

An Interview with Alaska Jane

AMONG the interesting women in the Georgeist movement is Alaska Jane. Of course that is not her real name. But to her many friends—and enemies—in Alaska, Canada, New York, Washington, D. C., Kansas and points West, Mrs. McEvoy is well known as "Alaska Jane." She is an elderly 'hard-boiled' woman; that is, she insists on calling herself "hard-boiled." "I got that way from being a newspaperwoman," she says. Just the same, there is a kindly gleam in her eye.

I had a chat with Alaska Jane in the lobby of the Martha Washington Hotel in New York, where she is staying at present, right across the street from the Henry George School. In her tumultuous career, Alaska Jane was not without influence in getting this Hotel established. "When I was a girl," she said, "women could not get into New York hotels unescorted. Whenever I came East, my father would have to telegraph a hotel to permit me to register. A group of New York women campaigned for a women's hotel. I often spoke on behalf of the idea. We believe we influenced the establishment of the Martha Washington, New York's first women's hotel."

Alaska Jane was raised in Kansas. Her father was a pioneer—he was in the Comstock lode in Nevada, sold lumber via the Santa Fe trail, invested in farming land. Alaska Jane remembers her father's and her own introduction to Henry George's "Progress and Poverty." "A young musician friend of the family used to come frequently. He was organizing a musician's union, but due to the crushing power of big business, he had to do it quietly. That was about the time of the Haymarket riots. This man gave a copy of 'Progress and Poverty' to my father to read. My father's eyes were not in good condition at that time, so he asked me to read the book to him. As I did, he would pause at each passage, expounding and explaining the difficult parts. He saw it clearly. Since that time both my father and myself were confirmed Georgeists."

In those days, Alaska Jane's father had a little hotel in Kansas, at the end of Calamity Branch. "Everybody who passed through stopped at my father's place," said Alaska Jane, "because we had the only hair mattresses west of the Missouri River!" Among the distinguished visitors to his hotel were John W. Davis and "Sockless" Jerry Simpson. They were both avowed Georgeists.

"You've met quite a few distinguished Georgeists," I said. "Have you ever met Henry George himself?"

"Yes," replied Alaska Jane. "I met him at Bryan's headquarters in New York. I saw him only a few times. Once he introduced me as 'Jerry Simpson's girl.' The outstanding thing I remember was a remark he made once. He said:

'If only I had the time, I would write a book on terminology. People do not like to read words they do not understand.'"

Alaska Jane was quite active in a number of social reform movements. In Chicago there was a great convention, in which the question of the United States taking over the Philippines was discussed. Alaska Jane was the only woman at the convention who opposed this imperialistic action. As she delivered her speech, she recalls, there was vociferous applause every now and then from a corner of the convention hall. When she was through, she was approached by Louis F. Post and John Z. White, who confessed to the applauding. "You were making your points," they said, "but you were making them so fast that we applauded to stop you for a minute or two, so that the audience would have time to let them sink in!"

"You have been associated with so many reforms," I said. "I suppose you were connected with the woman's suffrage movement?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Alaska Jane. "In Kansas I was the youngest woman tagging around at the Suffrage meetings. Susan B. Anthony called me 'our orphan.' In 1898 I was President of the Young Woman's Suffrage Club of Washington, D. C. I was the official 'lamp cleaner' for all the Kansas meetings! Back in 1912 I was in the State of Washington, where I organized the women for their first vote. The state went Democratic for the first time."

Alaska Jane took her first trip to the territory that gave her her nickname in 1910. First in so many things, she was the first white woman to enter Kennicott, the copper mine. At that time she contributed a series of articles to the *New York Times* on the Pinchot-Guggenheim fight. "Ochs took everything I wrote," she said.

Alaska Jane's chief occupation in Alaska, besides the job of newspaperwoman, was in the Bureau of Education in various native villages. The natives (commonly called Indians, but wrongly so, anthropologically) learned to trust her, and she was always "scrapping" with white men on behalf of these natives. She relates this story:

"One day an Indian woman came to me and indicated that her husband, Bob Johnson, was in trouble. I followed her and found that her husband had been taken prisoner by the new Biological Agent. He had arrested the Indian for hunting bear out of season. 'You can't arrest that man,' I said, knowing that for the natives the gaming law does not hold—they must be permitted to hunt all the year round, because that's their only source of livelihood. 'Now you mind your business,' said the Agent. 'You've been running everything in Alaska, but you're not going to run my department.' Well, they took him to jail. I said to the squaw, 'I'm going

to get Bob Johnson out.' So I went to the prison and commanded the jailer to let him out. There was some lively discussion, but I won my point—it was never questioned, either!"

