LORENZO DOW LEWELLING

Wichita (People's), 9 January 1893–14 January 1895

Born 21 December 1846, Salem (Henry County), Iowa; son of William Lewelling, a nurseryman and Quaker minister, and Cyrena Wilson Lewelling, 3 brothers and sisters; educated at Knox College, Eastman's Business College of Poughkeepsie, New York and Whittier College of Salem; military experience in Civil War, enlisted as drummer boy, relatives bought his discharge, drove cattle to quartermaster depot, and worked on bridge corps at Chattanooga; married (1) Angeline M. Cook, 16 April 1870, deceased, (2) Ida Bishop, 1886 or 1887, 4 daughters; religious preference Quaker; died 3 September 1900, of heart disease in Arkansas City; buried in Maple Grove Cemetery, Wichita.

Lorenzo Dow Lewelling had come into the 1892 election as a virtual unknown, yet he led the entire slate of People's party candidates to victory. Well-educated, articulate, long acquainted with labor-management problems, and an authority on penal reform, Lewelling had joined the People's (or Populist) party and had become chairman of the Sedgwick County party organization. He presented such an impressive welcoming speech to the 1892 People's party convention in Wichita that he was nominated as their candidate for governor and was later endorsed by the Democrats. In a close gen-
eral election, Lewelling won 162,507 votes, while Abram W. (Farmer) Smith, Republican, received 158,075 and the Prohibition candidate Isaac O. Pickering got 4,178.

Claiming that his administration was the first “people’s party government on earth,” Lewelling adhered to the party line even in his choice of gubernatorial residence: During his term, he stayed at the Dutton Hotel at 407 Kansas Avenue, much touted by the Populists because of its dollar-a-day rooms—half the cost of the Copeland, which was used by some of his predecessors. However, Lewelling’s efforts to accomplish anything during his term were frustrated by the “legislative war.” This name derived from the inability of the house of representatives to organize and select a speaker for most of the session because of a lack of a clear-cut majority for any party. The worst features of the legislative war were the product of Lewelling’s own bungling, or at least “his Quaker aversion to the use of force.” Although the state supreme court, dominated by Republicans, decided the issue in favor of Republicans, almost no legislation was passed during that session.

Legislative infighting stymied Lewelling’s administration, but the legislature did adopt the Australian ballot and an eighteen-month redemption period for mortgages. Lewelling had sought a law permitting individual borrowing at 5 percent from the state’s sinking fund and other state balances (to benefit those indebted, such as with mortgaged land), but the legislature did not respond. He also appointed the well-known Populist spokeswoman Mary Elizabeth Lease as superintendent of the State Board of Charities. Controversy, which became public, broke out between Lease and the governor, because Lease was unalterably opposed to Populist fusion with the Democrats—the alliance that had helped bring Lewelling’s victory. He eventually fired her. Lewelling favored state action on behalf of the oppressed, thus he called out state troops to protect miners from black strikebreakers who had been brought into southeastern Kansas coal fields. Although this action might have had racial overtones, Lewelling proved that he was color-blind when on another occasion he sent state troops to Salina to protect a black man threatened with lynching.

Governor Lewelling was the spokesman for Kansas at the World
Levellings inaugural took place in the chamber of the Kansas House of Representatives.

Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. In December of that year he gained his greatest national notoriety when he issued his controversial “tramp circular” to the metropolitan police commissioners. Lewelling condemned existing vagrancy laws and suggested better treatment for the unemployed. He stated that “thousands of men, guilty of no crime but that of seeking employment, have languished in the city prisons of Kansas or performed unrequited toil in ‘rock piles’ as municipal slaves, because ignorance of economic conditions has made us cruel.”

Lewellings election in 1892 was the first high point for the Populist party in Kansas; the state even cast its electoral vote to the Populist presidential candidate James Weaver that year. However, Lewells advocacy of women’s suffrage in 1894 split the Populist-Democratic alliance that had brought his victory. The Populists nominated the entire Lewelling slate in 1894, and they all went
down in defeat. Lewelling lost to Republican Edmund N. Morrill, 118,329 votes to 148,697, while David Overmyer, Stalwart Democrat, got 26,709 votes, and Isaac O. Pickering, Prohibition, received 5,496. A proposed amendment to establish equal suffrage also lost in that election, 130,139 votes to 95,302. In his final action, Governor Lewelling called the legislature into special session three days before the expiration of his term so that he could present his "official version" of the legislative war.

During his youth and early manhood, Lorenzo D. Lewelling had worked at varied jobs, canal tow-path boy, carpenter, section hand on a railroad, teacher in a black school in Missouri, and newspaper publisher. Between 1868 and 1880, excluding only two years, he served as superintendent of the Iowa Women's Reform School and in other positions in the Iowa reformatory system. For two years, beginning in 1880, he edited an "anti-ring" Republican newspaper in Des Moines. After being defeated in a race for secretary of state in Iowa, he moved to Wichita, Kansas, in 1887, to open a loan business and later a commission firm concentrating on nursery stock. Following his term as governor, Lewelling returned to Wichita and ran a dairy farm and creamery business, after which he became a manager of a land company and a traveling lecturer for an insurance group. He was elected on a fusion Populist-Democratic ticket to the state senate in 1896, and he served as a member of the State Railway Commission from 1897 to 1899. He also worked as a land agent for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad.

REFERENCES: Carlin and Richmond, 1982; Clanton, 1969; Daniels, 1931; Garretson, 1929; Hudson, 1893; Nugent, 1963; Parrish, 1968.