**8-5.6: POPULIST MOVEMENT AND FARMERS**

**8-5.6 Focus Question:**

How did the plight of farmers in South Carolina compare with that of farmers throughout the United States, including the problems of overproduction, natural disasters, and sharecropping and encompassing the roles of Ben Tillman, the Populists, and land-grant colleges?

**8-5.6 Essential Notes:**

The postwar agricultural depression continued after the end of Reconstruction and the Conservative government did nothing to help small farmers. Small farms, worked by sharecroppers or tenant farmers, replaced the large plantations of the antebellum period. Cotton continued to dominate the South Carolina economy, but it did not bring prosperity. Instead of helping the destitute farmers, the Conservatives passed a crop lien law that allowed creditors to have first claim on a farmer's crop. The crop lien system held farmers in continual debt.

In order to understand the economic roots of the Populist movement of farmers in the United States, in general, and in South Carolina, in particular, students must understand supply and demand. Although South Carolina farmers did not experience the mechanization of farming (cotton was picked by hand well into the twentieth century) that raised supply in other regions of the country, they did have fertilizers that increased the cotton yield. They were also competing with foreign suppliers. Worldwide supply exceeded demand and the price that farmers were able to get for their crops fell throughout the period. Farmers throughout the Midwest and the South were unable to make payments on the loans that they had taken out to purchase land and equipment. In South Carolina, the problem of debt was exacerbated by the sharecropping and tenant farming system and the crop lien laws. Farmers first responded to this problem as individuals by planting more so that they could make more profit. The more farmers planted, the more prices fell. In South Carolina, farmers also felt the impact of bank foreclosures, forfeiture of their land for non-payment of taxes, as well as drought and pests such as the army worm and the boll weevil that led to periodic crop failures.

The political roots of the Populist movement were established in South Carolina, as in other parts of the South and in the Midwest, as a result of these worsening economic conditions. Farmers organized first as the Grange, a social organization designed to alleviate the isolation of farm life. In the Midwest, the Grange evolved into a political organization. In South Carolina, the farmers did not have political power. It remained in the hands of the elite Conservatives. Farmers organized in regional Farmers' Alliances in the 1880s that advocated for an increase in the monetary supply, especially the coinage of silver. In South Carolina, where society was segregated by both law and practice, there was a white Farmers' Alliance and a Colored Farmers' Alliance. In the 1890s, alliances around the country united to form the Populist Party, which supported the regulation of railroads and banking, the free and unlimited coinage of silver, and a system of federal farm loans. The party also advocated democratic reforms such as the popular election of Senators, the secret ballot, and a graduated income tax. The farmers attempted to ally with industrial workers by advocating an eight-hour work day and restrictions on immigration. The Populist Party was successful in electing senators, governors and state legislators in the South and West. In South Carolina, farmers did not form a separate party but worked to control the Democratic Party.

South Carolina farmers accepted the leadership of **Ben Tillman** because of his extraordinary oratorical and political skills. He could be considered a Populist because he appealed to the values and needs of the common people against the Conservative elite. Tillman was not a true advocate for the ideals of the Populist Party and he strove to gain control of the Democratic Party in South Carolina. Tillman's political maneuvering were more in keeping with the political machines of the late nineteenth century than they were with the idealistic farmers' reform movement, which advocated for more popular control of the government. Unlike other Southern Populists [such as Tom Watson of Georgia], Tillman never supported the Populists' appeal for the vote of the African-American farmers, who suffered as much or more from economic conditions as the white farmer. Tillman's white supremacy message and racist rhetoric led to an increase of violence and lynching against African-Americans and to efforts to disenfranchise the African-American voter (8-5.4).

The fight between the Tillmanites and the Conservative establishment got statewide attention with Tillman's support for the establishment of Clemson as an agricultural college and his opposition to the elitism of the University of South Carolina. Tillman advocated the establishment of educational facilities for farmers to teach them better crop management and to develop new crops to increase their economic prosperity. The property at Clemson was a bequest by Thomas Green Clemson [son-in-law of John C. Calhoun], who supported Tillman's promotion of an agricultural college. Clemson was also a land grant college in that its operation was supported by the system of land grants established by the national government [Morrill Act] by which the sale of a portion of western lands was reserved to support agricultural improvements in each of the established states. In order to comply with the "separate but equal" doctrine, South Carolina and other southern states established separate land grant colleges for African America farmers. South Carolina State University was authorized by the land grant system but received limited financial support from the state. Clemson and South Carolina State encouraged diversification of crops, but changes in crop production in various regions of South Carolina occurred as a result of natural disaster and entrepreneurship.

Although its epicenter was nearer to Summerville, the effects of the 1886 intraplate earthquake were more graphic in the city of Charleston rather than the agricultural countryside. As the largest, most destructive, costly, and lethal earthquake ever to strike east of the Mississippi, the catastrophe and the city's response to it revolutionized and modernized practices in construction, disaster preparedness/response, and scientific study that continue to this day. The hurricane that struck Charleston in 1893 and others that followed wiped out the rice fields and competition from the Far East brought an end to the production of 'Carolina Gold.' Lowcountry farmers turned to truck gardening to supply local markets. Tobacco was introduced as a cash crop in the Pee Dee region but could not be grown in other parts of the Lowcountry. Some upstate farmers planted peach trees but cotton continued to dominate South Carolina agriculture into the twentieth century.