

THOMAS JEFFERSON MILLER

Labor Radical and Populist State Senator

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Thomas Jefferson Miller was a pioneering Washington labor leader and populist politician. A member of the Cigar Makers' International Union and the Knights of Labor, he participated in the Great Southwestern Rail Strike of 1886, and then came to Washington at the time of the 1889 Newcastle coal strike. He served as a Populist Party senator in the fifth and sixth legislatures (1897 to 1900) and finished his political career as mayor of Tumwater. Miller's story exemplifies the radical character of 19th-century unionism and the progressive nature of populist politics in Washington. His life reminds us that passionate labor activism can lead to positive political and social change.

Cigar Makers' Union

Miller was born October 30, 1857, in Anneville, Pennsylvania. By the time he was 17 years old Miller began an apprenticeship in the cigar making trade. Learning the cigar business had a great impact on the direction of his life, affecting the development of Miller's education and his social conscience.

Cigar making was among the first American trades to form a powerful national union. Under the leadership of a strong, military-minded German, Adolph Strasser, the Cigar Makers' International Union built an organization that successfully controlled strikes and established benefit pools for its members. Cigar making was an itinerant occupation; workers traveled from town to town, stopping where work was available. Because workers were constantly on the move, they gradually promoted unionism, as though it were gospel, across America.

Cigar making factories in most towns were small. Usually six to eight workers would occupy the benches, rolling cigars by hand or working from molds as "fillers" or "bunch breakers." Because the work was monotonous, cigar makers often pooled their wages to hire a reader, or lector, while they worked. Thus workers who could not read nonetheless became conversant with the works of classical writers as well as contemporary social reformers such as Henry George and Edward Bellamy.

After completion of his apprenticeship, Miller tramped across the Northeast and Midwest, plying the cigar trade and organizing Cigar Makers' locals. From 1880 to 1882 he rode the rails through New York, Ontario, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Indiana. He traveled under an assumed name—"Charles H. Howard" or "Henry Howard"—ostensibly, he said, to "save his family any possible embarrassment" over his itinerant lifestyle. More likely he assumed these aliases to cover his increasing involvement in radical labor activities.

In 1883 an incident occurred that would come back to haunt Miller later in life. In January he arrived in Palmer, Illinois, seeking work as a cigar maker. Here he met a 17-year-old girl, one Mary Alameda Moore. Using his alias, "Charles Howard," he married Mary in Decatur. Upon returning to Palmer, Mary told her mother of the secret wedding. During an ensuing confrontation, Miller refused to provide a home for Mary, claiming poverty. He left thinking he would never hear of Mary Moore again and drifted west.

Southwestern Railroad Strike

In 1885 Miller landed in Kansas where he became active in Terence Powderly's Knights of Labor. He was appointed to the executive committee of Knights Local 101 in Parsons, Kansas. There he became involved in one of the major labor disputes of the 1880s, the Great Southwestern Rail Strike. Early in March 1886, a Knights local in St. Louis refused to handle freight on the Texas and Pacific Railroad. Within days Knights workers blockaded all rail traffic on Jay Gould-owned lines in the southwestern states. Parsons became a major center of action. On March 6, Local 101 unionists blockaded tracks, forcing all freight and passenger traffic to a halt. By the following week 4,000 men were on strike in Parsons, and the Knights' executive committee, with Tom Miller acting as financial secretary, was meeting around the clock to plan actions.

Within a few days the first skirmishes of the strike took place, and victory went to the unionists. The company attempted to send out a freight train, but union men decoupled the engine and banked its fires. Further attempts to dispatch trains were foiled when strikers surrounded the engines with hundreds of men. Knights threw eggs, pulled dignitaries from cars, and disabled locomotives. Tensions escalated. On March 30 news came that a passenger train had derailed outside town. Strikers had removed the fishplates and spread the rails. The train's mail agent was seriously hurt.

The strike ended April 2 when Kansas National Guard troops entered Parsons to man the trains. Attempts by the sheriff to prosecute the Local 101 executive committee failed because Parsons' justices were all Knights of Labor members.

Newcastle Coal Strike

Following the rail strike, Miller continued to be active in the Knights of Labor, attending the 1887 General Assembly convention in Richmond, Virginia. In 1888 he came to the Pacific Northwest where he participated in Knights organizing activities at the Newcastle mines. Newcastle in King County was the center of a lucrative coal industry. In 1888 mine workers at Coal Creek, a mile above Newcastle, were involved in a conflict over jurisdiction that pitted the Knights of Labor against the Miners' and Laborers' Protective League. In late December the dispute culminated in a clash over the right of a Miners' League member to work a "breast," or mine face. The Knights contended the opportunity should go to one of their own. When, on January 2, 1889, the Miners refused to concede, the Knights ordered a work stoppage. Miners' League members ignored the order and continued to work.

