



Moore's Opera House, southeast corner of Fourth and Walnut streets, Des Moines. From a photograph owned in 1929 by Charles W. Schramm, taken sometime in the seventies. The entrance was at the extreme right.

# ANNALS OF IOWA

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## MOORE'S OPERA HOUSE

BY W. O. PAYNE

The burning of the old Moore's Opera House<sup>1</sup>—which had not been used for an opera house for all of forty-five years—has carried to many an old-timer in Iowa politics and affairs suggestions and reminders of matters reaching distinctly back of anything that this writer can personally remember anything about; for such reminders will reach back to many an old-time convention and also to the meeting of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee, whereat General Grant, then president of the United States, made what was in that time and for many a year a famous declaration in affirmation of the sanctity of the American system of common schools.

But to the writer the personal suggestion and reminder is of the Republican State Convention of 1883, which convention is by him especially remembered for the two reasons that it was the first state convention of any sort that he ever attended and that it was the last such convention that was ever held in that hall. Of course the writer knows that that was his own first convention; and he is sure about its being the last state convention that was there held; for the condition stands out with respect to the state campaign of that year that the Democrats had taken the aggressive by calling their state convention ahead of the Republicans, nominating L. G. Kinne, afterwards judge of the Supreme Court, for governor and challenging the Republicans to an issue in behalf of a general license law and against prohibition; and the recollection is also clear that the Republican convention the next spring to elect a Blaine delegation to the Republican National Convention was held in another hall.

So there is no mistake about it: it was the last convention

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<sup>1</sup>Moore's Opera House, Des Moines, was consumed by fire during the early morning hours of March 24, 1929.—Editor.

there, on which account at least the convention was memorable, and it was the writer's first convention, on which account it is actually remembered by him. But such circumstances now serve only to focus attention upon the real significance of the convention; for in a time long before the adoption of the primary system and while, therefore, the periodical meetings of the Republican state conventions were yet in fact the occasions for the assertion of the sovereign will of the assembled and represented people of the state of Iowa, that convention was the most significant and most important of any such convention that met for many a year.

For it was in that convention that for the first time—after the pioneer days—Iowa went dry. And the settings for the occasion had been dramatic. Four years before this meeting the Republican convention of 1879, from motives that were probably more evasive than altruistic but proceeding nevertheless in the exercise of its sovereign authority before mentioned, had ordered a referendum to the people of the state upon the question of prohibition, through the submission at a special election of a constitutional amendment. In compliance with such order the necessary resolution had been passed through two general assemblies; and then the people—contrary for the most part to current political expectation—had approved of it.

Then before the politicians or the people could quite catch their breath, a law suit was started over at Davenport between a brewer and a saloon keeper with a view to testing out the validity of the proceedings by which the amendment had been submitted and adopted. A local judge, whose personal opposition to the amendment and to prohibition was always frankly avowed, decided promptly that the amendment was not properly adopted, and the Supreme Court, though not open to the same imputation of sympathy but nevertheless suspected more or less of political side stepping, without signs of hesitation affirmed the decision, and a little further and upon a petition for rehearing adhered with rather an increase of emphasis to the position taken.

Upon such premises it was up to the Republican Convention of 1883 to decide, first, whether the state should accept the

opportunity for side stepping which the court decision had afforded or should conform to the rather unexpected result of the referendum, regardless of the technicalities recognized by the courts; and, second, what should be done to the supreme judge whose term was expiring and who had concurred in the first decision of the Supreme Court and had written and announced the conclusion upon rehearing. The governor and other state officers whose terms were also expiring had been nominated and elected two years before and were not being opposed for renomination, and there was nothing in particular in national affairs at the moment to be especially excited about; so that there was really nothing to fight about excepting the issue of general policy and the fate of that supreme judge. Never in any state convention were essential differences more clearly defined.

