writes, “many of whom had been anti-Populists in the 1890s, now embraced much of the agrarian platform as if they had invented it themselves.” These progressive Republicans relied on publications targeted at a middle-class audience, such as *La Follette’s Weekly Magazine*, to build support.⁷

The late historian Lawrence Goodwyn would not consider William

ties to the Populists. Thelen, *Early Life of Robert M. La Follette*, p. 9, mentions La Follette’s election as a state railroad commissioner with Populist support but does not elaborate. Terrence J. Lindell, “South Dakota Populism” (master’s thesis, University of Nebraska, 1982), pp. 78, 129, identifies La Follette as the brother of the Wisconsin progressive and points out his association with Populism but does not explore his life or career in depth.

4. Stock, “Making War Their Business: The Short History of Populist Anti-Militarism,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13 (July 2014): 387.

5. This essay is an attempt to, as Rebecca Edwards writes, “help rural folks gain entry into the progressive club” (Edwards, “Politics, Social Movements, and the Periodization of U.S. History,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8 (Oct. 2009): 471).

6. Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 159.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 158–59. Sanders does not list La Follette’s magazine as an example. Other scholars who find the origins of progressivism in the middle class include Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967), and Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Connie L. Lester also sees continuity from the Populists to the progressives. See Lester, *Up from the Mudsills of Hell: The Farmers’ Alliance, Populism, and Progressive Agriculture in Tennessee, 1870–1915* (Athens: University of Georgia

La Follette, whose association with the People's Party started in 1896, an authentic Populist. Goodwyn argues that true Populism emerged from the cooperative experience of the Southern Farmers' Alliance and the greenback critique of the United States financial system. Yet, he describes the form of Populism that emerged outside of these contexts as a "shadow movement."⁸ In contrast, Charles Postel observes, "no uniform doctrine prevailed within the Populist coalition."⁹ William La Follette fits Postel's more expansive definition of Populism. He participated in South Dakota's Populist coalition as an editor, candidate, or elected official from 1896 until Republicans forced them to unify under the Democratic banner.

As a child and young man, William La Follette followed the same path as many Euro American settlers. His parents, Josiah La Follette and Mary Ferguson, met in Indiana. After their first engagement failed, Josiah returned to Kentucky, his boyhood home, and Mary married another man, who died within a year. The couple's daughter and only child, Ellen, was born after her father's death. Five years later, Mary and Josiah wed. William was born 10 December 1847 on a farm in Indiana, followed by his younger brother, Marion. Mary and Josiah had two more children, Josephine and Robert (Bob), after moving to Wisconsin in 1849. William was eight when Bob was born on 14 June 1855. Josiah died eight months after Bob's birth and was buried with Marion, who had died earlier. Josiah's estate provided for William until his fourteenth birthday. Mary remarried, but William's relationship with his stepfather soured, and his mother sent him to live with an uncle in Indiana. William subsequently returned to Wisconsin and, at the age of

Press, 2006). Rebecca Edwards seeks to abolish the distinction between the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era; she, therefore, redefines the Populists as progressives on the merits of their platform and not because of ties to the next generation of reformers and insurgent politicians. The reforms William T. La Follette and the South Dakota Populists advocated adhere to Edwards's description of progressivism. La Follette and his associates, however, also provide a bridge from Populism to progressivism for those scholars reluctant to combine the periods. See Edwards, "Politics, Social Movements, and the Periodization of U.S. History," and *New Spirits: Americans in the "Gilded Age," 1865-1905*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

8. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 209.

9. Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 14.



William La Follette (standing) is pictured here with his younger sister Josephine and brother Robert during their childhood years in Wisconsin

seventeen, enlisted in the 46th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment a few weeks before the end of the Civil War. After the war, William returned to Wisconsin and, with his stepfather feeble, assumed responsibility for the family farm near Primrose. Around that same time, he married Olivia C. Soverns of Fayette, Wisconsin, in 1867. William remained eager to move west, however, and left soon after Bob returned to the farm after attending school in Argyle, Wisconsin. In 1871, William

and his family settled on a homestead in Clay County, Nebraska, and resided there for five years.¹⁰

William La Follette's career in public service started after he traveled to the Black Hills of Dakota Territory in 1876, where he resided in Lead between 1877 and 1882. A September 1878 report in the *Deadwood Daily Pioneer Times* suggested that he mined near Deadwood and Lead.¹¹ While there, he served as a deputy sheriff, night watchman, and member of a fire company. He also earned a seat on the finance committee of the Lead City Miners' Union. Although it would later help organize the Western Federation of Miners, the Lead City Miners' Union functioned largely as a benevolent and social organization during La Follette's time in the Black Hills. La Follette did not forget his family in Wisconsin during this period, and he sent at least one contribution to support his brother's legal training.¹²

La Follette moved his immediate family to Plankinton in the farming district east of the Missouri River in southeastern Dakota Territory in 1882. He was not the only member of the extended La Follette family to move to or buy real estate in Dakota Territory. Ellen Eastman, his older half-sister, lived there with her husband and family. In 1887, his brother Bob and wife Belle Case La Follette started acquiring land for a ranch that eventually encompassed more than a thousand acres on the Missouri River about fifteen miles south of Chamberlain. They planned to raise horses there while the land grew in value. With Bob away for long

10. La Follette and La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, 1:2–3, 6–7, 17; Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, pp. 9, 12, 22, 30; William T. La Follette, house no. 70, family no. 71, United States, 1890 *Veterans Schedules*, ancestry.com, accessed 24 July 2018; Wisconsin Historical Society, "46th Wisconsin Infantry History," wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2353, accessed 24 July 2018; "W. T. La Follette is Dead," *La Follette's Weekly Magazine*, vol. 5 (10 May 1913), pp. 9–10. William La Follette enlisted in the 46th Wisconsin on 18 February 1865. The 46th Wisconsin entered service on 2 March 1865, served guard duty along the Nashville & Decatur Railroad, and then mustered out on 27 September 1865. It lost twenty men from disease but did not see combat. Both young Bob and teenage William clashed with their elderly stepfather, John Saxton. See Thelen, *Early Life of Robert M. La Follette*, pp. 12–16.

11. *Lead (S.Dak.) Daily Call*, 12 Oct. 1894; *Deadwood (D.T.) Daily Pioneer Times*, 25 Sept. 1878. La Follette's name appears twice on a list of new locations for settlers, once at a "lot near Lead" and again at "Bunker Hill lode, Two Bit Gulch."

