

**A College Try: The People's College of Fort Scott Kansas**

Walter Sours

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It is April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1914; the miners at the Rockefeller mines in Ludlow, Colorado have been striking for around half a year. They are living in a tent city in the cold winter of Colorado, struggling to gain livable working conditions and decent wages. There are around 1,200 striking miners and their families. John D. Rockefeller has enlisted the help of private armed forces and the National Guard to break up the strike. The guard commander ordered Louis Tikas, the leader of the striking colony, to meet him at the Ludlow railroad station. Wary of this, the armed strikers go with Tikas in fear of an attack. Someone fires shots and the guardsmen train their guns on the tent city, where the unarmed families were residing. After raining bullets on the camp with machine guns for hours, the guardsmen begin looting and burning the tents. The guardsmen kill 24 people, including Tikas, two other camp leaders, and at least 19 people including 12 children in a horrific act that would come to be known as the Ludlow Massacre.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the massacre at Ludlow the miners and their families were left with no place to go. Some of them rose in armed rebellion and destroyed several company towns and retaliated against the National Guard.<sup>2</sup> Others went to Fort Scott, Kansas, to The People's College to seek support. According to Meridel Le Sueur, the daughter of People's College Professor Marian Wharton, the Ludlow Massacre refugees:

...marched down the street of Fort Scott silently, their bodies bent from the mines as if the sky also rested on them. They were gaunt sorrowing men. They were Armenian and Greek with the faces of Jesus. The faculty of The People's College marched behind them. I held my mother's hand. We were weeping. And some of the people on the sidewalks wept also and ran out to clutch their hands or embrace them. Others stood meanly and stolidly and silently as we passed. I saw the bodies bearing the mark of their oppression, of their stolen labor, and their now holy dead.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Harvard University Press, 2010). Randall McGuire, "Colorado Coalfield Massacre," *Archaeology* 57, no. 6 (2004): 62-70.

<sup>2</sup> Randall, "Coalfield Massacre," 62-70

Their bodies were hieroglyphs of their exploitation, their blood and bodies taken, their lungs turned to silica stone, a strange sadness and even humiliation in them, but also something else, a terrible fire and grief.<sup>3</sup>

The question then becomes, why did these miners come to Fort Scott, Kansas after the atrocity they had just suffered in Ludlow? They went there because it was a working-class haven, and The People's College was to be the culmination of their work in Southeast Kansas.

In this thesis I argue that The People's College was a working-class institution meant to bring about the liberation of working people by providing universal access to education. The College looked to teach in a way that did not indoctrinate people into the active system of labor exploitation rampant in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was part of a greater strategy that was being employed by Socialists of the time to bring about a peaceful, educated, and democratic revolution within the United States. They laid out their agenda in newspapers and the proliferation of literature and sought to further it by forming unions and through informal education.

While scholars such as R. Alton Lee and Elliot Shore have done extensive research on the Socialist elements of Kansas, there has been limited research on The People's College specifically. Lee gives a short history of The People's College in his book, *When Sunflowers Bloomed Red* and Shore mentions the College in passing, but neither strives to understand what the College was and what its goals were. The scholars Jane Greer and Julia M. Allen have written about Marian Wharton, a professor of English at The People's College and her textbook *Plain English*. However, they analyze Wharton and her textbook's importance and not the College's. The last piece of scholarship that is related to The People's College is Meridel Le Sueur's biography of her parents, Marian Wharton (head of the English department) and Arthur Le Sueur (head of the Law

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<sup>3</sup>Meridel Le Sueur, *Crusaders: The Radical Legacy of Marian and Arthur Le Sueur*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), xvii-xix.

department). The biography is titled *Crusaders* and in it she provides information about her parents as well as some firsthand accounts of the College. These scholars help provide insight as to why The People's College was founded and some of the people involved, but do not address its later period and eventual failure. This thesis explores the founding of the College, its founders' motives, its methodology, and why the bold social and educational experiment eventually failed.

## **Why Southeast Kansas?**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, continuing into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, workers were organizing in the United States. They organized because the working conditions that they were subjected to were dangerous and cost many workers their lives. Another element of this organization is that many people began to subscribe to the ideals of socialism and other left-wing ideologies. They felt that different forms of government would provide every human being with a better quality of life, less exploitation, more access to resources, and a less corrupt government.

To bring about these ideals, workers began to organize political parties, informal organizations, newspapers, and unions. One area where this was prominent was Southeast Kansas. An extremely important example of this was the *Appeal to Reason* (1895-1922), which was a socialist newspaper published in Girard, Kansas (about 20 miles from Fort Scott). However, there were other components of Southeast Kansas that made it a hotbed for Socialist activity. These included the radicalism of the people in the area, high union membership, and the independent efforts they were making to expand their ideologies. I will show how important these efforts were to the national struggle for workers' liberation, but also how they helped create the conditions for The People's College to be founded in Southeast Kansas.

The people who immigrated to Southeast Kansas were tough people, mostly moving there to work in mining industry. These people came from all over the world. However, after 1900 most

of the immigrants who came to work in Cherokee, Crawford, and Bourbon counties came from the southeastern region of Europe known as the Balkans. This led to the area of Southeastern Kansas gaining the nickname “The Little Balkans.” This nickname has stuck and every Labor Day weekend since September 1984 in Pittsburg, Kansas there is a festival called “Little Balkans Day” where homage is paid to the region’s history, ethnic diversity, and community spirit.<sup>4</sup>

The nickname “Little Balkans” did not just come from the ethnic makeup of those who immigrated to Southeast Kansas. It was originally a pejorative term (Balkans of Kansas) that described the economic and political climate of the region.<sup>5</sup> Labor unions and strikes were a staple of the region, in part due to the political beliefs that immigrants brought from their home countries, but more importantly, due to the treatment of the workers in the mines. The conditions of the mines were extremely dangerous with many miners being maimed or killed regularly. *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight* regularly reported deaths of miners in the area. The terrible conditions pushed miners to want a national union that could back them when they went on strike. As early as 1885, National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers chapters were found in central mining states. The Knights of Labor created National Trade Assembly No. 135 in 1886 for workers in the mining industry. In 1890 these organizations merged to form the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and Southeast Kansas formed a union district with Matt Walters as president.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of the UMWA had a quick impact in the region. In 1893, the state legislature passed a law that stated that mine owners, lessees, or operators could not remove parts of the coal

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<sup>4</sup>Randy Roberts, “History | Little Balkans Festival”, Accessed February 9, 2023, <https://littlebalkansfestival.com/history/>.

