



**LESLIE M. SHAW**

Governor of Iowa, 1898-1900, 1900-1902  
Secretary of the United States Treasury, 1902-1907

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## Eminent Iowan Series

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LESLIE MORTIER SHAW

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By WM. R. BOYD\*

*Former Editor Cedar Rapids Republican*

The public career of Leslie M. Shaw reads like a romance. It is altogether probable that if William Jennings Bryan had not come to Denison, Iowa, to make a speech in the middle 90's, Leslie M. Shaw would have continued to be a good lawyer-banker, highly respected citizen of Denison, and an outstanding layman in the Methodist church until the day of his death. Originally he had no political ambitions whatsoever.

He was a Vermonter, having been born November 2, 1848, near Stowe, on one of those Vermont farms where necessity compels men to work hard and be frugal. Young Shaw followed Greeley's advice and came west. He worked his way through Cornell college, then studied law, located in Denison and entered upon the practice of his profession. He didn't have to go through any very long "starving period." Presently he became interested in banking and became a capable banker.

\* One of a series of addresses broadcast over Station WSUI at Iowa City by Mr. Boyd. Manuscript filed in the Iowa State Department of History and Archives, Des Moines, with the Boyd collection. He died June 6, 1948, having attained 91 years. (See Notable Deaths section ANNALS OF IOWA, Vol. XXIX, No. 6.)

Then came that day when Bryan came to Denison and made his speech in favor of the free and unlimited coinage of silver. His eloquence captivated his audience, and it looked as though that community would go hell-bent for free silver, unless something was done to counteract the impression and the conviction Bryan had made. Those who were not captivated by his eloquence were alarmed. They said, one to another, as they would meet on the street: "Somebody's got to answer that speech, or Crawford county is lost to the gold standard." To one or more of these, Shaw remarked casually: "I could answer that speech if I had time to prepare." "You must take time," was the reply. To make a long story short, such pressure was brought on Shaw that he consented to undertake the job.

"I knew," he once remarked, "that I had to go into the matter thoroughly and expose every fallacy in Mr. Bryan's argument, if I was going to accomplish anything. A half-way attempt would only make a bad matter worse. So I studied, as I had never studied before. I made a large easel and got some large sheets of manilla paper. I drew graphs and made charts to illustrate my speech." Shaw didn't claim that his speech was one of the most masterful dissertations on the money question ever made in Denison, or anywhere else, for that matter; but that's what those who heard it said it was. The fame of it got abroad; he was asked to repeat it all over southwestern Iowa. But no political bee, as yet, was in his bonnet. As he looked at it, he was just doing something to expose what he believed to be a master fiscal fallacy.

Of course he took part in the memorable campaign of 1896 when the free and unlimited coinage of silver at the ratio of 16 to 1 was the paramount issue. It was, the most hard-fought campaign within my memory. It was, moreover, the greatest campaign of education of which I have personal knowledge. Everybody was roused to fighting pitch. This is no figure of speech. Men did fight on the streets over this matter, in every

town and hamlet in Iowa, and I suppose they did throughout the nation. Still, Shaw had no political ambition.

#### GOV. DRAKE NOT A CANDIDATE

Came 1897, however, and not so very long before the Republican state convention was to be held to nominate a candidate for governor, the incumbent, General Drake, suddenly announced that he would not be a candidate for a second term. Nearly every congressional district in Iowa (we had eleven at that time) ultimately brought out a candidate. The tenth district brought out Shaw. Outside of that portion of Iowa where he had been making speeches, he was little known. I remember coming into the *Cedar Rapids Republican* office one morning, and on my way to my sanctum I was handed a one-column cut with some reprint wrapped around it. I said, "What's this?"

"I don't know exactly," replied the party who handed it to me. "It's something about Shaw." "Who the heck is Shaw?" I asked. I read the reprint. It was well-gotten up and I ran it in the paper, of which I was then editor. The Cornell college people, and the Methodists generally, were friendly to this—to them a well-known alumnus. Linn county was inclined at first to support Matt Parrott of Waterloo, the lieutenant-governor. But before the convention assembled (it met that year in Cedar Rapids and was held in a large tent erected on the campus of Coe college), Linn county was largely for Shaw.

