

THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY IN DES MOINES COUNTY

BY L. O. LEONARD

At the request of his children Professor Nathan R. Leonard, for many years head of the Department of Mathematics and Astronomy in the State University of Iowa, at Iowa City, in 1908 wrote a brief sketch of his early life in Des Moines County, Iowa, and some of his experiences while teaching in Yellow Springs College, at Kossuth.

In this sketch is an account of the founding of the Know Nothing political party in Des Moines County. As this account may prove to be a bit of interesting political history of those early days it is sent to you for such disposition as you may wish to give it. It reads:

“In politics my father and all his people were Whigs. About 1850 the slavery question created serious divisions in this party. Father was somewhat conservative, but grandfather and Uncle Aaron openly espoused the ideas of the progressive leaders of the day. Father was surreptitiously, I may say, captured about the year 1854, by the Know Nothing party, a capture for which I was partly responsible.

“Without his knowledge, or grandfather’s I had joined the new party which was then strictly a secret organization. Having a retentive memory, it was but a short time until I knew by heart the ritual of the order, the tedious and grandiloquent formularies for the initiation and instruction of members, and all the rest of it, and was made a sort of factotum for the organization in that part of the country.

“Plans were soon set on foot for a growth which would sweep our whole community into the new party. In ways too tedious to mention we got a man who stood well in the esteem of such as my father, father-in-law, and others in the community who thought they were themselves the leaders of the public sentiment, and had these agents of ours interview them cautiously and ply them with the stock arguments of the day in favor of the new party or society.

“More easily than we had expected, they were won over, and agreed to become members of the party if, when properly enlightened, they considered it the right thing to do.

“I remember well their initiation. It took place in the old brick Academy building which is still standing at Kossuth. The candidates were admitted into a little entry room. There was a large class of them, as many as the room would hold by close packing. Father, father-in-law and other leading men were amongst them. After waiting a suitable length of time the factotum appeared, attended by a young man to hold a candle for him. You can imagine how those grave old men looked when they saw that young chap appear in that role. However they felt, they maintained a sort of quizzical silence as they were gravely advised as to some of the leading principles of the order, but none of its secrets. They were then told that if with this presentation of outlines they still desired initiation the formal ceremony would proceed in the adjoining room. If not they were at liberty to retire and keep to themselves, as in honor bound, all that had thus far been divulged to them.

“It was a critical moment. At first it seemed possible that they would rise up in rebellion, but the situation had some philosophical as well as comical features, and they finally concluded that they were in for it whatever it was, and bowed in acquiescence to the solemn exhortation to prove themselves worthy to be countrymen of Washington and the immortal heroes of the Revolution. So they were taken in.

“At the next election, men nominated in secret councils of the party, and not publicly proclaimed as candidates, were triumphantly elected, making a clean sweep of the county.

“That victory was an astonishment to the outsiders. Grandfather was not in the secret, and was the implacable enemy of secret societies, but he never said a word to me about it. He was wise enough to see what it would lead to, and was satisfied.

“What transpired in our county was transpiring everywhere. The new party grew like Jonah's gourd, but it was formed of such incongruous materials that its continued existence was impossible.

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.