<sup>5</sup> Roberts, “Little Balkans Festival.”

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Skubitz Jr, "A History of the development of deep mine production in Crawford County and the factors that have influenced it", *Electronic Theses & Dissertations*, Leonard Axe Library, Pittsburg State, 1934. <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/etd/149>.

Andrew Roy, *A History of the Coal Miners of the United States: From the Development of the Mines to the Close of the Anthracite Strike of 1902, Including a Brief Sketch of Early British Miners*, (Press of J. L. Trauger Printing Company, 1907), 243-261.

procured by miners to pay them less for their work. This law quickly led to a dispute between the miners and owners and Matt Walters called for a strike in May of 1893. One company, Mt. Carmel Coal Company, came to an agreement while the other companies brought Black workers from the South to break the strike. This strike went on for months until, with winter coming and no outside help in sight, Walters accepted an agreement that was only partially satisfactory.<sup>7</sup>

In 1898, another strike began. This strike was for the union to be recognized by the mine owners and an eight-hour workday. The strike began with miners in Arkansas, but the miners in Kansas were sending assistance and eventually joined the strike. The independent mine operators signed contracts with the union quickly, but the larger corporations (The “Big Four”) held out longer.<sup>8</sup> The “Big Four” shipped in hundreds of more Black workers to break the strike. These Black miners came mostly from Alabama and were then stuck in their jobs at the coal mines. They were originally at odds with the UMWA of the area because they had no wages, housing, or security to fall back on if they were to strike from their jobs. However, the UMWA of the area was serious in looking to unionize all workers in the area regardless of ethnicity or race. This was on display in the constitution drafted in 1900, which stated that no member of the organization who held a current membership card would be “debarred or hindered from obtaining work on account of race, creed or nationality.”<sup>9</sup> About one year after the Black miners had immigrated to Southeast Kansas about 65% of them had organized under the Union.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Skubitz, *A History*, 30-31

<sup>8</sup> The “Big Four” coal operators in Southeast Kansas at the time were the Central Coal and Coke Company, The Western Coal Company, the Kansas and Texas Coal and Mining Company, and the Southern Improvement Company.

<sup>9</sup> This is a quote from the *Proceedings: United Mine Workers of America, 1900*, 26. Taken from *The Migration of Negro Coal Miners from Alabama to Southeast Kansas in 1899*.

<sup>10</sup> John M. Robb, “The Migration of Negro Coal Miners from Alabama to Southeast Kansas in 1899” (1965), *Electronic Theses & Dissertations*, Leonard Axe Library, Pittsburg State, 107, <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/etd/107>.

Eventually with many of the Black miners enlisted in the Union they succeeded in their goal of shortening the workday to eight hours and ceasing discrimination against Union workers. Some of the Black miners even rose to positions of authority in the Union. One example is Milton Reed, who worked as a national organizer and a negotiator for the UMWA. For his efforts the UMWA paid Reed \$260.47 in 1899 and \$896.51 in 1901. Reed exemplified the integration that was so important for the UMWA's success in the 1898 strike. Although the Black miners became union men, not all of them stayed. In 1900 there were around 3,613 local Black citizens and approximately 1,300 Black immigrants had moved from Alabama.<sup>11</sup> By 1910 there were only 619 Black miners left in Southeast Kansas. Many of them left the Southeast Kansas area in search of new mines, or any other employment after the Coal Mines started to dry up. Many moved to cities such as Kansas City, St. Louis, or Chicago. While these Black Miners' time in Southeast Kansas was short, it was very impactful.<sup>12</sup>

This created a sense of comradery and radicalism in the area, which would bring other like-minded individuals to the area. Even after the majority of Black miners left the area the UMWA presence remained strong in Southeast Kansas with another strike happening in 1910, this time under the direction of District #14 President Alexander Howat. The UMWA eventually won this strike after about five months and wages were increased. These sorts of strikes became commonplace to the citizens of Southeast Kansas, due almost solely to the UMWA. They saw their families, fathers, and brothers all struggling against greedy coal mine operators for a living wage, but more importantly for their safety and pride as individuals.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> These are the approximates by Robb based on census data.

<sup>12</sup> Robb, "Migration of Negro Coal Miner," 107.

<sup>13</sup> Skubitz, *A History*, 149.

One of the like-minded individuals who came to Southeast Kansas was Julius A. Wayland. He began publishing a socialist newspaper in Girard, Kansas to build upon the sentiments of radicalism he saw in the area. The paper was originally published on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1895, in Kansas City, Missouri. Wayland founded this Socialist paper at the behest of Mary Harris (“Mother”) Jones and three-white collar workers. After a brief pause in publication in 1896, he resumed printing in Girard, Kansas in 1897.<sup>14</sup> Here he built the *Appeal to Reason* into a national newspaper that peaked at circulation of 760,000 copies a week, with special editions reaching 4 million readers.<sup>15</sup> This made the *Appeal to Reason* the most circulated Socialist newspaper in United States history (and still is to this day). This excited the residents of Girard because it meant that their town was producing a nationally circulating newspaper, thus putting it on the map. Another reason for excitement was the jobs that it brought. The *Appeal to Reason* became Girard’s largest employer, employing over one hundred people who worked forty-seven-hour work weeks in some of the best working conditions in the country.<sup>16</sup>

Another element of the *Appeal to Reason* that helped contribute to its popularity was its political cartoons. Ryan Walker was the most prolific artist that the *Appeal to Reason* had on its staff. Walker was employed by not only the *Appeal to Reason*, but also *The New York Call*, *The National Ripsaw*, *The Comrade*, and *The Coming Nation*. His cartoons were able to effectively communicate many of the ideals held by these publications while maintaining a humorous and engaging style.<sup>17</sup> Walt Disney was among those who were impacted by these cartoons. His father,

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<sup>14</sup>Elliot Shore, *Talkin’ Socialism: J.A. Wayland and the Radical Press*, (University Press of Kansas, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> One of these readers was Elias Disney and his children. Walt Disney, one of Elias’s sons, learned to draw cartoons from the front-page cartoons of the *Appeal to Reason* drawn by Ryan Walker

<sup>16</sup> R. Alton Lee and Steven Cox, *When Sunflowers Bloomed Red: Kansas and the Rise of Socialism in America*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 2020, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Cohen, “‘Cartooning Capitalism’: Radical Cartooning and the Making of American Popular Radicalism in the Early Twentieth Century,” *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007): 35–58, 51-53.

