Rustic Rasputin: William A. Peffer in Color Cartoon Art, 1891-1899

by Roger A. Fischer

Odd man out in a two-party chamber, Kansas Populist William Alfred Peffer left no great legacy from his 1891-1897 stint in the U.S. Senate, save perhaps a wealth of speeches in the Congressional Record distinguished mainly by their plethora of statistics and interminable length. Even within the Populist movement he became something of a peripheral player after 1891, removed by half a continent from the political fray in Kansas and at odds with his national party's drift toward fusion with the Democrats and single-issue silver politics. Yet, through much of the 1890s, Peffer experienced the dubious distinction of extraordinary prominence in one facet of political celebrity, color cartoon art. During his years in office, as Peter Argersinger has noted, "he became the political cartoonists' symbol of the People's Party more consistently than either the donkey or the elephant served the major parties." Through the creative talents of Joseph Keppler, Frederick Burr Opper, the Gillam brothers Bernhard and Victor, and other major graphic satirists of the day, Peffer probably achieved more prominence as a caricature than he did as a statesman.

On five dozen or more occasions between 1891 and 1899, Peffer appeared in lithographed color caricature or centerfold creations in Puck and Judge, the giants of the genre where cartoon conventions and caricatures were almost invariably pioneered and then parroted by lesser talents in other publications.

Launched by the Austrian-born artist and actor Keppler as a German-language venture in New York in 1876, Puck was introduced in an English-language edition a year later and rapidly revolutionary American political cartooning. Rejecting the stark black and white style, brittle partisanship and dogmatic moralism of the legendary Thomas Nast, Keppler endowed his cover and centerfold creations with a rainbow of colors, droll satire tempered with Viennese levity, and a fondness for elaborate vignettes featuring characters by the dozens. As circulation and profits soared, Puck's success prompted a host of imitators, chief among them The Judge. Founded in 1881 by Keppler expatriate James A. Wales, Judge gained legitimacy as Puck's Republican nemesis during a brilliant 1884 cartoon war over the alleged sins of James G. Blaine and Grover Cleveland.

Judge gained full parity after William J. Arkel assumed ownership and enticed Bernhard Gillam and Eugene Zimmerman away from Keppler in 1885. Together, the rival weeklies dominated political cartoon art through the 1880s and 1890s and were said by some to possess more political influence than all American daily newspapers combined.

The agrarian revolt that brought Peffer to the U.S. Senate and national prominence marked something of a milestone for the rival weeklies, bringing the Republican Judge and the nominally independent but predictably pro-Cleveland Puck into a rare "harmonic convergence" of political ideology. At the same time, these events served to rekindle the creative fires of artists gone...
There is an old chap, quite a brisk cuss,
Whose opinions are somewhat promiskous;
In the Senate he'll sit,
And he'll need all his wit,
Or the wind there will blow through his whiskers.

Fig. 1, "Spring Nonsense"

Gulliver Bound Down by the Democratic Lilliputians

Fig. 2, "Gulliver Bound Down by the Democratic Lilliputians"
Fig. 3, "The Grangers' Dream of Cheap Money"
stale on an unending succession of cartoons devoted to Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, and purported crimes against humanity in the guise of tariff revision. Until 1890, Pack and Judge had rarely agreed upon anything of substance, but beneath broad but shallow differences over party preference and policy initiatives lurked in both editorial suites an abiding conservatism on fundamental social, economic, and political values. Confronted with such perceived threats to the status quo as trade union activism, international manifestations of anarchism or communism, or Henry George’s 1886 bid to bring the single tax to Gracie Mansion, both Pack and Judge had routinely cast aside Viennese levity for lurid demagogy. When 1890 election returns from Kansas and other Great Plains constituencies signaled a serious challenge to politics as usual, Pack and Judge rallied to the defense of such verities as the two-party system and the sanctity of private property and the gold dollar; Populism became the bogey-man of New York color cartoon art and Peffer of Kansas its bewhiskered visual image.

On sixty or more occasions during the eight years following his Senate election in January 1891, Peffer’s caricature served a succession of Pack and Judge artists as the ubiquitous symbol of the Populist presence in American politics. At first he was paired often with Jeremiah “Socksless Jerry” Simpson and later on occasion with Simpson or other party luminaries Mary Elizabeth Lease, Jacob Coxey, or James B. Weaver. Much more frequently, however, he appeared alone. His debut in political cartoon art occurred in the April 8, 1891, Pack centerfold “Spring Nonsense” by Opper, a series of comic sketches and rhymes, including one of Senator-elect Peffer (Fig. 1) at a desk studying the rules of debate, sporting “clodhopper” boots and a beard that trailed across the floor.

