

Selecting Convention Delegates

One hundred years ago methods of nomination and election were primitive. For example, when provision was made in June, 1845, to re-submit to the people of the Territory of Iowa, the constitution drafted in 1844, the law stipulated that it should "be the duty of the judges of the election, to interrogate the qualified electors when they approach the polls to vote, whether, they are in favor of, or against the Constitution; to which interrogatory the elector shall answer simply, 'constitution,' or 'no constitution;' and the clerk of said election shall thereupon write down his name in a column headed, 'constitution,' or 'no constitution,' in accordance with the vote of said elector." Thus there was at that time a *viva voce* election.

A year later, the constitution of 1844 having been finally discarded, provision was made for the calling of a new convention to be composed of thirty-two members. Des Moines, Lee, and Van Buren counties were each authorized to elect three delegates; Jefferson and Henry counties were each to have two delegates; and Davis, Wapello, Mahaska, Keokuk, Washington, Louisa, Muscatine, Johnson, Cedar, Scott, Clinton, Jackson,

Jones, and Clayton counties were each to have one delegate. Iowa, Marion, Polk, and Jasper counties together were to have one delegate, Linn and Benton together were given one delegate. Appanoose and Kishkekosh also had one between them, while Dubuque, Delaware, Buchanan, Fayette, and Black Hawk counties together were to have two delegates.

The Democratic Party, in power in Iowa at that time, made provision for the nomination of its delegates in the several counties by means of county conventions. These were, of course, extra-legal and procedure was informal. That various methods of representation were developing is shown by the fact that in March, 1845, the editor of the *Capital Reporter* recommended that representation in Johnson County be as follows: from Iowa City precinct 18, from Old Man's Creek 6, Clear Creek 6, and Monroe Township 4. He suggested that this ratio had previously been used. Just when this method evolved, or by whom it was first suggested is not clear. Apparently it was based roughly upon population or upon voting strength of the several precincts.

On March 11, 1846, the Iowa City *Capital Reporter* said: "The Democracy of Linn county are to assemble in mass meeting at Marion, on Tuesday, the 17th inst., to nominate a Delegate to the

convention for the formation of a constitution." At the same time it said: "The Democratic Delegates for Lee, three in number, are to be nominated by a county convention composed of delegates from each township, on Saturday, the 14th ult."

Three weeks later the same paper, reporting on the convention in Lee County, said:

"The invincible Democracy of the banner county met on the 14th ult., and nominated for Delegates, Josiah Kent, Geo. Berry and David Galland — 'all good men and true, and taken fresh from the ranks of the people,' as we are informed by both the Lee County Democrat and Keokuk Argus. Lee County was a recognized Democratic stronghold, and the prophecy of a complete Democratic victory was fulfilled, but that was the only county in the Territory that sent three Democratic delegates to the convention.

There was less unity and less strength among the Whigs, and various plans were devised to secure at least some Whig representation in the constitutional convention. In the hope of inducing some members of the Democratic Party to vote for representative Whigs, the Whig leaders suggested "No Party" conventions. The plan was a unique one, and offered two modes of procedure.

"First — let as many candidates for Delegate

as choose to run, come upon the track, in every county, without the intervention of caucuses or party meetings, and from the number allow the voters to make their selection, free of party bias or constraint; or secondly, let men of all parties meet together, and nominate as candidates the best men the counties afford, looking to their capacity and intelligence."

This plan made no appeal whatever to members of the Democratic Party. On February 11, 1846, the *Iowa City Capital Reporter* said:

"The whig press, and particularly our joking neighbor of the Hawk-eye, is constantly harping upon the themes of a 'party constitution' and a 'no-party constitution' — strenuously urging the latter upon the favorable consideration of the people. Now the whigs claim, we believe, to be a *party*, and a pretty considerable of a party at that, if we are to judge from their blustering about the principle, '*locofoco misrule*,' and all that. A tree is to be known by its fruits; and . . . the whigs of Iowa, who are the sole advocates of this incomprehensible thing, this *sui generis*, called a no-party constitution, are fairly entitled to the cognomen of the *no-party party*."

