

We Would Sit and Build Castles in the Air
Great Plains Settlers, American Visions of Personal
Redemption, and the Ascendancy of Capitalism in the
West

by

Aaron Forbath
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Introduction: Settler Ideologies on America's Great Plains

This project begins and ends with the vision of the American West as a land of independence and individual self-determination.¹ Nothing better captures this part of America's identity than the hopeful settler, following the setting sun west to seek his fortunes or, as some like to say, "to make something of himself." The durability of this image throughout American history speaks to Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, which inscribed this vision of the American West into the nation's psyche. He held that settling the savage West defined a national character—independent, courageous, and persevering.² Turner's thesis invokes a deeply embedded tenet of American social thought—the promise that hard work and virtue will be rewarded with financial success, familial stability, and personal, spiritual fulfillment. This paper grapples with the ideological origins and implications of this promise in American history generally and in the history of the settlement of the Great Plains specifically.

Two central paradoxes lie at the heart of the history of the American West. The first, as illuminated by Alan Trachtenberg in *The Incorporation of America*, is the contradiction between the myth of the West as a utopian garden for independent yeoman and the role of capitalism and industrialization as the defining force of western settlement.³ A second, related paradox is the significance of failure in the history of a frontier that embodied the American promise of redemption. While popular visions of the

¹ Over the course of this paper, the term "American" is used to refer to the people and culture of the United States of America, rather than the continents of North or South America. This is done for rhetorical reasons and to invoke the self-conception of U.S. citizens.

² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1920).

³ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

West promised success, stability, and personal fulfillment for the hard-working individual, for most settlers, this promise never came to fruition. Rather than finding landed independence, wealth, and stability, they found a life of debt, destitution, and insecurity.⁴ This project examines the connections between these two paradoxes. It asks how different systems of belief—Republican agrarianism, capitalism, and the Protestant work ethic—shaped settlers understanding and experience of success and failure. Finally, it considers how capitalism and capitalist ethics absorbed and eventually transcended these other schools of thought.

In order to speak to this American promise of redemption, this project focuses on the life-narratives of three settlers of Nebraska at the end of the nineteenth century, each from distinct social, political, and ideological backgrounds. It uses their letters, journals, essays, and memoirs to piece together a sense of their motivating beliefs and how they understood success and failure in the context of these definitive ideological systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth century—the Protestant work ethic, Republican agrarianism, and capitalist or individualist ethics.

Despite their differing political views and places in society, the self-styled narratives of these individuals reveal some kind of vision of personal redemption rooted in hard work, virtue, and perseverance. For each of these settlers, these visions played a religious-like role in their lives, providing meaning, confidence, and hope to their efforts on the Plains. Specifically, redemption gave them a framework for navigating the

⁴ Recent historians have focused on the environmental history of this moment and demonstrated how the conditions of most Western states could never support the promise these settlers hoped to fulfill. One such historian, Donald Worster, sees the emergence of the Dust Bowl as the result of infeasible promises and unsustainable development: Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

capitalist structures that dominated the nineteenth-century American West. Other historians and storytellers have remarked upon this idea of redemption, but they often frame it in terms of the “heroism” of the men and women “paving the way” for future generations.⁵ More “professional” historians have rejected this trend altogether in favor of a more removed and calculating analysis of settler’s goals and actions. This paper takes seriously the role and significance of these narratives of redemption in the social history of the frontier.

Finally, this paper considers how economic instability and radical social change at the end of the nineteenth century influenced emerging political and ideological movements. In this moment of flux, visions of personal redemption played an important role in the parallel emergence of radical populism and laissez-faire individualism. While it was possible for settlers to balance notions of Republican agrarianism with the ethics and structures of capitalism during prosperous and hopeful times, economic failure and drought at the end of the century revealed the dominance of capitalism and the collapse of Jefferson’s vision of a yeoman republic. Ultimately, the ideological grey area between capitalist ethics and older Republican beliefs can be seen as the precursor to capitalism’s dominance over the economic and social structures of the Great Plains.

The first case study of this paper examines Ben Gitchel, an ill-fated settler-farmer of Buffalo County, Nebraska, who trusted the redeeming power of his land and hard work to lead his family out of debt and towards salvation. The Gitchel homestead brought misfortune after misfortune, but Ben refused to accept economic failure, hoping to realize a vision of Jefferson’s utopian promise. The second study examines a very different

⁵ For example: Herbert Hoover, "John Milton Leeper: Pioneer Farmer," *Nebraska History* 52, no. 1 (1971).

character: Benton Aldrich. Born to a well-connected and stable New Hampshire family, Aldrich spent more than a decade learning the markets of the Great Plains before rising to prominence as a successful fruit-grower, farmer, and businessman. Aldrich subscribed to a specific interpretation of social Darwinism in which morally superior families naturally rise to the top of society through their hard work, virtue, and foresight. His beliefs suggest a vision of redemption that combined economic success with moral advancement. The last chapter explores the life of Luna Kellie, a well-known Populist activist and speech-and-songwriter for the Great Plains Populist movement. Kellie's experience on the Plains led her to believe that forces outside of her control were denying her family their just rewards for hard work. Her experience of denied redemption led to a critique of systemic injustice in the Western free markets. Her memoir and political writings reveal how she translated a vision of personal redemption and success into a collective, political doctrine of redemption. This paper unpacks the connections and differences between these three stories and considers how a shared ideological heritage led these individuals down such different paths at the turn of the century.

Two central ideas—the value of land and the meaning of success and failure—defined my original conception of this project. Specifically, I planned to use the Homestead Act of 1862 as a point of entry into the paradoxes of the West. The Act overhauled previous land grant acts and squatter laws into a single public land system, designed to replicate in the West land holding patterns of the eastern states. In 1862, a Republican-controlled Congress took advantage of the Civil War to pass the Act, which offered 160 acres of land to any settler who lived on and improved it for five years, or at

\$1.25 an acre after six months of residency.⁶ With the Act, Republicans in Congress sought to realize a utopian vision of a society of independent, landowning commercial farmers. Supporters of the Act believed it would, in the words of Horace Greeley, “diminish sensibly the number of paupers and idlers and increase the proportion of working, independent, self-subsisting farmers in the land evermore.”⁷ Although historians offer different interpretations, many, like Richard White, agree that the Act failed to realize its lofty goal because its terms ignored the realities of the economic and natural landscape of the West. Similarly, Alan Trachtenberg argues that government land policy in the nineteenth century actually favored railroads, speculators, and corporations over small landholders.⁸

Thus, my original goal for this project was to consider how settlers understood this lofty vision of the Homestead Act in relation to their own personal goals and experiences, and whether they put stock in a Jeffersonian vision of a utopian garden in the West. As such, I became interested in the widespread practices by which settlers abused land policy and the General Land Office (GLO), which enforced it. The bureaucracy of the GLO was essentially powerless to stop fraudulent claims, multiple claims, and false documentation, leading farmers and ranchers to amass vast amounts of land by cheating the GLO.⁹ This trend, I believed, reflected conflicting ideas about the purpose of the Act and the relationship between citizens and the Public Lands generally.

⁶ Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West*, 1st ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 138-43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁸ Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 22.

⁹ White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 150-52.

With this in mind, I narrowed the focus of my research to settlers of Nebraska, as more public land was claimed through the Homestead Act in Nebraska than in any other state.

However, when I began my research in the archives, I was drawn to the stories of these settlers' lives, as captured in their letters, journals, manuscripts, and memoirs. Specifically, I noticed a pattern in how individual settlers framed their stories and beliefs, a common emphasis on faith and redemption. These values clearly echoed Christian doctrine, but more often than not, settlers expressed them in secular terms that invoked both Republican agrarianism and capitalism. Ultimately, I shifted the project to focus on these tenets of settler thought and their ideological origins and historical significance in the history of the American West. In so doing, I chose to explore underlying connections and contradictions among the different systems of beliefs that shaped the history of the nineteenth-century Great Plains.

As I began to explore settler discourses of success and failure, I sensed what I then understood to be a tension between agrarian ideals of independence, self-sufficiency, and redemption and a constant preoccupation with finances. I began exploring the idea of two competing visions of success: one based on the Jeffersonian promise of the independent yeoman and one defined by adherence to a set of "capitalist" beliefs. However, as I delved deeper into the individual narratives, as well as secondary material on this subject, this distinction became blurred. Attempting to separate a settler's agricultural concerns from their finances—and thereby speak to their adherence to "capitalist" beliefs—was both unfeasible and misguided. By the second half of the nineteenth century, incorporation and industrialization dictated the terms of agriculture on the Great Plains, and all farmers consciously functioned within a market sphere. More

importantly, visions of success in this moment crossed these boundaries. Farmers felt that hard work and perseverance would bring them a bountiful harvest, financial stability, *and* personal, spiritual fulfillment. As such, I began to consider the implications of this overlap, especially in moments of economic instability at the end of the century.

One remarkable aspect of American intellectual history is how completely notions of material success have become connected to ideas about individual moral worth and spiritual fulfillment. As scholars like Moses Rischin and Max Weber have studied, during the eighteenth century, Protestant beliefs about the spiritual value of hard work became ensconced in a secular social vision of individual success.¹⁰ This paper examines the continuation of this trend in the nineteenth century when Protestantism, Republican virtue, and capitalism all shaped American visions of success and redemption. As documented in Trachtenberg's seminal text, *The Incorporation of America*, the turn of the century saw the rise of the capitalist social order as the defining feature of society.¹¹ Trachtenberg writes, "Fertile soil on the high plains, open spaces, seemingly "virgin" lands beckoned the independent yeoman Jefferson had celebrated as America's best hope...The logic of events in the 1870's and 1880's disclosed, however, not an agrarian but an industrial capitalist scenario."¹² As such, western farmers necessarily oriented themselves to the mechanized, incorporated, and capitalist order of Western society in order to stay afloat.¹³ At this same moment, a vision of individual success, specifically *financial* success, began to overtake landed independence as the definitive paradigm of

¹⁰ Moses Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success; Individualism and Beyond* (Chicago,: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 3.

¹¹ Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

the American promise. The American gospel of success, already an important aspect of Protestant and Republican ideology, turned towards highly individualized success in the marketplace.¹⁴ Ultimately, this project considers how different sets of beliefs shaped emerging political and ideological discourses in the context of these rapidly changing socio-economic conditions.

Ideological Background

Christian law directly influenced the Republican and capitalist values that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In the colonial era, Calvinist doctrine emphasized the importance of hard work and virtue as a means to spiritual salvation and fulfillment. In Cotton Mather's 1701 essay, "A Christian at His Calling," he explains how the pursuit of a personal calling—in addition to one's general calling to serve g-d—is necessary for salvation. This personal calling, or vocation, allows one to be useful to human society and protects from sloth, indiscretion, and other sins. In pursuit of this calling, Mather emphasizes a specific set of virtues: industry, discretion, honesty, contentment, and perseverance.¹⁵ American Calvinism, therefore, dictated a specific moral code for one's conduct in worldly affairs. As numerous scholars of U.S history have noted, the influence of this code is clearly visible in Republican and capitalist ideals, specifically in their emphasis on virtue, honesty, and industry as the means to personal redemption. However, Mather concludes by pointing out that one's soul and salvation—one's general calling to serve g-d—must always take precedence over one's personal

¹⁴ Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, 4.

¹⁵ Cotton Mather, "A Christian at His Calling," in *ibid.*, 23-30.

avocation.¹⁶ This emphasis on serving a higher power gradually disappeared from discourses of labor and success during the centuries to come.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, influential thinkers like Ben Franklin secularized the Protestant code of ethics championed by Mather in their own discourses of success. In a 1757 story, “The Way to Wealth,” Franklin outlines a similar set of virtues in one’s personal endeavors—industriousness, caution, frugality—but emphasizes personal fulfillment, rather than spiritual salvation as the end goal of these virtues.¹⁷ A secular, Republican discourse of labor and virtue offered a distinct vision of redemption that no longer revolved around spiritual salvation. Similarly, Franklin’s essay demonstrates a shift in focus towards the economic sphere, the “art of money-getting,” as his contemporaries might call it. In the story, an old man instructs an unhappy crowd in the moral lessons of “poor Richard”—Richard Saunders, Ben Franklin’s pseudonym. Hearing the crowd complain about high taxes, the old man retorts:

If those [taxes] laid on by the government were the only ones we had to pay, we might more easily discharge them; but we have many other, and much more grievous to some of us. We are taxed twice as much by our idleness, three times as much by our pride, and four times as much by our folly; and from these taxes the commissioners cannot ease or deliver us...¹⁸

Franklin’s writings explicitly connect discussions of virtue with discussions of prosperity. The implication of the above quote is that moral faults, not high taxes, have brought hardship upon the individuals in the crowd.

Franklin prescribes good character—along similar lines as Protestant virtue—as the means to prosperity and happiness. In theory, the champions of Republican virtue saw

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷ Ben Franklin, “The Way to Wealth,” in Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, 34-36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

independence, not wealth, as the ultimate goal of a virtuous life, as it alone allowed for legitimate participation in a republican government.¹⁹ In *The Myth of American Individualism*, Barry Shain argues that the prototypical yeoman of Jefferson's utopia did not seek material wealth but simply hoped to maintain a "middle state" of economic independence.²⁰ This distinguishes Republican thought from otherwise similar ethics of capitalism.

At the same time, Republican thinkers tended to see all of these spheres—moral, political, economic—as intertwined. Just as nineteenth-century thinkers understood philosophy and natural science within the same sphere, so too did Republicans connect ideas of morality, politics, and economics into a single school of thought. Franklin's essay, with its focus on economic matters, speaks to the ambiguous connection between these sets of ideas. In *Concepts of Free Labor*, Glickstein is wary of drawing a bright line distinction between liberal capitalist ethics and Republican beliefs, pointing out the ambiguities in Republican ideas of success. As Glickstein explains, and Franklin's essay demonstrates, nineteenth century Republicans emphasized financial success and social ascendancy in addition to a more traditional vision of landed independence. Glickstein writes:

"To the great extent that it celebrated economic opportunity and social fluidity in the free states, free labor ideology reflected that ambiguity which may have been a major basis of its appeal—its identity as an amalgam of "small producer," republican values that exalted virtuous, comfortable economic independence and of those more resolutely liberal capitalist values which, in drawing on the mythology of America as a "country of self-made men," exalted the ability of the

¹⁹ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 17.

²⁰ Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*, 315.

talented and enterprising to rise to something beyond such economic independence.”²¹

The beliefs of the settlers examined in this paper demonstrate the ambiguous nature of American social thought in this moment.

Republican thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century emphasized a philosophy of “industrial freedom” that differentiates their ideas from capitalist ethics. They emphasized the right to sell and control one’s own labor as well as the inherent honor of hard work in and of itself.²² Jefferson’s society envisioned farmers as the pinnacle of this liberty, by owning their own land and providing for their own needs, farmers had full control over their labor. His vision also invoked what historians refer to as the “producer ethic”—the idea that farmers play a singular significant role in American society and are uniquely virtuous and essential to a republican form of government.²³ Moreover, Shain argues that eighteenth-century Republican notions of liberty assumed that citizens would subjugate their individual desires to a Christian moral code that stressed serving one’s community and serving one’s g-d.²⁴ In the eighteenth century, Republican beliefs also emphasized community and the collective good over the individual, although this gradually dissolved from Republican discourse in the nineteenth century.

From Turner to Weber and Trachtenberg to Foner, a number of scholars have considered the ideal of individual self-determination in relation to the history of the

²¹ Ibid., 13.

²² Jonathan A. Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 13-15.

²³ Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (New York: Norton, 1982), 13-14.

²⁴ Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 116-19.

development of the American West. Unpacking the historical discourse on foundational eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century ideas about labor and success, especially in relation to popular visions of the American West, illuminates certain arguments made in this text. At the turn of the century, Frederick Jackson Turner identified what he understood to be the importance of the frontier to American history. He saw the frontier as a place of perennial rebirth, where individuals are challenged to carry progress and civilization to barren and wild lands. Turner argued, and most Americans believed, that because of this dynamic, the West manifested America's character of independence, hard work, and virtue²⁵. In his own exploration of this Western mythology, Alan Trachtenberg explains that the West was seen as a place "where only personal merit and ability count. The very wildness of the West allowed native ability and honesty their due."²⁶ The West came to emblemize that distinct American promise and bedrock of American exceptionalism: the ability of an individual to rise based on industry and virtue. In *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*, Jonathan Glickstein traces this ideal from republican notions of agrarian independence to the capitalist discourse of individual prosperity that emerged during the nineteenth century.²⁷

Liberal Capitalist Ethics

With the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century, Protestant notions of labor and virtue were not only secularized but also reoriented; rather than putting a primary emphasis on one's moral or spiritual development, liberal capitalist ethics saw wealth as a goal in and of itself. As such, capitalist ethics abandoned the Republican belief that hard work is an honorable calling in and of itself. While early Republican thinkers emphasized

²⁵ Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁷ Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*, 13-15.

industry and virtue over the sins of idleness and greed, philosophers of capitalist ethics extended and shifted these ideas, suggesting that poverty *demonstrates* laziness while wealth *demonstrates* virtue. This reorientation largely abandoned the “middle road” of humble living embodied by Jefferson’s yeoman farmer.²⁸ As Glickstein explains, during the nineteenth century, liberal capitalist beliefs held that “talent, ingenuity, perseverance, or enterprise” was rewarded with material success.²⁹ As such, the free market was seen as a sphere of moral competition, in which the poor *naturally* fall to the bottom and the virtuous rise to the top.³⁰ This emphasis on economics as a force of “natural law” signifies the final step away from an ideology based on Christian doctrine. During the nineteenth century, capitalist beliefs invoked Darwin’s theories of evolution and competition towards the marketplace.

The implications and significance of this intellectual shift are evident in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s nineteenth century essay, “Wealth.” In it, he emphasizes how a free economy mimics the natural world; but rather than rewarding fitness, nature rewards virtue. He writes, “In a free and just commonwealth, property rushes from the idle and imbecile to the industrious, brave, and persevering.”³¹ He argues that all men have some degree of natural capacity for morality, which he often defines as adherence to natural law. He goes on to explain how good practices in a capitalist economy—smart investing, thriftiness, and so on—mimic those qualities favored by nature. He writes:

All things ascend, and the royal rule of economy is that it should ascend also, or, whatever we do must always have a higher aim. Thus it is a maxim that money is another kind of blood... So there is no maxim of the

²⁸ Ibid., 41-42.

²⁹ Ibid., 41-42.

³⁰ Ibid., 139.

³¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Wealth," in Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, 41.

merchant which does not admit of an extended sense, e.g., ‘Best use of money is to pay debts’; ‘Every business by itself’... The counting-room maxims liberally expounded are laws of the universe. The merchant’s economy is a coarse symbol of the soul’s economy... The merchant has but one rule, *absorb and invest*.³²

Emerson’s writing embodies the thrust of capitalist values. He endorses constant growth and sees material success as the natural reward of virtue. More importantly, he argues that these beliefs mirror natural law. Finally, Emerson’s writing demonstrates the confluence of these capitalist ideas of success with spirituality, as he writes, “The true thrift is always to spend on the higher plane; to invest and invest, with keener avarice, that he may spend in spiritual creation and not in augmenting animal existence.”³³ In the nineteenth century, capitalist ethics, therefore, moved away from republican virtue in focus, form, and justification.

Historical Background

This paper attempts to reckon with the contradictions faced by a group of people trapped between two competing visions of society. Some pointed historical background may help clarify these tensions. Essentially, the promise of the Homestead Act was untenable with the society inhabited by settlers of the Great Plains. The Jeffersonian vision of small landholding, independent farmers as encapsulated in the Act could never be realized on the Plains because the winds of incorporation and industrialization had changed the terms of farming.³⁴ In the nineteenth century, national corporations and businesses—banks, railroads, and insurance companies—took advantage of the

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ Ibid., 43.

³⁴ Furthermore, one must question whether a world that could support Jefferson’s vision ever existed outside of the American imagination. In the eighteenth century this vision served as a symbolic justification for America’s imperial policies of Indian removal and settler conquest.

opportunities and resources of the West and, with the government's encouragement, gained enormous control—politically and economically—over the entire region. Moreover, new technologies immutably changed the nature of farming on the Plains. Grain elevators and standardized grading of crops, along with the expansion of railroads and telegraphs lines, connected farmers with a national commodities market over which they had no control or leverage.³⁵ Subject to the fluctuations of this national, and soon international, market, for most settlers the economics of frontier farming would not balance out.

While the Homestead Act promised landed independence for the impoverished laborers of the East, starting a successful homestead on the Great Plains required significant capital upfront. Richard White estimates that, putting aside the costs of transportation, a family needed at least \$1,000 to build up a financially sound 160-acre farm on the Great Plains, buying plow, harrow, harvester, teams, harness, and lumber, cows, and seed.³⁶ Settlers without this money faced looming debts, mortgages, and instability from one harvest to the next. They were often forced to abandon their homesteads before they could “prove up”—certify and receive titles—on their claims and gain ownership of the land. In his essay on the role of mortgages on the Great Plains, “*The Mortgage Worked the Hardest, The Fate of Landed Independence in Nineteenth-Century America*,” Jonathan Levy follows the story of a German immigrant and settler,

³⁵ Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 21. For more on the development of standardized grain markets see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis : Chicago and the Great West*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

³⁶ White, “*Its Your Misfortune and None of My Own*”, 185; Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 13-14.

Henry Ise, who mortgaged his farm in Kansas for \$363.³⁷ Ise struggled with debt for the rest of his life and, according to his son, the anxiety caused by this debt “ruined his father,” who “worried incessantly, and was often found sitting in a chair mumbling aloud to himself, counting figures and wondering if he would have enough cash on hand when the note came due.”³⁸ Levy relates this case to his broader argument that mortgages effectively denied settlers the landed independence they sought on the Plains.

Although technological advancements in agriculture made farming the Great Plains feasible financially, economic and natural factors made it a tenuous and unstable task. Periodic cycles of rain and drought offered rich and bountiful harvest one year and barren fields the next. With no irrigation system in place, farmers on the Great Plains placed their fortunes and often their lives at the mercy of these natural cycles. They also found themselves subject to swarms of grasshoppers, which, in bad years like 1874, could destroy the crops of an entire county overnight. In order to withstand these natural risks and instabilities, farmers put faith in the notion that “Rain Follows the Plow.”³⁹ This pseudo-scientific theory asserted that by cultivating the land and releasing moisture into the atmosphere farmers could transform the climate of an arid region. This demonstrates how agrarian notions of redemption were often ingrained in the popular thought and scientific notions of the time. By a fateful coincidence, this wave of immigration into the arid region of Nebraska, past the 98th meridian, coincided with the start of a period of plentiful rainfall in the cycles of Nebraska’s climate. This rain reinforced people’s faith in

³⁷ Jonathan Levy, “*The Mortgage Worked the Hardest: The Fate of Landed Independence in Nineteenth-Century America*,” in *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 40-42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁹ White, “*Its Your Misfortune and None of My Own*”, 228-29.

“Rain Follows the Plow” and fueled the growing number of settlers that pushed further west through the middle of the 1880s.⁴⁰

Because of this heavy rainfall and recent technological developments in agriculture, the boom of settlers arriving on the Great Plains in the early 1880’s could often produce bountiful and profitable harvests. Land was bountiful and cheap, and John Lane’s soft-center steel plow, patented in 1868, revolutionized the possibilities of breaking ground in arid regions.⁴¹ Similar breakthroughs in steel cultivators and harrows dramatically reduced the amount of labor hours needed to plant and till each acre of corn or wheat.⁴² Finally, the successful development of combine harvesters allowed farmers to bring in their crops in a fraction of the time previously required, drastically reducing the risk of losing a harvest to bad weather.⁴³

During the mid-nineteenth century, the advent of grain elevators and standardized grading of grain enabled a modern, international commodities market for wheat and corn to emerge. This market provided an outlet for frontier farmers, but also led to unstable crop prices.⁴⁴ Additionally, these changes increased the required start-up capital even for modest family farms—more land, more equipment, and ideally, one’s own team of horses was needed to produce a profitably large crop.⁴⁵ These developments in nineteenth-century agriculture presented farmers with a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they dramatically expanded the amount of land a small family-run farm could plant and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 227-29.

⁴¹ Robert L. Ardrey, *American Agricultural Implements, Technology and Society* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 17-18.

⁴² White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 229.

⁴³ Ardrey, *American Agricultural Implements*, 60-63.

⁴⁴ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, Chapter 3, “Pricing the Future: Grain.”