This portrayal of Peffer as a comic-relief rustic primitive endowed with more facial hair than brains established a basic formula for Peffer caricature that resisted major modification in all but one respect throughout his years in public life. The one essential deviation was endowing his rather small and extremely intense eyes with a demonic quality. This was exemplified by Bernhard Gillam’s October 28, 1893, Judge centerfold “Gulliver Bound Down by the Democratic Lilliputians” (Fig. 2) and Louis Dalrymple’s July 8, 1891, Pack centerfold “The Grangers’ Dream of Cheap Money” (Fig. 3). Both characterizations were more appropriate for John Brown of Osawatomie than Bill Peffer of Topeka. On many occasions, especially in more creative Peffer caricatures, the Kansan was thus portrayed as something of a rustic Rasputin, apostle of agrarian dementia. In others, however, he was drawn with rather rapid eyes to create the effect of a simple-minded, rather innocuous, and altogether inconsequential hayseed visionary. The drollery of the Peffer caricature was embellished in many instances by such creative touches as depicting the grossly exaggerated beard adorned with a bow, tied into a Hindu knot (Fig. 4), or braided in the style of an ancient Egyptian. On other occasions Peffer was given a shabby carpetbag stuffed full of “wild ideas” and “Populist dreams” (Fig. 5), skewed spectacles, or a motley assortment of bedraggled hats.

In poking fun of Peffer’s prairie provincialsism with such devices as whiskers, “clodhopper” boots and shab-


Fig. 4. “Appropriate Costumes for the Presidential Carnival of 1892”
Fig. 5.

by old hats, cartoon artists were exploiting a hackneyed stereotype developed in countless situational black and white cartoons in Puck, Judge, Harper's Weekly, and other publications lampooning farmers from upstate New York, the Jersey flats, the plains of Kansas or the Dakotas, or the mountains of Appalachia for a primarily urban clientele. In one respect, however, they were required to exercise some care, for the revered national symbol Uncle Sam was also portrayed invariably in the cartoons of the day as a bearded agrarian decked out in boots and a white hat! Without exception, Puck and Judge artists featuring both Peffer and Uncle Sam in their creations (Fig. 6) took care to accentuate the contrast between national icon and Populist pariah by drawing Uncle Sam as neat to the point of neatness and depicting Peffer's beard and hat as uncommonly scruffy.

Despite the many droll variations, the essential Peffer caricature quickly became so instantly and universally recognized that he could be drawn in blackface or Indian warpaint, as an elf or fakir or Egyptian pharaoh, and even in some instances as an ape, a fish, a coyote, a hydra head, or a tree. In most instances his likeness was labeled "Peffer," although no need existed. Accordingly, the Kansan became a prized commodity to cartoonists as window dressing, as an ancillary feature that added to a cartoon's overall effect without major expenditures of space or effort. Like Benjamin Butler, Joseph Pulitzer, Carl Schurz, and other contemporaries endowed with truly distinctive physiognomies, Peffer was featured in many more cartoons than his actions or influence may have warranted. Perhaps the intent was to give these cartoons partisan balance with Peffer as the token Populist, but more probably he was included because he caricatured so successfully. He became a fixture in the obligatory holiday and seasonal cartoons, with casts of

dozens, that evolved into a popular tradition during the period.

Before Peffer developed into a cartoon cliché, however, he was for a season a curiosity in his own right. His election to the Senate and Simpson's to the House inspired Victor Gillam's April 25, 1891, *Judge* front cover cartoon “A Mighty Poor Exchange: From the Sublime to the Ridiculous” (Fig. 7), a lament that such giants as William McKinley and George Edmunds were giving way to a diminutive duo of Kansas Populists. Bernhard Gillam's June 6, 1891, *Judge* front cover “A Party of Patches” (Fig. 8) made mock of the May summit of splinter-party reform groups chaired by Peffer in Cincinnati, Ben Butler, labor kingpin Terence V. Powderly, Simpson, and Peffer were depicted riding a “platform of lunacy” held aloft by a balloon made up mainly of patches representing the Alliancemen, Knights of Labor, Grangers, Greenbackers, and other participants. Dalrymple's aforementioned “Grangers’ Dream of Cheap Money” lampooned Peffer's penchant for paper money by drawing the federal treasury as a windmill driven by the bellows of a rather maniacal Peffer churning out wagonloads of greenbacks, while a merchant demonstrated the inflationary effect by charging a ton of greenbacks for a ton of coal. Populist forays led by Peffer and Simpson in 1891 against the two major parties were parodied as a barnyard battle to salt an Alliance turkey in Bernhard Gillam's April 11, 1891, *Judge* centerfold “Too Old a Bird to be Caught That Way”; as a scalping party menacing John Sherman in Dalrymple's August 19, 1891, *Puck* front cover effort “After his Scalp”; and as a

---

A MIGHTY POOR EXCHANGE.
From the sublime to the ridiculous.

