SOURCE MATERIAL OF IOWA HISTORY

The Appointment of James Wilson as Secretary of Agriculture

[Evidently the appointment of Henry A. Wallace as Secretary of Agriculture in Franklin D. Roosevelt's first Cabinet, in 1933, recalled to the mind of an Iowa politician the circumstances under which James Wilson, Iowa's first Secretary of Agriculture, received his appointment in 1897. H. G. McMillan, the Republican state chairman in 1895-1897, wrote the following account of the appointment, which was published in the Traer *Clipper*, April 14, 1933. James Wilson of Traer, known throughout the state as "Tama Jim," served longer than any other Cabinet member — from 1897 until 1913, receiving successive appointments from Presidents McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft. Under his guidance, as McMillan points out, the Department of Agriculture, first established in 1889, grew in importance.

Of interest, in the light of McMillan's article, are the contemporary news stories and editorials from the Des Moines *Register*, which follow the McMillan story. These accounts illustrate the dangers of relying too heavily on contemporary newspaper stories for political facts, since the underlying maneuvering leading up to the Wilson appointment is completely hidden in the 1897 *Register* stories.]

WRITER REVEALS "INSIDE STORY" OF TRAER MAN'S CABINET APPOINTMENT.

James Wilson, of Tama county, or "Tama Jim" as he was familiarly called, was Iowa's first secretary of agriculture.

He was appointed by President William McKinley, beginning his term of office when McKinley was inaugurated March 4, 1897.

He was reappointed by Roosevelt and again by Taft, continuing in office sixteen years as secretary of agriculture and establishing an all-time record, no other cabinet officer to this day having continued in office this length of time.

His appointment created some surprise even in Iowa where he was best known. While he had served a term in congress [*sic*. Actually, three terms:

1873 to 1877, and 1883 to 1885.] some years before and at the time of his appointment was dean of agriculture in the college at Ames, he had not been active in politics for some time and was not believed to be in line for political preferment.

The influences brought to bear and the circumstances under which his appointment was obtained were not generally known at the time. Only a comparatively few who were active in obtaining the appointment were "in the know" and understood how the appointment came about.

In fact, it is a chapter in the political history of Iowa that has never been written.

We had just passed through one of the most memorable and spectacular campaigns in the history of the United States. Even in 1840, in the days of "Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too" when General [William Henry] Harrison was elected President, the excitement was no greater than in the free silver campaign of 1896.

Never before had the people so generally sought to post themselves on the issues involved and in no part of the country was the interest greater than in Iowa. Prices were low, money scarce and times were as hard as they are now.

The farmers were selling corn and oats at 8 and 10 cents a bushel, and hogs sold for $2.90 a hundred in Chicago in September, 1896. Rallies everywhere were largely attended and between rallies, curbstone and cracker-box orators drew large crowds at the street corners.

The argument for "free silver" and more money strongly appealed to the farmers, who were selling their corn at 10 cents a bushel and feared they would lose their farms through foreclosure on account of lack of money to pay interest and taxes.

The writer was chairman of the Republican state committee at that time and our first poll of the state indicated Iowa might be lost to the Republicans.

After one of the most thoroughly organized and intensive campaigns ever staged in Iowa, McKinley carried the state by a few hundred more than 65,000 majority.

At the St. Louis convention where McKinley was nominated, Albert B. Cummins was chosen as member of the national Republican committee from Iowa. J. W. Blythe was first selected by the Iowa delegation, but declined the honor, and Cummins was named in his stead.

Afterwards, Mark Hanna, chairman of the national committee, appointed Cummins a member of the executive committee, and in consequence Cummins was in Chicago a good share of the time during the campaign and took an active part in the work of the national committee.

Almost immediately after the campaign was over, on account of Iowa's splendid loyalty to McKinley and the Republican party, the eleven Republican candidates for congress being elected as well as McKinley, claims were being made in Iowa papers that the state should be recognized in McKinley's cabinet.

In this connection, Cummins was mentioned as especially qualified for the office of attorney general. He was a brilliant lawyer and one of Iowa's most popular campaigners, and had been a candidate for senator a short time before when [John H.] Gear was elected.

Having had such an important position with the national committee and having taken an active part in a campaign so highly successful, he appeared to have strong claim for recognition.

Among the congressmen who had been elected was Capt. J. A. T. Hull of the Des Moines district, who had served many terms in congress and was chairman of the committee on military affairs. As soon as Cummins' name was mentioned in connection with a cabinet position, Captain Hull's friends immediately brought him out as a candidate for secretary of war.

