Labor History, Vol. 43, No. 4, 2002

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Gideon's Band: From Socialism to Vigilantism in Southeast Missouri, 1907–1916[1]

JAROD H. ROLL

In late November 1915, 30 armed white tenant farmers and lumber workers mounted horses shortly after midnight and set out to visit six white co-workers recently hired by the Gideon-Anderson lumber company. After a short ride along roads recently hacked out of the southeast Missouri forest, the armed band, soon to be known locally as the Night Riders, surrounded the residence of the new hires, a wooden shanty not far from the most recent point of timber extraction, just west of Gideon, near the Dunklin–New Madrid county line. After shouting out a warning, the makeshift cavalry opened fire on the men in the shanty, who, quickly awakened, managed to return several volleys. The battle raged for a short time, until the mob, unable to take the six besieged men and with five of their own wounded, retreated into the darkness of the surrounding woodlands. Within days newspapers throughout southeast Missouri—the state's Bootheel—reported this latest incident of working-class violence. Several suspects had been arrested, the largely Democratic press jeered, and the law had posted warrants for more.[2] But not every Bootheel resident was pleased with the news. As the suspects were loaded onto a train in Gideon, their families swarmed the depot, making the short journey east to the county seat all the more difficult. As the heavily guarded train pulled out of the station, on rails many of the prisoners themselves had laid, "the wives and daughters and sons of the [accused] set up a wailing that was extremely pathetic."[3]

That the tenants and gang laborers arrested for Night Riding left behind women and children mattered little to their employers. In the bosses' calculations, the Night Riders had threatened business development in the Bootheel, first by demanding higher wages and lower rents, and subsequently, after the demands were not met, by attempting armed revolt in what concluded a tense three-month standoff between labor and capital in late 1915. In October, the owners of Gideon-Anderson received anonymous letters demanding wages be increased from $6 to $10 an acre for the gangs clearing timber and that rents be lowered for tenant families working newly cleared company land. Furthermore, the Night Riders demanded that all blacks leave the area and employers "discharge negro laborers and give employment only to white men."[4] If the company failed to meet these demands, the letter read, the towns of Gideon and Clarkton, the two major centers of company activity, would be burned and all company officials executed. Refusing to bow to these tactics, Gideon-Anderson officials hired six private

[1]The author would like to thank Josef Barton and Nancy MacLean for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article.

[2]*Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), 27 November 1915.

[3]*Scott County Kicker* (Benton, MO), 18 December 1915.

[4]*Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), 27 November 1915.

ISSN 0023-656X print/ISSN 1469-9702 online/02/040483–21 © 2002 Taylor & Francis Ltd on behalf of The Tamiment Institute
DOI: 10.1080/0023656022000030308

detectives to work in the forests and fields with the express purpose of infiltrating the Night Rider organization.[5] Once the 30 assailants had been captured, law enforcement, prompted by Gideon-Anderson officials, went on to arrest 37 more men involved, or allegedly involved, with the Night Riders.[6]

Area business leaders quickly set out to ensure prosecution of the Night Riders and to crush this threat to their economic interests. The trial of the 67 men, all either tenants or wage hands on timber gangs, plainly demonstrated class divisions in the Bootheel. Financing the prosecution was the New Madrid Citizen's Committee, a group of landowners worth more than $1,000,000 collectively and holding more than 200,000 acres in aggregate on which 5000 tenant farmers and their families scratched a tenuous living. Making an ostentatious show of power and wealth at the trial, the Citizen's Committee paid for the services of the Fairfield Hotel, in downtown New Madrid, where the elite landowners entertained journalists, law enforcement officials, and witnesses testifying against the Night Riders.[7] This group of "land barons," made up of men integral to the timber extraction, agricultural, and railroad interests of southeast Missouri, the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* observed, "is making every living effort to send to the penitentiary all of the 67 defendants."[8]

By contrast, most of those packing the courtroom and crowding the streets of New Madrid during the trial had left work in the fields and forests to support accused husbands, brothers, friends, and fathers. "The throng of people from the countryside," a *Post-Dispatch* reporter remarked, "have come in buggies and spring wagons, on mules and even on foot … wearing hickory shirts and corduroy breeches tucked into high muddy boots … watching the prisoners … whom some of them recognize as a neighbor." Moreover, the St Louis reporter continued, "in the spectators' seats [sit] men unshaven, spitting tobacco juices at knotholes in the floor, [along with] women from the bottom lands, in faded dresses and heavy shoes, some of them holding restless children, whose crying and murmurs of 'mamma' are almost endless." Many of these women were wives of the accused, who lived with their children in wagons near the jail during the trial.[9] In the event their husbands were convicted, these women faced the loss of indispensable wages and help in the fields and, most likely, utter catastrophe. Yet they evinced little fear at the possibility. "Mister," one wife informed an onlooker, "I ain't a-skeered of none of these here courts. The penitentiary is done full, they tell we-uns … so they kain't be no room there for to put we-uns men in."[10]

Testimony at the trial revealed that those composing the Night Riders were well known among the Bootheel working class. Moreover, witnesses testified that the Night Riders recruited members on the pretext of labor solidarity and collective action, thereby playing upon class-consciousness among Bootheel tenants and gang laborers. One witness, when asked if the defendants were members of the Night Riders, remarked "Lord, kno[w] nearly everybody around Gideon belonged to that band." He further revealed that the group's purpose was to increase wages and decrease rent.[11]

---

[5] Leon P. Ogilvie, "The Development of the Southeast Missouri Lowlands" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 1967), 217–219.

[6] *Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), 21 January 1916; 24 January 1916.

[7] *Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), 24 January 1916.

[8] *Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), 24 January 1916.

[9] Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 220.

[10] *Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), 21 January 1916.

[11] *Scott County Democrat* (Benton, MO), 16 December 1915; *Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), 25 December 1915.

Another witness, claiming to have initially been a part of the group, testified that the Night Riders were bent on more than petty economic gains. "If we could get enough votes we could send a man to the Legislature," he recalled being told. However, he continued, the Night Riders realized electoral gains would take too long and "decided on revolution."[12] Other witnesses claimed to have been duped into the makeshift organization under the auspices of it being a labor union. ' "It's a pretty long story," one onlooker told the *Post-Dispatch*, "but I know some of these young fellows just went into it thinking it was a labor organization."[13]

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

The 1915 Night Riding episode punctuated what was indeed a long story of militant, organized working-class mobilization in southeast Missouri.[14] Attracted to the area by intense capitalist development in the timber extraction industry and its concomitant employment opportunities, these ordinary white men and women from the Ozark highlands and hills of western Kentucky and Tennessee were quickly swept up in the tumult of heedless labor exploitation. But these folk had also come to the Bootheel envisioning a future their hardscrabble, isolated life in the hills denied them. They came seeking wages, land, schools—in short, an opportunity to establish stable yeoman families. Between 1880 and 1915, then, southeast Missouri served as a battleground between breakneck capitalist development and working-class movements hoping to salvage something of the goals and hopes these migrants brought with them from the hills.

The Missouri Socialist Party emerged in 1905 as the most militant proponent of the working-class struggle. Building on the idiom of religious revival, on the sociability of dances and picnics, and on the instrumentality of public meetings, the movement gave political direction and voice to working-class cultural expression. By 1912, however, conditions in the Bootheel had worsened as a broad agricultural transformation destroyed the ability of working-class families to realize their dreams of autonomy. The widespread rise of tenant farming decimated working-class hopes of owning land and seriously threatened traditional conceptions of gender and work. Furthermore, capitalist landlords, intent on wringing the greatest possible profit from the land, began recruiting black migrant workers from the South to undercut the white labor force. In

[12] *Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), 22 January 1916.

[13] *Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), 24 January 1916.