Fig. 7, "A Mighty Poor Exchange: From the Sublime to the Ridiculous"
Fig. 8. "A Party of Patches"
Democratic cart impeded by an Alliance rock in Victor Gillam's October 3, 1891, *Judge* centerfold "The Poor Donkey has Too Many Drivers." Other 1891 Peffer color cartoons, however, were less rooted in reality. Bernhard Gillam's August 8, 1891, *Judge* centerfold "Most Ripe" (Fig. 9), depicting James Campbell, Shelby Cullom, Russell Alger, David Hill, President Cleveland, Arthur P. Gorman, and Peffer, all in blackface, salivating over a "U.S. Presidency 1892" watermelon in Uncle Sam's garden, was the first of a long succession of cartoons presenting Peffer as a candidate for the presidency, for 1892 and again for 1896. Although the Kansan had exhibited no symptoms of White House fever, this theme was echoed in C. J. Taylor's December 30, 1891, *Puck* centerfold "Appropriate Costumes for the Presidential Carnival of 1892" with "Faker Peffer" as an emaciated, half-naked Hindu, the only Populist in the cartoon. Victor Gillam's "President Harrison Speaks for Good Money" and "The Foolish Appeals of the Political Tramps," *Judge* centerfolds on September 5 and 19, 1891, respectively, set a precedent for portraying Peffer as a fervent disciple of the free and unlimited coinage of silver at a time when his enthusiasm for this panacea was decidedly less avid than that of such mainstream figures as John J. Ingalls, the rock-ribbed Kansas Republican he had replaced in the Senate.  

Such cartoons were prophetic of future trends in Peffer's use as a cartoon convention. After 1891, apart from appearances in obligatory holiday extravaganzas and an occasional situational vignette, he was utilized almost exclusively in Puck and Judge color cartoon art as either a presidential possibility or leader of the free-silver forces, or both. In 1892, for example, he was cast as a potential candidate in three cartoons before Arkell and Keppel bowed to the inevitability that his party would run James B. Weaver instead. In Victor Gilliam's "The Political Bichloride of Gold" and "Judge's Political Dime Museum," featured in Judge on January 2 and April 9, respectively, Peffer saw duty as a "free money drunk" addicted to "presidential mania rum" and facing the cure of "Dr. Judge's bichloride of patriotism and unselshness gold" and as a freak show Lilliputian. In Oppe's May 18 Puck centerfold "Would-Be Models for the Great Painting 'Our Next President'" Peffer served as a bedraggled bumpkin in stovepipe hat, bib overalls, and clothhoppers lining up to audition for artist Uncle Sam. His only other appearance that year was as one of at least forty brownies in a New Year's Eve Judge centerfold.10

After a seven-month hiatus Peffer again appeared as a Judge centerfold brownie in a July 29, 1893, salute to the World's Columbian Exposition. A week later Cleveland, responding to business hysteria over the deepening economic crisis, summoned Congress into special session to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890. This precipitated a prolonged and acrimonious Senate filibuster that lasted through October and dominated political cartoon art into the new year. A dozen color cartoons pilloried Peffer as a silver obstructionist for his longwinded speeches opposing repeal. This was unfair, if not misrepresentative, for Peffer played a peripheral role in the conflict and his speeches, not especially lengthy or rambling for Pefferian oratory, tended to damn silver with the faintest of praise as a band-aid measure for westerners in need of economic tourniquets and transfusions. Nevertheless, both humor weeklies viewed any role in the filibuster as fiscal treason and Puck as a betrayal of a heroic President as well. If Puck cartoons tended to target for scorn such silver Republicans as William Stewart of Nevada and Henry M. Teller of Colorado and Judge artists worked in any Democrat they could, especially those with Tammany ties or free-trade tendencies, then Populist Peffer was fair game for both publications.