The Democratic press made vigorous appeals to members of its own party to organize for the contest. "Organize! Organize!" was the popular

Democratic slogan. "We have on two or three occasions", said a leading editor, "called attention of the Iowa Democracy to the importance of an early and efficient organization, in view of the approaching canvass for the election of Delegates to the Convention which is to form a Constitution for the future state of Iowa — This is not done from any apprehension that our opponents can, by any possibility, succeed in securing a majority in the Convention; but should our friends place too much reliance upon their superior numerical strength, and consequently relapse into indifference and suffer supineness to prevail among them, they may be taken by surprise, and when the crisis arrives, find themselves unprepared, even in some strong democratic counties, to meet the underhanded game by which the whigs are already striving to divide and distract our forces."

In Johnson County the *Iowa City Standard* called for a mass meeting of citizens, "without distinction of party," to meet on Saturday, March 14th. Although this meeting was in name a "no party" convention, in reality it must have been essentially Whig, for it nominated as its candidate for the office of delegate, Eastin Morris, editor of the *Standard* and an ardent Whig.

The Democrats met on the same day at the Capitol Building with each precinct in the county

represented. "There was no clashing of interest . . . no strife or log-rolling", no solicitation of delegates "to vote for this, or that particular candidate." The nomination was "the free and unbiased expression of the Democracy, fully and fairly represented." The able and distinguished lawyer, Curtis Bates, was named as the Democratic candidate, apparently with little opposition.

Although the methods of nomination may have varied in the different counties, it is probable that elections in all cases were by ballot in accordance with the law of 1843 which provided that:

"The manner of voting shall be by the electors approaching the ballot box at any time when the poll is opened, and by presenting their ticket to one of the judges who shall deposit the same immediately into a ballot box prepared for that purpose, and the clerk shall take down the name of all such voters."

Township trustees served as judges of election and the township clerk acted as one of the clerks. He was to choose "some suitable person" for the second clerk. If townships had not been organized the county commissioners were authorized to appoint three "capable and discreet persons, possessing the qualifications of electors" to act as judges. They were to appoint two persons with similar qualifications as clerks.

The tickets might be pieces of paper with the names of the candidates he favored written on it by the voter. In some cases these slips were printed by the party leaders and passed out to the voters. This made "scratching" tickets difficult, but the hand-written ballots might contain any variation of names. These voters of 1846 were party conscious but they were also individualistic.

The polls were to be open from nine o'clock in the morning until six in the afternoon, but the closing hour could be extended to nine P. M. if the judges so desired. Judges and clerks received a dollar a day with, apparently, no extra pay for overtime.

In Clayton County the Democrats nominated David Olmstead. The Democratic press reported that "the whigs *'tried on'* their amalgamation project; but it wouldn't fit." At all events the Democrats were agreed upon the selection of Olmstead, and at the ensuing election he was elected as the Clayton County delegate to the convention.

In Washington County, Nathan Baker, "a highly respected citizen and a true and tried democrat," received the Democratic nomination. "'A long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether,' on the part of the unterrified Democracy of Washington," it was said, "will secure his triumphant

election." But the Democratic commentators had not reckoned sufficiently with the opposition party. The Whigs, too, had a candidate in the person of Stewart Goodrell, and when the votes were counted it was found that the Whig candidate had won.

In Jefferson County the Democrats held a nominating convention on March 9th, with "an unusually full attendance from all the townships in the county, and every thing went off harmoniously and with the best possible feeling." There was a strong disposition in the convention to nominate Ver Planck Van Antwerp, but he declined the honor, expressing the belief that his duties as Receiver of the Land Office would not permit him to serve as a delegate to the convention. Thereupon, Colonel William G. Coop and Sulifand S. Ross, "two sterling and veteran democrats", were nominated. These men, it was said, had been "tried in the crucible" and found to be "the pure stuff". At the election which followed, they were elected as the Jefferson County delegates.

In Van Buren County there appears to have been something of a bi-partisan convention. At any rate the convention reported the selection of William Steele and Thomas Dibble, two prominent Democrats, and Erastus Hoskins, a staunch Whig. These convention nominees were later

elected and thus it came about that Van Buren County was represented in the constitutional convention of 1846 by two Democrats and a Whig.

