

## THE SAGE OF YELM

J. C. Conine and the Rise of Populism in Thurston County

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Joseph C. Conine had not written to the *Washington Standard*, an Olympia-based newspaper, since the 1880s. Though his pen had been on hiatus, it was certainly not for lack of opinions. There was plenty to worry and write about in 1896-economic despair and disparity were growing across the nation. In the June 19, 1896, edition of the *Standard*, editor and publisher John Miller Murphy headlined a letter to the editor titled "Pertinent Questions" and signed "Yours muchly, J. C. CO9."

When Murphy's friend Conine (CO9) sat down at his farm near Yelm and wrote to "ED[itor] STANDARD," he resumed a practice that would continue for over two decades. In Conine's mind the political system had become unresponsive. He wanted to warn Thurston County voters that the deck was stacked against them and the playing field tilted in favor of those with money and connections. For his part, editor Murphy would later call Conine "the Sage of Yelm." The Yelm community saw in Conine a dairy rancher, civic improver, and rhetorical hell-raiser. Twice married, Conine's second wife was the daughter of early Yelm settler James Longmire. Throughout his life J. C. Conine was a partisan Democrat though he had worn the Populist label in a run for county sheriff in 1894-a race he lost.

That first letter, probably written in longhand on coarse paper, set the pattern of future Conine missives. The *Standard's* motto stated, "Hew to the Line: Let the Chips Land Where They May," and Conine was ready to hack. Starting at the local level, he avowed that the *Daily Olympian* printed lies. County government, dominated by Republicans, was wasting the people's money. Mischievously referring to the GOP (Grand Old Party) as the DOP (Damned Old Party), Conine argued that the Republicans only pretended to care about the people and that those who supported that party were tools of the bosses. Simply put, the Republicans were "vultures."

Conine made it a point to deny that he had any interest in elected office:

*Now, Bro. Murphy there are no strings on me. I have no political ax to grind. I am not hunting for office-never did. 'Tis true I ran for Sheriff two years ago, but the man who says I solicited the honor is a liar and a demagogue and bribed with British gold.*

Six months later, in the 1896 election, Joseph Cowan Conine was elected to the Washington State House of Representatives.

One must look at the economic conditions under which western farmers labored in the first years of the 1890s to understand Conine's rise to elected office. Returns on a bushel of wheat, a pound of potatoes, or a bale of cotton had seldom been lower in anyone's memory. Increased production had driven prices down. When the Panic of 1893 hit, wheat, which had sold for 82

cents a bushel, fell to 36 cents between January and September 1893. Potatoes now might net one or two cents per pound. Eggs earned the producer a little over a penny apiece.

Farmers, however, had fixed costs. While a mortgage payment lived in divine stasis and bank loans for equipment purchases still came due, it was costing more to grow crops than one earned selling them. Farmers could sell off some land or borrow against their property, but those desperate measures might not buy them enough time; farm foreclosures had increased markedly of late. As a dairyman, Conine understood the farmers' predicament all too well. In his view, government ought to play a stronger role in providing economic support to farmers.

The impact of the depression widened, disrupting lives from coast to coast. In Tacoma, 14 banks failed; in Everett, all of them went under. Major railroads were declaring bankruptcy. With the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad two decades earlier, small lumber mills had grown up in the hills encircling the Yelm prairie, primarily turning out railroad ties. The timber industry of the Yelm area, to which some farmers had turned to ease their economic woes, eventually fell victim to these shifting economic fortunes. As railroads floundered, mills that cut ties closed up.

Yelm merchants felt the squeeze as well. Education also took a hit. The fall in tax receipts made it necessary to cut the school budget. As a member of the board of directors at the Eureka school, just south of Yelm, Conine was faced with the necessity of cutting teachers' pay. Over a two-year period it dropped from \$45 to \$25 a month—a 45 percent decline. Conine felt the trend in salaries was unconscionable, regardless of economic vicissitudes. Education was, after all, a pillar of democracy.

