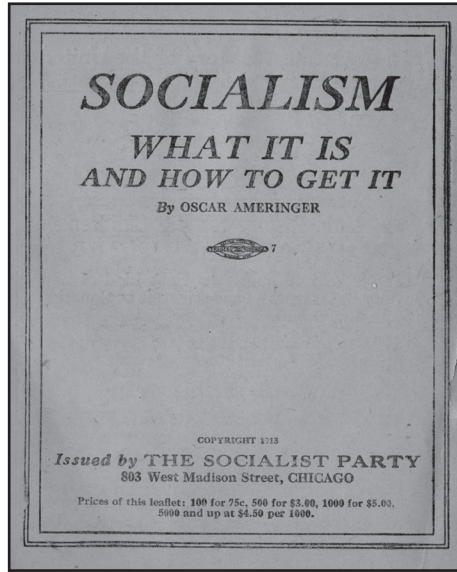


Colorblind Proletarian Brotherhood: African Americans, American Indians, and Racial Inclusivity in the Oklahoma Socialist Party



*By Matthew F. Simmons**

Early-twentieth-century Oklahoma was a home for three groups that existed on the margins of society: African Americans, American Indians, and Socialists. Despite their marginalization, members of these groups still demanded the right to determine their own political and economic destinies. But did members of these three marginalized groups ever consider working with one another in order to achieve their goals collectively? In the course of their struggles did blacks, Indians, and Socialists see each other as potential allies? More specifically, did Oklahoma Socialists see African Americans and American Indians as part of the working class? And were African Americans and American Indians interested in joining the Oklahoma Socialist Party? This essay will explore and delineate the attitudes of members

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of these three groups toward the inclusion of heterogeneous racial groups within the Oklahoma Socialist Party.

When it was first opened to non-Indian settlement, Oklahoma appeared to be a haven from the racist oppression of the Deep South—a place where African Americans could pursue the American Dream of political equality and economic opportunity. E. P. McCabe, a prominent African American advocate or “booster” of migration to Oklahoma Territory, stated it quite succinctly: “What will you be if you stay in the South? Slaves liable to be killed at any time, and never treated right: but if you come to Oklahoma you have equal chances with the white man, free and independent.”¹ The African American newspaper *Boley Progress* seconded this perspective of Oklahoma as a place of equality and opportunity, querying its readers, “Why not go to a country where the door still stands open and where you can enjoy all the rights and privileges as a citizen of this country?”² For black people, Oklahoma represented a chance for political equality and economic opportunity regardless of the color of their skin.

Yet little by little the same policies from which African Americans had escaped in the Deep South were instituted in Oklahoma. First, in 1890, school districts were given the option of choosing whether to have segregated or integrated classrooms. A law against miscegenation was passed in 1897. In 1901 segregated schools became mandatory, when the law declared that “no white child shall attend a colored school or colored child attend a white school.”³ Railroad coaches were segregated shortly after Oklahoma became a state in 1907. It was only the fear that President Theodore Roosevelt would reject the Twin Territories’ bid for statehood that kept segregation out of the new state’s constitution. Over time, black people faced increasing discrimination through legal and extralegal means, culminating in 1910 when Democrats attempted to disenfranchise the majority of African American voters through a literacy test, while excluding whites and American Indians from such a requirement.⁴

The American Indian experience paralleled that of African Americans in Oklahoma. Oklahoma promised to be a refuge for Indians as well. One key fact differentiated these two groups, however; African Americans chose to move to Oklahoma Territory, whereas the United States government forcibly removed members of the Five Tribes (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee [Creek], and Seminole) from their homes in the Southeast to Indian Territory, which later became part of the state of Oklahoma. The dark cloud of forced dispossession supposedly had a silver lining—Native people would not have to contend with land-hungry white settlers in Indian Territory, at least not initially.⁵

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E. P. McCabe (12151, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).



Nevertheless, American Indians could not distance themselves from white settlers forever, and after the Civil War white immigrants and entrepreneurs began entering the Indian nations in increasingly large numbers looking for land. White ownership of Indian land was illegal, yet many whites got around this stipulation by bribing Indians or simply squatting on Indian land. Another way to lay claim to Indian land was to marry into the tribe, and this is precisely what many settlers did. Tribal members feared what might happen if whites and Indians became neighbors again. One member of a Cherokee delegation to Washington, DC, wrote, "To mingle the Cherokees and white men together in the same community would result in the white men soon owning everything, the Indian nothing."⁶ Ultimately, pressure from the white settlers and railroad corporations eroded the control of the tribal governments to the point that they no longer controlled access to Indian Territory and its many resources.⁷ Thus, American Indians found themselves in a situation similar to that of African Americans in Oklahoma as they gradually lost their autonomy and power.

Neither of the two major political parties came to the aid of African Americans in their search for equality and autonomy. Republi-

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cans, tarred with the brush of being pro-black by their Democratic opponents, began to compete with Democrats for race-conscious, white Oklahoma voters with exaggerated fears of black domination. This fear was based on the perception of extensive African American immigration to Oklahoma, but the number of black immigrants to Oklahoma formed a relatively small proportion of the total community.⁸ Nonetheless, Republicans tacked to the right politically in order to compete with the Democratic Party, the traditional party of white supremacy and segregation.⁹

Republicans and Democrats alike also ignored the needs of Native people in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America by endorsing the allotment of communal Native lands as individual homesteads. Faced by pressure from white settlers who claimed there was excess land in Oklahoma that should be opened up to non-Indian settlement and Eastern reformers who believed American Indians must assimilate into mainstream society by adopting white culture, Washington politicians ignored the pleas of Indians to be allowed to preserve their traditions and maintain tribal autonomy. In 1887 and 1898 respectively, Congress passed the Dawes Act and the Curtis Act; these laws called for the redistribution of communal land into individual property—Indians were to become American whether they wanted to or not. It was a devil's bargain; the only way for Native people to survive in mainstream white society was to pretend that they were something they were not—100 percent American.¹⁰

