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Thanks again,

Sharon Hall  
Editor, Publisher, Researcher, Writer and Graphic Designer  
*Digging History Magazine*



**I**t wasn't that adherents believed in socialism as a religion. In fact, many who trekked out in the Oklahoma woods in the early 1900s likely participated in religious "camp meetings" or "brush arbor meetings". These meetings were common in the summertime:

*Sometime in the summer, usually in July after the crops had been "laid by," the plain folk would often gather to sing, preach, and pray together in great "protracted meeting" with the worshippers, of necessity, camping on the meeting grounds.<sup>1</sup>*

The concept was appropriated by Populists for political purposes in the late nineteenth century. These Populists would target Baptists, Methodists, and some of the Holiness sects, and actively recruited preachers from these religious traditions to participate in their Populist gatherings. By the early 1900s the concept had been likewise appropriated by the Socialist Party as a means to further its political agenda.

These meetings consisted of a fair amount of indoctrination, but not unlike the strictly religious versions, also included preaching and singing – to go along with all the propaganda. It brings to mind the old song, "Give Me That Old Time Religion" doesn't it – except for these meetings maybe it was more like "Give Me That Old Time Socialism"! In 1904 this announcement appeared in *The Labor Signal*, a weekly Oklahoma City journal devoted to the interest of organized labor:

*There will be a Socialist Encampment and Picnic at Crutchko Park, six and a half miles South East of Oklahoma City on August 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> inclusive. Good Speakers and Ministers will be in attendance, and one day will be set apart for the discussion of politics by inviting Democratic, Republican, and Populist Speakers to take an hour each in showing up the good*

*points in their political beliefs. Let everybody attend. Conveyance will be in waiting at all trains to carry passengers to the park, where ample facilities will be provided for food and sleeping accommodations.<sup>2</sup>*

Farmers were the primary focus of the Oklahoma Socialist Party, and these meetings were geared not only to issues of concern to this particular constituency, but ensured these protracted meetings were conveniently scheduled so as not to disrupt farm operations and concerns:

### **SOCIALIST ENCAMPMENT**

#### **Will Be Held in Lincoln County – Chance for Candidates to be Heard**

*Arrangements are being made to hold a socialist encampment in Lincoln county late in July or early in August as may be found most convenient for the farmers . . .*

*Good speakers will be in attendance to entertain the people and a chance will be given candidates of all tickets to engage in joint debate with the socialist speakers.*

*Everything for the comfort of those in attendance will be carefully looked after and the indications are that many people will avail themselves of this opportunity for recreation after the hard work of summer on the farm and to hear live issues discussed.<sup>3</sup>*

In conjunction with the Oklahoma Socialist Party convention in August 1906, an encampment would again be assembled at Crutch Park. While the 1904 encampment and picnic had promised all political persuasions would be given a platform, this one would feature prominent Socialists like Eugene V. Debs and “Mother” Jones. This encampment may have been a “barn burner” for fervent Socialists. Members of the Western Federation of Miners, a radical labor union active in the West and parts of

Canada, had been arrested and charged with murdering Idaho Governor Frank Steunenberg on December 30, 1905 – or rather William “Big Bill” Haywood, Charles Moyer and George Pettibone were being tried for paying someone to murder the governor.

The prosecution would rely heavily on the investigative skills of James McParland, a Pinkerton Agency detective, and whether or not they could prove Harry Orchard had been paid by the three prominent union members to plant a bomb on a side gate at Steunenberg’s home in Caldwell. The union would bring in bigger guns in the form of renowned attorney Clarence Darrow. All three men escaped prosecution. Darrow had at one time represented Eugene Debs.

Oklahoma Socialists were none too happy either as the upcoming statehood bill was moving forward. The bill did not recognize their party, and in order to be placed on ballots of future elections they would need to secure it by petition.<sup>4</sup>

Still, for the most part all political persuasions were welcome at the encampments. However, socialist encampments were not at all unique to Oklahoma. According to a Kansas left-wing (later Socialist) newspaper, the first such meeting had been held at Grand Saline, Texas in 1904. For the uninitiated the newspaper provided background:

*The term encampment is applied to this annual event from the fact that hundreds of families who come in covered wagons, and a per cent of those who come by rail as well, camp right on the grounds for the entire week to hear the message of industrial liberty. The encampment idea originated at Grand Saline. The first Socialist encampment on record was held by the Socialists of that town in 1904. It is a unique example of constructive Socialism and the best self-sustaining propaganda*

*institution yet devised; and one that will in time be adopted by the Socialists throughout the United States. It is a means of carrying on agitation and organization for Socialism at the expense of the general public, and without cost to the Socialist organization that controls and directs the meeting.*<sup>5</sup>

How clever it was that these meetings were held “at the expense of the general public”! (In actuality, it was good old-fashioned capitalism!) To be sure, attendees could expect enough propaganda to last them until the next year’s encampment with nationally-known Socialists like William “Big Bill” Haywood or the man himself, Eugene V. Debs.

