Populist Humor

The Fame of Their Own Effigy

by C. Robert Haywood

Political humor is a fickle mistress. It has served some politicians well—Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jack Kennedy, and Abraham Lincoln. But even Abe was criticized by some for being frivolous while the Union was in grave danger. Being too sober also has its hazards. Both Alf Landon and Thomas Dewey were accused of being too serious and somber. Getting the right leaven of wit into a campaign is a talent that not all possess.

Did the Kansas Populists, those passionately serious reformers, those “calamity howlers,” find the secret? Or were they damaged by their more secure opponents’ barbs, ridicule, and lampoons which passed for humor?

If ever a political party appeared vulnerable to an attack with massive barrages of humor it was the Populist party. In Kansas the mighty three, the Kansas triumvirate of the movement, seemed designed by some frivolous god of political battle for such an assault. There was William A. Peffer with his long beard which could be cartooned as a snake, tied in a fancy bow, draped around a dozen follies, or tripped over in flight; there was Jerry Simpson, the sockless one, who opened himself up to all the funny images bare feet had accumulated since civilization took to stylish shodding of people’s toes; and there was Mary Elizabeth Lease, the woman who spoke in public better than any man and thus exposed herself to the ridicule males reserve for strange, uppity-female behavior. They were a funny lot. In the brush of the cartoonists of Puck and Judge periodicals and sometimes in the pens of clever writers such as William Allen White, they could be made to appear even funnier. But as Leon A. Harris observed in his study of The Fine Art of Political Wit, there “have been periods when wit by politicians was out of

Footnote: Ford County native and retired professor and administrator of Washburn University in Topeka, C. Robert Haywood served as the 1992 president of the Kansas State Historical Society, Inc. Dr. Haywood’s presidential address, “Populist Humor,” was delivered at the Society’s annual meeting in October 1992.
fashion with the electorate," besides, in general
"politicians as a group have tended to be more
pious [than] . . . witty."24

Were the 1890s such a time? For instance, did
the presence or absence of humor have any effect
on the various campaigns? How were the three
superstars in Kansas served by their opponents?
How well did that capricious mistress, political
humor, serve the Pops and anti-Pops?

Few people have been called more malevolent
names in such a brief span on the political stage as
was Mary Elizabeth Lease. Most of the labels fas-
tened on her, including the "Yellen Ellen" error,
were not particularly funny: "the Irish biddy,
"Rabble Rouser in Petticoats," "Old Mother Lease,"
the "'she' lawyer," "She Hyena," "Kansas
Pythoness," "Red Dragon of Wall Street," "the
Kansas Cyclone," and William Allen White's place-
ment of her as one of Kansas' "three or four
harpies." Perhaps one of White's other descriptions
of her as being as "sexless as a Cyclone" might
have tickled someone's fancy but rated higher on
the vicious chart than on the laugh meter.
Descriptions of Mrs. Lease, when not in awe, tend-
ed to be cruel rather than clever. The Emporia Daily
Republican, September 29, 1892, reported, "She is
tall and raw-boned and ugly as a mud hen. . . . Her
voice is strong and full of the fog-horn variety, with
a slight twang." Previously the Wellington Monitor
had contributed what was intended to be a few
humorous flourishes to the description: "raw-
boned, ghostly-looking female who speaks with a
heavy bass voice with whiskers on it."25

The newspapers had more fun with her politi-
cal signature, the trade-mark advice to "raise less
corn and more hell," which incidentally was
about as funny as the lady who always dressed in
black got, if indeed she did deliver the line. The
Aitchison Daily Globe spent a year experimenting
with different spin-offs of the phrase:

You can raise eight bushels per acre of nearly any-
thing in this section of Kansas except hell.
Sol Miller says that if Mrs. Lease dies, she will have
a better opportunity to raise it.
What is needed in Kansas is a drought that will dry
up the candidate and let the corn alone.26

