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Kelly's Army

The Populist movement of the early nineties was an attempt of the discontented to better their condition. Farmers enrolled themselves among the down-trodden because the prices of crops were low and mortgages were too common, and industrial laborers felt oppressed because wages were small and jobs were scarce. They all wanted more money and better times. Various prophets of this discontent arose and preached their panaceas among the people. Perhaps the strangest of the many peculiar movements connected with the Populist uprising was the plan formulated and translated into action by Jacob S. Coxey of Massillon, Ohio, to relieve the suffering from unemployment.

On the chilly Easter Sunday of March 24, 1894, Coxey's army of the unemployed began its march on Washington, with the intent to present itself as a living petition to Congress for half a billion dollars

of paper money, to be expended in building good roads throughout the country, thus giving work to the workless at the rate of a dollar and a half for an eight hour day. The novelty of the scheme; "General" Coxey's business reputation; and the exploits of some of the freaks who accompanied the expedition attracted nation-wide attention. The organization was christened "The Commonweal of Christ", a title derived from the "theosophy" of the picturesque and versatile Carl Browne, a labor agitator, cartoonist, and religious crank who had converted Coxey to his faith and who was the marshal of the army.

The Commonweal arrived in Washington on the first of May, 1894. Coxey had boasted that a hundred thousand unemployed would be there to stage a great demonstration on the Capitol steps, but he arrived with a scant five hundred. After a disturbance on the Capitol grounds in which Browne and a number of spectators were clubbed by the police, Coxey, Browne, and Christopher Columbus Jones, the leader of a contingent from Philadelphia, were arrested, fined, and imprisoned for walking on the grass and for carrying banners on the Capitol grounds contrary to the law.

This fiasco did not put an immediate end to the army of the unemployed as had been expected. Coxey's army camped on the outskirts of Washington, awaiting reinforcements. It was evident before the Commonweal had reached Washington that

its march had started a movement. The newspapers had seized upon the story and had treated the public to a great deal of amusement at the expense of Coxey and his outfit, and incidentally they had given the Commonwealth an enormous amount of free advertising.

While Coxey was advancing upon Washington, various "industrial armies" were organizing in many cities to go to the Capitol and petition Congress. As they proceeded eastward they were fed because people sympathized with them or because it was the easiest way to get rid of them; they stole or borrowed trains when the railroads refused to carry them; and they were thus able to cover long distances before they were arrested or compelled to seek other methods of travel. Strict discipline was imposed by their elected leaders and while they were, on the whole, remarkably well-behaved and orderly, they caused much apprehension, and police, marshals, militia, and even the regular army were kept busy protecting railroad property and reassuring nervous citizens.

The largest, and in many respects the most interesting of these industrial armies, was the one piloted across the continent from San Francisco to Washington by General Charles T. Kelly. It attained its greatest numbers and the height of its popularity in western Iowa.

Early in April, 1894, the mayor of San Francisco paid the ferry passage of six hundred unemployed

men across the bay to Oakland. There Kelly took command and the men were fed, quartered in a large building known as the Tabernacle, and finally crowded into a freight train and shipped east. At Sacramento, where the army increased to a thousand men, a special train was provided to carry them over the Southern Pacific to Ogden, Utah. But Ogden did not want them and, after several days of excitement, the army marched out of the city escorted by cavalry. A Union Pacific train was captured (apparently with the connivance of Union Pacific officials who hoped in this manner to avoid responsibility for leaving the men at the other end of the line), and thus the army proceeded to Omaha.

While Kelly's freight cars were rolling toward the Missouri River the people of Omaha and Council Bluffs, fearing the approach of what they believed to be an army of tramps and desperate characters, became more and more alarmed. But when the train pulled into Omaha on Sunday morning, April 15th, the appearance and perfect discipline of the army helped to allay popular apprehension. The people of Omaha were further relieved when Kelly and his followers crossed the river to Council Bluffs.

If the Union Pacific was eager to pass the army on, the railroads that extended eastward from Council Bluffs were equally anxious to avoid receiving it. On Saturday, Judge N. M. Hubbard, attorney for the Chicago and Northwestern, had called upon Governor Frank D. Jackson at Des Moines to

ask protection for the railroads at Council Bluffs. The Governor also received a telegram from the sheriff of Pottawattamie County, which announced that Kelly's army was expected and that the railroads were demanding protection.

The Governor at once set out for Council Bluffs on a special train. Shortly after his arrival that evening he canvassed the situation with the Attorney General, the agents of the railroads, the mayor of Council Bluffs, and the sheriff of the county. The seven companies of militia, which had already been instructed to hold themselves in readiness, were called out, but at midnight the Governor announced that no effort should be made "to prevent landing of the pilgrims on Iowa soil", and that the troops would be used only to preserve order.