"Uncle Dick" [Richard P.] Clarkson, who was then owner and editor of the Register [Des Moines *Register*] and a veteran of the Civil war, vigorously supported Captain Hull and insisted the old soldiers should be recognized. He claimed that on account of his gallant service in the war and his experience at the head of the military committee in congress, he was exceptionally well qualified for secretary of war.

Many of the other papers in the state supported Hull and it soon became apparent that unless something was done to harmonize the situation there would be a bitter rivalry between the two candidates for a cabinet position.

I have already mentioned that I was chairman of the Republican state committee of Iowa. I had been the year before in 1895, the year that Governor [Francis M.] Drake was elected and had taken part in the campaign of Senator [William B.] Allison when he was re-elected in 1896.

When the rivalry between Cummins and Hull was beginning to become somewhat heated, word came to me from Senator Allison by special messenger that he regarded the political situation developing in Iowa as most

unfortunate and that if it continued it would be very unlikely that Iowa would obtain any cabinet position.

He indicated to me that as I was chairman of the Republican state committee and at the head of the party organization I should put forth my earnest endeavors to harmonize the situation. Allison was then one of the great leaders in the United States senate and was looked upon in Iowa as our ablest and wisest statesman, and a suggestion from him was accepted by the party workers with almost the force of law.

After hearing from Allison as indicated, I felt that I could not rightfully shirk the responsibility that he suggested I assume, and that I should undertake to discover some plan to bring about harmony in the party ranks. For many years I had known Henry Wallace, editor of Wallaces' Farmer. . . .

Wallace had supported the Republican ticket in the campaign just closed and conducted a discussion of the money question from the farmers' standpoint in the columns of his paper during the campaign.

He was without doubt the ablest and most forceful agricultural writer of his day and had great influence with the farmers. I had often consulted with him during the campaign and had great confidence in his judgment.

I went to see Wallace and explained the problem I had to deal with and asked his advice. After hearing my explanation of the situation, he said it was a mistake for Iowa to ask for either the attorney general or the secretary of war.

What Iowa should have, he said, was a secretary of agriculture. Iowa was the outstanding agricultural state of the nation and the farmers of Iowa had loyally stood by McKinley in the campaign when the temptation was great to leave the party, and they were the ones who were entitled to recognition rather than the legal fraternity or even the old soldiers.

Naturally the question at once came up — who would be an available candidate. I suggested Henry Wallace himself. He vetoed my suggestion at once. . . .

Wallaces' Farmer was rapidly building up and already had strong support among the farmers of the state. Wallace said he liked his work and did not want to leave his paper. He said, however, he had in mind "just the right fellow for the job." I asked him who and he replied: "Tama Jim Wilson."

At that time I hardly knew Wilson and was somewhat in doubt as to whether he was well enough known to make a strong candidate. Wallace

was sure his record was all right, and the more it was gone into the stronger he would become.

Before committing myself I told Wallace I would want an interview with Wilson. Wallace then agreed he would arrange to have him come down from Ames the next evening, which he did, and Wallace, Wilson and I went over the whole situation. I then learned Wilson had served in congress with McKinley and had been on most friendly terms with him while in congress.

He was willing to become a candidate if we thought best to bring him out. Before we adjourned, Wallace and I agreed that Wilson ought to be the candidate from Iowa, and we would see what could be done in his behalf. We all agreed that the only hope of success would lie in our ability to persuade Cummins and Hull to retire from the field in the interest of party harmony. As matters stood then this looked like a most difficult task.

My relations with Cummins during the campaign had been pleasant and quite intimate. We co-operated and pulled together throughout the campaign. Cummins and Wallace also were on very friendly terms, so we decided we would see him first and submit our plan in the interest of harmony. When we saw him he at first hesitated somewhat, but was much impressed with the claims of Iowa as an agricultural state.

He finally agreed that he would withdraw as a candidate in the interests of harmony if Hull would do the same, but expressed the opinion Hull would not give way.

At that time what was known as the "Stand Pat" crowd was in the zenith of its power, and Hull had the support of this faction of the party. It was a difficult matter to determine just how to approach Captain Hull.

