

A CHAPTER ON IOWA AND THE TARIFF

By ORA WILLIAMS*

The unceasing flow of inquiries across the desk of the curator of a state historical department is much like that which an active newspaper editor encounters in his work; and at rare times there seems to be such damning of the debris as to almost compel a clearing by research and exposition on one topic or another. Just as we were about to celebrate the first peacetime Christmas after World War II, some old penciled notes and faded letters that came together suggested making a record, perhaps not for publication, but to serve as a guide to future consideration of the matter of customs tariffs and the Iowa view thereof.

Upon the wall of my office is a fine photograph portrait of Albert B. Cummins, given to me by him about the time he was leaving the office of Governor of Iowa to become a Senator of the United States. A letter of inquiry from Lt. Comd'r Edw. E. Younger, a professor of diplomatic history at the University of Virginia, indicates that he is engaged in writing what may be a book about John A. Kasson, of Iowa, and his work as a diplomat and internationalist. This is the occasion for going into the letters of Mr. Kasson in the manuscript division of the State Department of History and Archives which department has recently taken over for its use the Kasson Memorial hall on East Thirteenth street, to the building fund of which Mr. Kasson was the largest contributor. Notation is found, in the catalog, that in May, 1904, a letter was received by Mr. Kasson from Ora Williams enclosing copy of the resolutions of a Republican state convention that year, and asking for comments. This is followed by notation that Mr. Kasson received from Gov. A. B. Cummins a letter in which he expresses "his ap-

*This article was written by Mr. Williams in 1946 while he still was curator of the State Department of History and Archives.

preciation of Kasson's letter to Mr. Williams which stirred up the Republican party in Iowa."

One can hardly be held to blame for following such a strange lead into the forgotten past. The fact is recalled, somewhat vaguely at first, that Mr. Kasson's letter, in response to the request indicated above, might be among the old papers in my room where I sleep and sometimes read, or listen to the radio. Yes, it was found, and a second letter, both in the hand of the veteran statesman, written out with the zeal and care of a crusader. One of the letters lacks the year date. A reference in the latter leads to search in the library of the volumes of the *American Review of Reviews* to establish the year. Now the *Review of Reviews* was a greatly esteemed magazine of fifty years ago, edited by Albert Shaw, an Iowa man, whose portrait had been recently secured for the State Historical Department's collection of portraits of Iowa authors. As I was poring over these old magazines, strangely enough a letter comes to the desk from this same Albert Shaw who is preparing a book on his recollections of Iowa.

Just another coincidence to mention. Upon going through the filing cases looking for material for use on THE ANNALS OF IOWA, I just happened at this time to come upon a manuscript by Charles Rollin Keyes, who died two years ago, and it is on "An Iowan before the Hapsburg Throne," meaning Mr. Kasson. He had left it with me for publication and had also promised another on the diplomacy of Mr. Kasson.

Putting this and that together, how could I avoid writing out a little story about Mr. Kasson and the Iowa viewpoint of the tariff. And that reminds me—John A. Kasson came to Iowa from St. Louis in the year the state capital was located at Des Moines. He had been in the "free soil" movement in Vermont. Neither the political or physical atmosphere of Missouri suited him. He helped organize the Republican party in Iowa and was

chairman of its campaign committee. Politics was his natural habitat.

When the great American crisis approached we find Mr. Kasson at Chicago writing the platform on which Abraham Lincoln would be elected to the presidency. A new party was in the making. The tariff would become a political issue. Secession would soon write into the constitution of the Confederacy a clause forbidding any protective tariff. Mr. Kasson wrote into the Lincoln platform this:

That while providing revenue for the support of the general government by duties upon imports, sound policy requires such an adjustment of these imports (duties) as to encourage the development of the industrial interest of the whole country.

IOWA REPUBLICANS UNCERTAIN ON TARIFF

A man from the raw prairies of Iowa was first to state clearly the whole philosophy of a tariff for revenue and the protection of home industries. It was to be a long and crooked path that Iowa would follow in finding the solid ground for a protective tariff. Iowa was an agricultural state and without manufacturers. Sheep growing was much stressed and the tariff rates on wool were deemed important. Men commenced to line up for or against in the early seventies. Wm. B. Allison in congress six years had not played the game with the skill that came to him later. His votes on the wool schedule won for him reputation as "a free trader." For this he was beaten by Judge Geo. G. Wright, whose protective tariff ideas were orthodox. And yet, Iowa was uncertain about the tariff. By 1875, with Governor Kirkwood making his come-back, the party said:

That we favor at tariff for revenue, so adjusted as to encourage home industry.

