

Guy R. Spencer The Commoner Cartoonist

The Arena Magazine for October pays a high tribute to The Commoner cartoonist. This is under the headline: "Guy R. Spencer, a cartoonist of progressive democracy and aggressive honesty." The Arena article follows:

No cartoonist of the great middle west stands so distinctively at once for the aggressive honesty so needed at the present time and for the principles of progressive democracy, as G. R. Spencer of the World-Herald of Omaha and Mr. Bryan's Commoner. His cartoons have been widely copied, not so much for their artistic worth as for the thought behind the pictures, the truth emphasized or the lesson sent home in such a manner as to leave a vivid impression on the minds of all who see them.

Mr. Spencer was born in Missouri in 1878 and was reared in a small Nebraska town. It is a fact worthy of passing notice that most of our cartoonists who are striking telling blows for the fundamental principles of free government and against the reign of graft that is a part of the present "system" that in recent years has dominated politics, have been born and reared in the country or in small towns. They have also usually been poor boys who had to depend on their own exertions for an education and a successful entrance into business life. In this respect also our artist was no exception to the rule.

His earliest interest in drawing dated from the receipt of a series of lessons on newspaper drawing. With enthusiasm and a resolute determination to accomplish something worthy, he set to work to master the instructions given. All the spare time at his command was given to the work. When Mr. Bryan was nominated for the presidency, he enlisted as a worker for the success of the great Nebraskan, seeing then what the majority of the more clear-visioned and thoughtful Americans, who are not beholden to or beneficiaries of trusts, monopolies and privileged interests, are now coming to see—that the real issue was not so much a question of the kind of money most demanded, but whether the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the ideals of Jefferson and Lincoln, and the fundamental demands of a true democracy should be maintained, or whether the government should pass under the control of privileged interests operating through corrupt bosses and the money-controlled machines—a condition in which the mantle of republican government should mask a despotism of the criminal rich, a commercial feudalism based on class legislation and special privileges of various kinds. Believing in the old ideals of freedom, fraternity, justice and honesty that marked in so conspicuous a degree the lives and statesmanship of Franklin, Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln, Mr. Spencer threw all the influence at his command on the side of free institutions and the rights and interests of all the people, bringing with him the fine enthusiasm of youth—that high-minded, conscience-guided youth which is the chief hope of the nation today.

In 1899 he went to Omaha, determined to secure a position on the World-Herald, the great progressive democratic organ of Nebraska and the one daily of the state that represented his own political ideals. Mr. Hitchcock, the proprietor, however, could not see his way clear to give him any position; but nothing daunted he appealed to the Sunday editor of the Herald, who agreed to let him work for him, provided he labored for nothing. This he did until the hour arrived when his little store of money was exhausted, and he was confronted by the alternatives of abandoning his cherished dream and perhaps permanently giving up his master-purpose in life, or obtaining some outside work in Omaha which would enable him to continue his art-labors, which he recognized as a valuable training or schooling. He accordingly set out to hunt work, but all doors seemed closed. Everywhere there appeared to be more seekers for work than positions calling for laborers. At last, however, he was offered employment in a restaurant. A smaller nature or a more superficial character would have spurned such work as too menial or as beneath the dignity of an artist, but Mr. Spencer belonged to that finest type of young American manhood—the type that has enriched our nation and added inestimably to the true greatness of the republic. Lincoln, with eyes fastened on a nobler station in law and in the halls of state, wrought with Herculean power and splendid enthusiasm in splitting rails, knowing that success in that humble task could be made the stepping-stone that would help him to his goal. Garfield on the towpath and Henry Wilson at the last, are other types of this class of America's noblemen who were great enough to

accept any honest labor that might help them to achieve the higher and finer dreams that haunted their brains. So when Mr. Spencer was offered the position which enabled him to continue his work on the World-Herald, he gladly accepted the work and strove to give satisfaction.

The pluck, determination and fine ambition of the young man, no less than his steady progress in his work as an artist, were not overlooked by Mr. Hitchcock, who one morning called Mr. Spencer to him and gave him a position as all-round artist to the paper at a salary of \$10 a week. "I never saw," observed Mr. Spencer in relating this incident in his life, "such big dollars as the ten comprising my first week's salary."

He gradually drifted into cartooning and in addition to his work on the Herald began, between three and four years ago, to make cartoons for Mr. Bryan's Commoner. Recently, in speaking of his present position, Mr. Spencer said:

"I am so fortunate as to be connected with two papers whose editorial policies, except in a few minor matters, are exactly in line with my political principles, and I am allowed a fairly free hand, most of the ideas of my cartoons being entirely my own and made on subjects of my own selection.

