

Coxey's Army

By Michael Munk

One of the periodic economic collapses endemic in America's economic history was set off by the Panic of 1893. The depression caused widespread suffering among both farming families, whose income fell sharply, and the growing industrial working class. The number of unemployed reached over four million.

A unique response to the crisis and perhaps the first "March on Washington" was prompted by Ohio businessman Jacob S. Coxey's proposal for a federally financed road-building program to put the unemployed back to work. To gain popular support, Coxey organized a United States Industrial Army (USIA) to march on Washington, D.C., in 1894 and demand that Congress legislate the jobs program into law. The "petition in boots," as Coxey called it, became popularly known as Coxey's Army.

In the agricultural Northwest, where industrial workers were found almost entirely in a few cities such as Portland, the point of view of business and civic leaders, propagated in the press, was that unemployment was the fault of the jobless and even their justified penalty for laziness. For several weeks in the spring of 1894, however, the unemployed men who joined Coxey's Army won the support of many people in the city.

Portland recruits became the army's Fifth Regiment, organized after the arrival on April 19 of a sixty-member contingent of Coxey's Army on freight cars from San Francisco—having picked up recruits in Ashland, Roseburg, Cottage Grove, and Salem. Led by USIA Captain Charles Kain, a house painter, they set up camp under an American flag near the Willamette River at the mouth of Sullivan's Gulch.

The next day, Coxeyite leaders matched from the Central Labor Council to what was known as the Plaza (now Lownsdale Square), where speakers urged a crowd of 1,500 unemployed to join the Army. They opened a recruiting station on Skid Road (West Burnside) and negotiated food with the city and local merchants. Over 500 Oregonians signed up and were organized into 12 companies. The largest, Company F, with 90 men, was led by Captain J.M. Schier, who became battalion commander.

Many Portlanders visited the disciplined camp with donations and ignored the contempt and slander from the *Oregonian*, owned by Harvey Scott, and the businessmen of Portland's Board of Charities. Those worthies dismissed Coxey's Army as "antiworkers" and charged that they were "a mobilization of bandits [and] a menace to law and order" and vagrants who had "organized . . . for the purpose of terrorizing the community." USIA Captain Kain fired back: "We are starving in a land of plenty. Why?"

When sympathetic Oregon Governor Sylvester Penney failed to secure freight cars from the Northern Pacific to move the Oregon contingent of Coxey's Army toward Washington, 446 men of the Fifth Regiment—now led by Portland stonemason General S.L. Shreffler—began to march east on April 25. They walked on the Union Pacific tracks to Troutdale, where they were enthusiastically received, fed, and housed. On April 28, they commandeered a special train and headed east.

The men got only as far as Arlington, where they were arrested by the U.S. Cavalry and returned to Portland. After a rally in the Plaza attended by 1,500 supporters and a trial, at which C.E.S. Wood testified for the Coxeyites, the Army's leaders were released on promises of good behavior. On April 30, Portland workers loudly cheered their new heroes at a protest attended by 3,000 men and 100 women.

After marching with union workers on May Day, when the U.S. marshal called unsuccessfully for federal firearms to confront what he feared was an "insurrection," the Oregon contingent of Coxey's Army began to leave for Washington, D.C., on east-bound freights (the Portland camp closed on May 10). Because over 200 Coxeyites were stopped days later on another train in Wyoming, it is unknown how many Oregonians and unemployed from Seattle and Spokane eventually arrived in Washington, D.C. Few were surprised that Congress rejected their demand for work.

Although an estimated 20,000 joined Coxey's army at some point on the way to Washington, many never reached the capital and only about one thousand remained during the summer. They were ridiculed in the press and by congressional leaders and, despite donations from sympathizers, were left disappointed by both the size and the reception of their march.

Sources

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