In 1908, Reverend Reddin Andrews was a featured speaker. In 1910 the former president of Baylor University ran for governor on the Socialist ticket. A number of speakers were slated, and although the list was incomplete, attendees could expect to hear “fresh” speeches daily as no speaker would appear more than once. In a spirit of fairness, “a division of time will be accorded any endorsed representative of capitalism.”<sup>6</sup>

Organizers were expecting at least ten thousand attendees on average per day, having recorded between four and nine thousand the year before. People would pour in from Texas and surrounding states.

*Thousands [would] come for the speaking and other thousands merely for fun and enjoyment, but even the pleasure-bent crowd take in a little Socialism by absorption, for the atmosphere is surcharged with revolutionary sentiment.*<sup>7</sup>

Family-oriented entertainment for the thousands or pleasure seekers included shows, drink stands, restaurants and various other attractions. This is where the “general public” paid for these encampments since those who ran the

entertainment attractions paid for the privilege of entertaining the masses.

The Grand Saline encampment was held in Richardson Park,

*where there are pearly springs and flowing wells of limpid water for every purpose. This large, well shaded location, fanned by refreshing breezes, admirably provides comfort for the thousands who will attend. No admission is charged. There is a spacious camp ground wood and water free and open for everybody. Take a vacation, bring your family and enjoy camp life for a week.*<sup>8</sup>

East Texas, and especially Van Zandt County, seemed to be the hotbed for Texas Socialist fervor, although as time went on encampments were held elsewhere in the state. In 1910 Yoakum, located in both Lavaca and DeWitt counties, was expecting a “monster encampment.”<sup>9</sup> In 1910 the Socialist vote was “Growing to Some Proportions in Milam County.”<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, by the 1910s “Southwestern Socialists had perfected such gatherings throughout Oklahoma and Texas. The largest such gathering in East Texas boasted an attendance of 50,000 during a week’s worth of preaching, singing, and propagandizing. For those not religiously or politically inclined, the East Texas Socialists promised a hamburger stand, a Socialist rodeo, and a Ferris wheel.”<sup>11</sup>

While the Socialist Party had grown to become the nation’s third major political party, their support was strongest in the American Southwest – Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana. In 1912 Eugene Debs ran for President, and these four states gave him about ten percent (over 80,000) of the total votes he received throughout the nation.<sup>12</sup> However, “Socialists did not manage to win any statewide elections anywhere in the country in 1912” – although

one congressman, Victor Berger, was elected in Wisconsin.<sup>13</sup>

If a Socialist managed to win an election in 1912 or 1914, it was most likely to fill local positions such as justice of the peace, constable, and perhaps mayor and county judge (Texas and Arkansas). In 1914, however, Oklahoma elected six Socialists to the state's legislature – five representatives and one state senator.<sup>14</sup>

Annual socialist encampments would eventually fade away. By the late 1910s fewer notices were appearing in newspapers. World War I was a contributing factor with crackdowns on radical groups, most notably, anarchists. In 1919 several newspapers carried a story of how a few hundred former Socialists of Eastland County had been “converted” away from “their Socialist faith”. As it turned out, a good dose of old-fashioned capitalism changed their fortunes:

### **SOCIALISTS GIVE UP THEIR FAITH IN SHORT ORDER**

#### **Interesting Story of How Texans Were Converted From Their Socialist Faith**

*For many years the hotbed of Socialism in Texas was in Eastland County, with Hog Town now called Desdemona, as the storm center of agitators who preached the doctrine of equal distribution of wealth among all the people. Now these very same men, who cast their votes for Eugene Debs for President, and prior to becoming Socialists, were pioneer members of the Populist party, are simply reeking with wealth – not imaginary prosperity but real coin – oodles of it. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that not one of them is saying a word about dividing up his fortune with the “downtrodden poor.”<sup>15</sup>*

What caused this sudden transformation? In a word, oil – “black gold, Texas tea” as

the old *Beverly Hillbillies* theme song goes. An annual encampment had been held in Ellison Springs for several years and many of the county's cotton and corn farmers no doubt were in faithful attendance.

Between 1910 and 1916 cotton production had declined precipitously as boll weevils devastated crops. In 1917 a major oil discovery at Ranger changed everything. In 1919 twenty-two million barrels of oil were produced in Eastland County.<sup>16</sup> By 1922 production had dropped, about the same time agricultural interests were improving. The 1920s brought more attention to Eastland County with “Old Rip, the Horned Toad Lizard” (see article on page 15).