12. *Black Hills Weekly Pioneer* (Deadwood, D.T.), 20 Nov. 1880; Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, p. 69. The Lead City Miners Union conducted funerals, participated in parades, and held balls in 1880. See, for example, *Black Hills Daily Times* (Deadwood, D.T.), 10 Jan., 30 June 1880; *Weekly Pioneer Times* (Deadwood, D.T.), 14 Jan., 29 May, 11 Dec. 1880.

periods of time, his brother and nephews looked after the ranch.¹³ Despite the help from family, he lost money on the enterprise. “We had expected the ranch would be a good investment but it had proved a costly experiment,” Belle Case La Follette later reflected.¹⁴

William La Follette remained active in law enforcement and politics after he moved to Plankinton. Scattered newspaper reports and county records provide a glimpse into his service. An 1883 article in the *Wessington Springs Herald* identifies him as a deputy sheriff of Aurora County. As a deputy, constable, and city marshal, he investigated cases

13. “W. T. La Follette is Dead,” pp. 9–10; Brule County, D.T., General Deed Index, pp. 160, 165, Register of Deeds Office, Brule County Courthouse, Chamberlain, S.Dak.; “Lafollette,” Biographical File Index, State Archives Collection, South Dakota State Historical Society (SDSHS), Pierre; *Mitchell (S.Dak.) Daily Republican*, 10 Oct. 1887; La Follette and La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, 1:91; Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, p. 106.

14. La Follette and La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, 1:91. Robert M. La Follette and Belle Case La Follette sold their 1,062-acre ranch for a slight profit in December 1897. See Brule County, D.T., Register of Deeds Book 21, p. 246, Brule County Courthouse. Although much of the ranch is now inundated under Lake Francis Case, some of their former land is accessible as part of the Elm Creek Lakeside Use Area.



Chamberlain, situated on the Missouri River in central South Dakota, was the location of the land office where William La Follette served his first public appointment.

involving horse thieves, larceny, debt, and public intoxication, seeing firsthand the consequences of the poverty his neighbors and fellow settlers endured. In 1886, a number of factions conspired to prevent his nomination for sheriff on the Republican ticket, but why he attracted opposition is unclear. La Follette remained a leader in the community and served as chairman of a county committee to petition Congress for statehood. In March 1889, he sought an appointment as a United States marshal but failed despite support from his brother, who represented Wisconsin's third district in the House of Representatives at the time. A few months after South Dakota achieved statehood on 2 November, a branch of the United States General Land Office opened in Chamberlain and the administration of Republican President Benjamin Harrison appointed La Follette as its receiver of public moneys.¹⁵

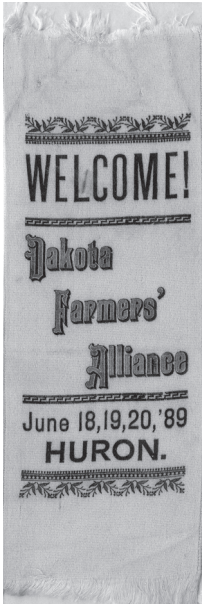
Although Dakota Territory farmers tended to support Republicans, the party faced a challenge even before South Dakota gained statehood. In the summer of 1889, La Follette advised territorial governor Arthur C. Mellette, the Republican candidate in the state's first gubernatorial election, about the growth of the Farmers' Alliance in Brule County. "I feel quite secure that you will secure this county of the nomination," La Follette wrote to Mellette on 29 July. "The Alliance are moving considerable here but I hardly think that they will get the county."¹⁶ By 10 August, however, he reported, "The farmer move[ment] has developed considerable strength in the last week."¹⁷ While Mellette prevailed in the October 1890 election, the Farmers' Alliance continued to gain strength.

On 4 June 1890, delegates to the state Farmers' Alliance convention created the Independent Party. A month later, La Follette warned Mellette that the Independents would prevail in the fall election unless the Republicans adopted positions that farmers advocated. After the election, the new party, when it cooperated with the Democrats, commanded a majority in the state legislature. In 1891, that coalition sent Inde-

15. *Wessington Springs (D.T.) Herald*, 5 May 1883; Aurora County, D.T., Justice's Docket, pp. 13, 77, 81, 83, 104, 193, Ruth Page Jones Collection, Waukesha, Wisc.; *Mitchell (S.Dak.) Capital*, 8 Oct. 1886, 23, 30 Nov. 1888; *Black Hills Daily Times*, 28 Mar. 1889; William T. La Follette to Arthur C. Mellette, 30 Mar. 1889, Mellette Papers, SDSHS; *Mitchell Daily Republican*, 11 Feb. 1890; *Jamestown (N.Dak.) Weekly Alert*, 13 Feb. 1890; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 22 Mar. 1890. Bob La Follette served the third district in Congress from 1885 to 1891.

16. La Follette to Mellette, 29 July 1889, Mellette Papers.

17. La Follette to Mellette, 10 Aug. 1889, *ibid.*



Arthur C. Mellette won South Dakota's first gubernatorial election in 1890 and served for two terms.

The Farmers' Alliance, which advocated for agrarian causes, was an active political player in the years following South Dakota statehood.

pendent Party member James H. Kyle to the United States Senate. La Follette urged Republicans to work with Kyle and try to convince him to vote with their party. La Follette predicted the coalition that elected Kyle would dominate state politics for the next five years.¹⁸

18. La Follette to Mellette, 25 July 1890, 4, 18 Feb. 1891, *ibid*; R. Alton Lee, *Principle over Party: The Farmers' Alliance and Populism in South Dakota, 1880-1900* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2011), pp. 42, 68-69, 75-76. Kyle initially voted with the Dem-

The coalition of Independents and Democrats could have created a formidable rival to South Dakota's Republican Party. Yet their inability to coordinate early in the decade prevented them from achieving the supremacy that La Follette had forecast. In 1892, the Independents aligned with the new national People's Party. They considered cooperating with Democrats by nominating the same candidates through a political tactic known as fusion, but both the Populists and the Democrats rejected the idea, allowing the Republicans to regain control of the legislature. After the Panic of 1893 sparked an economic depression and a Republican official absconded with the balance of the state treasury, however, the Populists had a new opportunity to appeal to South Dakota's struggling farmers.¹⁹

La Follette remained loyal to the Republican Party into the 1890s but worked against an established faction loyal to United States Senator Richard F. Pettigrew.²⁰ Despite La Follette's warnings about the rise of the Farmers' Alliance and Independents, he believed the Republicans needed to respond to Democratic President Grover Cleveland's election to a second, albeit nonconsecutive, term with a plan to "more equally distribute taxation . . . without surrendering protection to American labor."²¹ La Follette predicted the third-party movement would subside by 1896 and Republicans would prevail again if they adopted some reform positions. Meanwhile, his future employment remained uncertain, as Cleveland's election meant La Follette would lose his patronage position. When Cleveland appointed his successor in early 1894, a report circulated that La Follette planned to return to Plankinton. Instead, in March 1894, he commenced publishing a weekly newspaper, the *Missouri Valley Journal*, in Chamberlain.²²

ocrats in the Senate; however, he won reelection in 1897 with Republican support. He joined the Republican Party in 1898. See Lee, *Principle over Party*, pp. 75–76, 140–43.

