MARY ELIZABETH LEASE,
POPULIST ORATOR: A PROFILE
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HAD HER exhortation to the farmers to “raise less corn and more hell” been her only claim to fame, Mary Elizabeth Lease would still deserve more than the single line allotted her in many history books. For these words became a rallying cry of embattled farmers fighting for survival, and the woman who spoke them a symbol of their hope for victory.

True, there is some doubt as to whether she ever actually used the phrase, or if she did use it, whether it was she who coined it.1 But whatever its origin, the challenge it expressed aptly reflects the person with whom it is identified.

It was a fighting phrase and she was a fighter. But she was a great deal more. For when we examine the record, scattered as it is and often hard to come by, we find a woman of great attraction and determination, of practical good sense and no little wit, one who wrote and spoke with evangelical fervor, who was quick to defend her rights as a woman in a world run by men and zealous to extend those rights for herself and her sex—in short, a woman who in her own way not only made a distinctive contribution to American history but enlivened it considerably.

SHE WAS born Mary Elizabeth Clyens on September 11, 1850, at Ridgway, Pa., the sixth child of Irish immigrant parents. Graduating at 15 with a teaching certificate from St. Elizabeth’s Academy at Allegany, N. Y., she taught for a while at a school near Ceres, Pa. Teachers’ salaries were very low, and women of course were paid less than men. Unsuccess-


ful at organizing her colleagues for a wage increase, and hearing that wage scales were better in the Midwest, she went out to the frontier town of Osage Mission, Kan., in the fall of 1871. There she boarded at St. Ann’s Academy for girls, an institution run by the Catholic Sisters of Loretto, and later taught one term at a nearby grade school.2

In January, 1873, she married Charles L. Lease, owner of a drugstore, one of the directors of the Neosho County Savings Bank and an active Mason. The Leases were a popular couple. Mary Elizabeth wrote verses for the Osage Mission press and won praise for her vigorous performance in a play, “The Coming Woman; or the Spirit of ’76,” at an evening benefit for St. Ann’s. In April, 1874, Charles ran for mayor of the town and was elected over two other candidates.3

Then that summer, for some unexplained reason, the Leases moved to northern Texas, settling in another frontier town, Denison. Charles had hoped to open his own drugstore there but instead went to work as prescription clerk for Dr. Alexander Acheson. Mary Elizabeth was pregnant at the time she left Osage Mission, and in early November gave birth to a son. During the next 11 years five more children were born, two of whom died before they were a year old.4

Outwardly at least the young mother seemed to accept the cycle of pregnancy and birth—and only too often early death—as woman’s appointed lot. To the townspeople generally, as the Denison Sunday Gazetteer put it some years later, she was “a plain, quiet, demure

4. Neosho County Journal, Osage Mission, June 10, 1874; Denison (Tex.) City Directory, 1876-1877, p. 53; birthdate on Lease tombstone, Cedar Grove Cemetery, Flushing, N. Y.; Kansas census, 1885, Wichita, Denison (Tex.) Daily Herald, March 17 and September 1, 1875.
woman wrapped up in family, home and church." But from her own lips a different picture emerges, that of a mind fiercely struggling for growth and expression amidst the endless round of household and family demands. "I used to improve every moment," she once told an interviewer. "I have often kneaded bread or washed the dishes with some newspaper article of interest pinned to the wall in front of me that I might waste no time in digesting its contents." 

A chance to break out of her routine came when, between babies and with the encouragement of Dr. Acheson’s wife Sarah, she joined the local Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and was asked to speak at one of their meetings. Her eloquence was the surprise of the evening and marked the first step toward her future career as orator and advocate.

Temperance was only one of the causes she came to espouse. She deeply resented the general male attitude toward women, and in the press and on the platform hammered away at the fallacious reasoning that consigned her sisters economically and socially to second class citizenship, and politically to no citizenship at all. What especially irked her was the presumption that women were congenitally unable to grapple with ideas and issues. "There is no difference," she declared many times, "between the mind of an intelligent woman and the mind of an intelligent man."

Early in 1884, after the Leases had returned to Kansas, first to a farm and then to the town of Kingman, she wrote two articles for the Kingman County Citizen under the title "Are Women Inferior?" Here she set out to prove woman the intellectual equal of man by citing the achievements of women in a number of fields usually reserved to men—mathematics, astronomy, literature, politics, even the military. The following year, now a resident of Wichita, she wrote together the issues of temperance and suffrage in “A Plea for the Temperance Ballot for Women” at a local W. C. T. U. meeting. In January, 1886, she took the lead in founding the Hypatia Club, a women’s group dedicated to intellectual improvement, and was elected president. (The club is still in existence.)

year, during a local woman’s suffrage convention, she was called upon to introduce Susan B. Anthony at a mass meeting at the opera house. The convention then went on to establish a Wichita Equal Suffrage Association, in which Mary Elizabeth served briefly as president. Speaking at the association’s first meeting in December, she rebutted a long-standing argument with "It is said that women ought to be represented by their husbands. What about the 60,000 women who have no husbands? . . ."

In addition to such organizational activities, she had also begun to appear as a paid lecturer. Her first address, in March, 1885, entitled "Ireland and Irishmen," was a stirring defense of Ireland’s long struggle for freedom. In Wichita with its large Irish population the speech was received with so much enthusiasm by both audience and reporters that she was asked to repeat it a few weeks later. As word of her accomplishments spread, requests to speak began to come in not only from local groups but from neighboring towns also—gratifying evidence that here lay the possibility of a meaningful career.

