

MARY ELIZABETH LEASE:

VOICE OF THE POPULISTS

by

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During the year 1890 the radical ideas of a new political party swept across the Kansas prairie. On a spring afternoon of that year about four thousand farmers and their families gathered near Olathe, Kansas to hear the leaders of this new Party of the People. Many in the crowd came out of curiosity, for one of the speakers was a woman, Mary Elizabeth Lease. She was a tall woman and wore a plain black dress which was to become her trademark. Her hair was neatly styled and her blue eyes flashed as she stood quietly and waited for the crowd to settle. When she began to speak, her rich voice rolled out over the crowd and beyond. She moved about the platform gracefully and easily held her audience spellbound. When she issued the familiar admonition to the farmers that they should raise less corn and more hell, the crowd broke into wild cheering. Surely they had found a new Messiah to lead them out of their misery. Historians may question whether Mary Lease first used the "unlady-like" phrase, but they cannot question that she made the phrase "raise less corn and more hell", the rallying cry for the Kansas farmer during the summer of 1890. Here was a woman of courage and determination who would change the course of Kansas politics.

Mary Elizabeth Clyens was born in Ridgeway, Pennsylvania in 1850. She was the sixth child of an Irish exile family. Her father had agitated against the British Penal Code, had his lands confiscated and been forced to leave Ireland in poverty. Mary had learned languages from her mother, a linguist, and set her mind on getting an education. Though the family was in dire circumstances after her father and brothers died fighting for the Union in the Civil War, Mary did not give up. She ran errands and took in washing and sewing to earn money. At the age of sixteen she graduated from Allegheny University with a teaching certificate. Her first position was at a school near Ceris, Pennsylvania. Here Mary made her first stand against injustice. Teachers' salaries were very low and women, of course, were paid less than men. She tried to organize a union to bargain for higher wages, but fellow teachers were unwilling to speak out against the school authority.

About this time Mary read that teachers' salaries were much higher on the frontier and in 1870 she left Pennsylvania for Osage Mission, Kansas. She taught school until 1873 when she married Charles Lease, a young druggist in town. The two started married life in Osage Mission but Charles decided that he wanted to try farming. Sometime in 1875 the Leases homesteaded in Kingman County, Kansas. At first Lease seemed to enjoy the role of wife and mother and the challenge of the Kansas prairie. She worked beside Charles from sun

to sun, bore six children and offered no complaint. The life of a prairie farmer was hard and tedious. There were few neighbors and friends to talk to. It was either too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry. Some went mad from the loneliness. But Mary Lease would not let the grueling life defeat her. She read and re-read her books, wrote newspaper articles and kept her mind active.

Mary and Charles worked hard but the drought, grasshoppers, and low farm prices soon overwhelmed them and after only two years they lost the farm for non-payment of the mortgage. The Lease's then moved to Wichita. Charles went to work as a druggist and Mary set up house for her family. To help with family finances, Mary took in washing at fifty cents a day. If she had any extra money, it was spent for books. When she could not buy books, she borrowed them. In order not to waste any time she would copy pages from the books, pin them to the wall over the wash tubs and study as she scrubbed. But Lease was beginning to feel confined in her role as a housewife and in 1885 she studied law and was admitted to the Kansas bar. In January of 1886 she placed an ad in the Wichita Eagle for "all women interested in bettering their own and others' education" to meet together. Seven women came and they formed the Hypatia Club, one of the first women's clubs in Kansas which is still in existence today.

In 1885 Lease wrote a speech on "Ireland and Irishmen" for a St. Patrick's Day celebration in Wichita. The speech was well received and she was asked to repeat it. She soon found herself in demand as a speaker around Wichita. Because of the success of this speech, Mary decided to become a professional lecturer. She enjoyed the attention of the audience, had a vast store of knowledge and the family benefited from the additional income. Perhaps even more important for her was the chance to express the ideas and opinions she had formed. She spoke out for women's rights and began to champion the cause of labor. Lease took up the cause of temperance and began to speak out against the second class position of women in society. "There is no difference between the mind of an intelligent man and the mind of an intelligent woman," she declared.