Kelly's army arrived in Council Bluffs before noon on Sunday. The men stayed near their train and built fires of old ties which had been distributed along the track for that purpose. Many, worn with fatigue from the journey, slept on the damp ground. Three hundred militiamen were encamped a few hundred yards away, but the industrial army was under no restraint except that imposed by the moral effect of the presence of these troops and by their own discipline. "While here", said a dispatch to the *Iowa State Register*, "they roamed at will over the city, and not an act was committed that was not praiseworthy."

It was estimated that thirty thousand people came

to see the army during its first day in the city. The impression that it had a serious purpose was strengthened by its manifestations of religious zeal on that Sunday afternoon. "After dinner", wrote a newspaper reporter, "the army gathered into little knots and religious services were conducted in half a dozen places at once. Prayers were offered up by the men so earnest and full of touching pathos that tears were brought to the eyes of hundreds of people. The religious element seems strongly to predominate, and when some good old Methodist hymn was started it was carried through by hundreds of voices that appeared to be well trained for congregational singing." Kelly boasted that there was not a tramp or a drunkard in the army, and that three-fourths of his men were mechanics. The report that on the first day in Council Bluffs only one hundred and fifty-five recruits were accepted out of several hundred who applied, indicates that some discrimination was used in admitting members into the organization.

On Monday afternoon the army, in a column nearly half a mile long and headed by several wagon loads of donated provisions, marched to the chautauqua grounds three or four miles east of the city. The militia followed. The next day there was a cold rain, with flurries of snow: the industrials stood wet and shivering in the mud where they had spent the night. On top of Chautauqua Hill was an amphitheater, a large unused building which might have

afforded ample shelter, but part of the militia had encamped in it, and the officer in charge, nervously apprehending a disturbance if the industrials got too close to his men, refused to admit the unfortunate Kellyites. The owner of the building, however, took pity upon the men who, after a night in the mud and a day in the rain, were suffering acutely. He went to a lawyer's office and had a permit drawn up which allowed them to use the building for forty-eight hours if they built no fires there. When the sheriff received the permit at the chautauqua grounds he discovered that it had been dated the 15th instead of the 17th, and the time had expired before it began! He was unable to persuade the officer in charge of the building to admit the suffering men, and the militiamen "boasted that they would shoot if the Kellyites attempted to come in out of the storm."

This inhumane treatment of the men, for whom much sympathy had already been aroused, caused great indignation. A committee of citizens demanded that the Governor withdraw the troops. The Governor blamed the sheriff, saying that the militia was under the sheriff's orders when it was sent to the chautauqua grounds. He soon took the companies out of the sheriff's hands and relieved them from duty. Much of the popular resentment was directed against the railroads, which were held responsible for the militia being called out, while Judge Hubbard was the object of general

execration on account of his alleged declaration that if the industrials captured a train a wild engine should be sent down the track to wreck it and thus settle the whole problem.

On Wednesday night in Omaha at a great mass meeting in the public square Kelly told the story of his army and explained that the aim of his men "was to impress the government at Washington as mere petitions would not, and that the government might understand and appreciate the condition of the multitude of laborers and devise some measures of relief." He did not suggest any definite program of legislation — perhaps he had none worked out as yet — but he expressed a sort of mystical faith in the willingness and ability of Congress to do what was necessary when his army called attention to the need for it. "When we reach Washington", he said, "and present our living petition to Congress — a petition that cannot be pigeonholed, referred, or put in the waste-basket — something must happen. You ask me, What will we do? My answer is: What will the other fellows do? Do you not think that in California tonight there are thousands of women and children kneeling by their bedsides, praying to God for the success of the Industrial Army? So long as these prayers are ascending we will not turn back, nor will we abandon our purpose."

Meanwhile efforts were being made by Governor Jackson and the mayors of the two cities to induce

the railroads to carry the army to the Mississippi, or to Chicago, and they offered to pay the cost of running the trains. But the railroads did not want to set a precedent that would encourage other bodies of unemployed to move eastward. They also feared the displeasure of the people of Illinois, and they asserted that they had no right to carry men without means of support into that State.

