

# Workers and Politics

## The Knights of Labor in Dubuque, Iowa, 1885–1890

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THE NOBLE AND HOLY ORDER OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR, after growing slowly from its origin in 1869, exploded across the American landscape in 1885 and 1886. America's largest nineteenth-century labor organization achieved a membership that exceeded 700,000. For the first time a working-class association seemed capable of challenging capitalist control of the industrial system. By blending unionism and reform, the Knights of Labor forged a collective consciousness that sought to create a new social order where all workers could enjoy dignity, unity, and power. This radical vision proved short-lived, however, as the Knights suffered a period of uneven decline from the late 1880s to the mid-1890s. The Order's national pattern of rapid growth followed by sudden deterioration was repeated in states and municipalities throughout the country.

In recent years, the Knights of Labor has drawn increased attention from historians interested in the working class. Their writings include a growing number of community-based studies of Knights operations.<sup>1</sup> Knights activists fomented political

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1. A number of papers focusing on cities were presented at the Knights of Labor Centennial Symposium held at the Newberry Library in Chicago, May 17–19, 1979. See also Mark Stern, "Black Strikebreakers in the Coal Fields: King County, Washington, 1891," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5 (1977), 60–70; Joseph Carvalho, III, "The Baughman Boycott and Its Effect on the Richmond, Virginia Labour Movement, 1886–1888," *Social History* 12 (1979), 409–17; Michael J. Cassity, "Modernization and Social Crisis: The Knights of Labor

rebellions in city after city during the mid-1880s. So local communities provide important settings for explaining labor's perspective and influence on a variety of issues. An examination of the origins and impact of the Order's political activities in Dubuque, Iowa, for example, offers insight into the meaning of the movement for one midwestern municipality.

THE CITY OF DUBUQUE was the earliest settled area of Iowa. Dubuque's lead mines, hilly terrain, and Democratic politics differentiated it from the rest of the state. Among Iowa's urban centers in 1885, Dubuque ranked second in population and first in wealth. About half of the city's 26,330 residents were foreign-born or had at least one foreign-born parent. The population divided evenly between males and females, and those aged five to twenty-one accounted for one-third of the inhabitants. Although English, Scotch, French, Scandinavian, Canadian, Swiss, and Bohemian peoples settled in Dubuque, two nationalities, German and Irish, predominated. Dubuque Germans outnumbered their Irish counterparts by a two-to-one margin. The three German-language weekly newspapers published in the city underscored this strong Germanic influence. Each group preserved its heritage by developing distinct neighborhoods, churches, clubs, benevolent societies, and other ethnic ties. The German-Irish concentration helped to make Catholicism the city's dominant religion. In 1886 the Catholic presence in

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and a Midwest Community, 1885-1886," *Journal of American History* 66 (1979), 41-61; Jama Lazerow, "The Workingman's Hour: The 1886 Labor Uprising In Boston," *Labor History* 21 (1980), 200-220; Richard Oestreicher, "Socialism and the Knights of Labor in Detroit, 1877-1886," *Labor History* 22 (1981), 5-30; Elizabeth and Kenneth Fones-Wolf, "Knights Versus the Trade Unionists: The Case of the Washington, D. C. Carpenters, 1881-1896," *Labor History* 22 (1981), 192-212; David Brundage, "Denver's New Departure: Irish Nationalism and the Labor Movement in the Gilded Age," *Southwest Economy and Society* 5 (1981), 10-27; Michael J. Schewel, "Local Politics in Lynchburg, Virginia, in the 1880's," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89 (1981), 170-80; Susan Levine, "'Honor Each Noble Maid': Women Workers and the Yonkers Carpet Weavers' Strike of 1885," *New York History* 62 (1981), 153-76.

This local emphasis owes much to the pioneering work of Jonathan Garlock and Leon Fink: Jonathan Garlock, comp., *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, Conn., 1982), is a massive guide to Knights of Labor locals scattered across the countryside; Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, Ill., 1983), analyzes the Order's political activities in five representative cities.

Dubuque was mirrored not only in the churches and convents but also in several schools and academies as well as two colleges, a hospital, and an orphanage.<sup>2</sup>

While agriculture dominated the state's economy, Dubuque was Iowa's largest manufacturing city in the 1880s. Capital invested in Dubuque County industries exceeded two million dollars in 1884, and the county's manufactured goods, valued at over ten million dollars, stood at nearly double that of the second highest county. Dubuque's reputation as a manufacturing center rested on medium-sized, diversified industries in railroads, machinery, meat packing, lumber products, and clothing. By 1886 the city's 130 manufacturing firms employed approximately five thousand people.<sup>3</sup>

The state census of 1885 and the first three biennial reports of the Iowa Bureau of Labor Statistics provide a profile of Dubuque's working-class population in the mid-1880s. The typical worker labored ten hours per day. Wage rates reflected sex, age, and job differentials. Women and children worked in traditionally low-paying factory, retail, and service occupations. Those females, usually young and single, who worked outside the home tended to hold jobs as domestics or in the needle trades. Women's wages averaged about one-third to one-half less than those of men, while boys received slightly less than women, and girls received slightly less than boys. Carpenters, railway workers, teamsters, machinists, and blacksmiths represented common male occupations. Among male wage earners, unskilled laborers' daily pay ranged from \$1.00 to \$1.50, while bricklayers reported income of \$3.75 to \$4.00 per day. Common laborers customarily rented their homes, while between one-third and one-half of the tradesmen owned their own homes. Considering housing, food, and clothing expenses for an average family of four, Dubuque workers frequently struggled to

2. Iowa, Manuscript Census, 1885, Dubuque County schedule, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines (hereafter cited as 1885 Census); Iowa, Executive Council, *Census of Iowa for the Year 1895*, 25; Franklin T. Oldt, *History of Dubuque County Iowa . . .* (Chicago, [1912?]), 891-92; *Dubuque Daily Times*, 10 April 1887; *Dubuque Daily Herald*, 30 April 1885.

3. Oldt, *History of Dubuque County*, 187; Iowa, Bureau of Labor, *First Biennial Report . . . , 1884-85*, 378, 390-91; *Herald*, 24 October 1885, 28 February 1886; *Times*, 4 December 1885.

maintain a meager standard of living; half incurred indebtedness and the other half saved a little money.<sup>4</sup>

Before the Knights of Labor organized in Dubuque in 1885, trade unions existed only among printers, cigarmakers, locomotive firemen and engineers, tailors, and bricklayers. The membership in each of these labor bodies varied from twenty to forty.<sup>5</sup> These small unions held regular meetings, decided on wage scales and work rules, shunned independent politics, and protected their own exclusive memberships. This pattern of limited unionism, based on the job and wage consciousness of skilled workers, changed dramatically when the Knights' organizing drives launched the city's first mass labor movement.