No doubt her decision, reached thus early, to become a professional lecturer was influenced by the economic situation. Charles was working for a Wichita drug firm, but his earnings seem to have been fairly modest, and there were four children to provide for. Adding to the family income, however, was not Mary Elizabeth’s only consideration; there was also the deep satisfaction of capturing and holding the attention of her audience. And what may have been most important of all, she had found a way to express the multitude of ideas that churned within her, beholden to no one for her opinions and actions.

Now she was extending her activities into whatever area aroused her concern. By the end of 1886 the fast growing Knights of Labor had organized more than 250 local assemblies in Kansas, five of them in Wichita. Hailing their members as the "plumed and helmeted knights of to-day," who were leading the workers

5. Denison (Tex.) Sunday Gasetteer, March 29, 1897; Fort Scott Daily Tribune, May 6, 1883.
against "the jeering Sampsons of corporation and monopoly," Mary Elizabeth joined Wichita local assembly No. 3306, the Columbia Assembly. Here she functioned for some years as a "general and district organizer," and in recognition of her efforts was elected a Master Workman.\textsuperscript{10}

At the same time another oppressed group attracted her support, with consequences that were to shape much of her future. The economic suffering that had spurred labor organization in the cities was goading the farmers, especially in the South and Midwest, to form mutual protective groups calling themselves Farmers' Alliances. In June, 1886, Mary Elizabeth was invited to address two meetings of the Farmers' Alliance in nearby Harper county,\textsuperscript{11} probably more for her reputation as an inspiring speaker than because of her few months experience on a prairie farm near Kingman—an experience, however, that entitled her to membership. Now for the first time she found herself in an organization in which women took their place, at least nominally, on an equal basis with men.

Her entry into the political arena came in August, 1888. The Union Labor Party, organized a year earlier by some Alliance members, individual Knights and others disillusioned with the two "old" parties, held a state convention in Wichita. During the proceedings Mary Elizabeth was called to the platform and gave a brief, spirited speech pledging her support to the movement. She was rewarded with "wild cheers that lasted several minutes," and later stumped the state for the ticket. Although nationally the Union Labor vote was negligible and the party soon disappeared, locally some small successes were scored.\textsuperscript{12}

The elections over, she undertook to fulfill another long-standing ambition by becoming editor of a small weekly newspaper owned and published by Hamlin W. Sawyer. Apparently given a free hand, Mary Elizabeth changed the name of the paper from Union Labor Press to Wichita Independent and added an appropriate quotation from Lowell—"New occasions teach new duties"—to the masthead. However, her new duties, or her attention to them, occupied her only a few months. After the first of the year a series of lecture commitments pulled her away from her editorial desk, and by mid-March she was let go.\textsuperscript{13}

In April, 1889, she was admitted to the district bar of Wichita, having read law the summer before with Charles Eby, a local attorney. A month later she opened a law office with a woman partner, and was forthwith assigned the cases of a black defendant charged with having mortgaged property not his own. In her argument, delivered in a crowded courtroom, she "spoke at some length and quite eloquently upon the colored people and the money lenders, praising the former and most bitterly condemning the latter." But here for once her oratory failed her. She lost the case, and for the rest of the summer seems to have been immersed in her private affairs.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Meanwhile}, Kansas Alliance members had begun to consider some form of political activity for their originally nonpolitical organization. In the fall of 1889, Alliance folk, former Union Labor Party supporters and other dissidents held a People's convention in Cowley county, at which it was announced that support would be given only to candidates pledged to legislate "in favor of the producing classes." To the surprise especially of the Republican machine, the People's ticket won in every part of the county where the Alliance had a strong base.\textsuperscript{15}

That December the two wings of the national farmer's movement, the Northern Alliance (to which Kansas belonged) and the Southern Alliance met in separate sessions at St. Louis. Although on the three most basic issues—land, transportation, and finance—there was no disagreement, a hoped-for consolidation of forces did not take place, and Kansas transferred its allegiance to the Southern Alliance. Shortly after, a state platform incorporating the St. Louis demands was drawn up and sent around to the Kansas congressmen and senators—all Republicans—for endorsement. No congressman and only one senator bothered to answer;

\textsuperscript{10} Journal of United Labor, Washington, 1880-1886, passim. April 7, 1888, April 2, 1881, Wichita Daily Beacon, October 21, 1885; Labor History, p. 408; Voice of the People, Kingman, May 24, 1888.

\textsuperscript{11} Harper Sentinel, May 30, 1886.

\textsuperscript{12} Wichita Daily Eagle, August 29, 1888; American Nonconformist, Winfield, September 6, 1888.

\textsuperscript{13} Wichita Independent, November 17, December 29, 1888, March 23, 1889.

\textsuperscript{14} Wichita News-Beacon, April 30, May 7, 9, 1889; Wichita Daily Eagle, April 23, May 11, 1889.

Mary Elizabeth Lease (1850-1933) was described by one newspaper reporter as "a tall, stately figure with the swinging stride of a girl athlete... [and a] booming voice which... set the men of Kansas wild with enthusiasm for a new leader."
the delinquent senator was John J. Ingalls, whose third term was about to expire. Accordingly, when the presidents of the county Alliances met in Topeka late in March, 1890, they voted overwhelmingly not to support any candidate for the legislature who favored renaming Ingalls. A speakers' bureau that included Mary Elizabeth was set up and the campaign began.