It began with Victor Gilliam's portrayal of Peffer as a "silver rum" Democratic sat in the August 12 Judge cartoon "Cleveland's Cure and the Democratic Incurables." Two weeks later Peffer appeared with a broom at the beach fending off a "public sentiment on the silver question" tidal wave in Grant Hamilton's Judge centerfold "The Old Story—Trying to Sweep Back the Ocean." In his August 30 Puck back cover cartoon "Awaiting the News from Washington" (Fig. 10), Joseph Keppel, Jr., substituted demagogy for drollery, portraying Peffer and Democrat George Vest of Missouri filibustering while a New York financier dozes through telegraph reports of failures, foreclosures, and Senate paralysis. Gilliam echoed this theme in his September 9 Judge piece "The Senatorial Firemen Talk While the Fire Burns." This featured Peffer and fellow obstructionists as firefighters chatting as a bank, factory, and investment house perish in flames. In Taylor's September 16 Puck centerfold "They Can't Hold Up this Train" and in the October 21 Judge cartoon "Held Up," Peffer starred as a bandit attacking the repeal locomotive, in the former creation armed with a bellows to symbolize his legendary windiness. In Bernhard Gilliam's Judge, "Gulliver Bound Down by the Democratic Lilliputians," he was cast for the second time in ten weeks as a Democrat, in this case as a maniac midget delivering "Peffer Silver Lunacy Speeches" atop an "Industrial Prosperity" Uncle Sam bound by "free silver" and "tariff tinkering" bindings. Peffer was subsequently ejected from a Senate window in Keppel's "Throw 'Em Out"; cast as an ape in Keppler's "Through the Jungle," a pagan worshipping a smashed silver idol in Samuel Elshart's "One After the Other—Let the Good Work Go On"; and as a cheerleader for jackasses and dogs accosting Cleveland in Dalrymple's "The National Honor and Credit in Good Hands." Puck centerfolds on November 1, November 22, December 20, and January 31, respectively.11

During the next year Peffer was lampooned in several cartoons with varying themes. Taylor's February 7, 1894, Puck centerfold "The 'Peanut' Hagenbeck and his Senate Courtesies' Animal Show" cast Peffer as an ape in David B. Hill's circus in company with several senators opposing Cleveland's tariff initiative, but in Victor Gilliam's November 10, 1894, Judge centerfold "An Unjust Distribution of an Iniquitous Tax" he was savaged as an architect of the tariff's most controversial feature,


Fig. 10, "Awaiting the News from Washington"
a federal income tax. Peffer had played no role of consequence in the tariff struggle, favoring the income tax but cool to cosmetic rate revisions that led Jerry Simpson to brand it "only a robber tariff in a little less degree than the McKinley Bill." Taylor's "Dante's Inferno Up to Date," the August 22, 1894, Puck centerfold, drew Peffer and others deemed obstructionists during the Fifty-third Congress as doomed sinners led through the smoke of "political purgatory" into the fires of perdition by Uncle Sam as Dante and "Verginio Maro Puck." Oppen's "Puck's Valentines for 1894," a February 14 Puck centerfold, included a sketch of Peffer and Mary Elizabeth Lease with a verse poking fun at his intellect and windiness and urging him to resign (Fig. 11). F. M. Hutchins' October 10, 1894, Puck front cover "Peffer's Populist Boom" (see cover) showed him clinging to a ruptured "Populism" hot-air balloon descending over Washington. A fascinating cartoon, its inspiration was not made manifest by a companion editorial, although it seems improbable that it was the genius of prophecy on the Populist showing in the pending elections or insight into Peffer's growing isolation in a party drifting inexorably toward single-issue silver politics and fusion with the Democrats.12

Beginning with Victor Gillam's "The National Dog Show," Puck centerfold of February 23, 1895, casting Peffer, senators Jones and Wulcott, and "Silver Dick" Bland as a "prize litter of silver puppies" among the canine corpses of presidential aspirants. Peffer cartooning reverted to the familiar themes of portraying him as a White House candidate and free-silver evangelist. During the next several months he was drawn among the White House contenders as a "curious and rare orchid (crank species)" in Gillam's April 20 Puck centerfold "Judge's Easter Flower Show;" as a fish of the "Populist skate" species in brother Bernhard's "In the Political Swim" March 30 Puck centerfold; as a befuddled bicyclist in the Taylor June 12 Puck creation "Presidential Aspirants, Take to the Wheel!" (Fig. 12); and as the lone Populist being examined by the press corps with magnifying glasses in Dalrymple's November 20 Puck centerfold "The 'Press View' at the Candidate Show." As a fanatic for free silver foiled by Cleveland's heroic leadership, he was cast as one of a pack of coyotes harassing Cleveland's national stage pulled by horses "firmness" and "common sense" in J. S. Pughe's March 13, 1895, Puck centerfold "The 'Ki-Vis Can't Rattle Him" and as a head on a "free silver craze"

