

Lynn R. Lewis: Prohibitionist Mayor

By Jonathan Makeley



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Lynn R. Lewis was a businessman, manufacturer, and Prohibitionist Mayor of Cortland, New York. He was one of the various local officials in the state that were elected as a Prohibition Party candidate, and was an example of what a prohibitionist could do as the mayor of a city.

Lynn R. Lewis was born on January 28th, 1858, possibly in Chenango Forks, New York. He was the son of Salmon Lewis and Sarah Lewis. In 1882, Lewis moved to Cortland, New York. In the same year, he married his wife Emily L. Phelps Lewis. They would have 3 children: Paul (1886 to 1950), (Ralph 1892 to 1978), Florence (1893-1894). Around 1886, Lewis began a career as a local businessman and manufacturer. Census records indicate that his manufacturing included things such as tin smithing, producing plumbing materials, and manufacturing plow trucks.

In 1910, Lewis was nominated as the Prohibition Party candidate for Mayor of Cortland. He campaigned on a platform of doing everything in his power to enforce state laws restricting alcohol sales and to shut down saloons where possible, of working to remove graft and corruption from city government, and of strengthening law enforcement. He won the election by a plurality of 100 votes against the Democratic and Republican candidates. The elected city council consisted of 3 Democrats and 3 Republicans. The *Syracuse Post Standard* claimed that Lewis was the first Prohibition Party Mayor of a city in New York State.

The election of Mayor Lewis was met with hope from those who sought to achieve reform in the city. Mayor Lewis made known his intentions to combat liquor, gambling, crime, and corruption in the city. He promised a square deal for every man, with no special treatment for private or corporate interests. He stated that he would receive suggestions from any constituent and give them honest consideration. Lewis also realized that the process of reforming the city would be hard fought and that he likely wouldn't be able to achieve everything he hoped to. But he was committed to achieving what he could.

Mayor Lewis was opposed the city's pro-alcohol politicians, including 4 of the city's six alderman. At the head of this opposition was Alderman Vern Skeel. Skeel was a Democratic Alderman, hotel owner, and liquor dealer, who sought to oppose everything that Lewis sought to achieve.

Mayor Lewis worked to strengthen the city's enforcement of state laws regulating alcohol sales. He was successfully able to appoint a new city commissioner, who was a staunch prohibitionist and shared his goals for strengthening law enforcement. They encouraged city police officers to strictly enforce state laws on alcohol sales. Lewis' administration worked to shut down saloons that didn't have a state liquor license and to shut down licensed saloons that weren't in compliance with state liquor laws.

Lewis' efforts to combat the crime and corruption would eventually lead to the defeat of his opponent Alderman Vern Skeel. In spring of 1912, police officers raided Skeel's hotel on suspicion of it operating as a site of prostitution. Skeel grabbed a revolver and tried to shoot the officers. His wife also tried to assault the officers. Skeel and his wife were arrested and charged for a variety of crimes, including keeping a disorderly premises and assault on police officers. Not long after his arrest, Skeel resigned from his position as alderman. After a ten-day trial, he was convicted of conducting a disorderly house, sentenced to 10 months in prison, and required to pay a \$200 fine. He was charged with a felony for attempting to shoot the officers. It is uncertain whether he was convicted for this, and if so, what sentence he was given for this. Through this, Lewis succeeded in driving out one of the corrupt officials in the city's government.

Lewis did other work as mayor. He sought to remove graft and corruption from the city government, though due to the interference of the opposing alderman, his ability to do this was largely limited to the parts of city government that he could make decisions about on his own. He worked to discourage gambling in the city. He took on the Cortland Gas Light Company for overcharging the city and made them agree to lower their charges. Overall, Mayor Lewis was able to make some changes in the city of Cortland, despite facing opposition.

State Chairman C.E. Pitts described him as an example of what a Prohibitionist mayor could be and used his mayoralty as a template for a general platform of what a prohibitionist mayoral candidate could run on and work to accomplish as a mayor.

Mayor Lewis ran for reelection in 1912. His opponents in the Democratic and Republican parties united against him. The local Republican and Democratic Parties both nominated a Republican named Mr. Angell. Angell won the election with 1,486 votes to 1,103 votes for Lewis.

After losing reelection, Lewis returned to his regular life as a citizen. His wife Emily died in 1922. After that he ended up living with his son Ralph and his family in Cortland. By 1930, he was a foreman at one of the city's wire mills. Lynn R. Lewis died on March 24, 1940 and was buried in Cortland Rural Cemetery.

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