It was a campaign that called upon all her skill and stamina, and she relished every minute of it. During the next seven months she traveled hundreds of miles, crisscrossing the entire eastern half of Kansas, spoke in 16 counties, in perhaps 50 cities, towns, and picnic groves, sometimes two speeches in one day, sometimes in two different towns on the same day, an estimated total of 160 appearances. Impressively tall—almost six feet—she was yet graceful in motion and gesture, with blue eyes flashing as she drove home a point, and with a mellow contralto voice that penetrated the farthest reaches of any grove or open area. Often she would talk as long as two or three hours, urging nonpartisan political action, excoriating Ingalls for his betrayal of the farmers' interests, and denouncing the banks, the mortgage companies, and the railroads for their stranglehold on the American worker and farmer, a stranglehold that led to impoverishment and misery. Moving beyond her earlier notion that intemperance alone was the cause of crime, she now labeled impoverishment itself the "profligate parent" not only of intemperance and crime, but of "every evil that curses mankind." And the remedy, she held, was to be found in the political arena. If your by-laws will not permit taking politics into the Alliance, she told a Harper county convention, "then take the alliance into politics." 19

Her role in her own Sedgwick county convention in mid-June was limited, but she made one notable contribution. During a debate on whether the slate of candidates should be called a "People's ticket" or a "National ticket," she took the floor. "Let it be called the party of the people and give the tricksters a lick," she cried, and sat down to cheers and a unanimous vote. 20

Two months later she gave the opening address at the state convention of the People's party in Topeka, and also served on the resolutions committee. Aware of the diversity of interests among the more than 500 delegates, she urged them not to allow themselves to be divided either by differences in party background or by conflicting views on such "moral issues" as prohibition or woman suffrage, important as these were. The one question at hand was how "to stamp out this unholy monster, the money power," and the answer lay in "the unity of free men," whose votes could not be bought or sold. "Let the old political parties know that the raid is over," she concluded, "and that monopolies, trusts and combines shall be relegated to hades." 21

Such words delighted the delegates who, after adopting the St. Louis demands in addition to their own resolutions, nominated a full state ticket. But the speaker and her pungent style of speech promptly became the object of caustic editorial comment. "Mrs. Lease is a raw-boned, ghostly-looking female, who speaks in a heavy bass voice with whiskers on it," wrote the Wellington Monitor. The Clay Center Dispatch, also branding her voice as "masculine," fumed against "the vaporings of this hired woman" for her "un-American and villainous doctrine"; and the Topeka Daily Capital stated flatly, "Mrs. Lease is a demagogess." 22

The flood of denunciation loosed upon the Populists and their leading orator did not bring the electoral triumph the Kansas Republicans had counted on. They still retained the governorship and all statewide offices save one. But the Populists elected the attorney general (with Democratic support), five out of the seven congressmen and enough members of the legislature to control the selection of William Peffer over Ingalls as United States senator. 23 And while credit for Ingall's defeat did not accrue solely to Mary Elizabeth, her tireless campaigning was in large measure responsible and she never forgave her.

17. Tour reconstructed from notices in the Kansas Commerer, Newton, American Nonconformist, Topeka Advocate, and from cross references to the local press of the towns where she spoke.
18. Kansas Commerer, April 24, 1890.
20. Wichita Daily Eagle, June 11, 1890.
21. Topeka Daily Capital, August 14, 1890.
22. Wellington Monitor, August 29, 1890. Clay Center Dispatch, September 18, 1890.
After the elections she began to move farther afield, appearing under a variety of auspices not only in Kansas but in other states as well. In February, 1891, she spoke twice at the triennial convention of the National Council of Women in Washington, D. C., on "Women in the Farmers Alliance," shocking that decorous audience with her uninhibited language. In April she went on a two-week speaking tour through Missouri, and in May paid a brief return visit to Denison to talk about the Farmers’ Alliance. In June she was in Denver for a local anniversary celebration of the Knights of Labor, where she addressed an audience of 1,500 and was one of the leaders of the grand march at a ball held that evening in Coliseum Hall. Back in Kansas later that month she was elected a director of the state’s Mutual Protective Association, formed to assist farmers in the event of foreclosure, and in July organized a branch of the association at Westmoreland during an Alliance picnic there.24

The first week of August was spent at a Chautauqua in Lithia Springs, not far from Atlanta. Here, headlined as a modern Joan of Arc, she delivered four lectures to enthusiastic audiences, then brought her Southern visit to a triumphant conclusion when she became the first woman to address the state legislature. To the men and women who crowded the large hall and filled every seat in the galleries she spelled out the principles of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s party, and declared that it was the duty of all good Democrats to join in the struggle to defeat the common enemy, the Republican party. “If you men will vote for principle once and quit voting for party, the victory will be ours,” she told them, warning that the crucial test would come in the elections of 1892.25

Preparations for that test had been going on for some time. Encouraged by the local electoral successes of 1890, farmers were now talking of the need for political action on a national scale, though there was as yet no agreement on what form the action should take. Members of the Northern Alliance were ready to create a third party; most Southerners wished to work within the Democratic party and possibly capture it.

The issue was joined when, at a convention of the supreme council of the Southern Alliance on December 2, 1890, at Ocala, Fla., the Vincent brothers of Kansas brought in a call for a meeting in Cincinnati in February, 1891, “for the purpose of forming a National Party.” Because of strong Southern opposition the call was not adopted; however, a number of leading delegates did sign it as individuals.

