

Iowa People and Events . . .

Grant Sought Iowa's Wilson

An Iowa statesman who became an important figure in national American life was Sen. James F. Wilson of Fairfield. He first served as a member of the Iowa constitutional convention of 1856, then in the Iowa House of Representatives in the Seventh General Assembly in 1857, in the Iowa senate in 1859-61 and its president in 1861. He was a delegate from Iowa to the Democratic national convention at Baltimore in 1860, and when Samuel R. Curtis resigned his seat in congress to enter the army, Wilson was elected as a Democrat to fill the vacancy thus created in the Thirty-seventh congress; re-elected as a Republican and served until 1869.

In 1862, Iowa's increased population entitled it to six representatives instead of two. The eight men then to serve as its delegation in congress and remain during the period of the war and longer, has always been regarded as one of its ablest, consisting of James W. Grimes and James Harlan, senators, and James F. Wilson, from the First district, Hiram Price from the Second, William B. Allison from the Third, J. B. Grinnell from the Fourth, John A. Kasson from the Fifth, and A. W. Hubbard from the Sixth. Wilson served as one of the managers appointed by the House of Representatives in 1868 to conduct the impeachment proceedings against President Andrew Johnson.

In the make-up of his cabinet President Grant appointed Repr. Elihu B. Washburne, of Illinois, Secretary of State. In a revealing sketch regarding this action, Leigh Leslie quoted Grant as saying afterward in regard to the premiership:

My first choice for the State department was James F. Wilson, of Iowa. I appointed Mr. Washburne under peculiar circumstances. Mr. Washburne knew he was going to

France and wanted to go. I called on him one day when he was ill. I found him in a desponding mood. He said that before going to a country like France he would like to have the prestige of a cabinet office; that it would help his mission very much. He suggested the Treasury. I had already spoken to Mr. Stewart on the subject, and said I would make him, Washburne, Secretary of State. So came the appointment.

It has been stoutly denied that Grant offered Wilson a position in the cabinet. The following letter which was written by Grant's own hand, will serve to forever settle the question:

Washington, D. C., April 9, 1869

Hon. James F. Wilson:

Dear Sir,—It is but an act of simple justice to you that I should state that I have seen, with pain, for the last few days, studied and persistent attacks upon you for a vote which it seems you gave, as a member of the judiciary committee in the last congress, upon the McGarrahan claim. I was not aware that you gave such a vote until I saw these attacks, and now have no knowledge or opinion upon the merits of the claim. My opinion of you, however, is such that I do not doubt but you cast your vote conscientiously, and according to testimony advanced before the committee. The gossip, therefore, which says "that a distinguished member lost a seat in the cabinet, and a place in the confidence of his friends, through his connection with the case," is untrue. If it alludes to you, and it clearly does, it is refuted by the fact that I tendered you a place in my cabinet, and very much regretted that you felt constrained not to accept, for reasons entirely personal to yourself, and having no connection with any official act of yours.

With assurance that I still entertain the same high opinion of you that I did when tendering you a cabinet appointment, I remain, very truly,

Your obedient servant,

(s) U. S. GRANT

It was distinctly understood when Washburne was appointed Secretary of State that he was to resign within a few months and go as Minister to France, and that Wilson was to succeed him as premier. Wilson meantime was tendered another place in the cabinet, but he declined it. Once ensconced in the State Department, Washburne set diligently about the task of

dispensing the patronage of the office, and so well did he accomplish his purpose that, when he resigned, all the offices at his disposal had been given to his own friends. Naturally enough Wilson was indignant at the turn affairs had taken, and, without regaling the public with an exploitation of the reasons that impelled him to do so, he dignifiedly declined the highest place in the president's council. He could see no other course open to him consistent with dignity and self-respect. He cherished, however, no resentment toward Grant. The latter had no better friend than he proved to be.

The vicious spoils system nearly wrecked Grant's first administration. The successful soldier made a poor politician; he did not understand the arts of self-seekers and demagogues, and he was, therefore, easily imposed upon. To the unscrupulous place-hunters by whom he unsuspectingly surrounded himself were due the scandals that came so near destroying him. In the bitterness and the blindness of party rancor he was assailed most mercilessly for the acts of his betrayers. Washburne was unquestionably able but inordinately ambitious. As Minister to France he performed distinguished services.

Subsequently, President Grant appointed Wilson as the Government director of the Union Pacific Railroad, in which position he served eight years; then on January 10, 1882, was elected as a Republican to the United State senate, and re-elected in 1889, serving until March 3, 1895, being an unsuccessful candidate for re-election that year, and died April 22, 1895.