Elias Disney, was an avid Socialist and a subscriber to the *Appeal to Reason* and Walt would copy Walker's cartoons from the newspaper to practice. He said that he grew up making sketches of "the big, fat capitalist... with his foot on the neck of the laboring man."<sup>18</sup> Walt Disney would carry many of the ideals that he saw in cartoons he copied and the articles in the *Appeal to Reason* for the earlier parts of his life until fortune and fame would change his life and ideals. However, he would always remember Elias Disney and his ideals saying later in life that his father was "a great friend of the working man... He was very much for 'em. I grew up believing a lot of that."<sup>19</sup>

The *Appeal to Reason* was able to successfully convey and persuade many people, Walt Disney included, that the ideals of Socialism were sound through the publication of a newspaper, but that was not the only work that the *Appeal to Reason* was doing. Wayland believed that education was information and used the news stories that his paper published to investigate the underlying causes of the events.<sup>20</sup> One great example of this was the commissioning of Upton Sinclair to write a story about the meatpacking industry in Chicago. Fred Warren, an editor at the *Appeal to Reason*, commissioned the story in 1904 and the story was serialized in the paper through 1905. It was eventually published in book format as *The Jungle* in 1906 and enjoyed worldwide success.<sup>21</sup> This helped legitimize the Socialist movement to the locals of Southeast Kansas and beyond by providing news that helped them understand and interpret the socioeconomic situation of the nation that they lived in. The *Appeal to Reason* was a newspaper that had the people's interests in mind and worked to provide a better life for those of the working class, to which most local residents belonged.

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man* (University of California Press, 2007), <http://archive.org/details/animatedmanlifeo00barr>, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Watts, "Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (1995): 84–110, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2081916>, 100

<sup>20</sup> Shore, *Talkin' Socialism*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Shore, *Talkin' Socialism*, 167-68.

However, printing the *Appeal to Reason* was not the only endeavor in Girard, Kansas, to support the working class. J.I. Sheppard (who would go on to be one of the founders of The People's College) organized the "Appeal Law Class." *The People's College Vest-Pocket Edition of the Report of the Industrial Relations Committee* claims that "nearly five thousand men and women enrolled for this law course. Hundreds of them have graduated and are now practicing and occupying places of position and power."<sup>22</sup> Another example of this educational work in Girard was Walter Thomas Mills' International School of Social Economy. This school was founded by Mills in 1902 and taught socialism as a science because Mills believed that Socialism was the natural evolution of forms of government. He believed that as the study of government progressed, Socialism would naturally displace all other forms of government. Mills' school also published books to proliferate its ideas, of which the most popular was *The Struggle for Existence* (1904). This book espoused how the course of evolutionary development pointed inevitably in the direction of socialism and was quite popular, selling over 500,000 copies.<sup>23</sup> Wayland was extremely pleased with the success of this school and dedicated funds from the *Appeal to Reason* to the school. This school and the Appeal Law class were the predecessors to The People's College.<sup>24</sup>

## What were the college's goals?

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<sup>22</sup> Frank P. Walsh and Fred D. Warren, *The People's College Vest-Pocket Edition of the Report of the Industrial Relations Commission: Being the Gist of Three Volumes in Exact Words of the Reports*, (Fort Scott, Kan.: The People's College), 1915, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001840326>. 63. This was a condensed report of the Industrial Relations Commission published by The People's College. The US Congress created The Industrial Relations Commission on August 23, 1912, to scrutinize US labor Law. It studied working conditions between 1913 and 1915 and published an 11-volume final report. The "book" is 5 & ½ inches long by 2 ¾ inches long.

<sup>23</sup> George Cotkin, "The Socialist Popularization of Science in America, 1901 to the First World War," *History of Education Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1984): 201–14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/367951>.

James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1978), <http://archive.org/details/grassrootssocial004134>, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Lee and Cox, *Sunflowers*, 157.

The previous work that had helped legitimize the Socialist movement proved to be fruitful when it came to the founding of The People's College. It had provided a base that made the people of the area not only willing, but excited at the idea of the Socialist creating a College in Fort Scott. In an article written about the founding reception of The People's College in the *Fort Scott Tribune-Monitor* from July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1914, titled "Reception a Big Success," readers learned that "Mr. Hoffman [one of The People's College founders] assured those present that he appreciates more than the words could tell the royal welcome which Fort Scott extended to The People's College." However, the physical gathering for the reception of the College was not the only initial support that the local people gave to The People's College. "Almost before the ink was dry on the charter of this College, said Mr. Keene, it had enrolled 4,000 students."<sup>25</sup> The willingness of the people of Fort Scott to accept the College and participate in its correspondence courses was a very promising start to the endeavor of creating the first working class College in the United States.

The People's College framed itself as a working-class institution from its inception. The announcement of the founding of The People's College in *The Kansas City Star* on June 20, 1914, stated that the "College [would offer] vocational education for the working classes. That is the prime object of The People's College to be started shortly in Fort Scott, Kas., the incorporation papers for which were issued yesterday by the state charter board of Kansas."<sup>26</sup> This is an extremely important distinction that is made because by framing the College as a "working-class" institution rather than a "socialist" one, it allowed for greater participation beyond the Socialist political parties. According to the August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1914, edition of the *Fort Scott Tribune-Monitor*:

In some quarters there may not be such warm sympathy for The People's College and its aims, owing to the fact that the men behind it are Socialists, and many of those supporting it belong to the same party. But this is not a political matter.

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<sup>25</sup> "Reception a Big Success," *Fort Scott Tribune and The Fort Scott Monitor*, July 21, 1914, Newspapers.com.

<sup>26</sup> "To Be Vocational College," *The Kansas City Star*, June 20, 1914, Newspapers.com.

However you may disagree with a Socialist in his political beliefs, you cannot disagree with a Socialist or anybody else when it comes to the question of universal education. We all of us. Democrats, Republicans, Progressives, Socialist or anybody else and all members of other parties, realize that universal education is universal progress, and regardless of our other differences we are, in this respect, hand in hand.<sup>27</sup>

The local newspaper rallying behind The People's College and supporting their effort to maintain that the College was not a socialist institution was important for local participation. It also shows that The People's College was able to establish the idea that the education that they were providing was not one of Socialist indoctrination, but that it was one of universal access, in publications beyond their own. They were able to do this even though one of the most important members of the Socialist movement, Eugene V. Debs, was the chancellor of The People's College. This is significant because this meant that local people, most of whom were not socialist, were willing to participate in the College. This gave them a much wider base of support, which increased the College's likelihood of survival.