Dubuque's wage earners found the Knights of Labor attractive for a variety of reasons. The Noble and Holy Order upheld the value of labor by identifying work with self-worth. The Order promoted working-class solidarity, welcoming to its ranks all workers regardless of sex, race, nationality, or skill level. This commitment to labor as a noble cause based on strength and unity drew support from the city's producing classes, who were increasingly treated as commodities in a market economy. The Knights' reformist philosophy emphasized the need to build a well-ordered society where cooperative production would replace capitalist exploitation, arbitration would replace strikes, and mutual assistance would replace possessive individualism. This vision of a moral industrial order elicited a favorable response from laborers worried about wage cuts, layoffs, and unemployment in the sluggish city economy of the mid-1880s. The fraternal structure of the Knights also proved to be appealing in a community with strong Catholic and lodge traditions. The Order's ritual and ceremony had an enticing familiarity for workers who attended Roman Catholic churches or held membership in the Knights of Pythias or the Ancient Order of United Workmen. The maintenance of secrecy in the Noble and Holy

4. 1885 Census; *First Biennial Report, 1884-85*, 316-17; Iowa, Bureau of Labor, *Second Biennial Report . . . , 1886-87*, 43, 127-28, 193; idem, *Third Biennial Report . . . , 1888-89*, 24-25, 177, 188. See also *Report of the State Statistician of the Knights of Labor, Des Moines, Iowa, Feb. 1, 1888, to the State Assembly of the Knights of Labor of Iowa*, 4-5.

5. *First Biennial Report, 1884-85*, 55-57; R. L. Polk & Co.'s *Dubuque City Directory, 1884-85* (Chicago, 1884), 20; L. C. Sutton & Co.'s *Dubuque City Directory, 1886-87* (Dubuque, 1886), 35.

Order's internal affairs reassured employees who were fearful of employer reprisals. Finally, the Knights insisted that active and responsible citizenship required political action. Involvement in the Order and its activities promised to give new dimensions of dignity and power to the lives of Dubuque's toiling masses. Specific demands for the eight-hour day and workplace health and safety codes seemed worthy goals to those laboring sixty hours per week on unguarded machinery, under close supervision, and with few rest periods.<sup>6</sup>

DURING THE SUMMER OF 1885 conditions in Dubuque paved the way for the organization of the Knights of Labor. As economic hard times gripped the city, complaints about low pay, arrogant bosses, job insecurity, and exhausting work multiplied, providing the impetus for unionization. Young, skilled, and aggressive workers played a vanguard role in galvanizing the rising discontent. Three machinists employed at the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad shops—Dennis Cullen, Henry Dreazy, and Charles Woodward—quietly but effectively promoted the idea of citywide organization. Finally a meeting was called, and with the help of James R. Sovereign, a successful Knights organizer from Atlantic, sixty-six mechanics and laborers founded Local Assembly No. 4192 on September 8, 1885.<sup>7</sup>

A twenty-two-year-old blacksmith, John Stafford, quickly emerged as the city's most prominent Knight. He agitated, educated, and organized, mastering the skills critical to the Order's

6. *Constitution of the General Assembly, District Assemblies, and Local Assemblies of the Order of the Knights of Labor of America* (n.p., 1885), 58-59, Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University of America Library, Washington, D.C.; Oldt, *History of Dubuque County*, 187; *Journal of United Labor*, 3 March 1888; *Herald*, 9 September, 1 November 1885, 4 April 1886; *Times*, 1 November 1885, 18 March 1886; *Industrial Leader* (Dubuque), 18, 25 December 1886, 1 January, 25 June, 6 August, 15 October 1887.

7. *Leader*, 23 July 1887; *Herald*, 9 September 1886; *Journal of United Labor*, 25 March 1886; Sovereign to Powderly, 8 December 1885, 26 February 1886, Powderly Papers. James R. Sovereign was born in Cassville, Wisconsin on May 30, 1854. He worked as a marble carver for several years, then he turned to organizing for the Knights and editing a labor paper. He became State Master Workman of the Iowa State Assembly of the Knights of Labor, and he was appointed to the post of Iowa Commissioner of Labor in 1890. Sovereign succeeded Powderly as Grand Master Workman of the Knights nationwide in 1893. Contemporary biographical sketches of Sovereign appeared in the *Leader*, 16 July 1887, and the *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 21 December 1893.

local success. Described as "steady, sober, and industrious," Stafford enjoyed the full confidence of the workers. From his post as Master Workman of Local Assembly No. 4192, he spearheaded the organizing drives which by December 1886 brought six more locals into the Knights' fold. When Dubuque posted three new locals in one month, it became the fountainhead of Iowa Knighthood.<sup>8</sup>

Under the caption, "Becoming a Power," the *Dubuque Daily Times* of March 5, 1886, placed the Knights' membership at "over 700."<sup>9</sup> Less than a year later, enrollment figures peaked at about 2,500. Organization also reached the area surrounding Dubuque; local assemblies appeared in East Dubuque, Dyersville, and Farley by the fall of 1887. Large numbers of unorganized workers joined the Noble and Holy Order, and trade unionists affiliated as well. By joining wage earners in different workplaces, local assemblies functioned as city central bodies. Dual unionism appeared when printers, cigarmakers, and stationary engineers became Knights members while retaining their regular trade union affiliations. Consequently, a large, strong, and inclusive union had been built.<sup>10</sup>

The seven Dubuque locals were designated as mixed assemblies because they included people engaged in diverse occupations. A sample of 150 local members reveals information about their age, sex, race, nationality, and job classifications.<sup>11</sup> The sample indicates that Order adherents came from a wide range of age groups, with about half under forty years of age. Given the ethnic composition of the city, German and Irish names understandably predominated, accounting for three-fourths of those enrolled. Two local assemblies, Nos. 5986

8. *Leader*, 23 July 1887; *Journal of United Labor*, 10 October 1885, 10 April, 10 June, 10–25 October, 10 December 1886; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, Knights of Labor, Held at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, July 14, 15, and 16, 1886*, 10, 14, 40–42; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly, Knights of Labor, Held at Boone, Iowa, July 13th, 14th, and 15th, 1887*, 1–2, 9–10.

9. *Times*, 5 March 1886.