⁴⁵ Levy, *The Mortgage Worked the Hardest*, 46. Levy estimates that, in order to operate at a profit, a western farmer needed at least \$1,000 in start-up capital.

harvest with minimal outside labor. On the other hand, increased production drove down crop prices, and profit margins became slimmer, forcing farm families to raise production. The possibility of prosperity also raised the stakes and, therefore, the competition between farmers, leading to a paradigm of constant expansion.⁴⁶

Debt, Faith, and Landed Independence

In “*The Mortgage Worked the Hardest*,” Jonathan Levy shows that this emerging agricultural commodity market led to corresponding growth in high-interest loans and forced farmers to abandon control over their own labor. Levy’s essay accumulates incontrovertible evidence demonstrating how loans and mortgages funded the homesteads of Great Plains settlers. Given the relative poverty of most settlers in the region and the high start-up costs, settlers often had no alternative but to take out high-interest loans or to mortgage their homesteads as soon as they proved up.⁴⁷ In his essay, Levy charts the rise of debt alongside the settler boom of the 1880s. After unprecedented growth in farm acreage, one finds unprecedented amassing of debt: during the 1870s, farm acreage increased by 44%, while during the 1880s, farm mortgage debt increased by 41%.⁴⁸ Levy shows that mortgages became a fundamental institution of western farming, citing one study that in 1886 more than half of all Kansas farms were mortgaged.⁴⁹ With little enforceable regulation on interest rates, Eastern corporations quickly exploited the huge market for Western loans and sent thousands of agents west to broker high interest loans and mortgages.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 44-45.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 45-46.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 50-51.

Levy's essay argues that these loans forced farmers to abandon control over their own labor—their “landed independence.” In order to pay off his mortgage, a farmer had to concentrate his resources and labor on raising a single crop and maximizing profit. It also made each harvest a torturous affair—one wrong turn or bad spell of weather could lose the farm.⁵¹ Levy claims that this dynamic forced a farmer to treat his and his family's labor power as units of capital, to be used most economically in order to maximize profits. Furthermore, the competitive nature of Great Plains farming meant that the more labor one family poured into their work, the more the neighbors needed to put in order to remain competitive.⁵² It forced Western farmers into a system of competition “to produce a given quantity at the lowest cost” no matter the consequences to one's person, spirit, or family.⁵³ Ultimately, Levy argues that the mortgage system made the western farmers feel he had no more industrial liberty or freedom than eastern wage laborers.⁵⁴

Capitalism offers a complete moral code for understanding a society oriented around a free market. Like most moral codes, it has its own internal tensions and contradictions. Nineteenth century philosophers of capitalist ethics clearly decried the accumulation of debt.⁵⁵ They saw debt as a sin, a sign of greed, and an unnecessary gamble. They implicitly base this stance on the negative impact of a mortgage on one's independence in the capitalist sphere. At the same time, most industrial endeavors of the time, both agricultural and otherwise, relied on some kind of loan. Similarly, the ethics of capitalism clearly endorsed an entrepreneurial spirit—courage, daring, and faith in one's

⁵¹ Ibid., 42-43.

⁵² Ibid., 47-49.

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 50-51.

⁵⁵ For example, see P. T. Barnum, “The Art of Money-Getting,” in Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, 56.

abilities and the redemptive power of hard work. This faith resonates with Weber's arguments about the connections between Christian and capitalist doctrines. Weber writes, "Thus the Calvinist, as it is sometimes put, himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it... in a systemic self-control which at every moment stands before the inexorable alternative, chosen or damned."⁵⁶ These same virtues allow individuals to take the risks necessary to realize their lofty visions of success.

The language of debt and redemption in this economic sphere often resonate with Christian doctrine. Settlers believed that faith and service within a specific code of ethics would lead them out of debt and towards redemption. In this way, capitalist ethics resonated with older Calvinist ideas about salvation. One could never be truly certain that one would escape the burden of debt, but certain people still *knew* their abilities, virtue, and hard work would bear them out. Levy argues that the significance of debt and mortgages emblemized a paradigm shift away from Jeffersonian landed independence. I carry this argument a step further and argue that settlers' faith in their ability to pay off their mortgages speaks to the emergence of capitalism as the defining force in settler ideologies and material wealth as the new paradigm of success in the promise of the American West.

The Rise of Populism

During the last decades of the nineteenth century on the Great Plains, settlers went into debt to expand and build the infrastructure for their farms, but when the climate and economy took a turn for the worse during the 1880's, many were left with barren fields;

⁵⁶ Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2003), 112.

worthless crops, machinery, and land; and a defaulted mortgage on their home and land. What had happened? These settlers felt they had fulfilled their end of the promise—dutifully tilling and sowing their land, investing on a higher plane, living virtuous, industrious, and thrifty lives. Yet rather than success and independence, they found debt, despair, and defenselessness. During this moment, thousands of settlers flocked to organizations that offered an explanation for this failed promise that didn't condemn them as lazy, stupid, or immoral. These organizations—the Grange, the Farmer's Alliance, and, finally, the Populist Party—made farmers aware of systemic economic injustice and formed the short-lived but undeniably significant Great Plains Populist movement.⁵⁷ The final chapter of this project considers how Capitalist and Republican visions of personal redemption fueled settler support for the Populist movement. Understanding the rise of this movement and its treatment by historians illuminates the scope and significance of my arguments.

The Populist movement began with the Texas-based Farmers' Alliance, which spread to Kansas and Nebraska in the late 1880s as the National Farmer's Alliance and Industrial Union (NFAIU) or Southern Alliance.⁵⁸ During this period, the Alliance began to take membership away from older agrarian societies, like the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry—or simply “the Grange”—which emphasized the special role of farmers as the spiritual, economic, and ideological backbone of the nations. The Grange and the Alliance served similar social function, bringing together farmers into a “secret” society and fostering collectivity and cooperation. However, while the Grange lobbied

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 91-92.

⁵⁸ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36.

and worked for farmers' interests based on this agrarian exceptionalism, the Alliance brought farmers together based on common economic and political concerns.⁵⁹ During the hard years of drought, grasshoppers, high interest rates and freight rates, and low crop prices in the late 1880s and 1890s, the Farmers' Alliance emerged as the leading organization pushing for farm reforms. A bumper crop in the fall of 1889 led to a dramatic decline in crop prices during the winter and spring of 1890. This fall in prices and ensuing devastation in farming communities led to a rapid rise in Alliance membership on the Great Plains. Membership in the Nebraska Alliance went from 25,000 members in the fall of 1889 to 60,000 members in the spring of 1890.⁶⁰

The leaders of the Alliance pushed for a more even balance of power between Eastern corporations and Western farmers. They directed these efforts on two fronts. The first was to organize farmers into buying and selling co-ops, purchasing lumber and selling grain in community oriented collectives in order to gain leverage in the marketplace. This was met with extreme resistance, especially from railroads and grain elevator operators who rightly saw these collectives as a threat to their economic interests and control of Western markets. By refusing to sell to or buy from such groups, corporations were effectively able to quash the Alliance's efforts in most areas.⁶¹ In the early 1890's, the Farmer' Alliance shifted their energy to a second front—national political reform. Specifically, local Alliance organizations began to lobby for reforms to the railroad system—which they saw as corrupt and inefficient—and for currency reform, “a scientific dollar” based on silver, which would raise inflation and thereby lower the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁰ Ostler, *Prairie Populism*, 92.

⁶¹ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 43, 102-05; Ostler, *Prairie Populism*, 95.

mortgages and debts owed by farmers. Radical leaders of the Alliance supported the nationalization of railroads, land-loan plans (low-interest government loans for farmers), and corresponding reforms to the banking system. Despite a devastating winter of low prices and high freight rates, in 1889, the Nebraska Alliance had been unable to push through emergency relief measures to alleviate the farmers' situation. In the years before, the Republican Party, which had garnered the support of the Alliance in the past, seemed unconcerned and unmoved by Alliance demands. This sparked a debate about the respective merits of entering or remaining withdrawn from the political sphere. Although the Farmer's Alliance was officially non-partisan, during 1889 and 1890 fervor raced through the movement to use the strength of the Alliance to endorse its own political party.

In 1890, the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance ran its own candidates in state political races, under an independent ticket. They won both houses of the state congress and lost the governorship by only 1,000 votes.⁶² In 1892, the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance merged with a newly emerging national People's Party and dissolved as an independent organization. At the Omaha Convention of 1892, the People's Party endorsed the "Omaha Platform," which effectively brought together the interests of the Farmers' Alliance, the Knights of Labor, and the Greenbackers under a common platform of a national People's Party.⁶³ However, this unified, national Populist Party failed to garner support during the depression of 1893, and by 1896 the party had effectively diffused its more radical ideas by forming a free-silver coalition with Midwest democrats,

⁶² Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 146-51; Ostler, *Prairie Populism*, 111-13, 25-32.

⁶³ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 166-68.

culminating in William Jennings Bryan's presidential campaign that year.⁶⁴ This realignment, coupled with a sudden turnaround in agricultural markets, led to the deflation of the Populist Party before it had really begun. Nevertheless, its sudden rise has dramatic implications for the history of labor, liberty, success, and failure in the American West.

The final chapter of this paper examines how settler support for populist ideology relates to capitalist and republican visions of personal redemption and success. As such, it is situated in the middle of an ongoing historical debate about the ideological lineage and significance of the Populist Party. Certain older histories of American Populism call into question the egalitarian, progressive rhetoric of the movement. For example, Stanley Parsons' *The Populist Context* asserts that mid-western farmers sought to reap the benefits of open Western markets but were "not as well situated" as Railroads and other forces of development. This left them politically isolated, and as "frustrated, pragmatic capitalists" they sought reforms that would allow them "to compete more successfully."⁶⁵ On the opposite end of this debate, historians have linked the ideas of the Farmers' Alliance and the Populist Party to a doctrine of "economic collectivism" that countered the corruption and greed of the American economic system, especially its tendency to centralize wealth in the hands of a few elites.⁶⁶ Lawrence Goodwyn has argued that a radical, progressive political outlook defined the Populist movement, not a struggle for power in the marketplace or political arena. His text presents the Farmers' Alliance as a mass group struggling to create a new means for independence and individual self-

⁶⁴ Ostler, *Prairie Populism*, 177-78.

⁶⁵ Stanley B. Parsons, *The Populist Context* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 145-47.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

determination in American life.⁶⁷ In this paper, I resist the division drawn here because neither of these interpretations leaves space for the overlap between these systems of belief that is central to my argument.

More recently, Charles Postel has offered a compelling new interpretation of the ideological origins of the Populist movement and their relationship to capitalism. Postel connects the Populist movement with the Progressives and explains that they sought to reclaim economic and social progress as a force for good. He argues that the Populists applied foundational American ideas about liberty to the industrialized, streamlined economy and society of the late nineteenth-century American West. The Populist movement, he explains, understood the changes in American politics—specifically the emerging relationship between business and politics—and defined a new vision of Jefferson’s “industrial liberty” in relation to these changes. Their policies, therefore, envisioned a new, reformed economic system to realize this liberty. As such, he examines how Populist beliefs reoriented Republican notions of liberty to an industrialized and incorporated America.⁶⁸ This interpretation parallels my own argument—namely that nineteenth-century Populists had no choice but to incorporate capitalist ethics and structures into their vision for social change.

My project draws connections between the underlying beliefs of Luna Kellie and other settlers who did not become active in the Populist movement. Essentially, I hope to show how settler supporters of the Populist movement used the language and values of a capitalist and Republican society to attack certain structures of that society. This

⁶⁷ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 33 – 39; Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 156.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 – 10, 142.

demonstrates a broader trend in the history of capitalism's ascent on the Plains. While capitalism drew from the same ideological tributaries as Republican and Protestant beliefs, it necessarily flooded them in the rapidly changing social context of the nineteenth century West. Populists were aware of the institutional and ideological shifts happening in society but could only fight them by drawing on a shared vision of individual redemption.

The Ascendancy of Capitalism

This paper speaks to the ascendancy of capitalism by considering the beliefs, perspectives, and experiences of three fairly typical settlers and their families. In order to accomplish this, I try not stray too far from the sources: the letters, journals, essays, and memoirs of these individuals. Using these, I consider how their respective visions of personal redemption shaped their experiences on the Plains. In so doing, I necessarily grapple with the ethics and beliefs by which these settlers lived their lives and the ways in which their beliefs were conditioned by capitalist and republican notions of virtue, liberty, and independence. Because of this strategy, my project must communicate with certain social presuppositions ingrained in nineteenth-century America. One such issue is gender roles and accepted notions of masculinity and femininity. For each of these individuals, fulfilling the gender roles assigned to them, especially as leaders of their families, played an important role in their visions of success and redemption.

Most importantly, my project tries to take stock of these beliefs within the context of a dynamic and fluctuating moment in history. Settlers of the Great Plains lived in a society at once defined by capitalist ethics and structures and ideologically reliant on the Jeffersonian myth of an agrarian republic. The result is a group caught between two worlds of ideas, whose beliefs fluctuated between different schools of thought and often

occupied the grey space between them. Ultimately, this project has brought me back to the paradoxes of frontier history. Each of these settlers believed that they could channel hard work and personal moral worth into economic, personal, and spiritual success and salvation. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, massive social changes forced Americans to reframe the meaning and significance of success and failure both explicitly—in their professed political beliefs—and internally—in their personal goals, ideals, and decisions. This paper examines a dynamic, living history of overlapping ways of understanding the world and one's place in it and considers the lasting ideological implications of capitalism's ascendancy in the American West.

Chapter 1: *We Live and Hope for Better Time to Come*, Ben Gitchel's Visions of Landed Redemption

In Jamestown, Michigan, 1877, Mary Elizabeth Bailey and Benjamin Gitchel were married in secret; of all their family, only Benjamin's brother, George, knew of the wedding beforehand.⁶⁹ Three years later, Ben, a carpenter by trade, left his home in Michigan with Mary and their two infant daughters and settled in Buffalo County, Nebraska, just south of the Sandhills, where Mary's parents had their own small farm nearby. In the years to come, the couple regularly wrote letters to Ben's family back in Michigan detailing their pursuits in Nebraska. These letters defended the couple's departure and are marked by a certain proud defiance. A closer examination of Ben and Mary's writing can reveal the values, beliefs, and ambitions that defined their experiences. The arc of this family's life manifests capitalism structural and ideological transcendence on the Plains of the American West.

This chapter considers how the Gitchels dealt with failure and hardship and persevered through tragedy and defeat. It examines the respective influences of capitalist ethics, agrarianism, and populism on their beliefs and perspectives and how these informed a specific vision of redemption—a faith in their land and labor to relieve them from dire circumstances. It also considers the differences in Ben and Mary's respective roles in the family and the way these differences shaped an ideological divide between them. In the hard years of the 1890s, economic collapse and drought left countless settlers with nothing to show for years of hope and hard labor. Ben Gitchel refused to abandon

⁶⁹ Benjamin Gitchel to George Gitchel, September 8, 1877: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (Nebraska State Historical Society [hereafter NSHS], Series 1, Folder 1 [hereafter 1-1 eg.]).

his land or the vision of agrarian redemption that had brought him there, clinging to a dream that never conformed to the society around him.

The Gitchels' First Ten Years on the Frontier

The Gitchel family hit the ground running upon their arrival in Nebraska. In their first year, Ben bought a two-horse corn cultivator and a half-stake in a grain seeder. He also worked in a six-man crew harvesting wheat and corn with a brand new combine—“a header”—in exchange for help harvesting his own crop.⁷⁰ By 1882, the Gitchels had at least 100 acres of land; they grew corn, wheat, oats, potatoes, and vegetables, and raised four hogs.⁷¹ Although their letters don't disclose the date, at some point during these first years on the Plains the Gitchels took out a mortgage on their farm, presumably in order to pay for this machinery.⁷² Nonetheless, this early expansion, coupled with relatively good weather, gave the Gitchels reason to be optimistic in their first years farming in Nebraska. By the spring of 1882, the family had earned enough to employ a hired hand for the planting season, and Ben had constructed a schoolhouse, served as the director of the school district, and was overseeing road building for the community.⁷³ Despite their debt, the Gitchels immediately sought to establish themselves as contributing members of the community. Ben's work not only provided additional income but also affirmed his commitment to the future of his family and his community. Its important to note the active role he took in promoting education in the community, for it resonates with his hopes and visions for the future—in this case, educated and successful children.

⁷⁰ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, July 27, 1880: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

⁷¹ Ben Gitchel to Father and Mother, May 16, 1882 and November 6, 1882: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

⁷² Ben Gitchel to Father and Mother, August 29, 1887: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1)

⁷³ Ben Gitchel to Father and Mother, May 16, 1882: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS 1-1).

Ben's attempts to demonstrate his success to his parents in his earliest letters show his ideal vision of landed independence. Ben's letters focus on reaping the wealth of his land and feeding his family well. In the fall of 1880, he writes:

Mother wants to know how we like it here. We like it well here though our crops were poor this season but they did not have a chance. Have killed two hogs, have two more, will keep them till Jan. or Feb. Will not starve this year. Think fruit will do well here... Wild hops grow here on Wood River in great abundance, as fine as any tame ones I ever saw...⁷⁴

One can get a real sense of family dynamics based on the tone with which he responds to his mother—not quite spite, but proud defiance. He also demonstrates the beginnings of a conviction in the power of his land to see him through hard times; for example, his claim that his crops “didn’t have a chance this season.” From the outset of his time in Nebraska, Ben’s hopes for the future were wrapped up in the goodness of the land, which validated his venture in Nebraska. In November of 1882, Ben Gitchel wrote another letter conveying his assuredness to his parents. He details how many bushels of wheat, corn, and potatoes they harvested that year and the returns per bushel for each crop. He also explains, “... have one pork in the barrel, and four hogs in the pen. Saurkraut [sic], cabbage, potatoes, squash & pumpkins in the cellar & a half barrel of sorghum too. We will not starve this winter you see...”⁷⁵ Ben takes pride in defying the expectations of his family with this successful harvest. Ben signs off this 1882 letter as, “Nebraska Boy,” reifying an identity that has become tied up in his relationship to his western state and his piece of land specifically. With this signature, he tries to position himself as an

⁷⁴ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, October 27, 1880: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

⁷⁵ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, November 6, 1882: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

embodiment of the spirit and character of the West.⁷⁶

While Ben sought a vision of agrarian, landed independence, he understood that this would rely on financial stability. In these first years (1882-1885), the Gitchels had reason to be optimistic. Ben was an active member of the community and earning money doing carpentry work; they could feed themselves well from the garden and were able to slowly expand their crops, raising 26 acres of wheat in 1885 and making good money selling hogs and dairy products.⁷⁷ In each of his early letters, he gives his parents an update on the current prices of crops, vegetables, and livestock. For example, in one letter to his mother, he writes, “Potatoes are good... We had 180 bushels of the Beauties from four bushels of seed. They are worth 25 cents per bushel. Our corn is good, have not picked much yet, about 100 bushels. It is worth 35 cents. Have sold \$36 of hogs...”⁷⁸

Because these early letters clearly aim to make an impression on Ben’s parents, one can assume that he felt a certain pressure to demonstrate a mastery of the local markets.

By the middle of the 1880’s, both the weather and the economic climate took a turn for the worse. Farmers across the state faced dry conditions, high freight rates, and low prices for their crops. As discussed in the introduction, profitable farming on the Great Plains required high initial investments in seed, equipment, land, horses, and labor. As a result, farmers counted on the profits from the upcoming harvest to pay for each year’s investment, with obvious risks. In the harvest season of 1886, Ben’s letters to his family took on a different tone as they detailed the difficulties he faced:

⁷⁶ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, November 6, 1882: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

⁷⁷ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, October 22, 1886: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

⁷⁸ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, July 27, 1880: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

Times are very hard here, produce is very cheap. It keeps one scratching to keep even. Think that we have gained alittle [sic], will know when we balance accounts the first of January...[He goes on to detail what they sold and at what prices]... Our potatoes were a failure. They were worth 50 cents, that is in money in my pocket. The freight rates are so high to Omaha that it takes one half to get the rest to market. Corporate monopoly is the curse of this country. Wait and hope for a change. We send you, George, Eliza, Maria and Theodore each a picture of our residence.⁷⁹

Low crop prices, high freight rates, and a looming mortgage challenged Ben's vision of the order of Plains society. He believed that a farm family should reap the rewards of their harvest and that if he did his duty in raising a successful crop than society should recognize and reward him. The economic structures of the time, however, negated this promise with what Ben saw as systemic injustice; by offering farmers what appeared to be arbitrarily low prices, this economic system robbed farmers of much of their profits before the crop made it to market.

This instability conditioned how farmers like Ben understood their successes and failures. They had to evaluate the success of their harvest not at the time of reaping but at the time of sale. Ben's potato crops in this year, for example, weren't a failure agriculturally, but he was unable to turn a profit on them and, therefore calls them a failure. The balancing one's books—"keeping even"—therefore, became an act of self-reflection and self-evaluation. In this way, the Gitchels' experience on the Plains embodies Jonathan Levy's argument in *Farmers and Risk*, in that he lost control over his own labor and resources. In Gitchel's case this lack of control over labor corresponded with a new way to measure his own success and worth.⁸⁰ This necessarily came into conflict with Ben Gitchel's tendency (fully explored later) to focus on his agricultural

⁷⁹ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, October 22, 1886: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

⁸⁰ Levy, "The Mortgage Worked the Hardest," 42-43, 46.

pursuits in isolation. Ben's experiences in the second half of the 1880's challenged the vision of independence and stability that had brought him to the Plains in the first place. During the struggles of these years, he turned to a vision of agrarian redemption to see him through and make sense of a creeping sense of failure.

The Grange

Ben's beliefs were defined by an agrarian vision of the farmer as the backbone of society. At some point during the 1880's, Ben became a member of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry—or simply, “the Grange;” he would eventually rise in the organization and serve as a representative for his community at a statewide event.⁸¹ As mentioned in the introduction, the Grange was a national, family-based, rural society for farmers and is widely accepted as one of the four organizations that set the stage for the emergence of the Populist Party in the Midwest, along with the Farmer's Alliance, the Greenback movement, and the Knights of Labor. A group of clerks for the federal government, led by Oliver Hudson Kelley, founded the Grange in 1867 as a secret society for farmers and their wives to bond them together in ritual and provide a space for collective education, growth, and support. As such, the Grange sought to meet the fraternal, social, educational, economic, and political needs of rural American farmers.⁸² Membership in the organization peaked in 1874, with roughly one million individuals in over twenty thousand local groups. During this time, the Grange organized a number of cooperative buying and selling ventures and lobbied for reduced railroad rates.⁸³

The Grange, unlike the Farmer's Alliance, did not set the farmer's interests

⁸¹ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, February 10, 1888: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

⁸² Vernon Rosco Carstensen, *Farmer Discontent, 1865-1900* (New York,: Wiley, 1974), 17-18.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

against the railroads'. In their "Declaration of Purposes," published in 1874 after their first national session, Grange leadership explained, "We hold that transportation companies of every kind are necessary to our success; that their interests are intimately connected with our interests; and harmonious action is mutually advantageous."⁸⁴ Instead of focusing on conflict between farmers and railroads, they presented their organization as a means of working within preexisting structures. As explained in their "Declaration of Principles," they hoped "...to systematize our work and calculate intelligently on probabilities. To discountenance the credit system, the mortgage system, the fashion system, and every other system tending to prodigality and bankruptcy."⁸⁵ This quote suggests that they believed they could counteract the systems that controlled farmers' labor by "systematizing" and "calculating" that labor. This implies adapting their efforts to an industrial, capitalist society. The Grange, therefore, sought to protect the emphasis on agriculture in American culture by adopting farming and farmers to social change.

The Grange's ideology asserted that soil, and the labor of those who cultivated it, provided the source of all national wealth and, therefore, that farmers occupied a special role in society and deserved a certain privilege. They highlighted the spiritual relationship between a farmer and his land.⁸⁶ The constitution of the Grange, written in 1873, the year of the group's incorporation, highlights a specific vision of farming. It explains, "The productions of the earth are subject to the influence of natural laws, invariable and indisputable; the amount produced will, consequently, be in proportion to the intelligence of the producer, and success will depend upon his knowledge of these laws and the

⁸⁴ Edward W. Martin, "The Declaration of Purposes of the Patrons of Husbandry," 1874 in *ibid.*, 41-42.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Postel, *The Populist Vision*.

proper application of their principles. Hence, knowledge is the foundation of happiness.”⁸⁷ Ultimately, the Grange offered an encompassing vision of natural law that took on a religious-like significance for its members—it gave them a way of understanding the world and a set of principles to live by. This quote reflects a vision of agrarian redemption that links success to moral worth. This echoes both capitalist and Republican notions of self-determination. It measures this success not in dollars but in the bounty of one’s harvest.

In 1887, the Gitchels had a promising season early, but lost the entirety of their wheat crop to the chinch bug—a beetle-like insect that devastates farmland. Despite his financial losses, Ben’s high hopes and faith in the land remained constant. However, letters from the spring of 1888, confirm that the family was struggling to pay off debt from years past.⁸⁸ In April, Ben sent a letter to friends describing the weather and their prospects for the coming season. He explains, “So I think if our crops are good this season, we will be able to be above water. We hope so at least.”⁸⁹ Once again, one sees how Ben had come to evaluate his entire experience of farming based on this balancing of the book and struggling to stay afloat. Because of the seemingly arbitrary nature of the systemic obstacles to a profitable harvest, Ben turned to his deeply rooted faith in the land to see him through. After describing their successful vegetable harvest in a letter in August of that year, Ben writes, “Nebraska takes the lead of all her sister states &

⁸⁷ “The Constitution of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, 1873 in Carstensen, *Farmer Discontent*, 32-33.