Shepherd Leffler, Doctor Enos Lowe, and John A. Wright were nominated by the Democratic Party in Des Moines County. These men had all three served in the constitutional convention of 1844, Mr. Leffler having served as president of that convention. The *Capital Reporter* declared these men "are all the right stamp . . . to frame a civil code for a free and enlightened people." The Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, the Whig newspaper, declined entering into the contest — "declaring a determination to throw the responsibility wholly upon the Democracy" — "awful to relate", responded the Iowa *City Reporter*.

But the end was not yet. The Whigs, working quietly and quite unobserved, nominated a candidate of their own, in the person of G. W. Bowie. They induced a few of the Democrats to vote for him, just "in fun". When the votes were counted, it was discovered that Bowie was elected as one of the three delegates from Des Moines County, John A. Wright having lost out.

The *Capital Reporter*, commenting upon this election, said: "It appears to be a decree of fate, that old Desmoines shall always have a mixed representation. She is certainly an ill-starred

county. When will she wash out this leprous spot of federalism, and appear clad in the pure unspotted robes of democracy? G. W. Bowie, independent Whig, was elected over J. D. Wright, democrat, *in pure fun*. What think you of that, gentle reader? — Elected *in fun!*”

The Burlington *Gazette*, commenting upon the situation, said:

“Mr. Bowie’s election was not looked for by either party, and grew partly out of burlesque, and partly from the general opinion that there would be no whig in the field, so that the democrats did not come to the polls. The vote stood, for Leffler 480, Lowe, 475, Bowie 473, Wright 463. A large number of democratic votes were cast for Bowie, the whigs playing the game of swap, and making a butt of it themselves, the democrats joining in the sport, thinking there would be no danger of his election”. Accordingly, Des Moines County, like Van Buren County, was represented in the convention by two Democrats and a Whig.

In Linn and Benton counties the Democrats nominated Dr. Socrates H. Tryon, while the Whigs nominated Major McKean, who it was said “could not be beaten”. The election showed unusual Democratic strength, for Dr. Tryon won by a majority of eighty-eight votes — a larger ma-

jority than Augustus Caesar Dodge had secured at the previous election in that area.

Commenting upon the results of the election in these counties, the *Capital Reporter* said: "We would bring out our rooster to crow over their victory, were it not that he might be somewhat disconcerted by the sad tidings from Muscatine County." In that county, Colonel Nealey, the Democratic nominee, had met defeat at the hand of J. Scott Richman, the Whig candidate.

In the Scott County contest Judge James Grant, the Democratic candidate, was elected over A. Hyde, the Whig contestant. This was an occasion for an unusual editorial comment.

"All hail, the gallant democracy of Scott!" said one commentator. "Having skinned all the coons in the last great hunt, 'A. Hyde' was brought forth on the 6th inst; which they dressed very handsomely, and have realized a magnificent 'Grant' from the operation."

In Louisa County it was at first reported that the Whigs had won. In the end John Ronalds, the Democratic candidate, was elected by a majority of one vote.

In Henry County, the Whigs did not advocate a "no-party" constitution, nor did they talk of amalgamation; they held a convention of their own, nominated two staunch Whigs — Geo.

Hobson and Alvin Saunders, and elected both of them. Henry was the only county in the Territory which was represented in the convention by more than one member of the Whig Party.

Of the remaining counties, Cedar, Davis, Clinton, Jackson, and Jones selected Democratic delegates in the persons of Dr. Samuel A. Bissell, John J. Selman, Henry P. Haun, William Hubbell, and Sylvester G. Matson respectively. On the other hand, Wapello, Mahaska, and Keokuk counties selected Whig delegates in the persons of Jos. H. Hedrick, Stephen B. Shelledy, and Sanford Harned. Appanoose and Kishkekosh counties together were represented by Wareham G. Clark, a staunch Democrat, while the counties of Iowa, Polk, Jasper, and Marion named John Conrey, Democrat, and Dubuque, Delaware, Buchanan, Fayette, and Black Hawk were represented by two delegates — Thomas McCraney, a Democrat, and Francis K. O'Ferrall, a Whig.

All in all, thirty-two delegates were selected to attend the convention which met on May 4, 1846, to frame the constitution of 1846. Of these twenty-two were Democrats and ten were Whigs, chosen by democracy in action on the frontier.

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