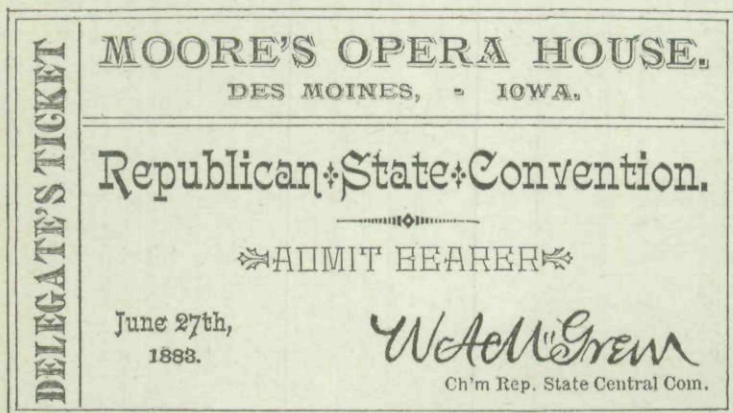


THE PIVOTAL CONVENTION OF 1883*

By DAVID C. MOTT

Some of our readers will remember an article by the late William O. Payne on Moore's Opera House, Des Moines, published in THE ANNALS in January, 1930, Volume XVII, pp. 163-67. That historic building had been burned March 24, 1929. In that article Mr. Payne gave attention to the Republican state convention of June 27, 1883, which he said, and which no doubt is true, was the last Republican state convention held in that building, as thereafter more modern facilities were available. Mr. Payne's article was of much personal interest to me as it was the first state convention I ever attended, and com-



FACSIMILE OF D. C. MOTT'S DELEGATE TICKET

ing to Des Moines then was my first visit to the capital city. I was a green farmer boy, although twenty-five years old. I put up at the Aborn House, near the Rock Island depot. The *Iowa State Register*, and Moore's Opera House were a little further up Fourth street.

*David C. Mott served as Assistant Curator of the Iowa Department of History and Archives and Associate Editor of *The Annals of Iowa* from 1919 to 1937. In July, 1939 he wrote this article and it was filed in the manuscripts awaiting publication in *The Annals*. He passed away March 8, 1941.

In his comprehensive and luminous way Mr. Payne delineated the conditions that caused this particular convention to be of unusual importance. One who did not live through the few years preceding 1883 can scarcely realize the great interest there was taken then by the people in the liquor question. The Sons of Temperance, and the Washingtonian Society had had their day somewhat, but the Blue Ribbon Movement and the Good Templars were in their heyday. The Republican party had been friendly enough to the temperance sentiment to promise a submission of an amendment to the state constitution. An intensive campaign went on, especially during 1881 and the early part of 1882, and the prohibition amendment was submitted to the voters on June 27, 1882, and adopted by a majority of 29,759.

Iowa was a good deal younger in 1882 than it is now, younger in years, and in experience, especially in experience concerning the liquor question. One bright morning soon after that election, but long enough after so we all knew the result, I met on a prairie road near our home in Keokuk county Uncle Joe Reeder. He had been at the head of the Good Templar lodge of that township and was regarded by all us youngsters as a wise man. After our greetings I said, "Well, the fight's over, isn't it!" His reply was, "No, young man. The fight has just commenced." After the lapse of half a century I am inclined to think Mr. Reeder was really a wise man, even wiser than we then suspected.

Before the end of the year a case reached the District Court of Scott county, Judge Walter I. Hayes presiding, and the amendment was declared as having been illegally passed by the General Assembly, hence unconstitutional. On January 18, 1883, the Supreme Court rendered a decision affirming Judge Hayes. The opinion was delivered by Chief Justice William H. SeEVERS and concurred in by Justices James G. Day, Austin Adams, and James H. Rothrock. Justice Joseph M. Beck dissented. At the April term of the Supreme Court an attempt was made to have the case opened for a rehearing. The ablest attor-

neys of the state were employed on each side, but the majority of the court adhered to its former opinion. During all this time the state was much wrought up over the controversy.