19. Lee, *Principle over Party*, pp. 92–93, 109–10, 112–13. Lee's history of South Dakota Populism does not mention William T. La Follette. For an overview of other works on South Dakota Populism, see William C. Pratt, "South Dakota Populism and its Historians," *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): 309–29.

20. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 15 July 1892.

21. La Follette to Mellette, 18 Nov. 1892, Mellette Papers.

22. *Ibid.*; Richard F. Pettigrew to M. Hoke Smith, 10 Jan. 1894, and Pettigrew to La Follette, 22 Jan. 1894, R. F. Pettigrew Papers (hereafter Pettigrew Papers), Siouxland Heritage Museums, Sioux Falls, S.Dak.; *Huron (S.Dak.) Daily Plainsman*, 8 Jan. 1894; *Forest City*

Although the *Journal* supported the Republican Party, La Follette recognized that the high protective tariff on numerous manufactured goods the Republicans promoted hurt the farmers the newspaper served. The Populist challenge had shaken the South Dakota Republican Party and advocating unorthodox positions such as a reduced tariff created controversy among party leaders. Yet, La Follette emerged from a bitter 1894 Brule County Republican convention as a delegate to the state meeting. In Wisconsin, his brother Bob waged a similar battle as he supported Representative Nils P. Haugen's unsuccessful bid for the Republican gubernatorial nomination against the party's established machine.²³

A family tragedy brought the brothers back together when their mother, Mary, died on 21 April 1894. William returned to Wisconsin and traveled with Bob to Postville where they disinterred the remains of their father and brother to rebury them with their mother in a cemetery in Madison. Josiah La Follette had died when Bob was less than a year old, so he spent a great deal of time scrutinizing his father's bones. Biographers Nancy Unger and Bernard A. Weisberger both emphasize how the elder La Follette's death shaped young Bob, who fashioned his beliefs to fit what he thought his father would have supported.²⁴ William, as a living connection to his father, may have held a special influence over Bob.

As Bob and his allies challenged the established Stalwarts—a conservative faction of Republicans—for control of the Wisconsin party, William urged South Dakota Republicans to adopt positions that reformers favored.²⁵ In addition to a tariff reduction, he supported the free and unlimited coinage of silver at the ratio of sixteen ounces of silver to one ounce of gold. The Populists and other “free silver” advocates believed its coinage would cause currency inflation, thus putting more money in the hands of cash-strapped farmers. La Follette's insurgent

(*S.Dak.*) *Press*, 11 Feb. 1904. Only a few issues of the *Missouri Valley Journal* from 1903 and 1904 are preserved on microfilm at the South Dakota State Historical Society.

23. *Little Falls (Minn.) Weekly Transcript*, 25 Jan. 1895; *Kimball (S.Dak.) Graphic*, 18 Aug. 1894; Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, pp. 104–6.

24. La Follette and La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, 1:7; Weisberger, *The La Follettes of Wisconsin*, pp. 5–6; Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, pp. 16–17.

25. See Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, pp. 106–8.

spirit attracted scorn from his fellow South Dakota Republicans, who saw his positions as steps down the path toward Populism. In response to La Follette's free-silver stand, the *Letcher Blade*, edited by H. E. Mayhew, warned that his rhetoric would result in the Populists capturing the Brule County vote. "We feel all the more warranted in speaking thus plainly because Brother LaFollette [sic] has been filling his paper with this kind of stuff for a year or two, and because he has no hesitancy in imputing ignorance, cupidity, mendacity and bribery to those who differ with him," the *Blade* editorialized in September 1895. "If his paper has any influence at home, that influence is directed each week toward a delegation in the legislature next year that will give the vote of Brule county to a Populist for the United States senate."²⁶

For his part, La Follette saw these policies as prudent in helping to rebuild South Dakota's agricultural economy following the Panic of 1893. He wanted to attract new settlers to the state and, entering 1896, did not seek to abandon the Republican Party. He remained involved in the Republican editors' association and wanted to serve as a delegate to the 1896 Republican National Convention at Saint Louis, although that prospect troubled Mayhew and the *Letcher Blade*. The rival editor wanted assurances that La Follette and the *Missouri Valley Journal* would support a Republican platform that included a commitment to the gold standard. The Brule County Republican Convention authorized La Follette to pick delegates to the state convention, who would then select representatives for the national gathering. Instead of selecting La Follette to go to Saint Louis, the state convention chose Senator Richard Pettigrew.²⁷

Despite a history of personal animosity, La Follette and Pettigrew resolved their differences prior to the 1896 campaign. Pettigrew, like La Follette, favored the coinage of silver. After the state convention refused to endorse free silver, La Follette, in an effort to bolster Pettigrew's credibility as a delegate, conducted a poll to show that a majority of delegates actually favored free silver. Pettigrew alleged that the rail-

26. *Letcher (S.Dak.) Blade*, n.d., quoted in *Kimball Graphic*, 14 Sept. 1895.

27. *Mitchell Capital*, 17, 31 Jan., 20 Mar. 1896; *Kimball Graphic*, 1 Feb. 1896; *Turner County Herald* (Hurley, S.Dak.), 19 Mar. 1896; Kenneth Elton Hendrickson Jr., "The Public Career of Richard F. Pettigrew of South Dakota, 1848-1926" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1962), p. 185. See also Wayne Fanebust, *Echoes of November: The Life and Times of Senator Richard F. Pettigrew* (Sioux Falls: By the Author, 1997).

roads had skewed the outcome by providing his enemies with free fares to the meeting while many of his friends stayed home because they had to pay their own way. In June, Pettigrew walked out of the Republican National Convention when the party adopted a platform committed to the gold standard. La Follette followed the senator out of the Republican Party.²⁸ In July, both men attended the state convention of the People's Party. "Editor LaFollette of Chamberlain has been at Huron all the week attending the populist convention," reported the *Kimball Graphic*. "It is understood that the Journal has bolted and will support [William Jennings] Bryan for president."²⁹