[14] In the southeast Missouri context, Night Riding referred to working-class vigilantism against both blacks and landlords and should not be confused with whitecapping, Bald Knobbing, or the Night Riding incidents of western Kentucky and Tennessee. That said, all three undoubtedly influenced vigilante activity in southeast Missouri. Whitecapping refers to vigilante violence that was directed specifically at black laborers by white farmers and agricultural laborers in the South. Often a key of white Southern political unity, or *herrenvolk* democracy, whitecapping did not involve white inter-class conflict. Bald Knobbing refers to vigilantism employed by hill folk in the Ozark mountains to defend against industrialization and the institution of formal law. The Night Riders that operated in Kentucky and Tennessee were themselves landlords striking against the national corporate tobacco trusts seeking to absorb their holdings. For more on whitecapping, see William F. Holmes, "Whitecapping: Agrarian Violence in Mississippi, 1902–1906," *Journal of Southern History* 35 (1969): 165–185; Pete Daniel, "The Crossroads of Change: Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures in the Twentieth-Century South," *Journal of Southern History* 50 (1984): 429–456. For a description of the Bald Knobbers, see David Thelen, *Paths of Resistance: Tradition and Dignity in Industrializing Missouri* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 87–92. For a thorough work on Night Riding in Kentucky and Tennessee, see Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890–1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

this atmosphere, the Bootheel's most militant and successful socialist movement gained momentum, adding appeals to traditional notions of manhood, republican maternalism, and white supremacy to the early movement's political and public mobilization repertory. Increasingly, as the plight of the working class worsened, socialist rhetoric subordinated political goals to the advocacy of divinely ordained retributive justice through vigilante violence, targeting white landlords and African-Americans.

The strength of Bootheel socialism emerged from the party's ability to tailor the socialist message and vision so closely to the fears and impulses of its rural working-class constituents. This ability was, however, a double-edged sword. As living conditions became more acute in the mid-1910s, socialist political goals and peaceful channels of discontent struggled to contain the furor aroused by party rhetoric. Amidst this desperate situation the Night Riders struck. While small in number, to many the Night Riders represented the initial wave in a rapidly approaching class war. In a political atmosphere of gathering patriotism and increased attention to the European war, the local lords of lumber and land would not tolerate any threat to industrial vitality and future fortunes.

In the minds of many Bootheel residents, not only the Night Riders, but also the Socialist Party, embodied that threat. In comparison to the very public remonstrations of the Socialist Party, the Night Riders offered little by way of advertisement, save the terse threats leveled at landlords and blacks. With clear distinctions between the two organizations absent, the Democratic press confidently and frequently linked Bootheel socialists to vigilantism. The party went, in the eyes of many, from the cultivator of a distinct working-class consciousness to a dangerous agent of proletarian revolution. As a result, its political legitimacy crumbled and socialist electoral numbers plummeted. What had been the party's strength—its ability to fashion a message that struck such a responsive chord among potential voters—also proved its undoing. By giving voice to fears and anxieties caused by economic exploitation, racial tension, and challenged gender norms, Bootheel socialists aggravated and politicized socio-economic fissures to such an extent that a purely electoral goal could no longer contain the working-class movement. The Bootheel Socialist Party was very much a creature of its environs. With the ability and resolve to tailor a message so closely to working-class fears and hopes, socialist agitators were led not by Marxist orthodoxy or national party directives, but by the economic vicissitudes of the Bootheel economy and its harrowing impact on neighbors, friends, and family. As conditions moved beyond endurance, so the party's rhetoric moved beyond the hope of political solution. By 1916, with the party decimated and the Night Riders facing prison, the Bootheel working class looked to a daunting and uncertain future.

MAKING A NEW BOOTHEEL, 1880–1907

As the northernmost reach of the Mississippi River's alluvial floodplain, the Bootheel, consisting of Dunklin, Mississippi, New Madrid, Pemiscot, Scott, and Stoddard counties, and the eastern half of Butler County, is bewilderingly flat (see Fig. 1). Historically, this geographical trademark prevented adequate drainage of either rainfall or the rivers coming out of the Ozark highlands. While the swampland was a permanent problem for those seeking to cultivate the land, the region's flatness offered no defense from the periodic floods of the Mississippi. To complicate matters, the swampland of southeast Missouri was also covered in dense, deep-rooted cypress and oak forests.[15]

[15]Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 7–22.

Map

FIG. 1. Source: Leon P. Oglivie, "The Development of the Southeast Missouri Lowlands" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 1967), 3.

It was timber, however, that began the process of economic development and swampland reclamation in southeast Missouri. Until the latter half of the 19th century, the swampland of southeast Missouri remained public land. Initially, swamp tracts were given to railroad and road building companies by county governments under the pretext that transportation corridors would be hacked out of the wilderness. The rest of the land was sold at $1.25 per acre. This relatively high price and the land's need for massive reclamation to be useful left the individual farmer unable and unwilling to buy. As a result, during the 1880s, timber-covered swampland was sold in massive blocks to lumber companies, including such sprawling national corporations as the American Sugar Refining Company and International Harvester.[16]

After the timber was gone, the question of what to do with the land remained. Reclamation projects in the Bootheel proceeded rapidly between 1900 and 1910, exponentially increasing the value of the once shunned swamplands. State legislation in 1879 enabled Bootheel county governments to contract private companies, such as the local Himmelberger-Harrison Lumber Company, to drain swampland not already sold and allowed the counties to pay the firms in land at the rate of $1.25 per acre. As a result of this policy, large landowners not only increased their holdings, but also upgraded the value of their land significantly. As the forests were being cut over, land reclamation slowly transformed the infested swamps into incredibly fertile and valuable farmland. Tracts that had sold for $1.25 per acre in 1880 were being valued at anywhere from $10 to $225 per acre in 1910.[17]

The rapid growth of the lumber industry and continuing reclamation work underscored the need to address what was perhaps the Bootheel's greatest deficiency: a large, active labor force. During the 1890s, through the exertions of county promotion committees and the lumber companies, people swarmed into southeast Missouri, looking for land and for work. Between 1890 and 1910, the population of every Bootheel county, except Mississippi and Stoddard, more than doubled in size, with Pemiscot's population increasing by 224%.[18] These newcomers came from divergent backgrounds and for various reasons. The national advertisement campaign initiated by regional promoters attracted many migrants from Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio in search of fresh land. This group more or less consisted of successful farmers who generally had means enough to buy.

While the more financially secure Mid-western farmer was attracted by the embellishments of promoters, thousands of settlers emerged from the Ozark highlands of northern Arkansas and southern Missouri and the hills of western Kentucky and Tennessee simply looking for work. These migrants were largely poor and gravitated to the multitude of jobs available in the sawmills or in gangs building the levees and railroads. The promise of wages undoubtedly attracted most. "They were poor people," settler Thad Snow recalled, "and they came from poor hill country where the going was hard, and they showed it."[19] Almost immediately, then, the Bootheel developed a distinct social stratification. Migrants of all classes sought to capitalize in some way on the tremendous economic growth occurring in the Bootheel. The aspirations of all hung precariously on the promise that land would be available, industrial work would remain, and the labor force would remain content.

[16]Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 99–102.
[17]Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 120–128.
[18]Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 529.
[19]Thad Snow, *From Missouri* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), 134–135.

Just as quickly as hopes had arisen in the Bootheel, they collapsed. By 1910, the timber companies' clear-cutting frenzy had devastated Bootheel forests. Although lumbering remained in southeast Missouri until the early 1920s, the industry was unable to maintain the astronomical production levels of 1900–1910, leaving thousands facing unemployment. With only a limited number of levee and rail jobs remaining, the main option left to the unemployed was working the recently clear-cut land.[20] Due to the nature of economic development in southeast Missouri—led by corporate control of timber tracts and, subsequently, reclaimed land—the unemployed lumber worker found no land open for purchase. To make matters worse, the lumber companies were unwilling to abandon the millions of acres of newly cleared, fecund farmland they still owned.[21] Even after clear-cutting, however, much timber waste remained. In the transition from timber to agriculture, then, the wage laborers on the massive clearance projects moved their families on to small plots and continued a detailed clearance by hand. Once the land was ready for farming those same families often stayed on, trading saws and chains for hoes and cotton-sacks. The economic transformation was so dramatic that by 1910, 82% of Bootheel farmers worked as tenants, where the rate in 1880 had been 20%.[22] The emergence of tenancy had a profound impact on working-class life, requiring a reordering of familial work patterns to be successful. In extractive work, men labored in gangs away from their homes for wages, while women and children tended garden plots and produced household goods. Deforestation and then the cotton boom led entire families to plant, chop, and pick the crop. Between 1900 and 1910, the Bootheel laborers gradually and unhappily moved into agricultural work.