⁸⁸ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, February, 10, 1888: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

⁸⁹ Benjamin Gitchel to Friends, April 22, 1888: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

especially Buffalo Co.,” revealing his pride and confidence in the fertility of the land.⁹⁰

Drought and Failure in the 1890s

As drought fell on the Great Plains starting in 1889 and economic depression continued to drive down crop prices, the Gitchels started slipping behind in their debts. Year after year, harvest after harvest, they faced the anxious uncertainty of their looming mortgage. Gone were their dreams of independence and stability, the Gitchels simply hoped to have food on the table, a roof over their heads, and a piece of land they could still call their own. To make matters worse, Ben’s health steadily deteriorated throughout the decade. He suffered a stroke in the winter of 1889 and 1890 and never fully recovered, often losing control of one side of his body. Around the same time, he started to show symptoms of arthritis and often couldn’t work for days on end.⁹¹ The sad, slow conclusion of this struggle brings Ben’s faith to the forefront. Like so many other settlers on the Plains, Ben could not square his lived experience of the frontier with the promises that had led him there. Although he could not deny the harsh reality faced by his family, he clung to his vision of landed redemption against all odds. He did not deny the direness of his family’s situation but rather held fast to his earlier beliefs as a way of validating his presence and labor on his small piece of earth.

The end of each harvest season on the Buffalo County homestead raised doubts. Would they have enough food and fuel to survive the long, cold winter? How much further were they from settling their mounting debts? At what point should they cut their losses and abandon the farm? Many of their friends and neighbors had been doing just that. Mary writes in a January 1891 letter, “The hard times commenced 5 years ago. They

⁹⁰ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, August 29, 1887: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

⁹¹ Ben Gitchel to Father & Mother, July 3, 1890, *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

have been getting worse ever since. People in order to meet their obligations, mortgaged their property. We hear of forced sales every week... We still get 20 cts. for our butter and 25 cts. for our eggs and that is what we depend upon until another harvest.”⁹² Despite these hardships, Ben Gitchel remained tenaciously hopeful in his writings. In his section of the same January letter, he describes their bleak circumstances to his parents: “Well, our crops were poor, but by selling of four hogs very close and not feeding the cattle any grain, we will come through the winter. We haven’t any potatoes to eat this winter and I miss them so much. Our cows is [sic] what is carrying us through... We live and hope for better times to come.”⁹³ While Mary focused on the day-to-day details of their continued survival, Ben looked further into the future and put faith in “better times to come.”

An analysis of Ben’s letters reveals how these hardships influenced his perspective on his life’s work on the Plains. In July of 1890, Ben reflected on the financial deterioration of the farm: “Times are very hard here. Small grain is almost a failure here, corn is looking fair. I tell you what with poor health, poor crops, low prices, hired hand to pay and not able to do much hard work and interest to pay keeps a poor man’s face too close to the grindstone. Well enough of that...”⁹⁴ Gitchel rarely complains in his letters; indeed, he rarely reflects on his emotional state, as opposed to his physical health, at all. Therefore, the assertion that his face was “too close to the grindstone” suggests a significant shift in attitude—or, at the very least, in the attitude he chose to express to his family. Several other details deserve closer examination. The phrasing of

⁹² Ben Gitchel to Father & Mother, January 5, 1891, *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Ben Gitchel to Father & Mother, July 3, 1890 and January 5, 1891, *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS 1-2); Paula Riney-Kehrberg, "But What Kind of Work Do the Rest of You Do? Child Labor on Nebraska Farms, 1870-1920," *Nebraska History* 82, no. 1 (2001), 7.

the expression he uses—“keeps a poor man’s face too close to the grindstone”—suggests that factors outside of his own control are causing his distress. As earlier letters demonstrate, Ben had no problems with hard work itself. Instead, the lack of control over his own labor caused his personal anxieties.

By the end of the decade, the agrarian vision that had brought the Gitchels to the Plains had all but vanished. After Ben’s stroke, the Gitchels’ two young sons—Jay and Sam-Leroy, ages 8 and 10 at the time—had to take responsibility for the cattle and crops.⁹⁵ The amount of work and responsibility this put on them is hard to fathom and undoubtedly interfered with their education, after Ben had given so much of his own time and energy to build and organize a school in the community. In addition, a dramatic drop in crop prices led to a greater reliance on the income Mary earned from the sale of eggs and dairy products. Raising chickens and cows for these products was uniformly considered the role of the woman in a farm family.⁹⁶ Mary wrote in 1890, “We are trying to raise quite a number of chickens. It is the only thing a woman can do out here to earn a little money.”⁹⁷ The impact of this gendered division of labor on visions of success and independence is discussed at the end of this chapter and in Chapters 2 and 3. The entire family, therefore, helped battle off debt and despair after Ben’s stroke in 1890. Their hard work helped them survive while Ben was incapacitated throughout the 1890-growing season. He recovered, but the effects of his stroke and his continued bout with arthritis left him unable to do any real work. The two boys took on more and more responsibility

⁹⁵ Mary Gitchel to Friends, November 1, 1891 and Mary Gitchel to Mother, July 13, 1892: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

⁹⁶ Ostler, *Prairie Populism*, 93.

⁹⁷ Mary Gitchel to Father and Mother, July 3, 1890: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

as the years wore on.⁹⁸

By 1893, Ben had begun to lose mobility in the right side of his body as heart failure wrecked havoc on his body. In the face of this personal battle and larger impending bankruptcy, Ben continued to take pride in the family's agricultural successes and the work put in by his sons and his horses. In the summer of 1893, a surprisingly promising season, Ben composed a letter describing their small successes. He writes:

Sweet corn almost knee high, potatoes budding for blossoms, peas eight inches high. Come and spend the Fourth with us and we will give you a mess of new potatoes and green corn and peas... It would almost scare you to know the amount of work that our team has done this spring. They have put in 26 acres of wheat for ourselves and fifty away from home...⁹⁹

This letter reveals not just Ben's continued optimism, but also the source of that optimism. Rather than focusing on the financial rewards of their hard work, Ben rejoices in the natural bounty of the land itself. Similarly, rather than pointing to the financial fruits of his team's labor, he praises them simply for their ability to work hard. In this way an agrarian, Republican vision of personal redemption continued to fuel his hopes.

Although Ben's health had improved, the harvest of 1894 led to disaster. Ben and the boys had planted 95 acres of sweet corn on the basis of a contract with a seed retailer in Omaha. However, shortly after they shipped the corn, the seedsman went bankrupt, and the family never saw a penny for the crop.¹⁰⁰ In a letter describing this incident, Ben captures his spirit of the moment:

...this winter does not find us in very good shape. Poor health has caused debts to accumulate, but for the last year the boys and I have done the

⁹⁸ Mary and Ben Gitchel to "Friends," November 1, 1891 and Ben and Mary Gitchel to Mother, July 13, 1892: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

⁹⁹ Ben Gitchel to Friends, June 14, 1893: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁰⁰ Ben Gitchel to Friends, January 16, 1894: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

work. I contracted to raise sweet corn for a seedsman in Omaha. We put out our entire corn crop, 95 acres. While the crop was poor, it amounted to over \$100 to us. Shortly after I shipped him the corn, he failed and we lose every dollar. Our wheat and oats were nearly a failure. Our cows and chickens are all we have to support us until another harvest, but we will keep trusting and hoping as long as life shall last.¹⁰¹

Ben, despite his arthritis and failing heart, and his two young sons, ages 12 and 14, had poured their energy into this crop, only to have the promised profits disappear in front of them. Ben's writing makes clear an awareness of how little control he had in these market exchanges. "Failure," or bankruptcy, is treated like a natural disaster, an unpredictable, unavoidable force. Once again he envisions redemption in the next harvest and vows to "keep trusting and hoping as long as life shall last." Like praying against a drought, Ben's effort to keep the homestead afloat became an act of faith. Ben clung to this vision of redemption with a religious fervor.

In 1894, after more than four years of plummeting prices, droughts, and sickness, Ben explained to his family his refusal to leave Nebraska. He emphasizes the financial logic of his perseverance—they would have to abandon their investment in the farm's infrastructure—but also writes:

This has been a good country and will be again if we can only weather the storm. I have all the confidence in the coming season. If the season opens dry in the spring (that is if we get no fall rains or snow this winter) then we will have to get out of this, but I live in great hopes. George, you speak about my courage. This has never failed me yet.¹⁰²

Despite all evidence to the contrary, Ben held fast to the hope that this land would bring the family's salvation. Ben saw this drought as a test of his own mettle and believed in

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ben Gitchel to "Friends at Home," February 20, 1894; Ben and Mary Gitchel to Mother, April 19, 1894; Ben and Mary Gitchel to "Friends," August 6, 1894; and Ben Gitchel to Brother and Sister, August 20, 1894: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

the redeeming force of the “good land” of Nebraska to see his family through these hard times. Once again, his beliefs suggest a religious-like trust in these visions.

These beliefs draw equally from Republican and Protestant visions of hope. The Gitchels were a Christian family and mention Christian doctrine in one or two letters, mainly when speaking of death. Only one letter specifically mentions their church, but they probably belonged to either a Baptist or a Methodist one.¹⁰³ However, Ben’s visions of redemption often invoke his religious faith. In the same letter quoted above, Ben explains, “We will trust in the Giver of all Good: there will be a way provided.”¹⁰⁴ Ben’s faith in his land and his labor on it can be seen as an embodiment of Cotton Mather’s doctrine of pursuing “a calling.” Mather asserts:

“Is your *Business* [personal calling] here clogg’d with any *Difficulties* and *Inconveniencies*? *Contentment* under those *Difficulties*, is no little part of your *Homage* to that G-d, who hath placed you where you are. Fall not into any fretful *Discontent*; but with *patience* make the conclusion of the Prophet; *Truly, This is a grief, & I must bear it!*... Let all persons take heed of *too suddenly leaving that Business*, wherein G-d has fixed them.”¹⁰⁵

Ben’s unflinching optimism, tenacity, and refusal to abandon the homestead all resonate with this doctrine. Whether or not Ben literally saw his work as a farmer as a personal calling in service of g-d, his vision of agrarian redemption clearly absorbed these Calvinist ethics. Ultimately, one can see his adherence to these as a reflection of the amalgam of beliefs that fueled his hope for the future. In this letter responding to his family’s concern, Ben invokes his confidence in the land—“this has been a good

¹⁰³ Ben and Mary Gitchel to Mother, January 14, 1893: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁰⁴ Ben Gitchel to Brother and Sister, August 20, 1894: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁰⁵ Cotton Mather, “A Christian at His Calling,” in Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, 28.

country”—his character—“[my courage] has never failed me yet”—and his g-d—“the giver of all good.” All three of these played a role in shaping the vision of redemption that pushed him through these hard years. The overlap between these three clearly demonstrates how Ben’s beliefs and hopes drew from Christian, Republican, agrarian, and capitalist visions of personal redemption.

Prices continued to plummet, not only for crops but also for eggs and dairy, and a cruel drought struck Nebraska in the summer of 1894. As conditions worsened, thousands of settlers abandoned their homesteads, selling off machinery, animals, and land at drastically reduced prices.¹⁰⁶ This glutted market drove prices down further, and, by August, Mary claimed, “Shoats that weigh 50 lbs. cannot be sold for \$1.”¹⁰⁷ Ben also writes about this period:

All we have to live upon is our cows and hens. The hens have stopped laying for want of feed. We have no grain to feed the cows and if they dry up, we have no hope unless the state helps the people. We will have no seeds to plant in the spring, no feed for the teams to work on. What we will do I do not know, but will try to face the future four-square and will not cross the bridge until we come to it.¹⁰⁸

To say the future looked bleak would be a gross understatement. The Gitchels had reached a turning point in their time on the Plains. With no seeds and no grain to feed their horses, even Ben could not summon hope for the next harvest, but still he continued to emphasize his own perseverance and bravery. This moment, however, marked the end of the family’s independence. After receiving this letter, Ben’s mother sent the family a few dollars to buy food, shoes, and fuel. The

¹⁰⁶ Ben and Mary Gitchel to “Friends at Home,” August 6, 1894: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Gitchels survived through the hard years of the late 1890's but lost the sense of independence that had defined Ben's early hopes for the farm. They only made ends meet through the financial support of their extended family and state-sponsored relief agencies. This charity had a humbling effect on Ben; it must have been hard to accept, given his original visions of landed independence. However, Ben continued refusing to abandon their homestead and the state of Nebraska.

Rather than the tragic and dramatic plummets experienced by many settlers, the Gitchels faced a slow decline: year after year of struggles and uncertainty. By the 1890's, Ben's condition had worsened and the Gitchels relied on their children's labor and resources. By the end of that decade, Mary and the boys managed the farm without Ben's help, and their eldest daughter, Ann, brought in much needed cash income as a schoolteacher.¹⁰⁹

As debt continued to loom over the family and Ben could no longer manage the homestead, Mary took responsibility for the future of the farm and the families finances. Finally, in the spring of 1899, Mary orchestrated a deal to trade their farm for another of lesser value and enough cash to pay off their debt. On their new homestead, 22 miles northwest near Amherst, Nebraska, Mary and Jay managed a smaller acreage of Winter Wheat, while Ben's daughters taught school to bring in money. By this point, Mary served as Ben's caretaker; his stroke had left him barely able to walk or feed himself. Ben died at the Amherst homestead eight years later, in 1907, survived by Mary, seven

¹⁰⁹ Ben and Mary Gitchel to "Friends at Home," January 7, 1895; Ben Gitchel to George Gitchel, February 3, 1898: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-3).

children, and at least two grandchildren.¹¹⁰

Differences in Mary and Ben's Perspective

In the narrative of the Gitchel family, Mary's decision to sell the farm raises an obvious question: would Ben have made the same choice? During the family's first fifteen years on the Buffalo County homestead, Ben's values and vision of success dictated the direction of the farm. After Mary took charge of the farm, she moved it in a different direction, eventually selling their original land and downsizing production. This shift speaks to the importance of gendered notions of labor in their broader visions of success and redemption. Informing Ben's brother about the trade and their decision to leave the Amherst farm, Mary writes, "We have traded our farm for 104 acres near Amherst. The place is 22 miles Northwest from here... There is a small orchard on it, and the buildings are better than the buildings on this place. The trade leaves us out of debt."¹¹¹ The detached tone with which Mary delivers this news is significant, especially when contrasted with Ben's weighty invocations of courage and perseverance. The trade seems eminently practical—exchanging a farm that they can no longer run at a profit for a smaller piece of land and an end to their debt—but one cannot imagine Ben making the same choice.

Frontier men and women tended to operate in distinctly different spheres. Traditionally, men raised cattle and pigs and managed the crops—oats, corn, and wheat. They worked long hours in the field and, theoretically, brought in the bulk of the family's income. Women raised the chickens and cows, tended the family's vegetable gardens,

¹¹⁰ Mary Gitchel to George and Pina Gitchel, August 8, 1899; April 24, 1899; December 1, 1901: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-3).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

cared for the children, and managed the household and, often, household finances.¹¹² Therefore, even before the difficulties of the late '80s and early '90s, Ben and Mary had different perspectives on their homestead's successes and failures. This division of labor reinforced a gendered sense of self. Ben's self-worth and masculinity were wrapped up in his successes and failures as a farmer. In other words, he measured himself and realized his masculinity through agriculture. It follows, therefore, that his vision of personal redemption and success was strongly tied to the land. Mary, on the other hand, did not share this distance from the day-to-day difficulties of frontier life; she acted as the manager and caretaker of the home and everyday reckoned with putting food on the family's table. Her writing lacks Ben's references to a spiritual connection to the land, suggesting that her vision of success differed from Ben's ideal of agrarian redemption.

At the end of the nineteenth century, drought and dropping prices distorted the separate spheres of men and women's labor. Ostler explains, "In such times, wives and daughters worked in the fields in addition to their usual chores. Moreover, since women were generally responsible for managing the household budget, they bore the burden of stretching fewer dollars to cover necessary expenses..."¹¹³ In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the Gitchel family relied on the money Mary brought in selling eggs and butter; she bore responsibility, therefore, for producing these products, managing the family's finances, and putting food on the table. Ben's sickness put even greater pressure on Mary, and introduced uncertainty about his ability to carry their crops to harvest in the years to come. As the difficulties and hardships of the 1890s pushed Ben towards a deeper, more abstract and spiritual connection with his vision of land, it forced Mary towards

¹¹² Ostler, *Prairie Populism*, 92-93.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 93.

pragmatism. Mary's sphere had less potential for lofty ideas about faith and redemption. She could never wait and hope but had to find a way to feed her family every day.

During the early years of Ben's sickness, the couple would often write a letter together—Ben writing the first half and Mary the second. Comparing the tone of their writing provides insight into how these separate spheres manifested disparities between their perspectives and beliefs. In February of 1894, the year of the great corn failure, Ben wrote to his family:

Sometimes when I get to thinking of the old home, it seems as if I could not stand it, and then (as George says) I bite my lip and go to work, hoping for better days to come. No, George, I have not given up. That is not Ben Gitchel's nature. No, as long life shall last, I press onward... Mother, do not deprive yourself of the comforts of life for me. There will be a way provided for us.¹¹⁴

By contrast, Mary wrote:

Mother, do not send us money if you are not abundantly able for I think we will not [starve]. We have wheat nearly enough for our bread. We milk six cows. They make enough butter to buy their feed and have some left for things in the house. The hens buy their own feed and some to spare. So we have something for groceries but can get scarcely any cash for eggs. Butter and eggs are cheaper than they ever were before this time of the year. Butter 12 ½ cts., Eggs 10 cts. per doz. We have our butter contracted for 20 cts. per lb. That helps us out some.¹¹⁵

The most obvious difference between the two sections is the attention Mary pays to the pragmatic details of their survival. While Ben's optimism is based on an abstract notion of personal courage and redemption, Mary gives a levelheaded analysis of the family's financial and nutritional prospects. Ben's faith that "there will be a way provided" is balanced by Mary's calculation of how the family will eat in the weeks to come. Because

¹¹⁴ Ben and Mary Gitchel to "Friends at Home," February 20, 1894: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

of her role in the family, Mary could not afford to abstract the hardships faced by the family into questions of faith and landed redemption. While Ben essentially ignored the practical implications of the farm's economic failures, Mary more directly confronted the capitalist systems that shaped their lives and their community. Her decision to sell the farm embodies this difference in attitude and perspective. The impact of Mary's dual role as breadwinner and manager of the house on her personal beliefs speaks the way in which women could often respond to the same challenges in a different way. This resonates with the life and beliefs of Luna Kellie, examined in the Chapter Three.

Understanding Ben Gitchel

Ben Gitchel's life demonstrates the interrelatedness of all of these spheres—agricultural, capitalist, and religious—in the history of American values. In the early nineteenth century, Americans understood agriculture as a spiritual and moral exercise. In *The Health of the Country*, Conevery Valencius writes, “The process of cultivation implied a relationship between farmer and land, in which each held responsibilities to the other, and steady attention would be rewarded with fruitfulness.”¹¹⁶ This faith held fast throughout the nineteenth century, but farmers began to expect to be rewarded not simply with a fruitful harvest, but also with a profitable one. Even Jefferson's vision of an agrarian society with household manufacturers assumed a market for the farmer's goods in more urban settings. The lines dividing capitalist ethics, republican virtue, and Christianity are often blurry. Gitchel believed in the redeeming power of his land with the same faith that he believed in the power of g-d to ensure his destiny. The same agrarian vision of redemption that inspired the Homestead Act fueled settlers faith that, once they

¹¹⁶ Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (Basic Books, 2002), 135.

had their own piece of land, hard work and perseverance alone would bring them independence and material and spiritual success. Ben's own asceticism straddled these beliefs; he believed that thrift, perseverance, and industry would bring economic success and landed independence.

The economic pressures Ben faced forced him to focus on the financial successes and failures of the farm. His frustrations in this fueled his animosity towards certain structures and systems of the grain market. But Ben, like the Grange, did not, in fact, oppose the fundamental beliefs of capitalism. Instead, the organization's ideals strike a balance between Jeffersonian land-based redemption and capitalist notions of success. While the Grange espoused older notions of yeoman exceptionalism, they also emphasized technological innovation and progress and education for farmers and their children. The guiding force behind the Grange movement was the independence and "supremacy" of the producing class above the non-producing classes. While this sense of superiority may have derived from a bucolic, Jeffersonian vision of agrarian America, it manifested itself in a demand for economic leverage. As such, the farmer's movement set itself not against the highest forces or the spirit of capitalism, but against parasitic middlemen. As one leader explained in a "Farmer's Platform" from the start of the Grange movement, "We believe that the true method of guarding against commercial revulsions is to bring the producer and consumer as near together as possible, thus diminishing the alarming number and the more alarming power of non-producers."¹¹⁷ The author sought to bring together farmers and leaders of capital and industry, not set them at odds. They hoped to spark a movement that would lift farmers back up to their just

¹¹⁷ "A Farmers' Platform Adopted at Centralia, Illinois, September 15, 1858," in Carstensen, *Farmer Discontent, 1865-1900*, 19.

post of primacy but sought to do so within the structures and beliefs of capitalist-orientated society.

Thus, the reorientation of society during the nineteenth century, manifested most strikingly in the economic sphere, provided the impetus behind the movement. In the same way, Ben would never have decried corporate monopoly as “the curse of the country” if his farm had been turning a healthy profit.¹¹⁸ Ben, like other settlers, found injustice in the systems of the West because they violated not only an agrarian promise of landed independence but also the capitalist ethics of the moment. Ben Gitchel’s story embodies the way settlers at this moment brought together capitalist and agrarian beliefs: he never once wavered in his faith that his land would bring him personal, spiritual, and financial redemption. Interpretations of capitalism in America promise success in all of these spheres. Indeed, this promise suggests that morality and hard work will be rewarded with financial success and that financial success allows one entry into a higher moral plane. The next chapter examines how another settler, Benton Aldrich, engaged this duality in both his philosophical writings and his personal letters.

Despite Ben’s confidence and faith, the farm was a failure. It brought neither economic success nor landed independence to the Gitchel family but instead led to frustration, hardship, and despair. Ben’s inability to accept this failure and sell the farm during the last healthy years of his life manifests the crushing ascendancy of capitalism on the Plains at the turn of the century. His deep-rooted faith in the land could not solve the instability of Western markets nor negate the fact that in the tumultuous economy of the 1890s, the Gitchel farm would never earn enough to pay off their debts. Ben refused

¹¹⁸ Benjamin Gitchel to Father and Mother, October 22, 1886: *Gitchel-Larsen Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

to reorient himself to a society that had long since abandoned an agrarian vision of success for a capitalist one. The tragic conclusion of his life on the Plains can be seen as emblematic of the way in which the ascent of capitalism on the Plains first consumed and, ultimately, replaced older Republican and agrarian visions of success.

Chapter 2: *The Road to Eternal Life Upon the Earth*, Natural Law and Capitalist Ethics in the Life of Benton Aldrich

Between his arrival in Nemaha County, Nebraska in 1864 and his death in 1915, Benton Aldrich established himself as a successful and prominent farmer, businessman, and philanthropist. Although Aldrich arrived with little more than the \$50 needed to buy 40 acres of land, by 1893 his family's property—land, equipment, orchards, stock, and crops—was worth at least \$12,000. By 1898, they owned 450 acres of land.¹¹⁹ For Aldrich, this success validated his particular worldview, one based on social Darwinism. A farmer-philosopher who, in his old age, filled countless notebooks with social commentary and essays, Aldrich subscribed to a specific moralizing interpretation of eugenics. He believed that families could be divided into a hierarchy according to moral advancement, and that the more advanced families would naturally rise to the top of society. He was an outspoken atheist and social critic, and conceived of an exhaustive system of moral and spiritual beliefs that he followed with a religious-like zeal. His life and beliefs speak to the ambiguities between capitalist, Republican, and Protestant beliefs and, ultimately, the dominance of capitalism in the West.

This chapter examines the guiding forces in Aldrich's life, and their relationship to the structures and ethics of capitalism on the one hand and Republican virtue on the other. This chapter reflects on the tensions between Aldrich's beliefs, as captured in his essays, and the details of his life, as defined by his personal letters. Specifically, I examine his relationship with the structures of capitalism, in particular speculation and

¹¹⁹ John Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library" (MA diss., University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, 1972), 40.

debt, and the ways in which his conception of natural law and the free market informed broader ideological beliefs. While the first chapter considered how Ben Gitchel's faith in a specific vision of redemption informed his experience of failure, this chapter considers how Aldrich's related vision of redemption defined his experience of success. Specifically, it reflects on the tensions between Aldrich's ideological construction of his path to success and the actual details of his life on the Plains.