As a featured speaker at a Wichita Equal Suffrage Association meeting Mary Lease declared, "It is said that women ought to be represented by their husbands. But what about the thousands of women who have no husbands or whose opinions differ from those of their husbands?" This was a radical statement for a woman to make in 1886.

A reform paper was started in Wichita called The Independent. Mary Lease was the first editor. In her first editorial she wrote, "In sending out to the world a journal devoted to reform, truth and justice, I am fully aware of the responsibility I have assumed and the unpopularity of the task I have undertaken. While I expect ridicule and criticism, I do not fear either."

During the next two years, 1888 and 1889, Mary Lease took her reform ideas before the people. She used her lectures to speak out for monetary reform, control of the railroads and women's rights. She took the side of the "little man" and blamed his ills on the politicians who had sold out to Wall Street. Lease followed a course over the next few years that she described in the March 23, 1889 Independent editorial: "Keep your eye fixed upon the mark, and don't flinch when you pull the trigger."

Mary Lease believed the remedy for the farmers' problems lay in the political arena. I do not think she became a politician by accident. Her influence in changing the non-political reform groups she joined to a political orientation cannot be discounted. The first group she joined was the Knights of Labor in Wichita. Soon another group attracted Mary's attention. This was an organization of farmers called the Farmers' Alliance. Lease was asked to speak at a meeting of the Alliance and because of her experience on the Kingman County farm, she was invited to join. In this organization women and men were equals and Mary Lease was able to move quickly into the leadership ranks of the Alliance. Though neither of these groups was politically active, this was soon to change. In August of 1888 some members of the Alliance began to form a political party. The first group was called the Union Labor Party. A convention was held in Wichita at which Mary Lease was a featured speaker. In the summer and fall of 1889 politically oriented members of the Alliance began to form groups throughout the state of Kansas. Early in 1890 these Alliance groups joined with the Knights of Labor to form a new political party. Mary Lease is given credit for naming the new party the People's Party or the Populists. Mary Lease, the political activist, was ready to be launched. She had a cause, a party and in the next six years would gain a prominence which few of her sex could rival.

The campaign of 1890 was more than a political campaign. Writers of the day called it a religious crusade or a revival. It was Mary Elizabeth who carried the message of the new party to the people. During that summer she gave 160 speeches. Wearing her black dress so the dirt wouldn't show, she traveled dusty country roads, spoke in school houses, picnic groves and town squares. She took the campaign to Lane, Harper, Coffeyville, Emporia; wherever people wanted to come to listen. And the people came, on horseback, on foot, in wagons, to hear this woman who expressed their frustrations, told them who to blame, and gave them hope for change. The man she singled out for her attack was John J. Ingalls, United States Senator from Kansas for the past sixteen years. Mary claimed Ingalls had betrayed the farmer and when Ingalls was asked his opinion of Mrs. Lease he replied, "Women don't belong in politics." With this statement the fight between Mary Lease and John Ingalls became personal as well as political. Mary Lease also attacked the mortgage companies that kept the farmer in debt, the railroads that charged exorbitant rates and the Republican Party. Mary Elizabeth Lease was loved by the people, feared by her opponents and maligned by the press. The Wellington Daily Monitor called her "a

raw-boned ghastly-looking female, who speaks in a bass voice with whiskers on it." She was called a "Red Dragon," a "Rabble Rouser in Petticoats," the "Kansas Tornado," and the Clay Center Dispatch fumed against her "unamerican and villianous doctrine."

But the press could not bring back the farmers once converted to Populism by Mary Lease and when the election of 1890 was over this upstart party had elected an Attorney General, five out of seven members of the U. S. Congress, and enough members of the state legislature to replace John J. Ingalls with William Peffer in the U. S. Senate. For Mary Lease the defeat of Ingalls was the greatest triumph. In later years when asked about her the best Ingalls could manage was that she was of "limited education" but "one of the most virile women" he knew.

Mary Elizabeth Lease had drawn national attention during the campaign of 1890 and she was asked to speak at many gatherings outside of Kansas. She spoke before the National Council of Women in Washington D. C. on women in the Alliance movement. The audience was surely curious about this "unladylike" Kansan and perhaps Mary took delight in shocking them with some of her tales and uninhibited language. Her speaking schedule grew. Two weeks in Missouri, a brief stop in Texas, on to Denver and then back to Kansas. In August, Mary was asked to speak before the Georgia legislature in Atlanta. She was the first woman to address such a group and the chambers and galleries were full. Mary took full advantage of this opportunity to preach the gospel of the Populist's reform.