Matters began to come to a head on Thursday, the 19th. At a workingmen's meeting in Omaha that night it was decided to march to Council Bluffs and apply to the railway managers for a freight train. On Friday morning a large body of laboring men with drums, fifes, and flags marched across the river and joined the crowd already gathered before the Grand Hotel. Ten thousand people were there — about half from Omaha and half from Council Bluffs. The situation began to look ominous. The railroads pulled their engines and cars out of town, and all train service was cut off. The Governor, the mayor, leaders of the army, and a committee of citizens conferred. The railroads unanimously declined to accept anything less than regular fares, amounting to about \$15,000, which was too expensive. Part of the mob captured an engine and some cars, but the engine was cut loose by its crew and run into a roundhouse. The Rock Island agent dispatched a section boss to tear up the track to prevent the passage of a train, but Kellyites persuaded the section hands to quit work and replaced the rail that had

been removed. The Milwaukee tracks were torn up at Neola.

In the meantime the army started to walk to Weston, a few miles away. A captured engine and some freight cars were run out to the camp at Weston, but Kelly was too conscientious or too wary to accept the train. He refused, he said, to break the law and put his army in the wrong by accepting a stolen train, and besides, he feared some trick. He declined an invitation to ride back and accept the hospitality of Council Bluffs, but he used the train to send back his sick, of whom there were a considerable number after the exposure on the chautauqua grounds. On Saturday, some Omaha trade unionists again invaded Council Bluffs, looking for a train, but they found nothing except a few Union Pacific switch engines and flat cars. By Sunday the excitement had subsided.

While these events were transpiring the army was growing: at Weston the enrollment reached nineteen hundred, and fully fifteen hundred men were in line when the column started eastward across Iowa. The march became a continuous ovation. Farmers came as far as twenty-five miles to see the army and to bring provisions. The Woodmen of the World, who had lodges in most of the towns along the route, furnished teams and wagons to carry the provisions and the sick. Advance agents, representing the Knights of Labor, the Central Labor Union of Council Bluffs, and the Nebraska Federation of

Labor, preceded the army and made arrangements for its entertainment.

On the road between Council Bluffs and Weston a youth from the Pacific Coast by the name of Jack London fell into the rear rank of the column. He had quit shoveling coal for \$30 a month to join the industrial army, but he had missed it at Sacramento and had pursued it on blind baggages, on the trucks of freight cars, and otherwise, until he finally caught up. He was not yet known as a writer, but he kept a diary of his journey with Kelly from Weston to Hannibal, Missouri. "It was circus day when we came to town", he wrote, "and every day was circus day, for there were many towns. Sure; they enjoyed it as much as we. We played their local nines with our picked baseball team; and we gave them better vaudeville than they'd often had, for there was good talent left in some of the decayed artists of the army!" Before he reached Des Moines his shoes were so worn that he found himself walking on "eight blisters and more coming", so he dropped out of the ranks to pick up a ride with a farmer.

In view of Kelly's lack of any military training his discipline, as it was described by those who saw it, was remarkable. The army consisted of thirteen companies, each with a captain, a lieutenant, and two sergeants. His men could form a column of fours with precision, and they could march in a very creditable manner, although on the long marches no attempt was made to keep them in formation. But

it was in the camp arrangements that his organizing ability showed best results. A correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune* described them as follows:

“Once the camp is reached . . . things move along at a lively rate. The first to arrive seize their axes and make for timber. There are good woodchoppers among them, and little time is required to cut enough for the night. Each company carries its share to its camp circle, and almost before it can be realized the commissary has served the rations, and big juicy steaks are frying in pans on fire beds of live coals. There is no confusion over this work and the men are not permitted to quarrel over camp locations or supplies. After supper guards are placed, with a relief every two hours, and no man is allowed to leave the grounds without a pass. The town authorities are requested to arrest all men not supplied with these passes In breaking camp everything is done in a methodical way. Only a few minutes are required to clean, roll, and tie up everything. A wagon comes up, when there are wagons, and each company loads its blankets and pans, falls in behind, and takes up the march. If there is a sick man in the company, he rides. When the grounds are deserted there isn't even a pin to be found. Only the smouldering fires tell the tale.”

The army maintained its own “intelligence service”. Men spied upon the railroads and former telegraph operators listened in on the messages at

the stations when they got a chance. But one night two sleuths of a very different variety camped with the army and tramped twenty-two miles with it the next day. William E. O'Bleness, Iowa State Labor Commissioner, and his clerk joined the army in disguise, at the suggestion of Governor Jackson, to find out what it was like. They reported that they had started with little respect for the men, though "thinking the leaders were well meaning but misguided zealots." They returned with their opinions reversed: they were "satisfied that the majority of the men composing the 'army' were men who would work if they had an opportunity; and that, chimerical as the movement was," the rank and file believed in it. "The men", they decided, "could not be properly classed as tramps or vagrants, as these terms are commonly understood, although they had no means of support either visible or prospective other than the charity of the public, and their banding together made their continued presence in any community both a burden and a menace." The leaders were considered "thorough frauds, fakers, and schemers for their own selfish ends."

