

Populists and Strangers

by Richard J. Margolis

Populist anti-Semitism was entirely verbal. It was a mode of expression, a rhetorical style, not a tactic or a program.

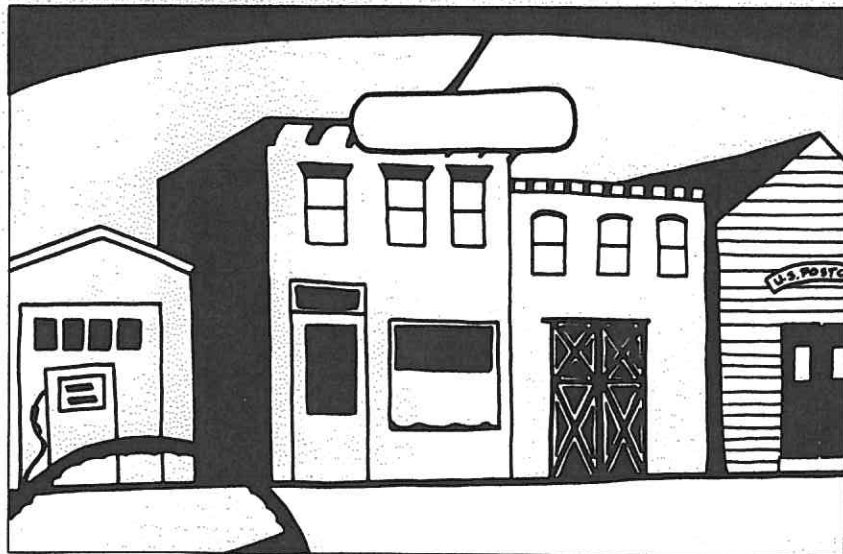
—Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*

I am sitting on a wooden barstool in the J&H Corral, sipping a Bud and soaking up the Iowa zeitgeist, when the farmer I've been bantering with spoils everything with a crack about the Jews. From the start I have figured him for a home-grown radical. In the first place, we're in southern Iowa, where populism never quite died. James Baird Weaver, the People's Party candidate for President in 1892 (he collected twenty-two electoral votes), practiced law hereabouts, and eventually settled in Colfax, about 100 miles down the road, where he got himself elected mayor. The Kansas line is only an hour from here, and Kansas is where populism found voice.

It was from a Kansas platform that Mary Elizabeth Lease advised bankrupt farmers to "raise less corn and more hell." If the populist current subsequently dipped underground, it has never stopped flowing and from time to time has surfaced to swell progressive streams. Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry Truman could not have been elected without help from populist tributaries.

In the second place, this guy dresses like a populist, from the tips of his muddy boots to the brim of his John Deere visor cap. Would a reactionary wear suspender overalls?

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Glenna Lang

And in the third place he's been lecturing me for forty-five minutes about the sins of Wall Street imperialists and their habit of exploiting

"Welcome to Iowa . . . We're really glad you're here . . ."

poor people in places like Guatemala and the Honduras. I think he suspects that I once banked at Chase Manhattan.

"All the land down there is owned by American corporations," he explains in a loud nasal drawl. "They pay the peasants slave wages and ship the profits back to New York."

"Is that how it works?" I ask.

"You better believe it. That's why so many Latins go Commie. If

I was making \$65 a year and Dr. Castro came knocking on my door, I'd say 'Walk right in,' wouldn't you?"

I spring for two more Buds. The farmer blows off some foam and gives me a thoughtful look. Is he going to thank me for the beer?

"You know," he says, "it's the Jews who're behind it all."

We stare at each other. "Yup," he goes on, "the American Jewish millionaires, they're the ones that own the land down there. Them and the Israeli people."

What first comes to mind are some of Meredith Wilson's lyrics from *The Music Man*: "Welcome to Iowa . . . We're really glad you're here, even though we may not mention it again." Actually, I'm only passing through.

Something, either thirst or curiosity, made me hit the brakes when this little place swept past my windshield: a cafe, a welding shop, a one-pump gas station, a wooden

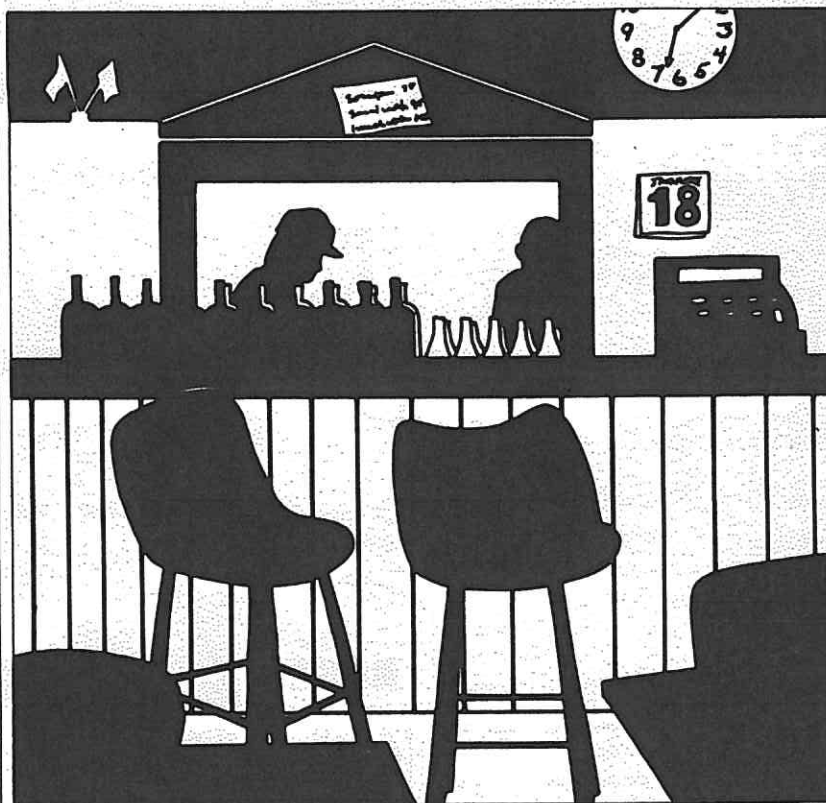
post office, a dozen gray houses, and a sleepy river suitably named the Nodaway. Carbon, Iowa—population 73. I nosed my rented Falcon up to the front of the P. O. and, like Fidel Castro at the peasant's door, walked right in. The postmaster was out, but Iva Strait, his eighty-nine-year-old mother, was on hand, and she proved to be all anyone needed to get educated about Carbon. She'd been postmaster herself for twenty-five years, passing the job on to her son in 1963.