While newspaper accounts were estimating more than one hundred men, who just a year ago had been “preaching Socialism and struggling to make both ends meet”, were multi-millionaires (\$10 to 25 million), most weren't that wealthy. Referring to them as “Socialist millionaires” was a bit of a stretch in some cases. Still, the money was good while the oil flowed.

One of the more interesting “Socialist millionaires” (he wasn't, by any stretch of the imagination) was Thomas Aloysius “Red Tom” Hickey, described as a “socialist journalist, lecturer and West Texas oilman.”<sup>17</sup> Born in Dublin, Ireland in 1869, Hickey immigrated to America in 1892 and joined the Socialist Party in 1893. He would be one of the regular speakers on the Socialist encampment circuit.

In 1907 he moved to Texas and in 1911 launched *The Rebel*, a Hallettsville newspaper which would eventually be considered the state's official Socialist newspaper. After World War I put the quietus on many Socialist publications, Hickey was about to revive publication of *The Rebel* in Dallas when news of the oil strike in Eastland County became headline



news. In a roundabout, capitalistic way Hickey would come into a bit of cash himself:

A number of socialist farmers lived in the area and sponsored a yearly encampment at Ellison Springs, where Hickey was the featured orator. The Desdemona socialists also had a baseball club, which played on a field owned by S.E. Snodgrass, a leading local Democrat and avid antisocialist. When Snodgrass banned the socialists from his land and demanded the exorbitant sum of fifty dollars for the 1½ acre ballpark, they raised the purchase price of fifty dollars by popular subscription. When oil was discovered, the baseball field suddenly became worth \$40,000 to its socialist owners. It was soon surrounded by producing oil wells also owned by the socialists.<sup>18</sup>

Apparently, Hickey had chipped in on the price of the ball field and now was part-owner, although he would by no means become a “Socialist millionaire”. Instead, he doubled as advertising manager for the Desdemona *Oil News* and correspondent for several other newspapers. He died of throat cancer on May 7, 1925.

The “Socialist millionaire” articles ended by announcing the end of encampments at Ellison Springs:

*As a result of this wealth, or perhaps because they are too busy piling up more, there will no Socialist encampment at Ellison Springs this year. If by any chance these men should get together, it would be a convention of more millionaires than ever before assembled at one time in Texas.*<sup>19</sup>

Socialism was by no means dead, but many so-called agrarian Socialists had moved on by the 1920s, with annual encampments remembered only as *passé* in “50 Years Ago” articles of the 1950s and ‘60s.

*Believe it or not . . .  
stranger things HAVE happened*

### Old Rip the Horned Toad

Although the term “cornerstone” is referenced several times in the Bible, the ceremony of laying a building cornerstone and placing items in it (a “time capsule”) perhaps began to be practiced as many as five thousand years ago. *Time Capsules: A Cultural History* suggests that:

*Time capsules can embody the highest technical and cultural aspirations of civilization, like the World’s Fairs where they are sometimes exhibited. They are commonly featured as institutional publicity promotions, public relations activities, carnival-type attractions, or even the very familiar, de rigueur civic commemorative rituals. They are convenient devices (literal or metaphorical) for us to commemorate hopes and evidence by leaving them for possible futures. Influential groups of twentieth century savants and promoters organized a few noteworthy time capsule projects and attempted to preserve them for future recipients. More often, people have been content to seal up smaller cultural samples, multitudes of which serve as “garden-variety” time capsules – modest shorter span memorials.*<sup>1</sup>

Such was the case in regards to a “garden-variety” time capsule for the town of Eastland, Texas. In 1897 the town was beginning construction of a new courthouse and a hollow cornerstone was being prepared to serve as a time capsule. Surely many late nineteenth century-everyday items were deposited, but only one such deposit would be remembered and eventually become wildly “famous” years later.



# DIGGING HISTORY

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THE MAGAZINE

Dying (or Lying) to Get on the Dawes Rolls  
(or how my ancestors were Indians one  
minute and the next, not so much)

WHEN RED MEANT RADICAL:  
Oklahoma Red Dirt Socialism

Give Me That Old Time Socialism

Milton Colony:  
The Bonds of Socialism

GOD'S LAND, BUT NO MAN'S

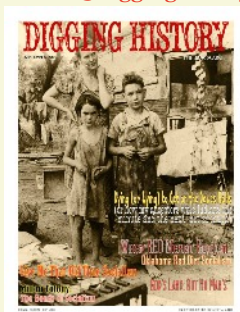


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Web Site: [www.digginghistorymag.com](http://www.digginghistorymag.com)

Contact Us: [seh@digginghistorymag.com](mailto:seh@digginghistorymag.com)



ON THE COVER:

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