Cyrenus Cole, late congressman from the Cedar Rapids district, was then associate editor of the Register. He was boarding at Hotel Savery and I had rooms there and usually lunched with him at the noon hour. I took the matter up with him and he agreed with me that an effort to obtain a cabinet position for Iowa with two candidates in the field would be fruitless, and if Cummins was willing to retire from the field in favor of Wilson, Hull ought to do the same.

He agreed to talk the matter over with "Uncle Dick," as we called Mr. Clarkson of the Register then, as he was Captain Hull's most vigorous and ardent supporter.

At first "Uncle Dick" appeared obdurate and not at all inclined to ad-

vise Hull to give way. Different ones talked to both Clarkson and Hull, but apparently we made but little headway. Finally Cole advised me to see Clarkson myself and explain to him Allison's desires in the matter.

I did this and in addition called his attention to the fact that his father, "Father Clarkson," [had] for many years conducted a farmers' page in the weekly Register and was universally regarded as the chief exponent and most loyal champion of agricultural interests in the state of Iowa and that it seemed to me when the time had finally come when we had a good secretary of agriculture at Washington, the first of the kind in our history, we should have his support in such a worthy cause and I hoped he would give the matter his most careful consideration before allowing the opportunity to pass.

He finally promised to do this and said he would see Captain Hull and let me know later what he would do. The result was that he advised Hull to withdraw. Cummins, as he had promised, did likewise and the field was cleared for "Tama Jim."

As soon as the announcement was made that Cummins and Hull had withdrawn and it became known that Wilson was a candidate for secretary of agriculture and that all factions of the party had united upon him, Allison and the entire Iowa delegation in congress got squarely behind his candidacy, and McKinley knowing him in congress and having a big opinion of his character and ability, his appointment soon became almost a foregone conclusion.

While many influences were brought to bear to accomplish this result and different individuals contributed in a greater or less degree to the final outcome, Henry Wallace, I think, is entitled to greater credit than any single individual.

He was the first to suggest the name of James Wilson, and when his own name was proposed, he magnanimously declined to have his name considered and insisted that Wilson was the man for the place, and until his appointment was assured he was earnest and active in his support. It was largely through the influence of Wallace that the agricultural interests of the state were solidly behind Wilson.

When James Wilson became secretary of agriculture [on] March 4, 1897, the department of agriculture was little more than a trifling affair compared to other departments of the government. The building in which the department was housed and carried on its work looked like a country courthouse

in the pioneer days of Iowa, and the appropriations that congress granted for the encouragement and development of agriculture were exceedingly meager.

Under Wilson's administration the department grew and expanded almost by leaps and bounds, and before he retired became one of the most important departments of the federal government. He established the forest reserves and experiment stations in all parts of the United States.

He inaugurated farm demonstration work on a national scale and enlisted an army of experts and scientists to obtain information and develop ideas of benefit to agriculture.

He obtained the confidence of congress to such a degree that he had only to ask for an appropriation to get it. It was during his administration that the repeated lavish appropriations were made to build the magnificent marble structure now occupied by the department of agriculture. It has been said he never asked for an appropriation that was refused.

Since Wilson's time, Iowa has had two of her sons at the head of the agricultural department at Washington. The late E. T. Meredith served for a time at the close of the administration of Woodrow Wilson. A son — Henry C. Wallace — of Henry Wallace who gave such valuable support to "Tama Jim" when he was appointed, was appointed by President Harding and served until his death some three years later, and now President Roosevelt has chosen for his secretary of agriculture a grandson of "Uncle Henry" Wallace.

Thus Iowa has been honored by six different Presidents, counting Wilson's re-appointments, in choosing a secretary of agriculture. In the last thirty-six years an Iowa man has been at the head of this important department more than half the time, and another man from the great cornbelt state that produces twice as many hogs as any other state is again taking charge.

It almost appears that Iowa has sort of a prior lien on this cabinet position. A considerable part of this standing in the nation, I think, can be attributed to the long service and splendid record of accomplishment made by "Tama Jim" Wilson, Iowa's first secretary of agriculture. . . .

[In light of the above reminiscences, thirty-six years after the event, the following contemporary news stories and editorials from the Des Moines *Register*, forecasting the appointment of Wilson, are of interest. On Janu-

ary 15, 1897, the Des Moines *Register* carried the following story on its front page:]

IT CAN BE "TAMA JIM"

THE PRESIDENT-ELECT HAS HIS EYE
UPON THE IOWA AGRICULTURIST.

