

The first election I remember

by Himena V. Hoffman

It was the year 1896. I was seven years old, the daughter of as devoted a Democrat as there was in southern Iowa, always a delegate to state conventions, sometimes county chairman, and one of Decatur County's best campaigners before each election. It was not a time when women were active in politics. . . . For most little girls politics was a closed book. I was different. Where my father went, I wanted to go too, and he took me. I went to political rallies even if I slept through the speeches; was in his office when the Democratic County Committee met; and rode with him in our buggy, all over the county, campaigning every two years.

It is the first election I remember but I was not inexperienced. Though I can not remember it, I made my first political speech when I was two years old, standing on my father's desk and saying, "I'm a Democrat," and being rewarded by dimes from the committee members present (more pay than I've received for any political speech since). I had publicly refused to shake

hands with a Republican congressman because I was under the impression that he thought Democrats should be hung, and after the election in 1892 I'd been sure my father and someone named Cleveland had saved us from something terrible.

Also, I knew the Democrats needed to be elected. I'd heard my father say to a Republican, "I know how you vote but Ed's son should go to high school. Ed's a good neighbor and needs your help," or "I know you are a Republican but John's wife isn't well. If John's elected they can move to town. They are members of your church so I thought you'd want to know how things are."

Then, as now, election to county office depended on much besides party affiliation, and my father knew not only the politics but what almost every voter in the county thought important.

In 1896, I knew I was a Democrat and the months before the election were exciting ones that I still remember vividly. I wore a [William Jennings] Bryan button, had a Bryan hat, picked a weed we

called "silver rod" and scorned golden rod. I could, if asked "what did Bryan say?" declaim, "You shall not press down on labor's brow this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind on this cross of gold." I had no idea what that meant but it secured Democratic applause when I or any other Democrat quoted it. I went to campaign rallies and while I did not know what was meant by Protective Tariff or Free Coinage of Silver, neither did many of the adults. I knew something was wrong about the railroads and that we Democrats would do something about it.

I heard political discussion too. I've never forgotten hearing my Republican grandfather (my mother's father) say to his Populist neighbor, "Peter, if you'd fill that lumber wagon with paper dollars, those dollars would not be worth burning if they didn't have gold dollars back of them." From the election of 1896 I still have a memory of that wagon and how I thought it would look full of paper dollars and how gold dollars could be piled back of them. I also imagined a bonfire of paper dollars!



The campaign was one of many rallies, campaign slogans, and parades. Not since 1840 had the rank and file of the party been so involved, and never since has there been one like it.

I particularly enjoyed the parades, even the Republican ones. One was a torchlight parade with a baby buggy section. The baby boys had such signs as "I'll vote Republican in 1918" or "I can't vote but my papa can. He'll vote for McKinley. He's our man." I do not know if girl babies were in the parade. If so, I am sure none said, "I'll vote in 1918" or any other year.

The longest Democrat parade was said to be so long that when the last vehicle in it left Leon, the first entered Decatur, but the Republicans disparaged the claim by saying that there was so much space between each entry that they could have stretched it out to the county line! The winning float featured sixteen pretty girls in silver dress and one in gold, with the slogan "Sixteen to one" [the ratio of silver to gold]. There was also a float that carried sixteen little girls my age, a children's

chorus, but either because of my lack of musical talent or living on a farm, I was not a member. However I rode with my father, and our buggy whip had a big silver colored bow and I my Bryan cap.

The summer was full of excitement and when fall came it was more intense. The two Leon papers, one Republican and the other Democratic, denounced and defended, young men fought after Saturday night dances, children staged battles pulling off each other's buttons, and speeches and parades continued. Even in the pulpit there was sometimes politics. Most Methodist ministers, for instance, shared with their parishioners the feeling that God was white, Methodist, and Republican, and doubtless other churches had their versions which sometimes differed.

As for me, no one was more certain of being a Democrat than I until the night of the election when I heard my father say, "If the Republicans win tomorrow, we'll

all live on cornbread." I was amazed. I loved cornbread. It was one of the few foods I liked.

By mid-morning I changed parties. I climbed on the fence and yelled to passersby to the polls, "Vote Republican! Vote Republican!" A man came to my father, campaigning near the polling place, "Cal, that little girl of yours is on your fence yelling 'Vote Republican.'" My father hurried down for an explanation and I think he understood. He loved cornbread too.

The Republicans won but we still ate white bread. I have never been tempted by any Republican promises since nor did I ever expect any magic from the Democrats. What I did gain was the conviction that I still have: that our government can stand after any election and our lives go on.

This is the first election I remember. I remember so many since, but never quite like the one eighty years ago. ❖

The author wrote this essay in 1973 for an Iowa Commission on Aging contest. It is archived at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).