

Coxey's Army

Page Smith

When the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition closed in the fall of 1893, the country slumped back into the depression; the magic illusion was dismantled, and hungry men and women roamed the city's streets or gathered to hear anarchists and socialists denounce capitalists. Samuel Gompers estimated that 3,000,000 men and women were unemployed countrywide. One alarming manifestation was the companies of tramps, numbering, it was estimated, tens of thousands, that roamed the country, begging or stealing food and terrorizing whole communities. James Weaver called particular attention to "vast armies of homeless tramps ever wandering alongside of vacant land held for speculation. . . ."

Congress could think of nothing better to do than fiddle with the tariffs again. Henry Adams described that body as "Poking the tariff with a stick to make it mad." "Winter is here," he wrote Hay, "and my perpetual miracle is that people somehow seem to go on living without money or work or food, or clothes, or fire. One or two million people are out of work; thousands of the rich are cleaned out to the last shoe-leather; not one human being is known to be making a living; yet on we go. . . . But it can't last."

One man had a notion. He believed in the eccentric idea that Congress not only could take actions to relieve the general distress but had the moral obligation to do so. In Massillon, Ohio, in the spring of 1894,

Jacob Coxey planned a march on Washington to dramatize the plight of the unemployed millions and plead for some action on the part of the government to relieve suffering. Ray Stannard Baker, then a fledgling reporter for the *Chicago News-Record*, was assigned to report on Coxey's march.

Coxey was a prominent citizen of the little community, jack-of-all-trades, a farmer and horse breeder as well as the owner of a quarry that produced silica sand, a product used in making steel. He lived with his wife and daughter in a large, comfortable farmhouse which served as "General" Coxey's GHQ for the planning and organization of his projected march. A small, mild-looking, bespectacled middle-aged man with a straw-colored mustache, who had fought in the Civil War, he was a classic American type. Behind his innocuous exterior burned the ardent heart of a utopian reformer. A devout Christian, Coxey wished to see the United States at last converted into a true Christian commonwealth. Although he had certainly never read John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity," he was animated by the same desire to redeem the times.

He had a most unlikely coadjutor in Carl Browne from Calistoga, California. Browne was a large, flamboyant man who dressed in fringed buckskins with silver-dollar buttons and sported a spectacular flowing beard parted in the middle. To Baker he looked like a salesman of Kickapoo Indian

medicines. Browne handed Baker a card with his written signature and the words "The pen is mightier than the sword."

He also showed Baker a large portrait that he had painted of Jesus Christ, which bore a striking resemblance to Browne himself. He was a Theosophist, and he told the young reporter that when people died their souls and bodies went into separate reservoirs to make new human beings. He had within him a portion of the soul of Christ and of the Greek historian Callisthenes. Around the painting of Christ, Browne had written: "PEACE ON EARTH Good Will toward men! He hath risen!!! BUT DEATH TO INTEREST ON BONDS!!!"

Browne had painted a considerable array of banners and signs. One banner showed Coxey dosing "the sick chicken of honest labor" from a bottle of "eye-opener," the Coxey plan for the "resurrection of the nation." Other banners bore such slogans as "We workmen want work, not charity: how can we buy at the stores on charity and cast-off clothes?"

The two oddly assorted leaders informed the skeptical Baker that they intended to start from Massillon on Easter Sunday with 20,000 marchers and on May Day reach Washington and there present a petition to Congress demanding that something be done to relieve the distress of unemployed and destitute Americans. Coxey had received thousands of letters of encouragement and many contributions of money from individuals, labor unions, and Populist organizations. He called the projected march "a petition in boots."

To Baker's queries on how Coxey intended to feed his "army," the leaders replied with handbills which proclaimed: "Fall in, let everybody send or bring all the food they can . . . join the procession, you who have bring to those who have not. . . . We are acting from inspiration from on high. We believe that the liberty-loving people comprising this indivisible and undividable American Union will respond in such numbers to this call of duty that no hessian Pinkerton thugs . . . can be hired for gold to

fire upon such a myriad of human beings, unarmed and defenceless, assembling under the aegis of the Constitution. . . ." Coxey quoted Elbert Hubbard's prophecy of an Armageddon where "the brute nature and immortal soul of man" would close "in final contest, which shall herald the dawning of the era of love and tenderness, when nations shall know the fatherhood of God and live the brotherhood of man."