The *Mitchell Capital* reported that La Follette joined the Populists about a week before the state convention. In contrast, historian Herbert S. Schell viewed the People's Party's nomination of La Follette as railroad commissioner for his district as a concession to the Silver Republicans.³⁰ La Follette's official party affiliation in the final years of the nineteenth century remains unclear. Regardless, from the perspective of the Republican Party regulars who supported William McKinley for president, La Follette had defected to the fusion coalition of Populists, Democrats, and Silver Republicans. Populists, having outpolled the Democrats in 1892 and 1894, dominated this South Dakota alliance. The Silver Republicans, the smallest of the three cooperating parties, exercised influence beyond their numbers because of Pettigrew's status as an incumbent United States senator. As part of the fusion agreement, La Follette's *Missouri Valley Journal* endorsed the Democratic presidential ticket of Bryan and Arthur Sewall, a Maine shipbuilder and capitalist whom some Populists found unacceptable. Meanwhile, his brother remained loyal to the Republican ticket.³¹

28. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 16 Mar., 10 Apr., 14 July 1896; *Lead (S.Dak.) Daily Tribune*, 20 Mar. 1896; Pettigrew to La Follette, 4 May 1896, Pettigrew Papers; Hendrickson, "The Public Career of Richard F. Pettigrew," p. 194. Earlier in the decade, La Follette sided with Mellette in the governor's dispute with the senator. See Pettigrew to La Follette, 1 Mar. 1892, Pettigrew Papers. The rapprochement may have started before 1894 when Pettigrew protested La Follette's replacement at the Chamberlain land office and asked for his help securing a legislative delegation favorable toward the senator's reelection. See Pettigrew to La Follette, 3 Feb. 1894, Pettigrew Papers.

29. *Kimball Graphic*, 11 July 1896.

30. *Ibid.*; *Mitchell Capital*, 17 July 1896; Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2004), p. 235.

31. *Mitchell Capital*, 24 July 1896; Lee, *Principle over Party*, pp. 98, 123, 132; *Dakota Farmers'*

As part of a sweeping victory that saw Populist Andrew E. Lee elected governor and the fusion coalition capture the legislature, William La Follette won election to the three-member railroad commission that regulated railroad rates and monitored the lines' physical conditions.³² Pettigrew encouraged La Follette to attack the railroad companies for the benefit of the People's Party. "If you get into a row with the roads it will strengthen you and the populist party," the senator wrote, "while if you compromise for one moment you are absolutely ruined politically and our party is damaged."³³ Soon after La Follette assumed office in 1897, the legislature empowered railroad commissioners to regulate freight rates. For any changes, state law required them to publish it as a notice to the railroad companies. On 27 August 1897, the commission established a new maximum rate. The railroad companies responded by suing to prevent their release. Following precedent, the court sided with the railroads and agreed to block publication. Populist newspapers defended the commission while Republican newspapers voiced criticism.³⁴

Amidst this fight, Bob La Follette called for regulating railroads during his second unsuccessful campaign for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in Wisconsin. William sent his brother a letter warning him to expect a bitter fight. "Well I see you are in for a hard struggle," he wrote, "and I trust you will succeed." He claimed a railroad official had told him that they were after "'the whole La Follette tribe' which must include you along with me, as my tribe is quite small."³⁵

Leader (Canton, S.Dak.), 24 July 1896; Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, pp. 107–9. Goodwyn denounces fusion politicians. He views fusion as the rejection of the Populist movement culture and that coalition advocates acted as "essentially men without ideas" (Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, p. 591). See *ibid.*, pp. 590–92.

32. La Follette served as a railroad commissioner from 1897 to 1901. He served alongside William H. Tompkins of Rapid City (1897–1898) and William G. Smith of Sturgis (1898–1911). See "Railroad Commissioners," in Doane Robinson, *Encyclopedia of South Dakota* (Pierre, S.Dak.: By the Author, 1925), p. 605.

33. Pettigrew to La Follette, 22 May 1897, Pettigrew Papers.

34. Lee to La Follette, 13 Dec. 1897, Lee Papers, SDSHS; Terrence J. Lindell, "Populists in Power: The Problems of the Andrew E. Lee Administration in South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): 352; Mitchell Capital, 17 Sept. 1897; *Black Hills Union* (Rapid City), 3 June 1898. The *Black Hills Union*, a Populist newspaper, defended the railroad commission in response to criticism from the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, a Republican newspaper.

35. La Follette to Robert M. La Follette, 26 July 1898, microfilm, reel 13, film 4438, Cor-



The election of Andrew E. Lee as governor marked the peak of the Populist Party in South Dakota.

William La Follette's official political allegiance remained vague. At this point in his career, he cared more about principles than partisanship. An 1897 entry for the *Missouri Valley Journal* in a national newspaper directory indicated "Populist" as its political affiliation. In April

respondence, 22–28 July 1898, Robert M. LaFollette, Sr., Papers (hereafter Robert LaFollette Papers), State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW), Madison. Robert La Follette sought the Wisconsin Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1898 but did not actively campaign. See *Madison Wisconsin State Journal*, 16 July 1898; Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, p. 114.

1898, La Follette was a delegate to a Free Silver Republican party gathering in Mitchell. A 23 June 1898 convention in Aberdeen arranged for the fusion coalition of Populists, Democrats, and Silver Republicans to continue.³⁶ When William wrote Bob on 21 August 1898 on the letterhead of the “People’s Party State Central Committee, Sioux Falls, South Dakota,” he probably knew his brother’s second attempt at the Republican gubernatorial nomination in Wisconsin had failed.³⁷ The letter revealed as much about William’s sympathy for the Populists as his choice of stationery. William lamented that his brother labored “in a party made up of all the rotten elements that hold the almighty dollar greater than honorable humanity.” He urged Bob to ignore criticism and avoid advocating positions or candidates merely because of party loyalty.³⁸

The South Dakota Railroad Commission elected William La Follette as its chairman in 1899. Rumors circulated early that year that Andrew Lee and his allies wanted La Follette to run as the Populist gubernatorial nominee in 1900. The state central committees of the three coalition parties elected La Follette as meeting chairman when they gathered in Huron in April 1899 to make plans for that year’s judicial campaign. The Populists supported La Follette’s leadership even though he was not a party member. In September 1899, he traveled with Lee to San Francisco to meet South Dakota soldiers returning from the Philippines. He remained a rumored candidate for the Populist gubernatorial nomination in December 1899, and fusion newspapers in the Black Hills cheered La Follette and his gubernatorial ambitions during a January 1900 visit.³⁹

La Follette’s political fortunes faced a setback by March 1900, when Burre Hanson Lien of Sioux Falls, a close Pettigrew ally, emerged as the fusion coalition’s favored candidate. The push for Lien occurred after La Follette confided his unease about working with the Democrats to Pettigrew. The coalition’s 12 July convention at Yankton selected Lien

36. N. W. Ayer & Son’s *American Newspaper Annual*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer & Son, 1897), 2:745; *Mitchell Capital*, 22 Apr. 1898; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 23 June 1898.