1. Leon A. Harris, The Fine Art of Political Wit (New York: E. P.
2. Wellington Monitor, August 29, 1890.
Sometimes the barbs were elevated to a chuckle, as they were on August 27, 1891, when the *Kansas City Chief* reported, “Let us be men,’ shouted Mrs. Lease, at an Alliance picnic the other day. But the other women present wouldn’t agree to it and the Scheme fell through.” The pickings in the humorous vineyard, however, were scarce. Perhaps the opposition felt they could not be explicitly mean enough if they resorted to levity. But a Georgian wrote of Lease during her troubled speaking tour in the South:

Well, boys, she is a plumb sight. If I had a hound dog that would bark at her as she passed by the gate I’d kill him before night. She could set on a stump in the shade and keep the cows out of a 100-acre corn field without a gun. She’s got a face that’s harder and sharper than a butcher’s cleaver. I could take her by the heels and split an inch board with it. She’s got a nose like an anteater, a voice like a cat fight and a face that is rank poison to the naked eye.

This was from the same state where another editor said “the sight of a woman traveling around the country making political speeches was simply disgusting.”

The general tenor of the attacks on Mrs. Lease were serious and viciously straightforward. It was a pious age, Victorian in stuffiness and certain of the place of women, and it was not on the lecture platform. But beyond the concern raised by her maverick female behavior, the seriousness of attacks on her was a barometer of the mainstream politicians’ and industrial leaders’ dismay at her and the party’s success. Since Mrs. Lease was deadly serious and her opponents the same, humor played a minor role in her career.

In a sense, the crowning glory of William Peffer’s career came in the gaudy cartoons appearing in *Puck* and *Judge*. According to one authority, for a man who left no “great legacy from his . . . stint in the U.S. Senate, save . . . speeches . . . distinguished mainly by the plethora of statistics and interminable length” and who served mainly as “a ‘peripheral player’ in Kansas, the opposition’s treatment of him as a major, or the major, figure in the People’s party is remarkable.” The cartoonists made him the symbol of the movement—an awkward, loutish hayseed beyond his depth in the sophisticated world of politics. But the cartoonist’s beard also made him famous. He was the one figure in any cartoon everyone could recognize immediately because of that beard. Populism, for many voters, became Pefferism.

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Humor elevated him. Peffer was caricatured as the stereotypical clodhopper always complaining that calamity was destroying the country, lazy-loutish in appearance and habit, and years behind the fashion in hairstyle, floppy hats, and economic reality. He became the opposition’s favorite presidential candidate, and his boring speeches were their picture of the essence of the movement. With more than a grain of truth in the opposition’s description of Peffer as being “as devoid of personal magnetism as a hitching-post,” he was a created leader, made by the opposition. Even Jerry Simpson found him to be “a musty old number.” Peffer was an easy target and the enemy felt comfortable in his presence, hoping to convince voters that he was the best representative of the party. They did much to enhance his career.

Jerry Simpson was truly the maverick who refused to play the game. He knew what the opposition’s script called for and he refused to reject his assigned lines. The Pittsburg Headlight of September 5, 1898, got the campaign story line down to its succinct basics in defining the race between William E. Stanley (Republican) and John W. Leedy (Populist). The editor wrote: “Stanley is cultured, dignified, religious; Leedy is ignorant, boorish, profane.” Any intelligent, right-minded, God-fearing, respectable Kansan—perhaps synonymous terms—would know which to vote for and why. Jerry accepted the line up. He reveled in his boorishness. Made a virtue of ignorance. Cashed in on the unpolished image he knew those who were to vote would recognize and claim as their own. And Jerry did it with such good humor and gusto that the rural folks took to him as they would their kith and kin. If Jerry never said that he wore no socks, he latched onto the implications and created a lovable icon of his socklessness.