In many ways, Aldrich embodied Jefferson's vision of a virtuous yeoman. He was hard working, thrifty, and committed to preserving the fertility of his land and providing for his family. He held onto a spiritual relationship with the land and, like Ben Gitchel, believed that adherence to natural laws determined one's success as a farmer.¹²⁰ Aldrich's identity as a settler ran deep; his ancestors were some of the earliest settlers of Massachusetts in 1631 and then New Hampshire in 1741.¹²¹ A 1966 retrospective on Aldrich in the *Lincoln Evening Journal* praises him as a leading horticulturalist of the state, on par with John Sterling Morton, a neighboring settler who rose to prominence as U.S Secretary of Agriculture.¹²² In 1972, John Irwin reinforced this same vision of Aldrich in his dissertation, completed for a Masters degree in Library Science from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. While Irwin's text provides a thorough and useful account of Aldrich's life based on his own research, for which this project is significantly indebted, it fails to challenge the vision of Aldrich as a virtuous yeoman. Irwin seems to accept at face value Aldrich's own presentation of himself as a hard-working, self-sacrificing, virtuous, and thoughtful settler and farmer.

¹²⁰ Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library," 23.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²² Dean Terrill, "Man Responsible for Thousands Of Trees Little Known in State," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, April 21, 1966.

In the traditional historiography of the western frontier, this interpretation of Aldrich's life and beliefs would have sufficed. Works such as Everett Dick's *Conquering the Great Plains* and older articles published *Nebraska History*, such as Herbert Hoover's "John Milton Leeper: Pioneer Farmer," endorse the image of the settler-farmer as a self-sacrificing hero, toiling night and day to give his children a better life.¹²³ The argument of this chapter, without denying the heroism, courage, or self-sacrifice of Benton Aldrich, or any other settler, tries to delve deeper, considering what systems of belief defined this vision of heroism and success. Specifically, it explores the relationship between spiritual fulfillment and material success in interpretations of morality and natural law.

Aldrich subscribed to a Jeffersonian vision of redemption that valued the honor of agriculture and the special place of the farmer in society. Like Gitchel, he grounded this vision of redemption in his relationship to a single piece of land. At the same time, the details of Aldrich's life and certain aspects of his writing reveal a parallel commitment to the capitalist ethics of the time. Specifically, he put faith in the ability of the free market to reflect natural laws and thereby allow morally superior individuals, families, and races to reach the top of society. This chapter pays close attention to Aldrich's relationship with the economic structures of the time, especially in contrast to his later philosophical considerations of virtue, land, and economics.

Although Aldrich's arrival in Nebraska preceded Ben Gitchel's by more than a decade, this paper does not seek a distinct historical comparison but, rather, presents them both as significant case studies in the history of failure and success on the Great Plains. While financial failure pushed Gitchel towards agrarian hope, financial success solidified

¹²³ Everett Newton Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890* Landmark ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Hoover, "John Milton Leeper; Pioneer Farmer."

Aldrich's confidence in the moralizing power of a free market. Interestingly, it is not the differences between the two's belief systems, but rather their similarities that show the significance of capitalist individualism at this moment in history.

Early Life of Benton Aldrich

Benton Aldrich was born on a farm in western New Hampshire in 1831 to a well connected and reasonably well off family, wealthy enough to send him to a private academy in Vermont for high school.¹²⁴ The Aldrich family embodied puritan New England virtue: hard working, successful, and family-oriented. Aldrich would later recollect how his upbringing instilled in him the eminence of one's ancestry and heritage. He later wrote of this, "It was the family that was the object of life, not anyone of the family."¹²⁵ In his youth, Aldrich excelled in math and science, and took up surveying as a hobby. Around 1850, Aldrich, now a young man, was offered a job at a local bank, but turned it down and soon left New England to seek his fortunes on the burgeoning western frontier.¹²⁶ As he came from a family of pioneers, he understood his westward movement as an opportunity to define and prove himself. His later correspondence with his parents, particularly his father, seems to highlight this attempt to demonstrate his mettle in the West.

After leaving New Hampshire, Aldrich spent more than a decade working for wages and farming in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Around 1852, he first arrived in St. Croix County, Wisconsin, near the town of Hudson, where he worked as a farm laborer

¹²⁴ Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library," 22.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 21-24.

and filed a claim under the preemption system for 270 acres of land.¹²⁷ Brimming with enthusiasm, Aldrich still lacked the start-up capital necessary to make his land profitable and lamented the high interest rates on loans in Wisconsin, demonstrating an awareness of the harsh economics of frontier farming.¹²⁸ Around this time, he met his wife-to-be, Martha Jane Harshman (or Jenny), but similarly worried that he lacked the money to build a home for the two of them.¹²⁹ As he explained to his mom in December of 1853, “I wish that I could get some money for it would be the means of my having a home.” Aldrich saw this start up capital as a the means to his deeper goals—a home and a stable, thriving family.

The path to this goal, as explained in his letters home, begins to reveal a specific vision of personal redemption. In a letter to his mother, he explained:

My worldly affairs are as prosperous as I could expect... But if I had two or three hundred dollars more than I have, it would help me a great deal. But I suppose there is no use wishing for that will not bring it, but hard work will and I have some of it left yet. I mean not to work so hard that when I get some property that I can enjoy it. It is a long road for a poor boy to get a fair competence or even commence to get one but I think I will have me a kind of home in the course of two years... Oh mother I want a home and I must have one sometime if possible. I think I know of a woman who would make it look cheerful, I wish that you were acquainted with her. I think that you would be pleased with her.¹³⁰

Aldrich was confident that his hard work would ultimately bring prosperity and allow him to establish a home and a family. Similarly, this quote begins to illuminate an

¹²⁷ The Preemption system, which preceded the Homestead Act, allowed settlers to file a residency-based claim on a piece of land and purchase it from the government for \$1.25 an acre. See Douglas W. Allen, "Homesteading and Property Rights; Or, "How the West Was Really Won", *Journal of Law and Economics* 34, no. 1 (1991): 18-20.

¹²⁸ Benton Aldrich to Mother, December 28, 1853; November 13, 1853: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹²⁹ Benton Aldrich to Mother, May 9, 1854: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1); Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library," 23.

¹³⁰ Benton Aldrich to Mother, May 14, 1854: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

important duality in his vision of personal redemption and success. On the one hand, his regret at not having another two or three hundred dollars to invest speaks to a capitalist ideal of success; on the other, his hope of building a home resonates with Republican ideals. Similarly, Aldrich's invocation of his future wife in this context demonstrates the interconnectedness of Aldrich's finances, personal goals, and thirst to prove himself to his family. Another interesting aspect of this letter is Aldrich's vow "not to work so hard" that he doesn't enjoy his future prosperity. This seems to contradict his austerity and admonitions of luxury and idleness expressed in his essays as an older man.

In describing his path to success as "a long road for a poor boy," Aldrich constructs a specific life narrative for himself. In this story, he clearly separates himself and his financial situation from his reasonably wealthy parents. This vision independence shaped his vision of success on the Plains. He writes in another letter to his mother a few days after the one quoted above:

"The fact is I feel poor. I suppose that my property is worth about \$800. I have one 40 acres of land that was not entered when father was here last that I can take \$150.00 for if I would wait a short time, but I cannot do so as I had rather have my property than any man's promise to pay... You do not know how much 2 or \$300 are worth to a man in this country. I suppose that I must stay here till I make something... You have all you want of money but my case is different. I have laid many a night on the cold ground (because I could not get a trifle more pay) where the wind blew my hair in snarls like a horse's mane..."¹³¹

Aldrich explicitly separates himself and his labor from his parents' resources, and the tone of this letter suggests a deep need to prove himself by facing adversity alone. The amount of capital and property he controlled at the time shows that by no means was he actually poor. This expressed feeling of poverty, therefore, suggests a loosely constructed

¹³¹ Benton Aldrich to Mother, May 14, 1853: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

narrative of his own life based on his rise and redemption from poverty to wealth. He brings a dramatic flair to this with his understated angst and poetic phrasing—“I suppose that I must stay here till I make something” and “the wind blew my hair in snarls like a horse’s mane.” While this individualism plays an important role in Aldrich’s conception of his life’s work, in the years to come it would contradict the actual details of his life on the Plains.

The quote above also speaks to Aldrich’s economic aspirations during these first years out West. His usage of the phrase “make something” in this context suggests that he prioritized economic success. Ultimately, he understood financial success as indicative of strength of character and saw the desire to prove oneself in this field as a mark of independence of character. In other letters, he repeatedly explains to his mother how much he could accomplish with just a few hundred dollars to invest. For example, in 1853, he writes, “Five hundred dollars would be worth more to me now than four times as much by and by.”¹³² Aldrich had an early understanding of the economic dynamics of the country and the opportunities created by the fluctuating, open markets for land in the West. Indeed, Aldrich’s understanding of the West was defined by the economic opportunities it offered. When his mother asked why he wouldn’t rather own a farm in New Hampshire, he explained, “Mother it would seem hard to leave this country a man can live with half the labor here, or can make \$1,000 in half the time. Now if I had a farm [in New England] all that I could do would be to live and hold my own.” In Wisconsin, he turned down a number of clerkships, explaining to his mother that he would rather be

¹³² Benton Aldrich to Mother, November 13, 1853: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1). Also see Benton Aldrich to Mother, December 28, 1853; November 13, 1853; May 9, 1854; May 14, 1855: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

a farmer.¹³³ Frontier farming offered both industrial liberty—that is control over his own labor—and the possibility for economic growth without a definite ceiling. As he explained to his mother about the West, “not that it is heaven as some seem to expect, but it is better than New England for a poor man and also for any man that cares a scrap for independence of character.”¹³⁴ Like Ben Gitchel, Aldrich’s understood success based on a specific masculine identity. Realizing his independence in the West would reify his worth not just as a person, but as a man.

While Aldrich consistently worked for wages during his first years in the West, he was often preoccupied with more ambitious economic ventures: buying and selling land in order to turn a profit. Land speculation plays an important role in the history of the Great Plains during the second half of the nineteenth century. Speculators bought up cheap land and manipulated the Preemption Act (1841), the Homestead Act (1862), and the Timber Culture Act (1873) with fraudulent entries and outright corruption in order to take control of millions of acres of the West, which they held and sold at a profit.¹³⁵ Paul Gates, a leading historian of land policy, found that, between 1862 and 1873, twenty-seven investors controlled 250,000 acres of Nebraskan land.¹³⁶ Most land in Nebraska changed hands a number of times, and speculators quickly took control of the most fertile and centrally located tracts. The Eastern land speculator often plays the role of the villain in histories of the frontier. Similarly settlers felt that speculators raised local land prices

¹³³ Benton Aldrich to Mother, December 28, 1853: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹³⁴ Benton Aldrich to Mother, August 5, 1855: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹³⁵ Paul Gates, "The Homestead Law in an Incongruous Land System," *American Historical Review* 41, no. 4 (1936): 656.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 666.

without helping to cultivate the land or build communities.¹³⁷ Historians like Alan Kulikoff, who study the development of capitalist structures in the West, also suggest that speculators were part of the larger force that denied settlers their economic independence.¹³⁸ As such, the Western land speculator is often used as a paradigm of capitalism's conquest of the agrarian West.

However, contemporary historians suggest a blurrier line between settler and speculator and a less obvious narrative. H. W Brands, for example, points to test cases in which settlers filed on claims with the expressed intent of selling the land as soon as they proved up—indeed, most historians agree that this was a common and effective means of manipulating the Homestead Act and an easy way to earn some of the start-up capital needed to build a successful farm. Brands points out that, in so doing, settlers looked at their claims as investments; they were, he asserts, small-time speculators and capitalists.¹³⁹ This provides an interesting model for understanding Aldrich's role as a speculator and speaks to the duality of his agrarian and capitalist visions of success. He was at once embedded in the capitalist systems of the time and committed to an agrarian vision of the frontier. Later in life, Aldrich decried the immorality of holding and selling land solely for profit, raising interesting questions in contrast to these early years.

¹³⁷ Allan G. Bogue and Margaret Beattie Bogue, "'Profits' and the Frontier Land Speculator," *The Journal of Economic History* 17, no. 1 (1957): 1.

¹³⁸ Allan Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (1989): 141-42.

¹³⁹ H. W. Brands, *American Colossus: The Triumph of Capitalism, 1865-1900*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2010), 217-18. This moment parallels the housing bubble of the 1990s, which similarly preceded economic collapse and instability. The conclusion of this paper explores the implications of this parallel between visions of capitalist redemption at the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century.

Although Aldrich presents a narrative of self-reliance in his letters, his success on the frontier, especially in this field of land speculation, actually depended on connections and resources from his family and friends back east. In 1852, Aldrich's father subsidized one of his first speculative ventures, buying the land of a man named Farrar for Aldrich to improve and sell for a profit. In a letter thanking his father, Aldrich explains, "My obligation to you for paying for said are more than I can express in words, yet I will be most happy to return your kindness in part, if possible by acts. It will be a great help to me, as it will enable me to make myself a home much sooner than I otherwise could have done."¹⁴⁰ Even in the context of this purely financial assistance, Aldrich thanks his father by mentioning how this will help him "build a home." Aldrich's offer to return the favor to his father by "acts" refers to further speculative ventures. In the same letter, he offers one opportunity to turn a quick profit by buying an improved farm. As Aldrich explains, "He is in a snap for his preemption has run out and he can not pay for land. He asks \$700 for the improvements but he told me privately that if he could get \$200 in cash he would take it rather than run the risk of losing the whole. I think the above is the best chance for making money that I have seen since I have been West."¹⁴¹ Aldrich would eventually manage a number of investments for his father during his years in Wisconsin.

In 1854, Aldrich formed a business partnership with a family friend from New Hampshire, Mr. Norris. Subsidized once again by Aldrich's father, the two speculated on land and bought a team of horses in order to hire themselves out to plow other people's

¹⁴⁰ Benton Aldrich to Father, October 28, 1852: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

fields. Aldrich's father acted as the primary investor in this enterprise.¹⁴² Aldrich assured his father in a letter of October 1854:

...if I had money by me I think I could dispose of it to as good advantage as we talked of. In that case you would send me a power of attorney. And again we (Norris and myself) think that in case we don't get our means into money we could use some of your money next spring to good advantage to you and ourselves. We can give you good security.¹⁴³

By this point, Aldrich had become completely immersed in these economic ventures, putting on hold his vision of landed, yeoman independence in order to earn the money to bring that dream into fruition.

These investments defined Aldrich's relationship with his father during these years. As demonstrated in the quote above, Aldrich's father now served as a sponsor and manager of his son's efforts. Their relationship blurred the lines between economics and moral obligation in a way that proves informative for a broader analysis of Aldrich's life. Time and time again, one sees Aldrich implicating economic matters into his moral beliefs, and vice versa. By going into business subsidized by his father and with a family friend, Benton's actions clearly contradict his self-constructed narrative of a poor man trying to prove himself. This contradiction raises questions about the significance of Aldrich's vision of self-reliance and independence. What vision of personal redemption so clearly overshadowed the realities of Aldrich's life on the Plains?

Although he relied on his father for these initial investments, Aldrich's own understanding of the market systems in Wisconsin ensured his success. His letters reveal a clear and comprehensive awareness of the financial dynamics of the frontier,

¹⁴² Benton Aldrich to Father, November 17, 1854: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁴³ Benton Aldrich to Father, November 17, 1854 and December 11, 1854: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

specifically the fluctuations in land prices. He acted deliberately in deciding when and how to buy, improve, and sell land. For example, as he explained to his mother in 1854, “You see that land is rising in value every day.... I would not sell the 70 spoken of above if I did not want the money to improve my place.”¹⁴⁴ Aldrich constantly demonstrated this mastery in letters to his father—indeed, it seems that this inspired his father’s decision to invest in the West and in Aldrich specifically. Ultimately, successes in these fields filled Aldrich with the confidence to marry Jenny, the woman he described earlier to his mother. As the two began to plan a home together, they hoped to leave St. Croix County for somewhere with more opportunities for themselves and their posterity.¹⁴⁵

In the fall and winter of 1854, Aldrich began to liquidize his investments in order to buy land somewhere less developed. In 1855, he sold the land he had accumulated for about \$600.¹⁴⁶ By this time, he had gathered experience both in farming and land speculation and had saved some amount of money from his wage-labor, speculation on land, and business ventures with Norris. Aldrich believed he could best put this to use in a more stable, long-term investment. He writes, “Still I don’t think it would be so well for me to put my means [in speculation] as it would to buy a farm and put my labor and means into improvements, for you are aware that I want a home.”¹⁴⁷ Aldrich saw his moneymaking ventures in Wisconsin simply as the means to his end goal—a financially stable and privately owned farm and home. Aldrich eventually decided on Winona,

¹⁴⁴ Benton Aldrich to Mother, August 15, 1854: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁴⁵ Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library," 22-23.

¹⁴⁶ Benton Aldrich to Father, October 7, 1854: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Minnesota as the location for his new home and filed a claim here under the preemption system for 60 acres of land at \$1.25 an acre.¹⁴⁸

Building a Home

Aldrich's description of the country around Winona reveals an interesting perspective on the value of land. He wrote to his father upon his arrival in Minnesota, "[Winona] is healthy, timber is not very plenty and no pine timber. Flour is \$7.50 per bbl. corn 60 cents, potatoes 50, cows none to be until spring when we shall get them from below. Oxen about the same as with you. Plenty of chances for speculation."¹⁴⁹ Like Ben Gitchel, therefore, Aldrich understood the price of crops and other staples to be a defining aspect of a place, as important as its soil quality and the availability of timber. However, Aldrich also included opportunities to speculate in this assessment of its merits. His usage of the term "healthy" to describe this land resonates with Conevery Valencius' *Health of the Country*. Valencius examines the deep and multifaceted connections eighteenth-century Americans drew between themselves and their land and how the language they used reflected this connection. They understood their own physical health and spiritual well being as an extension of their relationship to this land and the land's inherent goodness or healthfulness.¹⁵⁰ The fact that Aldrich comments on the financial environment of the area in such close proximity to the "health" of the land reveals how these economic considerations defined his understanding of the land. For Aldrich, a healthy and dynamic local economy meant more opportunities for a farmer-businessman like himself. Just as Aldrich's visions of success rested on financial gain, so too did his vision of a healthy country rely on economic opportunities. For some, new and growing

¹⁴⁸ Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library," 24.

¹⁴⁹ Benton Aldrich to Father, December 27, 1854: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁵⁰ Valencius, *The Health of the Country*.

local economies, based in part on rising land prices, were as much part of the allure of the West as the virgin, untamed land. In this way, nineteenth-century visions of redemption emphasized prosperity, while the eighteenth-century farmers, like those studied by Valencius, imagined a more holistic and spiritual landed redemption.

In Winona, Minnesota, Mary and Benton spent the next seven years (1855-1862) trying to “make a home” on these 60 acres of land.¹⁵¹ Their first three children, Karl, Nella, and Mary were born there, and they lived, for a time, as Aldrich put it “contented as beggars.”¹⁵² Aldrich’s use of this phrase implies the satisfaction they felt in laboring to realize their hopes of landed wealth and independence. The family grew corn and wheat and tried, unsuccessfully, to raise fruit orchards. Benton also helped establish the small farm community of Wiscoy and served as its first postmaster.¹⁵³

At the start of the civil war, however, Aldrich came into conflict with his neighbors over his radical views and forthright attitude. As a self-proclaimed pacifist, he opposed the Civil War and was vocal about how he would refuse to serve even if drafted. As he explained to his mother, “I have no right to kill an innocent man to save my own life.”¹⁵⁴ He felt that the federal government often overreached into the lives of individuals and was therefore hypocritical in fighting a war against slavery. He saw government control as its own form of slavery, and explained to his mother that he could not understand fighting to free the slaves when “I have enough trouble not being one.”¹⁵⁵ Regardless of the subtleties of his stance, Aldrich’s neighbors took issue with his

¹⁵¹ Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library," 23-24.

¹⁵² Ibid., 26. Benton Aldrich to Mother, April 5, 1855 and October 7, 1855: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁵³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵⁴ Benton Aldrich to Mother, November 2, 1856: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁵⁵ Benton Aldrich to Mother, September 1, 1862: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

opposition and pressured him out of town, even going so far as to try to bribe the sheriff to arrest him on trumped up charges.¹⁵⁶ In 1862, these tensions, as well as rising violence with Indians in the area, led the Aldrichs to relocate to a farm in Dunn County, Wisconsin, only two and a half miles from Jenny's parents. Balking at the idea that he had been forced off his own land, Aldrich explained to his mother they moved in order for Jenny to feel safer when he had to leave home.¹⁵⁷

At the Dunn County homestead, the family farmed 25 acres of wheat and raised a few animals. However, the farm had the infrastructure to accommodate a much more ambitious operation—an important virtue of the place for Aldrich. It included “a horse stable for 5 horses, a grainery which will hold 500 bu. of grain, a good corn crib made of lumber, and a hog pen made of lumber large enough for a dozen hogs. In fact, the place, for a western, is fixed up in nice shape.”¹⁵⁸ This possibility for upward mobility defined Aldrich's perspective on farming and corresponds with the ambiguity between agrarian and capitalist hopes considered in this chapter. His sentiments seem to resonate with the republican vision of middle class mobility outlined in Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*. As discussed in this paper's introduction, Foner argues that, although the discipline and self-sacrifice of the Protestant work ethic influenced Republican ethics, upward mobility also played an important role. He describes the importance of Protestant values—hard work, thrift, industry—in Republican ethics, but writes:

“In a static economy, therefore, the concept of a calling may be associated with the idea of an hierarchical social order, with more or less fixed classes. But Republicans rejected

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Benton Aldrich to Mother, October 6, 1862: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁵⁸ Benton Aldrich to Mother, November 2, 1862: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

this image of society. Their outlook was grounded in the Protestant ethic, but in its emphasis on social mobility and economic growth, it reflected an adaptation of that ethic to the dynamic, expansive, capitalist society of the ante-bellum North.”¹⁵⁹

While living on the Dunn County homestead, Aldrich continued to chart the speculative property value of his land in letters back to his parents as a way of measuring his success. He explained to his mother, “We think we have made a good change, we think this place is worth as much, at least, as the one we left.”¹⁶⁰ Real estate value played a continually important role in Aldrich’s letters and, ostensibly, in his decisions and self-understanding. At the close of this letter, he appeals to his mother, “I hope you will not think we are very poor now.”¹⁶¹ Money, and the potential to make more of it, continued to occupy an important space in Aldrich’s sense of self-worth. Poverty, as Aldrich alludes to it here, represents not just an economic condition but also a metaphysical state of being—a moral and spiritual deficiency.

By 1864, Aldrich’s search for prosperity and independence had pointed him further west, towards the Great Plains of Kansas and Nebraska. In the fall of this year, he took a train to Iowa and then embarked southwest on an eleven-day, 260-mile journey by foot to arrive in White Cloud, Kansas. During this trip, he spoke with locals and tried to learn as much as possible about the region’s agricultural and speculative opportunities.¹⁶² He explained his intentions in a letter he wrote back to Jenny: “I hope to make you and our dear children happier and myself better thereby.... I have kept the question, “Can we

¹⁵⁹ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 13.

¹⁶⁰ Benton Aldrich to Mother, November 2, 1862: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Benton Aldrich to Martha Jane Aldrich, October 1, 1863: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

benefit ourselves by coming here, continually in my mind.”¹⁶³ During his travels, Aldrich decided that fruit raising and sheep offered the best opportunities in the region, while low and unstable prices for wheat and corn made these an unreliable way to make a living.¹⁶⁴ Aldrich also decided that Nebraska offered better opportunities than Kansas for buying land. He writes, “The land is cheaper, less settlement, less subject to growth. The great evil here.”¹⁶⁵ Aldrich hoped to ensure his family’s continual success and stability by building a farm in a community with space for economic and agricultural expansion. He understood the need to establish oneself before entering into free market competition. Aldrich also saw the competitive people of Kansas to be morally suspect and believed the communities of the more sparsely populated Nebraska to be superior. In this way, his vision of a less populated community aligned with a notion of agrarian and Republican independence and virtue.

Eventually, Aldrich decided on Nemaha County, Nebraska, on the southeastern tip of the state, near the Missouri River. Having already filed a homestead claim in Minnesota, Aldrich chose not to violate the law, and, instead of filing an illegal second claim, he bought 40 acres of land from the government at \$1.25 an acre, borrowing the necessary \$50 from a family friend.¹⁶⁶ In the spring of 1865, he retrieved his family—his wife, Karl, now 9, Nella, 8, and Mary, 4—from Wisconsin and brought them to their new home, where Aldrich would live until his death in 1918.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Ibid., 1. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library," 24.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 26-27.