The People's College continued to uphold the idea that they were specifically a working-class institution, and their literature makes this evident. An advertisement for the College found in *The People's College Vest-Pocket Edition* declares:

Every course is upon a rational, scientific, basis. There is no attempt at propaganda for any "ism" or theory. When we say, "we teach from the working-class point of view," we mean that we teach from the point of view of those who have no need to subvert the truth because of special privilege. We teach from the point of view of that class whose historic mission it is to set the truth free from bondage to the Church, the State, or the Dollar.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Will Boost the College Union," *Fort Scott Tribune-Monitor*, August 22, 1914, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/59670224/?terms=The%20People%27s%20College&match=1>.

<sup>28</sup> Walsh and Warren, *Vest-Pocket Edition*, 60-61.

The People's College wanted to solidify to its constituents that the purpose of this College was always to educate. Even though the educators regarded themselves as Socialists, the classes that they were teaching had no such affiliation.

Although the College made this distinction, socialists around the United States took notice of The People's College. Even in the April 1915 edition of the *International Socialist Review* Leslie Marcy describes The People's College as “a Socialist dream is coming true at Ft. Scott, Kansas – the dream of a working-class College is becoming a reality.”<sup>29</sup> While Marcy describes this as a “Socialist dream” he also makes sure to label the College itself as a “working-class College”. This is important because while a working-class college and a socialist institution look very similar to the *International Socialist Review* and to Marcy, he understands the importance of distinguishing that it is a working-class institution to a broader audience.

To achieve the goal of educating the working population The People's College's founders initially chose to be a correspondence college. In the July 1918 edition of *The People's College News (PCN)*, Dr. Frank T. Carlton, a professor of economics at Albion College, breaks down the contemporary state of correspondence schools. He acknowledges Dr. William R. Harper, the late president of the University of Chicago as the father of correspondence education<sup>30</sup>. He instituted his first correspondence course in 1880 in Hebrew. Then in 1892 the University of Chicago made it a feature of its university extension work. The editor of the article interjects to state that

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<sup>29</sup> Leslie H. Marcy, “The People's College,” *The International Socialist Review*, April 1915, (April 1915): 612–13.

<sup>30</sup>People's College, “The People's College News”, *The People's College News*, no. Journal, Electronic, Accessed March 19, 2023, Leonard Axe Library, Pittsburg State, [https://pittsburgstate.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search/document?ho=t&include.ft.matches=t&l=en&q=People's%20College&id=FETCHMERGED-pittsburgstate\\_catalog\\_b184372052](https://pittsburgstate.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search/document?ho=t&include.ft.matches=t&l=en&q=People's%20College&id=FETCHMERGED-pittsburgstate_catalog_b184372052). The editor, likely Arthur Le Sueur or Marian Wharton, states that there were correspondence schools in Britain and one or two small ones in the United States before William R. Harper opened his.

correspondence education had become such a popular form of instruction that it enrolled over a million students per year.<sup>31</sup>

Attending school by mail also meant that students did not have to upend their lives and relocate to the place of instruction or quit their jobs. This was something that aligned very well with the goals of The People's College and allowed them to bring their school to the worker rather than force the worker to attend a brick-and-mortar location. The People's College believed in this so strongly that they went as far as to state in their college catalogue that "By correspondence is the only way the average worker can go to school."<sup>32</sup>

Once the founders had figured out the method of instruction the next step was to begin offering courses. The original courses that were offered by correspondence were English, Law, and public speaking.<sup>33</sup> These classes were selected because they could have an immediate impact on most working people's lives. The College chose English because of low literacy rates. According to the Bureau of the Census, in 1910 7.7 percent of the population (age 10 and over) was completely illiterate.<sup>34</sup> The number of people that had low literacy was likely much higher. The People's College stipulated that in 1915 there were 5.5 million people who could neither read nor write.<sup>35</sup> Improving the literacy of its students was one of the main initial goals of the College. If these people could improve how they spoke and wrote, then they could improve their lot in life by securing better jobs, being able to read current news and understand how politics effected them, and by generally being able to better express themselves and their views.

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<sup>31</sup> PCN, July 1918.

<sup>32</sup> "Unique School, The People's College Getting a Good Start at Ft. Scott," *The Topeka Daily Capital*, October 14, 1914, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/63700338/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Fort Scott School Wins Applause," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, October 16, 1914, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/59446332/>.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, and William Lerner, "Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970," (Bureau of the Census, September 1975).

<sup>35</sup> Walsh and Warren, *Vest-Pocket Edition*, 60.

However, increasing the working class's literacy was not the only goal of the English course. The language of the textbook that was used, *Plain English*, was very charged. Marian Wharton, the author, addresses students as “Dear Comrade” within the text and many of the passages and writing exercises were from contemporary social movements and leftist thinkers. Wharton did this both to empower students, but also to call them to social action. While Wharton does not explicitly state that she is pushing students towards socialism and socialist adjacent movements in *Plain English*, the language and quotes from many social activists shows the underlying goal.

Along with using charged language and looking to nudge people into social action, *Plain English* also looked to challenge the traditional ways of teaching and thinking about the English language. According to historian Julia Allen, Wharton was able to challenge the status quo in some ways, while she also reaffirmed some of the contemporary English rules. She was able to effectively challenge common beliefs about the English language through the concept that language is an ever-evolving concept that is shaped by people, rather than a rigid pattern that one must conform to. Allen puts it succinctly:

Not only have the people produced language, but language itself is organized in a democratic manner, functionally and nonhierarchically. Language has evolved, Wharton tells the reader, just as human society has evolved, progressing towards democracy. Moreover, this evolution is organic, and language itself is warm and living, not a cold unapproachable set of rules made for someone else.<sup>36</sup>

While Wharton establishes the idea that language is democratic and universal, her method of teaching ultimately mirrored many of the contemporary language courses offered at the time. As Greer points out, “despite the fact that Wharton discounts the study of grammar and encourages

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<sup>36</sup>Julia M. Allen, “‘Dear Comrade’: Marian Wharton of the People’s College, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1914-1917,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 1/2 (1994): 119–33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/359041>.

her students to ‘strive for effective expression, the criterion for effectiveness in *Plain English* is ultimately the absence of error’.<sup>37</sup> This is somewhat in contradiction to the idea of liberating people from the rules of the English language, but it was the necessary approach for the English that they learn to be effective in the contemporary system. Marian Wharton expresses this by stating:

All of these mistakes will require a considerable amount of effort to overcome, but the result is worth the effort for even those about us who will not take the pains or give the required time and effort to acquiring an education for themselves, will give greater heed to the speech of those who do speak correctly, and will readily acknowledge the leadership of those who have given the time and effort to self-development.<sup>38</sup>

While this is a contradiction from her methodology of trying to teach that the rules of English are fluid and evolving, it aligns with the idea of wanting to bring about a peaceful revolution. Wharton saw that language is not stagnant but did not think that its importance superseded being acknowledged within the current system of language. She understood that if the workers she was teaching could adequately express themselves by the grammatical rules of the time they were likely to be taken seriously and effect change. Providing workers with an education through this framework not only taught them English, but provided them tools to liberate themselves, and the rest of their class.