10. *Times*, 26, 28 October 1886; *Herald*, 2 November 1886; *Journal of United Labor*, 10 June 1886, 10 December 1887; *Leader*, 18 December 1886, 2 July, 15 October 1887; Garlock, *Guide*, 116–17.

11. The author compiled a sample of Dubuque Knights by securing 150 names from accounts of meetings, social gatherings, and other events sponsored by the Order. City directories and the 1885 census provided demographic information on those in the sample.

(Germania) and 8642 (Goethe), had largely or exclusively German memberships.<sup>12</sup>

Based on the sample, common laborers accounted for about one-fourth of the Order's membership. Most of these wage earners were employed by the city's railroads, lumber yards, and factories. Just over half of those who joined the ranks were skilled workers. Machinists and carpenters were the two most prominent trades. The Knights of Labor constitution required that at least three-fourths of a local assembly must be wage earners, but membership was open to anyone eighteen years old or older, except those "social parasites" in the "interdicted classes": lawyers, doctors, stock brokers, professional gamblers, bankers, and liquor dealers. Although the Order was dedicated to empowering the industrial masses, former wage earners could join, and the local assemblies attracted a small group of farmers, petty producers, and independent shopkeepers.<sup>13</sup>

Even though a slight majority of the Dubuque local assemblies' members were male, white, and skilled, they made a concerted effort to transcend traditional unionism by organizing not only unskilled laborers, but blacks and women as well. Dubuque's black population, like that of the rest of Iowa, was tiny, less than one percent of the total population. Several hundred minority workers resided in the city during the 1840s, according to one authority, but their numbers dropped steadily after the Civil War because of declining river traffic, the closing of area lead mines, and the anti-black sentiments of certain leading citizens. By the mid-1880s, only about seventy-five blacks lived in the city.<sup>14</sup> According to press accounts, Dubuque's black population attended the African Methodist Episcopal Church, organized a club, and celebrated Emancipation Day.<sup>15</sup> Beyond brief mention of these activities, the local press either ignored

12. 1885 Census; *Leader*, 18 December 1886.

13. 1885 Census; *Leader*, 18 December 1886; *Constitution* (1885), 59; *Herald*, 1 November 1885; *Dubuque City Directory, 1884-85; Dubuque City Directory, 1886-87*.

14. 1885 Census; *Dubuque City Directory, 1884-85; Dubuque City Directory, 1886-87*; Leola Nelson Bergmann, *The Negro in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1969), 5, 14, 34, 37-39. Bergmann's study first appeared in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 46 (1948), 3-90.

15. *Herald*, 18 February, 3 August 1886; *Times*, 22 July 1885, 3 August 1886.

blacks or gave lurid details of crimes they were suspected of committing. Most blacks were employed as personal servants, cooks, or porters. The Knights denounced wage and franchise discrimination on account of race. Yet local records suggest that no more than a half-dozen blacks belonged to the Noble and Holy Order, and none held leadership positions.<sup>16</sup> Their influence in the assemblies was, therefore, minimal at best.

Compared to blacks, women constituted a much larger and more significant force in the Order, accounting for nearly 20 percent of the rank and file. Local Knights recognized the value of all productive labor by opening membership to homemakers as well as wage earners. Treated as coequals with men, female members possessed full rights and privileges, and they established close ties with their male counterparts. The assemblies' endorsement of both equal pay for equal work and woman suffrage added a source of support, dignity, and opportunity to the lives of Dubuque's female Knights.<sup>17</sup>

Although six of the seven Dubuque locals were male, Local Assembly No. 5914, one of the city's largest, was composed entirely of women. Founded in March 1886, it was one of the state's first women's assemblies. Consisting primarily of factory operatives, the assembly included women employed in candy, bakery, tobacco, boot and shoe, soap, and buggy establishments, but the bulk of the membership came from those who worked in the clothing industry, the city's principal female employer.<sup>18</sup> When a local newspaper reporter encountered sixty members of the newly organized women's assembly on their way to an evening meeting, he inquired about their organization. The women responded by claiming that "all the factory girls in the city, several hundred in number, belong to the woman's branch of the Knights of Labor Order."<sup>19</sup>

To accommodate the new recruits streaming into the Order, meeting places were needed. Two centrally located sites were

16. 1885 Census; *Dubuque City Directory, 1884-85; Dubuque City Directory, 1886-87; Leader*, 18 December 1886, 23 July, 15 October 1887.

17. *Leader*, 18 December 1886, 23 July, 15 October 1887; *Times*, 31 March 1886; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, July 14-16, 1887*, 29-31; *Woman's Standard*, September 1886, December 1886, August 1887, December 1887.

18. *Leader*, 2 July, 6 August 1887; *Iowa State Register*, 3 April 1886; *John Swinton's Paper*, 3 July 1887; *Times*, 2, 11 March 1886.

19. *Times*, 31 March 1886.



secured, and plans for a new larger structure were under way by the fall of 1887.<sup>20</sup> The seven Dubuque assemblies held their regular weekly meetings in halls that also served as visible reminders of the Knights' presence in the community. The halls symbolized the Order's concern with equality, reform, and self-improvement. There members discussed labor issues, planned political strategies, conducted debates, listened to guest speakers, considered benefits programs, and collected statistical data on local workers. Musical recitals, educational programs, dances, and holiday celebrations contributed another dimension to the developing labor ethos. In many ways, then, the Knights of Labor halls functioned as working-class community centers.<sup>21</sup>

Encouraged by dramatically rising membership figures, Knights leaders took their zeal for economic reform into the local marketplace by launching cooperative enterprises. The most important of these was the publication of a weekly labor paper. Selling a share of cooperative stock for three dollars, organizers raised over two thousand dollars to fund the paper. Incorporated as the Knights of Labor Co-operative Publishing Company, John Stafford served as president of the company's board of directors, which included Nellie Dorgan of the women's assembly. The first issue of the new weekly, called the *Industrial Leader*, appeared in early October 1886.<sup>22</sup> The *Leader* advocated cooperative schemes like stores, home building, and profit-sharing as beneficial to labor.<sup>23</sup> During the first year of its existence, the paper flourished. Stockholders received a 10 percent dividend, and the subscription list expanded. A faithful readership pushed the paper's weekly circulation to 2,100.<sup>24</sup>

Formation of the Knights of Labor Co-operative Publishing Company occurred at about the same time as the establishment of a fuel cooperative. Officially named the Fuel Corporation Company, its capital stock totaled two thousand dollars. A share

20. *Leader*, 6 August 1887.

21. *Leader*, 18 February 1888; *Times*, 6 May, 27 August 1886, 13 December 1887, 25 April 1889.