What was the attitude of Oklahoma Socialists toward the inclusion of people of color within the party? The ambivalence from Republicans and hostility from Democrats toward people of color should have created an opening for Socialists to fill. One particular event highlights the relationship between the Oklahoma Socialist Party and people of color particularly well—the attempt by the Democratic Party to disenfranchise black voters and weaken the Republican Party through the proposed Grandfather Clause in 1910. This clause directly targeted African Americans, who formed a key constituency of the Republican Party in Oklahoma and, during elections, held the balance of power between the two parties. In order to limit the number of eligible African American voters, the Grandfather Clause stated that anyone (and their descendants) who was not a citizen prior to 1866 must take a literacy test to qualify to vote. And the administration of the literacy test fell to partisan election board officials. The test was a means by which Democrats skirted the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, which granted African Americans citizenship, equal protection of their rights, and due process.¹¹

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Opinion at the state level over the relationship between the Oklahoma Socialist Party and the African American community was characterized by division. At the time that the Grandfather Clause was proposed by Oklahoma Democrats, the Oklahoma Socialist Party was controlled by the “Milwaukee centralizers,” considered by some local Oklahoma Socialists to be a power-hungry cabal of northern interlopers. More to the point, these “outsiders” openly supported black voting rights. According to historian Garin Burbank, this leadership group included Oscar Ameringer, Patrick Nagle, and John G. Wills, all of whom were “firmly committed to inclusion of the Negro in the working-class and defense of his political rights.”¹² Historian Donald Graham has similarly characterized these individuals as “champions of the entire working class, regardless of race.”¹³

And their colorblind ideology manifested in practical ways. Each of these individuals made a particular contribution in the fight against the Grandfather Clause. Ameringer wrote the official argument against the clause, which was included on voters’ ballots for the 1910 election. In his autobiography Ameringer stated, “The lily-white Republicans didn’t have enough courage to fight for their own voters, so I wrote a twenty five hundred word argument against the adoption of the grandfather clause. This document was printed and distributed by the state.”¹⁴ On the day before the election, Wills wrote an open letter to the state attorney general in the Socialist newspaper *Oklahoma Pioneer*, advocating for the right of black people to vote. Wills stated that African Americans had “made wonderful progress and are manfully struggling to uplift themselves;” only “political tricksters . . . seek, as in the past to inflame the minds of the ignorant, gullible whites with race hatred.”¹⁵ Nagle, also writing in the *Oklahoma Pioneer*, gave practical advice to African American voters on how to ensure that their votes were counted on election day, even going so far as to encourage them to find a Socialist voter to help them if they were denied their right to vote by poll workers. Nagle optimistically declared that “if he is a southern man it will make no difference to him.”¹⁶ Clearly, Nagle felt that class solidarity trumped racial division.

The evidence points to an official policy of racial inclusion within the Oklahoma Socialist Party based on the state party’s opposition to the Grandfather Clause and the Oklahoma Socialist Party state platform. The 1912 state platform included a plank that called for the “black section of the working class” to enjoy equal political and economic rights with their white counterparts in the coming Socialist state. The content of the platform may have appeared unambiguous, but its application was another matter. For example, the editor of the Socialist

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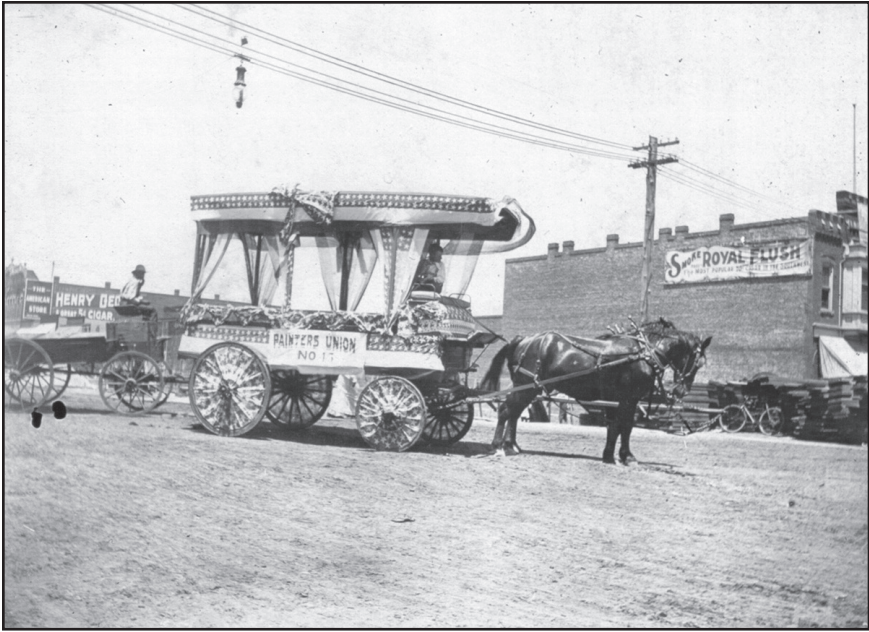


Patrick Nagle, Kingfisher, Oklahoma Territory, 1898 (5931.B, Frederick S. Barde Collection, OHS).

Industrial Democrat heartily approved of the absence of a “Jim Crow contingent” in the Oklahoma City Labor Day Parade and then went on in the same issue to explain why whites were better than African Americans.¹⁷ Furthermore, the plank on racial inclusion was confirmed in 1914, but the actual contents of the plank were not reprinted. And when Socialists were accused of being “nigger lovers” by Democrats, they fought fire with fire, declaring that it was really the Democrats who were “practitioners of nigger equality” because they had sexual relations with black people that resulted in “increasing yellow stock.”¹⁸ When push came to shove, Socialists could be just as racist as their Democratic counterparts.

Despite the mixed, if not outright cold, reception black people received from the Oklahoma Socialist Party, the evidence strongly suggests that most Oklahoma Socialists did follow the advice of Ameringer and his compatriots in voting against the Grandfather Clause. This does not mean that they shared the vision of racial inclusion espoused by the state leaders in Oklahoma City, however. Many party members recognized the Grandfather Clause as a wedge piece of legislation, meaning that once black people were disenfranchised there was no rea-

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Wagon for Painter's Union Number Seventeen in the Oklahoma City Labor Day Parade, 1902 (20150.2, Carl Reynard Collection, OHS).

son why poor, uneducated whites would not be next. According to historian James R. Green, "A majority of members probably voted against disfranchisement. They did so not because they 'loved the negro' but because their own political rights and class interests were threatened by black disfranchisement."¹⁹ White voters may have defended black voting rights because they were afraid they might be next—if African Americans could be disenfranchised through a literacy test, why not poor whites with little education?