Concerned lest the movement fall apart, Dr. C. W. Macune, editor of the National Economist, official journal of the Southern Alliance, offered a compromise: allow a year for sentiment to crystallize, then call a convention in February, 1892, of delegates from “all organizations of producers” and let them decide the course of action. Accordingly, representatives from the Southern Alliance, the Knights of Labor, the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, and several others met in Washington in January, 1891, constituted themselves a “Confederation of Industrial Organizations” and fixed Febru-


25. Atlanta Constitution, August 4-5, 9, 11, 1891; Macon Telegraph, August 9, 10, 12, 1891.
ary 22, 1892, in St. Louis as the date and place for a conference "of all the orders."

That same January the Northern Alliance, meeting in Omaha, put forward a somewhat more elaborate plan. A petition setting forth six fundamental principles (including abolition of national banks, government ownership of railroads and telegraphs, and a ban on sale of land to aliens) was to be circulated in every state by each industrial organization. When five million signatures had been obtained, state representatives would be selected as a provisional national committee to meet, also on February 22, 1892, in St. Louis, to make arrangements for a national convention.

But supporters of the Cincinnati call argued that such arrangements could not be delayed that long. Nor should the movement rely solely on Alliance members to build the new party. With the call already so framed as to invite a constituency far beyond the farmers, the date for the gathering was finally set for May 19, 1891.

The meeting, known as the "National Union Conference," drew an overflow attendance, more than 1,400 men and women, 400 from Kansas alone (but very few Southerners). Debate this time centered on whether to organize a third party immediately or to postpone formal organization until election year in the hope of reducing Southern opposition along the way. The second alternative prevailed. A platform that was a composite of previous convention demands was adopted, and most of the states thereupon elected three national committee men apiece, charged with building state third parties. That summer and fall "an army of lecturers," Mary Elizabeth among them, took to the road to urge support for the new party.

The results of their efforts surprised them. On February 22, 1892, more than 800 elected delegates representing 22 orders poured into a brightly decorated Exposition Music Hall in St. Louis. With Ben Terrell, president of the Confederation of Industrial Organizations, in the chair, and after a series of songs and speeches, a platform introduced by an eloquent preamble was adopted. Containing the words "We . . . support the political organization which represents our principles," the preamble implicitly projected the third party, but again in the interest of unity the meeting stopped short of explicit endorsement.

After adjournment, however, most of the delegates by prior agreement stayed on. Dr. Macune took the chair and James B. Weaver of Iowa, a former Union general, was made presiding officer. A committee of 15 was appointed to meet with the executive committee of the People's party, whose members had been at the conference but taken no official part in it. The two committees now merged and turned their attention to the presidential nominating convention. The date of July 4, 1892, was picked, a subcommittee of 10 chose Omaha as the place, a group of five was specially selected to draw up the call, and the deed was done.

Mary Elizabeth by now was moving easily in the upper echelons of both the Alliance and the People's party. During the first week in January, 1892, she had attended a large banquet of the Minnesota State Alliance and talked on "Woman's Place in Reform Work." ("Mrs. Lease is a wonderful speaker," Ignatius Donnelly wrote in his diary.) At the February St. Louis convention, "amid the wildest enthusiasm," she was introduced by General Weaver as "Our Queen Mary of the Alliance," and she was one of those chosen to draw up the nominating convention call. A delegate to the Kansas state convention at Wichita in June, she offered an equal suffrage amendment that was finally endorsed; and she was one of five delegates-at-large—and the only woman—elected to represent Kansas at Omaha.

The national convention opened July 2 on a note of uncertainty. Col. L. L. Polk, head of the Southern Alliance and slated to be the presidential nominee, had died several months earlier. While General Weaver was being considered as a replacement, a rumor arose that a Judge Gresham, not a Populist but a Republican from Indiana, might also be available. When on the third day an Indiana delegate took the floor to read a telegram that said, "Have just seen Gresham. If unanimously nominated he will accept," there was danger that the convention might swing to the judge. At this point Mary Elizabeth raced down the aisle waving another telegraph blank, and in

her most sepulchral tone announced, "I am authorized to say that if the nomination is tendered unanimously to Benjamin Harrison he will not decline." The house broke into roars of relieved laughter. General Weaver was nominated by Delegate Wheat of Alabama, seconded by Mary Elizabeth "in behalf of the women of the nation," and won on the first ballot. In a gesture of unity, ex-Confederate Gen. James C. Field was nominated for vice-president.

**THE NATIONAL campaign tour of the People's party began on July 22 when Mary Elizabeth and General Field appeared in Lincoln, Neb. The following week in Denver she and General Weaver addressed two overflow meetings, each attended by some 6,000 persons. Again Mary Elizabeth was the sensation of the evening when she invited all those in favor of helping the People's party to "hit me with a silver dollar," and the audience responded with laughter and a rain of coins.**

She spent August with General and Mrs. Weaver traveling through the West and Northwest, speaking as often as eight times a day to audiences that ranged up to 12,000. In San Francisco the Mechanics' Pavilion was "crowded to its utmost limit." In Seattle the turnout was so large it had to be divided; Mary Elizabeth spoke an hour to one group while Weaver addressed the other, then they exchanged audiences for another hour each. In Butte "the opera house was crowded to suffocation" and an outdoor meeting "covered about two acres," while in Wyoming the speakers were deluged with "floral tributes."  