![CIA hydra repulsed by Cleveland's "sound money policy"
broadsword in Dalrymple's June 19, 1895, Puck centerfold "It Cannot Pass While He Is There" (Fig. 13). In Dalrymple's July 3, 1895, Puck centerfold "Fizz! Boom!! Ah!!!" he was featured as "the Windy Man from Kansas" in a silver carnival and Independence Day fireworks exhibit.13

After the Populists became junior partners in the Democratic campaign for William Jennings Bryan and free silver in the summer of 1896, despite Peffer's urgent entreaties for party autonomy and a multi-issue reform agenda, he was essentially ignored in a vitriolic Puck campaign against Bryan. Perhaps this was reflective of his rather passive role in the campaign but more

---

probably he was ignored because, as a Populist, he had no place in what was portrayed as a Democratic party phenomenon. He appeared often, however, in anti-Bryan Puck cartoons as part of a Bryan silver entourage in which Democrats were routinely outnumbere  
d by such renegade Republicans as Stewart and Teller, renowned radicals Eugene Debs and Gov. John Peter Altgeld, and Populists Peffer, Simpson, Lease, Jacob Coxey, and Tom Watson. This was an obvious effort to  
est the Bryan insurgency as treason against the tradition of Jefferson, Cleveland, and Puck itself. Oppen’s  
August 12 front cover cartoon “The Silver-Tongued Ventriloquist and his Dummies” featured Peffer as a dummy. Taylor’s centerfold “A Down-Hill Movement” in the same issue portrayed him as one of ten “silver lunatics” rejoicing that their careening runaway car was gaining speed since they had unhitched the Democratic donkey! He was drawn as a “Popocracy” buccaneer attacking the good ship “National Prosperity” in Taylor’s September 23 centerfold piece “Political Pirates”; as part of a rag-tag Bryan army along with such disreputables as Coxey, Altgeld, and a broom-wielding Mrs. Lease in the Dalrymple September 30 centerfold “In Battle Array—and There’s Not Much Doubt About the Result”; and as an American Indian in the Dalrymple November 4 centerfold “Last Ghost-Dance of the Free Silver Tribe—Just Before Being Sent to the Salt River Reservation.”

Then, with a final appearance as a judge Christmas brownie and in one post-election Puck salt-in-the-wounds gloat over the thrashing suffered by Bryan and bimetallism, Peffer disappeared from color cartoon art even before he disappeared from national politics, a casualty of his failure to embrace fusion and silver with sufficient ardor. Two years after Peffer’s return to Kansas and private life, however, Eugene Zimmerman featured his caricature as a roving figural “dead Populist Peffer


Fig. 12, “Presidential Aspirants, Take to the Wheel!”
tree” in his March 11, 1899, *Judge* centerfold “Splitting ‘Old Hickory’” (Fig. 14). This was a blithe commentary on the dismembering of the party of Jefferson and Jackson by the Bryan and Cleveland factions and a reminder of an enduring fascination among the political cartoonists of the decade for Peffer as a study in caricature and a personification of the party he served in the Senate. It exemplified also another salient characteristic of the Peffer cartoon tradition, a total disregard for factual integrity. For by the time the Zimmerman cartoon appeared in print, Peffer had already decreed Populism dead and buried, had run unsuccessfully for the Kansas governorship as the Prohibition party nominee, and was completing the process of returning to the Republican party of his youth.13

Seldom in the annals of editorial cartooning has an American political figure been so systematically misrepresented so often and in so many fundamental respects. The artists for *Puck* and *Judge* drew Peffer superbly as an exercise in pure caricature, exaggerating his unrivaled beard and his rustic taste in wearing apparel—from his hats down to his clodhopper boots, that one suspects had been carefully cultivated for an agrarian Kansas constituency. Those who drew Peffer as the “windy man from Kansas” or symbolized his penchant for marathon speeches with such devices as a bellows or a coiled script as long as his beard succeeded in transforming an acknowledged foible into the realm of creative caricature. In a number of early Peffer cartoons, printed before he took his Senate seat and began to evolve into a known entity, portrayals of him as a lunatic-fringe crackpot or a rustic Rasputin menacing sacred canons of civilization and the marketplace exhibited a modicum of integrity as manifestations of Seaboard bewilderment over the odd new phenomenon


Fig. 13, “It Can Not Pass While He Is There”
of prairie Populism. After 1891, however, Peffer cartoons sacrificed integrity almost altogether in featuring him in cartoon after cartoon as a candidate for the presidency, avid evangelist for the free and unlimited coinage of silver, or both.