To continue to expand upon that goal, more classes were added later to directly improve people’s hard skills. By July 1915 Arithmetic (Elementary and complete), Bookkeeping (Elementary and Complete), and Stenography (Shorthand and Typewriting) had been added.<sup>39</sup> Learning these skills allowed people to find employment directly through skills that were learned

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<sup>37</sup> Jane Greer, “‘No Smiling Madonna’: Marian Wharton and the Struggle to Construct a Critical Pedagogy for the Working Class, 1914-1917,” *College Composition and Communication* 51, no. 2 (1999): 248–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/359041>.

<sup>38</sup> Marian Wharton, *Plain English*, (Fort Scott, Kan: People’s College, 1917), 131.

<sup>39</sup> PCN July 1915

from The People's College. There are examples of this within the *PCN*. There is a letter from John Paderewski in the July 1917 edition in which he writes:

My object in taking the Course was to become efficient in keeping records of business transactions, and also to use my knowledge as a lever with which to pry more wages out of my employer. When I finished the Elementary course, I was unable to secure an increase in salary from my employer, and on advice from the College I resigned that position, and secured another one paying a weekly wage of \$16.50. The former position paid a salary of \$60 a month. Now while I am finishing the Complete Course, I went after my employer again, and succeeded in obtaining an increase to \$19.20 and 10 per cent bonus per week.<sup>40</sup>

In the April 1918 edition it is stated that “One of the large State Colleges of the west recently called on us for a Commercial Teacher at \$150.00 a month.”<sup>41</sup> These stories provide examples of how The People's College was able to successfully help people advance their careers. The trumpeting of the students who were able to successfully utilize their education from The People's College illustrates that they were clearly interested in promoting working-class opportunities and not solely in the promotion of Socialist ideals.

Although many of the courses were orientated towards teaching people practical skills there were outliers. Appearing on the back of the *PCN* July 1915 edition there is an advertisement for “An Education in Music for You”. There were a variety of courses offered by the music department of The People's College. They included a Piano course which was originally created by William H. Sherwood, a singing course created by George Crampton, a public-school music course by Frances E. Clark, and a Harmony course taught by Adolph Rosenbecker and Daniel Protheroe.<sup>42</sup> The singing course used the Edison Phonograph for the reproduction of exercises done by the student to be submitted to the teacher. These courses are indicative that The People's

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<sup>40</sup> *PCN* July 1917, 23

<sup>41</sup> *PCN* April 1918

<sup>42</sup> These were all courses that originally ran at the Siegel-Myers Correspondence School of Music which was later changed to University Extension Conservatory. [https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/sherwood\\_smcs/](https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/sherwood_smcs/)

College aimed to become a large institution with many different departments, but also that it was one which was attempting to provide its students with well-rounded skills that allowed them to pursue a wider variety of careers.<sup>43</sup>

While those courses were more focused on the liberation of individuals so that they may better advance their own personal lives, and hopefully their class, the Law course looked to do more than that. *The People's Vest-Pocket Edition* claimed “upon successful completion of the course, you receive a diploma and a degree of LL. B. [*Legum Baccalaureus*: Bachelor of Law].”<sup>44</sup> This provided many trade workers with an immediate lift in status through the form of a job as a lawyer. However, the College hoped that the graduate would work in a role to directly advance their class. The College wanted them to be able to defend unions and working-class people in court. They also hoped that they would go on to fill positions of power such as becoming judges and politicians. Within *The People's Pocket-Vest Edition* there is a story titled “The Man Who Stayed on the Job” that details two men, one who retires from being a judge and one who, despite the corruption and unjustness, stays on the job to support his class. The book argues that while both these men are disillusioned with the law, the one who stayed and fought was the better man. This displays that The People's College and those associated believed that if workers could fill governmental roles, then they could directly create changes that would have broad effects in improving the condition of the working-class.<sup>45</sup>

Although most people see public education as a means to fulfill some of the goals of The People's College outlined above, those at The People's College did not. This is apparently evident in multiple articles in the September 1914 edition of *PCN*. The articles “Are Our Schools

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<sup>43</sup> *PCN*, July 1915.

<sup>44</sup> Walsh and Warren, *Vest-Pocket Edition*, 65

<sup>45</sup> Walsh and Warren, *Vest-Pocket Edition*, 60-65

Democratic?” by Eliza Taylor Cherdrone and “Shall Our Public Schools Become Corporation Schools?” outline the College’s belief that public schools, while schools have apparent public ownership and control, are in fact controlled by private entities and profit. These articles outline legal loopholes ripe for corruption, power concentration in school boards elected with private backing, and large donations that influence the curriculum of the schools.<sup>46</sup> The May 1917 issue of the *PCN* further outlines these ideas through the article “Shall Education be Rockefellerized?” which describes the Rockefeller Foundation’s attempts to control public institutions through donations. It also claims that the Rockefeller Foundation had many governmental organizations in their pockets.<sup>47</sup>

While the College denotes all these problems, they also claim that they have the golden answer to fixing these issues. They push for “democratic control” of the public schools, that way there will be real representatives of labor and the working class in charge of making decisions for their own children. Although they do not do much more than outline that there needs to be “democratic” control of the schools, whether that means electing their own people to school boards or a dramatic overhaul of the system of governance of the schools. By making it unclear they leave the action that the reader takes up to themselves. This likely means that the goal of running these articles is to influence people to take an active role and campaign to put working-class people on school boards to have a direct influence against these private interests.

Along with their distaste of public schools, and their sentiments that schools were being co-opted by private entities through donations and political control, the College also disliked vocational education and saw it as a way for capitalists to enslave people to trade. In an advertisement ran in the March 26, 1915, edition of *The Workers’ Chronicle* it is stated:

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<sup>46</sup> *PCN*, September 1914.

<sup>47</sup> *PCN*, May 1917.