The abilities of Mary Lease would be sorely tested in the campaign of 1892. It was a presidential election year and the Populist groups from other states were banding together to run a ticket for president. A committee, including Mary Lease, met in St. Louis to draw up a platform. The Kansas state convention was held in June and Mary presented an equal suffrage amendment which was finally endorsed. Mary was elected a delegate to the national convention of the Populist Party to be held in Omaha, Nebraska in July. At that convention, General James B. Weaver, a former Union Army officer, was nominated for president. Mary Lease gave the seconding speech, the first woman to do so.

Now Mary had two campaigns in which to participate, Kansas and General Weaver's. She began with Weaver in Nebraska in July, moved through Colorado and then into the West and Northwest. They drew large crowds, sometimes giving two or three speeches in a day or having to divide the crowds, Mary and General Weaver each speaking to a group.

Then the campaign headed South. This would be the crucial test. To win the election, the Democratic hold on the South had to be broken. Because of Mary's previous experience in Georgia she was confident of a warm reception. But their arrival at Waycross, Georgia,

gave the first hint of trouble. The press had been attacking General Weaver and Mary before they reached Georgia; Weaver, for his Union Army connections and Mary for degrading womanhood. Leaflets had been distributed warning people not to attend the rally, messengers were posted on roads leading to town to turn back the farmers. In Albany and Columbus more trouble occurred. In Macon, rotten eggs and vegetables were thrown. Finally, the campaigners had to concede defeat in Georgia. But the disruptions followed them across the state border into Virginia and North Carolina and Tennessee. The Raleigh Cronicle of Raleigh, Tennessee spoke for all the southern press when it said:

John Brown came from Kansas to the South to assassinate all slave-holders. Now Mrs. Lease comes south, from the same state with the declaration that the Negro should be made the equal of white man, and that all difference between the sexes obliterated! Great God! What next from Kansas.

The South was lost but the Populists continued to campaign in the midwest and Mary returned to Kansas to lend support to those candidates seeking state office. One of the more well-known was "Sockless" Jerry Simpson who had been elected to Congress in 1890. Like Mary, Simpson had risen with the Populist revolt. He had been nicknamed "Sockless" by Victor Murdock of the Wichita Eagle as an insult but Simpson turned the name into an advantage. He and Mary stumped the state, preaching reform and change.

Though the national ticket was defeated, in Kansas in 1892 the Populists were victorious. This new party had elected almost their entire ticket; twenty-five members of the state Senate and fifty-eight members of the House. Lorenzo D. Lewelling of Wichita was the new governor. Though the "legislature war" marred the first months in office, the Populists finally took over the reins of government.

On inauguration day, the greatest celebration ever took place in Topeka. Farmers came from all across the state to celebrate their victory. One of the stars of the show was Mary Elizabeth Lease, who had a new lavender dress and bonnet for the occasion. The press that had been so cruel to Mary had to admit that she was one of the ablest "men" in the new party. There was much talk of putting Mary's name up for the United States Senate. Debates over the legality of such a move were carried on but no one debated that Mary Lease was qualified for the job. The Farmers Wife, a Populist paper said:

The only objection that can be made against (Mrs. Lease) is that she is a woman. If that is going to be the fight let it come, for there is no person male or female, who has been engaged in the battle for human liberty that

is more entitled to and any better qualified to fill the office of United States Senator than Mary E. Lease of Wichita.

Mary herself never sought the office and when she saw that her nomination would divide the party, she told the state chairman, J. W. Briedenthal, not to allow her name to be placed in nomination. However, Governor Lewelling did appoint Mary to head the State Board of Charities and Corrections. She was the first woman in the United States to hold such a post.

The victory of 1892 should have established the Populist Party in Kansas but it didn't. Internal disagreements began to divide the party. In order to insure their political future, some of the Populist leaders wanted to join with the Democrats. Mary Lease did not agree with this. She felt the Populist principles would be changed or simply ignored. Mary also had a disagreement with Governor Lewelling about hiring and firing policies on the Board of Charities. At first the governor made light of the situation, but Lease, as always, spoke her mind. At last, Lewelling dismissed Mrs. Lease, an act he soon regretted. Never one to give up without a fight, Mary retained a lawyer and took the governor to court. She contended the governor could not fire her without a hearing, which she had not had and the court ruled in favor of Mrs. Lease.