37. *Madison Wisconsin State Journal*, 18 Aug. 1898; La Follette to La Follette, 21 Aug. 1898, reel 15, film 4438, Robert La Follette Papers.

38. La Follette to La Follette, 21 Aug. 1898.

39. *Mitchell Capital*, 13 Jan., 24 Feb. 1899; *Dakota Farmers’ Leader*, 7 Apr. 1899; *Black Hills Union*, 29 Sept. 1899; *Kimball Graphic*, 12 Dec. 1899; *Omaha (Nebr.) Daily Bee*, 4 Dec. 1899, 3 Jan. 1900.



Richard F. Pettigrew acted as both an opponent and an ally of William La Follette during the state's early years.

as their gubernatorial candidate by a large majority and nominated La Follette for reelection to the railroad commission. Lien and La Follette were the only candidates nominated for governor at the convention.⁴⁰

La Follette's quest to retain his office faced long odds as a resurgent Republican Party campaigned on renewed prosperity and a decisive victory in the Spanish-American War. La Follette's appeal to Civil War veterans for support backfired. "I think it is a very cheeky thing for a man to do who has been working in season and out of season to defeat Comrade McKinley [a Civil War veteran] to ask support for himself on these grounds," wrote a *Mitchell Capital* correspondent.⁴¹ In 1900, La Follette lost his campaign for reelection but was elected mayor of Chamberlain on the Democratic ticket the following year.⁴²

After emerging victorious in 1900, South Dakota Republicans sought to end the Populist challenge and break the fusion coalition by passing a law that prevented candidates from accepting the nomination of more than one party. The next year, La Follette served as secretary of a Democratic judicial nominating convention at Plankinton to elect the party's candidate for the state's fourth judicial district. The *Plankinton Mail*, in a report reprinted in the *Mitchell Capital*, described it as a Democratic convention that both Democratic and Populist delegates attended. Due to the new law, however, the convention decided to split into two. Some delegates thought it would be wise to have La Follette serve as secretary for both conventions, but he declined. Both groups nominated the same judicial candidate, a Populist who asked to be listed on the ballot as a Democrat.⁴³ By 1902, restrictive laws and the alliance's dwindling popularity made it impossible to continue to operate as two or three distinct parties.⁴⁴ The chairman of the state Democratic Party sought to unite "all voters who were not believers in the principles of the republican party."⁴⁵ He appointed a group, including La Follette, to draft a call expressing the state party's principles. Although La Follette later claimed

40. *Omaha Daily Bee*, 14 Mar. 1900; Pettigrew to La Follette, 23 Jan. 1900, Pettigrew Papers; *St. Paul (Minn.) Globe*, 13 July 1900; *Dakota Farmers' Leader*, 20 July 1900.

41. *Mitchell Capital*, 2 Nov. 1900.

42. *Minneapolis (Minn.) Journal*, 17 Apr. 1901.

43. *Mitchell Capital*, 6 Sept. 1901.

44. Lee, *Principle over Party*, p. 162.

45. *Mitchell Capital*, 21 Mar. 1902

that he had defected to the Democratic Party in 1896, he probably did not make the transition until forced to do so in 1901 or 1902.⁴⁶

Populism influenced La Follette's stance on matters beyond state issues. He expressed more hostility toward turn-of-the-century American imperialism than did his brother. Although he was away when his *Missouri Valley Journal* published a piece stating that "hundreds of thousands of Filipinos have been murdered because they believe in struggling for their own liberty and independence," La Follette presumably endorsed that view.⁴⁷ He most likely authored a thorough denunciation of imperialism that appeared in the *Missouri Valley Journal* in October 1903.⁴⁸

Like his more famous brother, La Follette was prone to bouts of ill health. Following "a partial stroke of paralysis" in spring 1903,⁴⁹ a Milwaukee physician recommended that he engage in vigorous activity. He returned to South Dakota in June and spent much of the summer cutting and stacking hay.⁵⁰ "Mr. LaFollette recently broke down physically and sought relief in Wisconsin, where his brother, Governor [Bob] LaFollette, took him to a physical culture expert," stated the *Mitchell Capital*. "He has been following that course of treatment ever since his return and has taken to the hay field as a practical demonstration of his complete recovery—and, incidentally, to keep himself in trim for the man who 'wants to see the editor.'"⁵¹ The *Dakota Farmers' Leader* in Canton reported that La Follette dropped from 216 pounds to approximately 170 pounds.⁵² The health scare did not slow him down.

La Follette bought the *Mitchell Gazette* in December 1903. According to the *Kimball Graphic*, the newspaper "was at one time one of the leading populist papers of the state and with a large circulation all over the state. Of recent years its field has been local in character but still has

46. Ibid.; *Grand Forks (N.Dak.) Evening Times*, 19 Jan. 1912; Lee, *Party over Principle*, p. 162.

47. "Criticism is Not in Order," *Missouri Valley Journal*, 4 June 1903.

48. "Hypocrisy of the Basest Kind," *Missouri Valley Journal*, 8 Oct. 1903. For fusionist hostility toward imperialism, see Nathan Jessen, *Populism and Imperialism: Politics, Culture, and Foreign Policy in the American West, 1890–1900* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017).

49. *Kimball Graphic*, 17 Apr. 1903.

50. *Missouri Valley Journal*, 25 June 1903; *Kimball Graphic*, 7 Aug. 1903.

51. *Mitchell Capital*, 14 Aug. 1903.

52. *Dakota Farmers' Leader*, 25 Sept. 1903.

a good circulation and is doing a prosperous business.”⁵³ The *Dakota Farmers’ Leader* reported that La Follette intended the *Gazette* to be a Democratic paper and an advocate for Mitchell as the new state capital. It described him as “a vigorous writer and a fighter.”⁵⁴ In his introduction to readers, La Follette wrote that the *Gazette* would promote “Democratic Democracy,” or, in other words, support the progressive faction of the Democratic Party.⁵⁵ La Follette planned for his son, Fred, to continue the *Missouri Valley Journal*. By January 1904, however, Jay Jackson, the editor of the *Frankfort News-Messenger*, had bought it. A month later, Jackson sold La Follette’s former newspaper to the editors of its two competitors, who closed it.⁵⁶

53. Kimball Graphic, 11 Dec. 1903.

54. *Dakota Farmers’ Leader*, 1 Jan. 1904.

55. *Mitchell Gazette*, 17 Dec. 1903.

56. *Ibid.*, 29 Jan. 1904; *Missouri Valley Journal*, 17 Dec. 1903, 4 Feb. 1904; *Forest City Press*, 11 Feb. 1904.