By 1905, the transition from households supported by wage-earning males to familial inclusive labor was well underway. The stark contrast between the propertied and the property-less that began to emerge in the Bootheel, predicated on imposed reclamation districts, inequitable tax structures, and government favors to corporate interests, catalyzed working-class mobilization. The leading voice against the capitalist interests was the *Scott County Kicker*, edited by Phil Hafner. Hafner had been a Democrat turned political independent bent on criticizing local government corruption and brutal Bootheel land policy. During 1906, however, Hafner slowly began formulating a deeper analysis of the overweening power of the landholders and the institutionalization of that power in the drainage projects.[23] That formulation called for a political challenge to the old party system. "I am tired of choosing between the lesser of two evils," Hafner declared prior to the 1906 election, and "I shall vote the ticket that comes nearest representing my ideas of government." Only by making a "bold stand against the organized corruption of both old parties," he continued, would the day of deliverance be hastened.[24]

As drainage operations picked up steam through 1906 and into 1907, Hafner drew

---

[20]Irvin Wyllie, "Race and Class Conflict on Missouri's Cotton Frontier", *Journal of Southern History* 20 (1954): 185.

[21]This approach was known as "timber mining" and occurred elsewhere quite commonly, especially in Appalachia. For comparison, see Ronald L. Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[22]Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 208–209.

[23]The origins of Hafner's conversion to socialism are unclear. His obituary notes that during an extended disagreement with the Democratic Party and press Hafner "read and studied the theories of Socialism and realizing the need of such education among the masses founded the Scott County Kicker." *Scott County Banner* (Morley, MO), 22 February 1917.

[24]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 3 November 1906.

closer to publicly supporting the Socialist Party. “I am not a member of the Socialist or any other party,” Hafner wrote in early 1907, but “I am carefully studying and watching, and the Socialists are the only ones who have any sane plan of operations.”[25] Fed up with elite control of Bootheel economics and politics, the national economic panic of 1907 pushed Hafner into the socialist camp.[26] Once in the party, Hafner forcefully applied his understanding of the Bootheel class structure and its effects on working-class families, aligning the *Kicker* with a militant working-class stance. Without socialism, he warned late in 1907, laborers “are doomed to wage slavery … and what better chance have your children?”[27]

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT EMERGES, 1907–1912

Between 1908 and 1912, Socialist organizations strengthened their presence in the Bootheel, mobilizing a steadily rising electoral base around a network of organizations and events designed to appeal to the Bootheel working class. How and why did socialism emerge so powerfully in the Bootheel? Local leaders, especially newspaper editors, successfully domesticated socialist ideology and organization. The party made a concerted effort to adapt its message to established Bootheel social forms, such as barbeques, picnics, and dances, deeply enmeshing itself within Bootheel working-class culture. Furthermore, socialist organizers and agitators appropriated an evangelical Protestant idiom that gave the movement something akin to a spiritual mandate, paralleling the rise of working-class Pentecostal revivalism. Moreover, religious excitement pervaded socialist mass meetings, literally transforming the movement into a spiritual and political revival. By 1912, socialist voters were turning out in droves throughout the Bootheel, yet a subtle shift was also underway as the locus of party power shifted to the tumultuous, burgeoning cotton lands of Dunklin County.

With the *Kicker* leading the mobilization for the 1908 election campaign, the socialist presence in the Bootheel grew dramatically. Between 1904 and 1908, the socialist vote in Scott County rose from 33 to 629, or 16% of all votes in the county. Hafner’s role was key. After he hoisted the red banner, the socialist vote in Scott County more than doubled the turnout of any other county.[28] In 1910, the socialists of Scott County polled 939 votes, or 24% of all votes cast in Scott County. The surging socialist movement in Scott led the growth in party strength Bootheel-wide. Whereas the socialist vote had comprised 5.5% of all Bootheel votes in 1908, in 1910 it commanded 8.5%. The Bootheel socialist portion of the state-wide party vote also increased, from 9% to 10.7%.

Socialist agitators, led initially by Hafner, molded party rhetoric to fit the economic, social, and cultural conditions of the Bootheel. Alongside a critique of local politics and

[25] *Kicker* (Benton, MO), 2 February 1907.

[26] The benefits of collectivization were best demonstrated, Hafner pointed out in an ironic flourish, by the ring of landlords running the Little River drainage project. Illustrating this point, he reported that a “Socialist gathering met for the purpose of organizing so as to effectively cooperate in the digging of a big drainage ditch.” Of course only large landholders attended the meeting. But observers should not mention collective effort when discussing the Little River operation, Hafner quipped, because “the landlords would get mad if you called them Socialists.” *Kicker* (Benton, MO), 11 January 1908.

[27] *Kicker* (Benton, MO), 10 October 1907.

[28] In the same time span, socialist voting strength increased from 2% to 5.5% of all votes cast in the seven Bootheel counties. The socialists ran no state or local candidates in 1906. *State of Missouri, Official Manual, 1905–06* (Jefferson City: Hugh Stephens Printing Co., 1906), 442–443; *1909–10*, 673–720.

land policy, the Scott County socialists pointedly addressed the situation of the tenant farmer and called for electoral demonstration and political change.[29] J. W. Adams, a socialist candidate in Scott County, wondered rhetorically whether Bootheel tenants felt satisfied with their current socio-economic state. "If you are," he continued, "take your medicine, look pleased and say it is good. But if not satisfied, hunt the remedy."[30] A correspondent recalled how he had voted Democrat his whole life, "but times get worse and worse." For him, the socialist vote represented the only alternative.[31] If the Bootheel working class would give socialism an opportunity, Hafner argued, "the landlord … who does no useful work, and who now sits in his comfortable home … might have to hunt up a pick and shovel and apply for a job." "Socialism," Hafner added, "is to eliminate rent, interest and profit."[32] Hafner also believed that socialism suffered politically from working-class fear. "There are hundreds of tenant farmers and wage earners who refuse to join a Socialist local because they are afraid of the landlord or boss," he wrote. Challenging laborers to stand up for themselves, Hafner implored the working class to "come out in the open and defy your landlords and bosses."[33] By 1910, large numbers of laborers began to do just that.

Central to public defiance, and to socialist organization and mobilization in general, was the party's use of mass meetings, social gatherings, and a public display of working-class vitality and power. Other than the party press, mass meetings offered the main medium for socialists to use in spreading their message to large groups. They ranged from party local meetings, debates, and barbeques, to speeches by such national figures as Kate Richards O'Hare and Eugene V. Debs. The press promoted such meetings and usually carried reports on the success of events as they occurred. "It was a great time the people had at Blodgett last Saturday at the picnic given by the Socialists," the *Kicker* enthused, "a tremendous crowd had gathered, variously estimated at from 1500 to 2000 people … the barbequed meat was fine."[34] Such reports heightened the anticipation of future events and helped reassure individuals about the nature of the Socialist Party. Whether or not the content of the meeting converted many to socialism depended on the quality of the message presented.