On June 4 the Knights brought in 100 to 300 miners (reports varied) from Gilman and McAllister to enforce the mine shutdown. Armed with rifles, they marshaled at Newcastle. There they cut telegraph lines, posted sentries, and boarded a train going up to the Coal Creek mine. Rioting broke out as the train stopped at a trestle to load workers. Boarding miners were tossed off the train, falling 40 to 50 feet to the creek bed below. Others were beaten senseless. Rifle shots were exchanged. Three Knights fell to gunfire, and at least one miner was killed. In the aftermath of the riot, the sheriff and militia were called in and the mines reopened. Eighteen

union men, mostly Knights, were arrested for rioting. Miller avoided discovery and headed to Tacoma, arriving there the next day.

Miller's early labor activities were recalled often during his political career. His opponents accused him of being a radical unionist involved in riot and property damage. Such a background should have eliminated him from consideration as a serious political figure. But conditions in Washington during the populist era turned that liability into a political strength.

Populist Leader

After arriving in Tacoma, Miller went to work at the Wanly Cigar Factory. Later he moved to Aberdeen where he met his future wife, Mattie Stewart. In 1891 they settled together in Olympia and Miller set up a cigar factory. His political career began the following year when he was elected as a delegate to the Thurston County Democratic Party convention. There he created a stir by demanding the exclusion of national bankers from the party. He also advocated Henry George's single tax proposal. George believed that property should be taxed according to its potential value, encouraging property owners to develop land rather than hold it for speculative purposes.

In June 1892 Miller switched allegiance to the Peoples' Party, an emerging third party espousing populist principles. In August the Thurston county Peoples' Party convention nominated Miller for the Washington State Senate. When this nomination was announced, one James Lane went wild with enthusiasm. According to the *Morning Olympian*, he "tore open his shirt collar to give his windpipe free play, calling on the convention for three cheers."

Between August and the November election, Tom Miller campaigned around Thurston County. He encouraged women to join the party, spoke for the single tax, and refuted charges that he had led a train riot in Chicago. To demonstrate his solidarity with working people, he displayed numerous union cards. Still, he was defeated by J. C. Horr.

After the election Miller remained active in union affairs. In February 1893 he was elected president of the state's Labor Congress. As a highly visible representative of labor viewpoints, he became a target for attack by pro-business elements. At various times he was charged with labor agitation, accused of being a "cunning and dangerous" communist who wanted to "slay" those who did not follow socialism, and a radical "skunk and pest."

In June 1894 Miller was selected as a delegate to the state's Populist Party convention in Yakima, where he was elected chairman. Following the event, he returned to Olympia in proper populist fashion, traveling "by foot and handcar." At that time it was said of Tom Miller that he "carries the [Thurston County] Populist Party in his vest pocket." Once back in Olympia he set out to prove the truth of that statement. He orchestrated a purge of the leadership and took over control of the party. He first deposed the party leader, Dr. Newell of the Knights of Labor, then secured for himself a second nomination for the state senate.

The campaign that fall took its normal course, with all candidates choosing character assassination over reasoned discourse as the preferred method for gaining election. One notable controversy stemmed from a Tacoma speech in which Miller allegedly defamed the American flag with the following statements:

"Why should we stand by the flag? Why should we stand by the Stars and Stripes? They mean nothing to us. Every star and every stripe represents so much poverty, so much misery. This flag may be all right for plutocrats, but it means nothing for us. I address slaves, not freemen."

Such sentiments were not well received by most voters. Miller finished fifth in an eight-man race, garnering only 491 votes.

Election of 1896

Populist political momentum peaked in 1896, and Miller rode this high tide into the Washington State Senate. He was elected to serve in the Fifth Legislature—the "barefoot schoolboy" legislature. The circumstance that allowed Miller to win election was the uniting of three previously hostile forces—the Populists, the Democrats, and the Free Silverites—into one melded, or "fusion," ticket. By working together, the three parties were able to take control of the legislature and elect Populist governor John Rogers, perhaps the ablest chief executive in Washington history. Miller was instrumental in persuading his fellow Populists to unite with the Democrats, and in this political act he made his greatest contribution to Washington history.