Success in Nebraska

Aldrich embraced the establishment and improvement of the Nemaha homestead as his life's capstone. His dedication to this task transcended all spheres of his life and became an intractable part of his self and his understanding of his family. During their first year, the family built a simple stone and sod dug-out house, broke land for their neighbors, started a small nursery of apple trees, and in response to the scarcity of timber, set out to plant acres of cedar.¹⁶⁸ In letters to his mother, he relished the work that they put into the land, explaining, "we have never enjoyed ourselves better.... There is pleasure in taking a bare [piece] land and fix it up in good taste [sic]."¹⁶⁹ A specific vision of individual aspiration and redemption fueled this work ethic; like Ben Gitchel, Aldrich took satisfaction in working towards this redemption. At the close of this first year, he wrote to her,

... it seems good to sit down after a long, hard, year's work... We have worked faithfully, but it has not been so tiresome as we have been hopeful of having, by and by, a plenty of fruit and other things we could not have in Wis. or Minn. But I fear I do not know enough to go on with first rate success. We are trying to get information from every quarter. We shall go slowly at first, do all the work ourselves, and then nobody else will be to blame for wrong steps.¹⁷⁰

Aldrich uses the language of faith—"worked faithfully"—to describe his efforts during this first year. This invocation implies to his confidence that the family's hard work will bring future success. He emphasizes their self-reliance, knowledge, and independence as the best path towards this redemption, keeping in line with both Republican capitalist notions of self-determination. Their hopes for material success became a vision of spiritual redemption. In 1871, he writes to his mother, "During the first six years of my

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 27-30.

¹⁶⁹ Benton Aldrich to Mother, August 5, 1865: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1), 2.

¹⁷⁰ Benton Aldrich to Mother, December 16, 1865: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-1).

married life so far as money was concerned I lost, lost at every stop, but since then we have made money without any losses for we trust no one to any great amount.”¹⁷¹

Aldrich’s goal, therefore—at least as he explained it to his family—was material success on his own terms and through his own force of will. In this way, his personal ethics manifest the strict individualism that emerged during the nineteenth century.

As planned during his visit to the Plains, Aldrich dedicated much of his land and energy towards fruit production, although the family also raised wheat and livestock. Between 1869 and 1871, the family built a massive apple orchard.¹⁷² In this spring of 1871, Aldrich planted over 1,200 apple trees, establishing, he believed, a resource that would provide for decades to come. In an April letter, he wrote to his mother regarding this ambitious crop: “these, together with all the other fruit trees and plants we have, make me downhearted sometimes when I think of the labor they will require before they bring any return. I tell the children they must keep a stiff upper lip for a few years and then circumstances will be better.”¹⁷³ In this way, Aldrich engaged with a more long-term vision of redemption, evident in his emphasis on this orchard as the “foundation for his prosperity.”¹⁷⁴ He details his numerous heart-breaking failures in previous attempts to establish an orchard—first in Minnesota and then, at the hands of grasshoppers, in Nebraska. He writes, “All these, and more adverse circumstances which I have not mentioned, kept us back 14 years; I believe this might have tried a person of less persistent character, but I never for once gave up having a Good Orchard [sic].”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Benton Aldrich to Mother, February 16, 1871: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁷² Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library," 30.

¹⁷³ Benton Aldrich to Mother, April 19, 1871: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁷⁴ Benton Aldrich to Mother, May 8, 1871: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Aldrich constructs a narrative of his life work in which only his persistence and force-of-will brought the success that, Aldrich implies, he so richly deserved.

Ultimately, Aldrich would find this financial and personal success with the Nemaha homestead. By 1871, he had established the family economically on the strength of their success raising livestock and fruit. In contrast to earlier letters home that detailed the hardships of a “poor boy” struggling to make it, letters from this period detail a sense of success and prosperity. Aldrich continued to measure this by comparing his wealth to that of his parents. In a letter from February of 1871, Aldrich estimates that the farm was worth at least \$8,000 and that the family earned \$500 a year beyond household expenses. He then implores his mother, “I am contented to lay by 500\$ per year I [believe] that is about what you used to make. I hope you will read this to Father that he may know that we are not likely to go to the Poor House and that his silly son is not quite worthless.”¹⁷⁶ Here, Aldrich evaluates his success against the achievements of his parents. He feels harbored against failure only after reaching the same degree of economic stability enjoyed by them. In this moment, he finally feels vindicated in his decision to move west.

Aldrich saw the orchard he established in 1871 as a turning point in his life work, and after its completion, he focused on preserving and expanding the homestead as a financial base for his posterity. As he explained to his mother, “my great life work is done. Here after I must care for what I have got—work hard, be economical, saving, thinking more than once before I step, particularly for a few years, yet my road is thenceforth down hill.”¹⁷⁷ Ultimately, this new path led Aldrich to focus on long-term investments and profit. While waiting for his orchard to come into fruition, he focused on

¹⁷⁶ Benton Aldrich to Mother, February 16, 1871: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

raising livestock—mainly pigs and cattle. By the fall of 1873, he raised and sold about 200 hogs, and travelled to Minnesota in order to purchase cattle that he would use to start a herd back in Nebraska.¹⁷⁸ In 1876, this herd had expanded, and he wintered 275 hogs and 50 steers.¹⁷⁹

In the same year, Aldrich established a circulating library for the surrounding community, which grew into the successful and influential Clifton Farmer's Library. Irwin's dissertation, which focuses on the impact of the Library, suggests that Aldrich saw the expansion of his personal library into a public one as a moral imperative and a service to the public good for generations to come.¹⁸⁰ Above all, Aldrich hoped the library would help educate younger members of the community in moral righteousness and older members in the physical and philosophical manifestations of natural law.¹⁸¹ By 1877, the Aldrich orchard began to produce fruit, and they earned over \$500 in their first growing season.¹⁸² Three years later, their returns on fruit continued to grow, and they continued to expand their livestock operations. They harvested 450 bushels of apples this season and made almost \$2,000 in the sale of hogs.¹⁸³ By this time, Karl had become an able and productive worker and manager of the farm, and the Aldrichs had earned enough to employ outside labor to help with day-to-day work.¹⁸⁴ From his start as a roaming settler and small-time speculator, Aldrich emerged as a wealthy and prominent farmer and businessman.

¹⁷⁸ Benton Aldrich to Mother, November 23, 1873: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁷⁹ Benton Aldrich to Mother, August 13, 1876: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁸⁰ Irwin, 61.

¹⁸¹ Irwin, 68-70.

¹⁸² Benton Aldrich to Mother, August 31, 1877: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁸³ Benton Aldrich to Mother, August 26, 1880: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-3).

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The financial success of Aldrich's farm must be attributed to his savvy as a businessman and his ability to predict and work within market fluctuations. From the start of the 1870s, Aldrich focused on hedging his bets and spreading out investments. After describing the poor wheat crop of the season and its effects on the debt of farmers, he writes, "We manage to have several ways to get money so that if one or two do fail we do not cry—in fact we expect such failure."¹⁸⁵ As instability was the norm in nineteenth-century Great Plains agriculture, Aldrich's ability to absorb losses with smart investing set him apart from other farmers. Similarly, he demonstrated an ability to predict how and when a market would turn in his favor, another fundamental talent of any successful businessman. In the fall of 1874, Aldrich paid a premium to raise a group of hogs on wheat after a failed corn crop. As he explained to his mother, "We do not expect to make any money by feeding this year, but the object is to have a large stock on hand when the next corn crop comes. Hogs are almost all sold out of the state..."¹⁸⁶ This prediction reveals an ability to decipher the interconnected market patterns of Western agriculture.

In the summer of the next year, swarms of grasshoppers destroyed crops across Nebraska, making it extremely difficult and expensive to raise hogs. Once again, Aldrich hoped to weather the storm in order to come out ahead. As he explained to his mother, "If we can hold on till the plague is past it will be one of the best strokes we have made lately..."¹⁸⁷ Aldrich's success must be understood within the context of a constant series of calculated financial decisions. By 1876, he was managing extensive investments in his orchards and livestock, and seems to have become an expert in balancing the various

¹⁸⁵ Benton Aldrich to Mother, May 5, 1871: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁸⁶ Benton Aldrich to Mother, November 8, 1874: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁸⁷ Benton Aldrich to Mother, June 13, 1880: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-3).

inputs and exports of a financially solvent Nebraska farm. In order to do so, he had to calculate the initial and variable costs of an investment against its future profits. In 1876, for example, he calculated the costs of raising cattle:

We have lately contracted to have 50 head of steers to fatten this winter. They will weigh about 1100 lbs. each and will cost about \$2,000. Of course we do not pay for them till sold, paying in the mean time 12 percent interest. The above stock will consume near 25 bushels of corn per day. The capital required to supply hogs and corn will be as much as the cost of the cattle, \$2,000 more...¹⁸⁸

By evaluating and understanding the current and future costs of these ventures, Aldrich found success in the western agricultural markets.

Understanding Success

In some ways, Aldrich's beliefs resonate with those of the ill-fated Ben Gitchel. Both highlighted their perseverance and hard work, and both believed, with a religious-like fervor, that such work would bring them success. Also both believed adherence to natural law would ensure their success as farmers. Similarly, both grounded their visions of redemption in their relationship with the land. This moment in Aldrich's life, therefore, marks a key distinction between the two men. While Gitchel clung to his hopes through true poverty and despair, for Aldrich, they were realized as his orchards and wealth continued to grow. Setting aside, for the moment, the factors that may have contributed to their respective fates, it is interesting to consider how success in and of itself shaped Aldrich's beliefs.

In these years, Aldrich adopted a rigid belief in the nineteenth-century doctrine of individual responsibility. As, he wrote to his mother: "You will hear hard stories about the suffering in Nebraska in consequence of Drouth and Grasshoppers. The people who

¹⁸⁸ Benton Aldrich to Mother, August 13, 1876: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

are asking for help are both lazy and shiftless and in nine cases out of ten the more you give them the worse they are off. They have no business on the [eastern] frontier, and the sooner they are driven back the better.”¹⁸⁹ While Ben Gitchel looked to external forces to explain his situation—not only drought but also greedy banks and railroads—Benton Aldrich denied the possibility that anything other than personal failure could lead to poverty. In Aldrich’s later philosophical essays, he saw the ability to acquire and hold property as an inherited moral sense. His vision of capitalism left no space to question how systemic injustices might lead to individual failure. It seems inevitable that Aldrich’s own success in these years informed this vision.

Eighteenth-century notions of virtue defined Aldrich’s relationship to capitalism. Aldrich denounced luxury, conspicuous consumption, and the accumulation of capital as a goal in itself. This stance echoes Ben Franklin’s eighteenth-century ideas about wealth, especially when compared to popular attitudes of the nineteenth-century Northern Gilded-Age elite.¹⁹⁰ Aldrich swore to avoid these pitfalls of greed and materialism and often compared his virtue to the vices of his friend and old business associate, Levi Farrar. In a letter in 1872, Aldrich claims that immorality caused the deterioration of Farrar’s health. He writes, “Levi’s trouble is in his head—‘the love of money’ We are making property rapidly, but I am determined the love [sic] of it shall not make me insane. When our income in money is greater I shall spend more to make life a pleasure.”¹⁹¹ As an alternative to Farrar’s attitude, Aldrich prescribes for himself and his

¹⁸⁹ Benton Aldrich to Mother, November 8, 1874: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

¹⁹⁰ In this way, Aldrich’s beliefs align with Franklin’s doctrine as discussed in the introduction: Ben Franklin, “The Way to Wealth,” in Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, 34-36.

¹⁹¹ Benton Aldrich to Mother, January 1, 1872: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

family a careful and considered frugality and constantly emphasized foresight and longevity.

Essentially, Aldrich understood the free economy as a sphere of character building and individual growth. In 1876, he wrote to his mother regarding how the family had changed over the past few years: “We have more confidence in ourselves; find it easier to live among ourselves alone—nearly; find that we can be in more easy circumstances without fooling our money away. This gives us confidence in trying to still further enlarge our income that we may extend our pleasures.”¹⁹² Aldrich embedded ideas about morality in a discourse of capitalism. He asserts that only after reaching a higher moral plane should one try to expand one’s property and capital and begin to enjoy the comforts of life.

Capitalist Ethics and Aldrich’s Morality

Despite his emphasis on personal independence and self-reliance, Aldrich continued to depend on help from his family, especially during lean years at the turn of the century. Like the initial assistance he received from his father, this calls into question whether Aldrich’s life actually aligned with his proclaimed vision of self-determination. Some of his actions in these years also raise tensions between his emphasis on virtue and honesty in business on the one hand and his actual exploits as a businessman on the other. In 1900, Nemaha County and the Aldrich homestead hit upon hard times financially. However, instead of focusing on keeping his farm afloat, Aldrich borrowed money from his sister to buy up the property of his worse-off neighbors. After thanking her, he explains:

¹⁹² Benton Aldrich to Mother, August 13, 1876: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-2).

It is this way, when a calamity comes, one must do something to meet it. If the public see him selling off his cattle or other stock, or disposing of anything he ought otherwise to keep, it can see at once that he has no means in hand to go on with. We have none of us any to much farm stock and selling it off cuts down prospective income. If a family suffering as we are from a misfortune can hold the even tenor of our way it shows a desirable stability and foresight which [is] not universal. When the grasshoppers were here and all of our crops eaten so that we had to import food, I borrowed \$500.00 in cash, and used it mainly in buying what my neighbors felt obliged to sell at a very low price. People seeing that I was buying for cash offered to sell to me and give me time to pay. I accepted these—[some] of them—when I felt sure I could turn the property into cash in the proper time. In six months I was in debt near \$1,100.00. (You will notice we had only 40 acres of land at that time.) Then I began to pay and had something to pay with. I could give you the details, but they might not be interesting. Of one or two facts I will venture to refer to. I borrowed of those who had money to loan, and, too, of those who had confidence in me, of course, and I had confidence in myself. I had confidence in my family that if I made dollar they would not ever desire to squander it for show and folly. This venture of buying when a panic was in the air to sell was the first one I had tried. The result was this, in the one year from the beginning of the panic—which lasted only two or three months—I supported my family in our usual economic style and cleared over \$1000.00. This was good but it was not the best of it, I thereby got the confidence of monied [sic] men that I was not likely to be rattled—our word for frightened—because my neighbors were.¹⁹³

In this letter, Aldrich acknowledges the importance of appearances and, one could argue, of deceit in business. This raises certain questions in light of Aldrich's usual emphasis on honesty and virtue in all spheres of life. He deliberately deceived his neighbors and business partners in order to win their trust. Similarly, he went into debt—something he usually admonishes—in order to achieve these goals. While he believed financial success do be an indicator of moral worth, the free market he references here emphasizes only the appearance of stability and virtue. Indeed, he explains at the end of this quote that the highest benefit of this affair was receiving “the confidence of monied men.”

Moreover, his success in these efforts obviously relied on his connections to people with wealth, presumably family or friends of the family—“those who had money

¹⁹³ Benton Aldrich to Sister, July 20, 1900: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 1-3).

to loan, and, too, of those who had confidence in me.” Obviously, a person of equal moral worth without these connections could never succeed in this kind of speculative opportunity. Indeed, this quote reveals how Aldrich’s ability to avoid the rapidly emerging credit system of the time enabled his financial success. As examined by Jonathan Levy and discussed in the previous chapter, most settlers relied on impersonal, high-interest loans from Eastern banks in order to finance their farms.¹⁹⁴ While their mortgages often dragged them into despair and destitution, Aldrich’s ability to avoid this system clearly enabled his success and independence. While this analysis calls into question Aldrich’s adherence to his own conception of capitalist ethics, a subtler reading allows us to investigate whether his actions did, in fact, contradict his espoused beliefs.

Aldrich’s self-defined code of capitalist ethics obscured certain distinctions that may seem clear to a contemporary observer. His commitment to what he understood as natural law validated a system of beliefs that straddled the line between Republican virtue and capitalist individualism. Where does one draw the line between the appearance of being an upright, stable businessman and projecting that appearance? Aldrich believed that he had justly earned the confidence of wealthy businessmen in his region because his efforts did, in fact, rely on a certain degree of foresight and courage. Similarly, Aldrich saw the loans he procured in this affair as an act of faith in his own abilities and understanding of natural laws. Just as Gitchel saw his mortgage as an act of faith that would lead to his eventual redemption, Aldrich believed that his ability to pay back these debts and earn a profit demonstrated his virtue, abilities, and understanding of the “natural” laws of the free market. His invocations of confidence—of others in him and

¹⁹⁴ Levy, *"The Mortgage Worked the Hardest."*

his confidence in himself—speak to this connection between character, faith, and capitalist success.

To some, Aldrich's economic ventures, in particular his exploitation of market declines to buy up property, seem contradictory to his moralizing views of natural law and the free market. However, Aldrich would never have understood his actions—buying the property of hopeless neighbors and selling them at profit—as exploitative or unjust. He believed that competition in the economic sphere mirrored competition in the natural world, and the failure of his neighbors demonstrated their laziness, lack of foresight, and personal ineptitude. As such, his actions simply reinforced natural law and, therefore, could not possibly be immoral. Aldrich validated his success on the Plains with a specific interpretation of natural law, morality, and heredity. In order to understand the broader implications of Aldrich's life and beliefs, one must delve deeper into this interpretation of “nature” and consider its ideological lineage. Aldrich's essays prove instrumental in this regard.

Heredity, Eugenics, Morality, and Redemption

By 1900, Aldrich had achieved his life goal of creating a stable home and opportunities for personal and financial progress for his posterity. Going into the twentieth century, he devoted much of his time and energy to reading and digesting academic works across numerous fields—sociology, philosophy, politics, and science—and writing his own notes and essays about the issues he encountered in these texts.¹⁹⁵ These essays give insight into the foundational beliefs of Aldrich's life and the balance he struck between agrarian, Republican, and capitalist ideologies, especially in the context of his own life as a settler and a farmer-businessman. In these essays, Aldrich verbalizes

¹⁹⁵ Irwin, “Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library,” 60-64.

and defends the beliefs that defined his life on the Plains, touching on many of the themes examined earlier in this chapter—personal redemption, independence, hard work, virtue, and self-determination. Ultimately, his writings on these subjects show how capitalist ethics permeated other systems of belief at the end of the nineteenth century. A defiant atheist since his youth, later in life Aldrich embraced a moralizing interpretation of eugenics with a religious-like zeal. His essays show an allegiance to the social Darwinism championed by the American Breeder’s Society and scholars like Charles Daren and John Kellogg. Aldrich, like these thinkers, equated the evolution of man with a march towards a higher moral plane.

In one essay, titled “On Maternal and Paternal Affection,” Aldrich presents four evolutionary phases of morality based on how animal species treat their young: first, fishes and other animals, who play no role in their children’s lives; second, species in which only the mother cares for the young; third, bison and other species, in which the female raises the young while the male offers some protection; and last, humans, who exhibit “mutual affection between the parents and a return affection on the part of the children.”¹⁹⁶ Aldrich goes on to place these four familial dynamics along a moral evolutionary plane. He writes:

In many species there is no moral sense, in many the mother alone has moral feeling, none being shown by the father nor by the offspring, next with a longer term of maternal love [and so on]... While these several phases of morality seem so wide apart extending from a glimmering of morality to that displayed by Joseph...they can all be exemplified in our fellow men.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Benton Aldrich, “On Maternal and Paternal Affection,” circa 1910, unpublished: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 2-3), 1-4.

¹⁹⁷ Aldrich, “On Maternal and Paternal Affection,” 6-7.

By asserting the language of human morality—of right and wrong—into a discourse of animal evolution, Aldrich reveals how his conception of natural law relies on cultural biases of multiple origins—Christianity, capitalism, and American, Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. While logical within the system of values he defines, these beliefs are not an inevitable extension of Darwinian thought; instead, they reflect the influence of a specific notion of morality.

Aldrich extends this discourse by asserting that “moral ability” dictates an individual’s success and place in society. In his essay “Nature’s Way,” he writes, “To sum up: Nature seems to favor the best of every race from the savage in America and Africa, to the Chinese, the Jews, and the Europeans. Even the trees of the forest are subject to this law, of the thousands of seeds, those that produce the more hopeful growth slowly over-spread and over-top those less fit to excel...”¹⁹⁸ He goes on to interpret the social dynamics of Nebraskan society as a manifestation of this pattern. Selfish and short-sighted farmers, he argues, will sell their rich fertile land as soon as they can turn a sizable profit, while morally superior farmers will hold onto the land in order to provide for their children and grandchildren. He concludes, “Hence, the better sections of our country are to be owned by the better families, those that have a deep concern for their posterity—seen and unseen.”¹⁹⁹ Like the stronger trees, the better families, Aldrich contends, will naturally rise to the top.

Aldrich believed that society’s natural tendency towards moral progress was being waylaid by a nefarious craze sweeping the country—material greed and

¹⁹⁸ Benton Aldrich, “Nature’s Way,” circa 1910, unpublished: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 2-3), 1.

¹⁹⁹ Benton Aldrich, “Nature’s Way,” 1.

conspicuous consumption, or as he articulates it, a desire for excess property. Aldrich explains:

If only a few in a neighborhood have the same excess the ill results are mitigated by public opinion...but when an excess becomes a craze as the desire to accumulate property is now, the resultant evils are far reaching, powerful, and to a majority irresistable [sic]. If it was done for a worthy purpose—as buying and keeping land for posterity there would be a moral excuse, and it would be of such a long-time effort that it would not degenerate into a demoralizing craze. But when the craze to get is consciously to display having it, to cause ill feelings in those having less to display; in short, when the getting is for an unkind and degrading purpose...the evil becomes one of the first magnitude.²⁰⁰

While Aldrich believed that competition in the free market reflects natural law at its best, he denounces this cultural manifestation of capitalism—materialism—as evil and unnatural. To resist this immorality, Aldrich suggests focusing on moral education in schools, taking personal responsibility, and above all, allowing “natural purification” to run its course. For Aldrich, the latter especially implies that a morally superior family must avoid “interbreeding” at all costs.²⁰¹ If intermarriage is avoided, he contends that natural law will ultimately lead these immoral families to extinction.²⁰² In this way, Aldrich thought society would naturally avoid the moral decline foretold in *The Protestant Work Ethic*. While Weber argues that the secularization of asceticism necessarily led to widespread materialism, Aldrich believed in a natural law that would enforce essentially puritan notions of austerity and industry.²⁰³ This reflects a central paradox in Aldrich’s interpretation of capitalism. While he envisions a capitalism ruled by moral law, the capitalist society he functioned in was often shaped by greed and

²⁰⁰ Benton Aldrich, “Notes on Eugenics and Heredity,” circa 1910, unpublished: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 2-4), 3-4.

²⁰¹ Aldrich, “Notes on Eugenics,” 4.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰³ Weber and Parsons, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 180.

exploitation. As discussed at the end of this chapter, Aldrich's life reveals an effort to tension and therein validate his success within Republican *and* capitalist traditions.

Aldrich's distinction between morally superior and inferior families raises an obvious question: is morality innate and inherited or learned and practiced? Ultimately, he argues that morality is a product of both free will and of lineage, both an innate quality and a learnable ability.²⁰⁴ To demonstrate this, he suggests a parallel between morality and musical ability.²⁰⁵ Some individuals are born without a propensity toward music, while others have natural, inherited gifts. Anyone may endeavor to improve their musical or moral abilities but can never transcend certain limitations. As Aldrich puts it, "Those that have little inborn moral sense can have only a little practical moral ability. They cannot appreciate the moral bearing of testimony, information, facts."²⁰⁶ For those with even a shred of moral sense, Aldrich suggests that by denying the temptations of conspicuous consumption and striving towards moral advancement they can lift up their families to a higher moral and social plane. He writes, "Any family that can come near this standard will probably acquire property enough and will slowly but surely be getting farther and farther ahead of the impulsive fad-following family."²⁰⁷ In this way, Aldrich's interpretation of morality reinforces his vision of personal redemption; only by striving towards a higher and truer morality can one find personal, financial, and spiritual success.

Although Aldrich appeals to science and natural law, his beliefs often resonate with Christian doctrine. In "Notes on Eugenics," Aldrich offers certain "conditions of mind" as necessary prerequisites for moral advancement. He highlights seven conditions:

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 5.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 8.

first, a deep desire to change; second, an ability to learn; third, faith that one will improve; fourth, personal willpower; fifth, a willingness to lean from others; sixth, an awareness that one must always either move up or down; seventh, a sense of purpose and a commitment to “study, persistence, and courage.”²⁰⁸ These third, sixth, and seventh traits all resonate with Calvinist ideas about faith and salvation. As Weber explains in *The Protestant Ethic*, for Calvinists, the path to salvation relied on “an absolute duty to consider oneself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil.”²⁰⁹ The conditions Aldrich prescribes also resonate with the Calvinist emphasis on hard work, self-help, and the dedicated pursuit of a personal calling, as well as Calvinist notions of a spiritual hierarchy. Like Aldrich’s theory of morality, Calvinism held that only those who pursued their callings—both personal occupations and general desire to serve g-d—with faith and persistence could be saved.²¹⁰ Aldrich’s vision of personal redemption, therefore, transposed Christian ideas into a secular discourse.