In the Yelm area, the only surplus commodity seemed to be anger. Forces beyond the people's control wiped out their savings, destroyed their livelihoods, and darkened their future. To make matters worse, the two major parties seemed more interested in the petty advantages of partisanship than the welfare of the people. Many American farmers found comfort in the Populist Party's rhetoric and goals. Mainstream politicians seemed less responsive to voters and more attentive to the needs of industry owners and their banking allies. Increasingly, farmers wanted government to act as a counterbalance to the trusts, railroads, and banks. Only the federal government could regulate interstate commerce or alter the tariff level. That meant national reform.

The Populists wanted to bring back silver to replace the gold standard, inflate prices, and drive up farm income. For the fat cats at the top of the economic pile, they advocated a graduated income tax. Government-secured postal savings banks would offer alternatives to the hated, unreliable commercial banks. The newly founded Populist Party's Omaha Platform of 1892 called for railroad and telegraph nationalization. Certain public land grants acquired by the railroads during their construction were to be returned to the people. The unemployed would be given work. Private charity, recognized as having certain limits, was to be replaced by a governmental solution that would play a larger role in the people's welfare.

Recognizing the political side to this economic structure, the Populists promised all power to the people. There was a call for lawmaking by the people through initiative and referendum. U.S. Senators would be chosen not by the state legislature but rather under the scrutiny of the voting public. The Electoral College was to be abolished. Condemning the courts' use of injunctions to interfere in labor disputes, Populists promised to rein in the judiciary. Combined, these platform planks represented serious changes to the United States' economic and political landscape.

Populist support in Thurston County increased from 1892 to 1894 as people grew disaffected with the major parties, which proved unwilling or unable to stem the tide of economic loss.

Democrats and Populists learned something from the local and state elections of 1894: though the Populists lost most races that year, the combined vote totals of Populists and Democrats were greater than what Republicans had polled. Disaffected Silver Republicans, Democrats, and Populists combined their forces and presented a united front-the Fusion ticket-to attract voters in the fall of 1896. They set their sights on Gold Democrats and straight party-line Republicans. One of the most energetic campaign seasons in Thurston County history ensued, and J. C. Conine was a loud part of it.

The most important issue for the Populist wing of the new coalition was the reintroduction of silver purchases by the government and the expanded use of the metal as currency. To Populists like Conine, more money in circulation would cause farm commodity prices to increase, benefiting farmers.

The Fusion ticket and the Republicans took their opposing doctrines to the people. The *Standard*, now fully backing the Fusion ticket despite the paper's earlier derisive comments about Populists, was replete with campaign information. Speakers fanned out across the county to promote the virtues of silver for easy credit; the promise of their candidate, William Jennings Bryan; and Republican candidate William McKinley's deficiencies as well as those of his Republican supporters and their "Gold Bug" allies. Local candidates and outside agitators took the stage in turn, exhorting people to change the way things were run in this country.

The highly partisan press missed no opportunity to denigrate the efforts of the opposing side. The *Standard* reported in September that the large Republican rally in Tenino was a fraud, maintaining that the audience was primarily made up of well-heeled Olympians and bums-the latter lured by cheap whiskey and free rail passes on the Port Townsend and Southern Railroad. The *Standard* made sure there was an endless supply of bad news for the Republicans.

Nothing related to the Republicans was exempt from criticism. When Republican supporters gathered at the Olympia Theater, the *Standard* even found fault with the songs chosen by their glee club. Following a Republican meeting to select delegates to the state convention, the paper cynically reported that the large number of delegates chosen was in marked contrast to the few people attending. Readers discovered in September that the "Gold Bug" meeting in Tumwater attracted an embarrassingly small crowd-17 people. In Shelton a Republican congressman received a "frosty" reception from the assembled loggers. In other cases, Republican meetings with sizable turnouts were revealed to contain many Populists swelling the ranks-there, no doubt, to scout the opposition, hoot down their inaccurate statements, and give three cheers for Bryan. According to the *Standard*, one McKinley Glee Club member summarized Republican fortunes this way:

*Talk about Populists being thick! They grow on bushes out there. Populists to the right, Populists to the left, Populists before and behind us. The meeting became so chilly for our boys, that I retired from the hall in disgust, thinking that, at least, outside I could get clear of the atmosphere.... Thought to drown my sorrow and soothe my nerves [with liquor]. Finishing the bottle, I threw it over in the brush. What was my consternation to find I had hit a Pop square on the head and he jumped up, hollering "Hurrah for Bryan."*

The Republicans were even labeled Anglophiles, a strong accusation of elitism and monarchical desires. When one of their meetings concluded with "My Country 'Tis of Thee," the *Standard*

reported instead that "God Bless the Queen" had been played for the monarchy-loving, upperclass Republicans. The paper failed to report that the old British melody had been sung with American lyrics.

The *Standard's* campaign reporting ensured that its readers understood the differences between the two men running for the nation's highest office. While Bryan traveled 10,000 miles through all sections of the country, McKinley sat on his "veranda in Canton [Ohio]." Bryan's other virtues included support by the people, whereas McKinley was the tool of the businessman Mark Hanna, a man whose wealth and power were "tainted with the sweat and blood of oppressed downtrodden labor."

Editor Murphy of the *Standard* loved to depict the Republicans as elitist and out of touch with the common man. According to witnesses at a Republican rally in Bucoda, the speaker had the audacity to argue that "loggers have had too much wages in this country...especially teamsters." The choice was clear and the future almost assured, the *Standard* commented, "Republican candidates are watching with fear and trembling the political barometer, and in their overheard talk they sometimes acknowledge a belief that it will be a big snow." The article concluded, "Not even the McKinley Glee Club could lift their spirits."

On the other hand, the Fusionists were gaining momentum. For starters, the Fusion organization set up shop in a large Olympia storefront at the corner of Main and Third. Supporting Bryan and John Rogers, the Populist candidate for governor, the "Bryan-Rogers Central Silver Club would serve as a

*general rendezvous for silver men and their friends. It [would] be kept open at all times and well supplied with chairs and tables, and such articles of comfort as may be introduced in a club-room calculated for instruction and a unification of popular sentiment on the vital issue of the great battle.... The tables will be well supplied with campaign literature. All are welcome.*

A Bryan-Rogers Glee Club showed up at rallies, entertaining the crowd with song and organizing political feelings into cheers for the good guys. The paper announced that women had organized their own Bryan club, complete with red, white, and blue skirts which were "natty and exceedingly becoming." Members of the Grand Army of the Republic (veterans of the Civil War) formed a Bryan club. The paper reported that Henry George, nationally known for decades for his "single-tax" position, predicted a Bryan triumph.

The Bryan forces had assembled a highly successful parade in Tacoma, twice as long as the Republican version held earlier. The *Standard* published a map of the United States predicting how the states would vote in the November election; Bryan was going to win the Electoral College. A local business school held a straw poll in which Bryan won. "It's in the air," reported the *Standard*. Even schoolchildren were breathing "the air of political freedom" in Tumwater where a straw poll in Miss Wilcox's room recorded a four to one vote for Bryan over "Boss" McKinley.

Pro-Bryan speakers appeared all over the county. A. D. Ward, an Everett attorney, spoke to the faithful in late August and delivered a speech that the paper could only describe as "volley after volley of canister and grape [which] effectively demolished the enemy's breastworks." Other speakers were greeted with "unbounded" enthusiasm. Sometimes Republican and Fusion candidates spoke from the same stage. Huzzahs for Bryan, according to the *Standard*, always drowned out any pro-Republican chant.

In nominating J. C. Conine to run for one of the 27th District's legislative positions, the Fusion ticket chose a political candidate who was a two-time loser. Earlier in the decade Conine had run and lost in his bids for county sheriff and assessor. The *Standard*, however, was in his corner. Editor Murphy promoted him as a man of "marked ability...sound judgment...[and] pleasing address" who, most importantly, would "not be swayed by corporate power."

