

Thomas Lee Bailey, Small-Town Editor in Middle Georgia
During the Age of Progressivism

Bernadette K. Loftin
Middle Georgia College

Historians generally ignore the small town in the United States as too insignificant. Creative writers, however, weave nostalgic and sometimes macabre tales about small population centers while sociologists scrutinize the townspeople's customs. The majority of Americans lived in the small community or country until the early 1920s when progressivism had already climaxed. Since so much of the fabric of American life existed in this setting, perhaps the time has arrived for historians to examine it from a more complete perspective. In support of this notion, this study relates to the small community of Cochran as reflected by one of its most important voices, the editor of the weekly newspaper. Of the 562 incorporated places in 1910 Georgia, Cochran was just one of the 518 towns with a population of less than twenty-five hundred.¹ As such and as part of the South and Middle Georgia, it represented other small towns in microcosm.

A definition of progressivism poses a problem since the literature substantiates the tenet that historians write for their own generation. Focusing for the most part on cities, or national and state leaders, historians have interpreted, reinterpreted, revised, and even argued that the movement did

not exist. All of these studies make it difficult to select a definition. Scholars such as Arthur S. Link, Richard L. McCormick, and Dewey W. Grantham maintain that diverse and contradictory reform movements took place called progressivism.² This paper accepts that definition and concentrates on common progressive issues as articulated by the editor of the *Cochran Journal* between 1910 and 1925.

Thomas Lee Bailey and Cochran came into existence during the same decade, the 1860s. Bailey, the son of a physician remembered for treating prisoners at Andersonville, was born on January 11, 1865 in Americus, Georgia. Cochran, a rail stop surrounded by pine trees and incorporated in 1860, replaced the village of Dykesboro, population 132. Bailey attended only the common schools in Americus. Judging by his ability to aid his grandchild in studying Latin and by his later writings, he gained an educational background from some source. Bailey went to work for the railroad as a telegraph operator at the age of sixteen. On December 1, 1886, he married Kitty Chaudron Blevins in Calera, Alabama. During these years the lumber and turpentine industries depleted the pine trees in central Georgia. Cochran then emerged as a thriving cotton town with a population of nearly one thousand.³

Bailey arrived in Cochran as railroad agent for the Southern Railway in 1892; a position he held for seventeen years. In 1896 he organized the Cochran Lumber Company. In 1910, Bailey purchased the two-year old *Cochran Journal* and served as editor. By then the population of Cochran numbered 1,638. The area's large landowners, who usually lived in town in new houses reminiscent of the Old South, pursued business and professional careers. This uptown elite, as Numan V. Bartley calls it, in association with other business and professional townspeople, generally served as the governing class of Cochran. A locally-owned cotton mill employing around one hundred people and a cottonseed oil mill provided the only other industry.⁴

The *Cochran Journal* mirrored Bailey's personality and philosophy. Folksy, outspoken, upbeat, Bailey's *Journal* included, and usually promoted, a variety of topics. Bailey's principal hobbies consisted of reading, talking, and listening to others. This probably accounts for the wide coverage in the newspaper. The editor, with piercing blue eyes, exuded vitality and speed, and his weekly reflected this in its lively style. Bailey, only five foot two, may have been short in stature, but his editorials, often flowery and crusading, were lengthy, sometimes extending to several columns. Although opinionated and moralistic, he conscientiously

printed opinions contrary to his own. To the discomfort of some of his subscribers, he included the facts on drunkenness, gambling, homicides, and suicides for prominent citizens as well as the poorest. Residents recalled his *Journal* as usually expressing Cochran's sentiments. Black and white described him as a fine, genteel man who worked diligently for the community. At times a touch of whimsy crept into his writings and his home. Solemnly he would say, when he or his family pondered an abstruse question, "Oh - she's gone where the woodbine twineth, the whippoorwill mourneth, and the whangdoodle yearneth for her young."⁵ For fifteen years, while progressivism reached its zenith and dwindled, the *Cochran Journal* carried the personal stamp of Thomas Lee Bailey.

Bailey considered himself a progressive. He used the word progressive as synonymous with good, and praised farming, education, politicians, and civic improvements as progressive. The editor, an extremely active Mason, limited his vision to "life in a small-town Protestant community," as Link and McCormick assess progressives as sometimes doing.⁶ Bailey never expressed doubts about being in mainstream American progressivism, except on the race question. By 1910, however, the "seminal 'progressive' reform" of black disfranchisement and segregation, as Jack Kirby describes it, was a reality in

Georgia.⁷ Bailey's progressive goals concentrated principally on better government, roads, schools, health, and social controls to improve society.