He has Said That the Secretary of
Agriculture Will Come
From the West

Fact Brought Out that Senator Allison
"Mentioned" Wilson to McKinley,
and That With "Unction."

"TAMA JIM" FOR THE CABINET

An Iowa man who has been in Canton [Ohio, McKinley's home], has the following to say in regard to a matter of state wide interest, the information is direct and reliable, and there are some reasons to think that it comes from the president-elect himself: "It has become talk in inner circles here that Major McKinley has been thinking favorably of the proposition to select his secretary of agriculture from Iowa. He has from the first said that he wants to choose the head of that department from the Middle West. Ex-Gov. Hoard, of Wisconsin, has been under consideration, but differences of opinion in that state, which is split into political factions, are said to be standing in his way. The president-elect, it may be said, is now looking further west for his secretary of agriculture. He has a desire to recognize the great farming regions of which Iowa is the center, and politicians here believe that Iowa stands a good chance of having this office. The president would like to appoint Mr. Cummins attorney general, but Mr. [Nathan] Goff, of [West] Virginia, has the first offer of that place. There are some things that go to show that he must take his secretary of war from a state farther east than Iowa. This is the way the situation looks now. What is Iowa ready to do in case a secretary of agriculture may be looked for from that state?"

Major McKinley will take his secretary of agriculture from the midland

region. He wants for the head of his agricultural department a practicing farmer, a man of resources and one who has the actual confidence of the farmers of the country. It has been pointed out to him that Iowa of all the states in the Union is the most distinctly agricultural state, and that the secretary of agriculture should come from a state which is so closely identified with the business of farming and which is at the same time so sound on all great financial and commercial questions.

Mr. Wilson is not merely a professional farmer. He has not been an organizer nor an agitator. He is a broad gauged man, a man of common sense, and of experience, of convictions — just the man who would make a great record in the department of agriculture. There is nothing in farming that he does not know and he has at the same time a business man's knowledge of markets and prices and manipulations and all this knowledge he could make of practical use to the farmers of the whole country.

AN AGRICULTURIST

Mr. Wilson was and is a farmer. His Tama county farm is one of the most successful in Iowa. It made him famous. Then he was sent to congress and he took his position with the ablest men in that body. He was as fully equipped for congress as he was for the farm. He was able to hold his own, whether in the committee room or on the floor. He showed the qualities of a statesman. After serving in congress he returned to his farm, until he was called to the Agricultural College, at Ames, where he became the head of the agricultural department and where he has made a record which places that department in the forefront with the best in the world.

That is James Wilson and that is his work for agriculture. He would at once give standing and prestige to agriculture. The farmers of the West want something more than a speech maker and diner-out at the head of their department in Washington. They want the department managed in the interest of the genuine agriculture.

The Register's information from Canton and Washington is to the effect that the president is looking to Iowa or one of the neighboring states for a secretary of agriculture.

The Register is in a position to say that if all will agree on James Wilson for secretary of agriculture he will be the man for the cabinet.

What of Cummins and Hull? Mr. Cummins is out of the race, for there is only one office in the cabinet he would think of accepting and that is attorney general. Mr. Goff, who will be the southern member of the cab-

inet, it seems to be understood, is slated for that place. Mr. Cummins has known of this preference or rather previous selection, for some time. Mr. Hull is still a possibility for secretary of war. He has the backing of the regular army influences. He is popular in army circles because of the able administration he has given as the head of the committee on military in the house, one of the few really great house chairmanships. That friendship is worth much to a man. Gen. Miles is especially fond of Capt. Hull, and Gen. Miles, who is a close relative of Senator Sherman, has in that way a willing ear at the White House. But Capt. Hull has held his friends back. He has had no appeal made to President-Elect McKinley. In a private telegram he said Tuesday: "I am convinced Wilson can be put into the cabinet. I want Iowa to have a cabinet place, and am ready to join on any man McKinley may take."

SENATOR ALLISON'S ATTITUDE

Washington, Jan. 12. — Senator Allison said to-day that the report that President-Elect McKinley had decided to invite ex-Representative Wilson, of Iowa, to a place in his cabinet as secretary of agriculture at his (Senator Allison's) suggestion, had for its foundation the fact that he had recommended Mr. Wilson for this office to Mr. McKinley. He said, however, that he had received no verification of the report that the nomination had been decided upon. The senator added that Major McKinley had asked him if he knew a practical farmer from the West. He had then suggested Mr. Wilson, whom Mr. McKinley had known as a member of the house, but that the president-elect had not indicated any decision. "I hope, however," he added, "that Mr. Wilson's fitness has so grown upon Maj. McKinley as to decide him to make the appointment as reported." . . .