Socialist meetings and speakers quickly gained a reputation for their scathing attacks on economic conditions and the old parties. "The Socialist speakers are the only ones that can draw a crowd," one correspondent told the *Kicker*.[35] Another gushed that one speaker in particular, J. K. Manion, delivered "sledge hammer blows with such precision and they never fail of good results."[36] While the Democratic press routinely accused the socialists of atheism, free love, and social leveling among different classes and races, the major party avoided direct debate. The Socialist "[P]arty is making open challenges to both the older parties," the *Kicker* exulted, "but they won't 'toe the mark.' "[37] Undaunted, and feared by Democrats and Republicans, Bootheel socialists

[29]Tenancy rates in Scott County rose from 55% in 1900 to 61% in 1910. *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, Report on Agriculture, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 926.

[30]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 2 April 1910.

[31]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 22 February 1908.

[32]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 8 February 1908.

[33]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 3 December 1910.

[34]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 4 September 1909.

[35]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 22 October 1910.

[36]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 8 August 1908.

[37]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 10 September 1910.

mustered support from the working class for their attacks on local economic conditions and their defiant posturing in public forums.

Despite Hafner's efforts in Scott County, socialist strength in the Bootheel had shifted to Dunklin County by 1912. In that year, the Scott County socialist vote dropped to 649, or just above the 1908 totals, primarily because economic conditions for the Scott County working class had improved.[38] To the south, on the other hand, economic conditions steadily worsened, notably in Dunklin County, where party success at the polls in 1912 reached 1001 votes from 307 in 1910.[39] By 1910, Dunklin County had almost completed a transformation from lumber to cotton production and had become the leading cotton-producing county in the state.[40] As lumber mills closed, increasing numbers of tenants took to the fields, bringing about more acute threats and obstacles for the Bootheel working class.[41] Sarcastically describing social relations between tenants and landlords, Thad Snow recalled how he and other landlords "enjoyed a ... position of overlordship that was mildly intoxicating." "It is nice," he continued, "to have employees and to direct their work, but it is much nicer to have servants."[42] Responding to the working-class crisis wrought by this economic transformation and building upon the organizational foundation laid by the Scott County socialists, the Dunklin movement experienced dramatic success at the polls, but the forces they had mobilized proved difficult to tame.

SOCIALISM STRUGGLES FOR POWER, 1912–1914

As Socialist strength shifted to the new cotton-producing counties, the Bootheel movement entered a new era. Between 1912 and 1914, the Dunklin socialist vote reached 20% and 25% in the county, eclipsing the Republican Party, and in 1913, the movement's most militant paper, the Kennett *Justice*, was founded by John Scott. One indicator of this new era was that the challenge of making the party's presence permanent pushed its leaders ever closer to local values and culture. In this move for political ascendancy, however, party leaders increasingly focused their rhetoric on the intensifying trials and tribulations experienced by working-class families in the grip of an ever more vicious tenant farming economic system, often losing sight of the traditional political arena in which they operated. Rather than directly critique political opponents, as Hafner and the Scott socialists had done so successfully, the movement militantly elaborated themes of lost manhood, republican maternalism, retributive Christianity, racism, and ultimately, as electoral success began to peak, the implementation of change through direct violent action. So effectively did the party mobilize and give voice to these working-class concerns, that it presented a public posture similar to

[38]Between 1910 and 1915, tenancy rates in Scott, which was not geographically suitable for widespread cotton production, began to drop, reaching levels comparable to those prior to 1900. *Official Manual, 1911–1912*, 736–738; *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Report on Agriculture, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1923), 587.

[39]*Official Manual, 1911–12*, 736–781; *1913–14*, 755–756.

[40]Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 181.

[41]"The mills at Deering are to shut down soon, the mills at Truman are laying off hundreds of men," Dunklin socialists observed, "and smaller mills everywhere are running part of the time or closing entirely." Dunklin socialists frequently looked to such mill closings as a root cause of the evils associated with tenant farming. *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 21 August 1914.

[42]Snow, *From Missouri*, 155.

that of the Night Riders, making itself vulnerable to a political attack that undermined socialist electoral support.

Dunklin County socialists argued that capitalism was incompatible with true Christianity; the major denominations harbored exploitative landlords and provided superficial moral justification for capitalist exploitation. "A Baptist preacher, a landowner, a Christian (?) landlord," Scott reported, "uses the courts here in Kennett to help him drive poor tenants off his land." "How," he asked, "can he throw his brother out of the shack he calls his home and make him a wanderer on the face of the earth?" For Dunklin socialists, a landlord could not be a Christian, "preacher or no preacher."[43] In its claim that the mainstream denominations no longer practiced true Christianity, Dunklin socialist rhetoric closely paralleled that of breakaway Pentecostal and Holiness movements.[44]

Dunklin socialists fused public meetings with the atmosphere of a tent revival and coupled socialistic and religious messages. *Justice* frequently announced speakers who "will lecture on Socialism, especially from the biblical standpoint." Further describing the speaker's credentials, the paper added that "he has preached the gospel of Christianity and in preaching Socialism he will surely make true, practical Christianity better understood by the laboring people."[45] The Bootheel socialists, then, made a conscious effort to couch their message in religious terms that potential constituents could grasp. *Justice* editors retold one story of a lonely widow who "said that the Bible and *Justice* were the best things she ever read and that she kept them together on the table where all could see and read them. This linking our little paper with the foundation book of Christianity was the best argument for Socialism we have heard for a long, long time."[46]

---

[43]*Justice* (Kennett, MO), 23 January 1914. In further criticism of the established churches, Scott reported that a preacher had taken a bucket of blackberries from an elderly woman who had picked them on his land and then told her to "go her way and sin no more." *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 18 September 1914.

[44]The Pentecostal movement arose in rural Kansas and Tennessee as a response to insecurities and physical dislocation caused by chaotic and rapid industrialization. Moreover, these Holiness sects were populated by members of the working class, who felt mainstream religion, patronized by an expanding urban middle class, no longer offered them any spiritual sustenance. Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 7–9, 223–240; Nils Bloch-Hoell, *The Pentecostal Movement: Its Origin, Development, and Distinctive Character* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964), 10–20; Mickey Crews, *The Church of God: A Social History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 2–16; Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), 98–110, 137–138. Additionally, during the 1890s and 1900s, mainstream denominations, especially in the industrializing South, praised and blessed capital expansion, rendering "unto Caesar what Caesar claimed." Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 173. For members of the working class victimized by industrialization, however, their old religious ties became increasingly meaningless. Crews, *Church of God*, 11–16. No longer willing to share churches with their social and economic betters, many working folk attempted to re-establish the primacy of the Bible, especially Old Testament "fire and brimstone" theology, in an effort to "substitute religious status for social status; transmute poverty into a symptom of grace." Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, 137–138. But, as Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, these sects were "not merely an expression of institutionalized dissent, but a flexible form of popular organization for all purposes, including that of agitation on practical matters." Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1959), 146–147.

[45]*Justice* (Gibson, MO), 1 May 1914. After Scott was physically assaulted on the streets of Kennett, *Justice* offices were moved to nearby Gibson in April 1914. Scott believed "the Socialists of the county acted wisely in placing their artillery, the Justice plant, just north of Kennett, rather than in the citadel of Dunklin county capitalism itself." *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 24 April 1914.

[46]*Justice* (Kennett, MO), 16 January 1914.

Direct connections between socialism and Pentecostalism in southeast Missouri are difficult to find, though Pentecostal churches were present in Dunklin by 1911.[47] Evidence does, however, point to cross-fertilization between the two movements. "Ready Red," a *Justice* correspondent, reported a sermon given by a Reverend King at a Pentecostal church and informed all readers who missed the occasion that the message was particularly damning of Dunklin Democrats.[48] Most Pentecostal–Holiness preachers like Reverend King were members of the working class, laboring all week and preaching on Sundays.[49] Editor Scott often told his readers about hearing workingman preachers extol both old-time religion and socialism. One Reverend Friend, Scott reported, preached a sermon that was "revolutionary and dealt with our unnatural, abnormal, and unChristian social conditions." Furthermore, Scott opined, echoing Pentecostal–Holiness critiques, "the church is a power for good or evil; sometimes it is used to hinder progress but … Friend is a power for good … let everyone who loves righteousness and social justice" encourage his radical approach.[50] Holiness preachers, derisively called "Holy Rollers" by the mainstream churches, proved great sources of consternation for Bootheel landlords. One Democratic editor threatened that "the next Holy roller evangelist who drops into their midst will be dropped into the" Mississippi.[51] While the roles of Pentecostal–Holiness sects and the socialist movement should not be totally conflated, both sought to address the spiritual and material needs of Bootheel working-class families dislocated by rapid economic transformation.