22. *Times*, 22, 25 August, 18, 22, 29 September 1886; *Register*, 11 December 1888; *Leader*, 18 December 1886.

23. *Leader*, 18 December 1886, 16 July 1887.

24. *Leader*, 20 October 1887; *Times*, 21 November 1888.

of stock could be purchased for five dollars, and no individual could hold more than four shares. The cooperative fuel venture sold oak, maple, and soft woods for heating purposes.<sup>25</sup>

The cooperative enterprise that touched the daily lives of Dubuque residents most directly was the Knights of Labor Co-operative Supply Company. Incorporated in May 1887, the company commenced business with a capital stock of five thousand dollars in June after purchasing the inventory of another store. The Knights' new store carried a variety of groceries and provisions. After two months of brisk trade, the store's success seemed assured. This example of associative buying eliminated the middleman, and marked the local Order's most ambitious attempt at cooperative as opposed to capitalist distribution.<sup>26</sup>

**B**URGEONING ASSEMBLIES and successful cooperatives served as a power base from which the Dubuque Knights pressed for workers' rights in politics. Local assemblies lobbied for labor measures, supported candidates friendly to workers, and ultimately formed a third party. Political action inspired by the Knights thus became both a vehicle for social reform and a challenge to the power of the governing elite.

The Dubuque Knights' first significant political effort occurred during the 1886 session of the Iowa legislature. They conducted intense lobbying to secure passage of workplace health and safety codes. An articulate and well-known railroad lawyer and Democratic state senator from Dubuque, William J. Knight, agreed to sponsor the local assemblies' labor protection bill. The bill established regulatory guidelines for proper ventilation, installation of machinery guards, adequate fire escapes, sanitation standards, and restroom facilities for men and women. Enforcement rested with local boards of health. Another section of the bill made employers liable for work-related employee injuries.<sup>27</sup>

When the labor bill reached the floor of the state senate, thirty prominent Dubuque manufacturers mounted a protest campaign. They claimed that the bill was not adaptable to Iowa's medium-sized industries and that it would be too costly to im-

25. *Leader*, 1 January 1887.

26. *Leader*, 18, 25 June, 27 August 1887; *Times*, 1 October 1886, 19-20 May 1887; *Herald*, 19 May 1887.

27. *Herald*, 7 March 1886; *Times*, 9 March 1886.

plement. Senator Knight cited state statistics on dangerous workplaces and employee accidents, scolding the manufacturers for putting pecuniary values ahead of worker safety and health. The manufacturers' chief complaint concerned the provision making employers liable for employee injury sustained through the negligence of any other employee. The Dubuque firms argued that under such a clause "careless and vicious" workers could impose liability penalties hampering existing industries and keeping out potential ones. Knight countered that making employers liable for injuries to employees resulting from the carelessness of other employees was fair because workers do not have "the right or opportunity to choose who shall work with [them]." Senator Knight also pointed out that imposition of the liability rule was a matter equity, since it already applied to the railway industry. The Dubuque manufacturers sent a delegation to lobby against the bill and convinced several other Iowa manufacturers to do the same. While representatives of the companies could descend upon Des Moines, Knight noted, workers must continue their daily toil. He contended, moreover, that the five hundred workers' signatures on the employers' petition against the bill were secured through deception, citing as proof a Dubuque Knights of Labor spokesman's description of "bulldozing methods" and the statements of fifty-five original signers who said they were misled.<sup>28</sup>

Yielding to pressure from manufacturers in Dubuque and other Iowa cities, the senate voted to recommit the labor protection bill to the Labor Committee. A. Y. McDonald, owner of a famous Dubuque pump factory, appeared before the committee as the principal spokesman for the manufacturing interest. Two lobbyists for the Iowa State Assembly of the Knights of Labor failed to support the bill because, according to press accounts, they feared "such stringent laws . . . would tend to cripple the rising factories of Iowa." Dubuque manufacturers, with the unexpected assistance of two inept Knights lobbyists, managed to "strangle" the labor protection bill.<sup>29</sup>

28. *Times*, 19, 23-25 March 1886; *Herald*, 19-20, 24-25 March 1886; *Register*, 19 March 1886.

29. *Herald*, 26 March 1886; *Times*, 26 March 1886; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, July 14-16, 1886*, 25.

The Dubuque assemblies lobbied for a variety of other labor reform measures, including arbitration of disputes between employers and employees, a prohibition on state leasing of convict labor, and abolition of child labor in mines, workshops, and factories. These bills, like the labor protection bill, were killed in committee. Faced with defeat of several labor bills in the 1886 legislative session, John Stafford and other Order leaders concluded that lobbying could secure little against the "money power." Distributing position papers among the candidates and supporting friends of labor at the polls seemed to offer a better way of obtaining favorable legislation.<sup>30</sup>

A political breakthrough occurred in early March 1886, when Knights candidates for mayor scored election victories in the Iowa communities of Clinton, Marshalltown, Lyons, and Boone. The Dubuque press characterized these results as "unexpected," and heralded the Knights of Labor as "a new power in politics."<sup>31</sup> Previous Dubuque elections had taken on the trappings of great pastimes, ritualistic shows of partisanship with little regard for industrial abuses or social ills. The dominant Democrats enjoyed the support of most working-class voters. During the spring and fall elections of 1886, however, the Dubuque political scene underwent a transformation with the appearance of a distinct labor-interest group. Dubuque Knights used their skills at agitation and amassed strength to gain public awareness of labor issues. The old parties tried to capture the workers' vote by discrediting one another's candidates and adding labor planks to their platforms. Wooed by both Republicans and Democrats, the expanding local assemblies determined to strengthen their political base rather than nominate an independent labor ticket. Consequently, they urged their members to vote for candidates, regardless of party affiliation, who appeared sympathetic to wage earners. In the April municipal election, three Republican candidates who were members of the Order received considerable labor support and won aldermanic posts. The congressional election in the fall, on the other hand, found city Knights endorsing the Democratic candidate

30. *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, July 14-16, 1886*, 20, 24, 27.

