

ANNALS OF IOWA

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

SHIFTING SANDS OF POLITICS IN IOWA

They who stand in line at the voting booths are inclined to the assumption that the lines of cleavage for the political parties are fixed and have always been that way. The passing of a former Iowan at his western home the other day was a reminder of the queer pranks sometimes played by the political currents and cross-currents, at least in Iowa. Newton B. Ashby died at the age of 88 at Tucson, Ariz. He lived in Iowa a long time. He had an influential and honorable part in the framing of public opinion in his time. He had been an editor, a writer, a speaker, a thinker, and for a time held public office. He was a farmer and wrote for the farmers. He wrote and published a book, the "Riddle of the Sphinx," and another entitled "Wealth and Civilization"; and these titles suggest the scope of his thinking. Once he turned aside to seek and accept public office. In a story of his life and family, published twenty years ago, he tells how it came about. He had taught school in Winterset, married a daughter of Henry Wallace, became connected with the *Iowa Homestead*, then became a lecturer and organizer of the Iowa Farmers Alliance, then to Cedar Rapids, where he became editor of the *Farmer & Breeder* in which Fred Faulkes was also a partner. Then as to appointment to an office:

Grover Cleveland was elected president a second time in 1892. I had been for years a Democrat in national politics on the tariff question and a Republican in Iowa on the prohibition question, before it became a "Mulct" party, and an independent in local politics. The Democratic party was under some obligation to me for the Hutchinson incident. I applied to Jerry Richardson of Davenport, National Democratic committeeman from Iowa, for an appointment in the consular service. It came about in this way. Your

grandfather Wallace was visiting us in Cedar Rapids over Sunday. He and Faulkes and I were in conversation. Faulkes suddenly sprang the proposition that I ought to have an appointment in the Foreign Service.

The result of our conference was that the next day I took train for Davenport with a letter from Mr. Faulkes to Mr. Richardson. Mr. Richardson read the letter and then turned to me and asked what letters of recommendation and petitions I had or could get. I said to him, "I have none and will not attempt to get any." He said, "Why not?" I answered, "I can have the appointment if you wish me to have it and all the letters of recommendation and petitions you ask for would have no effect. If you do not wish me to have the appointment all right." He pondered for a moment and then said, "The appointments from Iowa are in my hands, but President Cleveland holds me responsible for only recommending men of character who will not bring his administration into disrepute. I will recommend you for the appointment you ask if you will get a letter from Governor Boies saying your appointment will be satisfactory to him. (Boies had been reelected Governor.) I said Governor Boies has given out publicly that he will not give recommendations to anyone for appointment. He said, "Tell him I only wish the letter to show the President that you are acceptable to him and I will not file it." I took the night train for Des Moines.

On the train down the newspaper carried statement from Governor Boies emphasizing his refusal to endorse anyone for appointment by the president. I went over to the state house and after a brief wait, was ushered into the governor's presence. He and I were very good friends. I proffered my request and gave him Mr. Richardson's message. He turned to me with "Mr. Ashby, do you not know that I have publicly stated that I would not recommend anyone for appointment?" I answered, "Yes, I saw a second statement to that effect as I came down." He looked at me a moment, turned to his desk and wrote the letter Mr. Richardson desired. (I wish to say a word here about Mr. Boies. He was one of Iowa's great governors, a man of strict uprightness and probity and great ability. He had been a Republican, but had left the party upon the tariff issue.) When I returned to Davenport with the letter Mr. Richardson said, "Now go home and say nothing to anyone until the appointment is announced."

I heard nothing from Mr. Richardson for six or eight weeks and meantime, Mr. Faulkes, Mr. Wallace, Mr. Richardson, Governor Boies and myself, were the only Iowa people who knew I was a candidate for an appointment. Then one morning I received a telegram offering me a choice of Dublin or a post in England or one in Germany. I chose Dublin. Nothing further was heard by me

until one morning the Iowa papers bore in big headlines, "N. B. Ashby nominated by the President to be Consul at Dublin, Ireland." It created a turmoil among the Democratic politicians of the state. It was charged that I was not a Democrat. A demand was made to know upon whose recommendation I was appointed—a question never answered until this time, so far as I am aware.

This is an historical incident well worth bringing out into the open at this time and for permanent record. The way of this appointment has long been, and will long continue to be, at least one of the customary methods of deciding upon appointees. Governor Boies was not alone in being of the group hovering between political lines. There have been many notable instances of prominent men shifting party allegiance. Mr. Ashby entered the arena near the close of that hectic period when Iowa was swept by an upsurge of agrarian activity. A governor had been elected who berated against "the skeleton in the corncrib," meaning the high freight rates on corn shipped to market. One who afterwards served many years in the United States senate was defeated on his first trial for that office because of being for a low tariff and not quite orthodox on the wool schedules. It was a time when the Republican party, in an Iowa state convention, declared that "we favor a wisely adjusted tariff for revenue only." So it is not surprising that on the tariff issue, at that time, there was much uncertainty.

But really when Horace Boies came into the picture by making a quick shift from one party to another and was immediately elected governor, the saloon issue, or prohibition, had taken the center of the stage. The General assembly, at the last session before his election, received a petition for repeal of the prohibitory law, from the "Republicans of Black Hawk county," and the first name on the list was that of Boies. Before that time he had not regarded himself as other than a Republican.

There were other complications in the political currents of the time, in the year 1880 and afterwards; and one of the things little understood was "the railroad issue." Men

of great ability and keen discernment differed widely on this matter. There were those who bitterly denounced the railroad companies and their managers and attorneys for whatever there was of lack of prosperity in all Iowa. The defenders of the railroads pointed to their usefulness in development of a pioneer region. A more conservative group sought wise regulation of rail rates and curbing railroad political influence. In the end the issue disappeared by a process of natural settling down to a moderate position of mutual good will.

If the roll were called of Iowa men of prominence it would be found that from time to time very many changed their views upon such issues as the tariff, prohibition and corporation control. It is not at all strange that the platforms of the political parties reveal peculiar contradictions, and that no party can claim to have been consistent and steadfast on every dominant issue.

WRITTEN AT VALLEY FORGE

The Society of the Sons of the American Revolution is a comparatively small group of compatriots in Iowa, but they all very well know that although Iowa was a wilderness until fifty years after the close of the American Revolution, there were among the Iowa pioneers a number of the soldiers who served under Washington, who also helped turn the first sod in this first free state of the Louisiana purchase. Some of them have also seen in the state's collection of precious manuscripts the writings of the founding fathers kept as a perpetual reminder of the cost of liberty.

When a company of pioneers was formed for military action to go to the northern border of Iowa and protect the settlers around Spirit Lake, one of the company commanders in that expedition possessed a rare writing that connected him up with historic events of the long ago. Capt. Chas. B. Richards had an order of General Wash-

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.