The September itinerary took them into the South, and here trouble began to build up. For weeks the Democratic press had been attacking Weaver for alleged cruelties to civilians in Pulaski, Tenn., during the Civil War, and the Atlanta Journal had published a collection of affidavits in support of the charges. By the time the campaigners reached Georgia, emotions were at the danger point. At first, while Weaver was severely heckled, Mary Elizabeth was given a fairly respectful hearing. Although the Atlanta Constitution called her "raw-boned and ugly as a mud hen," it did pay tribute to her powers of oratory. But when she branded the Journal affidavits as lies and the Journal reporter a liar, the veneer of southern chivalry cracked. Shouts and catcalls interrupted both her and Weaver at Albany and Columbus, and at Macon a barrage of rotten eggs and vegetables drove the speakers from the platform, though not before both Mrs. Weaver and Mary Elizabeth had received their share of splattering. Unwilling to face further hostility, the Weaver party canceled an Atlanta engagement and left the state. As the speakers moved northward through North Carolina and into Virginia the violence subsided. And in the final days before the election, back in Nebraska where the campaign had begun, they were again greeted with the old enthusiasm.

Election day was November 8. When the tally was in, Weaver had polled more than a million popular votes, just under 10 percent of the total, and had won the electoral votes of Kansas and three silver states—Colorado, Idaho, and Nevada. The Kansas Populists, with Democratic support, elected Lorenzo D. Lewelling governor, took all the other state offices, won congressional seats in the second, third, fifth, sixth, and seventh districts, and gained control of the state senate. In the lower house, however, a number of seats were disputed and after many weeks of wrangling that almost came to physical violence the Republicans were declared the majority.  

Meanwhile, shortly after the election, word went out that Mary Elizabeth would be a candidate for the United States senate, although she herself had made no formal announcement. The novel idea of a woman candidate for that office set off a shiver of excitement. Attorneys interviewed as to the legality of such a step felt that eventually the supreme court would have to rule. General Weaver wrote that an examination of the constitution showed nothing that would prevent the election of a woman to the senate. Dozens of women from all over the country, Susan B. Anthony among them, and a fair sprinkling of men, expressed

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29. Kansas Commoner, July 7, 1892.
30. Wichita Daily Eagle, July 28, 1892.
32. Atlanta Journal, September 17, 22, 1892.
33. Atlanta Constitution, September 21, 1892; Atlanta Journal, September 23, 1892; New York Times, September 23, 1892; Wichita Daily Eagle, September 24, 1892; Omaha World Herald, November 1, 3, 1892, Lincoln; (Neb.) Daily Call, November 3, 1892.
admiration and hopes for success and urged Mary Elizabeth to "stand fast." 35

She nonetheless steadily maintained that she was not a candidate. "The office should seek the woman as well as the man," she told a reporter. Only if her eligibility were questioned on the grounds of sex would she enter the race. In a letter (November 29, 1892) to Hamlin Garland, with whom she had more than once shared an Alliance platform and who had based a character in his novel A Spoil of Office upon her career, she wrote, "I am not making the race for Senator or anything else." Just before the end of the year she sent a letter to J. W. Breidenthal, state chairman of the People's party, stating that in the interest of party unity she would not allow her name to be presented for consideration at the senatorial election. 36

Inauguration day for the Kansas state offices was January 8, and that evening a gala reception was held in the statehouse. Mary Elizabeth, in a new silk dress and bonnet, read a poem she had written in praise of women pioneers, and also took the occasion to answer a charge that an article of hers had exaggerated the kind of treatment encountered on the Southern campaign trip. "The fact was Mrs. Weaver was made a regular walking omelet," she declared. 37

Appointed in February by Governor Lewelling to head the State Board of Charities and Corrections, Mary Elizabeth became the first woman anywhere to hold such a post. She immediately started on a tour of inspection of the state asylums and reformatories, and in June represented Kansas at the national conference of Charities and Corrections in Chicago. Returning to Chicago in September, she was a featured participant in the Kansas Day celebration at the Columbian Exposition, where she lauded Kansans as "the most God-fearing, liberty-loving, intellectual people on the face of the earth... Patrick Henry pleaded for liberty," she continued, "Washington fought for it, the philosophy of Jefferson perpetuated it, but Kansans live it." 38

The warm glow left by the 1892 victory, however, was chilled by the unexpected defeat of a fusion ticket of Populists and Democrats in the Kansas local elections of November, 1893. Mary Elizabeth, outspoken as usual and seeing fusion as a betrayal of Populist principles, assailed the "corrupt" men in the People's party who had sought office through that device and said she was glad they had been beaten. Indignant party leaders angrily charged that her outburst was really due to the fact that two charities board members with whom she disagreed were not removed at her demand. At first Lewelling tried to make light of the situation, but Mary Elizabeth was not to be silenced, and by the end of December the governor felt he had to dismiss her from office. She thereupon retained counsel, and with the argument that since her appointment

35. Wichita Daily Eagle, November 18, 1892; New York Times, November 18, 1892; Journal of Knights of Labor, November 24, 1892; Farmers' Wife, Topeka, December, 1892.
37. Ibid., January 10, 1893; Topeka State Journal, January 10, 1893.
38. Kansas Board of State Charitable Institutions, Biennial Reports, Nos. 9-12 (1892-1894 to 1898-1900). The letter of transmittal to the governor, September 15, 1894, includes Lease among the signatories; Farmers' Wife, April, 1893; Proceedings, National Conference of Charities and Corrections, 20th Annual Session; Chicago Daily Tribune, September 10, 1893.
had been affirmed by the state senate only that body had the right to terminate it, won reinstatement."