Soon after La Follette purchased one of the local newspapers, the city of Mitchell pushed to be named the new state capital in 1904.

La Follette's purchase of the *Mitchell Gazette* coincided with his continued rise as a leader among state Democrats. He served as secretary for the 1904 Davison County Democratic convention and won election as a delegate to the state gathering.⁵⁷ According to the *Minneapolis Journal*, "old-time populists of the Andy Lee stripe" dominated the state convention. "The platform adopted at Aberdeen also shows what element was in control," the newspaper reported. "Government ownership of railroads and all other public utilities is a cardinal principle. Almost every plank on state issues in populististic."⁵⁸ While there, La Follette spoke against proposed legislation to make railroads liable for damage and injuries resulting from fires sparked by passing trains. He claimed that he did not oppose the proposal on principle. Instead, he believed that the courts, stacked in favor of the railroads, would never allow it. The former Populists and Silver Republicans who took control of the state's Democratic Party expected their candidate, the conservative Alton B. Parker, to lose the 1904 presidential contest and the Republicans to win a majority of state offices. The reformers fought to retain control of the party in South Dakota with the expectation that the national organization would rally behind William Jennings Bryan after Parker's defeat.⁵⁹

Despite La Follette's nearly decade-long association with reform movements, an incident in 1905 led laborers to view him with suspicion. On 2 October, printers in Mitchell went on strike against the *Mitchell Republican* and a company that performed printing for schools. The printers sought to reduce their workdays from nine to eight hours while keeping pay the same. Although the strikers did not target La Follette's *Gazette*, he announced that he would operate an open shop and hire non-union workers after 6 October.⁶⁰ The *Pierre Weekly Free Press*

57. *Mitchell Capital*, 1 July 1904.

58. *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 July 1904.

59. *Ibid.*, 26 July, 22 Sept. 1904. In September 1903, La Follette viewed Cleveland Mayor Tom L. Johnson as the best potential Democratic candidate for president (*Missouri Valley Journal*, 3 Sept. 1903). La Follette supported New York publisher and congressman William Randolph Hearst in early 1904 (*Mitchell Gazette*, 7 Jan., 4 Feb. 1904). Hearst belonged the Bryan wing of the Democratic Party and unsuccessfully challenged Parker for the nomination. See David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), pp. 168–85.

60. *Mitchell Capital*, 6 Oct. 1905.

claimed that “Bill” and his brother both posed as friends of labor, but contained “enough wind to start a No. 1 cyclone.”⁶¹

William did not hesitate to offer political advice to his younger brother and on occasion speculated to the press about his brother’s plans. In 1905, while serving as governor of Wisconsin, Bob La Follette won election to the United States Senate. Instead of resigning the former position, however, he left his Senate seat vacant and continued to serve as governor until the end of the year. He justified his actions, saying he wanted to enact his entire agenda before leaving for Washington, D.C.⁶² In October, William had allegedly told reporters that his brother instead planned to resign as governor, leave his Senate seat empty, and go on a lecture tour in anticipation of seeking the presidency in 1908. “Governor La Follette always confides to his older brother his political plans, and the idea of his going before the people as a lecturer, and resigning his official positions, was thoroly [sic] discussed by the brothers when the governor was here a short time ago,” the *Minneapolis Journal* reported.⁶³ However, La Follette resigned as governor and entered the United States Senate on 4 January 1906.

While his brother settled into his new position, William attempted to persuade South Dakota Democrats to endorse Populist-inspired policies. In 1906, La Follette and his fellow Davison County Democrats expressed their approval of Bryan and J. W. Folk, Missouri’s reform-minded governor. They also came out in favor of federal regulation of railroad rates, holding corporations accountable under criminal laws, direct election of United States senators, primary election and caucus reform, and prohibiting elected officials from receiving favors from corporations. Rumors circulated prior to the 1906 state convention that South Dakota Democrats would nominate La Follette for governor. While he did not garner the nomination, he served on the resolutions committee, and the party platform showed his influence. It advocated government ownership of railroads as well as telephone and telegraph lines, in-

61. *Pierre (S.Dak.) Weekly Free Press*, 12 Oct. 1905. Despite the *Pierre*’s newspaper’s comment, Bob La Follette voted in labor’s interest over the next decade. See Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, pp. 340–41, 345, 358.

62. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, pp. 131–36.

63. *Minneapolis Journal*, 9 Oct. 1905.

come and inheritance taxes, tariff reform, and direct election of United States senators.⁶⁴

La Follette's defense of another editor resulted in his arrest on libel charges on 2 January 1907, further dampening the prospect that he would ever head a state ticket. The headline in the *New York Tribune* announced, "La Follette's Brother Arrested." The events leading to his arrest started with the trial of a wealthy Sioux Falls woman, Emma Kaufmann, for the murder of her sixteen-year-old servant.⁶⁵ Joseph Kirby, a Sioux Falls lawyer, represented Kaufmann. In the *Mitchell Gazette*, La Follette supported comments that J. A. Ross, editor of the *Soo Critic*, had made about Kirby. Kirby then charged Ross and his wife, who edited the newspaper while Ross sat in jail, with libel. Kirby tried to persuade a deputy to force La Follette to go to Sioux Falls and face charges. Although the deputy served La Follette with a warrant for his arrest, he quickly paid bail, which allowed him to stay in Mitchell. The case was postponed for months before a May 1908 trial that ended with a hung jury.⁶⁶

As William fought libel charges, both La Follette brothers battled South Dakota senator Alfred B. Kittredge. Kittredge, an attorney, was appointed to the United States Senate after James Kyle's death in 1901 and won election to a full term in 1903. South Dakota progressives viewed Kittredge as a conduit for corporate corruption. Coe I. Crawford, a progressive Republican, launched a challenge to Kittredge's leadership in December 1903. Crawford denounced corporate influence on politics and called for a primary election law. Both Bob La Follette and Iowa Governor Albert B. Cummins swayed Crawford's supporters. Governor La Follette also met with and voiced support for Crawford during a June 1905 lecture tour of South Dakota. Crawford won the 1906 gubernatorial election after running on a progressive platform. The 1907

64. *Mitchell Capital*, 25 May 1906; *Walla Walla (Wash.) Evening Statesman*, 6 June 1906; *Sisseton (S.Dak.) Weekly Standard*, 15 June 1906.

65. "La Follette's Brother Arrested," *New York Tribune*, 3 Jan. 1907. For an overview of the murder case, see Lynwood E. Oyos, "George W. Egan: The Demagogue Who Would Be Governor," *South Dakota History* 36 (Fall 2006): 293–94.