Joined in Abuse of Lincoln

Comment is noted often of the "Copperhead" tendencies of Iowa's first two United States senators—George W. Jones and Augustus C. Dodge, whose first service in that capacity dated from 1848, but fortunately were succeeded in the fifties by James Harlan and James W. Grimes. During the Civil war a large

contingent, some high in official and military station, most severely criticized President Lincoln. Among these was former Col. Wm. H. Merritt, editor of the *Daily Iowa Statesman*, Des Moines, as evidenced by the following editorial appearing in that paper July 11, 1863:

"It is said that previous to the arrest of Vallandigham, when the expediency of his arrest was being discussed in the cabinet, Chase opposed the arrest of Vallandigham, or any prominent man from the state of Ohio, and asked Seward, 'why, if arbitrary arrests were to be made, they were not made in his own state of New York, where it was notorious that journals and politicians were more bitter and denunciatory of the war and the administration than they were at the West.'

"The administration and its friends have had much tribulation for fear its war policy would be brought into disrepute. In the present contest, no power on earth, except the disreputable policy which the president has seen fit to pursue, could bring either his own person or administrative acts into contempt. It is his own inconsistency and folly which have made him the butt of friends and foes alike. To be consistent, the president should not only arrest all Democrats, in every state, who discuss his policy, but he should also arrest the members of his own party who give sign of turbulence. The president has been kicked, cuffed, browbeaten and insulted, more by Wendell Phillips, Wilson, Wade, Chandler, and others of his own party, than any other class of men in the country. Phillips, from the inauguration of the president to the present time, has made no speech without pouring billingsgate or ridicule upon his head."

Less Hired Help on Iowa Farms

Hired farm labor seems to be gradually disappearing from the Iowa farm picture. While more farmers are hiring help than they were 10 years ago, they are

hiring less labor for shorter periods. This is shown in a cooperative study of the Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA.

Iowa farmers apparently are getting along with less hired labor through constantly increasing mechanization, newer and more efficient farming methods—and because opportunities for urban employment are taking the workers.

Ray E. Wakeley and Paul J. Jehlik of Iowa State College and USDA say that Iowa farmers appear to be approaching a level of self-sufficiency. This, with a combination of adequate mechanized equipment, available family labor and machine hire, is leading to the commercialized family-type farm.

For the hired farm worker, say the rural sociologists, this trend poses the problem of finding supplemental off-farm employment for an increasingly greater part of the year. But perhaps more important, they point out, is that if hired labor continues to disappear, it may close one of the pathways for young men to get started farming. Many farmers received their start in farming by first engaging as a hired hand.

The Iowa Capitol's Architecture

The State Capitol has much to commend it to the people of Iowa. It stands upon a commanding site, from which its golden dome can be seen for many miles. No Iowan who has a clean heart and wholesome state pride can catch a glimpse of that dome, when approaching the capitol city, without a thrill of pleasure. That first glimpse comes with no other part of the city in sight, with a background of moving clouds or clear sky, when its connection with the earth is out of view, and when its form and beauty are alone sufficient to touch our emotions.

One is disposed to linger upon the value of distant views of this central dome, because it is really the best

part of the whole building from the artistic standpoint. Even the four little domes stiffly disposed about it are not able to greatly diminish its importance. The capitol, like most of the public buildings of the country, is designed upon classic lines. Its style is a tribute to the architectural instincts of ancient Greece, to the achievements of Rome, to the Renaissance and to modern needs. There are to be seen columns and pediments of the Grecian type, the dome of the Roman and the provisions for suitable lighting, which the use of the building for offices makes necessary.

The influence of that old civilization on the shores of the Mediterranean is not more marked in any department of life than in the form it has given to the work of architecture in all quarters of the globe. It is not a little remarkable that after so many centuries the people of another hemisphere should go back to it for the ruling idea displayed in their buildings.

The Iowa capitol is a very fair representative of the state for which it stands. Large enough to command respect, built of good and honest material, adapted to the uses for which it was designed, it is a monument of which the people of the state are justly proud. They are warranted in a proper pride in the history of its construction, for it was paid for when the stones were laid, without the contracting of debt and without its fair walls being tainted by any suspicion of extravagance or corruption. Its interior does not shame its outward seeming. The rotunda and liberal halls are appropriate to its character as a public building. Its display of marbles from distant lands is interesting, and its ample offices, with well chosen mural decorations, afford a suitable home for departments of the state government.—Ernest Edward Clark, in *Midland Monthly*, August, 1898.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.