As the delegates assembled and met the various candidates—and there were some distinguished men among them—Shaw grew in favor. He knew how to meet people. He was a good story-teller, and his stories always had a point to them after the manner of Lincoln. He was nominated on an early ballot. The money question—though people thought it had been settled for all time the year before—still persisted. Mr. Bryan continued to be the idol of his party. Shaw

made his speeches along fiscal lines—sound money and a protective tariff. He believed in both with all his heart.

#### EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SPEAKER

I think it will be generally agreed that Leslie M. Shaw was one of the most effective public speakers who ever took to the platform. He was not an orator in the common acceptation of that term. He was a great advocate. He had an analytical mind. He could make the most obtuse question interesting. He could clear up an intellectual fog as a strong northwest wind dissipates a fog on land or sea. Without any fireworks, climaxes or perorations, he could hold an audience spellbound—not for 20, 30 or 45 minutes—but for an hour and one-half and two hours. When he finished, there was nothing more to say. It is not claiming too much to say that it was well-nigh impossible to answer him, any more than it is possible to answer a good mathematician demonstrating that the square of the hypotenuse of a right angle triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

Mr. Shaw was elected governor by a huge majority, and re-elected in 1899. He made a good governor. Under his administration the board of control of state institutions law was passed. It was up to him to make the initial appointments. He made them with an eye single to ability, integrity and efficiency. He wanted the law to start off under men of that type. His appointments were former Governor William Larrabee—one of the most distinguished governors Iowa ever had; former Justice of the Supreme Court L. G. Kinney; and John Cownie, a rare combination of farmer and businessman. The success of the new form of government for our penal and eleemosynary institutions was assured from the moment those appointments were made. They set a standard which no governor would soon care to lower.

Having been elevated to the governorship of Iowa, Mr. Shaw soon became nationally known, in that he was in demand everywhere for addresses before busi-

ness associations of the highest type and with national influence. Not long after Theodore Roosevelt succeeded McKinley as president of the United States, without the slightest intimation that such a thing was about to happen, it was announced that Governor Shaw had been appointed secretary of the treasury. How this came about is most interesting. A day or two after the announcement had been made, I happened to call on Senator Allison at his home in Dubuque. "Would you like to hear the story of this appointment?" he asked. "I surely would," I replied.

"I was just sitting down to lunch one day," said the senator, "when I received a telegram from the secretary to the president saying that unless I had objections, the president would like very much to appoint Governor Shaw secretary of the treasury. I replied that I certainly had no objections—that he would make a great secretary—but I wondered if this meant the displacement of the Hon. James Wilson, then secretary of agriculture, and a distinguished citizen of Iowa. Mr. Cortelyou replied that the president had no intention of displacing the Hon. James Wilson, but that he did want Governor Shaw to be secretary of the treasury. "Please see the party," continued the telegram, "and ascertain whether or not he will accept." After a conference with Senator Allison, Governor Shaw accepted. He sat very near the head of the cabinet table.

Months later Senator Allison told me how the president came to take what seemed to be such hasty action. It seemed that Colonel Roosevelt, in 1900, being a candidate for vice president, was campaigning out in the Dakotas—at the time a hotbed of populism. His voice gave out, and Governor Shaw was sent to join him and take the laboring oar. When he met up with the candidate for vice-president, an afternoon meeting had been arranged, the plan was for the colonel to make what was called a "curtain raiser"—a speech of five or ten minutes. Shaw was then to take the audience, the colonel going to his car to rest and sleep. "I

thought," said Colonel Roosevelt, "that I'd stop just a moment or two in the back of the hall and see how the governor would start in that hell-hole. Well, I didn't go to my car. I stood there for two hours, wedged into a crowd, and listened to him make such a speech on fiscal matters as I had never heard before, and I made up my mind right then and there that if I were ever president of the United States, I would have that man as my secretary of the treasury."

