Western Expansion and the Rise of Populism

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects: U.S. Government or U.S. History

Time Requirement: 60-minute class period

Objective: Understand the origins, characteristics, and impact of the late nineteenth century Populist movement.

Background:

In the late nineteenth century, southern and western farmers were at the mercy of eastern-operated railroads, banks, and other businesses that charged high prices and fees. Beginning in the 1870s, they began to organize and cooperate in the form of the Granger movement (a granger is a farmer). They attempted to establish their own banks and insurance companies and created cooperatives to market their products in bulk rather than as individuals. They also enacted state laws regulating railroad rates. Unfortunately for them, none of these measures were effective so they began to organize into a national third political party known as the Populists.

Lesson Plan:

Part 1: Warm Up Activity (10 minutes)

Watch the following video on post-Civil War expansion and answer the questions. Then discuss.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=togDUjZ0Utc&ab_channel=NBCNewsLearn

Reflection:

1. How did settlers get land? What did they have to do to keep it?

2. Identify and explain at least three problems facing farmers.

Part 2: Picture Analysis (15 minutes)

Look at and study the Granger picture below. Based on your observations, what do you notice about how the Grangers saw themselves, and how they perceived other workers and professionals? Hint: Look for small details, how people are depicted, what they say, etc.

What students should notice:

- A Jeffersonian view of the farmer as a lone independent operator behind a romantic landscape. He is clean, fit, and sturdy.
- Notice that it says 1776 - 1876.
- The soldier has the blue Union uniform.
- The professionals are well dressed, not authentic like the farmer (notice the General Broker says "I Fleece you all!").
- Nothing can operate without the farmer who feeds them all.

Part 3: Populist Party Emerges (20 minutes)

In 1892, farmers created the Populist (Peoples) Party with a national platform with the following goals:

1. Unlimited coinage of gold and silver (Money was backed up by and convertible into gold. Since gold is a finite resource this kept the money supply limited, hence deflation or lower prices. This hurt farmers because it kept their crop prices low. Coining silver, which is far more abundant than gold, would vastly inflate the money supply and increase the price of the crops they sell.)

2. Popular election of senators (Currently the state legislators, often dominated by corporate interests, selected senators.)

3. A graduated income tax to reduce the tariff (Tariff rates were very high on manufactured goods which raised the prices on goods purchased by farmers. A graduated tax means you pay progressively more as your earnings increase. This would impact the wealthy. If the government could collect money from an income tax it could lower tariff rates.)

4. Public ownership of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones

5. One term limit for the presidency

6. Eight-hour day for workers (non-agricultural)

7. Outlawing of mercenaries, specifically Pinkertons (private armies hired by companies to break labor stoppages, most famously at the Homestead Strike in 1892)

8. All land granted to railroads "in excess of their actual needs," returned to the government (Federal and state governments had granted millions of acres to the railroads during the 1800s. Railroads were the largest landowners in the nation.)

9. Support for Knights of Labor (currently the largest labor union in the nation)

Reflection: Have students work on the following in small groups and then discuss:

1. List what you think are the three most radical or extreme demands and explain your reasoning.

2. How are the Populists attempting to remake American capitalism?

3. Why would farmers call for numbers 6, 7, and 9 since they do not directly benefit them?

4. What do you think about number 5? What are the pros and cons of a one-term presidency?

Part 4: Populists' Legacy (10 minutes)

Explain to students that though the Populists elected some congressmen and governors, they never won the presidency. The merged with the Democrats in 1896. However, some of their agenda eventually became law:

1. The creation of the Federal Reserve in 1913 expanded the money supply.
2. The 17th Amendment mandated the popular election of Senators.
3. The 16th Amendment created the income tax.
4. Railroads, telegraphs, and telephones are now regulated by the federal government.
5. There are many local, state, and federal labor regulations.

Part 5: Review and Check for Understanding (5 minutes)

- Farmers, in the late nineteenth century, were economically struggling.
- They initially tried to organize at the state and local levels, but realized they had to do so nationally, creating the Populist Party.
- The Populists created a radical agenda that attempted to restructure American capitalism.
- Though the Populist party quickly went out of existence, parts of its agenda eventually become law.