How did African Americans respond to the Socialist defense of their voting rights in Oklahoma? Did they show increased interest in the Oklahoma Socialist Party? Some of the best primary material for gauging the response of African Americans in Oklahoma to the mixed overtures of the Oklahoma Socialist Party is newspapers. Oklahoma had a particularly strong cadre of black newspapers; between 1889 and 1930, there were seventy-eight African American newspapers in Oklahoma.²⁰ A survey of three African American newspapers—the *Boley Progress*, the *Muskogee Cimeter*, and the *Oklahoma Guide*—covering thirty-two issues shows that these newspapers only mentioned Socialists in passing with oblique references; the newspapers only mentioned Socialists a total of four times.²¹

OKLAHOMA CITY U.S.A. THE FIFTY CENTS A YEAR
INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY
 OPPOSED TO WAR AND POVERTY IN FAVOR OF PEACE AND PLENTY

VOLUME 1 OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA, SEPTEMBER 10, 1910 NUMBER 37

Labor's National Holiday

Monday, labor's national holiday, was observed in Oklahoma City in a fitting manner. In numbers and effectiveness of programs it was the most successful Labor day celebration in the history of Oklahoma City.

To the thousands of people who lined the streets of the city at 10:30 a. m. the parade was an inspiring spectacle. Unmanned by the presence of militia or police, the sole ranks of labor marched as a single mass under the international banner of socialism, which denotes the worldwide character of the movement.

In the line of march there was no "Jim Crow" division, for scattered through the long file of march were the negro leaders and members of labor organizations, all of which bring to mind the fact that in the chain arrangement there can be no division of labor on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude, but that the workers of the world must unite and march to victory under one common banner.

The authorities at the state fair grounds was well fitted when the speech-making program of the day was commenced by Governor Haskell. As he always does, the governor took advantage of the occasion to stress the present state administration, and undertook to lead the laboring people to believe that they had received everything they had asked for in his hands.

The governor was followed by Mayor Henry M. Rankin, who declared the city administration and offered labor plenty of free advice, although a working class city administration was not recommended. Probably the most pungent way to labor which the mayor did not contain in the following statement:

"The labor problem is not yet solved and I hope the day will come when laboring people will be given an equal

Scheme to Reduce Wages

"It seems that certain interests in Oklahoma City are deliberately advertising a shortage of laborers and mechanics in Oklahoma City for the purpose of flooding the town with unemployed labor prospectively to forcing a reduction of wages. I would suggest that some precaution be taken by the same interests for giving these men employment or else the people will be forced to care for them this winter by charity, and hard times, such as never have been experienced here before, will result."

This is the essential statement of E. W. Vason, state employment agent made with his report for the month. The total number of applications for work was 4718. Six hundred and seventy-two persons were supplied with work.

"The advertising of the opening of the packing plant September 1, 1910, has caused a great influx of laborers. Seventy-nine applied for jobs. Of that number nearly all are working at common labor. Four hundred and fifty centers applied for work and only two calls were made and they were filled."

"One hundred and twenty-four bookkeepers, salaried and stenographic sought work. Only two were furnished employment. A total of 1500 common laborers applied and 229 were supplied with work. Two hundred calls for labor were made and these were placed. There were 20 applications for farm jobs and 2 calls were made."

"A comparison with the report of the Muskogee bureau shows a big difference. Only 283 calls for help of all kind were made and 239 persons made application for work


Prosecute Election Thieves?

Remains in the Oklahoma City press are to the effect that a special grand jury is to be called for the purpose of "investigating" the recent primary election fraud.

Oklahoma county is about as noted for "fast grand jury investigations," however, as it is for election frauds, murders, white slave dealers, bootleggers and gamblers, and it's doubtful if a long-suffering public can be appeased by a grand jury "investigation" that never investigates.

We had a grand jury some time ago to "investigate" the Columbia Bank and Trust Company affair, but when the investigating process reached the governor's cabinet the "investigation" ceased. This is only a sample of many other grandstand plays of the same kind, but it is of such recent occurrence that it is hardly possible for the public to have forgotten it, and it should be evidence enough that the people that protest are not loud enough to stand themselves in the preliminary for election thieves and ballot box stuffing.

When it comes to a pass that the democrats are brazen enough to deal among themselves and publicly admit the truth, it's certainly time to vote for a change in the administration—AND THAT'S THE ONLY WAY THE PEOPLE OF OKLAHOMA WILL EVER GET RELIEF THAT RELIEVES.



LEONARD JOHNSON
The Farmer Agitator who is carrying the message of Socialism to the "grass roots" in Okla.

A Moralist Moralizes

A pseudo moralist who signs himself Robert A. Baird, writing in the *Okla. Herald* and afterwards getting his doge copied in the *Okla. Tribune*, has by chance come in possession of August Bebel's book, "Woman Under Socialism," and by selecting a few obscure paragraphs which he hasn't the brains to understand, and quoting a few random extracts from this early stage social philosopher's proceeds, in the space of five or six columns, making out a bad case for Socialism, according to his way of thinking.

The trouble with the majority of such petty peddlers as this man Baird is that they never go to the right place to ascertain what Socialism is. The principles for which the Socialist party stands can be found in the platform and declaration of principles, but can't be mastered broadcast through the land, but these very party moralists never tackle the real thing. What's the reason?

People of intelligence realize that when individuals write on any subject they express individual opinions, but in court in the land, as had in the courts are, would take the evidence of any individual as final without hearing the other side of the case.

But, in his writings, may reflect the true doctrine of Socialism in every particular, and he may see, but those in certain fields can see

"SHERMAN'S MARCH" TO OKLAHOMA CITY

Saturday was republican day in Oklahoma City, being the event of the visit of Vice President Sherman and his last speaking date in the state.