31. *Times*, 4 March 1886; *Herald*, 3-4 March 1886.

as more committed to their legislative recommendations than his Republican opponent.<sup>32</sup>

The Dubuque Knights' relationship to the political process entered a new phase when electoral politics became the focus of their reform strategy in 1887. The January 1, 1887, issue of the *Industrial Leader* urged its readers to pursue intelligently the cause of "labor uplift" by using independent political action to battle "capitalist monopoly and political fraud."<sup>33</sup> With a membership in excess of 2,500, seven assemblies in flourishing condition, and 1,900 registered voters out of an anticipated total of 4,500 to 5,000 voters in the city, Knights leaders reasoned that the proper time had arrived for founding a labor party. So in mid-February a full slate of labor candidates was nominated for the coming municipal election. Ratification occurred at a secret mass meeting attended by five hundred Knights on February 26. The labor party ticket, composed entirely of Order members, contained a mixture of small businessmen and skilled wage earners.<sup>34</sup>

The new third party, called the Labor Reform party, declared its intention "to have the laws made and executed in the interest of justice, of morality, and of productive labor; so that the workers, who produce all the wealth, may not sink into deeper poverty, while the idle drones, who produce none, revel in increased opulence." The party's platform appealed to workers and middle-class reformers while it attacked the ruling Democrats. Specific planks denounced waste and extravagance in the budget, inequitable taxes, rising indebtedness, the contract labor system of performing street work, and other monopolistic practices of "corrupt rings and political tricksters." On the sensitive liquor issue, the Knights upheld temperance, a voluntaristic approach that sidestepped Republican support for prohibition and Democratic advocacy of local licensing.<sup>35</sup>

32. *Herald*, 12, 16 March, 6 April, 4, 15 August, 24 September, 15, 24, 28, 30 October, 3, 6 November 1886; *Times*, 12, 14, 16 March, 2-6 April, 29 July, 20 August, 7 September, 26-30 October, 3-4 November 1886; M. H. Moore to L. H. Weller, 25 September 1886, Luman Hamilton Weller Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

33. *Leader*, 1 January 1887.

34. *Ibid.*; *Times*, 13, 15, 27 February, 9, 13 March 1887; *Herald*, 27 February 1887.

35. *Herald*, 5 March 1887; *Times*, 5 March 1887; *John Swinton's Paper*, 20 March 1887.

The Labor Reform party's presence in the municipal election changed the Dubuque political scene. The new party challenged entrenched Democratic control of city politics, and it offered the minority Republicans an opportunity to make political gains. Some Republican and Democratic business leaders suggested a fusion ticket to defeat the upstart Laborites, but their efforts failed. Democrats were confident of victory even if the labor party cut into their traditional support among workers, and Republicans disliked Democratic rule more than they feared a labor victory. Although the Prohibition and Greenback parties had garnered only a few votes in previous local elections, the 1887 contest among Democrats, Republicans, and Labor Reformers turned into an exciting and unusual three-party race.

The Republican daily newspaper, the *Times*, took a perverse delight in watching frightened Democrats defend their management of city affairs and vociferously attack the new party. Labeling the labor party a "secret political organization," the Democratic party organ, the *Herald*, accused the Laborites of stirring up class warfare, concocting socialistic taxation schemes, and threatening economic development. The two major parties traded charges about cutting deals with the Labor Reformers, but separate tickets were maintained even though each endorsed a couple of labor candidates as a sop. The Republicans and Democrats adopted a defensive campaign strategy, depicting themselves as champions of the workers, denigrating the Laborites' ability to attract voters, and making partisan appeals to the party regulars.<sup>36</sup>

Election-day balloting brought surprising results; the entire Knights of Labor ticket was elected. The winning pluralities ranged from around 500 to 750 votes for city executive posts and from about 15 to nearly 230 votes in the aldermanic races. The victorious Labor Reformers "formed a big impromptu procession of about 800 strong, procured a brass band and marched around gleefully, carrying brooms to betoken their full sweep." While the Knights celebrated, the *Herald* grudgingly accepted

36. *Times*, 3, 5, 8, 19-31 March, 1-7 April 1887; *Herald*, 5, 6, 9, 13, 16, 20-31 March, 1-7 April 1887.

the election results, but the *Times* welcomed them as a harbinger of the end of intolerable Democratic rule.<sup>37</sup>

The labor party's success reflected a combination of emergent class feeling, growing reform sentiment, and superb organization. The Labor Reform party's ward committees, voter registration drives, and mass rallies ignited public interest; the election contrasted sharply with the managed and issueless campaigns of the past. With Democrats vulnerable to charges of ring control, high property taxes, and fiscal mismanagement, middle-class reformers voted the labor ticket. Some Laborites infiltrated caucuses of the major parties they formerly supported and created dissension among the delegates by nominating Knights as candidates. The Labor Reformers conducted an aggressive campaign among workers, gaining solid pledges of support for their platform and candidates. They successfully lured working-class voters into the Labor Reform party fold and accounted for most of the 20 percent increase in voter registration.<sup>38</sup>

Analysis of voting patterns confirms the *Herald's* contention that Democrats "went over to the new ticket" at a rate three times that of Republican bolters. The Labor Reformers' victories in the first, third, and fifth wards revealed a significant erosion of traditional voter support for Democrats. The narrow win of the labor candidate in the normally Republican fourth ward resulted from the Democrats' endorsement and indicated the bipartisan nature of the Knights' sweep. Finally, the Labor Reform party's success in the evenly contested second ward can be attributed partly to the candidate's strenuous campaign and winsome personality. Another important ingredient in the Knights' success was what the *Times* called a "perfect organization." The Laborites had prepared for months, they did their work in secret, and they convinced nearly "every workingman, whether Knight or not, to vote their ticket."<sup>39</sup>

37. *Herald*, 5-8 April 1887; *Times*, 5-9 April 1887; *Register*, 6 April 1887.

38. Oldt, *History of Dubuque County*, 377; *Times*, 28 October 1886, 13, 29, 31 March 1887; *Herald*, 2 November 1886, 6, 13, 16, 20, 25, 29, 31 March, 1-3 April 1887. A copy of the pledge used by the Labor Reform party is in the Weller Papers.

39. *Herald*, 6 April 1886, 5, 6, 9 April 1887; *Times*, 5, 7 April 1887.

