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# The Socialist Lecture Van in America

by G.H. Lockwood

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Dr. C.W. Wooldridge, formerly of Cleveland, Ohio, was the first Socialist in this county to conceive and put in operation the idea of the Socialist Lecture Van. In the winter of 1896 he designed a wagon for this purpose and had it constructed by the Labor Exchange Branch at Ashtabula, Ohio.

The van completed, he advertised in *The Coming Nation* for a companion, and, after a preliminary correspondence, selected the writer of this article, who was at that time living the life of a recluse in the woods of California, preparing for the Socialist platform.

Together we went to Ashtabula, outfitted the van, and started what I believe to be the most effective method of Socialist propaganda ever designed.

The first van was a very clumsy affair. The wheels were low, the reach was long, and it was decidedly top-heavy. Many is the time I have on a bike followed the trail of that old wagon for miles by the snake-like track it made; for like the Socialist agitators who went with it, it was not built to run in the ruts of a capitalist roadbed.

Over an 18-inch deep wagon bed a 6x12-foot platform was constructed, covered by a canvas top over 6 feet high, making the extreme top of the wagon 12-feet, 8-inches from the ground. An ordinary load of hay would go places where we would be sure to get stuck and many bridges and railroad culverts, especially in Tennessee and Kentucky, we could not go under without first "dismantling the riggings."

Unfortunately, Dr. Wooldridge's wife was stricken with nervous paralysis soon after our start and he was compelled to abandon the project, much to his sorrow, for if there ever lived a man whose soul

was in the Socialist movement and who was willing to sacrifice and who did sacrifice for the cause, that man is Dr. Wooldridge.

In the fall of 1897, after working during the summer in Ohio, the van, manned by the writer and a young stenographer from Cleveland, Ohio named Joe Beardsley, a fine singer and pianist, made the trip from Cleveland to Ruskin Colony, Tennessee.

Beardsley was not a Socialist at the start but got off on a month's vacation to make the trip for the sake of his health. In three weeks' time he was a thorough convert to the cause in general and the van propaganda in particular, and threw up a good job to cast his lot with what we at that time called "The Wagon Mission of the Cooperative Commonwealth."

After a very successful trip, everything considered, we eventually landed in Ruskin Colony, stored the outfit for the winter, and spent our time working with the colonists, with the exception of a two months' trip to Nashville, then the home of our National Secretary, William Maily, who was an active assistant to our work in that city.

Early in the spring of 1898 the van left Ruskin Colony for Chicago. This trip we had a male quartet of singers on board, having added A.S. Edwards, former editor of *The Coming Nation*, and another singer named Garken to the outfit.

The old comrades at Paducah, Evansville, Vincennes, Terre Haute, and other points along our trail will testify that we stirred up the animals wherever our four lusty voices broke loose.

About this time the Cuban War excitement was at its height and we found the propagation of Socialism "uphill business" until we hit on the plan of advertising to talk on "War from the Socialist Standpoint," thus attracting large crowds who would listen to any kind of talk if they thought it had anything to do with the war; and inasmuch as the Cuban War was a product of Capitalism, the text was a good one for our purpose, in more ways than one.

At Chicago we attended the first convention of the Social Democracy, or what has been called the Debs movement which resulted in a split and the organization of the Social Democratic Party by the minority faction, which stood for political action, while the majority faction soon went to pieces on a utopian colony scheme.

After the convention Edwards and Garken left the van, the former to take over the editorial management of the *Social Democratic Herald*. Beardsley and myself again hit the trail, this time for Toledo, Ohio. Starting out in the hole over \$5, we met all expense, including

repairs on our wagon from an accident, and landed in Toledo with about \$12 in our treasury, all of the money coming from the sale of Socialist literature.

At Toledo the best looking girl in old Tennessee came up and join the mission, and after that the Lockwoods had complete charge of the destiny of the van.

We took our wedding trip in the van and were only prevented from being married in it by the collection of a crowd of curious people from whom we took refuge in the friendly home of Rev. George Candee, who married us without money and without price — fact is I was about as near broke at that time as, as a Socialist agitator generally is.

It would be useless, at this time, to try and follow the trail of this old Socialist Literature Van to the time when the severe illness of Mrs. Lockwood forced us to abandon the ship. We spent four years of active service with it, covering over 5,000 long, weary miles of country, dispersing Socialist philosophy and countless recitations interspersed with music and supplemented with literature sales.

It would require a book to give an adequate account of the interesting and exciting experiences incident to the pioneer work we were doing.

During the four seasons we worked with the old van, we were, most of the time, in territory wholly unorganized and depended on voluntary contributions and the sale of literature for our support. I was prejudiced at that time against the idea of taking public collections, which undoubtedly would have yielded us a better living than our book sales and the few dollars that were given to us by our friends.

As it was, book sales were light, there being comparatively little interest or sympathy with the movement at that time, especially so outside the cities. As the Irishman expressed himself: "The only way we kept up our expenses was by keeping them down."

Many is the meal we made on graham mush prepared on our little gasoline stove, for we always kept house, and the house was always the same, though we frequently moved our backyard.

By the majority of the people we were considered as dangerous "anarchists," or at the best as rattle-brained cranks. We frequently worked for weeks without meeting a comrade and those who were friendly to us in our audiences were usually afraid, or ashamed, to manifest it by any act more than a kindly look, though our book sales

was evidence that we had created an interest. Practically we were outcasts in our own country.