The primary issue of the 1896 political season was fusion: could the three political parties of the left form a united front to win the November election? During the week of August 12 the three parties held simultaneous conventions in Ellensburg. The question dividing the parties was a simple one: how should the various state and national offices be shared among the three groups? Miller's Populists came to Ellensburg as the most powerful of the three parties. The majority sentiment among Populist delegates was initially against fusion. The selection of the convention's temporary chairman pitted fusionist Tom Miller against antifusionist C. L. Cline. Cline was easily elected on the first ballot. It appeared there would be no united front against the Republicans in November.

In the ensuing days of the convention, Miller and his fusion allies lobbied middle-of-the-road delegates to persuade them to unite with the Democrats. Miller moved a compromise, that the convention proceed to nominate the three-party conferee committee's fusion ticket and that any unfilled positions be assigned to Populist candidates if no agreement with other parties could be reached. Delegates accepted this position. The Populist convention endorsed the fusion ticket headed by John Rogers, assuring victory in November.

Returning to Olympia after the convention, Miller worked to bring about the same fusion of political parties in Thurston County that had been achieved at the state level. Having reached this goal, he was voted acting chairman of the Populist-Democratic-Silverite fusion convention and won the fusion ticket nomination for the state senate. With fusion came new respectability. In the past Democratic newspapers had routinely excoriated Miller as one who would "agitate and inflame the laboring classes," a cunning and dangerous oracle who would "scatter the seeds of discontent and disloyalty," a man of "condemnable sentiment" who practiced "only the arts of the demagogue." Now he was found to be a man of "marked ability, sound judgment, and pleasing address," possessing "an analytic mind well stored with the results of careful reading and mature reflection." He was "emphatically a man of the people." On November 6, Thurston County voters elected Miller to the state senate by a margin of 198 votes.

Populist Senator

In the legislature Miller proved true to his populist convictions. He attempted to limit the salaries and perquisites of government officials and refused to accept state supplied stationery and stamps. He introduced bills to limit railway passenger and freight rates and to regulate telegraph charges, and he voted to ban religious observances during legislative sessions. During the Sixth Legislature Miller introduced resolutions supporting direct election of United States senators and establishment of the initiative process. He proposed legislation to protect consumers from adulterated foods and regulate telephone rates.

Miller's major concern in the Sixth Legislature was to gain funding for a new state capitol. He orchestrated a successful effort to get an appropriations bill through the legislature and to establish a capitol commission. Governor Rogers vetoed both of these bills. When asked by a fellow senator if he had voted for Rogers, Miller said, "I wish I hadn't." By 1900 the era of fusion politics was over. The Democratic Party reestablished its primacy, and the Peoples' Party disappeared as an effective political force. Miller joined most other Populists in moving under the Democratic umbrella, but his senate seat went to another Democratic candidate, and Miller found himself out of elective office.

Marriage Scandal

In 1904 Tom Miller was elected mayor of Tumwater and reelected in 1906. During his first term an incident occurred that could have ended his political career—the public discovered that Miller had two wives. The story attracted considerable attention around the state and in the Midwest.

In April 1905 one Laclede Howard, a Midwest millionaire, died in St. Louis. In May a mysterious woman named Mrs. William Leafgren surfaced, asserting that she was Howard's widow and making a large claim against the estate. Attorneys for the Howard estate determined that Mrs. Leafgren was none other than Mary Alameda Moore, the girl Tom Miller had married during his youth. Apparently, Mary was attempting to defraud the Howard estate of \$500,000. Estate attorneys discovered Tom and Mary's marriage certificate and located Miller's mother from her truthfully given name on the license (recall that Miller wedded Mary Moore using his alias, "Charles Howard"). Lawyers located the Palmer, Illinois, boardinghouse operator who hosted Miller during his stay there and brought her to Olympia. There she identified the mayor of Tumwater as Mary's true husband. Miller admitted the same.

Having neglected to divorce Mary Moore before wedding Mattie Stewart, Miller was in a condition of bigamy. He quickly brought suit against Mary for divorce. At that point the story became public knowledge, and the details were front-page news. In the end, Mary Moore Leafgren's claim was denied and she received no part of Laclede Howard's estate. Tom Miller continued his political career, unfettered by this blot on his character.

Last Years

During World War I Miller's loyalty came under suspicion due, presumably, to his radical unionist past and his Germanic origins. He was known to have referred to England as "perfidious Albion." In the last years of his life he continued to follow the cigar making trade, working from his front porch when he no longer had strength to run his factory. Thomas Jefferson Miller died on January 6, 1921, at 63 years of age, and was buried in the Tumwater IOOF (Independent

Order of Odd Fellows) cemetery where his grave may be seen today. To the end he never wavered in his support of populist ideals, and he was fortunate enough to have lived to see many of his radical notions embodied in law.

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