[In the issue of February 5, 1897, the *Register* published the following day-by-day account of the appointment of James Wilson:]

IOWA MAN IN CABINET

Prof. James Wilson, of State
Agricultural College, Accepts
a Place

Will Be Secretary of Agriculture in
President-elect McKinley's Cabinet.

Ames, Iowa, Jan. 29. — Hon. James Wilson, professor of agriculture in the Iowa Agricultural College, received a telegram last evening from President-elect McKinley asking him to come to Canton at once. Mr. Wilson had arranged to take the train for Des Moines on business connected with the college, but on receiving McKinley's telegram, he made hurried arrangements and took the evening train for Canton.

Canton, O., Jan. 29. — Ex-Congressman James Wilson, of Iowa, came to Canton on the Pennsylvania train from the West, and about 10 o'clock reached the McKinley home. With Maj. McKinley and ex-State Librarian Joseph P. Smith, he passed an hour in the private room. When asked by the Associated Press representative if there was any statement he could make regarding his visit to Canton, or the gossip connecting him with the cabinet as secretary of agriculture, he said there was nothing that he could say at present.

Canton, Jan. 30. — Hon. James Wilson, of Iowa, left for his home this morning. He was very reticent touching the results of his visit, but it was not difficult to infer from his talk that he is more than a cabinet possibility, and that he may accept the agricultural portfolio.

Ames, Feb. 1. — Special: Prof. James Wilson returned this morning from Canton, O., where he was tendered the position of secretary of agriculture by President-elect McKinley, and has accepted the same. His many friends here extend congratulations. . . .

[On February 19, 1897, the *Register* published the following editorial, commenting on the appointment of Wilson:]

A CHAPTER IN POLITICS.

The appointment of "Tama Jim" Wilson as secretary of agriculture has given great satisfaction not only at home, but throughout the country. No appointment could have given more general satisfaction. Not a voice has been raised in criticism, that we have heard. That is a remarkable thing in connection with an appointment to a seat in the cabinet. The Iowa men who participated in the bringing out of Mr. Wilson naturally feel some pride in the appointment. Even the Register has felt a little pride in the fact that it was among the first if not the first to suggest Mr. Wilson for the agricultural portfolio, and certainly the first not only to predict, but to announce that he would be appointed.

There has been some misapprehension which, we think, ought to be dis-

pelled. It was at the time given out that there was the least tinge of rivalry among several Iowa men who had been mentioned for places in the cabinet, especially Congressman Hull and Mr. A. B. Cummins. The Register happens to know that both men stepped aside and waived all consideration, as soon as they saw that Mr. Wilson had become a possibility. Mr. Hull wrote from Washington that he would not allow his friends even to suggest his name to the president-elect as long as "Tama Jim" was considered for the office of secretary of agriculture. Mr. Hull did restrain his friends and participated in advancing the candidacy of Mr. Wilson.

It is also true that Mr. Cummins when he was called to Canton, just before Senator Allison made his visit there, was under consideration for the position of attorney general. He would have been in the line of appointment when Mr. Goff declined the position (he was afterwards persuaded to reconsider his declination). When the president-elect asked in regard to a suitable man for secretary of agriculture, Mr. Cummins recommended Mr. Wilson, with whom Maj. McKinley had served in congress. Mr. Cummins then and there waived any right to consideration that he might have claimed. He informed Maj. McKinley that he did not want to be considered in connection with the office of attorney general as long as Mr. Wilson's appointment was under consideration. Mr. Cummins did a generous and characteristic thing for Mr. Wilson whom he was able to recommend in the highest terms. Mr. Cummins came home and talked the matter over with Mr. Wilson whom he met here by appointment. It was at that time that The Register learned, direct from Canton, how seriously Mr. Wilson was under consideration and predicted his appointment. After the consultation with Mr. Wilson, Mr. Cummins wrote to Maj. McKinley, the result of his conclusions. Senator Allison had in the meantime added his approval and in due time Mr. Wilson was sent for and offered the place.

These explanations form an interesting chapter in Iowa political history and they are at the same time due to the two men who were at that time in a fair way to be seriously considered for cabinet places. This was one of the years when Iowa was considered to have several men strong enough to be taken into consideration in the formation of the president's cabinet.