Responding to the prevalence of familial-based tenant farm labor, Dunklin socialists emphatically commented on the threats capitalist political economy posed for working-class families, women, and manhood in general. *Justice* writers relentlessly appealed to notions of threatened working-class manhood that ran wild in the chaotic and menacing economic context of the Bootheel. "For my part I'd rather live under a king and give him a tenth," Scott blared, "than to live in hell as we do and give a third to the landlord, half of what's left to the speculator, 60 cents on the dollar to the merchant and then try to feed a family on what's left. It simply can't be did, boys."[52] Under the capitalist system, Scott preached, men could not be men. Only socialism and cooperative effort, Scott argued, could secure a stable family existence. "Why do you starve in a room filled with food? Ever think about it brother?," *Justice* asked. One writer described how "going across a cotton patch the other day we saw a baby lying in the middle of the cotton rows on the ground asleep … the mother was picking cotton." Linking this atrocity with an appeal to Christianity, the writer remarked how "Jesus said of this little one 'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven' and told us to pray, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' " "We wonder if we will find such things in heaven?," he asked.[53] At the core of such appeals was the imminent threat posed to traditional conceptions of manhood: the impossibility of realizing a stable family structure amidst such economic hardship.

---

[47]E. T. Echols, "Pentecostal Revival in Senath," in *Early History of the First Assembly of God Church* (Senath, MO, 1989), 4.

[48]*Justice* (Gibson, MO), 12 June 1914.

[49]Crews, *The Church of God*, 5.

[50]*Justice* (Gibson, MO), 5 June 1914.

[51]Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 221. One defendant at the Night Rider trial was a member of the Pentecostal–Holiness sect, telling a reporter that he was "mighty innocent," and adding, "I'm a minister in the church of God, mister." *Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), 21 January 1916.

[52]*Justice* (Kennett, MO), 16 March 1914.

[53]*Justice* (Gibson, MO), 2 October 1914.

Also integral to this component of Bootheel socialist mobilization was a perceived change in female gender roles. Under capitalism, Scott argued, traditional womanhood for working-class women was a farce. "A woman in Campbell takes her 4-year old and 8 months old babies to the cotton fields with her everyday. There she hoes and scrapes in the dust and heat to earn a scanty living for the sucking babe," a *Justice* correspondent gloomily reported. "But if you kick and protest against such outraged motherhood you're branded as a fool."[54] The gender component of the Bootheel socialists' message did not limit itself to mourning the death of traditional femininity, however. The socialist press also portrayed working-class women as patrons in the struggle. One female correspondent informed *Justice* readers that "we women are tired of all this and should take more interest in politics and urge our husbands to work harder for Socialism and for freedom from rent and the profit system. The women must help for the men are too slow."[55] Even so, *Justice* was careful to reinforce the idea of republican "maternalism." This was most true in its advocacy of the Missouri female suffrage campaign of 1914. Conjuring images of homebound women rearing wholesome sons, *Justice* editors reminded readers that "we are to vote on Woman's Suffrage this fall and the man that votes against it ought to have to do his own housework with cooking and washing too, and raise a gang of boys besides."[56]

The socialist appeal to manhood and womanhood was not only encoded in terms of class, however; it also spoke of threatened sexuality in powerfully racial terms. Race relations in the Bootheel in the 1910s were chaotic and violent.[57] Between 1910 and 1912, a number of white working-class attacks on black laborers prompted landlords and civic elites to request that Governor Herbert Hadley send military help for "protection from the roving mobs over our country who are intimidating the negroes who are picking cotton." This group of assailants, a Caruthersville landlord continued, is "composed of tenants and laborers, who think if the negroes were out of the country they could get better wages for picking cotton and get cheaper rent."[58] As this complaint suggests, the root cause of these disturbances was economic competition. Yet, as we have seen, economic threats aroused an intense fear of collapsing gender norms among the white working class. To intensify matters, whites in the Jim Crow South relentlessly feared that "a new generation of young black males, impatient with restraints, acting on their natural impulses, and giving full vent to their lascivious nature, had targeted white women."[59] In this context, then, the Bootheel's white

---

[54] *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 12 June 1914.

[55] *Justice* (Kennett, MO), 3 April 1914.

[56] *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 17 July 1914.

[57] Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 235–236.

[58] J. S. Gossom to Herbert Hadley, 17 October 1911, Herbert Hadley Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collections, Ellis Library, University of Missouri-Columbia.

[59] Black men, no longer bounded by slavery, the argument went, sought sexual access to the white South's most guarded possession—its women. Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 212–213. As Southern journalist W. J. Cash carefully explained, "[w] hat [white] Southerners felt, therefore, was that any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the [white] Southern woman." William J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 116. A sampling of other works that discuss the sexual component of racism in the Jim Crow South include, Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 231–36; Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 141–44; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Mind that Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine

working class viewed black laborers as direct threats to economic survival and gendered white racial purity.

Black labor was seen not as a potential ally in the class struggle, but as another weapon of economic and familial destruction wielded by the planter elite. In the transition from lumber to agricultural production, Bootheel landlords sought a labor force well-schooled in cotton growing. Arguing that the white labor left behind by the declining lumber industry demanded inflated wages and was not pliant enough for field work, many landlords sent labor recruiters into the South to secure blacks to cultivate the cotton crop.[60] Historically, local custom had maintained geographical barriers in the Bootheel to protect white laborers from slave and later free black labor, the most prominent of which was the "dead-line" forbidding blacks from living or working west of the Little River, which cut between Pemiscot and Dunklin counties. In the rush for industrialized profit, this boundary was ignored and landlords brought thousands of black laborers into Dunklin.[61]

Dunklin socialists capitalized on the racial unrest caused by this disruption in local custom. Not only was the capitalist system threatening manhood and womanhood, *Justice* warned, but it was also well on its way to toppling working-class white supremacy.[62] Since the economic changes threatening white working-class autonomy and traditional gender norms also threatened white working-class racial supremacy, Dunklin socialists addressed economic issues in racialized terms. Racial unrest and the socialist movement came to maturity at the same time in southeast Missouri; economic discontent and racial conflict went hand in hand. If the Dunklin socialists hoped to attract the thousands of white tenant farmers and industrial laborers, they had to fashion a message suitable to them, and that frequently involved the use of racist rhetoric.

The racial component of the Bootheel socialist message centered on the idea that working-class whites were being turned into "wage slaves." David Roediger has suggested that the term "wage slave" was used almost purely as metaphor, with little connection to the actual practice of slavery.[63] While this may be true in a semantic sense, in the face of economic hardship, flagging independence of white labor, and the increased presence of black labor, socialist use of the idiom of slavery carried tremendous impact for working-class whites in southeast Missouri. *Justice* routinely compared

---

Footnote 59 continued

Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review, 1983), 334–35; Lawrence J. Friedman, *The White Savages: Racial Fantasies in the Postbellum South* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 119–49.

[60]H. R. Post to Hadley, 23 November 1911, Hadley Collection. Moreover, white Bootheel tenants received only one-year contracts for work, placing their precarious station closer to black tenants than their white counterparts in the Deep South. Thelen, *Paths of Resistance*, 92.

[61]Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri," 240; Thelen, *Paths of Resistance*, 92–93.