LIQUOR QUESTION CONFRONTED REPUBLICANS

It was in this situation that the Republican state convention of June 27, 1883, met in Moore's Opera House. There were two subjects that intensified interest in this convention. What position will be taken in its platform of principles on the liquor question, now that the amendment is declared void? What will the convention do as to renominating the justices of the Supreme Court who ruled out the amendment?

I do not think it is presumption on the part of us who are now the "old fellows" to say the state conventions of those years were of greater interest and importance than those held now-a-days. The nomination of candidates for state offices instead of by primary election made the convention a great event. There were less large meetings, less travel. Nearly all the travel being by railroad made meetings less frequent. No radios and less newspapers, made those interested in politics anxious to partake of the enthusiasm of the big convention, and to hear the big orators of the party. And there were some then. One hardly ever went to a Republican state convention then without being inspired by such men as Hepburn, Dolliver, Henderson, Cousins, James F. Wilson, Kasson or Allison.

The old Opera House was jammed full for this meeting, the delegates nearly filling it. Judging by our own delegation, that from Keokuk county, if all the chosen delegates were not there, others got their proxies, and came along, so our delegation of ten was there. I remember how we were jammed in closely together as we were seated at the convening.

State Chairman W. A. McGrew of Ottumwa called the assembly to order at 11:00 A. M. Bishop Hurst of the Methodist Episcopal church pronounced an invocation, brief, appropriate, and in fine spirit. The temporary

chairman, John A. Kasson was then introduced. Kasson had already served several terms in congress, had won eminence in the field of diplomacy, was one of Iowa's most distinguished public men, and was a polished and eloquent orator. His speech met the full expectations of the audience.

KASSON RECOGNIZED DRY SENTIMENT

On the keynote subject of discussion Kasson said: "In the great and unending debate between the claims of Iowa homes and the demands of Iowa saloons, the Republican party, enlightened by and obedient to the popular verdict rendered just one year ago today, ought not, cannot, and will not take the side of the saloon." The response of the delegates and audience to this sentiment was so spontaneous that nothing more was needed to indicate the dries had the convention.

The appointment of the committees followed Kasson's speech. The committee on resolutions, its members having been selected that morning in the caucuses of the several districts, was about as dry as if it had been hand-picked for the occasion. However, it was composed of eminent citizens, and was as follows:

- First District, James F. Wilson, Fairfield.
- Second District, John Mahin, Muscatine.
- Third District, Daniel Kerr, Grundy Center.
- Fourth District, Aaron Brown, Fayette.
- Fifth District, S. N. Fellows, Iowa City.
- Sixth District, Frank T. Campbell, Newton.
- Seventh District, J. S. Clarkson, Des Moines.
- Eighth District, A. J. Baker, Centerville.
- Ninth District, John Y. Stone, Glenwood.
- Tenth District, D. D. Miracle, Webster City.
- Eleventh District, J. N. Miller, Odebolt.

After the appointment of the committees, adjournment was taken to 1:30 p. m. On reassembling at that time the convention was all on tiptoe awaiting the climaxes. The Jasper county delegates were occupying seats im-

mediately back of ours when my attention was attracted by the handsome and vivacious personality of a man in their delegation who I soon learned was former Lieutenant Governor Frank T. Campbell. Several of the delegates, knowing he was a member of the committee on resolutions were plying him with questions about the sort of a resolution on the liquor question the committee had agreed to, and his only reply to them was, "Well, it's mighty good readin'."

When the convention was called to order Colonel David B. Henderson of Dubuque was made permanent chairman. The previous November he had been elected the member of congress from the Third District and as congress did not convene until the next December he had not entered as yet on his long and distinguished career in the House of Representatives, and he was at this time almost a stranger to the members of this convention excepting those of the Third District. His speech full of humor, happily phrased and abounding in vigorous oratory, was very well received.