In applying these Christian doctrines to his own discourse of morality, Aldrich replaces the divine spirit with an appeal to nature and natural law. As such, he offers a vision of personal redemption that draws on Christian ideas of salvation but reorients them to a vision of virtuous agrarian society. He writes:

Human Inheritance seems in some cases to be cruel, but it is balanced by great kindness in others; and this is the case in all Nature’s laws—we can obey and be blessed, or disobey and suffer. She is not disturbed in the latter case nor elated in the former. You can put your family on the road to eternal life upon the earth or on one to extinction in a century, while the rains fall upon the just and the unjust continually. There is no surety of commendable gain but by faithful, purposeful

²⁰⁸ Aldrich, “Notes on Eugenics,” 1.

²⁰⁹ Weber and Parsons, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 111-12.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 172; Cotton Mather, “A Christian at His Calling,” in Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, 23-24.

endeavor, and this must be continuous from year to year in person and generation to generation in family life.²¹¹

Aldrich exchanged a vision of Christian salvation with an idea of “natural” personal redemption. While the former promised entrance into heaven and eternal salvation, the latter promised stability and social ascendancy for one’s posterity—a form of eternal life in and of itself. Interestingly, the vision of redemption offered here relies upon one’s continuous hard work, echoing Weber’s analysis of Republican and capitalist notions of virtue and success. In this quote, Aldrich’s interpretation of “Human Inheritance” and “Nature’s laws” as the arbiters of social standing and success ignores the obvious importance of inherited property and wealth. This contradiction, which is evident in Aldrich’s own life, speaks to the way in which his beliefs validated his success on the Plains.

Aldrich’s vision of moral advancement resonates with broader tendencies in the American school of eugenics, specifically amongst those engaged, as Aldrich was, in agricultural and biological development. While European eugenics focused on racial categories and the relationship between individuals and governments, American eugenics emphasized the progress of the individual and of individual families. The rise of this school of thought coincided with the development of selective breeding in agriculture during the 1890s and 1900s. The American Breeders Association (ABA), of which Aldrich was a member, dealt with both social eugenics and the science of heredity as it applied to biology and agriculture.²¹² Aldrich subscribed to the ABA’s monthly journal, potentially because of his interest in these scientific developments, and in 1882, he

²¹¹ Ibid., 5-6.

²¹² Ibid. Barbara A. Kimmelman, "The American Breeders' Association: Genetics and Eugenics in an Agricultural Context," *Social Studies of Science* 13, no. 2 (1983): 167-68.

helped found the first Nebraska branch of the Farmer's Institute, an organization that emphasized the scientific-agricultural education of farmers.²¹³ Barbara Kimmelman argues that the agricultural context of the ABA, which later shifted its focus more exclusively towards social eugenics, shaped its emerging political discourse. Specifically, she argues that the American Breeders movement more readily accepted the inheritability of certain abstract characteristics because of their background in agricultural science.²¹⁴

This same connection can be drawn on a personal scale to connect Aldrich's experiences and beliefs. As a scientifically minded farmer, a savvy businessman, and a moralist, Aldrich logically linked together these ways of understanding the world. Eugenics also allowed him to apply personal, moral beliefs to a doctrine of scientific progress. Aldrich believed that a single, unified natural law dictated the rise and fall of all things—not only plants and animals, but individuals, families, and races. He believed that understanding and adhering to these natural laws, which, for Aldrich, encompassed both scientific and moral “truths,” defined one's personal success. Indeed Aldrich, like many other late nineteenth century farmers made significant gains by understanding and exploiting the differences in certain strains of crops or breeds of animals. This empowered Aldrich to assume that the functioning of the free market was ruled by the same set of laws.

Morality within Aldrich's Life

The next step in analyzing Aldrich's system of beliefs is to contrast decisions he made earlier in his life with his later philosophical writings. While it is academically tempting to highlight certain actions as hypocritical, in many of his essays he absorbs

²¹³ Irwin, “Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska, Farmers' Library,” 75-76.

²¹⁴ Kimmelman, “The American Breeders' Association,” 192-93.

these details of his life into his moral and ideological code. Aldrich's initial decision to abandon New Hampshire for the West raises this issue. Aldrich's writing explicitly creates a moral hierarchy based on "concern for the future of [one's] famil[y] and race."²¹⁵ He explains the experience of morally superior families in his essay "Errors of Farm Life": "their hope for their posterity, their faith in them, their willingness to practice self-denial of luxuries for them, are enjoyments...these are of a higher and nobler order than mere display, and luxury, and idleness...these are characteristics of civilization, while the former are like those of the savage..."²¹⁶ However, by his own admission, he abandoned his family in New Hampshire in order to pursue personal opportunities in the West.²¹⁷ In "Notes on Eugenics," he laments the effects of American families' separation across the country, but defends his own actions. He writes, "My ideal was to make a new home as good as either one of those left in New England. The Mass. home was left by one branch of the family because there was new land in New Hampshire, and I left for less rocky land in the west."²¹⁸ Once again, Aldrich defends and validates his actions within the contained system of values he has defined for himself.

Similarly, while one might point out that one's position in society can give unfair and unjust advantages, Aldrich subscribed to the opposite opinion. He understood moral sense as a natural ability and charted a family's progress in society as a reflection of their ability to preserve and cultivate this quality. As such, his "high breeding" did not give him an unfair advantage in the economic sphere; rather, it instilled in him the mental and

²¹⁵ Aldrich, "Notes on Eugenics," 6.

²¹⁶ Benton Aldrich, "Errors of Farm Life," circa 1910, unpublished: *Benton Aldrich Papers* (NSHS, 2-2), 2.

²¹⁷ Aldrich, "Notes on Eugenics," 12.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

spiritual capacity to maintain and expand his property. Similarly, the financial assistance he received from his family—although it seems to violate his notions of individual fulfillment and self-determination—actually resonates with a belief that only morally superior families maintain these close ties.

Aldrich and the Rise of Capitalism

Aldrich's personal beliefs reflect the overlap and ambiguities between capitalist and Republican ethics. On one hand, Aldrich clearly followed certain Republican ethics. In addition to his invocations of landed independence, he reproved the materialism of the Gilded Age in favor of a Republican vision of thrift and industry. This was not simply a rhetorical device; Aldrich tried to embody these virtues throughout his life on the Plains, as evidenced by his decision to live in the same small sod house for forty-six years (1865-1911), well after he could afford to build a more comfortable wood-frame one.²¹⁹ At the same time, his uncompromising vision of individual self-determination in the free market and his emphasis on economic success as the manifestation of personal worth clearly align with capitalist beliefs. The ambiguous overlap between these ideas resonates with Foner's assessment of the ambiguities in Republican doctrine. In the nineteenth century, visions of economic success, defined nineteenth century Republican politics as much as landed independence. Aldrich's story demonstrates the potential to balance these two systems of belief *if* one is economically independent and successful.

Aldrich used a faith in scientific progress and natural law to validate a certain code of ethics. From an early age, he denied the traditional Christian ontology offered by his parents and instead sought to define his own interpretation of the world around him. This search conditioned his appreciation for emerging ideas about heredity, competition,

²¹⁹ Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton, Nebraska Farmers' Library," 41.

and eugenics. He used natural science, rather than Christianity, to give meaning to the world around him and his role in it, although Christian doctrine paralleled his ostensibly “scientific” morality. His discourse on posterity and his efforts to ensure “eternal life upon the earth” based on the success of his progeny show how he used this “natural law” in place of Christian ideas about salvation. Therefore while Protestant and Republican visions of redemption, success, and morality shaped and conditioned Aldrich’s beliefs, he transposed these into a complete system of beliefs founded on a “natural” vision of moral progress.

Ultimately, Aldrich’s beliefs built on the intellectual shift in the eighteenth century that transformed Christian doctrine into a secular discourse of Republican virtue and capitalist ethics. He took this trend a step further by reclassifying Christian and Republican values as “natural” law and merging capitalist individualism with these other beliefs. He claimed that the same natural law that shapes the natural world governs the free market and that natural law favors Christian and Republican notions of virtue. This informed his redemptive vision that natural law would, if left undisturbed, bring the most virtuous and moral families to the top of society. His beliefs turn the free market into the ultimate sphere of morality; while immoral families may become rich, they will never remain so unless they abandon their ill ways.

As Aldrich’s own life story makes evident, inherited wealth, not moral ability, hard work, or intellect, is the most common means to prosperity. However, this moralizing vision of personal redemption gave meaning to Aldrich’s success in Nebraska. More specifically, it guided him through the unstable times at the end of the century. While others failed, Aldrich succeeded on the basis of his abilities as a capitalist and his

family's connections and wealth. The capitalist promise of redemption not only gave hope to those struggling to make it—like Ben Gitchel—it also gave meaning to the success and wealth of individuals like Benton Aldrich. Ultimately, this analysis of Aldrich's beliefs demonstrates how capitalism and capitalist ethics absorbed and replaced older notions of success, independence, and virtue. While Aldrich fused Republican, Protestant, and agrarian beliefs into his discourse of natural law, ultimately he favored the individualistic and competitive notions of success that defined American capitalism moving into the twentieth century. Just as Ben Gitchel's story shows the tragic consequences of an individual who would not reorient himself to capitalist society, Aldrich's life shows how, in the nineteenth century, economic success both demanded and led to an acceptance of capitalist ethics. Ultimately, at the close of this century, the delicate balance between capitalist and Republican beliefs gave way to a society clearly oriented to capitalist ethics and beliefs.

Chapter 3: *We Would Sit and Build Castles in the Air*, Luna Kellie, Personal Redemption, and the Populist Movement

Before her rise to prominence in the Nebraska Populist Party, at nineteen, Luna Kellie travelled alone from St. Louis, Missouri to Kearney County, Nebraska with an infant son in her arms. In her memoir, *A Prairie Populist*, Kellie tells the story of her life in Nebraska and shows how her experiences as a homesteader in the hard decades of the 1870s and 1880s led to her involvement with first the Farmer's Alliance and then the Populist Party.²²⁰ This chapter proposes to extract from this text a sense of the guiding beliefs that led her to understand personal failures as the result of systemic injustices. In order to consider how capitalism and capitalist ethics overwhelmed other systems of belief at the end of the nineteenth century, this chapter focuses on how a discourse of individual redemption and success conditioned the emergence of populism on the Great Plains and how the Populist movement both denied and affirmed the tenets of capitalist society.

Kellie, like Ben Gitchel and Benton Aldrich, believed that adherence to a specific moral code would lead to her personal redemption and her family's success. However, in 1883, after almost a decade of tireless labor, debt forced her family to sell their homestead, challenging Kellie's faith in this vision of redemption. In the wake of this setback, Kellie turned to the emerging radical politics of the Farmer's Alliance and the Populist Party. In so doing, she repurposed her vision of personal redemption from the

²²⁰ Luna Nelsen, Jane Taylor Kellie, *A Prairie Populist: The Memoirs of Luna Kellie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992).

sphere of individual success towards one of collective political reform. In the late 1880s, the heyday of Great Plains populism, Kellie emerged as leader capable of producing and shaping compelling Populist language for the movement. Her role as a rhetorician offers unique opportunities for social-historical analysis in the context of this project. By connecting her beliefs and experiences as a homesteader—specifically, the way in which Republican and capitalist ethics shaped her vision of redemption, success, and failure—to her political rhetoric, one can consider how these underlying beliefs influenced the ideology of the Populist movement and popular support for the movement at this moment in history.

An 1877 pamphlet published by the B & M Railroad—from which Kellie would later buy the land for her homestead—promised that even those settlers who arrived in Nebraska with nothing could become rich if they “fought hard enough.”²²¹ This guarantee echoes a more widely accepted notion of individual redemption that emerged during the nineteenth century. In her memoir, Kellie explains how she embraced this promise in her youth but never found the success she hoped for on the Great Plains. She had her own vision of wealth—stability, a large and healthy family, good food, and some degree of comfort—but was constrained by the natural and economic hardships of the plains. During her politicization and alliance with the Populist movement, she never actually rejects this capitalist, utopian promise as false; instead, she blames the banks, railroads and their corrupting influence on government for blocking the way to this deserved redemption. Her political rhetoric repurposed this vision of redemption towards a

²²¹ Ibid., 150.

collective hope for a restructured society. With this she promised salvation—if not in the present, then for the children and grandchildren of the movement.²²²

A Prairie Populist

Kellie hand-wrote her memoir—actually two distinct manuscripts: a personal memoir about her life in Nebraska and a political memoir about her role as secretary for the Nebraska Farmer’s Alliance—on the back of old Farmer’s Alliance certificates, addressing it to her youngest daughter, Lois Kellie Peterson.²²³ Lois set these documents in type, and they eventually found their way to the Nebraska State Historical Society. In 1992, Jane Taylor Nelsen transcribed and published the two memoirs, and Luna Kellie’s famous speech, “Stand up for Nebraska,” in a single text: *A Prairie Populist: The Memoirs of Luna Kellie*.²²⁴ Unlike the speeches, songs, and articles that Kellie wrote to mobilize individuals in support of the Populist movement, her memoirs served no obvious political purpose; indeed, until fairly recently, they were not available to the public at all. Therefore, while her personal politics and ideology color the text, one can fairly read this as the result of retrospect and not stemming from a specific political agenda. She wrote these texts as a way of preserving her story, ideas, and beliefs for her children and grandchildren. In this way, her memoirs can be analyzed along similar lines as Ben’s letters and Aldrich’s essays

By examining Kellie’s early experiences as a homesteader and her later political rhetoric, one can consider whether and how the experience of failure shaped her later political ideology. Kellie’s speeches struck a chord with small farmers across the state

²²² Ibid., 127.

²²³ For the sake of clarity for the rest of this essay, this first document—her personal memoir—will be simply referred to as Kellie’s memoir, while her political memoir will be referred to as such.

²²⁴ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*.

because she invoked certain commonly held beliefs; specifically, the promise of personal redemption on the frontier. When considered in this light, the way this vision of personal redemption shaped her life takes on a larger significance, as it speaks to an ideological foundation of Great Plains populism. Specifically, this analysis focuses on her commitment to Republican virtue and capitalist ethics as they defined her visions of success, failure, and redemption.

Luna Kellie's Arrival in Nebraska

Luna Kellie was born in 1857 in Southwest Minnesota, where her father—J. M. Sanford—worked on the Northern Pacific Railroad.²²⁵ When Luna was a teenager, her mother tried to persuade J. M. that they should claim a homestead near Lincoln, Nebraska. J. M., however, felt they lacked the start-up money to make it out west. The family instead moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where J. M. was offered a managerial job for the Railroad, and Luna eventually married one of her father's co-workers, J. T. Kellie. In crowded, humid St. Louis, Luna's mother came down with malarial typhoid and died in 1874.²²⁶ In her memoir, Luna highlights her father's "bitter regrets" of missing the opportunity to take the family west, and she connects these feelings to his subsequent decision leave St. Louis for Nebraska.²²⁷ She suggests that J. M. felt he had missed an opportunity to save his wife's life and sought personal redemption for this failure on the Plains.

By 1875, J. M. had settled on a claim in Kearney County, remarried a 22-year old woman, Jennie, and sent for Luna's younger siblings to join him. Luna remained in St. Louis with J. T. and their newborn son, Willie. However, a year later, J. M. persuaded her

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149-50.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

to follow them and claim her own piece of land.²²⁸ She was nineteen years old at the time. From the beginning, Luna's experiences in Nebraska were shaped by a vision of the country's redeeming power. Luna remembers being impressed by the opportunities on the Great Plains from an early age. She writes, "The glowing accounts of the golden west sent out by the R.R. company remained in my mind and I had a vague idea being only 14 years old that they were doing a noble work to let poor people know that there was such a grand haven they could reach."²²⁹ Although in the memoir she couches this remark with an indictment of the greed and exploitative nature of the Railroads, it is evident from the rest of the text and her political writings that this vision of Nebraska as a "grand haven" continued to play a role in her later life.

Luna and Willie left St. Louis for Nebraska in 1876, while J. T. stayed behind to finish his contract with the railroad. Luna and her son spent a year living with her father, Jennie, and Luna's brothers and sisters in a two-room sod house. In her memoir, Luna vividly describes the details of their day-to-day life and how she became accustomed to it. By all accounts (and in the history of Nebraska there are many), living in a sod house offered unique discomforts.²³⁰ They were dry and dusty in the heat, muddy when wet, with dismal lighting and precarious, leaky roofs. Luna describes how she grew accustomed to the circumstances of her new home and, more significantly, grew to appreciate the fine distinctions between a good and a poor sod house. Her father's had a separate inner room, a solidly built roof that never leaked, an exterior cave for storage,

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Indeed some historians see sod houses as the defining feature of early Nebraska's literal and ideological landscape. See, for example: Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890*

and, most exceptionally, a real framed window on the south wall, all of which she only began to appreciate after a few years in Nebraska.²³¹

Luna's attitude towards sod houses provides an insightful metaphor for the beliefs that shaped her experiences and expectations in Nebraska—specifically, her relationship to Protestant and Republican notions of industry and hard work. Kellie not only accepted the hardships of living in these conditions, but also relished in the opportunity to make the best out of her circumstances. At the same time, her vision for her family's future invariably included a wood-frame house with enough space for the large family of at least 12 children she and J. T. hoped to raise.²³² This manner of enduring and thriving in hardships with a cheerful eye on her future rewards defined her early years on the Plains. With it, she fulfilled the central tenets of Cotton Mather's vision of Christian moral industry, as well as the more secular vision of redemption espoused by thinkers like Ben Franklin. Both Franklin and Mather emphasized the importance of hard work, thriftiness, and contentment in one's labor. While Mather saw these characteristics as a foundation for good Christian living, Franklin more explicitly linked them to a vision of eventual success.²³³ Kellie, like Franklin, believed that these traits would lead to her ultimate redemption but also, like Mather, understood them as important and honorable in and of themselves.

J. T. joined the family in Nebraska in November of 1876, and they filed a homestead claim about a mile away from Kellie's father.²³⁴ The young couple shared a

²³¹ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 11.

²³² *Ibid.*, 33, 93.

²³³ Cotton Mather, "A Christian at His Calling;" Ben Franklin, "The Way to Wealth," in Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*.

²³⁴ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 24-25.

vision of their eventual success that defined their early years in Nebraska. As Luna writes, "...[J. T. and I] spent a very happy day planning how soon we could have a horse team and things good as Aunt Hattie, meanwhile not caring for anything so [long as] we were together."²³⁵ J. T. arrived with about \$300 to invest, and the two set out immediately to make their land a home. By the time they'd put up the walls of their sod house, however, the ground froze, and they had to settle for a roof of straw; however, this setback did nothing to damper the young family's optimism.²³⁶

Youth, Hope, and Hard Work

Throughout the first half of her memoir, Kellie's emphasis on the fortifying strength of their hope for the future remains distinct from their financial prospects. In fact, she contrasts their hope and happiness with other people's monetary concerns. Speaking to J. T.'s arrival, she writes, "...He had a little saved from his summer's work probably between 3 and 4 hundred dollars in all. But little we cared then for money or anything it could buy. We were together again... We were young [and] full of hope and nothing could daunt us."²³⁷ The Kellies invested the money they had in cattle, chickens, and, eventually, the minimal equipment necessary to raise wheat.²³⁸ Luna began planning a large and diverse garden, and they bought enough lumber to build furniture for their home—they even had a window with a sash. According to Luna, the family was as happy as millionaires, despite their unfinished house and uncertain future: "...behold we had a

²³⁵ Ibid., 25.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid., 24.

²³⁸ It is interesting to note that the Kellies, like Gitchel, clearly did not have access to the thousand-dollar minimum investment set by contemporary historians as the touchstone for a financially successful farm. Levy, "*The Mortgage Worked the Hardest*," 47-48.

home and no rent to pay. Who could ask for more?”²³⁹ In this way, her hopes for the farm were linked to a Republican vision of landed independence and self-reliance.

One dominant aspect of Kellie’s vision of redemption—like Gitchel and Aldrich’s visions—was the importance of hard work. She writes of her and J. T.’s earliest years on the frontier: “we had youth and hope [sic] which means happiness and we worked ourselves harder than slaves were ever worked to be able to fulfill our hopes.”²⁴⁰ This quote demonstrates the religious-like zeal and certainty with which the Kellies linked hard work to their hopes for the future. The Kellie’s faced significant and constant hardships their first year, enduring ceaseless hours of breaking sod and a leaky roof on rainy nights. During their first year, the family went months with only cornmeal and potatoes to eat, and Kellie describes dreaming of fresh bread every night.²⁴¹ In her memoir, Kellie details how hope in the future pushed them through these years. She writes:

We would sit and build castles in the air of how we would get this and that. Oh the farm of our dreams was fair to behold and gave a good living and would enable us to bring up a large family in plenty. That was all we asked of life. To get this we were willing nay anxious to work all in our power. And always we planned for a large family...²⁴²

The young couple’s work ethic seemed to assure them that their dreams would come into fruition.

Specifically, the quote above suggests a vision of success based more on Jefferson’s vision of yeoman independence than on prosperity and the accumulation of property. Indeed, the fair farm of Kellie’s dreams embodies the Republican ideal: an

²³⁹ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 26.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 23.

independent, farming family with total control over their own land, resources, and labor.²⁴³ Similarly, this quote suggests that Kellie envisioned no greater material success than needed to “bring up a large family in plenty.” In this way, her beliefs align with the Republican “middle road” of economic independence explained by Glickstein in *Concepts of Free Labor*.²⁴⁴ This ideological alliance with Republican ethics determined Kellie’s specific vision of personal redemption. Unlike Aldrich, who sought a success that transcended financial and spiritual spheres, Kellie’s vision of success was genuinely limited to establishing a stable, happy, and independent home.

Kellie’s descriptions and interactions with other settlers speak to her values and ethics. Describing their first years in Nebraska, she offers a particularly telling anecdote about a family that passed through their homestead in a homemade wagon. Kellie writes:

She introduced themselves in a laughing manner as Mr. and Mrs. Sam Ship from the coal mines of Pennsylvania and on their way to a homestead in Phelps County. Said they had walked all the way or Sam had as sometimes going down easy places she rode and going up hill she pulled and most times they both pulled together. They wished to stay all night and of course we made them welcome. She offered to buy milk for the children and eggs and said they had never begged although they left home with almost nothing. When they got out of money they stopped and one or other or both worked until they got ahead enough to go a ways farther. They had been over 2 years on the road. The baby they had when they started had been buried on the way this one was born on the road but nothing daunted the mother who was fairly radiant for joy of being near their journey’s end where they could have a home of their own.²⁴⁵

Kellie’s description of this family falls into the American tradition of using prototypical characters to demonstrate a political or ideological point. This family symbolizes Kellie’s beliefs about the redemptive value of hard work and determination. The details of Kellie’s rendering of this family bear out this symbolism: the woman’s “laughing

²⁴³ McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, 68-69.

²⁴⁴ Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*, 315.

²⁴⁵ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 75-76.

manner” and “radiant joy” despite the hardships they faced, the potent imagery of the couple pushing their wagon up a hill, the romantic, if arduous, life the two created for themselves while on the road. Indeed, her description has Biblical overtones of a paradigmatic tale; their road to Nebraska takes on a distinct symbolic meaning. It presents a moralizing vision: determination and hope despite their loss of an infant child, cheer, perseverance, and pride despite their hardships.

Kellie’s rendering of this prototypical vision of settler redemption reveals her simultaneous allegiance to Protestant, Republican, and capitalist notions of virtue and morality. Their unbreakable perseverance and faith resonate with Cotton Mather’s guidelines for virtuous living explained in “A Christian at His Calling,” specifically his emphasis on contentment in one’s calling and steadfast commitment to it.²⁴⁶

Alternatively, the family’s ultimate vision of “a home of their own” and their desire to rely solely on their own hard work to achieve this vision, invokes republican ideals of hard work, independence, and individual self-determination.

The family’s determination to “stay ahead” financially over the course of the journey, and their explicit willingness to work for wages in order to meet these goals invokes a specific set of capitalist values. As such, the Ships embody the industriousness and self-reliance favored by Ben Franklin in “The Way to Wealth,” which promises industry, steadiness, independence, and frugality as the only road to wealth.²⁴⁷ Finally, their proud avoidance of debt or charity at all costs resonates with the ideals of capitalist thinkers like Emerson, Horatio Alger, Andrew Carnegie, and P. T. Barnum. Barnum, for

²⁴⁶ Mather, “A Christian at His Calling,” in Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, 23, 28.

²⁴⁷ Franklin, “The Way to Wealth,” in *ibid.*, 34-35.

example, explains, “There is scarcely anything that drags a person down like debt...Debt robs a man of his self-respect, and makes him almost despise himself.”²⁴⁸ The Ships’ attitude resonates with Horatio Alger’s moralizing stories of self-made success, in which virtuous and hard working souls are able to raise themselves out of dire circumstance by virtue of good character, perseverance, and inexplicable acts of fate.²⁴⁹ Therefore, this simple anecdote of a family traveling across the country demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of Luna Kellie’s beliefs that lie just beneath the surface of her text. Specifically, it reveals how her vision of redemption existed within the overlap between these three systems of belief.