[62]In this respect, the socialist movement in southeast Missouri differed greatly from its counterparts elsewhere in the South. The socialist parties of Tennessee, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Texas all advocated black economic and political equality. Certainly, their rhetoric was often laced with racism. As Philip Foner has pointed out, Southern socialists supported the economic and political equality of blacks but not an agenda of social equality. Although Foner's work needs revision, he argues that intense race baiting by the Democratic Party in the Jim Crow South prevented any socialist move toward inter-racial organizing. Philip Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 221–225.

[63]David Roediger, " 'Labor in White Skin': Race and Working Class History," in Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (New York: Verso, 1994), 31.

the plight of white tenant farmers and laborers to a romanticized notion of chattel slavery. "As a rule the terms offered the wage-slave are less desirable that the terms offered the chattel slave," the *Kicker* observed. "The black slave was sure of his feed, and comfortably housed … in case of sickness he got the best medical attention."[64] The wage slave occupied a worse position. "Several slaves hunting masters around here," *Justice* continued, "but they are not so fortunate as the niggers were who always had a master and grub furnished them."[65] The rhetoric of wage slavery certainly challenged white labor's assumptions about its place in society. At the core of this rhetoric, however, was the notion that the capitalist system stripped working-class white men of their manhood and dignity. "Race suicide," *Justice* flared, "is a necessity under capitalism for many families."[66] Though socialist use of wage slave rhetoric carried a gravity of its own—evidenced by its use in racially homogeneous industries of the North—it carried more weight in the racially charged Bootheel. "It is reported that Massa Frank Shelton will put all Socialists off his 2700 acres of land in Arkansas," *Justice* lamented. But "where will Massa Frank put all of those white niggers?"[67]

Understanding the growing anger of white laborers, the socialists moved beyond the rhetoric of wage slavery and offered a racist explanation for the pitiful state of the white tenant laborer. Pinpointing the threat black labor posed to white employment, Scott reported that in some fields "only negroes … were employed … Americans could not get work at all only these flatheads."[68] Bootheel socialists argued that the capitalist system lowered white workingmen to the social level of the blacks brought in to compete with them. This rhetoric struck a sensitive chord with the white working class; the race-baiting tactics of the old party press to some extent mandated it. "Socialism is a system of social equality," the Campbell *Citizen* warned. "It follows that Socialism is a system of 'nigger equality,' " as well. Therefore, why support Socialism? So "your daughter can arm a colored gentlemen (?) to church … or on the dark of the moon at night"?[69] Reacting, Dunklin socialists made sure to show they did not support racial equality, especially not the social variety.

Bootheel socialist racism appeared most forcefully in discussions of female suffrage. Black males were constantly portrayed as being given superior status to white women. "The Reverend Carpenter preached a while from the Bible last Sunday night and then declared that the Socialists were coming into power but that then we would have nigger equality," *Justice* reported. But "the poor fellow didn't even know that Socialists are

---

[64]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 10 August 1910. To reinforce the comparison, *Justice* reprinted a portion of South Carolina Senator James Hammond's 1858 "mudsill speech," which compared chattel slavery to the "slavery" of northern wage labor. Our slaves are hired for life, Hammond pointed out, while yours are hired by day. Furthermore, he continued, "your slaves are white, of your own race, you are brothers in blood." *Justice* (Kennett, MO), 19 March 1914. For a discussion of the pro-slavery argument and concepts of white political unity, or *herrenvolk* democracy, as expounded by such antebellum Southern ideologues as Hammond, John C. Calhoun, and George Fitzhugh, see Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: 1987), 276, 412; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 66–67; Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998), 49–53. For a cogent analysis of antebellum northern white working-class sentiments on slavery, see Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso Press, 1999), 65–92.

[65]*Justice* (Kennett, MO), 9 January 1914.

[66]*Justice* (Kennett, MO), 23 January 1914.

[67]*Justice* (Gibson, MO), 7 August 1914.

[68]*Justice* (Kennett, MO), 23 January 1914.

[69]*Citizen* (Campbell, MO), 19 December 1913.

trying to make women equal to niggers by giving them the right to vote." Obviously, the paper concluded, "Democrats and Republicans like niggers better than their wives and mothers."[70] White working-class women were also given a voice on this matter in the socialist press. "We women are tired of being put beneath the negro who can stagger up to the polls and vote," one female correspondent wrote, "while we have to go to the fields and drag a pick sack and use a cross-cut saw in the woods."[71] To some extent, Bootheel socialists used such appeals to turn the race-baiting tactic on the old parties. More important, however, was the receptiveness of the white working class. Had the Bootheel Socialist Party chosen to fight for the rights of the black working class, it likely would have lost white support.[72]

Bootheel socialists also aptly politicized the violent activity common to the area just as they did white racism. In southeast Missouri, one editor observed, "a man who takes a fellowman's life can more easily escape punishment than one who steals a cow or a hog."[73] He was not far off the mark. The area's tenant farmers, lumber workers, and day laborers, as historian Irvin Wyllie commented, "were a rough, hard-working, hard-drinking lot."[74] "They would just take so much abuse," Thad Snow recalled, "then they would sass you back, and perhaps pull a knife or gun."[75] And these hill folk were prone to settle their disputes with force. Crime in the Bootheel was difficult to report, Hafner noted, because it "is so common that it ceases to be news."[76] Pemiscot County in 1911, for example, experienced "three murders in a ten day period in January, two in two days in March, and two more within ten days in September."[77] More often than not, drunkenness played a part in the murder cases. "The fair this week started off fine," *Justice* sarcastically commented, "only one man killed so far. It is said that whiskey and women caused the trouble."[78] As has already been noted, racially motivated violence was also commonplace. Between 1902 and 1911 nine blacks were lynched in the Bootheel.[79] As these examples demonstrate, the Night Riding incident of 1915 was not an aberration. Bootheel residents exhibited a tendency to resort to drastic, often deadly measures in order to settle disputes or effect change, rather than work within established structures of power. As a result, law enforcement and political channels received limited respect.

[70]*Justice* (Kennett, MO), 23 January 1914.

[71]*Justice* (Kennett, MO), 9 January 1914.

[72]Working within the purview of the white working class, the Bootheel socialist press did not miss an opportunity to endorse spreading racially motivated violence in the early 1910s. The Springfield, Illinois, race riot of 1908 "was not a 'race-riot' at all," one socialist argued. After a black man allegedly attacked a white woman and the law was ineffective in taking action, his argument continued, the whites of Springfield lost patience. They "had just tired of the inactivity of their officials who were playing politics to secure the negro vote." *Kicker* (Benton, MO), 22 August 1908.

[73]*Pemiscot Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), 5 October 1911, in Wyllie, "Race and Class Conflict," 185–186.

[74]Wyllie, "Race and Class Conflict," 185.

[75]Snow, *From Missouri*, 154.

[76]*Kicker* (Benton, MO), 28 August 1908. A cursory examination of Scott County circuit court proceedings reveals just how pervasive lawlessness in the Bootheel could be. In a two-month period, the courts dealt with two cases of manslaughter, six felonious assaults, two robberies, three charges of carrying pistols, and one each of malicious trespass, dynamiting, gambling, carrying concealed weapons, murder, and disturbing religious worship. *Kicker* (Benton, MO), 24 October 1907; 2 November 1908.

[77]Wyllie, "Race and Class Conflict," 185.

[78]*Justice* (Gibson, MO), 9 October 1914.

[79]National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1918* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1919; Negro Universities Press, 1969), 81–82.

Bootheel socialists continually advocated the use of peaceful means for the acquisition of power, yet, at the same time, subtle and not so subtle allusions to violence permeated their appeals to white workers. "We hear around town that some people are becoming desperate, men wanting work and their families hungry," yet everywhere there is wealth and plenty, *Justice* angrily reported. "How long do you who hold our lives in your hands expect us to stand by and see the idle machines and land, and the wealth created by our toil piled up on every side? Your high sheriff, your laws, your militia don't scare a hungry man much," Scott continued, and "we will not starve in sight of filled stores in Kennett."[80] Bootheel socialists argued that if violence occurred, it would be the fault of the capitalist oppressors. "Now we Socialists are peaceful people … but if we are persecuted … we will do exactly what every other downtrodden class has done—revolt and fight." Furthermore, "if you purposely bring on trouble then the blood will be upon your own heads."[81] After all, Scott reasoned, "jails, prisons, laws, and constitutions are made chiefly to prevent those who have little from helping themselves from the supply they have created of those who have too much."[82] So, he seemed to conclude, there was no use obeying those structures of power.