He arrived at the city over the Muskogee train at 12 noon Saturday morning in company with quite a number of republican politicians of state note

ing and close of his remarks. The plan of the democrats who have seen fit to do his "twenty per cent" was turned to good account when he mentioned the audience that if he was elected governor he would put the state on forty per cent of the amount of money that the democrats

Industrial Democrat (Oklahoma City), September 10, 1910 (image courtesy of The Gateway to Oklahoma History, gateway.okhistory.org).

One example is an article in the July 28, 1910, edition of the *Boley Progress*, which predicted that the Socialists would take votes from the Democrats, thereby making a Republican victory easier. "Most of the Socialist gains in Oklahoma come from the ranks of Democracy . . . assuming . . . that there will be 60,000 Socialist votes in the general election this will be sufficient to swamp the Democratic majority if the Republicans pool their full voting strength."²² If Socialists took votes away from Democrats, the Republicans would have a better chance of winning the election. African American newspapers did acknowledge the existence of the Socialist Party as one of the three major parties in the state and even discussed it in terms of its effect on elections, but did little more than that.²³

Black newspapers also had noticed the growing ambivalence, if not outright hostility, of the Republican Party toward African American voting rights and participation in the political process. An article in the April 23, 1909, edition of the *Muskogee Cimeter* lamented the growing "Negrophobia" within the Republican Party, stating that "there are others [Republicans] who have cold feet, and have denounced the par-

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David J. Turner on the steps of Farmers and Merchants Bank in Boley (3377.B.1, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).

ty because of that dreadful contagion of Negrophobia. Such curses as these are not wanted in the party and the sooner they are kicked out the better it will be for the party.”²⁴ African Americans in Oklahoma who voted Republican were hopeful that white party members who did not support black voting rights would be ostracized and expelled from the party.

If Republicans were trying to rid themselves of their African American constituency, what was it about Republicanism that so attracted black voters? African Americans had been allied with the Republican Party since before the Civil War; it was Republicans who pushed for an end to slavery and a Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, who signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing enslaved blacks. Furthermore, the African American community of Oklahoma associated prosperity with the Republican Party and its probusiness agenda. For example, in the July 28, 1910, edition of the *Boley Progress*, an article addressed to “Oklahoma Republicans” discussed how Republican principles such as business investment, lower taxes, and improved state credit would “usher in a period of prosperity which Oklahoma so richly deserves.”²⁵ African American newspapers certainly replicated the probusiness philosophy of the Republican Party in their columns. A May 19, 1910, article in the *Boley Progress* lamented the deleterious effect

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of stalled legislation on economic growth, stating that “‘pending’ retards business and commercial growth. The sooner the people of the state of Oklahoma quit ‘pending’ the quicker we will build a bigger and a better state.”²⁶ An article in a later edition of the same paper called for the establishment of additional businesses within the city of Boley so that area farmers would not need to go to nearby Paden to have their needs met. According to the article, “with a few more stores . . . we would be able to care for the majority of farmers around Boley. It is necessary that we get busy along that line and save to our town some of the business that is going elsewhere.”²⁷

Practical action to incorporate people of color within the Oklahoma Socialist Party never emerged. It is not entirely clear why the Oklahoma Socialists did not make a serious attempt to organize African Americans, especially after their defense of black voting rights. Ameringer certainly had experience working with the black community; he had helped lead an integrated dock and brewery workers’ strike in New Orleans. Yet the Oklahoma Socialist Party leadership never put into place a plan for proselytizing their black brethren, perhaps due in part to intraparty squabbling—Ameringer and his allies were fighting to maintain their leadership of the Oklahoma Socialist Party at the same time that they were advocating for black voting rights.

African Americans had reason to be attracted to the Oklahoma Socialist Party. After all, the Socialists were their strongest advocates in their fight against disenfranchisement. And from 1910 until 1914 the Oklahoma Socialist Party was experiencing tremendous growth. It also appears that black voters had begun to lose some of their attraction to the Republican Party, or at the very least had become equally disgruntled with all political parties. In an article entitled, “The Democratic Way,” the *Muskogee Cimeter* highlighted how “the democrats when in power adopt the same tactics as do the republicans in order to expedite legislation,” such as requiring that a bill be voted upon before opposition legislators had time to read it in its entirety.²⁸ This kind of comparison equating Democrats and Republicans should have elicited a sharp rebuke from black Republicans who saw the Republican Party as the party that freed the slaves and the Democratic Party as the party of slavery. If African Americans really believed this of all politicians then there was no reason for them to remain loyal to the Republican Party. They might as well become Democrats, or even Socialists.

Ultimately, the reason for the reluctance of African Americans to embrace socialism stemmed from their desire to integrate themselves as much as possible within capitalist, mainstream society, even while maintaining some distance from white racism by living in separate, All-

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Black communities. The color of their skin already stigmatized them in the eyes of white society; adopting socialism would have added an additional stigma for people already considered “lazy” and “ignorant” at best, and “thieves, liars, and cheats” at worst, by many whites.²⁹ Opponents similarly slandered Socialists as “immoral and antireligious”; Socialists favored free love and did not believe in God.³⁰ According to Burbank, Socialists were “jeered, threatened, and ostracized in their own communities.”³¹ And in the years following the passage of the Grandfather Clause, the Democratic Party attacked the Socialist menace in earnest through a “campaign of political and economic discrimination,” thus providing further disincentive for blacks to join the ranks of radicalism. Being black and Socialist was simply a burden too heavy to bear.³²

There was one other marginalized racial group in Oklahoma to whom Socialists could have appealed—American Indians. Indians and Socialists had remarkably similar ideas regarding land ownership: both believed that land should be held communally and that farmers had an immutable, natural right to the soil, meaning it could not be confiscated or lost through foreclosure.³³ At the same time it is important to note that the relationship between Native people and land ownership was not analogous to the relationship between African Americans and land ownership. And to complicate matters even further, some individuals in Indian Country were both African American and American Indian. It is important to not simplistically equate the experiences and place of black and Native peoples within white-dominated society.³⁴

