

The Irish in Politics

American Politics

Irishmen were lured into American politics early. The Irish peasant found it easy to follow the political boss and take an active role.

As early as 1840 the Whigs and Democrats were vying for the foreigners' vote in Iowa. The *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser* wrote:

Germans and Irishmen of Iowa! will you, with evidence such as is here given of the desire of the Whigs to DEPRIVE YOU OF THE RIGHT OF SUFFRAGE, lend your assistance in elevating them to power? If you do, you will have yourselves alone to blame — upon your own heads will rest the consequences.

Colonel Richard M. Johnson, Vice President under Van Buren, was quoted as saying:

The adopted Irishman — a good man, wherever you find him. *Sons of the Emerald Isle!* Listen to what this . . . war worn veteran says to you, and remember that although purse proud aristocracy may assail you, while democracy continues in the ascendant your rights will suffer no curtailment.

In 1847 a letter writer from Agency City thought the *Iowa Capital Reporter* (Iowa City) was up to dirty work, slandering the Irish Catho-

lics by saying they were deserting the United States army in the war with Mexico. He warned against action. The Irish Catholics "are a hornets' nest."

By 1853 even the Democrats in eastern Iowa thought there were too many Irish on their tickets. That year the Whigs nominated J. P. Farley for Mayor of Dubuque while the Democrats nominated B. J. O'Halloran. Many split their tickets, resulting in a sweeping defeat for the Democrats.

The newspapers of different political affiliations were repeatedly trying to sway the Irish from one side or the other. The *Democratic Banner* of Davenport printed a letter from "A Foreigner" in May, 1854. He quoted the *Davenport Gazette* as saying, "This city contains all kinds of people and from all nations of the human race, and some that are scarcely human, among whom are some of the wild red-mouthed Irish, with hair on their teeth, that are a pest to society." The correspondent asked if the "suffering sons of Erin after having been trampled upon" in Ireland were to be met by this type of "sympathy" in America.

That some of them are poor and miserable, of coarse appearance, and perhaps still coarser manners, no one denies, but shall they be taunted with their poverty and misery because forsooth their *dress* is not quite so *refined* and the *hand* not quite as *soft* as that of Mr. Alfred Sanders [editor of the *Gazette*] and his immaculate correspondent?

In Garryowen the Catholic Irish, it was said,

refused to permit any but "whole-hog democrats" to settle there. It was also claimed that the only one who could read and write was the postmaster. It was alleged that he determined who should be voted for on election day and thus frequently helped to elect Democratic candidates.

In 1855 A. R. Colton was running against Hiram Price for judge of the 8th judicial district. Knowing the Irish hostility to the Know Nothings, an opponent of Colton went to Garryowen and told them Colton was a Know Nothing. The Irish decided that "divil a vote for Colton" would be cast. Colton's protests did no good; the Irish did not vote for judge at all, and Price was elected.

Political rallies were frequently humorous events. At a rally in 1858 in the Irish Settlement in Madison County, B. F. Roberts and H. J. B. Cummings, prominent Republicans, were the speakers. The rally was held under a large black walnut tree on the farm of John Holton. As Cummings was speaking on the political issues of the day, some wag climbed the low hanging branches of the tree and beckoned for others. Soon all were hidden among the branches and Cummings had to finish his speech to a few women.

The Des Moines *Daily State Register* in 1867 was attempting to win Irish to the Republican party. In an editorial, it commented, "How an Irishman, whose whole life is an impulsive throb of enthusiasm and radicalism, can chain himself up to

the slow car of a conservative party [Democrats] is surely a mystery."

In 1868 new legislation regarding registration of voters was being considered. The *Register* felt that a primary declaration of intention to become citizens did not answer for final and complete naturalization. "It has been intimated," the editor asserted, "that the Democrats expect to make a gain in the 5th District, by the Irish laborers that may be employed on the railroad." The editor agreed this was all right if the Irish were regularly naturalized and long-time citizens of Iowa. Otherwise, the proof should be clear beyond doubt, "in all cases of new names and new faces of day laborers who claim naturalization and residence."