Gender and Redemption

Kellie’s understanding of her role in the family—her labor, or her “personal calling” as Cotton Mather would call it—informed her vision of redemption.²⁵⁰ The Kellies faced a multitude of hardships during their first year on the Plains—swaths of locusts, high freight rates, and unstable crop prices among others.²⁵¹ Kellie became sharply focused on raising animals and vegetables to keep the family well fed. As she explains, “as I took delight in seeing anything grow vegetable or animal so I rejoiced in them.”²⁵² Family, food, and comfort were clearly central to Luna’s vision of the family’s future. After a strong harvest allowed them to purchase their own header (harvester) and a few other household necessities, Kellie explains:

Life looked good to us then and we often planned of the large family we would have and the many additions we would build on the house [by then they had

²⁴⁸ P. T. Barnum, “The Art of Money Getting,” in *ibid.*, 55-56.

²⁴⁹ For example Horatio Alger, “Struggling Upard, or Luke Larkin’s Luck” in *ibid.*, 67-89.

²⁵⁰ Mather, “A Christian at His Calling,” in *ibid.*, 23.

²⁵¹ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 151.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 38 – 40, 45, 64.

moved into a frame house (?)] as we needed them. Of how we would have a real home and raise all the fruit and everything we needed. And we planned or I did to have things as much like Grandpa Sanford's place was...a cellar full of everything good to eat with abundance of the best butter and cheese and fresh fruit of every description. It seemed to us it would be wicked to raise a family and not do our best to provide all those things for them so to that end we set out all things we could afford to get to make our home more homelike.²⁵³

Like Aldrich, Luna's hope for the future rested on reaching the same level of comfort and security as older generations, and she measured her own success by those terms. She also envisioned a large and stable family. The details of this quote—new additions to the home, plentiful cheese and butter, and, in particular, Luna's desire to make their home “more homelike”—begin to reveal how the distinct role society defined for farm wives on the frontier shaped Luna's future hopes, hence Luna's focus on building a strong home as the primary manifestation of her vision of success. Luna, like Aldrich, became obsessed with finding hardy strains of fruits that the family could raise, devoting countless hours to planting various berry bushes and fruit trees.²⁵⁴ During these years (1878 – 1880), Luna gave birth to a son, James, who died in infancy, and, a year later, a daughter, Susie.²⁵⁵ Always, hopes and vision for the future determined her next course of action.

While the two shared a strong bond, Kellie understood her and J. T.'s roles in the family as distinctly separate. In the text, she not only distinguishes between their respective responsibilities, but also considers their finances and property as separate. Explaining her success raising chickens and selling eggs, she writes, “J.T. liked the chickens but did not like to feel that he owed me for his living so it was his notion that I

²⁵³ Ibid., 93.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 93-94.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 63, 83.

keep account of expenses and income and he had given me 2 cows Lady and Topsy to pay for what we used in 1879 and 1880.”²⁵⁶ For Luna and, it seems, for J. T., her role was managing and maintaining the home, raising the families’ food, caring for the children, and not insignificantly, supporting her husband. Luna, at least according to the memoir, embraced her fulfillment of this role as the greatest pleasure of her life. Early in the memoir, Kellie discusses the joy of gardening and of having fresh vegetables to eat. She writes, “I am convinced that nothing else equals an early hour or two of in garden with hoe and rake to keep an overworked housewife equal to her duties. She comes back to the dishes and cooking with lungs full of fresh air...”²⁵⁷ Luna’s vision of hard work was specific, therefore, to her role as a housewife, and she explicitly acknowledges the importance and benefits of industry in that pursuit.

When the family fell on hard times in 1880, Luna’s labor in these areas not only kept the family fed but also provided most of their income. As she explains:

I had taken much pride in the fact that the garden and chickens with milk from 2 cows and a couple of pigs to butcher had not only made our living but bought our groceries and clothing as well. It was my joy to think that everything J.T. made could go into needed equipment to farm better and more as more land was broke up for farming. And as work is never a drudgery for those we love so it had been a delight to me to have the best and largest garden the best and the largest flock of chickens and so be able to have the pleasure of setting as good a table as could be found.²⁵⁸

Luna’s hard work and success within this sphere brought her undeniable joy because she saw it as the furtherance of her hopes for the future. A number of historians have focused on this place and moment in American history as it relates to gender and, more

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 101.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 100.

specifically, women's agency, responsibility, independence, and influence.²⁵⁹ Nelsen raises certain interesting insights into the parallel between Luna's role as a leader of the Populist Party and her role as a farmer and housewife.²⁶⁰ Similarly, the way in which Luna's memoir separates J. T. and her own finances has interesting implications for recent debate over the agency and exploitation of homestead wives. Clearly, her perspective distinguishes her vision of redemption and success from those of Ben Gitchel and Benton Aldrich in certain important ways. Money—that is saved money—never occupies a central place in her writing, nor does the acquisition of land. Her dreams for the future do not involve long lineages of her progeny, but instead revolve around caring and providing for her immediate family. Finally, and most importantly, while Gitchel and Aldrich framed their redemption in terms of their relationship to their land generally, Kellie frames her success in terms of her relationship to her home.

Good Capitalism and Bad

Luna Kellie's relationship to capitalism during her life on the Plains was complicated and multifaceted. In order to grow wheat, the Kellies, like most Great Plains farmers, needed a short-term loan to buy machinery and seed. Describing the loans market in her community, Kellie expresses an open abomination for usury and its exploitative nature in Nebraska. She writes, "...the town was full of money lenders the most of whom took 10 times the needful security and as a great favor procured your

²⁵⁹ Certain historians have focused on single women homesteaders, and how they manifested and shaped notions of gender and gender roles of the time. Because, as discussed in the first two chapters, visions of landed redemption implicitly invoked a certain kind of masculinity, the space carved out by independent female homesteaders necessarily challenged certain social assumptions. Sherry L. Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders: The Perplexing Case of Elinore Pruitt Stewart," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1991).

²⁶⁰ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 156-158.

money ‘from a friend in the east’ at never less than 2 come 10 interest and I have known the Updike Brothers to charge 7 come 10 interest.”²⁶¹ The Kellies were forced to take such a high interest loan from the Updike brothers because the demand for loans outstripped supply.²⁶² Her abhorrence for usury, however, did not correlate with a similar distrust for big business or corporations. Instead, her memoir endorses a human capitalism built on personal relations and trust but still productive in large markets.

In her memoir, Luna describes an interaction with a salesman from a farm machinery firm from whom they bought a header—a wheat harvester—on credit. At the time, around 1880, Ben had fallen ill, they were behind on their debts, and a thunderstorm had led to the destruction of their first sod house. Needless to say, they could ill afford to pay for the header or the interest gathered. She writes of her exchange with the man:

He sat there and talked quite pleasantly so I felt quite at home with him and told him just how we were fixed, how much wheat to thresh, how we had to fix some kind of a house, and how afraid I was of sod houses. How J. T. had worried about the debt he owed them and expected to pay it soon as we could thresh and haul off the wheat, but wheat was low and it cost for threshing and we had to pay some for harvest. And in short he could see we would not have much to fix a house let alone get through the winter but I guess he felt we were honest for as he rose to go he said “Tell Mr. Kellie not to worry about the note to us. I will mark it extended for another year and tell him I want him to go ahead and fix up a better place for you and the baby before it gets cold.” Can you wonder we always felt that was a good firm to deal with.²⁶³

Financing and big business, therefore, could be conducted morally if individuals were treated with respect and dealt with personally. In making this point, and expressing her belief that the machinery man “felt we were honest,” Kellie aligns herself with a certain

²⁶¹ Ibid., 34.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid, 84-85.

capitalist conception of “character.” This idea—that certain people have high “character” and are therefore trustworthy and will inevitably be successful—is one clear indicator of capitalism’s implications in American society. Indeed, taken to its necessary extreme, this kind of idea begins to resonate with Benton Aldrich’s vision of moral eugenics, in which moral ability dictates one’s place in society. Even as she opposed aspects of capitalist society that she found abhorrent and exploitative, Luna could not escape from a society structured around the ethics and beliefs of American capitalism.

Kellie’s moral interpretation of economic relationships parallels her moral beliefs on a local scale. She expresses a similar appreciation for kind and generous neighbors and a similar animosity towards those who selfishly. In one season, the Kellies were deceived on a larger scale by their friends and neighbors, the Summers. The Summers had persuaded J. T. and Luna to lease two old heifers, paying an annual rate and caring for them in exchange for the milk they produced. Ultimately, the two cows produced barely any milk for the entire season, compounding the Kellie’s financial and personal hardships of the moment. After realizing they had been deceived, J. T. confronted the Summers. Luna writes of the interaction:

... but Mrs. [Summer] spoke up and gave it all away saying he ought to “look out what he signed, everyone must look out for their own interest.” Then another slight eruption and J. T. said “Well I wanted you to acknowledge before my wife that you were a pair of unmitigated blank ----- liars who would deceive and doublecross your best friends for a little money and you,” turning to Summers, who had knelt with arm around him at times in eloquent prayer for help and strength to avert temptation, “you knew I was trying to do right and you ought to have helped me instead of pitching me into Hell like this.”²⁶⁴

Eventually, Mr. Summers agreed to take back the cows and relax their contract post-facto, but this incident reveals much about the intersection of morality and economics for

²⁶⁴ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 66.

the Kellies. Especially interesting are the religious overtones in this passage, particularly Luna's evocation of the two men praying together. Her religious sentiments are inseparable from her beliefs about morality, which in turn, are implicated in her broader conception of capitalism.

Debt and "Loss of Hope"

Although Luna suggests that they tried to avoid debt, the Kellies took on a number of loans during their early years on the Plains. These debts built up and culminated in a mortgage on their home in 1883, which would lead the family to destitution. During their first year in Nebraska, 1877, the Kellies took out a loan for 100 dollars at 10% interest in order to buy seed and equipment. They struggled through their first years and were on the verge of stability when a flurry of tragedies struck in 1879—the death of their second son, Jimmie, the collapse of their home's roof, and a poor, dry season with a weak harvest. These forced the family to take out another loan in order to buy lumber for a new home and machinery to harvest their crops.²⁶⁵ They had a strong harvest the following season, but in 1882, the family took a misstep that drove them deeper in debt. That spring, J. T. had decided to invest in new seed for a hardier and more bountiful strain of wheat. The investment paid off, and by the fall they had lush and full fields of wheat.²⁶⁶ This confidence led them to speculate on their future rewards. Kellie writes:

...many passers by declared it the finest field of wheat they ever saw so we felt quite rich and when Damron came along from Hastings with horses and mules J.T. bought a team of mules from him as we needed more horsepower badly to farm so much land. He hesitated to run in debt for them but Damron felt his money was secure with that fine wheat along the road and urged the matter till

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 83-85.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 112-113.

finally the deal was made. That was our first big mistake as things turned out and had quite an influence on our future.²⁶⁷

The family saw their investment in this new seed as a wise and profitable decision, bolstering their confidence in themselves as farmer-businessmen. This confidence and, according to Luna, the pressures put on them by Damron, led them to gamble on the future profits of their crop. Unfortunately, a heat wave struck the region, causing the wheat to ripen quickly, and then a hailstorm damaged the crop, and the family missed the brief window for harvest because J. T. had committed to helping a neighbor harvest his crops. Ultimately, the Kellies harvested less than five bushels an acre, a dismal harvest. To add insult to injury, the two mules they went into debt to purchase died shortly after their harvest.²⁶⁸ As a result, the family could not afford to pay their debt on the mules, nor their outstanding debt on a header and windmill. Furthermore, in order to get back on track during their next harvest, they needed cash to buy a new team and a new wagon.²⁶⁹

In the spring of 1883, they were forced to take out a mortgage on their farm for \$800 at 10% interest. At the same time, crop prices plummeted because of national overproduction, and the cost of growing wheat surpassed the revenue it brought in for the Kellies. The family was forced to trade their mortgaged homestead to J. M. (Luna's father) in exchange for his timber claim, 160 acres of unimproved land, a few miles away.²⁷⁰ This move undoubtedly made a significant impact on Luna's understanding of the world and shaped her hopes and visions for the future. She would eventually see the

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 113-114.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 121.

family's struggles to pay their mortgage as indicative of the systemic oppression in Great Plains capitalist systems.

Kellie undeniably understood that their farm functioned in a risky economic sphere. Her father's hesitancy to travel west, and her own assertion that the family invested in cattle as the "surest thing in the country" speak to this awareness.²⁷¹ Clearly, their loans and mortgage multiplied these risks. At the same time, even as the family sunk further into debt during the early 1880s, Kellie clung to her hopes of landed independence. This faith served as pragmatic optimism, a way of squaring her beliefs in what is right and just with the realities she faced. It allowed her to push through hard times and gave her a way of making sense of the hardships her family faced.

During the 1880's, however, the oppressive force of the Kellies debt caused this optimism to bend and snap. Luna, like other settlers, began to blame the loss of her home on the exploitative nature of the Western loans market and the injustice of railroad's control of crop markets. This raises a central question for contemporary thinkers and modern historians alike: Where should we draw the line between a farmer's autonomy and forces outside of his control? Or, as a census surveyor of the time put it, "Is a mortgage ever a cause of misfortune, except secondarily through the borrower's want of prescience or through his inability properly to manage the borrowed wealth?"²⁷² This paper does not try to judge whether any individual's poverty or prosperity was or was not the result of personal misjudgment. Doing so would require an analysis of structural issues—market relations, local politics, financing regulations—, which I am not prepared to address. Instead I hope to consider how a certain conception of success, individual

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁷² Levy, "*The Mortgage Worked the Hardest*," 62.

agency, and personal redemption informed the social critiques of populist farmers like the Kellies.

Debt and Despair as Narrative Constructions

In her afterword to *Prairie Populist*, Jane Nelsen comments on the cycles of Luna Kellie's life. She writes, "Five major turning points in Luna Kellie's life trace a circle of hope and despair." Specifically, she points to their hopes upon arrival in Nebraska, the hardships they faced (culminating in the loss of their farm), their realization that their hardships were caused by forces outside of their control, Luna's rise in the Farmer's Alliance, and finally, her disillusionment with the Populist movement.²⁷³ While this summation accurately captures the narrative arc of the text, it does not consider why *Luna* would present her life story in this cyclical way. In fact, Kellie actively constructs the arc of her story around cycles of hope and despair because they validate her emerging political beliefs.

Kellie explicitly contrasts her youth and hope during her first years in Nebraska with the despair she felt as the family's fortunes fell.²⁷⁴ After describing their poor harvest and the death of the mules in 1882, she writes, "So in less than a week we were plunged from confidence and hope to poverty and despair."²⁷⁵ By focusing on the impact of these events on their "confidence and hope," Kellie begins to craft a broader narrative and hint at a deeper significance to their losses. Later, describing their move away from their original homestead, she writes:

Life looked dark only I was glad to be relieved of the mortgage. We both realized in leaving our first home we had left not only our youth but most of our hope

²⁷³ Ibid., 148.

²⁷⁴ For examples of this language of "youth and hope," see Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 11, 24, 42, 93.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 114.

there. While one has youth and hope or either of life, life is not a burden... We realized that the best 7 years of our lives had been given to enrich the B. & M. R.R. That they had cleared annually more from our toil than had been wrung in old times from the colored slaves.²⁷⁶

In this quote, she makes explicit the broader significance she seeks to impart on her narrative: a vision of railroads and eastern interests as the enemies of America's Free Soil promises. As such, she paints herself as a prototypical character, like those discussed earlier: a hardworking, virtuous, and loyal farmer whose hopes for the future were dashed by greedy corporations.

As Nelsen acknowledges in her afterword, popular thinking at the time supported an individualistic vision of success that linked financial welfare to one's worth as a person. This made a Populist vision of systemic injustice difficult to justify. Blaming systemic problems for your personal failure was seen as low and petty and violated the dominant discourse of individual responsibility deeply embedded in Protestant, Republican, and capitalist beliefs. During the 1880's, however, the Farmer's Alliance embodied the frustrations of thousands of farmers and generated widespread support amongst certain communities, particularly on the Great Plains. Luna, who would later rise in the ranks as a writer for the movement, had these beliefs ingrained in her conscious by the time of her writing. Therefore, she emphasized the cyclical nature of her life story in order to draw out her later vision of a road to redemption blocked by forces outside of her control. This is not to say that Kellie's political beliefs emerged in false consciousness or that her political beliefs masked an inability to deal with personal failure. I believe, instead, that the cycles of hope and despair traced in this memoir reflect

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 122.

the development of Kellie's beliefs—from a personal faith in landed redemption to a broader hope for systemic change.

The Politicization of Luna's Beliefs

The seeds of Kellie's politicization were sown by the bitterness she and J. T. felt after leaving their first home. Specifically, this moment brought Kellie's agrarian hopes into direct conflict with the realities of Western society. Describing their reaction to the loss of their home, she writes:

As J.T often said 'We have raised enough grain this year to feed us and all our descendents for a hundred years yet have to sell every bushel of it to pay expenses and our expenses did not include a salary for ourselves or anything not absolutely necessary to produce the crop.' These things made us feel bitter and though we were bound to make a good home for the children we felt the lack of youth and hope.²⁷⁷

This quote clearly resonates with my earlier analysis of Luna's cycles of hope and despair, specifically its invocation of a "lack of youth and hope." As such, it highlights the importance of this moment in redefining her beliefs and hopes for the future. This quote also highlights Luna's land-based, agrarian vision of redemption. J. T. and Luna believed that the hard work that they had put into their farm and the agricultural fruits of their labor should ensure the independence and stability of their family. But, as this quote suggests, their labor earned them literally nothing in the free markets of the West. Their expectations and faith were bound up in agrarian, Republican beliefs, as demonstrated by J. T.'s invocation above of "feeding their descendents for a hundred years." The world they lived in, on the other hand, was oriented to capitalist systems and capitalist ethics. In times of plenty, these two systems of belief could—on the surface at least—coexist. In these moments, free markets made on good on agrarian exceptionalism by paying farmers

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 123.

well for their crops. However, in hard times like the 1880s and 1890s, this unity fell apart. As the bottom fell out on the market for wheat and corn, it became apparent that industrial, American society offered no such guarantee for farmers. As this emerged in Kellie's life, she felt a sense of bitter betrayal, which directly informed her political leanings.

Kellie's path to populism actually began earlier, with J. T.'s involvement in the Farmer's Alliance, starting around 1881. A Farmer's Alliance chapter was first organized in Kearney County in the winter of this year as a non-partisan organization focused on education, economic cooperation between farmers, and federal reform.²⁷⁸ Kellie's chapter was likely a local branch of either the Northern Alliance or Milton George's National Farmer's Alliance, both of which arrived in Nebraska around this time. The Kellies entered the movement on the ground floor, as membership in the Nebraska Farmer's Alliance remained relatively low and stagnant until 1889, by which time the chapters of the Alliance in Nebraska had been stabilized under a state-wide Alliance, and membership shot up as more and more farmers found themselves in dire straits.²⁷⁹ Although her local chapter quickly became a center for fervent political discussions, Luna recounts being uninterested in politics at the start of the 1880s, as she understood herself as a loyal Republican.²⁸⁰ As the Kellies sunk further into debt during 1882 and 1883 because of poor crops and low prices, J. T. began to use his unique perspective as a former railroad employee to explore emerging, radical ideas at Alliance meetings. Luna writes:

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 104.

²⁷⁹ Ostler, *Prairie Populism*, 91-92.

²⁸⁰ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 104.

[J. T.] knew the approximate cost of the Union Pacific, Northern Pacific, B. & M. and other railroads per mile. Knowing they held their charters under plea of public welfare and knowing the cost per mile of freight per mile etc. he was trying to see where R.R. welfare left off and Public welfare began. But he did not bother me very much about it and as I did not attend the Alliance meetings I do not know how early or thoroughly they discussed these topics but they were thinking and every stroke of adversity which robbed us of the fruit of our labor made them question the more, what if we had had our deserts in other years?²⁸¹

J. T.'s ability to compare the costs incurred by railroads to the terms of contract offered by the government put him at the forefront of Alliance thinking. While this chapter focuses on Luna's politicization, J. T.'s seems equally compelling, especially as it relates to ideas about the reification of masculinity explored in the previous chapters. Like Aldrich and Gitchel, J. T. understood himself as the breadwinner and protector of the family. During the 1880s, he began to appreciate the injustices that prevented him from fulfilling that role, but, unlike Gitchel, he had unique and personal insight into the functioning and financing of railroad corporations. As such, he was able to articulate and pinpoint specific injustices where others could not. Finding himself subject to the humbling experience of relying on his wife's income, he could channel his frustrated masculine energy towards a specific and identifiable enemy—his old benefactor, the railroads.

Unfortunately, Luna's personal memoir ends soon after the family's move and before her involvement in the Alliance.²⁸² Manuscripts relating to Luna's life show that after their relocation in 1883, Luna quickly became more involved in the Alliance. Nelsen writes that after their move, "[Luna] began to make a conscious connection

²⁸¹ Ibid., 114.

²⁸² As explained at the start of this chapter, *A Prairie Populist* contains *both* a personal memoir (dealing with Kellie and her family's day-to-day life) while the political memoir charts Kellie's involvement in the Farmers' Alliance and Populist Party.

between her family's financial problems and the railroad companies' general exploitation of farmers... For the next five years, while devoting herself to making their new timber claim a home, Kellie also educated herself in the Alliance movement."²⁸³ In this way, Luna became cognizant of the point made by Levy in "*The Mortgage Worked the Hardest*"—namely, that the economic systems of the time could not coexist with most settlers' hopes for landed independence.²⁸⁴ In the years to come, Luna devoted herself to renewing this vision of the West.

Kellie's position in the Farmer's Alliance rose alongside the movement's prominence on the Great Plains. By 1890, membership in the Nebraska Farmer's Alliance had more than doubled in size in a single year—from 25,000 members to 60,000 members—and sparked a movement culture defined by speeches, songs, and stories and essays compiled in Alliance newsletters. After joining around 1883, Luna gradually became active in the movement, writing articles for its papers and composing songs and poetry that funneled her frustrations into the movement's cause. In January of 1894, Kellie was asked to serve as her community's representative at a statewide Alliance meeting and to deliver there what would be her most famous speech—"Stand Up for Nebraska."²⁸⁵ A number of historians have acknowledged the significance of Kellie's role as a leader of the "movement culture" of Great Plains populism, suggesting that her aptitude as a crafter of language allowed her to connect with a mass audience.²⁸⁶ Indeed the widespread, positive reception of her speech at the convention led to her election as

²⁸³ Ibid., 159.

²⁸⁴ Levy, "*The Mortgage Worked the Hardest*."

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 135-140.

²⁸⁶ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 160-161, 180-182.

State Secretary and subsequent responsibilities writing and editing for Populist newspapers. By considering Kellie's rhetoric as a product of ingrained beliefs and experiences on the Plains, one can strive towards a broader analysis of the ideological foundations of Great Plains Populism.

Sweet Glimpses of the Land Beyond: The Social Framework of Luna Kellie's Political Rhetoric

An examination of the language Kellie uses in "Stand Up for Nebraska" reveals how her ideological and personal beliefs informed her politics. As a leader in the Populist movement, Luna translated her earlier faith in the redeeming power of hard work into an alternate vision of redemption, one based on mass mobilization and political change. Kellie chose "Stand up for Nebraska" as her title and theme because "republicans were just then accusing us of slandering the state..."²⁸⁷ The speech asks its listeners to stand together against eastern corporations and corrupt government officials. She includes a few lines of a song that highlight the speech's agrarian and Christian visions of redemption and salvation:

There's a land where the toiler is free,
Where no robber of labor can come,
Where wealth gives not power to oppress,
Nor another man's labor to own.

In that sweet by and by
Which has been for long ages foretold,
In that sweet by and by
Moral worth will rank higher than gold.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 128.

²⁸⁸ Ibid. Although not fully considered in this paper, Kellie's use of music and poetry has significant implications regarding the role of women in the Populist movement. Kellie's songs demonstrate how women used resources from their traditional roles in the family to transcend the usual political boundaries they faced.

This song borrows the language of a Christian hymn, “Sweet By and By,” to promise the collective salvation of Nebraska’s farmers.²⁸⁹ While in the hymn “by and by” refers to heaven, Kellie’s usage of this phrase appeals to a future that makes good on Jefferson’s promise of an agrarian utopia. Kellie promises this utopian future along the same terms that a preacher might promise spiritual salvation—it exists only as an abstract vision and can be reached only through faith and perseverance.