One key difference is the concept of sovereignty, which was closely tied to the Native understanding of land ownership and use. Native peoples in eastern Oklahoma waged a protracted battle to maintain independence over their own internal affairs for much of the late nineteenth century. Maintaining a communal form of land ownership was as much about the distribution of resources within the community as it was about maintaining control over the tribe’s internal affairs. The battle within tribes and against the federal government in eastern Oklahoma over land use was not seen in terms of class, or even in terms of race; it was about sovereignty. The fight over land ownership within the tribal community in Oklahoma cannot be seen simply as a battle between capitalism and communalism. The situation was much more complicated than that.³⁵

The use of American Indian newspapers as a potential source to evaluate the attitudes of Indians toward Oklahoma Socialists is even more challenging than the use of African American newspapers to gauge the attitude of black people toward Oklahoma Socialists. In part

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this is a question of provenance; it is rather hard to determine which newspapers in Oklahoma were run to any extent by Native people.³⁶ Furthermore the presses stopped rolling or American Indians lost ownership of the *Cherokee Advocate*, the *Indian Journal*, and the *Indian Champion* before the Socialists could reach their full strength, as the party crested in 1916. Even though Native newspapers stopped printing before the Oklahoma Socialist Party could become prominent, these newspapers can still provide clues to the attitudes of Indians toward socialism because we can see the responses of American Indians toward capitalism, its antithesis.³⁷

A survey of a combined thirty-one editions of the *Cherokee Advocate* and the *Indian Journal* covering portions of the years 1901, 1902, 1905, 1906, and 1910 yielded no direct references to the Socialist Party. Yet a tantalizing clue did turn up in historian Andrew Denson's book, *Demanding the Cherokee Nation*. This passage includes a quotation from a Cherokee leader, Chief Dennis Bushyhead, who claimed that while the Cherokees did own land in common within the Cherokee Nation, they were "neither Socialists nor communists . . . we have a land system which we believe to be better than any you can devise for us . . . Cannot you leave us alone to try our plan, while you are trying yours?"³⁸ This passage is clear evidence that members of the Cherokee Nation were aware of socialism, yet perceived it as simply another aspect of white American culture, a culture they were uninterested in embracing.

The *Cherokee Advocate* provides evidence that at least some Cherokees embraced the capitalist ethos and cultural mindset of mainstream American society. An article reprinted in the February 17, 1906, edition of the *Advocate* discussed the Marxist concept of class conflict between capital and labor. Yet this article denied any antagonism between capital and labor, instead claiming that when the two united, "the wheels of progress will move steadily forward" and that "the war on capital is wrong. The plea for labor is a reflection upon intelligence."³⁹ The frequent publication of newspaper articles "boosting" Tahlequah, or discussing its potential as a center of commerce, is further evidence that members of the Cherokee Nation were beginning to assimilate the capitalist ethos of their white neighbors.

Similar evidence exists in the *Indian Journal* that some Muscogees (Creeks), like their Cherokee counterparts, embraced capitalism and desired to assimilate into the American economic system. An advertisement for shoes in the July 25, 1902, edition of the *Indian Journal* illustrates this point; it appealed to the penny-pinching consumer that was such an integral part of American capitalism. This advertisement

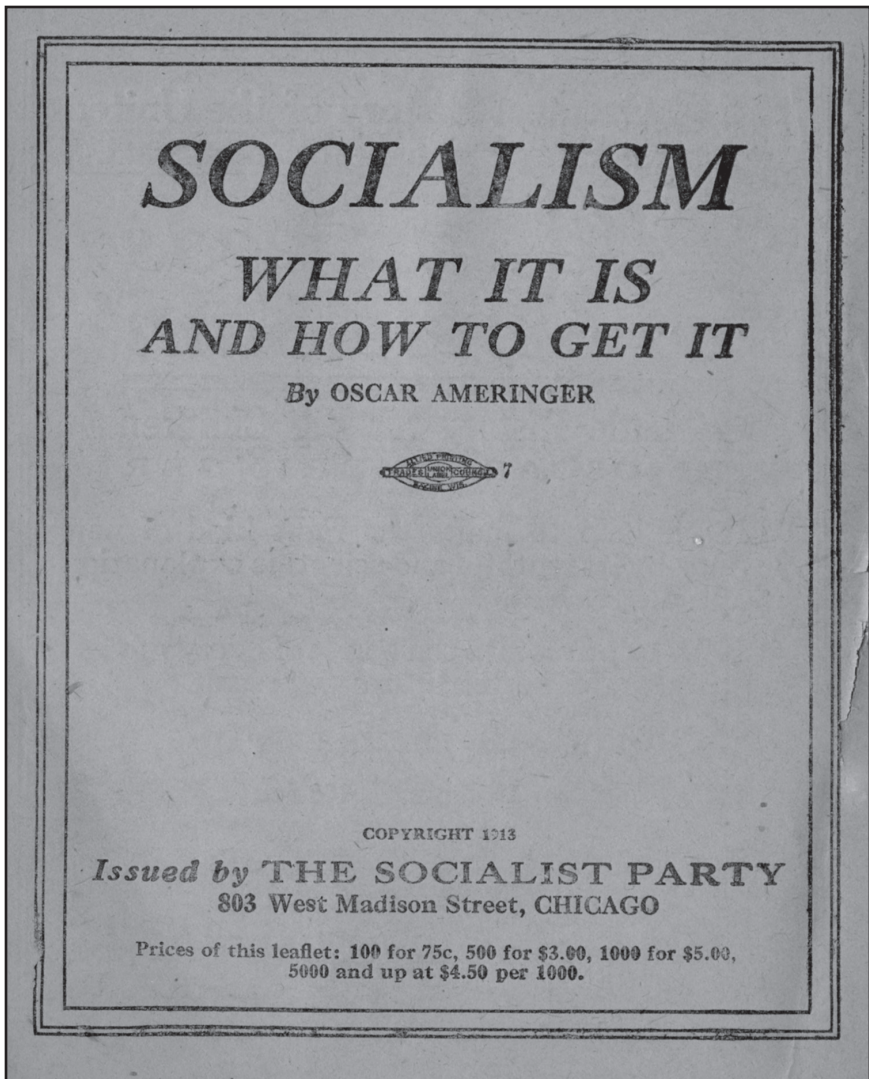
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Oscar Ameringer (23187.2, Oscar and Freda Ameringer Papers, OHS).

could have been found in any American newspaper. It beckoned to potential customers: "Bargains! Bargains! . . . We will give you some great bargains if you will call on us and let us show you what we have. Remember we sell **THE BEST SHOES FOR THE LEAST MONEY** of anybody in town."⁴⁰ This advertisement presumed that purchasing inexpensive goods made by others was now a first principle among the Creek people and that the cheapest price took precedence over quality or the manner in which goods were produced.