At least one story of how the sobriquet came to him was advanced many years later by the Kansas City Times:

In the course of the Seventh District representative’s political campaign James R. Hallowell gave a speech in which he characterized Simpson as a clown, an ignoramus, a boor, and a ragamuffin. The next day Simpson retorted:

“This prince of royal blood travels in a special car. His dainty person is gorgeously bedizened, his soft white hands are pretty things to look at and his tender feet are encased in fine, silk hosiery. What does he know of life and the toil of such plowhandlers as we are? I can’t represent you in Congress with silk stockings—I can’t afford to wear ‘em.”

It may be as good a story as any concerning the origins of his socklessness, but others have claimed responsibility. A more likely source of the moniker was Victor Murdock, editor of the Wichita Eagle. Regardless, Simpson accepted the label and gloried in being the diamond-in-the-rough, farm-smart buffoon. His supporters loved his style and occasionally followed his lead. A Populist parade was hardly considered “complete without at least one float loaded with pretty girls knitting stockings for Sockless Jerry.” William Allen White put Jerry’s role in perspective. Simpson, who White came to admire deeply, acted as he did “because it helped him talk to the crowds that gathered to hear him. . . . The real Jerry Simpson profited by the fame of his own effigy.” And he played his role to the hilt.

As was true of the other Populists, except Peffer, speechmaking was a major contributor to the Populists’ success. The written words—pamphlets, books, and newspaper editorials—were important intellectual tools for describing conditions and theory, but the emotional messages of the speakers brought voters to the polls. The thorough analysis of Populist speeches made by Donald Ecroyd years ago concluded that the movement was largely carried through to success by the speakers:

People who lived through the '90s in Kansas and recall them vividly, merely add to the impression that, above all, the speaking of the Populist movement gave it life and made it dramatically successful. Thus, in a very practical sense, to show the successes of the party at the polls is . . . to show the effectiveness of the Populist orators themselves.

Assuming this to be a correct assessment, descriptions of Simpson's style of public speaking revealed the actor playing broadly and humorously to the paying groundlings. In a debate with prim and proper Chester I. Long before an overflow crowd, Jerry crawled into the assembly hall through a window, waving at the assemblage and grinning like a clown. When he rose to speak, he "removed his coat and vest, collars and cuffs, saying, 'When I want to skin a goldbug I want to do it right.'" In Harper "he pulled off his coat, drank water directly from the pitcher, wiped his mouth on his sleeve" (like any thirsty, uncouth farmer), and set about ridiculing Long's reference to an "Honest dollar." While on the campaign trail he kept up the masquerade even when not on the stage. When a southern hotel waiter, with great and exaggerated flourish, offered Simpson a napkin, Jerry looked up and said, "Look here, young fellow, none of your pranks with me; I've [already] got a handkerchief." He followed that by responding to the question of whether he was going to the soiree that night: "No, I'm afraid I'd catch it. I'm susceptible to common diseases." No one was going to make a dude of him or catch him going to a party with such a fancy-sounding name he couldn't spell. His antics made good, humorous copy.

Jerry used his humor for serious and constructive purposes also. One of the tasks the Populist speakers had was building new loyalties. As a third party they needed to persuade people to leave old commitments and form new relationships—creating "club spirit," firm attachments, and secure loyalties. Donald Ecroyd noted the "subtle indirectness and good humor" of one of Simpson's stories told to a Wichita audience and reported in the Wichita Kansas Commoner, September 24, 1891:

A great deal depends on the kind of men elected to office; a great deal depends upon it. It is going to try your patience, your patriotism and your devotion to your principles. I want to tell the Alliance men the day is coming when you want to say you can stick to the Alliance. They have insisted that you cannot stick. It reminds me of a story of an old fellow when it first became necessary to use stamps on letters, the post master told him he would have to buy a stamp for his letter; you know at one time you could send a letter and have it paid for at the other end of the line; the old fellow bought 25 cents worth of stamps and asked how to fasten them on, the post master told him to wet it and it would stick. In a few days he wrote a letter, but when he came to stamp it, he licked the stamp on the wrong side, and of course it would not stick. Finally he called to his daughter for a needle and thread to sew it on and took his pencil and wrote across the envelope: "The passage is paid if the darn thing sticks." . . . This is the way with some of the Alliance men, they are not locked on the right side.

