The Populists

“My intention in this article was to suggest another means to teach a difficult period in American history. The Populist appear less than real to modern urban students. But kids all know Oz, thanks to Judy Garland and television.” Henry Littlefield, 1992

Objectives:

The students will…

• Be able to understand the major ideas and beliefs of the Populist Party
• Understand the purpose of party platforms
• Be able to explain the meaning of an “allegory” and how it can be used to convey factual information
• Be able to identify the major figures in the Populist movement and their significance

Materials:

• The Populist Platform of 1892; The Populist Platform of 1896
• The Wizard of Oz (Use the DVD since you can skip to the appropriate scenes)

Optional:

• Wendy’s Wizard of Oz is a privately run but excellent website on the movie
• There are many myths about the Wizard of Oz that are explored at the Wizard of Oz online
• Information on how to sync Pink Floyd’s Dark Side of the Moon to the Wizard of Oz is available at Synchronicityarkive
Additional Resources:

- **The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism** is the original Henry Littlefield article explaining using the Wizard of Oz as part of an American history curriculum.
- **The Wizard of Oz: An American Fairy Tale** is a wonderful website at the Library of Congress tracing the history of the books and various movie versions of Baum’s classic.
- **The Progressive Era** at the Library of Congress
- William Jennings Bryan’s [Cross of Gold speech](#)

Background:

The idea of using the *Wizard of Oz* as an allegory on populism was first originated by Henry Littlefield in 1964. It has been used, embellished, and expanded on over the decades but remains an effective tool to help students understand, appreciate, and remember the key issues of this important period of history. It also shows how film can be used in the history classroom as part of the curriculum and as a tool to teach content. Although Frank Baum never intended this piece to be a political commentary, it is fun to tell the students this fact only at the end and ask them to come up with some novel interpretations and new symbolism. In recent years, there have been claims that the *Wizard of Oz* was synchronized to Pink Floyd’s album, “Dark Side of the Moon.” Several websites are available that explain this theory.

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1. Tell the students that they are about to see the most important historical movies ever made about the Populist Movement.
2. Show the clip from the DVD: Chapter 16: “Follow the Yellow Brick Road.”
   a. After showing the clip, the students will be surprised and confused. Explain to them that the Wizard of Oz was a political allegory and that it is, in fact, a very sophisticated political commentary (This, of course, isn’t exactly true but it will increase the students’ interest and enthusiasm).
   b. Key points to make from viewing Chapter 16:
      i. 1939 is considered to be the greatest year in film-making
      ii. *Gone with the Wind* and the *Wizard of Oz* debuted this year along with *Wuthering Heights* and *Young Mr. Lincoln*
      iii. During the Great Depression, people went to the movies to escape the realities of everyday life
      iv. Color had just been introduced to film
      v. During the Populist era, money was based upon the Gold Standard
      vi. Farmers and debtors wanted silver to become the new standard to make money more available
      vii. Silver coinage would have been inflationary
viii. William Jennings Bryan delivers his famous “Cross of Gold” speech in 1896
ix. Dorothy is wearing “ruby” slippers symbolic of free silver
x. The Yellow Brick Road represents the Gold Standard
xi. Oz is an abbreviation for “ounce”, the measurement for weighing gold

3. Show the clip from the DVD: Chapters 18 and 19: “If Only I Had a Brain” and “We’re Off to See the Wizard.”
   a. Key points to make from viewing Chapters 18 and 19:
      i. The Scarecrow represents the American farmer
         1. Over-productive—produce too much and prices are deflated
         2. Should curb their production to increase prices
      ii. Believe the Wizard (President McKinley) can solve all of their problems
      iii. On their way to the Emerald City (Washington, DC) much like Coxey’s Army during the depression of 1893

4. Show the clip from the DVD: Chapters 21 and 22: “Dorothy Meets the Tin Man” and “If I Only had a Heart”
   a. Key points to make from viewing Chapters 21 and 22:
      i. The Tin Man represents the industrial workers
         1. Man turned into a machine for production
         2. Oiled with John D. Rockefeller is Standard Oil of Ohio

5. Show the clip from the DVD: Chapter 25: “Dorothy Meets the Lion”
   a. The Lion represents William Jennings Bryan
      i. Bryan was a powerful orator but was accused of being “All roar and no bite”

6. Show the clip from the DVD: Chapters 30 and 31: The Emerald City” and “The Merry Old Land of Oz”
   a. Key points to make from viewing Chapters 30 and 31:
      i. The Emerald City is Washington, DC, the home of the Wizard (President)
      ii. It is a city where no one works very hard
      iii. Each day was the same—full of merriment with little substantive work

7. Show the clip from the DVD: Chapter 40: The March of the Winkies”
   a. Key points to make from viewing Chapter 40:
      i. Singing “All we own, we owe” Symbolic of the debt of the working classes in America
      ii. The Populists believed the workers were in virtual bondage to the corporations and railroads

8. Show the clip from the DVD: Chapter 45: ‘You humbug... “
   a. Key points to make from viewing Chapters 45:
      i. The President was not all powerful
         1. In many ways, he was a fraud—the people believed he was more than he actually was
✓ The Tornado—The Panic of 1893
✓ Toto—The “teetotalers” or Prohibitionist
✓ The Wicked Witch of the East—The Banks
✓ The Tin Woodsman—The Industrial Workers
✓ The Scarecrow—The Farmers
✓ The Cowardly Lion—William Jennings Bryan
✓ The Emerald City—Washington DC
✓ The Poppy Fields—China/American Foreign Policy
✓ The Winkies—The enslaved, indebted working class
✓ The Flying Monkeys—The American Indian
✓ The Yellow Brick Road—The Gold Standard
✓ The Ruby Slippers—(In the book, they were actually silver; they were changed to ruby because red provided a better cinematic effect.) Free silver
✓ The Wizard—William McKinley
✓ Dorothy—The archetype good and decent American
✓ OZ—ounce; the measurement for gold