Yet some members of the Cherokee and Muscogee (Creek) Nations resisted capitalism and assimilation into the American way of life. Evidence in both the *Cherokee Advocate* and the *Indian Journal* demonstrates how many American Indians worried about the loss of their way of life, a life distinct from American culture and society, even while some of their brethren readily assimilated. One article in the *Indian Journal* explicitly separated Creek society into two groups, "Progres-



"Socialism: What It Is and How to Get It" pamphlet by Oscar Ameringer, 1913 (Book 13, Oscar and Freda Ameringer Papers, OHS).

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sives” and “Unprogressives,” represented by two clans, the Cowetas and the Spokogeas. The author of this news article, Luke McIntosh, discussed how the progressive Creeks adopted “written laws and a government patterned after that of the white people, despite the opposition . . . of the Spokogeas.”⁴¹ He further concluded that because of the Spokogeas’ backwardness, “all the good lands have been filed upon by the shrewd Indian and only the hills are left for the slow and unprogressive Spokogeas to lay claim to in the end.”⁴² Tribal members not willing to adapt to the new ways would be left with very little.

As indicated by sentiments expressed in places like the *Cherokee Advocate*, many Indians actively rejected the new American way of life. One obvious method by which these traditionalists showed their discontent was in their rejection of allotment. A sizable group of Cherokee and Creek full-bloods opposed allotment even after the process had begun, as evidenced by a flurry of articles in both the *Cherokee Advocate* and the *Indian Journal* that tried to cajole and shame full-bloods into taking their allotments. The February 1, 1902, edition of the *Cherokee Advocate* pleaded with full-blooded Cherokees to enroll because “they owe something to their children, and should enroll their name on the Dawes roll.” The article continued, stating that “right or wrong the Government is doing it, and if your names are not on the roll, you will not be a beneficiary in the division of the lands.”⁴³ The author of this article drew on the presumed sentimentality of readers by appealing to them as parents. The author’s argument in this article was also highly pragmatic because it pointed out that not accepting an allotment would not change anything; unavoidable change was coming whether they wanted it or not through government-enforced allotment.

In the end, the vast majority of American Indians received their individual allotments. Native society among the Creeks and Cherokees was rearranged along American capitalist lines. So when socialism burst on the scene in Oklahoma, significant economic change had already taken place. Perhaps if the Socialists had come sooner, they would have found allies among those tribal members opposed to allotment with their communal form of land tenure. The Socialist plan was quite similar with its idea of “use and occupancy” as being the sole title to land.⁴⁴ It is also possible that Native people would have been suspicious of the Socialists and any alliance offered by them considering their past negative experiences with whites and their politics. Certainly those Indians who supported assimilation and understood and profited under the capitalist system would have rejected any Socialist entreaties to find common cause.

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Socialist encampment, September 2-5, 1910 (20489, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).

Those entreaties were apparently never made in any significant way by the Oklahoma Socialist Party. There is little, if any, evidence that Oklahoma Socialists made an effort to reach out to American Indians as a group. Among historians of Oklahoma socialism, only James Green discusses any attempt of the Oklahoma Socialist Party to reach out to the tribes. He claims that some effort was made to reach out to the Choctaw people. This piece of information seems to have been gleaned from Oscar Ameringer's autobiography, which describes an encounter with Choctaw Indians during a speaking tour of the former Indian Territory. He was there to reach out to tenant farmers and miners, not necessarily Indians. That certainly did not stop him from realizing an opportunity to expand the Socialist sphere of influence when some Choctaws expressed interest in attending his upcoming schoolhouse meeting. Ever the pragmatic organizer, Ameringer not only invited them to come, but also asked them to bring along additional members of the tribe, telling them that he "would deliver a sermon on the problems of the North American red men at large and point a way out of their trials and tribulations."⁴⁵ Yet there is no evidence that a concerted effort was ever made to reach out to the Five Tribes in eastern Oklahoma. And perhaps more tellingly, Socialist candidates received very few votes in regions of Oklahoma with large Native populations.⁴⁶

What might account for the lack of outreach on the part of the Socialist Party to the American Indians in Oklahoma? Certainly, the possibility exists that the Socialist Party did not consider them a viable constituency since American Indians could not vote nationally until 1924.⁴⁷ It is also possible that the national party simply was not focused on American Indians since its imagined community of workers was primarily industrial. The national Socialist Party was quite con-

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flicted about how best, if at all, to incorporate farmers into the cooperative commonwealth and had a very poor understanding of the lived experiences of poor farmers in the South.⁴⁸ Oscar Ameringer demonstrated this lack of knowledge about poor farmers when he first arrived in Oklahoma. "I knew farmers like a book. . . . Farmers were not wage earners. They were capitalist, exploiting wage labor." He later discovered how little he knew about poor farmers, describing that "I saw humanity at its lowest possible level of degradation and decay."⁴⁹ At the local, grassroots level the tenant farmers and sharecroppers who flocked to the red banner of socialism in the former Indian Territory likely would not have viewed American Indians as viable allies either, since American Indians were often their landlords, and as such would have been seen as exploiters rather than the exploited from the perspective of poor whites.⁵⁰

It is impossible to gauge the individual motivation of those who voted for or against the Grandfather Clause, but Socialists with sizable African American populations in their communities voted more often for the Grandfather Clause than those without sizable African American populations nearby.⁵¹ And even though the leadership of the Oklahoma Socialist Party supported black voting rights from an ideologically pure stance—African Americans were part of the working class, ergo their voting rights must be protected—Oklahoma Socialists made little, if any, effort to reach out to this branch of the working class. While official national and state policies called for inclusion, Socialists took no active steps to win over black voters. Apparently African American voters needed to find out about the party on their own.