MODERN INDUSTRY REQUIRES SKILLED WORKERS, education to some extent at least. So capitalism is reaching out to clutch our public schools and use them for what capitalism calls 'vocational education.' They want to make our public schools, training schools for Big Business. Cultural studies are dropped. History, science, art, all that goes to make life worth living, is left out.<sup>48</sup>

The People's College was strongly against the practice of vocational education because they wanted the workers to be able to think for themselves. They believed that by confining workers to a single trade by exclusively teaching them one skill, it limited the quality of life and entrenched the capitalist system.

### **All Good Things Must Come to an End**

Ironically, The People's College eventually became what they believed to be a training school for big business -- a vocational College. This happened after many of the Socialists who founded the school left the College. While the exact reasoning and timeline are unclear, it is apparent that after the outbreak of World War I, there was unrest at The People's College. In 1917 there was a fire at the College. According to R. Alton Lee, "two weeks before America entered World War I, a fire devastated The People's College. About 10:00 AM, workers discovered the wood balcony on the third floor had caught fire. It was soon brought under control, but the water damage from the city fire department ruined the first two floors."<sup>49</sup> Meridel Le Sueur claims that "In 1917 we fled from Fort Scott, Kansas, after the vigilantes had destroyed The People's College with ax and fire, took the back roads to escape the gangs that tarred and feathered and tortured all who opposed World War I."<sup>50</sup> On the matter of the fire the *Fort Scott Daily Tribune* stated that "Chief Mort Smith is certain that the fire had its origin on a veranda on the south side of the building, but can form no theory as to just how it started there, unless from a carelessly discarded

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<sup>48</sup> "The People's College Extension Department," *The Workers' Chronicle*, Pittsburg, Kansas, April 2, 1915.

<sup>49</sup> Lee and Cox, *Sunflowers*, 166

<sup>50</sup> Le Sueur, *Crusaders*, xi

cigar.”<sup>51</sup> While this does not confirm that the fire was arson, it is highly indicative that the fire was not an accident.

The national climate towards those protesting the war is indicative that the fire was a result of arson. Starting with the Espionage Act passed on June 15, 1917, the Federal Government of the United States looked to curtail any information that could be harmful to the United States. More importantly the Wilson administration deemed any written materials violating the act or “urging treason” were “nonmailable matter”. The Espionage Act was disproportionately used to silence those opposed to the war and those deemed as socialists, communists, and anarchists. The *Appeal to Reason* was targeted by this act and stripped of its mailing rights.<sup>52</sup>

The Espionage Act was expanded to limit speech critical of the war with the addition of the Sedition Act passed May 16, 1918. This expanded the purview of what was illegal to include inciting disloyalty in the military; use of speech or writing that was disloyal to the government, Constitution, military, or the flag; advocating for strikes on labor production; or supporting countries at war with the United States. Under the Sedition Act one could be imprisoned for up to 20 years and incur a fine of \$10,000. More than 2,000 cases were filed under the Espionage Act and over 1,000 ended in conviction.<sup>53</sup>

One of the most notable of these cases, and most pertinent to The People’s College was the Supreme Court Case *Debs v. United States* (1919). This case began on June 16, 1918, when Eugene Debs, the former chancellor of The People’s College, was giving a speech outside the Canton, Ohio, prison where three Socialists were being held for violating the Sedition Act. Debs looked to

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<sup>51</sup> “People’s College Fire,” *Fort Scott Daily Tribune and Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, March 17, 1917.

<sup>52</sup> Deborah Fisher and David Asp, “Espionage Act of 1917”, Accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1045/espionage-act-of-1917>.

<sup>53</sup> Christina L. Boyd, “Sedition Act of 1918”, Accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1239/sedition-act-of-1918>.

avoid saying anything illegal, even noting that he had to be prudent with his word choice. However, he was still arrested for obstructing military recruitment and enlistment and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Debs appealed this conviction, arguing that his speech was protected by the First Amendment. This case made its way to the Supreme Court where Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. authored the unanimous decision to sustain his conviction.<sup>54</sup>

Concrete laws such as the Espionage and Sedition Acts were not the only form of repression that was happening within the United States during World War I. There was a more informal approach taken to keep citizens from dissenting against the war as well. This is evidenced in speeches and vigilantism that was happening across the United States. In a speech given by Woodrow Wilson in Pueblo, Colorado, the president proclaimed “I want to say – I cannot say too often – any man who carried a hyphen about with him carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic whenever he gets ready. If I can catch any man with a hyphen in this great contest, I will know that I have got an enemy of the Republic.”<sup>55</sup> Here Wilson refers to those who hyphenate their identities as Americans such as Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Austrian-Americans, and any other such identity. The idea that Wilson is evoking, and many other people of power at the time, is that these “hyphenated Americans” were disloyal to the country and that they posed a threat to the security of the nation. This was of particular importance to a region such as Southeast Kansas because of the large population of immigrant Americans who lived there. It also impacted The People’s College because of their accepting attitude towards those “hyphenated Americans”.

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<sup>54</sup> Douglas C. Dow, “Debs v. United States”, Accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/289/debs-v-united-states>.

<sup>55</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar-President*, NYU Press, 2006, 412.

The national attitude towards people opposed to World War I was reflected in the state of Kansas. According to historian Craig Miner,

The assault on slackers, on conscientious objectors, on suspected pro-Germans, on supposed radicals of any kind, and, by implication on diversity itself in Kansas during World War I and immediately after was hardly limited to a few mob incidents. When threatened, Kansas optimism became intolerance, Kansas uniqueness became parochialism, Kansas morality became peevishness and stubborn pride.<sup>56</sup>

Miner expands on the idea that Kansas had a strong backlash against people it had previously embraced by showing a few examples. One of which is the attacks on labor organizations for being “disloyal” to the country. Among the groups who faced persecution were the Non-Partisan League and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The *Appeal to Reason* was also chosen as a target for much muckraking and stripped of its second-class mailing rights under the Espionage Act. Another example of repression was an Italian American miner in Pittsburg, Kansas who had grease dumped on him and was hanged for a short moment for refusing to buy a war bond.<sup>57</sup> Attacks such as these are indicative of a hostile environment towards those who opposed the war in the state of Kansas, which supports Meridel Le Sueur’s claims that her family and The People’s College were the victims of the oppressive climate.

Although the political climate at a national and local scale indicates that the account from Meridel Le Sueur that her family was the subject of persecution and forced out of Fort Scott is likely true, the *PCN* does not corroborate this story. According to the *PCN*, on March 17, 1917, a fire broke out and the cause was unknown, but could possibly have been the result of a burned-out chimney.<sup>58</sup> Marian Wharton and Arthur Le Sueur remained at the College for several months after

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<sup>56</sup> Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000*, (Lawrence: Published in association with the Kansas State Historical Society by the University Press of Kansas, 2002), 238.