"The cartoonist can do his best work only when his heart is enlisted in the cause which he is advocating with his pencil. He has, to a great-



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er or lesser degree, an influence on public opinion, and particularly at a time like the present when the country is saturated almost to the soul with corruption, any man wielding any influence, however small, should see to it that that influence be cast on the side of the right—the right as determined by his conscience, not his Saturday night check.

"Of course, it is practically impossible in this day and age for a cartoonist to make every cartoon an expression of his individual view on the subject in hand, owing to the peculiar habits editors and proprietors have of running their own sheets and firing incorrigibles. All that is left for the poor fellow is to secure a situation, if he can, on a paper whose editorial policy is as nearly in accordance with his ideas and ideals as possible and do the best he can. With present conditions so serious the ranks of reform can not spare a man and the cartoonist should look beyond mere salary."

In answer to our question as to his views on the master evil of the hour in our land, Mr. Spencer replied with clearness and directness, and in his reply we may see something of the high moral idealism that dominates his brain.

"Our business, political and social life," observed Mr. Spencer, "is steeped in corruption and graft. The extent of the deterioration of the moral

fabric of a great body of our citizens is appalling. Were this moral degradation confined to a certain class or a few individuals of many classes, the conditions would not be so dangerous. But the graft germ seems to have inculcated itself into the moral tissue of all classes and a much too big percentage of the whole of each class.

"The fact that a great railroad official has been giving rebates or that a trusted insurance president has been working the game for all it is worth, or that a United States senator has been discovered deliberately assisting to defraud the government need not, of itself, worry us over-much. But it is the evidence seen on every hand that the disease extends not only into the great places where temptation is great, but into the humblest homes in the land that shows the real seriousness of the situation. Your office boy borrows a bicycle and grafts the 10 cents you gave him for carfare. Neither your stenographer nor your bookkeeper ever buys writing paper, pens or ink, and seldom purchases a stamp. Your man on the road stops at a \$2 a day hotel and charges you \$3, and so on. The whole business world is full of it—this petty grafting. And no one seems to think anything of it. Everybody does it, what's the harm? Nobody makes any pretense of concealment, except possibly from the 'boss.' 'Of course, he wouldn't care, but—oh, well, you never can tell!' It is all so trivial and not to be compared with the giving of a rebate or the adulteration of a food product. Yet it is this moral obtuseness to the iniquity of little things that it seems to me is the real danger that threatens the country. A man does not become a criminal in a day. We do not forget the lessons of a God-fearing mother in an hour, and the nation can not become wholly corrupt in a decade.

"By association with wrongdoers and by departing by only one short step at a time from the straight and narrow path do we drift into ways that are dark. Familiarity with evil lessens the hideousness of evil, and the time soon comes when what to our senses once was evil is no longer evil; what was once a crime is now a custom.

"The young man who, unknown to his employer, carries home from the office, paper, pens, ink, etc., sufficient for his own and probably his room-mate's correspondence, will, when sent out of town for the office, 'pad' his expense account, only a little at first, but gradually more and more on each successive trip, until it is standing 'all the traffic will bear.' He is considered honest as the world goes and probably will never reach the point of 'stealing'; yet can this petty grafter be expected, when he reads of the great insurance scandals or the Pennsylvania railroad exposures, to experience the sense of outraged justice any honest man would feel? The arguments of the pleader for special legislation, the monopolist or the grafter appeal to him a little more forcibly than to another. He drifts with the tide of everyday association and custom. All over this broad land are thousands of respectable men working little grafts of their own and almost unconsciously sympathizing with the ambitions of the bigger grafters. And these men exercise no small influence on election day.

"This moral blindness to the wrongfulness of little misdeeds grows with the indulgence and unless it is checked it will be only a matter of time until the state becomes utterly corrupt, the home will become as corrupt as the state, and the history of Rome will have been repeated.

"But I think the checking process has begun. It is only a question of rousing the conscience of the public and of teaching a part of it what is right and what is wrong. Modern 'business' methods have so warped the senses of a great body of our citizens that they will have to be re-taught at least the finer distinctions of right from wrong. This can be done by precept and by force; that is by preaching and by legislation. Of course we are told that morals can not be legislated into men, but, to a certain extent they can. We declare by law that a certain ethical or moral offense is criminal, prosecute, convict and punish the offenders and in the nature of men, if the process be repeated often enough, he will learn to refrain from trespassing this law and in time come to believe the breaking of it to be wrong, no matter what opinions he may have had prior to the establishment of this particular rule. A conscience can be redeemed as surely as it can be lost, and inherently our consciences are all sound.

"There are enough right-minded citizens in this republic to save it if they but continue as they have begun. A partially free press is doing noble

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