We traveled during the day. Invading the towns by night, we rang our gong, advertised our meeting, lit our lights, played violin and organ duets, such as they were, to attract the crowd, then went after them with illustrated lectures and recitations and closed our meetings with book sales. And after it was all over we drove out of town in the darkness and camped like gypsies along the country highways, frequently taking precaution to get several miles out of town before we pulled in for the night.

At 4 o'clock the next morning we were again hitting the pike, though we generally tried to have a good rest at noon, having usually reached a camping ground near to our night's stand. In the afternoon while the horses were picking grass along the roadside, Mrs. Lockwood would do her house work and I would get on our bike and go down to reconnoiter the enemy's country and lay out a plan of attack.

It was a hard life, especially for a woman, but the spirit of the great Social Revolution was on us; we had seen the vision of the "New Heaven and the New Earth," and the old one would no longer satisfy us. Day after day, week after week, month after month, we hit the trail, seeking new fields in which to plant the seeds of social discontent which might someday, we knew not when, blossom into our beloved Cooperative Commonwealth. That we did good work will be attested by thousands of comrades in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, who first heard of Socialism through the medium of the old "White Elephant," as the boys nicknamed our van.

After abandoning the old van that was much the worse for wear, we went to Minnesota and took an active part in the work in that state. As State Secretary and organizer of Local Minneapolis, I started the movement for the building of the Minnesota State Van, which has done such excellent service the past season under the management of State Secretary Holman, manned by Etherton and Martin. This van was planned and partly built by myself and was run the first season by the Lockwoods. That the van was a success from the start the Minnesota comrades will gladly testify.

Partly through our influence *The Coming Nation* boys [Fred Warren and E.N. Richardson] started the van proposition that has resulted in the building of three excellent vans, which will be started out as soon as the weather is favorable in the spring. After coming to Girard we started another van agitation that resulted in Comrade [Julius]

Wayland purchasing a complete outfit for local work. With the exception of a van that was operated in California one season, 1898, by Job Harriman, and the Lockwoods' new auto, these are the only Socialist Vans in the country of which I have any knowledge.

I have gone somewhat into the history of this matter to show that my enthusiasm for this method of propaganda is not altogether the result of theorizing. Basing my opinion on my past seven years of experience, I am *heartily in favor* of the Socialist Lecture Van.

There is room for 100 vans in this country. The van, aside, of course, from the weekly Socialist papers, is the cheapest and most effective method of propaganda yet devised. If seven years ago two people could invade the enemy's country and carry on an active and successful propaganda without the aid of organizations and at a time when the question of Socialism was not in the public mind, what a field the country now offers for this kind of work backed up by a powerful organization and a quickened public interest.

The strong points in favor of the van method are these: It saves car fare and puts the time of starting and stopping at the disposal of the operators. It saves hotel bills, or inconvenience to friends. It saves advertising expenses and work. It saves hall rent. But best of all and more important than anything else, it catches the crowds, furnishing a good light and fine rostrum from which the speaker can pour forth hot broadsides into the rotten old capitalist hull.

You can do more effective advertising with a good van in half an hour than with any other method in a week's time. Everything put together, it is a sharp axe for cutting tall timbers compared with a dull jackknife or a stone implement.

A Socialist van won't run itself; it must be operated, and it is certainly important that the right kind of people operate it. But we already have plenty of bright young Socialist agitators who are capable of doing good work with this kind of a tool and the *Appeal* is going to give them a chance to get an outfit that is complete in every particular. Nothing that the *Appeal* has done, or can do, in my estimation in the way of premiums can equal the one it is now offering. And the conditions of the contest are such that everyone has an equal show to get out and hustle.

This van outfit is worth working for, and working hard at that. We know that the "hustler" who gets it will keep on hustling for the great cause; he's the very fellow we want to have it because he will have demonstrated the ability to do the right kind of wood chopping.

“ARE YOU THE MAN?” That was the heading of Dr. Wooldridge’s little ad that attracted my attention and started me out on the first van over seven years ago. “ARE YOU THE MAN” who will get out and hustle for this fine premium?

ARE YOU THE MAN? Why not

I venture to predict that the name of the winner of this prize, in less than one year from today, will be known all over the U.S. ARE YOU THE MAN?

Dr. Wooldridge had over 100 applications to fill the place that he offered. I made up my mind that I wanted to go and, well, if you make up *your* mind *strong* enough, you can win out. *You* might just as well be the man as the other fellow and if you will do the right kind of hustling YOU WILL BE THE MAN. If I was out in the field without a good outfit, and I saw a chance to get one like this I’d have my coat off in a minute. Makes me feel like going into this contest just to think about it, but this is out of the question. I expect to be kept busy at this office helping to take care of the returns.

Come! Set your machinery to work and get busy. Remember, *all the cards you buy count*; you can sell ’em any old time after you get the van. See?

And suppose you lose, you will have done some grand work for a grand cause and have gained some useful knowledge that will help you to succeed the next time. Every subscriber you get for the Appeal is a prospective Socialist Vote and enough Socialist Votes means Socialism. It’s worth working for, boys, without any premium, but with a chance of gaining such a prize it is worth an extra effort. YOU MAY BE THE MAN, MAKE THE EFFORT.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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