That seemed to be shying off from the elevated dais on which Mr. Kasson had placed the national party. In 1877, with John H. Gear running for governor, the party said simply:

That we favor a wisely adjusted tariff for revenue.

This was repeated the next year without change. Again, in 1879, this went for the party. By 1883 the tariff indicator had swung far to the right, and a state convention, over which Mr. Kasson presided, condemned the alleged efforts of the party opponents to establish free trade and came out flatly for protection.

Recital of this rather dry and well known history leads squarely up to the letters heretofore referred to. In the meantime Mr. Kasson had been the American representative engaged for years in endeavoring to so deal with tariff duties and reciprocal concessions as to give to the American farmer and manufacturer as much of the world market as possible. He was, in fact, the great practical exponent of utilizing the tariff for commercial advantages. When he returned on one occasion, from service for his country at foreign courts, he was given a reception in his home town of Des Moines, as if he were a returning hero of many campaigns. I sat on the porch of his house on Sycamore street and interviewed him on more than one occasion, as he told with delight of his world experiences. He was living in retirement when in the year 1903 the Republicans of Iowa declared:

We endorse the policy of reciprocity as the natural complement of protection. Reciprocity between nations is trade for mutual advantage and both must give and take.

That was in line with the life work of Mr. Kasson. That was the platform on which Governor Cummins was re-elected as chief executive. That was the platform Cummins had in mind when he attended as a conspicuous figure a great national reciprocity convention in Chicago. Then something happened. A state convention to choose delegates to a national convention, fell into the hands of a group that did not share the Cummins' views on world trade. In May, 1904, the party declaration was:

We are in favor of reciprocity in non-competitive products only.

The rest of the plank was like this. It was a year to elect president and not governor. I was in active newspaper work. I knew Kasson and thought I understood

what he would think on the tariff. So the letter that now turns up in the Kasson manuscripts was written. The answer has now been added to the files.

JOHN A. KASSON TO ORA WILLIAMS

Washington, 1726 I street, May 27, 1904.

Mr. Ora Williams, Des Moines, Iowa.

Dear Sir: In reply to yours of the 22nd instant, I have not the health or vigor to enter into the discussion to which you invite me, I thank you for the copy of the platform which you sent me, and regret that meaningless platitudes have been substituted in it about the tariff for the usual plain talk to which Iowa farmers were treated in former times. Not one politician in a thousand studies the actual conditions of our exports to foreign countries, or of our imports from them, and the relation of each to our industries. They do not understand that in those articles—particularly of agriculture—whereof we produce a large surplus for export, if the foreign market were lost to us the effect upon the home industries concerned would be just as disastrous to our industries as if an equal amount of the foreign product were imported. It is surpluses on our market—no matter where they come from—that make prices sag. Hence it is of prime importance to us to secure always foreign markets for our surplus.

Again, the platform favors "reciprocity in non-competitive products only." Will the author of that plank try his hand at making a treaty with any nation of Europe on that basis? I wish he would. He would not find enough business covered by his treaty to maintain a store at a Kentucky crossroads village.

Reciprocity does not mean free trade. As interpreted by the treaties made under the Dingley tariff act and by direction of President McKinley, it means a concession on our side of a percentage of duties of our tariffs not needed for the adequate protection of our industries, in exchange for a reduction of duties on the other side which is of more importance to our production for the export trade.

It was so interpreted by Dingley himself, in the offers he made to the Canadians in the British American commission, when a reciprocity convention was under consideration. On some things he offered a larger or smaller reduction of duties, in some cases entire freedom from duty, in exchange for satisfactory concessions on the other side.

This platform indorses the Dingley act and in the next sentence repudiates the reciprocity for which it provided.