While the preparations for the march went ahead, Mrs. Coxey gave birth to a baby, who was promptly named Legal Tender Coxey, and Browne gathered recruits in nearby towns by fiery speeches at torchlit rallies denouncing the "Money Power" and the "Octopus of the Rothschilds." Browne also composed a song for his enthusiastic listeners to sing to the tune of "After the Ball."

*After the march is over,
After the first of May,
After the bills are passed, child,
Then we will have fair play.*

Coxey and Browne found unwitting allies in the reporters who soon swarmed around Massillon, writing colorful and often mocking accounts of the preparations for the march. If more sophisticated readers smiled at the bizarre accounts, hungry and desperate men in cities and towns felt a surge of hope. Newspaper editorials that denounced the march as dangerous and revolutionary served only to heighten public interest in it and win more recruits for the army. One of the recruits was Dr. Cyclone Kirkland, a little man in a silk hat whose mètier was predicting hurricanes through astrology. He began writing an epic poem on the march in the style of the *Odyssey*. Kirkland told Baker it would be a "hummer in a cyclonic way." A black minstrel singer named Professor C. B. Freeman, who claimed to be the loudest singer in the world, had left his wife and children to "follow de Gen'l." Another recruit, who arrived by Pullman car, was "The Great Unknown"; he subsequently turned out to be "Dr." Pizarro, a traveling medicine man who was usually accompanied

by a band of Indians. There was even a brass band, the "Commonwealth of Christ Brass Band—J. J. Thayer, Conductor."

The cynical reporters, sure that the march would never start, debated the idea of hiring 100 unemployed roustabouts from a nearby defunct circus to march for a day or so with Coxey and Browne so that their papers would at least have a story. But astonishingly, as Easter approached, grim, ragged men began to appear, dropping off freight trains, arriving in farmers' wagons or on foot. Soon there was indeed the nucleus of an army. The people of Massillon, doubtless pleased at their town's sudden fame, turned out to provide food and shelter for the recruits. At eleven o'clock on Easter morning Windy Oliver, the bugler, riding a horse with a red saddle, sounded attention. Browne, on one of Coxey's finest horses and wearing a dashing sombrero, joined the general at the head of the column, the Commonwealth of Christ Band struck up a tune, and the march began. At the head of the strange column rode Jasper Johnson Buchanan, a black man, carrying the United States flag. Conspicuous among the marchers was Hugh O'Donnell, one of the leaders in the Homestead strike.

The Three Graces—Faith, Hope, and Charity—were female relatives of Coxey's. Mrs. Coxey accompanied the march in a carriage with Legal Tender, and the general's son, Jesse, wore a blue and gray uniform, symbolizing the unity of North and South in the fight for social justice. A huge crowd had assembled to witness the beginning of the march, and the army, counting perhaps 400, set off for Canton, its first day's march, to the accompaniment of shouts of encouragement.

No one was more surprised by the spectacle than the newspaper reporters, themselves grown into a small army. "The whole enterprise had seemed preposterous; it couldn't happen in America," Ray Stannard Baker reflected. Other "armies" were recruited elsewhere around the country, some from as far away as California.

The reporters who had been covering the preparations for the march were convinced that it had to end in disaster because

of the difficulty of supplying any considerable number of marchers with food, but, as Baker noted, "instead of beginning to disintegrate immediately, as we had anticipated, the army grew in numbers and at each stopping place the crowds were larger and more enthusiastic. . . . Coxey had started with only enough in his wagons for a day or two, but at each town where a stop was scheduled, there appeared an impromptu local committee, sometimes including the mayor and other public men, with large supplies of bread, meat, milk, eggs, canned goods, coffee, tea—a supply far more generous and varied than even Coxey and Browne had expected or imagined." It was clear that the good wishes and hopes of large numbers of ordinary Americans marched with Coxey's tatterdemalion band.

When the army reached Pittsburgh, a city often racked by labor troubles, the humbler citizens, many of whom had vivid memories of the Great Strikes of 1877, turned out in a tumultuous welcome. Bands, delegations of marchers from unions, schoolchildren, and socialists packed the streets to cheer the marchers and join in what took on the character of a victorious parade. "I shall never forget as long as I live," Baker wrote, "the sight of that utterly fantastic, indescribably grotesque procession swinging down a little hill through the city of Allegheny singing with a roar of exultation Coxey's army song to the tune of 'Marching Through Georgia.'"