Jerry used the same homespun story technique to impress his listeners that the people's movement was on the right track and headed for certain success:

They have been very successful in the past, but I want to warn them that [the Alliance] is the biggest little thing they ever tackled. They are going to meet about the same calamity as the little poodle dog that I once heard about . . . You have all noticed in traveling that at certain

11. Barber County Index, Medicine Lodge, January 16, 1891.
places on the road a little dog comes out and runs a race with the train. This was on a branch road and not the main line, and the train was a little tri-weekly, it would go up the one way the first of the week and try to get back the last. At a certain place along the road there was a fellow who had a little bench legged [illegible]; one of those skinny fellows, part of his tail was gone, one ear off, his hide was old, kind o' like these old hair trunks where the hair was worn off in spots; he had red eyes, and every time this train would come along, this little train loaded with bacon and beer, he would start up and run a race and would keep up with it, then would return and act as if to say, didn't I do it? But this little short line one day passed into the hands of the main line, and they put one of those lightning express trains on that track, that came along and that little dog started out and ran, and ran, and ran, and fell down and died.

That train was this Alliance; that little dog was the little red headed newspaper editor [Victor Murdock]. This lightning express train is the Alliance through train going through to Washington.\(^{12}\)

Simpson's speeches were filled with down-home illustrations that reminded people of Abraham Lincoln's use of stories to make a point. Like Lincoln, Simpson was scolded by some for his "crude stories," a term that has changed meaning over the years when the original did not refer to "off-color," but to folksy, farm

and work yarns. In one of his speeches in Congress, Jerry said of President McKinley's being forced into war with Spain, "It is like a story of Champ Clark of Missouri. [Clark] had a Chester White sow. He had to pull her ears off to get her to the trough and then pull her tail off to get her away. That's like McKinley and the republican party in war."\(^{13}\)

The hog parables, which Lincoln also admired and told, stayed in Jerry's repertoire. On another occasion when accusing eastern businessmen of excessive greed he said, "The more I see of human beings, the more I admire hogs. When a hog gets his belly full he goes off and lies down to sleep. But a man [when he gets his belly full] . . . tries to take possession of the whole trough."\(^{14}\)

Among others, Henry George recognized the Lincolnesque character of Jerry. "I have always believed," he told the Populist's Boswell, Annie L. Diggs, "that Jerry Simpson was the best example of Abraham Lincoln type of man I had ever met."\(^{15}\) The

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evaluation was certainly a stretch but there was no denying that Lincoln was the model for Jerry’s stories.

Another of his crude stories told in Johnson City referred to the recently adopted Republican platform and used humor to good advantage:

...a horse trader...had a horse which sat down every time it was touched in the belly with foot or spur. He sold it to an Englishman, saying it was a marvelous hunter. The Briton mounted, spurred the horse; the horse sat down. The Englishman complained and was told the animal was a “setter and a pointer”; it was on point for a rabbit in a nearby pasture. That satisfied the new owner until he rode into a stream, touched the sensitive spot again, and the horse sat down in the water. The Englishman asked, “And what is he setting for now, do you know?” The trader answered, “Easy enough, he is setting for suckers.”

The Republican platform was set for suckers.

Simpson saved the cruder stories for the rural area in his jousts with “Prince Hal” Hallowell, he of the silk sock. One such was told by the Larned Chronoscope on September 26, 1890:

“Hal tells you that he is a law maker, that he has been to Topeka; and that he has made laws. I am going to show you the kind of laws that Hal makes.” He reached over the lectern, picked up a book, and opened it, tapping a page with his finger. “Here is one of Hal’s laws. I find that it is a law to tax dogs, but I see that Hal proposes to charge two dollars for a bitch and only one dollar for a son of a bitch. Now the party that I belong to believes in equal justice for all.”