And respecting these differences the Republicans of the state had been attentive, and delegates had come down knowing what they were there for. Inevitably the first and most vital question was upon the choice of the Committee on Resolutions, and for places upon that committee the biggest men in the state were candidates. Also as between factions the contest was short, sharp and decisive. In the district caucuses the dries made an absolutely clean sweep, and among their exponents chosen were Senator James F. Wilson, John Mahin, "Ret" Clarkson, Prof. Fellows of the State University and Frank T. Campbell, as well as Daniel Kerr, Aaron Brown, Gen. A. J. Baker, John Y. Stone, Judge Miracle and J. N. Miller—all to the last one outstanding men of that time, who would, if the matter were to be done over again today, be satisfactory, quite so, to the representatives of the Anti-saloon League.

Of course, Senator Wilson, who above any other man of that time was the representative of temperance forces in Iowa politics, was chairman of the Committee on Resolutions and had come to the convention with his platform ready and in his pocket. And as the Senator came upon the stage to present the platform which he had prepared and had been authorized to present, a political veteran—then unknown to the writer but happening to sit in the gallery at his elbow—was heard to observe, with evident reverence and with absolute verity, "There comes

the great platform-writer." Which was all as it should have been; for James F. Wilson was the very embodiment of the spirit and purpose of that convention, was rarely gifted in the matter of felicitous and effective statement, was in the enjoyment of the very highest confidence of the people of the state, was at the acme of his powers and had not yet suffered the siege of grippe, the after effects of which later compelled his voluntary retirement from the Senate, and in fact ended his life within a very few weeks following the end of his second senatorial term.

So the platform was both conciliatory and emphatic. It demanded the keeping of the faith on prohibition, and it commanded the General Assembly to put into the statute what had failed to get into the Constitution; but at the same time everything was said and done to make it easy for any who might not like the program to adhere to it nevertheless. It was characteristic of the Senator: it held things together politically, it maintained the moral standard, and it made prohibition the law.

But though the platform was conciliatory, the unfortunate judge had no chance at all. Really Judge Day was a temperance man, but his fiber had not been quite equal to his responsibility. Further, and perhaps having quite as much to do with the matter, his corporate alignment had not had the approval of what in other days have sometimes been referred to as the "interests"; so when his normal friends among the temperance people went back on him other folks took advantage of the situation and tore him "limb from limb." But however this latter factor may have affected the immediate result, it was not the whole thing, for of the four judges that had concurred in overthrowing the amendment only one survived the vengeance waiting when his term expired, and the verdict stood that the cause of prohibition was not to be trifled with.

Along with the more vital features of the convention was the habitual one of rustling for tickets to let one into the convention. To the writer this was a first experience, and never in all his years did he see a harder rustle; for it was a great convention and long ahead of the time of primary elections and bigger convention halls; but somehow the practice of later years was fur-

ther established in the circumstance that, after all the trouble for tickets the most of the folks who had come to the convention did in fact get into the convention.

But also there were incidents pertaining to the unusual attendance of temperance leaders who had rustled their followers out to the caucuses and had accordingly come as delegates to the convention. So when the time was reached for the nomination of a candidate for governor a loud voice in the back of the hall moved the re-nomination of "Buren R. Sherman by acclamation." The chairman apparently was not as familiar with camp meetings as with politics, and he inquired as to the name of the mover. It was "Parson" Lozier of Sioux City.

But the ever-to-be-remembered incident was a politician's pronouncement of the sentiment of the occasion. For Manning of Carroll upon his renomination for lieutenant governor responded to the call and with abundant accompaniment of voice and eloquence led his audience up to the climax, that "Iowa Republicanism stands for protected homes and firesides, a schoolhouse on every hill and no saloon in the valley." The convention caught the epigram, applauded warmly, then vociferously, then stood up and howled with an enthusiasm that in forty-five subsequent years the writer does not think he has ever seen paralleled in an Iowa convention.

So was it indeed a great convention—a good convention for a political novice to draw his first impressions and experience from, and a fitting convention with which to conclude the political record of the first of Iowa's great and historic convention halls, a hall that has now at last met the fate impending for any public building that waits long enough.

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#### NAVIGATING THE IOWA RIVER

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The Iowa City folks are rejoicing with exceeding great joy over the arrival of a steamboat at their city a few days ago. The "Rock River" was the happy craft that afforded so much gratification to the folks in and about the capital of Iowa.—*Lee County Democrat*, Fort Madison, April 30, 1842. (In the Newspaper collection of the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa.)

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