No documentary evidence exists to suggest that he harbored ambitions for the White House in 1892 or in 1896, or that he ever found it necessary to renounce grassroots groundswells of popular enthusiasm among the party rank and file for such a candidacy. In late 1891 and early 1892 cartoonists may have been misled by his celebrity status and by the muddled presidential picture within his party's organization. By the time cartoons suggesting an 1896 Peffer candidacy began to appear in 1895, however, such ambiguity did not exist. By then it must have been clear to even casual observers of Populist politics that he had become an anachronism in a party drifting steadily toward single-issue silver politics and fusion with the anti-Cleveland agrarian Democrats, an agenda that Peffer decried consistently and openly. Within the Populist movement a peripheral figure, and even in Kansas so alienated from the party mainstream that in January 1897 he would enjoy little serious support for a second Senate term, Peffer was credible as a Populist presidential nominee only in the minds of the New York color cartoonists. When he allegedly was urged by a delegation of diehard Texans to stand against Bryan on the eve of the 1896 Populist convention in St. Louis, Peffer was said to have turned them down, sadly explaining that he could not win a single Kansas county against the Nebraska Democrat.14

These artists also strayed far from factual accuracy in their persistent portrayal of Peffer as a "silver lunatic." A devout Greenbacker who denied altogether the metallic basis of money, he looked condescendingly upon free silver as a monetary moheli, remarking that "as long as we use metals for money I favor their unlimited use." In this spirit he supported silver initiatives and opposed the repeal of the Silver Purchase Act, but made no secret of his contempt for the idea that free silver could solve the farm crisis or attack the root causes of the depression. He believed that to do so would require the abolition of rents and interest, the nationalization of the money and railroad trusts, land redistribution, and the issuance of paper money directly to the needy. In short, Peffer never deviated from his faith in the early Populist agenda and resisted strenuously its subordination to the rising clamor for silver and the single-issue rallying cry of agrarian reform. He also never wavered in his belief that only an autonomous Populist party provided the one hope for meaningful economic reform, and he opposed openly and persistently fusion with a Democratic party he had loathed since boyhood. To the end he held firm for party autonomy and broad-based platform reform initiatives. Although he endorsed the Bryan-Tom Watson Populist slate, he devoted most of his efforts to promoting Watson against Bryan's Democratic running mate, Maine banker Arthur Sewall. For cartoonists to depict Peffer as a "silver lunatic" was to echo an accepted misconception; for them to persistently portray him as a Bryan "groupie" was to indulge in sheer fantasy.17

The cartoonists also erred fundamentally in portraying him as either a droll dimwit or a rustic Rasputin, for he was clearly neither. If Mary Elizabeth Lease characterized Peffer in 1914 as "utterly lacking in brilliancy," his speeches and editorials bear testimony to mental powers that compared favorably with those of his colleagues, both in Congress and in the Kansas press corps. Writing of the new Kansas Populist members of Congress in 1891, the Washington Post stated that "no set of men ever merited less the ridicule that has been heaped upon them." In 1895 a Washington Evening Star reporter expecting to interview a "political dime museum freak" found instead "a gentleman of a mild and benevolent countenance, of engaging manners, and of a gentle and persuasive voice." In July 1894, Review of Reviews stated that he "seems to have won the respect and esteem of his colleagues, and to have convinced them that he represents a high standard of citizenship."18 Instead of being a blatant demagogue and Populist fire-eater, eulogized a Philadelphia Press reporter in response to Peffer's failure to win a second term in January 1897, "he has turned out to be a very mild-mannered gentleman indeed, who has, of course, the crazy notions of the Populists, but whose presentation of these notions has been made in the proxiest, least sensational manner imaginable."19 Perhaps Walter T. K. Nugent put it best when he wrote of Peffer that "his sedate, logical, fact-crammed, humorless speeches and editorials justify better the description of single-minded and dedicated rather than fanatical."20

17. For an outstanding synopsis of Peffer's consistent position on free silver as economic dogma and party strategy, his adamant opposition to fusion, and his alienation within the movement as a result, see Angersinger, Populism and Politics, 91-92, 129-29, 152-55, and 194-99.
18. Washington Post, March 14, 1891; Washington Evening Star, October 12, 1895; and Review of Reviews 10 (July 1894):11, all quoted in Angersinger, Populism and Politics, 106, 195, respectively.