In his "ignorance," it would seem, the Indian cannot understand why the resources of nature should ever be untouchable. He simply will not accept a "law" that he cannot hunt what, where and when he pleases. Hence the white man has been obliged, in Alaska, to make an exception to his laws in this case. Lo, the poor Indian! unable to comprehend the benefits to be derived from the white man's laws!

Alaska Jane spent much of her time in Juneau, where she was known as a "holy terror." She explains: "The reason I made so much trouble for the politicians at their Council meetings, is that I knew the Single Tax. I could analyze everything from that point of view, and they were confounded. They hated me for it."

"Is there some connection between your reputation there and your nickname?" I inquired.

"Well," she replied, "it began this way. They were building a railroad there at that time, and from my knowledge of Single Tax I predicted that the road would cost \$100,000,000; that they would lose on upkeep. They jeered at that. Judge Walker said, 'A woman goes to pieces on figures.' Well, that road cost them \$200,000,000. But at that time I earned the name of 'Calamity Jane.'"

"Then I wrote a series of articles in a local paper. It was edited by a woman with Marxian leanings. She complained that nobody read her paper. I ventured to pep it up for her. So I wrote a lot of local, funny stuff. That gave me the name of 'Humorous Jane.'"

"On one occasion, when there was talk of building a wharf in town, I lined up with the officials for once. They were quite pleased with that, and one of them said, at a public meeting: 'You all know this woman. She's been known as Calamity Jane; and then as Humorous Jane. But tonight she's our own Alaska Jane!'"

But her agreement with the officials and politicians was the exception rather than the rule. There were more complaints than praises. At a Council meeting in Juneau, one of the men exclaimed impetuously, "I'm getting out of here. No one can run a caucus meeting with Alaska Jane present." To which Jane retorted, "Yes you can, if you'll only take the axes out of your sleeves."

At one time, a Guggenheim attorney had water pipes laid through the town of Juneau. When the town made a bid for the main, the attorney offered it to them for \$50,000. At a meeting, the officials decided they couldn't afford that amount. Next year the same line was offered for \$60,000, and was again refused. The next year the price was \$75,-

000. Then the Council began thinking it over. The matter was discussed. One of the men said, "The pipes are not in good condition." Alaska Jane said, "The condition of the pipes makes no difference. We're not buying the pipes, we're buying a franchise." "There was no franchise," said the mayor. "We just let the attorney have the streets." A lawyer said, "Alaska Jane is right. All we're buying is a franchise."

Alaska Jane is actively connected with the Women's Single Tax Club of Washington. She is the Club's President, having been elected to that office four times in succession. Indeed, Alaska Jane was one of the founders of the Club, in 1898. At present the Club is launching an organization known as the Women's National Tax Relief Association. The Women's Single Tax Club will remain the "mother" Club. The ambitious goal of the new Association is to band together 50,000 women throughout the country to "lift our national debt by the simplest and least painful method." The economic reforms advocated by Henry George will be propagated in this Association. Mrs. Walter J. White is President of the organization, Miss Alice Siddall is Treasurer, and Alaska Jane is the Chairman of the Executive Committee.

And now for the latest achievement of Alaska Jane. She has just finished compiling an exhaustive Concordance of "Progress and Poverty." This represents twenty-two months of unremitting toil, and it contains about 88,000 key words. The purpose is to be able to find the page and exact line of any important word or phrase in Henry George's great classic. It is unnecessary to point out the value of this work. It is as indispensable as a Biblical Concordance.

"How did you conceive of this idea of a Concordance?" I asked Alaska Jane.

"The idea first came to me one evening, when I was talking to an old-timer in the Georgeist movement. In the course of our conversation I used the term 'metayer system.' 'Where did you get that from?' asked this fellow. 'From "Progress and Poverty,"' I replied. 'Nonsense,' he said, 'I've been reading that book for thirty years and I never came across it.' Well, I had to prove my point, so that night I took my copy of 'Progress and Poverty' and looked for 'metayer system.' I stayed up all night and couldn't find it. Then I decided that we needed a Concordance."

Alaska Jane believes we ought to do more of this constructive work, rather than quarrel and split over doctrinal issues. She berates the "young upstarts" who "just try to upset things with their new-fangled theories."

"The real work before us," says Alaska Jane, "is to understand and propagate the philosophy of Henry George. Why can't we all pull together for that great work?"

—ROBERT CLANCY