Kellie was raised as a member of a Methodist Episcopal Church in Minnesota, and she and J. T. joined a revivalist, Presbyterian Church community in Nebraska.²⁹⁰ Though religion plays a subtle role in Kellie’s personal memoir, it comes to the fore in her political doctrine. In addition to the quote above, later in this speech she invokes Nebraska as the “promised land” and promises the Alliance that if they labor onward, “someone, sometime, will arise and call the Alliance blessed.”²⁹¹ She also argues that the corruption in Western society violates the teachings of Christ: “The Christian way closely followed at the ballot box would soon right every legalized injustice, and yet the majority of the voters pretend to be his followers. Had they been so in deed and in truth how different would be the condition of our country.”²⁹² This speech highlights how the Farmer’s Alliance relied upon the traditions and messages of evangelical Christianity to gather support. As Ostler explains in *Prairie Populism*, the Alliance used Christian

²⁸⁹ Dan Fox, *Reader's Digest Family Songbook of Faith and Joy: 129 All-Time Inspirational Favorites* (Pleasantville, N.Y.: Reader's Digest Association, 1975). The refrain of the song goes, “In the sweet, in the sweet/By and by, by and by/We shall meet on that beautiful shore.”

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 128.

traditions to build a movement culture around the movement.²⁹³ Moreover, Protestantism offered Kellie a model to express the Alliance’s political ideology. Framing the goals of the Alliance in terms of redemption and salvation made it easy for the public to understand and connect with its politics.

These Christian visions of redemption are used to promote classical Republican ideals about labor and independence. Specifically, Kellie highlights notions of free labor and suggests that Western free markets, rather than enabling this kind of independence and liberty, actually detracted from it. Also prevalent in the speech and in the lyrics above is her emphasis on Nebraska’s exceptional ability to support virtuous and independent yeoman. Kellie imagines a country defined by this code of ethics rather than by money. As such, she places these republican ideals in competition with what she sees as the corrupting influence of capitalism, hoping for a future where “moral worth will rank higher than gold.” The framing of this line also appeals to Christian notions of virtue and personal worth.

“Stand up for Nebraska” ultimately offers a vision of collective redemption through unity and reform. It demonstrates how Kellie channeled her faith in the redemptive power of personal labor into a new vision of collective power for social change. In the first paragraph of her speech, she writes:

At times we grow weary and discouraged when we realize that the work of the Alliance is hardly begun...we have hardly taken a step on the road to industrial freedom. We know that although we may not arrive there **our children** will enter into the promised land, and we can make their trials fewer and lighter, even if we live not to see the full light of freedom for mankind...Meanwhile to us who have learned to ‘labor and wait’ there come sometimes sweet glimpses of the land

²⁹³ Ibid., 160.

beyond, and it seems so near, the road so short, that we can not have long to wait to enter and possess the land.²⁹⁴

The symbolism in this text—“the land beyond,” “the road to industrial freedom”—speak to a vision of settler redemption based on landed independence. She highlights faith and dedication as a means of realizing this vision of redemption, promising that future generations of Nebraska farmers will find this utopia even if she and her compatriots will not. This confidence parallels her earlier faith and hope in the future home her family would build on the basis of their hard work and virtuous living. At the end of the above quote, she explicitly links a fallen faith in the dream of Free Soil to a new promise of redemption and a new road to “the promised land.” This transference of a vision of personal redemption—whether Christian, agrarian, capitalist, or, as was often the case, a mix of all three—into a vision of collective redemption defined the popularity of the Populism in this moment. The personal story of Kellie’s politicization and the cycles of hope and despair crafted in her memoir can be seen as a microcosm of this trend. Populist doctrine invoked an ideology that drew from both Republican and Christian traditions and ultimately relied on the frustrations of a people whose individual visions of redemption had been denied.

Populism and Capitalism

The impetus behind the Populist movement, as demonstrated by Kellie’s personal narrative, was a corrupt and brutalizing economic system that failed to make good on the American promise of redemption. At the end of the nineteenth century, Kellie transferred her agrarian hopes into productive political action towards social change. Her story raises a central question for historians of Populism: to what extent did Populist doctrine actually

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 127. Emphasis in original.

contradict the central tenets of capitalism? The section above demonstrates how, in rhetoric at least, Kellie's Populist doctrine drew heavily on Christian and Republican traditions. Therefore, the most revealing question is how Populists like Kellie hoped to use these ideologies to shape a society so deeply reliant on capitalist structures and capitalist notions of individual success. By examining the specific policies endorsed by the Populists and how they functioned within a free-market, capitalist model, one can more broadly consider the relationship between these two seemingly contradictory ideologies.

Great Plains Populists supported three central political and economic reforms: the nationalization of railroads, free coinage of silver, and, most radically, redistribution of Western lands. In "Stand Up For Nebraska," Kellie claims that frustrations in the 1890s led to the radicalization of these demands. She writes, "While a slight reduction [in freight rates] would have sufficed three years ago, the people now know that they have the constitutional right to take the railroads, under right of eminent domain and run them at cost in the interest of *all the people*..."²⁹⁵ This remark suggests that a call for nationalized railroads was not the inevitable result of the Populist's ideological stance but, rather, a response to unfailingly high and exploitative freight rates. This, like Kellie's earlier interactions with large corporations, speaks to her belief in a fair and unfair way of conducting free market exchange.

Similarly, the Populists saw the currency issue as a structural problem in free-market capitalism. As explained in the preamble to the Omaha Platform of 1892 (or People's Platform) of the Populist Party:

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 129. Emphasis in original.

Our annual agricultural productions amount to billions of dollars in value, which must, within a few weeks or months be exchanged for billions of dollars' worth of commodities consumed in their production; the existing currency supply is wholly inadequate to make this exchange; the results are falling prices, the formation of combines and rings, the impoverishment of the producing class.²⁹⁶

As such, Populist demands for currency expansion and the free coinage of silver was seen as a fix, not a challenge, to the current capitalist system. This demand sought to exorcise corruption in the free market and create a more just—some might say favorable—system for farmers. Therefore, these two demands, arguably the most important to farmers of the Great Plains, clearly function within the structural and ideological precepts of free-market capitalism. Essentially, they try to reorient the market in a way that reestablishes the primacy of Jefferson's yeoman. Their vision of a nationalized railroad, by conflating the interests of farmers with "the interest of *all the people*," speaks to this trend. This reform still imagines an economic separation between the farmers and non-producing classes and competition between farmers.

This is not to say that the Populists did not try to challenge capitalism with their emphasis on cooperation, collectivity, and social change. In "Stand Up For Nebraska," Kellie also articulates a demand for land redistribution based on "use as sole title."²⁹⁷ This directly challenged free-market conceptions of property rights. Redefining these rights based on an agrarian model of society would genuinely have upended America's social order. The plank adopted by the Populist Party at the Omaha Convention, asserted, "All land held by railroads and other corporations in excess of their actual needs, and all lands now owned by aliens, should be reclaimed by the government and held for actual

²⁹⁶ "The People's Platform, 1892" in Carstensen, *Farmer Discontent, 1865-1900*, 91.

²⁹⁷ Kellie, *A Prairie Populist*, 129-130.

settlers only.”²⁹⁸ By aiming to end to land monopolization and reserve all public lands for farmer-settlers, the Populists did, in fact, envision a society reoriented to America’s agrarian past. However, even the most radical Populist reforms presupposed capitalist structures. This reform ultimately sought to upset railroads and banks’ monopoly on Western land. While it imagined radical change, that change sought to reestablish the potential for individuals to win out against larger corporations in the economic sphere.

These three reforms, taken together, show how settlers’ economic frustration acted as the impetus behind the rise of the Populist movement. Settlers carried this failed vision of personal redemption into the political sphere by endorsing a vision of political, collective redemption. Ultimately, their highest political goals were based on reestablishing the opportunity for individual self-determination and success in an agrarian and capitalist society. Settlers like Luna Kellie came west with a vision of success and redemption that conflated the Republican promise of landed independence and the capitalist promise of material wealth, but in the hard times at the end of the century it became clear that capitalist redemption was the one that mattered. While Populists imagined a society that transcended the ills of capitalist corruption and greed, they could not negate capitalism’s role as the defining systems of American society.

This is made glaringly evident by the sudden dissolution of the party in the last years of the 1890s. After her speech at the state convention, Kellie was appointed as State Secretary of the Nebraska Alliance, which, after the Omaha Platform, essentially became a wing of the Populist Party. As Secretary, Kellie adopted a hard-line stance on financial reform and aligned herself with the most radical wing of the Populists—the middle-of-

²⁹⁸ “The People’s Platform,” in Carstensen, *Farmer Discontent, 1865-1900*, 93.

the-rovers—who believed that isolation from the corrupt two-party system was the only way to realize social change.²⁹⁹ In 1896, however, the Party threw its weight behind the Democrat, William Jennings Bryan, on the basis of his free silver platform. This led to the splintering and eventual dissolution of the People’s Party and around 1905 Kellie abandoned the Party and the Alliance out of frustration.³⁰⁰ A complex confluence of political patterns led to the fall of the People’s Party, but, for the purpose of this paper, one can interpret its demise as an indication of the primacy of capitalism as the defining force in American society in this moment. While Kellie hoped for a society “where moral worth ranked higher than gold,” the end of the nineteenth century marked the opposite; gold emerged as the definitive measure of individual worth and independence.³⁰¹ The Populists put their support behind Free Silver because it offered the best hope for farmers to reclaim stability and independence in a capitalist society.

During the nineteenth century, structural—that is economic and technological—changes in agriculture corresponded with an ideological shift. No longer was agricultural success (raising lots of food) considered valuable alone; economic success defined one’s personal worth and independence. This parallels a shift away from Republicans’ value in the honor of labor in and of itself. While Luna Kellie felt betrayed by the repercussions of this shift, her vision of social change remained within the capitalist model. The People’s Party sought market regulations that brought back this apparent confluence of agrarian and capitalist beliefs about labor.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 161 – 162.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

As Postel argues in *The Populist Vision*, the fluidity of American society at this moment enabled a re-orientation of fundamental American ideals. This resonates with the connections explored among these three chapters and suggests a space in which similar beliefs and values could be taken in radically different directions. Kellie's vision of home building, like the parallel visions of Gitchel and Aldrich, focused on individual redemption and self-determination, and her memoir suggests that this individualism and a belief in the gospel of success shaped the popularity of the Populist Party. One must consider, therefore, how even collective, egalitarian movements in American history are founded on a faith in individualism, individual virtue, worth, and success. This does not make the Populists and settlers like Kellie into "petty capitalists." Instead, it suggests that the Populist Party by necessity imagined a capitalist society that combined the American gospel of individualism and success with an adherence to Jeffersonian, agrarian notions of liberty, Christian values, and a "producer ethic," and arrived at an ideology that reflects an amalgam of foundational American beliefs. Like all social movements, they had no path by which to transcend the structural and ideological foundations of their society.

Kellie's life makes manifest a central and reoccurring paradox of American capitalism. While prominent and prolific thinkers like Benjamin Franklin and Benton Aldrich imagine that the free market adheres to certain moral guidelines, the lived experience of capitalist society is often degrading and demoralizing. Instead of virtue and honesty, American capitalism often rewards exploitation and deceit. Despite this contradiction, most people—like all three examined here—clung to a moralizing vision of capitalist self-determination. Kellie's story gives some insight into why. First of all,

her life demonstrates how and why people need visions of success and redemption. These bring meaning and a motivating force to people's lives. Kellie's narrative also demonstrates the impossibility of transcending capitalist beliefs in a society clearly oriented around the free market. Her story shows the inevitable trend by which groups and individuals conform their beliefs to fit within capitalist models and ethics. The arc of Kellie's life and ideals can be seen as a microcosm of capitalism's ascendance as the defining force in the West.

Conclusion

Each of the three settlers studied in this paper came to the West with hopes of personal success, independence, and a “better life” for themselves and their family. However, the Great Plains of the late nineteenth century generally failed to fulfill the visions of redemption that brought them west. Settlers of the Great Plains did not find a virgin land where a poor, northern laborer could achieve landed independence and stability on the basis of hard work and virtue. Instead, they arrived in an industrialized and incorporated society, largely controlled by banks and railroads with a rapidly growing mortgage system and a tightly held market for agricultural goods. Upon arriving on the Plains, settlers quickly became immersed not only in these structural systems, but also in capitalism’s foundational beliefs. While the reality of the challenged Jefferson’s vision of a utopian garden, the history of the Great Plains also demonstrates an easy fluidity and ambiguity between capitalist, Republican, and agrarian ethics. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the potential for balance between these different visions of success and redemption became untenable, and capitalist individualism rose to the fore as the defining feature of the American West.

Each of the settlers studied in this paper put faith in their land and labor to bring agricultural, financial, and personal success. Their visions of personal redemption provided inspiration to work and brought meaning to their lives on the Plains. Their faith in this redemption shaped how these individuals understood success and failure; virtue and sin; and liberty and dependence. Many U.S historians, like Jonathan Glickstein and Eric Foner, have considered the lineage and overlap among the defining systems of belief

of the nineteenth century—Protestant ethics, Republican agrarianism, and capitalist individualism. Other scholars, such as Richard White and Alan Trachtenberg, have examined the ascent of capitalist ideas and institutions at the end of this century.

This paper works in conjunction with both of these schools of nineteenth-century U.S history. The three settlers examined herein not only reflect the complexities and ambiguous overlap between these belief systems but also show how capitalist ideals prevailed at the end of the century. Gitchel, Aldrich, and Kellie each subscribed to a view of the world that in some way fused these three systems of belief. At the same time, this volatile and dynamic moment in American history created dramatic rifts in political thought, especially in interpretations of capitalist free markets—hence the wide gap between Benton Aldrich and Luna Kellie’s beliefs, despite their shared emphasis on personal, agrarian redemption. Essentially, my thesis speaks to the relationship between social change and ideological shifts during the unstable decades of the 1880s and 1890s. In these years, the American West emerged as part of an industrial and capitalist society with no real space for agrarian, Republican notions of labor, redemption, or success. The lives of these three settlers each speak to this shift.

Economic challenges in these decades both conditioned and revealed the foundational beliefs of these settlers. Ben Gitchel clung to his faith in the land to bring personal and financial redemption, as his family struggled to stay afloat in an unstable economy. Benton Aldrich, on the other hand, formulated a complex personal philosophy that endorsed and absorbed capitalist ethics into a moralizing vision of natural law and personal success. Finally, Luna Kellie alone among these three (though her actions were not atypical among her contemporaries) actively and passionately resisted the march of

capitalist society on the Plains. She hoped to preserve the agrarian vision of personal redemption that had brought her west by undermining the economic and social structures that empowered eastern corporate and industrial interests.

In certain ways, capitalist beliefs seem to be compatible with older ideas about labor, virtue, and success. Capitalism favors a vision of redemption based on hard work, perseverance, and virtue that easily attached itself to Republican society in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Similarly, the promises of capitalist redemption easily adapted themselves to Republican ideals of self-determination and personal liberty. Despite this semblance of compatibility, capitalism by nature consumes and replaces other ways of understanding the world. In part, this is caused by a central tension of capitalist society—although it promises total liberty, that liberty is conditioned by participation in free market systems and, therefore, adherence to capitalist notions of success and personal redemption. A settler of the Great Plains could never have refused to engage with the national market for grain, and many could not even afford to finance their farms without taking out mortgages. The structures of capitalism in the West clearly defied the Republican vision of landed independence, but, by the end of the nineteenth century, visions of economic success had replaced older ideas about yeoman independence. Even those who clung to ideas of agrarianism and yeoman exceptionalism sought to realize these ideals by protecting a farmer's right to a decent living and leverage in the marketplace. As such, economic pressures of a capitalist society necessarily lead to compliance with capitalist ideals. Specifically, capitalist society demanded adherence to the notion that hard work, virtue, and honesty leads to wealth and that individualism and competition are the best means of serving a common good.

The experiences and beliefs of all three of these settlers demonstrate the effects of capitalism rise in the West. Ben Gitchel's story is the most tragic. Unconditionally committed to his faith in the land, he found himself adrift in a society organized around capitalist institutions. While he was cognizant enough of capitalism to envision a personal redemption that would transcend personal, spiritual, and financial spheres, he never really reoriented himself to the incorporated and industrial society in which he lived. Aldrich provides a foil for this tragedy. He demonstrates how some settlers adapted capitalism into older discourses of labor, success, and redemption. He not only mastered the market systems of the West but also adopted the motivating beliefs of capitalist society into his own philosophy of natural law. In so doing, he validated his financial success by connecting it to his ideas about morality and heredity. It is tempting to see Aldrich's ideology as a kind of false consciousness, as his invocation of natural law seems to so clearly serve the interests of wealthy, white males. However, Aldrich *did*, in fact, believe that his race and heritage entitled him to a certain kind of success; he embraced capitalism as natural law because it so easily correlated with his vision of how society should be structured.

Luna Kellie, on the other hand, tried to create systemic change while working within the structural and ideological confines of a capitalist society. This provides the most compelling evidence for capitalism's ability to consume its own contradictions. Luna Kellie genuinely subscribed to a vision of success based on landed independence, not wealth. However, whether or not she agreed with the central tenets of capitalism, she could only challenge them through the means available to her—the American promise of personal redemption. As such, she envisioned a reformed capitalist society reoriented to a

Republican agrarian tradition. Despite broad support, even this challenge could not loosen the grip of capitalist ideals on American society, and Populist reforms were easily defused or co-opted into mainstream political discourse. The sudden decline of Populism and Kellie's disillusionment both speak to the futility of challenging capitalism based on other systems of belief at the end of the nineteenth century

The rise and fall of populism reflects broader trends in the rise of capitalism in the West. If one examines three systems of belief—Christianity, Republicanism, capitalism—in some kind of linear pattern (a slightly problematic and misleading prospect by my own arguments, but rhetorically useful), an interesting pattern emerges. First, Republicanism secularized Protestant beliefs and reoriented them towards personal, rather than spiritual, redemption. Capitalism, in turn, continued this shift towards the individual and emphasized wealth as a manifestation of a virtuous life. However, the rise of capitalism is unique in that it not only consumed but eventually discounted and replaced these older ideologies. In earlier decades of the nineteenth century, capitalism could be understood as compatible with or even complimentary to a society organized around Republican virtue. However, the dominance of capitalist structures and the free market in American society necessitated an ideological shift and social reorientation. In this rapidly changing society, individuals had no choice but to accept capitalist ethics in order to understand their world and “make it” in the U.S. While the unstable economy at the end of the century sparked a movement that theoretically challenged the precepts of capitalism, in fact this instability both demonstrated and solidified the emergence of capitalism as *the* defining force in society. The lives of the settlers studied in this paper

speak to these trends and, more importantly, to the contradictions of capitalism that emerge from this history.

This paper's treatment of capitalism as a faith-based ideological system has significant historiographic implications. Specifically, the connection drawn between mortgages and visions of redemption in American society can be seen as a defining feature of the nation's history. By considering a mortgage as an act of faith—in one's personal worth and in the promise of American individualism—one can discern patterns in the relationship between systems of debt and the history of ideas in America, specifically in relation to notions of success and failure. For example, the end of World War II ushered in a new vision of suburban stability as the paradigm of success. Middle-class prosperity replaced old Jeffersonian notions of landed independence as the defining vision of American society, and the suburban home with a car and washing machine played the role of the hearty yeoman's family farm. Just as banks created a complex mortgage system to prop up Jefferson's agrarian vision, so too did they build an even more intricate mortgage system to finance millions of suburban homes. Similarly, the rise and fall of housing markets during the twentieth and twenty-first century, especially the collapse of the home mortgage system in 2007, brought American ideals of redemption, success, and failure to the fore and sparked intense political debate. This mirrors the way in which, as examined in this paper, the collapse of crop prices in the late nineteenth century West brought these beliefs to the fore.

In the same way, moments that threatened this twentieth-century American vision of success, particularly the economic instability of the 1970's and late 2000's, produced ideological and political reactions that parallel those examined in this paper. In these

moments of uncertainty, one sees two responses: one based on liberal capitalist ethics and an appeal to “laissez-faire” and another based on progressive notions of collectivity and populism. However, *both* of these perennially conflicting responses to instability rely on notions of individual success and redemption. The laissez-faire reaction demands that the government allow the economy to run its course so as not to interfere with the “natural” patterns by which a free market rewards virtue and perseverance: for example, the hands-off attitude of Goldwater conservatism and the Tea Party. (However, just as Aldrich’s discourse of natural law actually validates a specific vision of society that empowers white, wealthy males, “libertarian” political doctrines similarly discriminate the interests that will be served by the government.) The populist reaction, on the other hand, demands government regulations in order to ensure fairness in and access to this vision of individual self-determination and redemption: for example, Johnson’s Great Society and the Occupy Wall Street movement. These seemingly irreconcilable political divisions, therefore, actually demonstrate a common lineage in American intellectual history.

Another connection between visions of redemption in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is how each relied on the idea of constant expansion and seemingly infinite resources. In many ways, one can see this as the fulfillment of Turner’s 1893 prophecy that the frontier would define the American character and American society for years to come. Both Jefferson’s agrarian vision for the Plains and liberal, capitalist visions of the West depended on the idea of an essentially infinite amount of land for anyone who hoped to claim it. This gave everyone the resources to establish their own landed independence, as in Jefferson’s vision, or, in the capitalist model, prove their personal worth through material success. Similarly, twentieth-and-twenty-first-century

visions of redemption and success—as embodied by the suburban homes mentioned earlier—rely on a constantly expanding currency: a man-made and truly infinite resource, which upholds the fundamental institutions of the American economy—inflation, stock markets, and government bonds. This post-war vision of suburban success is inherently connected to this vision of unlimited growth. Therefore, one could argue that this boundless resource literally relies on a collective act of capitalist faith; inflation necessarily demands faith in this unbounded future and trust that the currency will not collapse. This parallels the agrarian and capitalist beliefs that pushed individuals to persevere through hard times at the end of the nineteenth century. Ultimately, just as economic failure in the 1890s demonstrated the instability of the promise of the frontier, so too did the economic collapse of 2007 reveal the instability of this capitalist promise.

This project also gestures towards the way in which empire-building, race, and religion defined capitalist ethics and visions of success and failure in the nineteenth century. Although these themes were not the primary lens of my analysis, the arguments made here undoubtedly demonstrate their significance. The settlement of the American West was an act of displacement and expansion. The land policies that sent settlers west and divided up the Plains, including the Homestead Act, used farmers as an advance guard in what was essentially a military conquest. Considered in this context, the ideological foundations of land policy and settler success can be seen as validating the subjugation of indigenous peoples. Similarly, visions of the foreordained ascendancy of the Anglo-Saxon race clearly validated individual settlers' notions of personal redemption. Indeed, Benton Aldrich argued that the American West created a space for the most industrious and virtuous races to establish their dominance. In his essay on

eugenics, he reflects on the relative moral virtues and faults of Blacks and Native Americans, and considers why they found themselves subjugated and defeated by other races. In furthering this claim, Aldrich admittedly supports a vision of white ascendancy and “manifest destiny.”³⁰² The history of the beliefs and values of the American West, therefore, is also a history of race and empire.

More explicit in this project is how Christian doctrine informed capitalist visions of redemption, success, and failure. The beliefs of these settlers show how Christian ideas about salvation mirrored secular, capitalist notions of personal success and redemption. I also demonstrate that unwavering faith played as important a role in capitalist discourse as it does in Christian law, in that it validated and defined the experiences of these settlers. Therefore, while most people perceive the economy as a secular sphere, one can see that the moral and ideological beliefs implicit in capitalism relied heavily on Christianity. Settlers’ dependence on debt and mortgages facilitated a secular, capitalist equivalent of Christian faith, which shows how spiritual, personal, and material visions of redemption became intertwined during the nineteenth century. A more ambitious project than my own could consider how race, empire, and Christianity continued to shape manifestations of capitalist values in the twentieth century, especially during moments of economic and social instability. The 1970s provide an especially interesting foil, given the confluence of economic collapse, escalating racial tensions, evangelicals' emergence in the political sphere, and key military conflicts to defend America's influence overseas. Moreover, the 1970s saw the culmination of the Cold War, which, one could argue, was a battle to protect and spread America’s capitalist empire.

³⁰² Benton Aldrich, “Notes on Eugenics and Heredity,” circa 1910, unpublished: Benton Aldrich Papers (NSHS, Series 2, Folder 4), 10-12.

The beliefs of these three settlers are ultimately connected to a lineage of American visions of redemption that has shaped U.S history at every turn. Their stories demonstrate how different systems of belief came together at the end of the nineteenth century and charted a new path in the history of America's foundational ideologies, a path that ultimately led to the capitalist society of the twentieth century. The history of these motivating beliefs lies at the heart of many fundamental tensions in American history but none more prominently than the American vision of individual liberty and self-determination. The lives of these three individuals can be seen as manifestations of the central paradox of American capitalism. At the close of the nineteenth century, one finds a society that promises wealth on the basis of virtue and industry but reserves it for a select few based on inheritance and market savvy; it guaranteed personal liberty but conditioned that liberty on participation in an inherently controlling market system. This paradox has continued to shape Americans' relationship with capitalism to this day.

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