Dunklin socialists also linked appeals to violence and lawlessness with radical Christianity and threats to manhood. "If economic conditions don't soon change," Scott warned, the people "will stampede the storage houses and take back part of the product of their toil, robbed from them by rich speculators." Moreover, he continued, "Jesus will not find fault with them for doing this, for He plucked the ears of corn on the Sabbath which was against the man made laws of that time."[83] One tenant told Scott that "God made the land for all, not for the few to own. And if they fire us off the land for thinking this way why a little of Christ's example would be good for the fellows who do the firing." Tenants should expel their landlords with force, he argued, just as Christ did with the moneylenders in the temple. Christ "wasn't a night rider but he did it openly," this man reasoned, and he did it as an example for the downtrodden to emulate.[84] Since tenant farming was the socialists' prime economic target, they argued that landlordism violated man's divine right to the land. Also, by fusing Old Testament justice through violent retribution with a well-known Christian parable, the Socialists hinted that if politics did not work in easing the plight of the tenant, then violence surely could. Threats to traditional notions of manhood also became cause for militant uprising. "If work could not be obtained," J. W. Campbell, a socialist speaker, suggested, "then they [working-class men] should not sit around and see their babies starve but to organize, demand, and if necessary take what was needed to sustain life." In another example, "one poor Dunklin slave says he just has $1.30 in cash, a wife, six children and a revolver," *Justice* lamented. "He further says that he has got to have a job or starve them all." Condoning the use of violence, Scott suggested "he may have to use the revolver to feed the family."[85] The Dunklin socialists succeeded in politicizing issues of racism, evangelical religion, manhood, public presence, and allusions to violence because all were deeply enmeshed in Bootheel working-class life.

[80] *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 21 August 1914.
[81] *Justice* (Kennett, MO), 9 January 1914.
[82] *Justice* (Kennett, MO), 9 January 1914.
[83] *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 11 September 1914.
[84] *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 6 May 1914.
[85] *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 31 July 1914.

EPILOGUE: INTO THE WILDERNESS, 1916

During the Night Rider trial, Democratic editors quickly pointed out to readers that the defendants' demands differed little from those espoused during the previous 10 years by the Socialist Party. The leaders of the Night Riders, declared the Sikeston *Standard*, "were Scott County Socialists who were followers of the teachings" of Phil Hafner, who "is held in contempt by decent men of all respectable parties for his rabid preachings and should be indicted along with the balance of the band for he is the real instigator of their crimes."[86] Democrats closer to Gideon assigned blame to John Scott and his fellow agitators at *Justice*. "This night rider business," the editor of the Campbell *Citizen* concluded, "is the natural result of the preachings of John G. Scott, W. W. McAllister and J. W. Campbell, the imported socialist speakers who infested this country." "It was this man Scott," the *Citizen*'s editor argued, "who proposed, advised and insisted on the tenant farmers and farm laborers to organize so as to force exactly what the night riders are demanding." The socialists' "nihilistic doctrines took root in the minds of many poor tenant farmers and laborers," he reminded his readers, "and was beginning to bear fruit when these night riders decided to threaten merchants, manufactures, land owners, and bankers with bodily harm."[87]

To anyone in the Bootheel who had followed the development of the socialist movement, the Democratic allegations would seem reasonable. By 1914, Bootheel socialists offered a damning critique of the cotton economy and its effect on working-class families. Coupled with outright racism and allusions to violent action, socialist rhetoric was almost indistinguishable from that of the Night Riders. It did not help matters that the socialist press tacitly condoned the Night Riding episodes. Writing about recent outbreaks of Night Riding in western Kentucky, *Justice* recalled that similar " 'trouble' there some years ago benefited the farmers by securing a better price for their tobacco, and even in Dunklin a night riders 'scare' reduced the rents." Coyly suggesting that some new outbreaks of Night Riding might be a good idea, Scott pointed out how the end effect "was lots of 'trouble' for the landlords."[88] Of course, in little over a year Night Riding would explode in the Bootheel.

Since the socialists' message and goals were so similar to those of the Night Riders, the public outcry and legal clampdown that led to the conviction of the vigilantes also engulfed the Socialist Party. Between the elections of 1914 and 1916, with the Night Riding conflagration flaring in 1915, the Bootheel socialist vote dropped by 44%, from 2337 votes to 1306. The largest drop occurred in Dunklin County, home of the party's strongest county organization and the site of the Night Riding outbreak, where the party lost 65% of its 1914 vote, dropping from 1031 ballots to 375.[89] Clearly, public backlash against the Night Riders crippled the Socialist Party. As it turned out, much to Scott's and the other party members' dismay, the Night Riders caused more trouble for the socialist movement than they did for the landlords.

But why was the Bootheel socialist movement so susceptible to association with the Night Riders? Why did the party suffer so thoroughly at the polls from a charge that, on its face, appears to be little more than the work of politically opportunist editors? As

[86] *Standard* (Sikeston, MO), 24 December 1915.

[87] *Citizen* (Campbell, MO), 17 December 1915

[88] *Justice* (Gibson, MO), 19 June 1914. For the thousands of white laborers who moved into the Bootheel from the Black Patch of western Kentucky and Tennessee, where large-scale Night Riding was commonplace, these hints must have been particularly resonant. Waldrep, *Night Riders*, 16–17.

[89] *Official Manual, 1915–16*, 484–486; *1917–18*, 431–456.

the movement's strength shifted to the cotton-producing counties, the fact was that the party aligned itself ever closer to working-class fears and anxieties, using a language that superseded the traditionally political. Yet, this trend of shaping party rhetoric to fit local cultures and concerns formed the bedrock of the entire Bootheel socialist movement. Scott County socialists employed it by airing their critique of local politics and economic structures in public forums of working-class dissent. Scott and the Dunklin socialists simply built on this organizational structure, eventually, as economic conditions worsened, appealing to racism, retributive Christianity, challenged notions of manhood and womanhood, and violence. Unfortunately, the organizational records of the Bootheel Socialist Party are no longer extant. It is impossible to determine whether or not the Night Riders were actually socialists. One is inclined to conclude that the vigilantes must have had some connection to the socialist movement, but it is not terribly relevant. To most people in the Bootheel in 1915 it must have seemed the Night Riders were directly inspired by socialist agitation. For the most part, that was enough to seal the movement's fate.

Historians have consistently demonstrated, largely in response to Daniel Bell's condemnation of the party as being in the world but not of it, that American socialism was successful because its message was adaptable to so many diverse localities, cultures, and folkways. From the urban Jewish enclaves of New York to the farmlands of central and east Texas, the Socialist Party successfully built electoral strength precisely because it was able to bend the socialist message to fit and speak to various cultural mindsets.[90] Nowhere has this been shown more convincingly than in the work of James Green and Jim Bissett. In Bissett's study of Oklahoma socialists, he admits that the adaptability of the party message led some organizations into positions divergent from one another and from orthodox Marxism. But, he argues, "their divergence was not the result of inherent character flaws that made them poor Marxists ... Rather, socialists in Oklahoma were simply demonstrating their proficiency at adapting the socialist message into a form consistent with" local life.[91] Integrating Marxism with the traditions of evangelical Protestantism and Jeffersonian republicanism, he continues, the Oklahoma socialists consciously framed their message "in cultural and ideological terms that were authentically American," and most importantly, easily intelligible to rural Oklahomans. This ability, he concludes, explained the socialists' amazing electoral success.[92] Similarly, in his discussion of southwestern socialism, James Green has shown that socialist electoral success in states like Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and Louisiana "depended largely on [the party's] ability to organize methodically around pressing issues in the 'real world' of regional and local politics."[93] Furthermore, Green suggests that the southwestern organizations were more than mere political bodies. The socialist movement, he argues, also connected itself culturally and spiritually with the rural working classes. "As a revivalistic crusade," Green writes, "it created a kind of religious

---

[90]Urban socialist movements also mobilized around local and ethnic cultures. For a look at socialist organization at the local level in New York, see Charles Leinenweber, "Socialists in the Streets: The New York City Socialist Party in Working-Class Neighborhoods, 1908–1918," *Science and Society* 4 (1977): 152–171. For a look at the machine politics of Milwaukee socialists, see Sally Miller, "Milwaukee: Of Ethnicity and Labor," in *Socialism and the Cities,* ed. Bruce M. Stave (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975), 41–71.