A week before the election *Standard* readers were reminded of Conine's sterling character as well as his impressive story of service to his nation and community: He began teaching at age 17 back in Iowa. While serving the United States during the Civil War, he was captured at the Battle of Pea Ridge and spent time in solitary confinement in a Little Rock cell where he lived on a diet of cornbread and water. When paroled, he reenlisted and eventually achieved the rank of sergeant. He had farmed in Illinois, Iowa, and Washington and taught school for over 20 years, also serving as a justice of the peace and notary public. In conclusion, Murphy wrote, "Mr. Conine is a man of sterling integrity and he has the grit to stand for the right against all opposition."

The *Daily Olympian* marked its Republican opposition to Conine's candidacy early and loudly. A story on the campaign referred to "Co9" as the "flatulent populist nominee for the legislature." From the *Olympian's* perspective, Conine was nothing more than a blowhard; it almost did not matter that his politics were also suspect. The paper did not treat his candidacy kindly. The October 5 edition found fault with Conine's knowledge of math and extrapolated from that a reflection of his deficient economic understanding. The *Olympian* article began by quoting an earlier *Standard* article in which a writer called "Dusenberry" (undoubtedly Conine himself, using a nom de plume) assessed the attendance at a Republican McKinley rally in Yelm. Dusenberry reported that a mere 50 people attended the meeting but then counted 75 Populist Bryan men in attendance as well. The *Daily Olympian* lamented that it was this type of math, similarly used in Populist attempts to equate less valuable silver with gold, that so endangered the nation.

The Conine/Dusenberry letter proudly mentioned the cheers for Bryan that must have embarrassed the gathered Republicans. Once again the *Olympian* begged to differ: Instead of the massed voices of Populists cheering Bryan on, the audience heard a single dissenting voice, which sounded "more like the shrill rebel yell described by war veterans." That single voice belonged to J. C. Conine. (The comparison of his voice to that of a rebel doubtless infuriated him.) In the *Olympian's* version, Conine's proposal of cheers for Bryan found no support at all. Heads turned toward the diminutive man, the "flatulent populist," but his attempt at disruption fell upon deaf ears.

Conine the candidate served as a pawn in a classic political battle between the two rival newspapers. On only one particular issue did Conine's position diverge from that of John Miller Murphy and the *Standard*. He opposed women's suffrage while Murphy supported the idea. This was a sore point between them, and to exploit this difference of opinion the *Olympian* published a letter from Yelm signed "Dem" in an attempt to drive a wedge between the two men. A group of Republican women in Olympia had organized the "Woman's Non-Partisan Sound Money League," with an office and club in a donated vacant storeroom at the corner of Sixth and Main. Editorializing in the *Standard*, Murphy characterized these women as nothing more than the "wives of bank officers and old time political hacks" and asserted that the women were actually undermining their chances of achieving suffrage.

Quick to defend the reputations of these "honorable" women, the *Olympian* scolded Murphy for attributing such base motivations to women he knew and respected. As to Murphy's claim that by organizing themselves the women were harming the cause of suffrage, that was simply wrong. And anyway, the *Olympian* concluded, "Everybody knows that one of this county's candidates on the people's party ticket, for representative, is an avowed enemy of the measure." That avowed enemy of suffrage was Conine. The *Olympian* was telling Murphy to get his own house in order before he started worrying about how women might harm their chances for success.

Conine traveled the county spreading the new gospel of silver. As a Populist he elaborated on the problems confronting the nation and the state. In addition, on one occasion he spoke at a rally near Yelm that, according to one estimate, attracted over 300 cheering Populists.

A number of letters promoting Conine's candidacy and the Populist cause appeared above his name in the *Standard*. When referring to the Republicans and their supporters, Conine spared no invective: The "syndicate [was] in the saddle." The Populists were there to fight the "money power" and the "money sharks." The Republicans were dominated by "unprincipled scoundrels" and the party supported "pernicious legislation." The gold standard, the Crime (or Coinage Act) of 1873, the protective tariff, the "greenback controversy," the banking system, and other legislative measures supported by Republicans were so evil as to require a "new vocabulary to describe [them]."