*Come, we'll tell a story, boys,
We'll sing another song,
As we go trudging with sore feet,
The road to Washington;
We shall never forget this tramp,
Which sounds the nation's gong,
As we go marching to Congress.*

Baker, increasingly sympathetic to the strange procession and its eccentric leaders, walked with the marchers and talked with them. "I had known just such men in my boyhood," he wrote. "To call them an army of 'bums, tramps, and vagabonds,' as some of the commentators were doing, was a

complete misrepresentation. A considerable proportion were genuine farmers and workmen whose only offense was that they could not buy or rent land . . . or find a job at which they could earn a living." Baker became convinced that "there could have been no such demonstration in a civilized country unless there was a profound and deep-seated distress, disorganization, unrest, unhappiness behind it—and that the public would not be cheering the army and feeding it voluntarily without a recognition, however vague, that the conditions in the country warranted some such explosion." He wrote to the editor of his paper: "It seems to me that such a movement must be looked on as something more than a huge joke. It has more meaning than either Coxey or Browne imagines." But the editor, reprinting Baker's letter as part of an editorial, drew from it conclusions opposite to those intended by his young correspondent. To the editor, "the continual turning of the people to Washington for aid . . . is pathetic and portentous. The country," he concluded, "is sick just to the extent that its people try to lean on the government instead of standing upright on their own feet."

The editor's view was shared by the great majority of middle- and upper-class urban Americans, who could discover little sympathy for the armies that threatened to converge on Washington with their demands for congressional action to relieve the widespread suffering. Coxey's Army and those auxiliary armies forming—by one journalist's calculations—in at least eleven different towns and cities aroused the never distant anxiety about the "dangerous classes" that was such a persistent element in the consciousness of the upper classes. John Hay professed to believe that revolution was just around the corner. Coxey and his army would soon be in Washington, and Hay hoped the mob would spare his house, as he wrote Henry Adams, "because it adjoins yours. You, of course, are known throughout the country as a Democrat and an Anarchist and an Unemployed. Your house will be safe anyhow; so you might as well stand on my steps

while the army passes, and shout for 'Chaos and Coxey' like a man."

As the army approached Washington, it found the going increasingly arduous. There were cold spring rains and even snow to contend with. The residents of the towns through which the army passed were far less hospitable; food and fuel grew scarce; toll roads barred the marchers' way, and tolls were demanded for every "soldier" in the now-depleted force. Beyond Cumberland, Maryland, the roads were so bad that Coxey chartered canalboats on the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal at the charge for "perishable freight" of fifty-two cents a ton. For three days the army made its way down the canal past "the dog-woods and judas trees in bloom, and innumerable wild flowers on the hillsides." The marchers sunned themselves on the decks; the general hammered out "orders" and "resolutions" on a battered typewriter, and Browne wrote poems celebrating the great journey. At Williamsport, Maryland, the army debarked and was joined a few days later by two converging armies, one from Philadelphia, led by a man in a high silk hat named Christopher Columbus Jones.

At last, on a blisteringly hot day, the combined armies approached the Capitol itself, marching down Pennsylvania Avenue. Coxey's daughter Mame, dressed in red, white, and blue, on a handsome white horse and representing the goddess of peace, led the procession. Large crowds lined the streets, and the police were out in force to block any effort to invade the congressional chambers. In front of the Capitol Browne dismounted, and Coxey, leaving his carriage, kissed his wife to the cheers of the onlookers.

Browne then made a dash through the police lines, apparently with the intention of entering the Capitol. The police overtook him and clubbed him to the ground. Coxey, meanwhile, reached the steps of the Capitol, but before he could read his prepared address to the crowd, the police dragged him away, too. He was arrested and charged with walking on the grass. The marchers were scattered by mounted police, and the Commonwealth of Christ was no more.

Coxey's "Address of Protest" was read in Congress by a sympathetic Populist legislator. It declared that the Constitution guaranteed to all citizens the right to petition for redress of grievances. "We stand here to-day to test these guarantees. . . . We choose this place of assemblage because it is the property of the people. . . ." They were there to protest "the passage of laws in direct violation of the Constitution" and