A "war correspondent" for the *Des Moines Capital*, who viewed the whole affair as "a piece of monumental folly", expressed more cynical views. The creed of the army he stated in the words: "We do not intend to starve, nor do we intend to work, and we do not intend to walk unless we cannot help it We are getting along so well that we

have been led to wonder why this plan of civilization had not been thought of before." The army had the sympathy of laboring men, and the honest farmers who furnished food had been impressed by the singing and flag waving. The result, he concluded, was that no one could criticise the industrials without criticising those who indorsed the movement, and this shut the mouths of politicians who wanted the labor vote.

At Avoca, Kelly gave a representative of the Associated Press a more definite statement of the demands of his army than had been hitherto expressed. The principal item was a scheme for putting the unemployed to work on projects for the reclamation of arid lands. By the time the work was completed, he thought, the workers could have saved enough to carry them through a year of farming on the lands that they had reclaimed, thus developing "from homeless wanderers into steady farmers and property owners." "If we can only get to Washington", he said, "if we can let the lawmakers see that we are breadwinners, honest and sincere, we will be successful in our mission, for our demands are not unreasonable". He added that Congress was not to be asked to issue any "special funds or bonds": the financing of the project was to be left entirely to the discretion of the lawmakers.

As the column neared Des Moines the farmers along the way were no longer so enthusiastic as those in the western part of the State and wagons

became scarce. Desertions reduced the force for a time to about eleven hundred, but Kelly firmly refused to allow his men to capture a train, insisting that such action would ruin the cause. For several days the army kept up its pace of twenty miles a day, and finished by attempting a forced march of forty miles into Des Moines, through the night of April 28th.

Des Moines had been making preparations for the invaders. The People's Party Political Club had appointed a committee, headed by the ex-presidential candidate of the party, General James B. Weaver, to arrange for the entertainment of Kelly's men. General Weaver sent word to Kelly at Atlantic that sentiment in Des Moines was very favorable to the army and that he was endeavoring to secure railroad transportation from Des Moines to Washington, with every prospect of success. The city authorities, on the other hand, who felt less of this favorable sentiment than the Populists did, prepared to prevent any demonstrations when the army arrived.

Apparently Kelly planned to enter the city in time for a great ovation on Sunday morning, but he reckoned without his host. It was a long hard march, the farmers gave little aid, it rained, and the General lost his way. Morning found the men in camp at Walnut Creek, where they were visited by General Weaver. When they finally approached the city they were detained by the police, shivering in the

rain, while the stragglers came up, and it was late in the afternoon before they marched to the stove works, an unoccupied three-story brick building where they were quartered during their stay. Brass bands and parades were forbidden.

On Monday night a meeting was held in the interest of the army in the Trades Assembly Hall. General Weaver, who was called upon to speak, compared the situation with the French Revolution. He told how in Congress he had seen petitions on the clerk's desk carted off by the janitor without having been read. The right of petition was a farce. "Here", says a reporter, "the crowd yelled for air", and the meeting was adjourned to the courthouse yard, where General Weaver explained what the army wanted: free silver to right the "crime of '73", and appropriations to irrigate arid lands in the West. Kelly announced that he had intended to be in Washington on May 1st but, although he had not been able to do so, he would persist if it took until Christmas.

During the sojourn of the army in Des Moines, Kelly also spoke to the students of Drake University, which made it seem advisable to the trustees of the institution somewhat later to issue a denial that they had any special sympathy for him. The Drake students did more than listen to Kelly, however: they investigated his army. They recorded what information they were able to obtain from the men and President B. O. Aylesworth compiled statis-

tics from this material. The results showed that of 763 men questioned as to their nationality, 549 professed to be American born. Of the foreign born, two-fifths came from the British Isles or British dominions, and more than a fourth from Germany. Most of the remainder were from western Europe. Eighty-three trades and occupations were represented among the 425 men examined who claimed to have any. In politics, 240 were Populists, 218 were Republicans, 196 were Democrats, 81 were undecided, and 11 were independents. There were 358 Protestants and 280 Catholics, while 114 said they had no religion. The average time since the men had been last employed was six months.

The *Iowa State Register* printed summaries of the stories of about fifty of the men. Many of them stated the wages at which they were willing to work—half a dozen wanted “union” or “standard” wages and the rest named amounts varying from one to two dollars a day. Seven said they were willing to do any work offered. “Of the men in Kelly’s army”, said a *Register* editorial, “perhaps not more than eight out of every ten belong to the real industrial classes, but the fact that the professional roadsters have taken to marching in armies is only a manifestation of the discontent that exists among laboring men.”