THE LABOR REFORMER'S VICTORY brought them clear control of the city government. In addition to electing Knights to all six executive posts—mayor, recorder, auditor, attorney, treasurer, and assessor—Order members held eight of the ten aldermanic seats, five newly elected plus three holdovers.<sup>40</sup> The Knights' most articulate spokesman, John Stafford, was elected city recorder. The new mayor, Christian A. Voelker, had been active in the Democratic party before joining the Knights of Labor. He had learned the chairmaker's trade as a teenager and subsequently became a dry goods merchant. His German ancestry, his Catholic religion, and his longtime residence made the thirty-six-year-old Voelker an archetypal Dubuquer.<sup>41</sup> Friendly, well-known, and civic-minded, the mayor's term commenced in an atmosphere of anxiety and curiosity. After taking the oath of office, Mayor Voelker noted in his inaugural address that the Labor Reform party would correct abuses, initiate reforms, and respect the "sacred rights of persons and property." Seeking to assuage fears in the business community, Voelker said the party abhorred "socialism and communism" and contemplated "no startling changes or innovations." "We have no war to wage with capital," he asserted, but we aim "to better the condition and prospects of the laboring masses." Finally, he affirmed the party's commitment to a fair system of taxation and reduction of the city debt.<sup>42</sup>

Immediately after the election, the *Times* noted the presence of an unusually large number of office-seekers; it also reported the street talk about wholesale personnel changes designed to make city hall a center of Knighthood.<sup>43</sup> At the first

40. *Herald*, 5 April 1887.

41. After his mayoralty, Voelker successfully ventured into the real estate and insurance fields, and in 1895 he was elected to the Iowa General Assembly as a Democratic state representative. For further biographical information on Voelker, see *Leader*, 18 June 1887; *Herald*, 5 March 1893, 1 November 1895, 26 January 1896; *Telegraph-Herald* (Dubuque), 13 August 1925; *Portrait and Biographical Record of Dubuque, Jones and Clayton Counties, Iowa . . .* (Chicago, 1894), 134–35; Oldt, *History of Dubuque County*, 638–39; *Annals of Iowa* 15 (1926), 320; Chris A. Voelker, Jr. (as told to Delphine Corpstein), "The Story of My Grandfather," 5-page typescript, ca. 1923, Center for Dubuque History, Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa.

42. Dubuque City Council Record, 7 April 1887, 270–72, Carnegie-Stout Public Library, Dubuque, Iowa; *Herald*, 8 April 1887; *Times*, 8 April 1887.

43. *Times*, 7, 9 April 1887.



official meeting of the new city council, key appointments, as the *Times* predicted, went to those who were members of the Noble and Holy Order. This angered some people; others complained about the Germans capturing nearly all of the major city offices; and still others claimed that the third ward "owned the town," since the mayor, city marshal, street commissioner, and marketmaster all resided there.<sup>44</sup> Dissent on Main Street reached a crescendo in early May when the council voted unanimously to discharge the entire police force. The council immediately reorganized the force into a working-class unit. Half were hold-overs and half were new, but all were Knights. The press labeled the action a stroke of patronage, but Knights councilmen held that law enforcement in Dubuque had been antilabor; employers used the police to harrass workers, and poor wage earners often suffered imprisonment for relatively minor offenses.<sup>45</sup>

In the administration of city affairs, the newly elected council made controversial decisions on subcontracting labor for street work, chartering a new gas company, constructing a new sewer system, and levying city taxes. The Noble and Holy Order opposed the city's long-standing practice of having private contractors submit bids for street work. They proposed instead that the city act as a public employer and hire day labor, supervised by the city engineer, for these projects. Abolishing subcontracting, they argued, would reduce the burden on taxpayers by eliminating the contractor's profit margin; day labor, moreover, would provide a better paid and more efficient workforce. The previous council had toyed with the Knights' plan but had taken no action to implement it; the new council passed an ordinance requiring the use of day labor, rather than contract labor, on city street work. In another class-conscious action, the council legislated a 40 percent increase in the prevailing daily wage for city work from \$1.25 to \$1.75, a rate higher than that ordinarily paid to private sector laborers.<sup>46</sup>

44. *Times*, 12 April 1887; *Herald*, 12 April 1887; City Council Record, 11 April 1887, 273-75.

45. City Council Record, 9 May 1887, 302-5; *Herald*, 10-11 May 1887; *Times*, 10-11 May 1887.

46. City Council Record, 6 June 1887, 315, 324-25; *Times*, 3 May, 7 June 1887; *Herald*, 3 May, 7 June 1887.

The council simultaneously rejected an offer by the county supervisors to have county jail prisoners work on city streets. Both the *Times* and the *Herald* attacked the decision, arguing that the supervisors' offer would save money, put idle men to work, and teach inmates "a lesson." The Knights held that convict labor was the worst form of contract labor; it created unfair competition, depressed wage scales, and amounted to involuntary servitude. After a three-month trial period, the use of hired day labor for city street improvements was reported to be a monetary and public success.<sup>47</sup>

The united front presented by the new council on the contract labor question contrasted with its decision on chartering a new gas company. The Dubuque Light and Fuel Company petitioned the city council for a charter to manufacture and supply gas to the city. This challenged Key City Gas Company's position as the community's sole supplier. Consumers, workers, business leaders, and the council itself split on the issue of whether or not Dubuque Light and Fuel Company should be chartered. The editor of the *Herald* was one of the incorporators of the new company, so it is not surprising that the paper backed the venture. When the president of the *Times* withdrew as director of Dubuque Light and Fuel, that paper's editorials shifted from support to opposition. Proponents of the new gas company argued that it would increase competition, lower gas rates by 30 percent, and stimulate the local economy. Detractors insisted that the city could not support two gas companies, that the price drop would only be temporary, and that a Philadelphia gas syndicate intended to use the new company as a pawn to establish full control over the city's gas supply. The *Industrial Leader* approved chartering the new company for reasons similar to those advanced by others, but the *Leader* also brought a Knights' perspective to the issue.

The city council has no right to protect a monopoly by legislation, unless that monopoly is owned and run by the city in the interest of all. . . . So long as public functions are usurped by private corporations, no council has a right to say that one corporation may do a thing which another corporation may not do, nor to say that

47. City Council Record, 6 June 1887, 322, 5 September 1887, 391; *Herald*, 4, 7, 10 June, 6 September 1887; *Times*, 5, 7 June 1887.

because the corporation is here in business, that no other can come and invest in the same business.<sup>48</sup>

After hearing the presidents of the two companies and receiving citizen petitions on both sides of the issue, the city council voted by a margin of six to four to draft an ordinance chartering the Dubuque Light and Fuel Company. The ordinance was designed to answer critics by including two restrictive clauses: one prohibited rate increases for a ten-year period; the other enjoined the company from entering into any gas combine.<sup>49</sup> When the final vote was taken on the ordinance, however, the councilmen rejected it by the same six to four margin by which they had previously approved its formulation. Since the city had entered into a ten-year contract with the Key City Gas Company in 1884, a majority of the aldermen argued that chartering another company would constitute "an act of bad faith" by "destroying the value of the [original] contract."<sup>50</sup>

Reporting that the council had been "browbeaten" and "hoodwinked," the *Herald* agreed with the *Leader's* conclusion that six aldermen voted against the wishes of their constituents, the principles of the labor party, the business interest of the city, and the welfare of gas consumers.<sup>51</sup> The monopoly of the old company was assured, the labor paper asserted, when a majority of the councilmen succumbed to economic coercion. The *Leader* reported that several prominent manufacturers who held stock in the Key City Gas Company were in the council chambers "to make sure their employees voted correctly." The Catholic church, too, the *Leader* hinted, had a stake in the outcome, since the value of Father Burke's Key City Gas stock amounted to ten thousand dollars. Capping the pressure on the labor council to deny the new company a charter was "the threat . . . that if the gas interest was disturbed" plant closings and unemployment would result. The *Leader* lamented that even labor's control of the legislative

48. *Leader*, 25 June 1887. See also *Times*, 13 April, 8, 22 May 1887; *Herald*, 8, 23 May 1887.