Further, the platform has expressions of a mysterious significance, as when it declares it "unwise to legislate in a manner to provoke American industries to making war upon each other." Does this mean that competition should be discouraged? I can not believe this, and yet to what legislation does it refer?

I should have desired a platform which declares with old Iowa frankness that we adhere firmly to the doctrine of protection at to home production and home industry, adequate to the maintenance of the home market with fair profits to labor and capital employed. At the same time we recognize the necessity for securing foreign markets for our rapidly increasing surplus production beyond the demands of the home market.

We also recognize the fact that in a country of rapidly changing development and ever changing international commerce, no tariff law can be like "the law of the Medes and Persians which changeth not," but should be revised from time to time to adapt it to changing conditions, whether increasing or lowering the duties according to the needs of the times. Such changes, however, should be entrusted by the people only to the party which stands firmly by the principle of protection to home industry.

Very truly yours, JOHN A. KASSON

This was indeed the thunderbolt that aroused the Republicans of Iowa to the danger into which they had been led by the bitter factionalism, so that what might be called the "old line" party leaders were already far astray from the historic position of the party on the tariff. Not surprising at all, that Governor Cummins wrote to Mr. Kasson in approval of the criticism voiced by the experienced diplomat. Little did the governor know that he would be irresistably drawn into a third campaign for governor against all precedents and in violation of his own personal desire. But, he did have it in his mind that some time he would again be a candidate for the senate and seek to go where tariff policies are actually made. The governor had been given one added year to his second term by the legislative adoption of the biennial election plan. Despite the plain effort to sidestep the historic attitude of the Republicans toward the tariff, the state went strong for election of Col. Theodore Roosevelt. There were others who shared with Kasson and Cummins the chagrin over the Iowa departure, and in my files lies this letter from

the president of the Iowa commission to the St. Louis exposition:

WILLIAM LARRABEE TO ORA WILLIAMS

St. Louis, Mo., Iowa State building, June 18, 1904.

Ora Williams, Des Moines, Iowa.

Dear Sir: I have read the Kasson letter with much satisfaction. Among all the public men of the country, none were better equipped to outline a tariff policy, or to prepare a tariff schedule, than Kasson, Blaine, McKinley and Dingley.

It is unfortunate when the advice of such men is ignored and when congressmen fall under the selfish and vicious influences that always hover about our national capital.

People who only desire good government, and do not expect to share in the spoils of office, have only contempt for a clap-trap deception political platform. The early platforms of the Republican party make wholesome reading for the present day.

Yours truly, WM. LARRABEE

Then came the campaign of 1906, the most dramatic in all Iowa history. I had moved to Chicago and was editor of a daily paper. I learned at a dinner of the Chicago press club something of a meeting held in the office of the Pullman company by Iowa men responsible for the 1904 platform, which led me to return at once to Iowa. I commenced a vigorous campaign to compel Governor Cummins to be a third term candidate. But I was only one of many. Cummins was renominated and saved the party from complete wreckage. His friends controlled the resolutions committee. The tariff indicator was brought back to normal with this declaration:

We favor the reciprocity inaugurated by Blaine, advocated by McKinley and Roosevelt and recognized in Republican platforms and legislation.

Against open rebellion in his own party the governor was re-elected. I sat in a quiet nook of the state central committee offices and furnished the publicity. It is not my purpose here to write the story of that stirring chapter of Iowa political history. I am thinking now only of the strange story of Iowa and the tariff. Again I delve

into my files of forty years ago and find this letter which should be added:

JOHN A. KASSON TO ORA WILLIAMS

Washington, 1726 I street, Oct. 4th (1906)

Mr. Ora Williams.

My Dear Sir: I have yours of the Oct. 1 with Gov. Cummins' opening speech, and am much obliged for it. Its moderate tone is surprising under gross provocation. It is admirable and worthy of the governor.

I watched the canvass for the nomination with great interest and the governor won a splendid victory. I was glad to see that it was widely appreciated.

The article in *Review of Reviews* for September was very good. You can call the governor's attention to the third article of the Dingley tariff, which authorizes a large reduction in reciprocity upon a few special articles—wines, &c, upon which the administration is still acting to save our markets abroad with Spain and Hungary, &c. It proves that the Dingley tariff recognized the fact that some duties were needlessly high for purposes of protection, and could be safely reduced. It was a perpetual provision.

