

Mary Elizabeth Lease: Populist Reformer

by Kelly A. Woestman

Blaming Wall Street for the nation's economic woes is not a new idea in American history. Over a century ago, Mary Elizabeth Lease, the best-known orator of the Populist era, asserted, "Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street." Usually wearing her trademark plain black dress, Lease first gained national attention battling Wall Street during the 1890 Populist campaign. Although she was mistakenly credited with saying that farmers should "raise less corn and more hell," Lease took what seem to be the words of a condescending newspaper reporter and turned them to her advantage as her own rallying cry. She hoped that by appealing directly to the heart and soul of the nation's farmers, she could motivate them to political action to protect their own interests not only in Kansas but throughout the United States. Mary spent most of her life speaking out in favor of social justice causes including woman suffrage and temperance, and her work reflected the multifaceted nature of late nineteenth-century politics in the United States.



Mary E. Lease is depicted supporting William Jennings Bryan in the election of 1896 in this illustration from *Puck* magazine. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Lease was born in 1853 in western Pennsylvania to Irish exiles fleeing both political and economic hardship. Her later advocacy work reflected her family's Irish nationalism. In the 1860s, when the Civil War took her father and two brothers, Mary blamed the Democratic Party for these personal losses and this further cemented her dedication to fighting the "oppressors" who did not protect the interests of the "common" people. As historian Rebecca Edwards notes, "The war years taught harsh lessons in economic inequality." Because Mary's mother received only a modest pension upon the death of her husband, Mary experienced firsthand the same economic distress that many others felt in the tumultuous years following the Civil War. This was not the last time that Mary would experience financial hardship and these experiences had a direct impact on her advocacy of those oppressed by the national economic powers represented by Wall Street.

Mary carried this same passionate spirit for economic equality when she became a teacher. In 1871, frustrated by her colleagues' unwillingness to fight with her for better wages for this now female-dominated profession, Mary left Pennsylvania for southeast Kansas. She had heard woman teachers on the frontier were paid more. She taught at the Osage Mission near St. Paul, Kansas, for three years before marrying Charles Lease, a local pharmacy owner who later became mayor.

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Her marriage, however, never provided Mary with the economic security she desired, especially as the harsh realities of the economic depression of 1873–1879 ravaged the country. During the early years of her marriage, Mary tried to find employment to help support the family. She grew continually frustrated at the lack of suitable job opportunities for women. Hardship forced the Leases to move, and they followed the railroad south to Texas.

During the time she and her husband lived in Denison, Texas, it appears that Mary first encountered the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The words of Frances Willard, the leader of the WCTU, spoke directly to Mary and she soon became an officer in the Denison WCTU chapter. She began speaking out against the destruction alcohol ravaged on families. When the local newspaper attacked Willard's speech and asserted that women should "be silent and learn wisdom from their husbands," Mary wrote several scathing editorials of her own and often declared that "There is no difference between the mind of a smart man and that of a smart woman." This was a radical idea in a time when women were seen as intellectually inferior to men.

Landing in Wichita in 1884, Mary had the opportunity to utilize even further her extensive organizing and speaking skills in a wide variety of venues. She presided over a woman suffrage convention in her city and also briefly represented working-class Irishmen who built railcars at a Wichita factory as a paid organizer for the Knights of Labor. Besides having a sharp memory for almost anything from the Bible to Shakespeare to statistics, Mary could appeal to any group—Catholics, Protestants, struggling farmers, middle-class businessmen, or poor laborers—and make them feel that she was one of them. Mary remained in the Republican Party until 1888 when she ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for local office on the Union Labor Party ticket.

By 1890 farmers had begun to enter the political arena in increasing numbers to protect their eroding rights in the nation's economic system. Groups such as the Farmers' Alliance were formed and attracted the attention and involvement of social justice advocates like Lease. In Kansas, one of the Alliance's first goals was a campaign to remove US Senator John Ingalls from office. The Alliance asked Mary to join its speakers bureau and Ingalls's dismissal of woman suffrage made her an eager participant. Mary traveled hundreds of miles across the rough roads of Kansas, making more than 160 speeches to promote Alliance efforts and bluntly stating that "Wall Street owns the country." At a county convention, Lease proposed that the Alliance's list of candidates should be called the "party of the people." Two months later, at the state capital in Topeka, Mary gave the opening address at the state convention of the People's Party, also called Populists. She played a pivotal role in defeating Ingalls's supporters and removing him from office, and became a heroine of the emerging Populist Party as Kansas elected the nation's first Populist senator in 1891 and a Populist governor in 1892.

Mary's popularity transcended the boundaries of her home state of Kansas, and she was soon in demand as a speaker throughout the nation. In 1891 and 1892, she and other Populists cooperated with the Prohibitionists who were simultaneously pushing their party to adopt Populist economic planks. The two political groups, however, were never able to successfully reconcile their stances. More importantly, Mary realized as early as the fall of 1892 that she and her allies were not in control of their own party's future.

In 1892, Lease was chosen as one of five delegates at large to represent Kansas at the national convention of the Populist Party and voted to nominate James B. Weaver of Iowa as its candidate. The Populist Party gained momentum against its rival Democrats and Republicans but Weaver's candidacy ultimately imploded when newspapers accused him of committing cruelties during the Civil War. Populists did gain control of the Kansas senate but internal disagreements, including the 1893 "Legislative War" for control of the Kansas house of representatives, began to divide the party.

The pressures of the depression of 1893 caused even more internal conflicts within the Populist Party and, by the next election cycle in 1894, Mary had begun to realize that there were limits to her interest in supporting the Populist Party. Not only had the Kansas governor removed her from her position as president of the Kansas Board of Charities, Mary was disappointed with the Populist Party's refusal to

support either woman suffrage or temperance.

As the 1894 election contests rolled into the 1896 presidential race, Lease became increasingly frustrated with the “fusion” efforts in which both the Democrats and the Populists threw their support behind silver advocate William Jennings Bryan. More importantly, she simply could not support a “fusion” with the party she blamed for the death of her father and two brothers. As historian Rebecca Edwards has pointed out, “Lease’s policy goals remained consistent: she placed equal stress on Populist economic reforms, Prohibition, and women’s suffrage.” The problem was that no one larger political group remained consistent on all three of these issues and, thus, Lease ultimately believed that her Populist Party had abandoned her.

Disillusioned with Populist politics, Mary moved to New York City in 1896 to write for Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*, a newspaper actively campaigning against the Democrats and Williams Jennings Bryan, and to speak on behalf of the paper’s views. As Teddy Roosevelt charged on to the political scene, his stance on foreign policy especially appealed to Mary. Looking at her earlier background, especially her family’s experiences in the Civil War, and her later disillusionment with the Populist Party, it is not surprising that Mary returned to the Republican Party in 1900. In 1902, having divorced the husband she long ago left behind, Mary continued her public speaking engagements until about 1918. Mary Elizabeth Lease died in 1933, leaving behind a legacy as complex as the causes she advocated.

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