Bailey's first goal was the improvement of county government. The structure of the city government, in which he served as an alderman (1910-1911), met his approval. The county, however, needed change, according to Bailey. Cochran, nine miles east of the Ocmulgee River, was then a part of Pulaski County. Hawkinsville, on the west side of the river, served as county seat. Bailey supported a move to replace part-time county commissioners with a one-commissioner system with a supervisor from each of the fourteen districts. The *Journal* printed a seven-column article by a supporter, Joel T. Deese, a large landowner and West Point graduate. He argued that one commissioner would be more efficient, business-like, and responsive to the citizens. The *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, the official county organ, editorialized that the five-commissioner system, composed of the better business men from different sections, should be retained. Out of a vote of 682, a referendum establishing a one-commissioner system carried with a small majority of 38. Hawkinsville opposed the one commissioner while the districts that composed the Cochran community voted for it.⁸

The most important county reform, however, consisted of separation from Pulaski County by the districts on the east side of the river. Bailey admitted to purchasing the *Cochran Journal* initially with the aim of using it to promote the formation of a new county. The drive for a new county began in 1910 with mass meetings, a common practice in the area. At the mass meeting held on June 23rd at the Opera House in Cochran, representatives from Pulaski districts east of the river met and voted unanimously for a new county. The population of the Cochran community districts east of the river then totalled 11,850, or 2,475 more than the other districts. In numerous editorials and articles, Bailey, backed by strong letters from Dr. Thomas D. Walker, appealed to his readers to support a new county. They maintained that citizens in the most northeastern part of the county lived so far from Hawkinsville they could not conduct court business and return home the same day. This left their families unprotected at night. They consequently avoided jury duty. More important to the town, a county seat in Cochran would add to the prosperity of the community. Supporters of the new county, warned by Bailey not to let the governor's race between Joseph M. Brown and Hoke Smith divide them, elected Deese state representative. Deese then introduced the enabling amendment. On July 30, 1912 the Georgia legislature

created Bleckly County from the eastern portion of Pulaski. After the voters approved the creation the creation referendum on October 3, 1912, Bailey announced in a banner headline, "Bleckly County Glorious Reality."⁹

The welfare of the new county always remained of concern to Bailey. The *Journal* cordially welcomed the four attorneys who moved to Cochran after the county's creation. Although the editor usually did not support any particular candidate for county government, he covered the election results. County officials, unlike the city, often came from the rural areas and were not the large landowners. If he felt that some action of the county needed change, he quickly called it to the public's attention. Bailey helped push through the county bond issue for a courthouse and jail but printed opposition views. When the bond issue received a large majority of the votes cast but failed because of the low voter turnout, he scolded the absentee registrants. To his gratification, a sufficient number voted to pass the bond issue at the next election. The system of paying county officials, such as sheriffs, from fees collected rather than a set salary appeared grossly unjust to him. Therefore, he advocated its end.¹⁰

Since 85 percent of the Cochran community lived on farms, Bailey devoted much effort to progressive agriculture. Only

40 percent of the farmers owned their land, usually two-hundred square acre farms. Mostly black laborers worked the large farms of around one thousand acres or more owned by nineteen planters. The editor, however, did not see any dire poverty such as described in so many histories of the South, nor did the *Journal* ever refer to the somewhat nostalgic country life movement. His progressive farming came from the United States and Georgia Departments of Agriculture, banks, and the Southern Railway. He often printed articles from these sources and pushed diversified farming, which they promoted. "Scare" stories of the approaching boll weevil appeared frequently from 1910 until the pest's arrival in 1916. His articles on farming included references to popular campaigns such as "hogs and hominy." In 1911 he promoted and helped organize the first Corn Club, membership 109, and served as secretary. He did the same for the Farmers Institute in 1913 and advocated the use of a county home demonstration agent. The *Journal* continued the ritual of recognizing the farmer who produced the first boll of cotton and brought the first bale to the gin. Bailey, however, poured praises on farmers, both black and white, who raised crops other than cotton.¹¹

The Peacock Brothers, the largest Cochran planters, switched from cotton to pure-bred hogs in 1911. In so doing

they produced a moment of fame for the community as their red Duroc Jerseys became world champions. Other area farmers joined in raising prize hogs. The Southern Railway furnished Pullmans for buyers coming to the Cochran hog sales. One prize hog, described as big as a cow, sold for \$16,500 in 1919. The *Journal* expressed pleasure in this kind of progressive farming, faithfully covered all hog events, and reproduced articles referring to them from other publications. In 1920, the *Journal* bragged, "Our hog crop brought more than the cotton crop last season."¹² Bailey became so enthusiastic he began printing the caption, "Bleckley County--The Pure Bred Hog Center of the South," on the corner of the front page. Some of the large farmers, however, refused to switch from cotton. Small farmers, unable to buy high-priced hogs and unwilling to change to other crops, still relied on cotton. So, despite the emphasis on hogs, cotton remained sufficiently dominant that the boll weevil hurt the small independent farmers and the workers. Cotton failures in the 1920's forced white farmers to become workers or to find other jobs in town. It caused the black population to drop eight percent in the twenties as they migrated to Florida or to the North.¹³ Since the departure of the blacks occurred about the same time and after Bailey sold the newspaper, he made no mention of it. The *Journal* continued to promote diversified farming and hogs

as a substitute for cotton as long as Bailey remained editor.