#### AS SECRETARY OF TREASURY

What kind of a secretary of the treasury did Governor Shaw make? I will let one of the great businessmen of the middle-west and a prominent Democrat speak as to that—Marshall Field. I chanced to be introduced to him at the close of a banquet given in Chicago, at which Secretary Shaw was the guest of honor. He said: "We of the middle-west have every right to be proud of our secretary of the treasury. You know I am a Democrat," he continued, "and I think I may say, without appearing to be egotistical, that I know what is going on in the financial world. Having said this, I now wish to give it as my opinion that Leslie M. Shaw is the greatest secretary of the treasury in my life-time. No one except those who are thoroughly acquainted with the financial situation as it has existed recently knows how many times Secretary Shaw has averted a panic."

Apropos of this, a year or two later, I was having dinner with Secretary Shaw in the Willard hotel following a coming-out party for one of his daughters. He excused himself and me from the after-reception dinner and we went into the men's room and sat down at a little table. He was silent, which was not his wont. I tried to make conversation without success. Finally I said: "Are you not feeling well this evening, Mr. Secretary?" He leaned across the table and whispered: "I am perfectly well physically—but I am scared stiff. How I wish I was out of this office! We are on the verge of a panic. I am going over to New York

tonight to release fifty millions more from the treasury, hoping to stop it before it starts, as I have done many times. I don't know whether I can do it or not. Here are the facts: We have had an ox-cart system of currency in the United States since the days of Andrew Jackson. Our monetary system is sound enough, but it has no elasticity to meet the exigencies of business, and it's going to take a panic to teach our people that we have to do something along the lines advocated by Senator Aldrich of Rhode Island." Senator Aldrich was going up and down the country advocating the principles embodied in the Federal Reserve Act passed during the first year of the administration of Woodrow Wilson. But he wasn't meeting with much success. The panic foreseen by Secretary Shaw came in 1907. For months currency was out of circulation, and we did business on cashier's checks. I think Marshall Field's estimate of Secretary Shaw was a just estimate.

Thus far, I have portrayed only the keen businessman, the logician, the master of finance, the keen analyst. Insofar as space permits, I would fain show you another side. Leslie M. Shaw, as I have said, was Lincolnnesque—apt in illustration, in application perfect. I once saw him change an atmosphere charged with hatred into one of abounding good humor with a story.

#### A MEETING WITHOUT A CHAIRMAN

We had bitter factionalism in the Republican party in the early days of this century. There was a schism relative to the tariff—so sharp that the two factions of the Republicans hated each other worse than they disliked politically their long-time opponents. This incident occurred early in the spring of 1904—the year Theodore Roosevelt was to be nominated in his own right for the presidency. He asked Secretary Shaw to come out to Des Moines and make a speech in the capital. Shaw belonged to the conservative wing of the party.

The atmosphere that night was tense. The leaders of the two factions glared at each other from boxes

on opposite sides of the stage. The audience was about evenly divided. Shaw refused to let anybody introduce him. When the hour for the speech arrived, he walked out of the wings and down to the footlights, looked over the audience and smiled. He was a slender man, slightly stooped, with a keenly intellectual face and kindly eyes. He said:

I am in a very embarrassing position here tonight. I am a Republican. I am a member of a Republican administration. I have to make a Republican speech. I wouldn't want to make any other kind, but I don't want to hurt anybody. The situation reminds me of what took place once upon a time, when a peace-loving Englishman was challenged to a duel by a fiery Frenchman. The Englishman didn't want to fight; neither did he wish to be branded for life as a coward, as he would have been in those days had he refused. Therefore, he accepted, and exercising the prerogative of the challenged party, chose as the place a dark room, and for weapons pistols. It was arranged that the principals and their seconds were to go into a large room in the downtown district, near by which was a church with a clock in its steeple. They were to go in shortly before the hour of noon.

When the room was thoroughly darkened, the seconds were to withdraw, and the principals were to begin shooting on the stroke of the hour of twelve. As they entered the room, each saw that it contained a huge open fireplace. Now the Frenchman, who was at heart a coward and fearful that he would get hurt, the moment the room was darkened climbed into the chimney and when the clock struck the first stroke of twelve, the kind-hearted Englishman, not wishing to hurt even his opponent, went and shot his gun off up the chimney.