During the presidential campaign the *Register* alleged that the Davenport *Democrat*, the Burlington *Argus* and other newspapers are "frantically endeavoring to prejudice the foreign element of the voting class in their regions against Colfax by falsely charging him with having been a Know Nothing," which was proved false a long time since. The editor asked why they didn't say something about Clagett being a leader of the Know Nothings. "The German and Irish voters of the first District would like to know something about that."

The campaign was marked with vigorous attempts to win Irish votes. The *Register* thought Irishmen would do well to remember the speech

made in 1866 by Frank P. Blair, Democratic candidate for Vice President.

At the time that many Irishmen were leaving the United States for Ireland, Frank happened to be on a little bender, when he made the following speech: "Good-by, Finnegans. You go out with whole hides; we don't care how you come back. May you have a safe journey out; and a long one back — so long that you never get back!" And this is the man whom the Democracy presents for the suffrages of Irishmen! We imagine they won't take him down in very large doses!

On October 17 the *Register* again quoted Blair's speech. A letter of Schuyler Colfax, Republican candidate for Vice President, was also quoted. He had sent \$20 to the Fenian cause since he regarded "hopefully every well-directed and patriotic endeavor throughout the world for nationality" and rejoiced "that so many loyal Irishmen had enrolled themselves in the Army of the Union, to save their adopted country from anarchy and destruction."

A few years later the *Register* quoted the *Irish World* in a further attempt to persuade the Irish to become Republicans. The Republican party "has treated the negroes as men, and the Democratic party has treated the Irish like niggers."

In the election of 1892 the tariff was the issue used by Republicans to appeal for Irish votes in Iowa. Republican newspapers quoted English papers which stated that the McKinley tariff was ruining English industries.

The Irish were urged to vote against the Democratic party which stood for "English free trade" and "prosperity for England." The London *Times* was quoted as saying, "one Irishman in the United States wearing English broadcloth and voting free trade is worth more to England than fifty Irishmen at home."

In 1931 Iowa was faced with redistricting for Congressional elections. Otha D. Wearin commented at Cedar Falls that the Democratic party strength might suffer from mixing Dubuque County Irish Catholics with German Protestants in Scott and Clinton counties. C. F. Clark, representing Linn County in the Iowa Senate, opposed any bill which would place his home area in the same district as Dubuque, Scott, Clinton and Jackson counties. "The proposed second district is as wet as the Mississippi River. To win election to Congress in it, a man would have to speak four languages, English, German, Bohemian and Irish."

British-Irish Politics

Iowa newspapers frequently took the side of Ireland in Anglo-Irish conflicts. The *Iowa State Gazette* of Burlington reported Irish news extensively in 1848. The editor wrote:

Our prayers, our hopes, our wishes and aspirations are with that gallant nation so long the victim of the merciless tyranny of England. That she may be free is the universal prayer of the people of this continent.

Although the number of Irish in Iowa had diminished during the Twentieth Century, interest in Ireland did not decrease. In February, 1919, the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Polk County was associated with the Federation of Friends of Irish Freedom. In a petition signed by John P. O'Malley, M. T. Scanlon and others, the United States was asked to intercede with Great Britain for the freedom and independence of Ireland.

Their plea was based first on the United States being the champion of true democracy; second, all nations are entitled to the rights of self-determination; third, President Wilson had stated no country should be governed without their consent; fourth, Ireland had suffered much because of their love for freedom; fifth, returning American soldiers had waged war for the same principle; and finally, the United States "has always been . . . on friendly terms with Ireland."

The Fenians

The Fenians were organized in the 1860's to destroy English rule in Ireland by force of arms and to establish an Irish republic. Following the Civil War, Irish started Fenian movements in many Iowa localities. In April, 1866, a Fenian meeting was held in Des Moines where "Ireland is pretty largely represented" and where the movement "has many ardent and working friends."

The *Iowa State Register* was very pro-Irish and anti-British at this time.