The *Journal* supported a mass meeting of farmers in 1914. Those in attendance adopted a resolution condemning big banks and the tariff, and requesting the government to loan the farmers twelve and one-half cents on cotton priced six and three-quarters cents. President Wilson received support for the Farmers Land Bank, the Good Roads law, and the "continuance of the twelve regional banks that have wrestled from Wall Street financial domination of the entire country." Bailey, however, never joined the movement to curtail the railroads. He also did not object to the frequent Superior Court convictions for hoboing, or catching rides on the trains which usually carried a sentence of four months, or \$40.¹⁴

The *Journal's* editor, who always remained a booster of the community, served as secretary of the first Cochran Chamber of Commerce. Article after article publicized the town's merits and encouraged home-town buying. Nothing, the *Journal*, editorialized on one occasion, was more important than to "put Cochran on the map as one of the foremost and progressive towns in this section."¹⁵ The Cary and North Railroad, promoted by Bailey, failed to attract sufficient financing and did not materialize. New roads to provide a shorter route northward became the next cause. This became a reality with the construction of the Cochran Short Route from Macon. At

times Bailey operated as if he had taken lessons from Henry Grady in his vision of the New South.

Racial problems continued after black disfranchisement and segregation. Bailey displayed an ambivalence characteristic of moderate racists. His editorials expressed a belief in the Lost Cause, white supremacy, segregation, and that he and his friends were "to the manor born." On the other hand, eulogies and recognition of worthy blacks, particularly loyal ones or those successful in acquiring land, appeared in the newspaper. At that time, twenty-one blacks owned more than the average acreage of fifty acres with little or no interference. "Black hand" letters, which were anonymous notes usually directed at blacks to intimidate them from some action or frighten them into leaving, received disapproval. The *Journal* resented Northerners who tried to lure "their blacks" from Georgia. They interrupted the labor supply. Law enforcement officers who arrested blacks but not more affluent whites for the same offenses also found themselves the object of censure. Bailey called "shiftless" blacks "Cuffy" but did not allow disparaging terms applied to blacks in his home. The "white man's burden" obligated him to educate blacks, but the "history of the world is the history of the Aryan race."¹⁶

Lynchings and the Ku Klux Klan always drew forth a spirited response such as "mob rule has no place in a civilized

society."¹⁷ The defeat of the anti-lynching bill in 1922, however, received praise since it interfered with states' rights. No serious racial activities occurred, and KKK activities remained minimal. Only two lynchings took place in the Cochran community from 1910 to 1925. Rumored drownings in the river of road-gang convicts still in chains drew no coverage.

While editorials urged blacks to "stay in your little cabin on Happy Hill . . . where the ole 'oman and the picannies rest in full security," the Japanese were not welcome.¹⁸ Bailey explained that the Japanese possessed an alien culture and would not provide the type of labor needed in the South. Jews, however, who established some of the first businesses in Cochran and proved good citizens, were welcome. During the turmoil of the Leo Frank case, the *Journal* cautioned readers to remember that one Jew committed a crime, not the Jews as a group. Bailey, expressing intense patriotism during World War I, nevertheless urged tolerance of German-Americans.

An ambivalent attitude also existed on the rights of women. Bailey thought women needed protection but also education. Both his daughters attended college. Early editorials objected to the vote for women on the basis of the Bible, insisting that the franchise would destroy the purity of the home. Guest columnists, such as Deese, ridiculed equal

rights. He maintained that if women have the right to hold office they also have the right to become pig stickers in slaughtering houses. Bailey urged the "ladies" to form a civic league, which they did, and they made him an honorary member. The "ladies" in the Civic League showed great independence furnishing services usually provided by a city government or a Chamber of Commerce. They supervised the cemetery, maintained a rest room for visitors, landscaped the courthouse grounds, and undertook many other activities. Bailey, however, continued his opposition to the vote for women. He argued that it meant giving the vote to black women, the "deadliest menace to the peace, welfare, and prosperity of this fair land."¹⁹ At that time Southern senators advanced similar objections to the franchise for women in the United States Senate. After the ratification of the 19th amendment granting the franchise to women, Bailey dropped his opposition. The first women to vote in 1920 included Mrs. Thomas Lee Bailey. The editor remarked how well the election went and forecast a large moral impact from the women. Bailey's granddaughter considered his ambivalence on equality for women an example of his groping for what he considered the right answer.²⁰