<sup>57</sup> Miner, *Kansas*, 240

<sup>58</sup> *PCN*, March 1917.

the fire. Arthur Le Sueur had a letter of resignation printed in the June 1917 edition of the *PCN*. However, both of their names continued to be printed on the advisory board for the College until at least September of 1917, although their names did cease to appear as editors and as instructors after Arthur's letter of resignation.<sup>59</sup>

Marian Wharton and Arthur Le Sueur were not the only Socialists to exit The People's College. Eugene Debs sent in a letter of resignation on November 13, 1917. The reason for his resignation as Chancellor of the College was that he was in declining health and did not have the time to be of service to the College. He closed the letter by stating that he had always regretted not being able to give more personal attention to the College and wished it the best in the future.<sup>60</sup>

Regardless of the reason for their exit, the programs at the College changed drastically after the socialists, Marian Wharton, Arthur Le Sueur, and Eugene Debs ceased involvement with the College. This meant that leadership fell to J.I. Sheppard, who radically changed the College. One major way he did this was the opening of a vocational motor department. This had its roots in Fort Scott City Ordinance No. 1537 in which:

The People's College, a corporation organized under the laws of the State of Kansas, be and the same is hereby authorized and granted the right-of-way to maintain and operate a Motor Car and Motor Truck Line for the carriage of passengers and freight upon and over the streets, avenues, alleys, and public grounds of and within the corporate limits of said city and operate its said line of motor cars and motor trucks across all bridges belonging to or controlled by said city within the corporate limits thereof.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *PCN*, June 1917, September 1917. The archives at Pittsburg State's Leonard Axe Library are missing the Oct.-Dec. 1917 editions of the *PCN* and their names, along with Eugene Debs, are missing from the Jan 1918 edition. The style of the *PCN* also changes, with the inner cover no longer containing the advisory board members.

<sup>60</sup> Eugene Debs, "People's College 1917-11-13," November 13, 1917, Indiana State University, <https://indstate.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/evdc/id/9464>.

<sup>61</sup> "People's College Motor Car and Motor Truck Line. Ordinance No. 1537," *Fort Scott Daily Tribune and Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, July 31, 1918, Newspapers.com.

After operating the motor car and motor truck line for around six months The People's College opened its new auto department. "The Auto Department, which we have just opened, is like no other school in the world... It offers instruction to car owners who would skillfully operate their cars that will save them hundreds of dollars in expenses and the life of the car. It offers technical training to men or women who would become skilled mechanics, preparing them to command the best wages anywhere they go."<sup>62</sup> With the socialists gone, the College became a vocational College seeking to give workers training in a specific field, and in the eyes of those who previously ran the College, pigeonholing them into careers as mechanics.

The People's College Motor School ran advertisements that distinctly showed the shift in ideology from an institution for universal education to a vocational institution. In the *Oklahoma Farmer* of Oklahoma City an advert for the college read "Thousands of high-salaried positions are calling for expert motor mechanics. The field has no limit!" This shows the shift from trying to educate workers so that they can think for themselves and determine their own future to one in which the College tries to provide material benefit first. Another quote from the advertisement reads "Today is a day of speed and skill. Nobody wants unskilled hands." This line shows how the courses that Motor School was teaching were aligning with modern industry, the very thing that the original founders of the College were trying to subvert. It also shows just how drastic the shift in the college was. In its original form the College would never have demeaned workers for being unskilled, it would have instead looked to provide them with equal opportunity and access. The People's College Motor School prioritized trying to push people towards enrollment and securing

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<sup>62</sup> "Citizens of Fort Scott and Vicinity," *Fort Scott Daily Tribune and Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, January 20, 1919, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/59676468/?terms=The%20People%27s%20College&match=1>.

a job in the motor industry (which was notoriously grueling), rather than providing people with the skills to liberate themselves from the systems of labor exploitation.

However, The People's College Motor School maintained an especially important characteristic of the original People's College. "It is incorporated as a non-profit-making institution: A school which cannot pay a dollar of profit to a living soul! Every dollar above expenses must go back into that school for increased efficiency!"<sup>63</sup> Although the Motor School maintained the idea that the school may make no profit, this was likely not an ideological choice as the school had originally been incorporated as a non-profit with the state, and they likely had to maintain that due to its charter.

Although drastic changes were made to The People's College to remain afloat, it was enough. In a last-ditch attempt to raise money for the College, the 2,200 acres near Hollister, Kansas, that The People's College had acquired during the working-class ownership period of the College, were to be auctioned off under the pretext that there was oil on the land. Advertisements ran all over the state of Kansas declaring "See a big oil well 'brought in'". One such advertisement in *The Walnut Eagle* read, "Oil men are of the opinion that the well will open a wonderful new oil field and be the signal for another 'rush' like that following the discovery of the great El Dorado (KS) gusher a few weeks ago."<sup>64</sup> Along with this promise there were other promises that it could turn one into a millionaire overnight and that there were no oil companies involved in the auction, so there was no attempt by The People's College to sell stock. The price of a unit (2 acres, 1100

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<sup>63</sup> "A Motor School of New Ideas and Principles – People's College Motor School," *Oklahoma Farmer*, February 10, 1919, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/584533115/?terms=The%20People%27s%20College&match=1>.

<sup>64</sup> "See a Big Oil Well 'Brought In,'" *The Walnut Eagle*, June 10, 1921, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/482497345/>.

units total) was \$400. The units were divided into eighths so that people with less money could invest with \$50. Each buyer was given a warranty deed for the land.

Organizers put together a festival surrounding the oil well being “brought in” to draw more people and bidders for the auction. There were prizes such as life scholarships to The People’s College and units of the 2,200 acres. There was live music, “twenty fat, juicy beeves”, barrels of ice water, and shelter. There were special trains from Kansas City and Fort Scott that ran to Hollister.<sup>65</sup>

While the event turned out to be large, with an estimate of 2,000-5,000 people in attendance, the actual sale of land was not as fruitful as hoped. *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight* stated that, “neither Sheppard nor others interested in the sale of units will make any definite statement on the business done Saturday, merely asserting that it was ‘satisfactory.’”<sup>66</sup> The oil well was not drilled on the day of the event, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1921, and the reason assigned was that there was too much water in it. However, The People’s College was able to sell considerable amounts of land with an article in the *Pittsburg Daily Headlight* detailing \$50,000 worth of sales from Kansas City alone. The article also details that sales of \$400 were made to one man in Chicago, Illinois, and to one woman in Mobile, Alabama.<sup>67</sup>

The sale of land was not enough to save the College. The news that the College went into receivership made it as far as the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>68</sup> Not only was this oil prospecting scheme not enough to save the College, but it turns out those who invested were not very savvy investors.