With the political campaign over, Mary could again return to platform lectures. She was always in demand and drew large crowds. She also enjoyed debating and took part in two of note: the Great Quadrangular debate in Salina on political philosophies and a debate on the question, "Do Kansas Women Want the Vote?" Her reply to this question was, "To infer that they do not is to call them inferior!"

Mary Lease was not inferior but she was uncompromising and this may have contributed to the fall of the Populist Party in Kansas. When the women's suffrage plank was dropped from the platform in exchange for votes from the Democrats, Mary began to speak out against the party leadership. Though the Populists attempted to show a unified front in the election of 1894, they could not carry the election and the Republicans swept the state. Mary Lease predicted that the Populists would never again be a power in Kansas. Her prediction was premature but accurate. In 1896 the National Populist Party Convention voted to join the Democrats and nominated a new Messiah, William Jennings Bryan, for President. Though Bryan lost the election, he helped carry the Populist ticket in the state of Kansas and they again gained some control of the state government. But the party was fading from the scene. The leadership could not agree on policy. The farmers were disillusioned when nothing changed for them. And Mary Lease was a politician without a party.

Mary had found life exciting and challenging during these six years. If we remember that in 1890 women were just beginning to

emerge from the kitchen, we can perhaps realize the courage and determination of this woman. But what of her family? On some of her shorter trips she did take one or more of her children along. Certainly the family was better off financially because of her lecture tours. From all reports the children were bright, happy normal children. Perhaps the person to really suffer from Mary's activities was Charles. The care of the family was left to him during Mary's absences and no doubt he was criticized and ridiculed in the press. In the male-oriented world of that time, he must have found his role difficult, and Mary did not want to return to the role of a housewife. Shortly after 1897, she left Wichita and filed for divorce. Charles did not protest and to his credit he never said a derogatory word about Mary. He told the Wichita Eagle in an interview, "Mrs. Lease is 'all right'. She is wonderfully ambitious, and I presume she thinks she can make her own way in the world better without me. My sincerest wish is that her future life may be a happy one."

Mary Lease did make her own way in the world. She left Wichita in 1897 to make her home in New York City. She did not give up politics but returned to the Republican Party and found a new foe to attack in William Jennings Bryan. Joseph Pulitzer, seeking to insure the defeat of Bryan, hired Mary as a writer on his New York World. He also capitalized on her great attraction as a lecturer and arranged numerous tours across the country for Mary. Mary also found time to renew her law practice among the poor of New York City (for no fee, of course).

Mary Lease was never politically active again as in her Kansas era, but the eventual adoption of many of the reform measures she advocated must have given her great satisfaction. She said "The seed we sowed in Kansas did not fall on barren ground." New banking laws were written, railroad rates were regulated, Senators were elected by direct vote, women's suffrage and even prohibition became law.

Mary Elizabeth Lease was a political agitator, a fighter and perhaps an opportunist. Some say she was inconsistent; I prefer to call her adaptable. When a situation changed, she changed. She defended her rights as a woman in a man's world and extended and extended those rights. She asked no special privilege because she was a woman. She played a man's game, in a man's world, by men's rules and won. At the time of her death in 1933 William Allen White wrote:

Mrs. Lease is dead. The announcement means little to Kansas today... It is nearly forty years since Mary Lease was a power in this state. Only a few of us remember her at all. Yet from 90-96 she reigned (as) probably the most powerful person in the state. She was a boss without an organization. She had the weight of popular appeal. She could talk. She had a golden voice

and the emotional register of a great actress. incidently she thought fairly straight for a highly emotional person. She tried office-holding and made a poor fist of it. But as a agitator, as a voice calling the people to action, she has never had a superior in Kansas politics. Jim Lane, who survived a few years longer was scarcely her equal. She overthrew Ingalls... She raised Peffer. She sent Governor Morris to private life. No other Kansas boss has ever reigned with such an iron hand as Mary Lease held over Kansas for six years...."