Lewelling, mindful of Mary Elizabeth’s standing in the community, seems to have shown an uneasy ambivalence in handling the affair. Shortly after the dismissal, in an apparent attempt to forestall legal action, the governor threatened that if necessary he would make public “certain affidavits” concerning Mary Elizabeth’s conduct during the presidential campaign. Ignoring the threat, Mary Elizabeth filed her petition in the Kansas supreme court on January 4 and won a stay, then several weeks later went on the offensive. In a stinging letter to the Pleasanton Herald, reprinted the following day in the Kansas City Times, she accused the state administration of taking bribes from three of the railroads, of being in partnership with saloons and gambling houses, and of planning another fusion sellout. But, she added, for them to succeed they must first “kill me politically.” To that end they not only “say I am working for Republican pay,” but “they paid $500.00 to obtain affidavits that Gen. J. B. Weaver and I slept together at many of the leading hotels during the campaign.”

Asked to comment on these extraordinary accusations, the governor in an apparent retreat told a Kansas City Times reporter that he knew nothing about stories reflecting on Mrs. Lease nor did he have any intention of investigating them."

Yet despite her vehement attack on him, by the end of summer Mary Elizabeth had decided to support Lewelling again for the governorship. However, Populist unity was now seriously strained by internal discords—some party members were even calling for defeat of their own administration. In addition, the Democratic party, rejecting Populist offers to field a fusion ticket in November, put up its own slate of candidates. As a result the Republicans, except for one congressional seat, swept the state. Mary Elizabeth blamed the outcome on the “disgraceful compromise with the Democracy” two years earlier and the “treachery” of Sen. John Martin and state party chairman Breidenthal; then in a more positive vein she asserted that the election “was not a Republican victory so much as a Democratic

39. Topeka Daily Capital, November 16, 1893; Kansas City (Mo.) Journal, December 23, 1893; Topeka State Journal, November 10, 1893; Kansas City (Mo.) Star, January 4, 1894; and Wichita Daily Eagle, February 9, 1894. She was replaced in July, 1893, by an appointee of the new governor, the state supreme court upholding the replacement.—Topeka Daily Capital, July 7, 1895.

defeat” that cleared “the decks of the Populist ship.”

The deck-clearing, if it was ever actually that, did not last very long. The 1896 Populist nominating convention accepted the Democrats’ presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan, and nominated one of their own, Tom Watson of Georgia, as vice-president. At the time it seemed the best of all possible solutions. Even Mary Elizabeth was carried away. “In the name of God,” she cried in seconding Bryan’s nomination, “forget your prejudices and unite in supporting this God’s new Messiah!”

Although the new Messiah was rejected nationally, in Kansas he garnered the electoral vote and for the first and only time the Populists, heavily assisted by Democrats and Silver Republicans, gained control of all the state offices and both branches of the legislature. But it was a victory that exacted a ruinous price. The gradual erosion of principles that Mary Elizabeth had so bitterly criticized as early as 1893 was now manifested in a platform whose original broad anti-monopolist content was pretty much watered down to a single narrow plank, the monetization of silver. Thus the end result of fusion was destruction of the unique program that had made the Populist party the farmer’s rainbow of hope.

WITH THE decline in the national fortunes of the Populists after 1896, Mary Elizabeth’s role as their advocate also declined. And as her ties to the party began to fray, so did her ties to the Kansas scene. Her lecture tours had long been taking her away from home, especially to New York; by April, 1897, it was rumored that she would live there permanently. She seems, however, to have retained a lingering attachment to both party and state. In July of that year she talked about running for governor, while in December she announced her intention to campaign for the Seventh congressional district seat held by Jerry Simpson.

In the end it all came to nothing. Having left Charles behind in Wichita, she now settled in New York with the rest of the family. She still made her living by lecturing—the eldest son, Charles H., a customs house clerk, served as program manager—and was also employed for a time as a feature writer on Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World. By 1900 she had completely reversed herself politically, writing scorching articles against both Bryan and the Populists, and campaigning statewide for McKinley and the Republicans in Nebraska.

In January, 1901, she filed divorce proceedings against Charles in the Wichita district court, charging nonsupport. At first there was doubt as to whether the case would be heard at all, since Kansas law required continuous state residence for 12 months prior to such action. But Mary Elizabeth argued that she had never given up her legal residence in Wichita and, on that technicality, in May, 1902, she was granted a divorce and custody of the two minor children, Grace and Ben Hur.

Shortly afterwards she became a paid lecturer in an evening program for adults under the auspices of the New York Board of Education, a post she held for a number of years. Speaking regularly in all five boroughs, generally on literary and historical topics, she was, according to the Topeka Daily Capital, eventually “entitled . . . to the rank of dean and the use of her collegiate robes”; and the paper for September 5, 1915, has a picture of her so gownned.

She made a final foray into the political arena in August, 1912, in New York, when she spoke at two large outdoor meetings and several smaller indoor rallies for the Bull Moose party. Long an admirer of Teddy Roosevelt—in 1904 she had announced her intention to stump for this “man of destiny”—she now hailed him as “a fearless leader . . . the champion of the people . . . the new Twentieth Century knight.” Branding the


44. Trice’s Directory, New York, 1898-1899; New York World, July 4, 6, 1900; Omaha Daily Bee, October 4, 8, 1900; Nebraska State Journal, Lincoln, October 4, 7, 1900.

