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HIST 1101 Paper

Coxey's Arrival in Washington, as Depicted in the *New York Times*

In the spring of 1894, amid the country's worst depression yet, an Ohio businessman named Jacob Coxey and his eccentric California sidekick Carl Browne led a band of several hundred unemployed men on a march from Ohio to Washington, DC. Their aim was to demand that the federal government provide jobs to the unemployed building roads, and pay them in paper money so as to expand the nation's currency. Popularly known as "Coxey's Army" and also calling themselves the "Commonweal of Christ," the men slept in fields and lots along the way and were fed by sympathetic townspeople. As they made their way from town to town, newspaper reporters followed them and filed stories on their adventures, at times chronicling feuds in the movement's leadership. Other groups were also attempting to travel to Washington, several from as far away as California and Oregon. For those contingents with farther to travel, there were some train heists, which the press also covered. The planned arrival date in the capital was May 1, and newspaper readers knew that the city police were waiting for the Coxeyites.

An article in the *New York Times* printed the day after their arrival describes the events of that day. The writer of the article is clearly not sympathetic to the cause of Coxey's Army, referring to the Commonwealers as "a disreputable crowd of tramps audaciously claiming to be the representatives of millions of respectable wage earners and bearing ridiculous banners and devices." Although the writer estimates the crowd of spectators as being in the thousands, the writers is still sure that "few of them . . . were weak-minded enough to feel anything but

contempt for the marching travesty” and that their interest was “akin to that with which a specialist in insanity might regard a new form of the disease.”

The article estimates that the army that marched down the streets of Washington numbered about 600. According to the article, half that number were local unemployed men, lured into the movement by Coxey’s representative in the city and encouraged by members of the Populist Party in the Senate. The other half were believed to have actually made some or all of the long march. Coxey was half-heartedly arrested but then released, the article reports, while his second in command, Browne, as well as one Christopher Columbus Jones, leader of the contingent of marchers from Philadelphia, were taken into custody, charged with “trespassing on the Capitol grounds.” Browne, according to the article, also received a clubbing. He did not, however, spend the night in jail, as a local dry goods dealer names Elizabeth A. Haines put up \$500 bond for his release. Jones did remain in jail that night, “acting in a tragic manner when approached and refusing to talk.” The three leaders were to be arraigned in court the next day, and the article makes clear that a large crowd of spectators was expected, considerably more than the 200 that the courthouse was designed to hold.

The 300 marchers who had come in from out of town were taken to a “newly selected camp ground near an open sewer” to spend the night. Coxey, knowing that there were many curious spectators, applied to the city for a permit to charge admission to the ground where the men would be staying, asking to be charged no license fee on the basis that all of the proceeds would be used to feed the men. The district commissioners agreed to consider Coxey’s request but advised him to pay the license fee for the first day, which the article reports that Coxey did. The men were greatly fatigued that evening; their dinner appears to have consisted of hard-boiled eggs, soup, bread, and water. Four of the Coxeyites became ill that day, though not seriously so.

The article further records that about 500 persons paid the two-cent admission to visit the camp area and hear speeches by Coxey and Browne.

The article closes with an excerpt from a statement issued by Browne. That statement in itself shows something about Carl Browne's way of thinking. Predictably and understandably, he declared that "liberty" had been "stabbed in the house of friends by her supposed guardians" while "free speech has been suppressed and policemen's clubs have taken the place of the scales of justice." But it did not take him long to link his producerist theory with far-flung conspiracy theories to which he apparently subscribed, with even the apparent twinge of antisemitism that permeated parts of the Populist movement of the time. Browne made reference in his third and final paragraph to "the real traitors, the Rothschilds who used the men of the South to bring on [the American Civil War] to the profit of King Gold." But, Browne was confident, the villains would be vanquished, and "every producer will then get the products of labor, for the passage of Brother Coxey's Good Roads Bill would be the entering wedge to such a condition." There is, of course, no record of how many of the marchers believed that the Civil War had been a Rothschild family conspiracy.

As we know, "Brother Coxey's Good Roads Bill" was never passed, and there was no realistic chance that it would be. Even so, two important observations must be made as one reads this article. First, obviously, is the extreme scorn that the mainstream press, as exemplified by the *New York Times* had for the whole Coxey movement. Yet even so, it was a subject of great popular interest, as evidenced by the large crowds that watched the parade, visited the camp, and were anticipated at the courthouse the next day. The arrival of the "Commonweal of Christ" at the Capitol thus represents an important moment in the history of popular protest in the United

States and of public debate about the proper role of government in relation to economic hard times and income inequality.

References:

“Coxey Silenced by Police: Hustled from the Capitol When He Tried to Speak,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1894.

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