49. City Council Record, 6, 10 June 1887, 322-23, 329; *Times*, 7-11 June 1887.

50. City Council Record, 8 July 1887, 343-44.

51. *Leader*, 2, 16 July 1887; *Herald*, 2, 9 July 1887.

process could not guarantee success in the struggle against the forces of capitalism.<sup>52</sup>

Another public utility question emerged in the late summer of 1887 when the city's official physician, business leaders, and the press urged the council to construct a centralized sewer system. The project promised to improve the health, sanitation, and business climate of Dubuque. The labor council quickly approved preliminary plans for the new sewerage by a seven to three vote. The three dissenters questioned the appropriateness of the route and argued for more planning time, but they approved the basic idea.<sup>53</sup>

Final approval of the project hinged on the engineering reports and construction costs. By a split vote the council decided to submit the sewerage question to a vote of the people. Two concerns prompted this action. Some councilmen questioned the reliability of the engineering reports and considered street improvements more important than the sewerage matter. But the overriding issue was the expense of the project. Cost estimates soared to well over \$100,000, with financing based on a large tax increase of two mills.<sup>54</sup>

The outcome of the special election showed that more than 80 percent of the voters opposed the proposed sewer construction. Since the popular vote was advisory, the council still had to decide whether or not to proceed with the project. Faced with the delicate task of weighing public welfare and fiscal responsibility, the aldermen, by a five to four vote, formally rescinded their decision to build the system. Although a majority of the council favored a new sewer system, they reasoned that, for the present at least, public opinion doomed the project. Apparently the people of Dubuque considered the project too costly.<sup>55</sup>

The Labor Reform party had campaigned on a pledge to institute a more equitable system of taxation. Reforming the city's tax structure meant that business properties, capital goods, and

52. *Leader*, 16 July 1887.

53. *Leader*, 3 September 1887; *Herald*, 27, 31 August 1887; *Times*, 27, 31 August 1887; City Council Record, 26, 30 August 1887, 382-84.

54. City Council Record, 23 September 1887, 404; *Herald*, 24 September 1887; *Times*, 24 September 1887.

55. City Council Record, 3 October 1887, 413, 421; *Herald*, 1, 4 October 1887; *Times*, 1, 4 October 1887.

large estates should be taxed to the full extent of their assumed value. The council also sought to fairly tax unimproved land held for speculative purposes. The net effect of these policies was that the total amount of the city tax assessments increased by 20 percent. Some prominent businessmen and large landowners saw their tax bills rise by as much as 60 percent compared to the exemptions or undervalued amounts they paid in previous years. At the same time, most taxpayers received some relief when the city tax levy was reduced by one mill, bringing an 8 percent decrease in the overall tax rate.<sup>56</sup>

The local press called the council's tax policies a severe blow to Dubuque's manufacturers and large merchants. The *Times* charged that the "over assessment" would drive business out of the city. The *Herald* angrily denounced the Equalization Committee for its "attempt to tax capital out of existence in Dubuque and enthrone labor on the ruins."<sup>57</sup> Characterizing these attacks as politically motivated, Mayor Chris Voelker defended the tax equalization program. He called the tax assessment increases fair, and he noted that disgruntled citizens had the right to appeal.<sup>58</sup> A sizable number of individuals and companies did petition the council to reduce or cancel their assessments. Some petitions were approved, some were denied, and a few were determined to have mixed merit.

In the end, the council's graduated taxation policies added more than three million dollars in assessed value to the city tax rolls. When the Knights assumed control of city hall, Dubuque's total city indebtedness exceeded \$800,000, the highest of any city in the state. The council enlarged tax revenue and reduced the deficit by about 15 percent, freeing for community projects revenue that had previously gone to unproductive debt service.<sup>59</sup>

The Knights proved that a labor council, motivated by civic pride and concern for the public welfare, could administer city affairs in an honest and moderately progressive manner. Despite opponents' dire predictions of economic woes, Dubuque pros-

56. *Leader*, 2 July, 13, 27 August 1887; *Herald*, 22-23, 25 September 1887; *Times*, 22-23 September 1887; Oldt, *History of Dubuque County*, 378-79.

57. *Times*, 22 September 1887; *Herald*, 23 September 1887.

58. *Herald*, 24 September 1887; *Times*, 24 September 1887.

59. City Council Record, 9 April 1885, 301, 8 April 1886, 562, 7 April 1887, 270, 5 April 1888, 564.

pered while the Knights of Labor controlled city hall. There were no strikes, employment increased, and wages rose modestly. The total value of goods and services produced in the city rose by 20 percent, the largest annual increase between 1885 and 1895.<sup>60</sup> The Laborites also fostered expanded public services. The local transportation network was improved when the city helped finance two new railway lines, a new ferry company, and a high bridge across the Mississippi River. Finally, installation of a new fire alarm system enhanced public safety.<sup>61</sup>

DESPITE THESE ACHIEVEMENTS, the political power exercised by the Dubuque Knights of Labor soon ended. After the Noble and Holy Order captured city hall in the spring election of 1887, the opposition forces, led by old party bosses and influential business leaders, orchestrated a series of counterthrusts that crushed the Knights' independent political movement. The daily press and a newly organized Board of Trade combined their community standing and economic power with scare tactics to assail the Knights' third party. The press, openly, and the board, discreetly, disparaged the Laborites with a stream of invective, calling their administration of city government incompetent, labeling their leaders as power-hungry cranks and communists, and insisting that their rule would lead to economic chaos and joblessness. Simultaneously, unofficial overtures from certain regular Democrats and Republicans proposing fusion created partisan divisions within the third party.<sup>62</sup>

While the Knights of Labor suffered from these outside onslaughts, it also experienced internecine strife. From the beginning, Order members differed over how far to venture into the political arena. Some voiced skepticism about the labor party, arguing that lobbying was more effective than independent politics. Others demanded a straight economic organization com-

60. City Council Record, 5 April 1888, 563-68; *Times*, 6 April 1888; *Herald*, 6 April 1888, 25 January 1896.

61. *Times*, 11 June, 24, 29 November 1887, 6 April 1888; *Herald*, 11 June, 4 September, 30 November 1887, 6 April 1888; *Leader*, 13 August 1887; City Council Record, 10 June 1887, 329-30, 27 October 1887, 434, 5 April 1888, 563-68.