45. Petition in the district court of Sedgwick county, dated December 25, 1900, Wichita Daily Eagle, January 22, 1901, May 24, 1902.

46. New York City Department of Education, Annual Reports, Superintendent of Lectures, 1902-1921.
Democratic party "a moribund mass of political putrescence, a stench in the nostrils of the people," she kept a Union Square audience of a thousand or so cheering and applauding for more than an hour with all her old-time magnetism and fire.

After the campaign, however, a misunderstanding arose with regard to a speaker's fee. As she explained with increasing acrimony in a year-long series of letters to W. H. Hotchkiss, one of the candidate's managers, while she had been glad to donate her services at the indoor meetings, she had made it clear that she expected compensation for the two outdoor speeches delivered "at a cost of tremendous physical and mental effort . . . in order to reach the throng." Given a brush-off by Hotchkiss, she then directed her plea to Roosevelt's secretary, Frank Harper, and finally received "the munificent sum of $50," less legal fees. 47

Her direct political participation now ended, she nonetheless maintained a lively concern with both the local scene and world affairs. When war broke out in 1914 she had the solution: "Stop sending food abroad. Starve the warriors and the people and they will be glad enough to come to terms." After the war she added lectures on the League of Nations, problems of reconstruction, and the "Melting Pot" to her Board of Education repertoire. 48

Although the 1920's were years of lessening activity, she was still occasionally called upon for one of her spirited lectures. Nor had her vitality seemingly diminished. When in 1931 Charles L. Edson, a former staff member of the Kansas City Star, called upon her in the Brooklyn apartment she now shared with Ben, he was greeted by "a tall, stately figure with the swinging stride of a girl athlete" and the same "booming voice which forty years ago . . . set the men of Kansas wild with enthusiasm for a new leader." 49

And just as the earliest years of her life had been spent on a farm, so were the last ones. Having lately purchased a number of acres at Long Eddy, a fertile area some 90 miles northwest of New York City, she gave herself up to the pleasures of planting and harvesting "as though unlimited by Time." But time was indeed limited. A few weeks after her 83d birthday, suffering from nephritis and a leg infection, she entered the hospital at nearby Callicoon, where she died on October 29, 1933. She was buried in Cedar Grove Cemetery, Flushing, Long Island.

"In the history of Kansas," wrote William Allen White, "... she will deserve a bright paragraph. She was an honest, competent woman who felt deeply and wielded great power unselfishly. Peace to her ashes." 50

CLEARLY, a brief summary such as this can only begin to resolve what Prof. James C. Malin has called "the problem of Mrs. Lease as an historical character." 51

There is no doubt that she was a highly effective political advocate, surely one of the most influential of her times. Life on frontier and farm she knew at first hand. She was able to articulate superbly the plight and demands of the farmer and, if somewhat less immediately, those of the urban worker as well.

Her lectures and writings, derivative rather than creative, reflect a more than ordinary range of reading. She drew heavily upon the Bible in both manner and substance, and quoted time and again from Emerson, Lowell, Wendell Phillips, Victor Hugo, the Irish revolutionary poets, and many more. She was devoted to Tennyson, whom she held to be something of a minor prophet; and Victor Murdock, who had known her when he was a young reporter for the Wichita Eagle, noted that "She was particularly and richly laden with Shakespeare." 52

Her political speeches were less analytical than oratory. Hewing close to the Alliance- Populist line, they usually contained some special, forceful reminder that women too must be included in any program for reform. An excellent memory enabled her to fortify her

50. Letter dated "Crystal Springs, Sept. 11, "33" to "Dearest Toppie," her grandson Epes Winthrop Sargent, son of Louise Lease Sargent. Letter in the possession of Mr. Sargent, who kindly permitted me to copy it; verified transcript from the "Register of Deaths," town of Delaware, Sullivan county, New York; Emporia Gazette, October 30, 1933.
52. Wichita Evening Eagle, October 31, 1933 (obit.).
talks with a wealth of statistics, and to quote verbatim from colleagues and opponents as recorded in campaign literature and the press. If much of what she said had been heard many times over, her mastery of the effective phrase often made it all seem startlingly fresh and startlingly right. A few examples:

“A rise in breadstuffs means a fall in virtue and morality. An increase in the cost of living means an increase in the sum total of vice and crime.”

“A mortgaged home, an empty stomach and a ragged back knows no party. . . . We will live to write the epitaphs of the old parties: ‘Died of general debility, old age and chronic falsehoods.’”

“If the government can loan money on corn juice [by subsidies to distillers], it might, in all justice, loan to the farmers on their corn.”

“. . . human greed . . . which seeks to make the Golden Rule subservient to the golden calf.”

“Our laws are the output of a system that clothes rascals in robes and honesty in rags.”

“War is legalized murder.”

During the growth and early victory years of the People’s party the course she pursued was one of forthright support. She eagerly embraced the antimonopolist, anticapitalist sentiments that characterized the Populist movement, and she responded positively to the fragments of socialist thinking that turned up on occasion. It never bothered her to be called a socialist—a label indiscriminately applied then (as now) to advocates of even the mildest economic or political change. Speaking in Georgia in 1891 she had said: “You may call me an anarchist, a socialist or a communist, I care not, but I hold to the theory that if one man has not enough to eat three times a day and another man has $25,000,000, that last man has something that belongs to the first.” And some years later, citing “the great German agitator Bebel,” she criticized the suffrage movement for not recognizing that “the cause of all slavery, all degradation and woman’s so-called political inferiority is her economic depen-
dence upon man . . . the dependence of the oppressed upon the oppressor.”