The British Lion has a lively and extensive tail, but there is an excellent prospect of having it pulled out by the roots before the Fenian excitement shall have dropped dead.

A few days later it was announced that J. F. Barrett and Dr. C. C. McGovern were to speak on "Fenians and the Freedom of Ireland." "Go and hear what the champions of Irish liberty have to say." Barrett and McGovern, the *Register* records, struck Old John Bull several times between the eyes. . . . We are inclined to think . . . that the Fenians have no great measure of affection for England: — We can't blame them much; for it is impossible to tell just now what particular benefaction, except starvation and misgovernment, have been conferred by J.B. on the Emerald Isle.

The Fenians in Des Moines were described as "active, working men whose interest in Irish independence is no mawkish, sentimental affair!" They were so enthusiastic that many felt the organization would last until it gave the English "the almightiest scare, or flogging which it has received since the days of Washington and Patrick Henry!" When conflict broke out in Ireland, newspapers urged: "Fenians, go in!"

We prefer the Irish flag to the British Lion. — We'll go for Limerick before we shall go for perfidious Albion! Our voice is for war, for Tipperary, and for Irish Independence! If Brittannia rules the waves, the Fenians are in fair way to rule the Canadas. Success to 'em!

The Fenian attempt to invade Canada led to other editorials:

The Fenians are undoubtedly a sort of judgment seat sent by Heaven to punish the read-coats [sic] for their hypocrisy and rascality during our late Civil War, and we are disposed to accept their dispensation of Providence with the most devout resignation. We hope Gen. Grant and the State Executives on this side of the line will just keep hands off, and let the young gentlemen with the shillalahs slosh around on Canadian soil to their hearts' content.

The movement spread throughout Iowa from 1866 to 1869. A Republican meeting at Norwalk in 1866 urged release of all Fenians, declaring:

We sympathize with the oppressed of every Nation or People who are struggling to be Free, and that we consider it the peculiar duty of Americans to aid, by all lawful means, the Irish, in their patriotic efforts to wrest their native land . . . from the grasp of a perfidious, hereditary, and insatiable foe.

Dr. Bell, a Fenian from Dublin, spoke at Muscatine a few weeks later. Davenport also had "a tremendous meeting" about the same time. Large Fenian demonstrations were held in Dubuque on July 4, 1866. The next year Fenians from Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota held their convention in Dubuque — July 2 to 4. Social events were not overlooked. The Des Moines Fenians staged a Grand Fenian Ball on August 1, 1867.

The Sarsfield Circle of Fenians in Dubuque, of which John O'Neill was commander and John P. Quigley secretary, held at least four annual balls from 1867 to 1870. The third grand ball of 1869 was a great success. Music was furnished by a

ten piece band and a "sumptuous repast" was prepared. The price of admission was \$2.50 per couple. Receipts totaled \$575. The same year the Fenians, the German Rifles and German Turnverein, participated in Decoration Day ceremonies.

Delegates of the Fenian Brotherhood met in Dubuque again in 1868. General John O'Neill, President of the Brotherhood and Professor Brophy of Washington, D. C., were the speakers.

With such a leader [O'Neill] that wishes for independent nationality on the beautiful Isle where sleep his forefathers, who will longer hesitate to do his duty? An organizer . . . will soon visit your localities. Be prepared to labor with him in the glorious work and . . . the shout of a triumphant and victorious people will gladden the hearts of the republican world, long, long ere that world may hope for such a result.

The peak of Fenian activity in Iowa was reached by 1868 when there were about fifty circles. The Chicago *Irish Republic*, eloquent spokesman for Fenianism, had a circulation of 5,000 in Iowa. Some newspapers were not sympathetic to the movement. The *Albia Union* considered the movement humbug. On the other hand, W. S. Burke of the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* went to Canada to see the Fenian invasion firsthand.

By 1869 the movement in Iowa had waned, although it was concluded that: "Certain it is that the Irish heart was never so full of hope that Ireland is to be free as it is at the present time."