The Barber County Index, October 1, 1890, claimed that following one of the debates Hallowell “retired from the stage...and hid himself in one of the dressing rooms, while Simpson utilized the thirty-minute close in...mopping the earth with the carcass of his princely antagonist” to the accompaniment of round after round of applause. Jerry’s folks, the farmers, loved the shock of his attacks and enjoyed the humor. Champ Clark who was something of an authority on the subject, testified that Jerry “was one of the best rough and tumble debaters with whom I have served in my thirteen years in Congress. His wit, humor, sarcasm, and wide knowledge of men rendered him a master in that difficult field of endeavor.”

Simpson carried his image and stump-speaking techniques into the United States House of Representatives. In his campaign debates he had an irritating habit of inter-

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rupting his opponent’s speeches with short, but hardly avoidable questions. In Washington no one was safe from the same intrusion. Sereno Payne, chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, had one of his speeches punctured by an unauthorized question from Jerry. Thinking to put the country bumpkin in his place, Payne turned to the speaker of the house:

Mr. Payne: If I were inclined to be rude, Mr. Speaker, I would answer the foolish query of the Gentleman from Kansas by asking him if his ancestors were monkeys.
Mr. Simpson: In which event I should reply as did the elder Dumas, when a French fool asked him the same question. I should say to the Gentleman, Yes, [and] your family ends where mine began.18

The even more powerful “Uncle” Joe Cannon, himself the epitome of a hard-boiled hayseed, felt Simpson’s sting when Cannon criticized Simpson for opposing the army appropriation bill by saying that if he, Simpson, had delivered his speech in the Philippines, he would have been placed before a firing squad. Jerry responded by saying it would be better to be shot in Manila “than to be shot here by an old muzzle-loading brass Cannon.”19

Although the “Sockless Socrates” was a formidable foe in any exchange of humorous jibes, he did not go unscathed himself. Ignatius Donnelly said of him: “Jerry Simpson has written a book entitled If the Devil Came to Congress. Nonsense, Jerry; he has been there all the time: he came there one time without any socks and they say he has now retired.”20 The Conway Springs Star, after Simpson had compared the suffering of the Alliance people with the persecution and crucifixion of “the lowly Nazarene,” retorted that if Jerry ever had the misfortune to be crucified he would not be suspended in the middle, “but will be one of the two outside ones.”

Taken as a group the Populist big three in Kansas seemed to have had the advantage in political humor. Mrs. Lease was so vilified that the opposition seemed unwilling to lower the decibels to more gentle jibes. Peffer was elevated beyond his talents by his ubiquitous and funny portraits in Puck, Judge, and other lampoons. Sockless Jerry was the best served and better practitioner. Considering all the comic raw material the Populist party and personalities furnished, the Republicans and Democrats seemed to have failed to take advantage of the offerings. Bumblers are more believable than sinister villains—and just as dangerous once in office. That ought to have been a signal to call on their best humorist. Maybe they thought they had. But to tar a man or a woman with being both foolish and diabolical at the same time is nearly impossible.

The times and the issues made for serious discussion, and that mood dominated the political scene. Too bad. Too bad. For the historian the period would have been far more enjoyable if there had been more debaters like Joseph Ralph Burton, an anti-Populist before becoming spokesman for the more radical Non-Partisan League. “A man,” he explained, “always dissatisfied, always whining, thus addressed his dog. ‘You, you have nothing to do but just eat and eat, and then sleep and sleep. But me, I works and works, while you eat and sleep. And when you die, you just die, but me—when I dies, I goes to hell.’ That,” said J. Ralph, “is a Populist.”21

19. Ibid., 184.