CHAPTER
5

Section 3

AMERICAN LIVES Mary Elizabeth Lease
Taking a Stand for Farmers' Rights

"We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box . . . [and] the Congress. . . . The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few . . . and the possessors of these, in turn, despise the Republic and endanger liberty."—Populist party platform (1892)

Mary Elizabeth Lease had a long career urging reform causes. She gained fame, though, for her passionate speeches on behalf of farmers and the Populist party in the 1890s.

Lease (1853–1933) was born in western Pennsylvania to Irish immigrants. She moved to Kansas at age 17 to teach, where she met her husband, Charles Lease, a pharmacist. They tried farming in Kansas and then in Texas but returned to Kansas and the pharmacy business in 1883. She began to address meetings to raise money for a group called the Irish National League. She soon expanded her interests to include the Farmers Alliance and the Knights of Labor. By 1890, her career as a speaker was flourishing.

Lease was a passionate speaker, willing to stretch the truth for effect. When she spoke for the Irish National League, for instance, she sometimes said that she had been born in Ireland. Her speeches were built on emotion, not logic, and with them she roused the crowd. She became so carried away that sometimes she could not remember what she had said. Supporters called her "our Queen Mary." Enemies referred to her as "the Kansas Pythoness." She sometimes used the name Mary Ellen, which was transformed by foes into "Mary Yellin."

Her speaking career began in Kansas, where she delivered more than 160 speeches in 1890 alone. Soon she was campaigning in the West and the South. In early 1892, Lease became one of those who plotted a strategy to make the Populist party a national force. Her strength was speaking, however. At the Populist convention of July 1892, she gave the speech that seconded the nomination of James Weaver of Iowa for president. She campaigned with Weaver across the midwest and South, stirring crowds with her cry that farmers should "raise less corn and more hell." She complained that the wealthy had taken control of the country. "It is no longer a government of the peo-ple, by the people, and for the people," she said, "but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street." She said that it was time for women to enter politics: "Thank God we women are blameless for this political muddle you men have dragged us into. . . . Ours is a grand and holy mission . . . to place the mothers of this nation on an equality with the fathers."

Weaver did not win the election, and Lease returned to Kansas to help the party win control of the state government the next year. She was nominated to run for the U.S. Senate, but she lost the chance to become the nation's first woman senator.

The next year Lease broke with the party. In 1895, she published a book that laid out her new vision for America. She proposed that the United States annex Canada, Cuba, and the West Indies; plant colonies in those areas; and establish free trade for the western hemisphere. She also believed that the government should take control of the railroad and telegraph systems, adopt free silver, and make political reforms.

In 1896, she refused to back the nomination of William Jennings Bryan, preferring William McKinley. She moved to New York, where she became a newspaper writer on politics and taught. She spent the remainder of her life pursuing various causes, including prohibition and women's suffrage. She supported Theodore Roosevelt in his 1912 Bull Moose campaign for the presidency. While still active, Lease was unable to achieve the influence she enjoyed in the 1890s.

Questions

1. How did Lease appeal to audiences?
2. What placed Lease in the forefront of women and politics after 1892?
3. Which of the positions taken by Lease in her book reflect Populist views?