Perhaps part of the problem was that many African Americans were simply not interested in jumping ship from staunch Republican backgrounds to socialism. Historically, black people had voted Republican en masse since Reconstruction and were firmly wedded to the Party of Lincoln. In Oklahoma they played an important role in state politics and benefited from that role. They were an important voting bloc that could tip an election in the Republicans' favor. They participated in and benefited from the patronage system. Patronage, after all, was how E. P. McCabe received his appointment to the territorial government of Oklahoma.⁵² Yet in the face of rising racism, the Republican Party became divided over the place of black people in the party. Many in the party began to believe they were losing white votes by supporting African American rights. This "lily-white" faction wanted to purge black party members from active participation in the Republican Party. Some African Americans did leave the Republican Party, some very briefly even voiced support for the Socialist Party. Yet most Afri-

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can Americans remained in the Party of Lincoln until the 1920s and 1930s.⁵³

African Americans immigrated to present-day Oklahoma because there were better economic opportunities in the new state than there were in the Deep South. By all accounts black immigrants to Oklahoma Territory were following the capitalist American Dream: land ownership would result in wealth, which would result in the good life and the respect of black and white people alike. Unfortunately many found that racism followed them to Oklahoma, so they moved on to Canada or another northern location.⁵⁴ Those who remained, however, made the best effort they could to climb the economic ladder through land ownership. And many black freedmen in Indian Territory did own their own land, as they were included in the allotments of the Five Tribes. For a time it seemed as though Oklahoma held unlimited potential for black citizens pursuing the American Dream of economic prosperity. If they were so intent on obtaining and keeping land, then surely they would have been put off by the Socialists' interest in dramatically changing the nature of land ownership. Perhaps they feared the Socialists would take away what they had accumulated, and furthermore, membership would have created an additional stigma for them to bear beyond the color of their skin. To be politically red and racially black at the same time was simply too burdensome.

Similarly there seems to have been little interest within the Native community in joining the Socialist Party. A few years before Socialists became prominent in Oklahoma, American Indians saw their land-use system dramatically altered by the United States government. The government forced them to give up their communal land tenure, which ironically was quite similar to what the Socialists would attempt only a few years later. Perhaps if the reorganization of the Indian land-use system had occurred at the same time as the Oklahoma Socialists were proposing their agrarian reforms, the two groups could have made common cause. Unfortunately a number of years separated them, and the damage had already been done to the Native way of land use.

In conclusion, the leadership of the Oklahoma Socialist Party—men such as Ameringer, Nagle, and Wills—took an inclusive view of race within the Oklahoma Socialist Party, but they did not actively recruit either African Americans or American Indians into the Oklahoma Socialist Party. Part of this reluctance was likely due to the ambivalence, if not outright hostility on the part of the Oklahoma Socialist Party rank and file toward people of color, which in turn only echoed the growing racism of American society, particularly in the South. Even if a call for working class solidarity had been made to African Ameri-

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cans and American Indians, there is no evidence to suggest that they would have answered that call. Most African Americans seemed to have been too busy pursuing the American Dream of economic prosperity to heed the Socialists' call for a reorganization of society along more equitable lines. Native people who might have been most inclined to make common cause with the Socialists and their program of land ownership, which was similar in some ways to the traditional Indian system of land tenure, had already been forced to take their individual allotments. In short, each group, Socialists, African Americans, and American Indians, had reasons to cooperate with each other, but what should have brought them together was less powerful than what kept them apart.

Endnotes

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¹ Hannibal B. Johnson, *Acre of Aspiration: The All-Black Towns in Oklahoma* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 2002), xi–xiii; George O. Carney, “Historic Resources of Oklahoma’s All-Black Towns: A Preservation Profile,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 69, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 118, quoted in Johnson, *Acre of Aspiration*, 42; see also Murray R. Wickett, *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865–1907* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 54–55.

² *Boley Progress*, March 23, 1905, quoted in Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 56.

³ Oklahoma Territory Laws, art. 11, “Separate Schools Law of 1901,” quoted in Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 87–88.

⁴ Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 34–35, 44–47, 109–13; Johnson, *Acre of Aspiration*, 63–64; James R. Scales and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 46–47; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 39–40, 190–201.

⁵ There was no reason for whites to want the Indian land in Oklahoma initially because Oklahoma was seen as part of the “Great American Desert,” and thus viewed as unsuitable for farming, but perfectly suitable for “uncivilized” Indians. See Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 16–17; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 2–4.

⁶ Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 41st Cong., 2nd sess., House Executive Document 1, 847, quoted in Daniel F. Littlefield Jr., *The Cherokee Freedmen: From Emancipation to American Citizenship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 39; John Thompson, *Closing the Frontier: Radical Response in Oklahoma, 1889–1923* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 29–33; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 46;

⁷ Thompson, *Closing the Frontier*, 30–32.

⁸ Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics*, 19, 46–47; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 13, 51–53, 65–66, 178–81.

⁹ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 35–37; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 175–86, 192.

¹⁰ Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 46–54, 180–81, 196.

¹¹ Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 114–16; Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 108–14; Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics*, 44–47; James Q. Wilson and John J. DiIulio Jr., *American Government: The Essentials* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), A15–A16.

¹² Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910–1924* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 71, 87; Donald Graham, “Red, White, and Black: An Interpretation of Ethnic and Racial Attitudes of Agrarian Radicals in Texas and Oklahoma, 1880–1920” (master’s thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1973), 219; James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 39, 44, 114, 118–19.

¹³ Graham, “Red, White, and Black,” 219.

¹⁴ Oscar Ameringer, *If You Don’t Weaken: The Autobiography of Oscar Ameringer* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1940), 279; Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 109–10; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 100–02; Bruce R. Shepard, “The Origins of the Oklahoma

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Black Migration to the Canadian Plains,” *Canadian Journal of History* 23, no. 1 (April 1988): 17.

¹⁵ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 71; Graham, “Red, White, and Black,” 220.

¹⁶ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 71.