16. See Angersinger, Populism and Politics, 256.
Pfeffer's refusal to play the role of "political dime museum freak" presented cartoonists with a dilemma, for truly effective cartoon art uses graphic and thematic distortion and exaggeration to present underlying truths. It does not thrive on egregious falsehood. That Keppler, for one, pondered the dichotomy between Pfeffer reality and Peffer caricature early in the game is obvious from the July 8, 1891, Puck which featured both Daltry's "The Grangers' Dream of Cheap Money"—in my opinion the most demonic portrait of Pfeffer in color cartoon art—and a companion essay observing that "Pfeffer is already giving signs of weakening in his capacity of political freak." This essay also noted that Pfeffer had published a magazine article indicating "great anxiety to prove to the East the entire reasonableness of the Mid-Western idea," and it reported rumors that "he has had made for him, or has otherwise procured, civilized or semi-civilized clothes." That Pfeffer continued to appear in cartoon after cartoon as a rustic Rasputin or droll dimwit long after he evolved into a familiar figure in the Senate suggests that the men who perpetuated his image were as gifted at the art of ethical compromise as they were lacking in the science of political observation.

Pfeffer was by no means unique as the recipient of such distorted press coverage. In 1890, Jerry Simpson, commonly characterized in major party newspapers as "simian" although he more closely resembled in appearance a Republican banker, remarked to a crowd in Harper, Kansas, "You may be surprised to see me in the form of a man, after the descriptions of a partisan press, but I'm no zoological specimen—not even a monkey or an orangutan." It became much worse in Republican papers after fusion in 1896. In his Weekly Kansas Chief coverage of the St. Louis convention, Troy Republican Sol Miller described the male delegates as "men with unkempt and matted hair, men with long beards matted together with filth from their noses, men reeking with lice, men whose feet stank, and the odor from under

whose arms would have knocked down a bull and the female delegates as "brazen women, women with beards, women with voices like a gong, women with scrawny necks and dirty fingernails, women with their stockings out at the heels, women with snaggle-teeth, stretchmets, rips, and women possessed of devils." Even William Allen White, that icon of civic probity, was moved to make reference in his celebrated October 1, 1896, Emporia Gazette editorial "What's the Matter with Kansas?" to the immaculately groomed and intellectually impressive Frank Doster as a "shabby, wild-eyed, rattle-brained fanatic."32 Clearly, then, perpetuating Peffer's cartoon identity as a rustic Rasputin at odds with his proper, rather prosaic conduct in office was no isolated phenomenon. Born as a natural response to his early celebrity and remarkably appropriate appearance, the Peffer cartoon image sustained itself to serve well the needs of discrediting the agrarian insurgency through graphic satire.

This dichotomy between the Peffer graphic image and the Peffer persona gives rise to a question as to why Puck and Judge singled him out as their Populist stereotype for all seasons. The publications certainly had other options. Jacob Coxey, leader of the 1894 march of the dispossessed on Washington that garnered extraordinary media attention for months, never really secured a niche in color cartoon art. He proved useful, however, in Puck's 1896 effort to depict Bryan as head of a contingent of crazies. Among the Kansans the truly bizarre John "The Milkman" Ois was ignored altogether, and such key Kansans as Frank Doster and Annie L. Diggs apparently lacked requisite recognition for a mainstream national audience. Jerry Simpson, infinitely more fascinating a personality than Peffer, surely more significant in party affairs and more representative of Populism after 1891, and as "Sockless Jerry" endowed with a colorful identity as pregnant with promise for cartoon artists as Peffer's beard and rustic dress, saw duty regularly as Peffer's sidekick in 1891 and 1892, but never became a comparable fixture in Populist caricature. Why he failed to do so may have been partly a result of a renowned homespun sense of humor reminiscent of that of Abraham Lincoln and a stellar ability to use literary quotations that belied his lack of formal education, but probably owed more to his trim, neatly mustached features, conservative dress, and a paucity of creative opportunities in sustained exploitation of the "sockless" theme.33