Bailey, the recipient of little formal schooling, strongly supported education. He said, "You can have everything taken

away. But not an education."²¹ As chairman of the Cochran Public School Board, he attended and reported all educational events for both black and white schools. The *Journal* pushed for new schools, compulsory education, and well-qualified teachers. All the Cochran high school faculty in 1910 had bachelors degrees and at least two years' experience, a rather unusual accomplishment for a county with an illiteracy rate of 34 percent for males of voting age. Bleckley County had its own elementary system, and the country students attended the city high school. While the city schools offered a full term, the county schools usually offered only five months. The *Journal* advocated consolidation of the 20 small schools in the county system and merging of the city and county school systems. Consolidation occurred in the county system, but antagonism between town and country prevented merging. The *Journal* also sponsored a lyceum in 1913 and chautauquas for adult education. Bleckley became part of the new twelfth district represented by Dudley Hughes, who sponsored vocational education in the Smith-Hughes Act. The *Journal* lent its efforts in the establishment in 1917 of a Twelfth District Agricultural and Mechanical College, replacing New Ebenezer which had closed. By 1920, the illiteracy rate for males of voting age had dropped to 28 percent, with about five blacks to one white illiterate. Most blacks still lived in

the country.²²

Cochran citizens read in their weekly frequent warnings of the necessity of a sanitary town. Until 1916, when a drive began for city sewerage, health articles provided information on sanitary closets and cleaning the Big Ditch, a stream which flowed through Cochran. Typhoid, malaria, and hookworm were common. Only one identified case of pellagra, associated with malnutrition, occurred. The *Journal* helped the State Board of Health in 1915 in their hookworm eradication program funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. It was not until 1919, despite Bailey's plea to "let's get out of our swaddling clothes" that the bond issue passed to provide sewerage.²³

Social controls advocated by the Baptists and Bailey's own Methodist Church received full support from the newspaper. The crusade to prohibit alcohol remained primary with gambling and Sunday closing restriction secondary. Cochran never exercised its option to allow alcohol sales during the period between the passage of the local option law and the bone dry law in Georgia in 1917. The problem then lay in its enforcement. Personally Bailey did not object to moderate drinking, but it was illegal.²⁴ So he maintained a barrage of articles and editorials condemning the "pistol toter and the blind tiger," the name given to moonshining. Farmers used to supplementing their cotton crop income with moonshining

continued to do so as long as local residents bought it. Every county court tried cases dealing with selling liquor, making it, drinking it, or disturbing divine worship, usually a euphemism for appearing drunk at church. In 1920 the *Journal* opposed the reelection of the incumbent sheriff because he allegedly did not arrest his friends for liquor violations. The sheriff won overwhelmingly in the country districts but only by ten votes in Cochran.²⁵

Georgians who wanted Bible reading required in the public schools came into conflict with Bailey's perception of liberty. The Georgia legislature considered a bill making Bible reading mandatory in the public schools. While professing his belief in the Bible, Bailey queried: "What right had the Georgia legislature to ram a certain kind of Bible down the throats of the free people of this state? Does it not smack of an alliance of church and state? Is religion to be forced on us?"²⁶ Of course, required Bible reading eventually won over Bailey's concept of liberty-loving Georgians.

Effective January 1, 1925, R. E. Hammack purchased and edited the *Cochran Journal*. By that time the word progressive seldom appeared in the newspaper. When Bailey retired from the newspaper, he left his county well-established. The blacks, however, were leaving the cotton farms because of the

boll weevil. Cochran, nevertheless, remained comparatively prosperous because of the planters who diversified. Health, education, and sanitation showed improvement. Women voted, but "pistol toting and the blind tiger" continued. At the time of Bailey's death in 1949, the *Journal* stated that for fifty years Bailey had a large part in every progressive movement in Bleckley County and Cochran.²⁷

The terminology of Bailey's progressivism would probably be familiar to residents of Anywhere, USA from 1910 to 1925. Certainly it substantiates Link and McCormick's contention that the whole nation experienced progressivism, even a small town in Middle Georgia. The Cochran community of Bailey's *Journal* existed with less poverty and backwardness than previously thought for the rural South. The many changes promoted, even those not always successful, indicated optimism and vitality and set the stage for an eventual upheaval of the old order. The motivations, however, of this small town's progressivism pose a larger enigma. Was Bailey merely a follower who copied urban progressives and furnished support for the power manipulations of Georgia leaders? Was he attempting, as Grantham advances, to reconcile progress and tradition? He was a little of both of these, but essentially his motivation stemmed from doing what he considered good for home and community. Bailey was, however, just one editor of

one small town. Further studies of other small communities should refute or substantiate the effect of home-town boosterism during the progressive period.