to draw the eyes of the entire nation to this shameful fact. . . . Up these steps the lobbyists of trusts and corporations have passed unchallenged on their way to committee rooms, access to which we, the representatives of the toiling wealth-producers, have been denied. We stand here to-day in behalf of millions of toilers whose petitions have been buried in committee rooms, whose prayers have been unresponded to, and whose opportunities for honest remunerative, productive labor have been taken from them by unjust legislation, which protects idlers, speculators, and gamblers; we come to remind the Congress here assembled of the declaration of a United States Senator, 'that for a quarter of a century the rich have been growing richer, the poor poorer, and that by the close of the present century the middle class will have disappeared as the struggle for existence becomes fierce and relentless.' " In the name of justice "and in the name of the commonweal of Christ, whose representatives we are, we enter a most solemn and earnest protest. . . . We have come here through toil and weary marches, through storms and distresses, over mountains, and amid the trials of poverty and distress, to lay our grievances at the doors of our National Legislature and ask them in the name of Him whose banners we bear, in the name of Him who pleaded for the poor and oppressed, that they

should heed the voice of despair and distress that is now coming up from every section of our country, that they should consider the conditions of the starving unemployed of our land, and enact such laws as will give them employment, bring happier conditions to the people, and the smile of contentment to our citizens.

If the Eastern newspapers were contemptuous of the remnants of Coxey's ragged army that reached Washington, they had many supporters in the Midwest and among workingmen and women. The *Topeka Advocate* observed: "These men have as much right to go to Washington and demand justice at the hands of congress as bankers, railroad magnates and corporation lawyers have to go and lobby for measures by which to plunder the public; and if their rights are not respected there will be trouble; rest assured of that. Let the powers that be beware how they treat the Coxey army." The *Wealth Makers*, published in Lincoln, Nebraska, noted apropos of Coxey's march: "For our part we wish that all the destitute, wretched, miserable millions of American citizens which unjust legislation has made, could camp around the Capitol at Washington and form an ever present conscience-arousing spectacle for our national lawmakers to face."

Annie Diggs, a Kansas Populist, urged the passage of legislation that would form the unemployed into an "industrial army" to be "employed on works of public improvements, such as canals, rivers, and harbors, irrigation works, public highways, and such other public improvements as Congress . . . shall provide."

In fact, the so-called good roads bill (also known as the Coxey Bill) was introduced into the Senaté by William Alfred Peffer, a Kansas newspaper editor, turned Populist politician. The bill called for the printing of \$500,000,000, the money to be used to employ the jobless on the construction and improvement of the "general county-road system of the United States." The pay should be not less

than \$1.50 a day for an eight-hour day, and "all citizens of the United States making application to labor shall be employed."

Three days later another Coxe Bill was proposed to allow any "State, Territory, county, township, municipality, or incorporated town or village" to issue noninterest-bearing bonds, the proceeds from which were to be used to make "public improvements."

Former President Benjamin Harrison took the occasion of an address to the Republican State Convention in Indiana to support protective tariffs, declaring: "The times are full of unrest, disaster, and apprehension. I believe today that all the tumult of this wild sea would be satisfied, as by the voice of Omnipotence, if the industrial and commercial classes of this country would know today that there would be no attempt to strike down protection in American legislation."

Larger than Coxe's Army was that of a thirty-two-year-old printer named Charles Kelley. Kelley's Industrial Army, recruited primarily in California, numbered some 1,500, among them Jack London. One of the "soldiers" was a young miner-cowboy named William Haywood, called Big Bill by his friends because of his size. Haywood remembered the "march" as one of the "greatest unemployed demonstrations that ever took place in the United States." At Council Bluffs, Iowa, Kelley's Army was turned out of the railroad cars that had brought them East

and forced to exist as best they could in the rain while the people of the town brought them food. After a week they continued their march on foot, but hungry, weary, and discouraged, the "Industrial Army" melted away.

In Montana a group of 650 miners, led by "General" Hogan, captured a Northern Pacific train at Butte and ran it themselves. When a trainload of railroad deputies overtook them at Billings, there ensued a sharp fight in which the railroad men were routed. At this point troops were called up from a nearby Federal fort, and the train was surrounded. The men surrendered and were dispersed, a handful finally making their way to Washington.

Although fewer than 1,000 or so men of the various armies that set out for Washington arrived there and although their reception was unvaryingly cold—hostility mixed with ridicule—the episode was an unsettling one for the world's greatest democracy. For each of the ragged, hungry, and defiant men who reached the nation's capital in symbolic protest there were thousands who shared his bitterness and, perhaps more, his confusion and disillusionment, who wished to know what had happened to the dream of "liberty and justice for all." To a contemporary journalist named M. J. Savage, the marches were a symptom. "Symptoms," he wrote, ". . . mean always internal disturbance, they mean the possibility of diseases that may threaten the vitals."