66. *Mitchell Capital*, 4 Jan. 1907; *Canton Farmers Leader*, 13 Dec. 1907; *Scotland (S.Dak.) Citizen-Republican*, 14 May 1908.

legislature passed a variety of progressive measures, including bills to limit corporate influence on politics and regulate railroad rates.⁶⁷

Once Bob La Follette took his seat in the United States Senate, his conflict with Kittredge intensified. In January 1907, the Senate passed a bill sponsored by La Follette that limited railroad workers to sixteen consecutive hours on duty and required at least ten hours of rest. La Follette believed that Kittredge, working on behalf of the railroad companies, had tried to scuttle the bill and eviscerated him during a lecture tour of South Dakota. William accused Kittredge of misrepresenting himself as a reformer while supporting corporations, noting in particular Kittredge's opposition to the Hepburn Act of 1906 and Bob's efforts to strengthen it.⁶⁸

As the 1908 election approached, William's supporters made a final push to nominate him as the Democratic candidate for governor. Mitchell Democrats supported his nomination. The *Rapid City Union* viewed him as the favorite in late 1907. A correspondent for the *Omaha Daily Bee* expected La Follette to be nominated for governor at the 7 April convention and that former Populist governor Andrew Lee would run for the United States Senate. Although reports suggested Lee did not desire another term as governor, he won the gubernatorial nomination, with La Follette selected as the candidate for lieutenant governor. Lee explained that he had not intended to accept the nomination but yielded after some old friends persuaded him to do so. He urged former Populists to support the Democratic ticket. La Follette did not express disappointment in public over failing to gain the gubernatorial nomination and campaigned on behalf of Lee and Bryan, the Democratic presidential nominee for a third time.⁶⁹

Although William campaigned for Bryan, his brother reluctantly supported Republican nominee William Howard Taft.⁷⁰ William created controversy when he stated that his brother should be a Democrat

67. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 258–62.

68. *Scotland Citizen-Republican*, 17 Jan., 11 Apr. 1907; *Dakota Farmers' Leader*, 13 Mar. 1908.

69. *Rapid City Union*, 27 Dec. 1907; *Omaha Daily Bee*, 26, 29 Mar. 1908; *Pierre Weekly Free Press*, 9 Apr. 1908; *Mitchell Capital*, 10, 17 Apr. 1908. See Ralph R. Tingley, "Brass Bands and Huzzahs: Politics at the Corn Palace, 1908," *South Dakota History* 12 (Spring 1982): 32–47.

70. Robert La Follette considered Taft, according to Unger, a "bumbler and compromiser" (*Fighting Bob La Follette*, pp. 186). *Ibid.*, pp. 184–91.

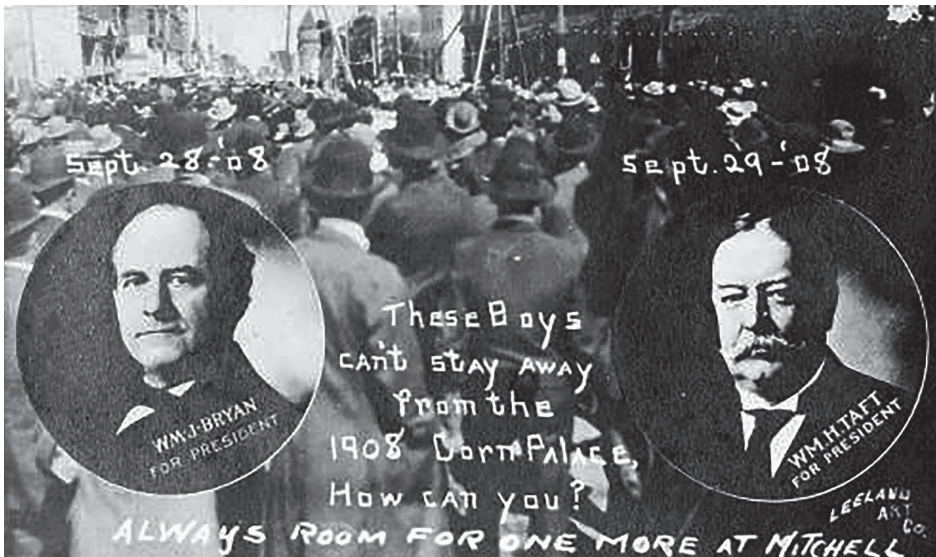
and that his supporters should back Bryan. "Bob is simply supporting Mr. Taft for the sake of party regularity, in much the same way that Mr. Bryan supported Parker four years ago," he claimed. "His heart, however, is with Bryan and the principles for which he stands. Bob ought to be a democrat. He stands for things democratic. I know the feelings of the men who are the supporters of my brother in Wisconsin, and I know they are going to vote for the great commoner."⁷¹ The reaction to his comments forced "Brother Bill" to give assurance that "Brother Bob" did not, in fact, support Bryan.⁷²

William's own political career floundered in 1908 as his outspoken reaction to the 1905 printers' strike haunted him. Sioux Falls Typographical Union No. 218 sent circulars denouncing La Follette to every labor union in the state. "This man [La Follette] is one of the bitterest enemies of organized labor that the country possesses," the union literature read.⁷³ The campaign against La Follette may have worked, as

71. *Washington (D.C.) Evening Star*, 30 Sept. 1908.

72. *Turner County Herald*, 8 Oct. 1908.

73. *Watertown (S.Dak.) Saturday News*, 30 Oct. 1908.



During the 1908 presidential campaign, the La Follette brothers split their support between William Jennings Bryan and William Howard Taft.

the Republicans, Robert S. Vessey and Howard Clayton Shober, won by more than twenty-three thousand votes and La Follette attracted fewer votes than Lee.⁷⁴

Another political defeat and poor health may have contributed to La Follette's decision to sell the *Mitchell Gazette* and to move to Madison, Wisconsin, to lead the advertising and circulation departments for his brother's new weekly magazine. Bob La Follette had published the first issue of *La Follette's Weekly Magazine* on 9 January 1909. William moved to Madison that December but resigned as business manager just a few months later in May 1910. Why he left after such a short time is unclear, but he continued to live in Madison, where he remained involved in public affairs. He served on the executive committee of the American Anti-Trust League when it lodged a protest against the confirmation of Charles Evans Hughes as an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court in 1910.⁷⁵ Even after the death of his wife, Olivia, on 11 February 1911, William continued to campaign. He delivered an address to Wisconsin Democrats in January 1912 and worked with Joseph E. Davies, a member of the Democratic National Committee, on Woodrow Wilson's presidential campaign that year. La Follette believed Wilson belonged to a progressive Democratic tradition that began with Bryan. While speaking in support of Wilson, La Follette obscured both his and his party's recent history: "I am proud to say that I have been in my feeble way a follower of [Bryan]. I was originally a progressive Republican but transferred my support in 1896 and say here that we have not had a Democratic platform since that was not progressive."⁷⁶

Wilson won the Democratic nomination and carried Wisconsin en route to a November victory over Taft, the Republican incumbent, and former president Theodore Roosevelt, who created the Progressive Party to support his challenge to Taft. While William was outspoken during the presidential battle, his brother remained silent. Although Taft was Roosevelt's hand-picked successor, he had alienated the for-

74. *Omaha Daily Bee*, 6 Dec. 1908. Vessey defeated Lee, 62,989 to 44,837; Shober defeated La Follette, 64,592 to 41,318. See L. M. Simons and James W. Cone, comps., *South Dakota Legislative Manual 1909* (Pierre, 1909), p. 363.