Yet at no time could she be called a political theorist. Her one full-length venture into theory and program—stimulated perhaps by the publication of books from the pens of such Populist colleagues as Peffer, Weaver, and Ignatius Donnelly—was a bizarre, crudely racist volume appearing in January, 1895, and grandly titled The Problem of Civilization Solved. Here, in discussing the worldwide problems of poverty, overcrowding and crime, she did make use of phrases that recall the classical criticism of capitalism: the dollar (in gold or silver) as only “an abstract measure of value”; the appropriation of “unearned increment by the capitalists”; workers reduced to “mere human accessories” of the machines they operate. But her “solution”—a grotesque echo of the racial bigotry of the day—was to remove the “inferior” races (Negroes, “ryots,” and Orientals) from the midst of the “highly gifted white race of Europe and America” and send them to colonize the sparsely settled tropical regions of Latin America and Africa under the benevolent paternalism of “Caucasian planters.”

For Mary Elizabeth, however, there was no conflict between these views and her urge to better the condition of mankind, all mankind, nor indeed with the notion of herself as a socialist. In the spring of 1899, shortly after hearing an address by Eugene V. Debs, she joined a Massachusetts branch of the Social Democratic party and lectured half a dozen times for the party in Boston and surrounding towns. “Yes, the real, veritable and only genuine Mary E. Lease of Kansas . . . . the one time populist and greatest woman orator in America, has joined us,” exulted the Social Democratic Herald; while in June Debs himself through the columns of the Herald welcomed “Our New Comrade” and called upon the branches to utilize “her marvelous oratorical powers.” And even though in the 1900 presidential election campaign she could declare herself a McKinley Republican, for the next several years she still spoke occasionally


under the auspices of the New York socialists.\footnote{56}

Inconsistency of this sort became a pattern of conduct as the 1890's wore on. An increasingly unsteady relationship with the Populists led her to damn their leaders at one time and support them at another. Originally adamant against fusion, her opposition collapsed in the turmoil of the first Bryan campaign. She denounced the “butchery” of Filipinos by United States troops in 1899, but the following year (repeating a position elaborated in her book) she spoke approvingly of expansionism as “a natural development that has come to stay.”\footnote{57}

A large streak of willfulness and an absolute conviction in the rightness of her own opinions made friendship with her a precarious affair. If others, women perhaps even more than men, appeared to challenge her supremacy in any of her chosen fields, she would either rush to find fault with the challenger or abandon the field. It was as if the outward aspect of self-confidence cloaked an inward sense of insecurity that constantly clamped for reassurance—a reassurance most fully operant during the heyday of Populism. But even before the movement began to decline we find Mary Elizabeth restlessly picking up and dropping one new interest after another—a National Peace Society, a Masonic order for women (Charles almost got into trouble when she claimed to know the ritual and he was suspected of having violated his oath of secrecy), bicycling for health (dressed in a trousered Syrian costume), spiritualism—to which she was said to have been converted at about the same time she joined the Social Democratic party, “Emersonian” theosophy, “mental science,” and Margaret Sanger’s campaign for birth control.\footnote{58}

Her many absences from the Wichita home seem to have been simply accepted by the family, with Charles always there to fill in for her. Mary Elizabeth counted it a virtue never to be gone longer than two weeks if she could help it, and she occasionally took one or another of the children on her shorter journeys. The young people have been described as bright, well-brought up and loving; many years later one observer remembered Mary Elizabeth’s “remarkable control over her four children . . . without a word of impatience or rebuke.”\footnote{59} Yet the loving bond, often alluded to with pride, may have been too tightly drawn; of the four only the older daughter, Louise, and not until she was 30, ever married.

Still, it was probably the senior Charles who suffered most. Overshadowed literally as well as figuratively, he found himself after a dozen years pushed into a role totally at odds with all the expectations of a male-oriented world. The press that clawed at Mary Elizabeth for betraying femininity was just as cruelly quick to poke fun at Charles for surrendering his masculinity to the duties of housekeeper and children’s nurse. To his credit he bore it all stoically including the divorce, which he did not contest. “Mrs. Lease is all right,” he told an \textit{Eagle} reporter afterwards. “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.”\footnote{60}

Wonderfully ambitious she certainly was. And yet not entirely for herself alone. There was a time when she was sure, as so many others hoped they might be sure, that the road of salvation for the downtrodden indeed lay open, and that it was her destiny to lead the way. Nor did she wait upon the prompting of others. “She had the courage to take the next step before she was propelled into it, which is a great gift,” wrote Gerald Johnson.

And maybe in the long run she did not have too many illusions. She was never a major prophet, she told Charles Edson; she had one talent and she used it to the best of her ability. In a moment of wry perception she once said: “I went up like a rocket. Perhaps I’ll come down like one.”\footnote{61}

She was right. The trail of stars died away long before the burnt-out casket touched earth, but at its zenith the burst of light was dazzling.

\footnote{50} Mrs. Scott Campbell, secretary to Mrs. Lease for a number of years, in \textit{Wichita Sunday Eagle Magazine}, June 14, 1925.

\footnote{60} \textit{Wichita Daily Eagle}, May 25, 1902.