The resulting legislative agenda was not beneficial to the common farmer or worker but reflected the "avarice" and "greed of the Shylocks." The "oil trust," "sugar trust," "salt trust," and even the "nail trust" were taking money "from the pockets of labor" and making "colossal fortunes for a few lazy barnacles." The Republicans and their wealthy supporters had as much concern for the people as a "vulture has for the lamb, or a hawk for a dove." Once elected, Republicans sang "the song of Vanderbilt, 'the people be damned.'"

Just how damned were the laboring classes? According to Conine, the people were in "bondage." Interest rates could be as high as 20 percent and property values had declined by as much as 50 percent. Wages were low. Workers, ruled by injunction, had Pinkerton agents patrolling their towns. Misery, poverty, and pauperism were the realities of the laboring masses who in fact produced the wealth they did not enjoy. The government seemed more interested in the construction of penitentiaries, jails, asylums, poorhouses, and soup houses, than in the "welfare of producers." It was time, Conine wrote, to "get on the populist bandwagon." In one letter he compared the current problems facing the nation to a boil on one's body. Political and economic corruption was feeding the boil. "In fact, at the present time this boil has attained such colossal proportions...that it has been decided by universal consent to apply a surgical remedy, and William J. Bryan has been selected to perform the operation with his silver lance." It was time for the "piratical crew" to be "relegated to the shades of oblivion and smolder in their own rottenness."

Candidate Conine made sure to link arms with Bryan in his letters and speeches. Bryan would bring justice for the "toiling masses." William McKinley was in the pocket of the moneyed interests. He had been "bought and bound and owned" by gold interests. McKinley was the "tool of the money power." Worse still, McKinley had changed his traditional position on the silver issue and was a "captive" of the "soulless syndicate." By contrast, Bryan, although he was young, was at least "free." He had spent his career fighting "tyranny" and "oppression."

On October 31 the *Standard* published its last pre-election edition. A predicted victory for the Bryan, Rogers, and Conine ticket in the state and the county was merely a matter of days away. By the time the next edition of the *Standard* was printed voters already knew the outcome. William McKinley had won the presidency, but in Washington Fusion candidate John Rogers had won the governorship. Likewise, Fusion candidates swept Thurston County, winning nearly every major race. Joseph Conine would serve in the state legislature from the 27th District.

J. C. Conine had been chosen by the people to represent their wishes in government, one of the greatest honors a republic may bestow on one of its own. He had ridden a wave of national discontent into the halls of power. In January he rode to Olympia to begin his service to the people.

An unseasonably warm January had plumped the buds of trees and flowers, creating a fresh, green backdrop of natural renewal. The fifth session of the Washington State Legislature was supposed to do the same. Alas, the triumphant surge to the Elysian Fields of the Olympia statehouse did not signal the blooming of direct democracy and a living wage for everyone. When Conine returned to Yelm at the session's end in March, snow fell, signaling that a colder reality had overcome his high hopes.

As Conine rode back to his ranch at the end of the session, he could be proud of a few legislative triumphs: There was immediate financial relief in the form of a tax exemption for the first \$500 of one's personal property and a similar tax break for improvements on real estate. Bank foreclosure procedures became less draconian, benefiting the property owner who was about to lose his land. A referendum for a single tax was slated for the 1898 election. Railroads, so often a target of Populist wrath, escaped with only a cap on tonnage rates. A new law changed the method of apportioning state money for schools, a boon to the poorer districts with which Conine was familiar. His committee on prisons had engineered a sentencing reform. Workers would benefit from changes in laws regarding pay and mine inspections. Women received the right to oversee estate probate and the chance to receive the right of suffrage at a later date. Overall, however, the session was frustrating and disenchanting. Much of the legislative agenda failed to make it to the governor's desk.

Conine did not run for reelection in 1898. It was just as well, for the Republicans stormed back into power in the state legislature, signaling an effective end to the state's populist moment. He continued to write to the *Standard* about issues of the day for the next 20 years. In over 120 letters Conine, inspired by the nation's ills and convinced of his own correctness, continued to be an incisive critic of the establishment, weighing in on subjects from Prohibition ("agin' it!") to pension increases for Civil War vets ("about time!") and enjoying the moniker John Miller Murphy had bestowed upon him: "The Sage of Yelm."

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