Scarcely ever has a Republican state convention had two such outstanding orators as its presiding officers, the stately and classical Kasson and the eloquent and magnetic Henderson, and never had it a better reading clerk than Cal Manning of Ottumwa. His voice had quality and carrying power.

The convention renominated Buren R. Sherman for governor, O. H. Manning for lieutenant governor, and John W. Akers for superintendent of Public Instruction, all by acclamation, and harmoniously. Each one, as nominated, responded in a few remarks. Mr. Manning, in his talk of perhaps three minutes gave expression to that famous epigram, "A schoolhouse on every hill and no saloon in the valley," which brought a furor of applause. Then came the only test vote of the convention, the vote on the nomination of a candidate for justice of the Supreme Court.

RETIREMENT OF SUPREME JUSTICE DAY

James G. Day of Fremont county was the only justice whose term was to end with 1883, but he was one of the four justices who rendered the decision against the prohibitory amendment only five months before, a decision quite obnoxious to this convention. Justice Day had been a captain in the Fifteenth Iowa Infantry in the Civil war, was badly wounded at Shiloh, had served eight years as judge of the District Court, and was just finishing his twelfth year on the bench of the Supreme Court. No objections were being made to Justice Day except he was one of the four who gave the opinion that killed the prohibitory amendment. But that was enough in the eyes of these delegates as was soon shown. The competitors with Judge Day were District Judge George W. Ruddick of Waverly, Circuit Judge Robert G. Reiniger of Charles City, former District Judge James W. McDill of Afton, and District Judge Joseph R. Reed of Council Bluffs. The informal ballot gave Reed, 270; McDill, 248; Day, 133; Reiniger, 78; Ruddick, 58. Before the roll call of the first formal ballot was finished Judge Reed was nominated by acclamation. Thus ended the only actual contest in the convention.

The committee on resolutions then made its report through their chairman, United States Senator James F. Wilson. Senator Wilson was then in his prime. He read the document with proper modulation, dignity and emphasis; it was enthusiastically received by the great body of the convention and was adopted unanimously and with cheers. The clause concerning prohibition said the fact that the people of Iowa having adopted the amendment, "we accept the result of that election . . . as the verdict of the people in favor of constitutional and statutory prohibition, and without making any new test of party fealty" they went on and pledged the party to enact and enforce those principles. Thus the Republican party of Iowa shouldered a responsibility that later became burdensome as years went by.

But while enthusiasm ran high, it was evident that

there was a minor tone, a minority who were yielding against their judgment. However, the *Iowa State Register* the next day said "Those who said that this convention would be angry and divided, saw it unite at last in a platform adopted without a dissenting vote. Those who said it would have an intolerant majority, which would make a crusade on all who differed with it, and on the court which disappointed the state by its decision, saw a contest of great tolerance, free from personal accusation or feeling, and ending in a ticket ratified by an unanimous convention."

So it must be said that Republican state convention held on June 27, 1883, just one year to a day from the adoption of the Prohibition amendment by a vote of the people, stands out as one of the pivotal conventions in the political history of Iowa.

THE NATIONAL CAPITAL IN IOWA

The citizens of Council Bluffs are petitioning congress for the removal of the national capital from its present locality to Council Bluffs. One of their strong grounds of claim upon the capital is their geographical location; Council Bluffs being, as they alleged, the exact center of Uncle Sam's dominion. That dodge won't work, friends. There was a time when such a claim was valid. But Uncle Sam, like all other earthly matters, changes.

When Seward purchased the new territory of Alaska, and affixed it to the northwest corner of our domain, the geographical center immediately took its departure from the "great commercial emporium," and set itself down in Sanborn & Follett's lumber yard, in Sioux City, and there it sticks now, plainly visible to the naked eye, and defying the most persistent efforts to remove it.

Still, notwithstanding we have a very decided advantage in this respect, we are not disposed to quarrel with our Council Bluffs friends, over the location of the capital, but will rather unite with them in securing to our sister town the benefits and advantages they so much desire.—*Sioux City Journal*, January 1, 1868.

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.