There used to be lots of coal beneath Carbon, and lots of people—maybe as many as a thousand—living on top of the coal. But when World War II came along, all the miners marched off to glory, never to return.

"Not that it mattered much by then," Mrs. Strait said. "There wasn't much coal left anyhow." She showed me a loose-leaf book the people of Carbon had assembled a few years back in honor of their centennial. There was a picture of young Iva Strait, pale and prim, standing among a half-dozen sooty miners. "The coal seams ran for miles in all directions," she said. "The whole town's undermined now."

I crossed the highway to the J&H Corral, a small brick edifice that Iva's father had built. His own establishment, the Pioneer Store, used to stand next door. Inside I met both J and H—John and Helen Olson, proprietors. Their tavern is a dark room with a bar, a few scarred tables and chairs, a pool table and an ancient, unlit jukebox in one corner. You can get a bowl of homemade chili there for a dollar and a spicy Polish sausage sandwich for \$1.25. The Buds cost 50 cents a mug.

John and Helen look alike. They are gaunt, bespectacled, and friendly. For most of their lives they were farmers, but last year they went broke and the farm was auctioned off for debts. "Reaganomics," John explained to me.



I asked him if he liked living in Carbon. "I was born here," he replied. "I can't see myself living any place else. I guess you could say I never got very far in the world."

Well, how has his life been so far?

and raised in Minnesota," I say

The farmer grins and slaps me on the back. "I *thought* you looked Swedish." It is a peace offering of sorts. In Carbon, Iowa, to be a Swede is probably to be within

In Carbon, Iowa, to be a Swede is probably to be within striking distance of redemption.

John took off his glasses and carefully wiped the lenses with a paper napkin. "OK," he finally said. "Pretty OK."

Now at mention of "the Jews," the Olsons are keeping very busy behind the bar, glancing everywhere but in my direction. They want no part of this little chat I am having with their farmer friend, someone they have known all their days.

"You should choose your words carefully," I tell him. "I'm a Jew."

"Well, that's all right," he drawls. "Where you from?"

"Connecticut now. I was born

striking distance of redemption and certainly to be innocent of an connection with the Eastern Jewish Imperialist Conspiracy. I do not protest.

Back on the road, with Carbon still in my rearview mirror, I am thinking about Richard Hostadter: he was right. Populist anti-Semitism, was, and is, "a mode of expression, a rhetorical style, not a tactic or a program." To my agrarian drinking companion, "Jewish" signified whatever was suspect in corporate America, a helpful abstraction that he embraced in ar

ger and ignorance. It meant the opposite of the dark-skinned Caribbean peasants with whom he sensed something in common. In the course of biting off a piece of the truth he had swallowed the biggest, most persistent lie in Western history.

The good people of Carbon suspect that something is wrong somewhere; they are groping for a name to give the invisible hands that have made rural people dance to urban tunes. For more than half a century Carbon has indeed been undermined. Depression, war, out-migration and now a farm crisis—brought on by high interest rates and Reaganomics—have shaped their days and harried their nights. To those who can't see themselves living anywhere else, these catastrophes seem beyond reach or reason. They resemble fate, and if fate has a human face, it is the face of the stranger.

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Populism, alas, has never lacked for scapegoats. Mary Elizabeth Lease liked to describe Grover Cleveland as, "an agent of Jewish bankers and British gold." Thomas E. Watson, the Georgia populist, got elected to Congress in 1891 by slandering strangers of all races. "The scum of creation has been dumped on us," he said. "The most dangerous and corrupting hordes of the Old World have invaded us."

The hell that Watson, Lease, and others raised back then lingers on, confronting progressives today with a major dilemma. It is true that populism still represents a struggle of ordinary people against

extraordinary forces that must be named and understood before they can be deflected. To that extent we can forgive my farmer his populist trespasses. But forgiveness will not close the gulf between us; it will not make us allies. Only a common language, an agreed-upon vocabulary that adequately explains the American condition, can bring us together at last.

Nothing has changed since William Peffer, the Kansas populist editor, wrote in the 1890s of "a gigantic scheme of spoliation" that threatens us all—nothing except the time remaining. It is now later than ever. ■

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