[91]Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), xv.

[92]Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism*, 186.

[93]James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), xiv.

enthusiasm … ingeniously combining the demand for immediate change with the ultimate promise of a cooperative society."[94]

While these historiographical advances over Bell's constricted account have led to a valuable reconceptualization of American socialism, they offer a misleading celebration of the party's ability to enmesh itself with particular cultures. When viewed against the grain of the existing historiography, the Bootheel socialist movement presents an interesting corrective to the positive, laudatory portrayal of socialist organization presented by Green, Bissett, and others. In many ways the Bootheel socialist movement resembled movements elsewhere. Bootheel socialists sought the support of a rural working class, comprised mostly of tenant farmers and lumber workers, just as other rural socialist organizations did. The Bootheel movement also employed many of the mobilization techniques outlined by Green and Bissett, tailoring its discourse and vision of the future to fit the cultural orientation of that rural working class. Yet, Green offers no discussion of the Bootheel movement within his compendious account of southwestern socialism.[95] More to the point, he dispenses with Bootheel socialism in a footnote, casually stating that the "party was fairly strong in the area." Furthermore, Green confidently characterizes the Night Riders as "frustrated Democrats who turned to 'anarchistic' violence and murder."[96]

Green's dismissal of the Bootheel movement underscores a weakness in his characterization of the socialist movement, one that is propagated through Bissett's work. A laudatory portrayal of the party's mobilization and rhetorical techniques does not conceptually allow for Bootheel socialism. The preceding analysis demonstrates not only how the Bootheel movement molded itself to fit the cultural specifics of southeast Missouri, but also how area economic changes helped shape the socialist message over time and how this process led the movement deep into a cultural wilderness that culminated in appeals to white manhood, racism, and vigilante violence.[97]

---

[94]Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, xx–xi.

[95]Few scholars have treated Bootheel socialism and none has looked at the movement's connection with the Night Riders. The most thorough account of Bootheel socialism prior to my work has been offered in Leon P. Ogilvie, "Populism and Socialism in Southeast Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review* 65 (1971): 159–183. Ogilvie offers little by way of analysis, arguing that the importance of Bootheel socialism has been "greatly exaggerated." A briefer description of the movement can be found in Thelen, *Paths of Resistance*, 92–99.

[96]Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 337–338, especially note 48.

[97]Significant comparisons can be drawn between the Bootheel socialist movement and late nineteenth-century labor movements in the West. A socialist-led Workingmen's Party rally in San Francisco in 1877 was quickly taken over by members of the local anti-coolie club. Fueled by rhetoric of white supremacy and threatened economic status, anti-Chinese violence raged for two days following the rally, leaving several Chinese workers dead and a great deal of property destroyed. Socialist organizers in California were consistently pushed aside and outdone by anti-Chinese workmen's groups. In most instances, the socialists fell into line. At Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885, white coalminers, affiliated loosely with the Knights of Labor, attacked Chinese workers, killing 28. The 16 whites arrested were later released by a grand jury without indictment. As this example suggests, unlike working-class racists in the Bootheel, anti-Chinese organizations in the West generally operated with the sanction of all elements of white society. The Committee of Vigilance formed to investigate the disturbance in San Francisco showed sympathy for white workers, asking how long white workers would remain peaceful when the Chinese undercut them and the government did nothing to stem the tide of immigration. Of course, working-class agitation against the Chinese was ultimately successful, helping secure passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. For more on anti-Chinese belief and activity among the Western working-class and the examples shown above, see Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), especially 114–120 and 201–211; Richard E. Lingenfelter, *The Hardrock Miners: A History of Mining Labor Movement in the American West, 1863–1893* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

The Night Riding incidents that emerged out of Bootheel working-class mobilization destroyed the Socialist Party's standing as an electoral political entity. After the marked dip in electoral strength in 1916, the Bootheel party continued to reel. Further constrained by the Sedition Act 1917 and war preparedness campaigns, Dunklin socialists mustered only 64 votes in 1918. Meanwhile, John Scott scrapped *Justice* and enrolled at the University of Missouri-Columbia, receiving a master's degree in 1921, writing his thesis on unionization in the teaching profession.[98] Also in 1918, Scott County, the epicenter of the movement, produced only 23 socialist votes.[99] Hafner's death and pressure from the federal government forced the *Kicker* to stop publication in 1917. With the more hostile political atmosphere during World War I and the socialist press dismantled, the party was unable to overcome associations with the Night Riders.[100]

All 67 men accused of Night Riding were convicted. Only 18, however, were required to serve their sentences, which ranged from two to five years. The rest were immediately paroled on good behavior. Shortly after handing down the verdict, the presiding judge addressed the visibly relieved men. "You are free to go home and live the lives of good citizens, the slate is wiped clean," he declared. "Hereafter," the judge continued, "when you have a grievance against your employers, go to them and talk it over. Remember that the laws of this country are too great to be overthrown by any band of men. We have a law that is based on the laws of the Bible, and under our Constitution, any citizen, rich or poor, can come into court and get justice."[101]

With that, the convicted Night Riders returned to their wives, their children, their shanties, and their tenant plots. Some set out for St Louis or Chicago, continuing their search for a better life, and many would be off to Europe, some never to return. Most, however, stayed in the Bootheel chopping cotton, paying rent, and trying to send their children to school. Not until 1939 was life in the Bootheel again disrupted by mass working-class mobilization. But this time, black sharecroppers led the way, protesting the hellish Bootheel economy and seeking some justice for the many thousands of working-class folk, black and white, with whose hands and backs it had been built.[102]

---

[98]Ogilvie, "Socialism in Southeast Missouri," 176.

[99]*Official Manual, 1915–16*, 484–486; *1917–18*, 431–456; *1919–20*, 411–412.

[100]Ogilvie, "Socialism in Southeast Missouri," 170. For works treating the repression of socialists as World War I neared, see H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917–18* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1957); James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925* (New York: Random House, 1967), 119–176; Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 262–302; Richard W. Judd, *Socialist Cities: Municipal Politics and the Grass Roots of American Socialism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 164–170.

[101]*Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), 25 January 1916.

[102]On 10 January 1939, over 1000 black and a few white sharecroppers, organized by black preacher Owen Whitfield, encamped peacefully on highways 60 and 61 in the Bootheel to protest the one-year contract and its concomitant annual evictions. The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), wracked by a racial and sectarian split, did not initially support the demonstration. Incidentally, Thad Snow, an earlier commentator on socio-economic conditions in the Bootheel, did support Whitfield. While the roadside strike caught the attention of the national public, the Governor, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and did wrest minor gains for the croppers, it ultimately "did little to alter the farm tenancy system or correct the abuses and injustices of economic servitude." And the socio-economic devastation described above has only worsened throughout the Bootheel and the Delta at large. For more on the Missouri demonstration, see Louis Cantor, *The Missouri Sharecropper Roadside Demonstration of 1939*, 159–163. For more on the STFU, see Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971); Howard Krester, *Revolt among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Covici Friede, 1936). For a scathing and frank discussion of current economic and race relations in the Delta region, see Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998).