"Now I don't want to hurt anybody," repeated Shaw, but I have to make a Republican speech." The theatre rocked with laughter and applause, the tension was broken, Shaw made a great speech and everybody enjoyed it.

The last time I saw him he was just leaving a hotel. "Are we going to have a chance for a visit?" I asked. "I'm afraid not," he said. "There's an automobile at the door to take me on a 400-mile jaunt."

"Can you tell me in a word what you think of the state of the Union?" I queried. "Yes," he said, "one day a white man was dickering with a colored man

for a mule and a cart. 'Has the mule good eye-sight?' said the prospective purchaser. 'Boss, that mule's got eyes like an eagle,' said the darkey. A price was agreed upon. The white man stepped into the cart, took up the reins and drove away. He hadn't gone forty rods, when the mule ran head-long into a tree and smashed things up generally. He went back to the colored man and said, 'Look here Mose, you lied to me. You said that mule had eyes like an eagle. Now the first tree he comes to he runs headlong into it, and you see what's happened. Give me back my money.' 'Boss,' said the Ethiopian, 'you don't know what youse talkin' 'bout—dat mule can see better'n you can. I'll tell you what's de matter with de mule—he jest don't give a damn.' ” The Secretary smiled, stepped into his car, waving his hand as he drove away. I didn't have to hunt anybody up to find out what he meant. I wonder how many of us are still in that frame of mind?

#### “SIX DAYS SHALT THOU LABOR”

The last time I heard Secretary Shaw make a speech was in my home town of Cedar Rapids. It was an impromptu affair in a room adjacent to the dining room of the old Chamber of Commerce. Word got about that he was to make a speech, and the auditorium was packed. He went up onto the platform and said, in effect:

“I'm going to preach you a little sermon this noon. My text is a portion of one of the Commandments, 'Six days shalt thou labor.' ” He kept repeating these words over and over again, teetering up and down on his toes the while. He stopped suddenly, looked searchingly at his audience and said: “I wonder if it is beginning to dawn on you that I am opposed to the Child Labor Amendment.” (It had just been promulgated.) His audience sat forward in their chairs. They hadn't thought the matter through, and most all of them were for it. “I am opposed to it,” he continued, “and I say to you if it becomes a part of the organic law of

this land, it will work more evil than any statute ever enacted in this Republic. Think of it! No one is to be allowed to work until he is eighteen. What are you going to do with those whose mental capacity is not beyond the eighth grade? Let them grow up in idleness, becoming softies or criminals? We have had altogether too much of this kind of thing already. I wonder what would have become of me if I had not been allowed to work before I was eighteen? Of course I am not in favor of the exploitation of children in factories—neither is any other decent man in this day. But this amendment, if it is adopted, will be used by sentimentalists to ruin our youth—absolutely ruin it.”

“I have two grandsons,” he continued, “and you know sometimes grandparents seem to love their grandchildren better than they do their own children. I don’t know what I would do to anyone whom I should hear praying this prayer for those boys: ‘O God never let them have any burdens to bear; any difficulties to overcome; any temptations to resist; make everything easy for them O Lord.’ I think I’d brain them. This is the prayer I pray for them: ‘O God, give them burdens to bear, difficulties to overcome, temptations to resist and strength and grace to conquer.’ ” His audience was on its feet, cheering. It was minutes before he could go on.

This was Shaw—hard-headed, logical, shrewd, yet kindly withal—a statesman of the very first rank. From the standpoint of intellectual power, I very much doubt if anyone from this state surpassed him.

## Governor Shaw and a New Era

By EDGAR R. HARLAN\*

In the campaign of 1897 there were five parties who put tickets in the field, including nominees for gov-

\* Adapted from Mr. Harlan’s “*The People of Iowa*,” Chap. XXXIV, descriptive of Leslie M. Shaw’s entrance to Iowa’s public affairs.

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