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<sup>65</sup> These advertisements ran in cities all over the Midwest including Kansas City, Joplin, Pittsburg, Oklahoma City, Wichita, and many others.

<sup>66</sup> “Business Drags at Sheppard’s Oil Show,” *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, June 13, 1921, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/96151899/>.

<sup>67</sup> *Daily Headlight*, Sheppard’s Oil Show, 1921.

<sup>68</sup> “People’s College Goes into Receiver,” *The Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1922, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/380515715/?terms=The%20People%27s%20College&match=1>.

The oil well was drilled in Hollister, but no oil was found. This led those who ended up buying land to engage in a lawsuit against the College. Over 500 people were defendants in the case, and they sought \$55,000 in damages. According to the *Chanute Daily Tribune* about 200 people, averaging around 1 acre each, bought land. Some bought as high as \$400 and others as low as \$5, but all the unit holders, their wives, husbands, and heirs, along with the trustees of the College, were named as defendants.<sup>69</sup>

Due to the number of people in the lawsuit it took months for all the claims to get filed and processed. Eventually, in November, the Sheriff's office of Bourbon County received an order from the office of the Clerk to open for sale the farmland of The People's College on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1922, at one o'clock. The sale of the land became the largest of the Bourbon County Sheriff's office to that date when the 2,250 acres were sold to Mrs. Harriet Z. Hughes for \$63,855. Her late husband, W.H. Hughes, was the one who originally sold the farmland to The People's College. The debt that had been incurred was paid off and the remnants of the oil drill were removed, marking the end of The People's College.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

While The People's College's history officially ends with the oil prospecting scam, the receivership of the College, and the sale of its farmland back to the original owner, the College really died when the Socialists left, and it was converted into a vocational College. The People's College was originally founded as a working-class institution with the goal of educating and liberating working people by providing education, in a form not coopted by those exploiting labor,

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<sup>69</sup> "Suit Has More Than 500 Defendants," *The Chanute Daily Tribune*, May 9, 1922, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/54289955/?terms=The%20People%27s%20College&match=1>.

<sup>70</sup> "The Largest Land Deal," *Fort Scott Tribune and The Fort Scott Monitor*, December 21, 1922, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/58947021/?terms=The%20People%27s%20College&match=1>.

that was accessible to all. This dream died when it became a vocational school for working on motor vehicles due to the shift away to providing universal access to education to trying to help people secure jobs in a capitalist system.

However, it should be noted that while the dream of a liberating all working people died, a new one took its place. Motor vehicles were an emerging technology at the time, and one that was thought to provide individual liberation due to shortening of space and time that a motor vehicle allowed.

The shift in ideals does not overshadow the important work that was done before the change to a vocational school. Regardless of whether the shift was an organic one or one that came about due to the repression surrounding World War I, The People's College was able to build from the previous work that was done by Socialists in Southeastern Kansas. J.I. Shepard was able to continue to teach people law beyond the "Appeal Law Class" and help establish The People's College. The College succeeded in establishing a correspondence course that provided thousands of people with literacy skills that they never would have acquired otherwise. It also trained people in skills such as algebra, shorthand and typewriting, elementary arithmetic, advanced arithmetic, elementary bookkeeping, complete bookkeeping, and penmanship that could help them to improve their own lives and assist their families.

Beyond the hard skills that the College was able to teach people, it also helped people to be able to better understand their economic and social positions. One way this occurred was through Marian Wharton's deliberate pedagogical strategies in *Plain English* which pushed people to think critically while learning language. *The People's College Vest-Pocket Edition* also contributed to this effort by helping disseminate the findings of a governmental committee to the common worker. The goal of providing people with a better understanding of their economic and

social position was even pursued through various forms of informal education such as lectures and Sunday schools.

These ideals of universal education endured through the publication of the *Little Blue Books*. These small, affordable, paperback books were printed by Emanuel and Anna Marcet Haldeman-Julius.<sup>71</sup> They began publishing classic works of literature in 1919 through the *Appeal to Reason* as the Appeal Pocket Series (later the People's Pocket Series and then Ten Cent Pocket Series).<sup>72</sup> The Haldeman-Julius company published the books with the same goals in mind as The People's College, to bring access to literature and knowledge within the reach of everyone. Meridel Le Sueur claims that the idea for these books grew directly from The People's College.<sup>73</sup> The Haldeman-Julius company was very successful in its book publishing endeavors until 1978 with an estimated 300 million books sold.<sup>74</sup>

Although The People's College was never truly able to accomplish its goals of universal education and the liberation of working people, its work was important to those who worked at and attended the College. It also served to inspire people to continue to work towards the ideals of universal education and the uplifting of the working-class. Another aspect of the legacy of The People's College is that it serves as a great case study in how education can be done differently. The United States has become a place where the average College student has \$25,921 in debt just

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<sup>71</sup> Emanuel Haldeman-Julius was an editor for the *Appeal to Reason* starting in 1915.

<sup>72</sup> I was able to discover the order of the names by looking through the *Appeal to Reason*. Appeal Pocket Series first appears in the newspaper on February 22, 1919. People's Pocket Series first appears July 10, 1920. Ten Cent Pocket Series first appears April 1, 1922.

<sup>73</sup> Le Sueur, *Crusaders*, xx & 45

<sup>74</sup> "Little Blue Books", St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture, *Encyclopedia.com*, (February 5, 2023), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/media/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/little-blue-books>. Emanuel and Anna's son, Henry Haldeman-Julius, continued the business after Emanuel's death in 1951 until the company eventually folded in 1978.

For further reading on the Haldeman-Julius company –

R. Alton Lee, *Publisher for the Masses, Emanuel Haldeman-Julius*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

for an undergraduate degree.<sup>75</sup> In a country where working conditions are once again becoming worse and worse, and where fewer people are being educated about their rights as workers, models such as The People's College may not be the blueprint, but it may contain some real insight as to how college education could be changed for the better in the future.

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<sup>75</sup> David Edelson, "What Is the Typical Debt Load for Graduates of Four-Year Public Universities?", (Association of Public & Land-grant Universities, October 13, 2022), <https://www.aplu.org/our-work/4-policy-and-advocacy/publicvalues/student-debt.html>.

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