Such limitations did not apply, however, to the incomparable Mary Elizabeth Lease, who probably possessed more attributes for cartoon caricature than any public personality of her generation. She impressed a Kansas City Star reporter as "rather slender" in figure with a "strong, good, not pretty, and very feminine" face evoking "no sense of harshness," but the editor of the Wellington Monitor described her as a "lantern-jawed,oggle-eyed nightmare...hideously ugly in feature." Photographs suggest that the truth lay somewhere between. To William Allen White she resembled "a kangaroo pyramided up from the hips to a comparatively small head," hair set severely in a knot, "no figure, a thick torso, and long legs," and "no sex appeal—none!" Partisan biases and personal tastes aside, at nearly six feet tall with an affinity for what White described as "the most ungodly hats I ever saw a woman wear," she possessed in abundance attributes ripe for great caricature. Inventor of a fictitious Irish birthright and a series of apparently imaginary 1892 dalliances with James B. Weaver, she exemplified that element of incongruity on which cartoon art has traditionally fed. On the stump she personified the "calamity howl" of prairie agrarian angst, defying every last gender-driven stereotype of public probity in urging Kansas farmers to "raise less corn and more hell" and to combat the money cabals of London and international Zionism. Yet, improbably, Mary Elizabeth Lease appeared rarely in color cartoons and only Dailymere, drawing her as a broom-toting prune-faced harriett in his September 30, 1896, Puck centerfold "In Battle Array," even made an effort to exploit her extraordinary potential for caricature.34

That Peffer evolved into the ubiquitous cartoon image of the Populist crusade over such compelling alternates may defy precise analysis, but common sense suggests that his early prominence and uniquely agrarian appearance undoubtedly had much to do with it. As

22. Alliance Bulletin, Harper, September 26, 1890; Weekly Kansas Chief, Troy, July 30, 1896; and Emporia Weekly Gazette, October 1, 1896, quoted in Clanton, Kansas Populists, 85, 186, 191, respectively.


the only senator created by the 1890 upheaval, Peffer
occupied a special niche in the public mind and his
starring role as chair of the Cincinnati conclave and
frenetic 1891 campaign endeavors added to his celebrity.
When he came east that fall to take his seat, the press
proclaimed him "perhaps the most extensively adver-
tised Senator that ever came to Washington." As Peter
Argersinger has reminded us, Peffer was so intrinsically
identified in the public mind with early Populism "that
for a time he lent his name to it. Before the People's party
movement became designated as Populism it was popular-
larly referred to as Pefferism; and Populists were fre-
quently termed Pefferites or Peffercrats." Since success
in cartoon art is in large part determined by an instant
recognition of its caricatures and conventions, artists
who had done much to establish Peffer as the accepted
personification of his party would have entertained an
understandable reluctance to confuse their public with
a substitute symbol, simply because he stubbornly re-
fused to play his appointed role of "political dime
museum freak." So, to some extent, Peffer's niche in
cartoon art was a result of his status as the movement's
first celebrity.

25. Argersinger, Populism and Politics, 104. After Peffer began to
decline in importance in the estimation of the press, according to
Argersinger, the term "Pefferism" gradually became a synonym of
sens for the apocalyptic "calamity howl" lamentations for which the
movement was notorious, although Zimmerman's use of a "dead
populist Peffer tree" as late as 1899 to symbolize the party's demise
would seem to indicate a lingering linkage between man and party in
the public mind.

To a much greater extent, however, it was a result of
a physical appearance that dovetailed superbly with the
graphic image of the rustic prairie provincial developed
over a generation of cartoon satire and firmly estab-
lished in the popular mind. Tall, almost skeletal, elderly,
with gaunt features, piercing eyes that evoked passionate
purpose if not dementia, and a magnificent beard that
flowed nearly to his waist, Peffer embellished nature's
gifts by his fondness for floppy country hats and
"clothhopper" boots and a disdain for neckties or even
collars. Put simply, he represented a nearly unique
phenomenon in the annals of American cartoon art, a
pristine example of natural caricature. O. Gene Clanton
has written persuasively that the pervasive Populist
image conveyed by the eastern urban press was that of
"a weather-beaten old man" approximating "the missing
link in the evolutionary chain" with a "dilapidated hat
perched atop a head that was ornamented with a long
but manly-looking beard...and a bony frame...covered
with a tattered set of bib overalls, from which emerged
invariably a pair of oversized boots recognizable as
'clothhoppers.' The uncanny parallel between
this generic stereotype and Peffer's living likeness sug-
gests that, as Voltaire quipped about God, if Peffer did
not exist, the cartoon artists of the day would have had
to invent him.

26. Clanton, Kansas Populism, 63. For an excellent description of
Peffer's physiognomy and taste in wearing apparel, see Argersinger,
Populism and Politics, 105.