75. *Turner County Herald*, 6 May 1909; "W. T. La Follette is Dead"; *Perth Amboy (N.J.) Evening News*, 2 May 1910.

76. *Grand Forks Evening Times*, 19 Jan. 1912.

mer president and his supporters. Bob had sought to oppose Taft for the Republican nomination, but after Roosevelt entered the contest running on a progressive platform, he was left embittered. With the senator on the sideline, his supporters were open to William's calls for them to disregard party labels and vote for Wilson.⁷⁷

In April 1913, rumors circulated that Wilson intended to reward William with an appointment as register of deeds for the District of Columbia. Bob also sought to work with the new president and argued for Republican cooperation with Wilson in a front-page editorial for *La Follette's Weekly Magazine*. Wilson summoned him to the White House for a strategy meeting on 14 March 1913. Just as it appeared the La Follette brothers' political ambitions might align, Bob was called back to Madison. William had fallen gravely ill. He died from heart disease on 30 April 1913.⁷⁸ "In the death of William T. La Follette, my friend, I feel a strong sense of personal loss," Joseph Davies said. "In my association with him in the last few years I came to know him well. He was strong, staunch, and true—one of the finest men I have ever met."⁷⁹ President Wilson did not learn of William's death for three weeks, but he sent Bob a belated condolence letter. "I learned to have a very warm feeling of friendship for [William] and mourn his death most sincerely," Wilson wrote.⁸⁰ "It hit me pretty hard," Bob wrote to his sister after William's death. "He saw the wrongs of the world and hated them—and fought them in his own way."⁸¹

Both La Follette brothers fought to regulate the railroads during the era of the Populist revolt. Bob remained more conservative than William on several key issues, however, whereas the elder brother's positions more closely aligned with those of his partners in the Populist coalition. A personal friendship with William McKinley and loyalty to

77. Vinita (Okla.) *Daily Chieftain*, 17 Sept. 1912; Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, pp. 200–20, 222–24. For La Follette's failed bid to seek the 1912 Republican nomination, see *ibid.*, pp. 198, 203–5, 216–19.

78. *Pierre Weekly Free Press*, 10 Apr. 1913; La Follette and La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, 1:464–65; *Wood County Reporter* (Grand Rapids, Wisc.), 3 Apr. 1913.

79. "W. T. La Follette is Dead."

80. Woodrow Wilson to Robert La Follette, 23 May 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link, vol. 27: 1913 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 466.

81. Robert La Follette to Josephine La Follette Siebecker, 7 May 1913, quoted in Weisberger, *The La Follettes of Wisconsin*, p. 149.

the Republican Party kept Bob tied to the gold standard and a protective tariff in 1896. While William's newspaper questioned American imperialism, Bob adhered to the default Republican position in support of the Spanish-American War and the subjugation and annexation of the Philippines. Bob's position on all of these issues evolved—perhaps not coincidentally—after William's move to Madison and subsequent death. He called for tariff reform in 1908 and opposed the Payne–Aldrich Tariff Act of 1909. Bob's conversion to anti-imperialism did not begin until 1911, but it was aided and influenced by his correspondence with Pettigrew and by reading the writings of his brother's old ally. Even Bob's position on monetary policy changed. By 1913, he considered Wilson's Federal Reserve Act an insufficient reform, thus ending a brief “honeymoon” of cooperation between the Wisconsin senator and the new president.⁸²

William La Follette's experiences on the Northern Great Plains brought him into association with Populism while his more famous brother battled for reform within the Republican Party. Still, the two La Follette brothers remained close. It is not difficult to imagine that William's battles with railroads on behalf of farmers inspired his brother or that his support of Wilson made it easier for Bob to dialogue with the Democratic president early in his term. Although William died in 1913, his disregard for party labels may have contributed to Bob's decision to seek the presidency as an Independent Republican in 1924. In South Dakota, Andrew Lee, the former governor and William's old ally, appeared on the ballot as a La Follette elector.⁸³ “La Follette has always stood for the interest of the common people,” Lee wrote to Pettigrew.⁸⁴ Pettigrew sent letters to former South Dakota Populist leader Henry L. Loucks and former People's Party national chairman and former North Carolina senator Marion Butler urging them to support Bob La Follette's candi-

82. Richard Drake, *The Education of an Anti-Imperialist: Robert La Follette and U.S. Expansion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), pp. 96, 103–14, 205, 416–22; Unger, *Fighting Bob*, pp. 104, 108, 184, 186–88, 225–30.

83. “Withdrawals on L'Follette Slate Unite Factions,” undated, unidentified newspaper clipping, Henry Langford Loucks Papers, SDSHS. Although Republican Calvin Coolidge won South Dakota, La Follette won sixteen counties and finished ahead of the Democratic nominee in the state.

84. Lee to Pettigrew, 13 Sept. 1924, Pettigrew Papers, SHM.

dacy. Loucks and Tom Ayres, a former Populist and the Farmer-Labor Party nominee for the United States Senate, endorsed La Follette.⁸⁵ In the case of South Dakota and the La Follettes, at least, the ties between Populism and agrarian progressivism persisted.

85. Pettigrew to Marion Butler, 14 Apr. 1924, and Pettigrew to Henry L. Loucks, 17 Apr. 1924, Pettigrew Papers; Ralph R. Tingley, "The Crowded Field: Eight Men for the Senate," *South Dakota History* 9 (Spring 1979): 323, 329. For more on La Follette's presidential campaign in South Dakota, see Ralph R. Tingley, "Podium Politics in Sioux Falls, 1924: Dawes versus LaFollette," *ibid.* 10 (Spring 1980): 119–132. South Dakota progressives enacted many of the Populist demands. See Lee, *Principle over Party*, pp. 173–86.