62. *Herald*, 21 June, 11, 16, 30 September, 13-14, 23 October, 5, 6 November, 7, 13 December, 1887; *Times*, 11, 16, 21 June, 14 September, 14, 16, 19, 23 October, 6 November, 13 December, 1887; *Leader*, 18 June, 2, 23 July 1887.

pletely removed from the corruption and divisiveness of politics. Still others charged that the party's status as a disciplined and independent organization was damaged by opening membership to ward heelers and by nominating Republican and Democratic candidates who were office-seeking renegades not committed to Knights principles. Thus the internal strain of organizing a third party, competing with the existing parties, and satisfying workers sapped the movement's vitality.<sup>63</sup>

The political demise of the Dubuque Knights came swiftly. The fall 1887 election results indicated a return to traditional politics, as Democrats outpolled their Republican and Laborite rivals by a two-to-one margin. Compared to the previous spring, the labor vote declined by 45 percent; the Democrats gained equally from Republican crossover votes and from former labor party voters who returned to the fold.<sup>64</sup>

This setback caused Knights leaders Voelker and Stafford to announce early in 1888 that the labor party would not field a separate ticket in the upcoming municipal election. They called instead for a unity ticket representing Democrats, Republicans, and Knights. When the antilabor forces nominated a fusion slate without representation from organized labor, Stafford rallied a coalition of Knights and some dissident Democrats into an opposition party known as the Straight Democrats. Yet the merger of the old parties produced predictable results. The citizens' ticket, composed of half Republicans and half Democrats, won nearly all of the city offices and a majority of the council seats. The election completed the political destruction of the Knights' local power base. All of the Straight Democrats who were members of the Order suffered defeat, and two of the five holdover councilmen distanced themselves from the Knights by claiming an independent status.<sup>65</sup> The Knights of Labor never again played a significant role in Dubuque city elections, and they abandoned independent politics completely by 1890.

63. *Leader*, 2 July, 6 August, 3 September, 15 October 1887.

64. *Leader*, 19 November 1887; *Herald*, 9, 10, 13 November 1887; *Times*, 9–11 November 1887.

65. *Times*, 15 January, 8, 15, 16, 25, 28, 30 March, 1, 3, 5 April 1888; *Herald*, 15, 18 January, 16–18, 25, 28, 30 March, 3–4 April, 1888; *Register*, 15 January, 25, 28 March, 3 April 1888.

In the wake of these electoral defeats, a succession of membership losses plagued the Order. From an organization that boasted more than 2,500 members in 1887, the Noble and Holy Order was reduced to a few hundred adherents by 1889. Only Local Assembly No. 4192, the first established of the seven Dubuque assemblies, survived into the 1890s. The other six locals, founded in 1886, lapsed after operating from one to three years.<sup>66</sup>

Election defeats and membership losses reflected a collapsing organizational apparatus. Local cooperative ventures fell victim to slackening patronage, intense competition, and management problems. The effectiveness of the Dubuque Order depended, to a large degree, on the leadership skills of John Stafford and the agitational impetus of the *Industrial Leader*. So when Stafford died suddenly in October 1888, and the *Leader*, suffering from financial problems, ceased publication a few weeks later, the once robust movement received two devastating blows.<sup>67</sup> The faltering labor movement escaped further damage when the Knights took the leadership in forming the Dubuque Trades and Labor Congress, a citywide labor organization, in July 1888. Although the Congress operated with Knights principles and leaders, it grew slowly, exercised little political influence, and gradually retreated from the lofty goal of labor solidarity.<sup>68</sup>

THAT THE DUBUQUE KNIGHTS OF LABOR ultimately succumbed to external attack and internal discouragement should not detract

66. *Herald*, 31 March 1889; W. T. Wright to Weller, 24 June 1889, Weller Papers; *Times*, 14 February 1890; *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America, November 13-27, 1888*, 17; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly of the Knights of Labor Session Held at Marshalltown, Iowa, Feb. 11, 12, 13, 1890*, 12-13; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly of the Knights of Labor, Session Held at Des Moines, February 10, 11, 12, 1891*, 16-17; Garlock, *Guide*, 116-17; Oldt, *History of Dubuque County*, 379. James R. Sovereign noted a rapid disintegration of the Order in Iowa at the end of 1887. See Sovereign to Powderly, 24 December 1887, Powderly Papers.

67. *Journal of United Labor*, 29 October 1887, 24 March, 20 December 1888; *Herald*, 17 October, 20 November 1888; *Times*, 21 November 1888.

68. *Herald*, 24 July, 25 October 1888; *Times*, 24 July 1888, 16 July 1889; Lorin Stuckey, *The Iowa State Federation of Labor* (Iowa City, 1915), 11-12. A slight resurgence of the Knights occurred when retail clerks, electric street railway employees, and ladies garment makers formed short-lived local assemblies in the early 1890s.



from their accomplishments. Local laborers who enrolled in the Noble and Holy Order found that they had joined more than a trade union. Guided by Knights principles of productive work, self-improvement, and education, a working-class culture emerged in Dubuque. The Knights spawned a mass labor movement nurtured by a rich associational life that spread from the workplace to the meeting hall and from the cooperative store to the hearth and home. For a few years this community of producing classes struggled to make organized labor and independent politics vehicles for securing workers' rights.

The two most important legacies of the Dubuque Knights were, indeed, economic organization and political action. The Knights initiated widespread support for unionism among local workers. Dedicated to organizing all toilers, they provided a solid foundation for subsequent unionization and a cadre of trade union leadership. The Knights' entrance into local politics ended the routine practice of ignoring labor's interests and running only self-employed businessmen and professionals as candidates. This forced the old parties to recognize organized labor when writing their platforms and selecting their nominees. Although their political tenure was short, the Knights of Labor opened the political process to those of non-elite background. These gains were admittedly a far cry from the workers' democracy the Knights envisioned, but they did contribute to the empowerment of Dubuque's working class.

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