I am too weak to write fully upon the question as I would like to do.

I hope the Governor may win by a large majority, & that before I die I may see him a senator of the United States.

I am grieved to hear bad news of Allison's health.

Yours very truly, JOHN A. KASSON

The reference by Mr. Kasson to the *Review of Reviews* led to the library shelf, and there I found a volume of that admirable magazine which Dr. Albert Shaw, of Iowa, edited, and a splendid sketch of Governor Cummins, from the hand of his warm friend, Johnson Brigham, the then state librarian, in which was made the whole story of the fight for the reciprocity use of tariff schedules.

Mr. Kasson had his wish in living to welcome the governor to Washington where he became a senator. Mr. Kasson's activities had wide range—political manager, platform writer, postmaster general, furthering the postal union, member of congress, maker of reciprocity treaties, lecturer on diplomacy and historian of the constitution.

But his heart was always in carrying out fully and completely the tariff policy that he wrote into the platform on which his party rode to power.

KASSON FROM AN EDITOR'S VIEWPOINT

My letter files turn up one more item in this connection. It is manuscript of an article written by myself for and published in the *Omaha Bee* on October 13, 1901, when I was on the editorial staff of that excellent newspaper. This was a story about Kasson while he was yet active and gave the viewpoint of a reporter of his times. Here is one paragraph:

When Iowa selected delegates to the Republican national convention in 1860 so many wished to go that double the number of delegates were selected, and among them was John A. Kasson. He went to Chicago and was placed by the Iowa delegation on the committee on resolutions, and by that committee on the sub-committee to frame the platform. While serving on this sub-committee all night long he actually wrote the major portion of the platform and was credited by Horace Greeley, also a member of the committee, with being the real author of the platform on which Abraham Lincoln was elected president.

Mr. Kasson's interest in the tariff never failed. In the same article, written now forty-five years ago, reference was made to his work in the diplomatic field, and his work in congress, and then:

President McKinley was next to demand something of Mr. Kasson. He was appointed a special commission to negotiate reciprocity treaties with certain governments, especially the South and Central American nations, and he entered upon this duty with great hope. He did, indeed, secure the signing of several very important treaties, which provided for better trade relations in the interest of American consumers and dealers. But the senate failed to confirm these treaties and Mr. Kasson resigned his position in disgust, deeply regretting that his labors are for the present in vain.

Now that in this year 1946 there is an aroused interest in better trade relations and a new diplomacy to direct international affairs, this little story of a great American may have some value. The opportunity to bring together these scattered items is to the writer a reminder once again that the one grand royal job of a newspaper man

is that of reporter, a daily explorer in the jungles of an active civilization, a knight errant ever seeking new adventures and evaluating the activities of life, ever seeking and often finding the hidden gems of information, a volunteer liaison man between the few who do things and many who want to know about everything. Would that I had been a better reporter.

MISSISSIPPI NAVIGATION IN 1844

The Mississippi usually rises at this season of the year, but it is now quite low and reported to be falling. So, navigation will not in all probability be improved this season, which will be very unfortunate for the towns above the lower rapids, inasmuch as the boats on the upper river trade are chiefly engaged in the lead trade and are often too heavily loaded to take freight from points above the rapids. But a small portion of the upper country merchants have yet laid in their stock of fall and winter goods, which leaves the whole upper country in danger of suffering inconveniences incalculable should winter suddenly come upon us. Boats are now detained for some time in crossing the lower rapids, which retards the progress of navigation to such an extent as to leave the upper country always in danger of disappointment, which should prompt it to new and energetic exertions to procure an appropriation for the removal of obstructions at the rapids. An exhibit of the increase of trade on the upper Mississippi would not be without effect in inducing congress to provide for the improvement of the navigation of the river.—*Bloomington (Muscatine) Herald*, October 25, 1844.

KOSSUTH ASKED IOWA TO HELP CAUSE

Kossuth has written to Governor Hempstead of Iowa saying that he cannot visit that state, but advises him to form Hungarian associations for the purpose of raising "material aid."—*Western Democrat*, Bellevue, Iowa, March 17, 1852.

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