The Coxey fiasco at Washington occurred while Kelly was in Des Moines. At first Kelly had asserted that the industrial army movement had no

connection with the Coxey movement in Ohio; then he said that he would coöperate with Coxey if he arrived in Washington on time; now he attacked Coxey's lack of generalship. Coxey should have waited, he thought, until the western armies came up to support his demonstration. "His whole fate", said Kelly, "depends upon my army. . . . The whole west, especially the laboring element, is with me and my men in our mission. . . . The laboring men form the bulk of the voting population, and these demonstrations have already had their effect upon the western congressmen." Coxey, therefore, had no one but himself to blame for his failure.

The army had not been in Des Moines long before the food supply began to run short, and donations came in slowly. After a few days the camp at the stove works was reported to be so filthy and insanitary that there was danger of a pestilence. But the army grew: a new company was formed, and a count of the men on May 3rd showed thirteen hundred and fifty in camp. The city council asked Kelly to move on, but the men were tired of walking and the transportation question again became crucial, both for the industrials, who wanted to go east, and for the citizens who wanted to be rid of them.

At this juncture James R. Sovereign, the General Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, appeared unexpectedly in the city, declaring that the army would not walk out of Des Moines if it was necessary "to tie up all the railways in Iowa" in order to get

concessions from them. On May 3rd a delegation of three hundred laboring men, headed by General Weaver and local labor leaders, called upon the Governor and urged him to find some way to move the army. Governor Jackson agreed to make another attempt to get it to the Mississippi if it would agree to go by steamboat down to Cairo and thence up the Ohio. The railroads, however, steadfastly declined to furnish a train for anything less than passenger rates.

Finally a scheme for moving the army was concocted. Flatboats were to be built and the army was to be transformed into an "industrial navy" and sent down the Des Moines River. Des Moines carpenters furnished tools and helped in constructing the boats, while the industrials, working busily in "Kelly's navy yard", were visited by thousands of people who rejoiced in "the prospect of the departure of the enormous white elephant that has squatted down upon the city." Kelly had stayed too long. His army and its friends in Des Moines had begun to get on each other's nerves. On May 9th the army, consisting of about a thousand men, embarked on one hundred and thirty-four boats, and Des Moines breathed a sigh of relief.

There were indications that Kelly's hold upon his men was slipping before he left Des Moines. Lack of discipline, or the weather, or both, soon scattered the fleet along many miles of the shallow stream. Several boats manned by Sacramento men (Jack

London seems to have been one of the ringleaders) got away before the others and picked up provisions intended for the main body. At Ottumwa the famished army was fed, and visited by ten thousand people. After twelve days of river navigation the flotilla reached the Mississippi. There the flatboats were lashed together into a sort of raft which, with the army aboard, was towed down the river.

Southward General Kelly proceeded with his army, past St. Louis where labor leaders gave a flattering reception, on to Cairo where he destroyed his boats, and thence up the Ohio in barges. He was reported to be leading a force of at least twelve hundred men when he approached Louisville, but the whole ascent of the Ohio was a struggle with adversity. The people east of the Mississippi were less hospitable than the farmers of Iowa. Other industrial armies had traversed this region before and the novelty had worn off. After the first of May, Kelly's cause, like Coxey's, had declined. By July his men seem to have been scattered in various parts of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia — many in a destitute condition, to the great annoyance of farmers upon whom they foraged.

On July 12th, more than three months after he had left San Francisco, Kelly appeared in Washington with a few of his men. Six hundred more, he claimed, were still on the way. The remnants of other industrial armies continued to straggle into

the capital and by the end of July there were twelve hundred or more encamped in the vicinity.

Although Populist Senators and Representatives talked and introduced resolutions, Congress did nothing for the unemployed. The living petition was a failure, and the petitioners faced starvation. General Coxey, now a Populist candidate for Congress, visited Washington and advised his men to beg until they were arrested and thus obtain food at public expense — advice which few cared to follow. The behavior of the industrials continued to be characteristic of law-abiding workingmen rather than of professional vagrants. Even during the starving time a reporter noted that in one of their camps the chickens from the neighboring farms wandered about with impunity, although the commander, wistfully regarding one of these birds, warned it that if the situation grew much worse he feared for its safety.

Kelly returned to California to work for the cause. Other leaders took to the road to raise funds. The authorities of Maryland and the District of Columbia at last took measures to dispose of the armies, and the men were shipped to cities in the neighborhood of their homes. By the middle of August the camps were deserted, and this strange crusade of the unemployed was ended.

DONALD L. McMURRY