¹⁷ *Oklahoma Pioneer*, August 17, 1912, quoted in Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 76. “Jim Crow contingent” was a reference to a segregated, black formation in the parade; black people were intermingled with whites. See also *Industrial Democrat* (Oklahoma City, OK), September 10, 1910, quoted in Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 74.

¹⁸ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 77; *Otter Valley Socialist* (Snyder, OK), May 10, 1916, quoted in Graham, “Red, White, and Black,” 231–33.

¹⁹ Graham, “Red, White, and Black,” 278–80; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 106.

²⁰ L. Edward Carter, *The Story of Oklahoma Newspapers, 1844–1984* (Muskogee, OK: Western Heritage Books, Inc., 1984), 187–89.

²¹ This survey focused on the months preceding the November election of 1910, but also included editions from as early as 1909 and as late as 1912.

²² “Oklahoma Republicans,” *Boley (OK) Progress*, July 28, 1910.

²³ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 108–09; Shepard, “The Origins of the Oklahoma Black Migration,” 10.

²⁴ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 37–38; Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics*, 19, 46–47; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 184–86; “Cold Feet Republicans Beware,” *Muskogee (OK) Cimeter*, April 23, 1909, 1.

²⁵ “Oklahoma Republicans,” *Boley Progress*, July 28, 1910.

²⁶ *Boley Progress*, May 19, 1910.

²⁷ *Boley Progress*, August 18, 1910.

²⁸ “The Democratic Way,” *Muskogee Cimeter*, April 16, 1909.

²⁹ *Boley Progress*, April 21, 1910; “Okemah Ledger,” *Boley Progress*, September 29, 1910; “Ribbon Ballot,” *Muskogee Cimeter*, April 30, 1909; David A. Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832–1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 181; Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 118–19; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 236–37, 386–87; Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration*, 8–9, 14; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 28–34.

³⁰ Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 96.

³¹ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 11.

³² Thompson, *Closing the Frontier*, 131–35.

³³ Oscar Ameringer, *Socialism for the Farmer Who Farms the Farm* (Saint Louis, MO: The National Rip-Saw Publishing Co., 1912), 13–15, 27–29; Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 18–19, 96–100; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 5.

³⁴ Brian Hosmer, H. G. Barnard associate professor of western American history at the University of Tulsa, interview by the author, March 28, 2013, Tulsa, OK. It is worth noting that even though many whites regarded both American Indians and African Americans as racial others, the one-drop rule did not apply to American Indians. Their status as Americans was not fully determined by their nonwhite ancestry. Mixed-blood Native peoples, depending on their degree of acculturation to white society, could be accepted as white, something never possible to African Americans.

³⁵ Hosmer interview. American Indians did not see communalism as related to class-based socialism—for them it was about sovereignty. For more on the relationship between American Indian people and capitalism see Alexandra Harmon, *Rich Indians: Native People and the Problem of Wealth in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

³⁶ Carter, *The Story of Oklahoma Newspapers*, 12–15. It is worth noting that not all Indian tribes would have had newspapers, since the written word was, with the exception of the Cherokee Nation, largely a part of white civilization. The Cherokees were the

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only tribe to create a written form of their spoken language. Written records can be used as a way to gauge the attitudes of only a small slice of the American Indian population.

³⁷ Carter, *The Story of Oklahoma Newspapers*, 11–14, 33. Yet there is evidence that suggests that Socialists had a small, if limited, presence within Indian Territory in the early years of the first decade of the twentieth century while the aforementioned tribal newspapers were still in existence. According to historian Jim Bissett, “Socialist leaders organized a series of lecture tours in the Indian Territory beginning in 1903.” See Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 140–41, 153.

³⁸ *Cherokee Advocate*, April 13, 1881, quoted in Andrew Denson, *Demanding the Cherokee Nation: Indian Autonomy and American Culture, 1830–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 226–27. The *Cherokee Advocate* ceased publication in 1906.

³⁹ *Evenor* (Murray, KY), quoted in “Announcement,” *Cherokee Advocate*, February 17, 1906.

⁴⁰ *Indian Journal*, July 25, 1902.

⁴¹ *Indian Journal*, July 18, 1902.

⁴² *Ibid.* The characterization of traditional Creeks, most likely full-bloods, as “Unprogressives” and assimilationist Creeks, most likely mixed-bloods, as “Progressives” is really a matter of semantics. It is important to note that the categories of “mixed-blood” and “full-blood” did not really determine the level of adherence to traditional Native practices on an individual level. To be American Indian was a matter of culture rather than of race. For further discussion see David Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 13, 93–96.

⁴³ *Cherokee Advocate*, February 1, 1902.

⁴⁴ The second plank of the Farmer’s Program adopted by the national Socialist Party in 1912 stated that “actual use and occupancy shall be the only title to land.” See Ameringer, *Socialism for the Farmer Who Farms the Farm*, 31.

⁴⁵ Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 109–10, 266; Ameringer, *If You Don’t Weaken*, 237–39.

⁴⁶ Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 109–10; Ameringer, *If You Don’t Weaken*, 234–35, 239.

⁴⁷ “Today in History June 2,” Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/june-02.

⁴⁸ Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 28–29, 79–86; Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897–1912* (1952; repr. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2004), 69–72, 127–29.

⁴⁹ Ameringer, *If You Don’t Weaken*, 227, 232–33.

⁵⁰ Thompson, *Closing the Frontier*, 29–31, 40–44.

⁵¹ According to Graham, “there was a high correlation between Socialist voting and opposition to the amendment which varied directly (with the exception of Okfuskee County) with the proportion of Negroes in living each county. Socialists residing in areas with relatively few black neighbors were more strongly opposed than those living in the midst of blacks.” See Graham, “Red, White, and Black,” 290.

⁵² Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 96–98; Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 16, 35–36.

⁵³ According to Franklin, the relationship between the African American community and the Republican Party began to collapse in the 1920s: “By the twenties . . . unmistakable strains appeared that in the following decade helped to disrupt totally the alliance between the black community and the GOP.” See Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 117–19, 122.

⁵⁴ For more on the exodus of Oklahoma blacks to Canada, see Shepard, “The Origins of the Oklahoma Black Migration,” 1–23.