

Two District Conventions

The Republican convention of the Tenth Congressional District of Iowa was held in Algona on August 19 and 20, 1886. Before the delegates met it was evident that there would be a very close race in the nomination of a candidate for Congress. Among the likely aspirants for the position were Major A. J. Holmes of Boone, who was serving his second term as Congressman from the district; John J. Russell, a State Senator; W. L. Culbertson, a State Representative; Colonel J. M. Comstock, a leading merchant of Algona; and J. P. Dolliver, then a young attorney of Fort Dodge.

The Fort Dodge *Messenger* admitted that the outcome of the convention was uncertain but anticipated that Dolliver would be the leading candidate. To command the largest following, however, did not assure him of the nomination but it was a gratification to him "that a majority of the counties having no home candidate, and the only ones therefore free to choose from all the candidates for their value to the whole district, will send delegates directed to vote for Mr. Dolliver." Moreover, the *Messenger* in championing the cause of its townsman, expressed the hope in common with "all the people of Webster county" that the Algona convention would "put the banner of its cause into the hands of this glorious

young champion. The republicans of this county," the local journal went on to say, "his neighbors for eight years, who have admired and loved him not only for the genius that is winning fame, but for the manhood that through poverty and in success alike has been unbended and unsmirched, give their pledge that it will be no mistake. All the people of this county know that whether J. P. Dolliver goes to congress this year or not, he is, if spared life and health a man of great future. It is idle to question his gifts. Even envy does it no more at home. His gifts are extraordinary; his attainments are great; his character is strong; his impulses are lofty; his tastes are pure; his ambitions are high; his associations and habits are clean; his industry is indefatigable; his judgment is sound and personally he cannot have an enemy who knows him."

In presenting a young man with such a combination of good qualities, the Republicans of Webster County were confident that he would fill the office with credit. "Put him by the side of Henderson and Hepburn," the *Messenger* suggested, "and we pledge he will be found a worthy colleague. Put him there with the assurance that the district will never blush for an action or an effort of his, but will be honored, to the gratification of all within its lines, by his intelligent and conspicuous part in public affairs." When the members of the convention began to arrive it was evident that Dolliver would be one of the strongest candidates.

The Algona *Republican* enjoined the residents of Algona to be agreeable hosts. "Let all things be done", the paper continued, "to make the occasion one to be pleasantly remembered, and with that end in view it will be well for our people not to talk insufferably much about the \$150,000 worth of improvements Algona is making this year and the splendid prospects of the town. Our visitors will notice those things."

At ten o'clock on the morning of August 19, 1886, Phil Livingston, the chairman of the district central committee, called the convention to order at the courthouse, and prayer was offered by Reverend W. H. Bernard of the Algona Congregational Church. After completing the temporary organization and appointing the necessary committees the convention adjourned until one-thirty o'clock in the afternoon.

Upon reconvening, T. W. Harrison, the temporary presiding officer, was made permanent chairman. He was a first-class presiding officer, and handled the convention in a creditable manner "without being too stiff and formal". The delegates, "a fine looking body of men", refrained from smoking during convention hours and were characterized by their "exceptional good humor and good behavior".

With the preliminaries out of the way the convention began to vote on candidates for Congress. On the first ballot Dolliver received thirty-one votes, Russell twenty-six, and Holmes fifteen, while twenty-

five votes were scattered. Since there were ninety-seven votes in all, forty-nine were needed for the nomination. Thus, on the first ballot none of the candidates received the required number of votes and the balloting continued. Before the afternoon session closed no less than seventy-five ballots had been taken. On the last ballot of the afternoon Dolliver received thirty-one votes, Russell twenty-six, and Holmes nineteen.

An unusual amount of public interest in the proceedings of the convention was manifest. The convention hall was thronged throughout the entire procedure. Chairman Harrison said that ladies never attended a tenth district convention in such numbers before. During the afternoon the number of ladies at the convention was greatly augmented by the entire membership of the normal institute, then in session at Algona, filing in on the floor and into the gallery, "each individual school ma'am looking her prettiest."

After the seventy-fifth ballot the convention took a recess until seven o'clock in the evening and then resumed its deliberations. The Algona cornet band was present and won many compliments from the audience for its fine music. The balloting showed that Dolliver had lost none of his following during the recess. Although the delegates from most of the "north-end" counties voted solidly for various candidates from that region, Winnebago County stood faithfully by Dolliver throughout the convention.

All attempts to turn that delegation from Dolliver were futile, even when "partly in a spirit of fun and partly out of curiosity", to see if anything would shake its "Dolliver allegiance", the solid vote of the north-end counties was given in turn to two of the Winnebago delegates. But the Winnebago delegation remained steadfast in support of the Fort Dodge candidate. On one of the ballots taken Thursday night the number of votes cast for Dolliver reached forty-five and ten-elevenths. Had he received one and one-eleventh more votes he would have been nominated on that ballot because his friends maintained that he had two votes in reserve "which would come when he could master 47."

After one hundred and sixty-four ballots had been taken the convention adjourned until eight o'clock Friday morning. On the last ballot of the evening Dolliver maintained his lead with thirty-eight votes, followed by Holmes with thirty-four, while the remaining twenty-five votes were cast for Russell. No one could predict the outcome.

When the convention convened in the morning, however, the balloting took an unexpected turn. The thirteen votes of the delegates from Boone County were cast for Russell. This action was evidently intended to obtain either of two results: to secure the nomination of Russell or to demonstrate the hopelessness of his cause and secure an alignment of his supporters for Dolliver or Holmes. These were bold tactics. At one time the vote for

Russell reached forty-seven and either Dolliver or Holmes might have dictated his nomination. The final break came, however, when the delegates from Carroll, Crawford, and Green counties wheeled into line for Holmes. The excitement which had been restrained up to that point "broke out into cheers which called many people from the streets to learn who had won." Holmes was nominated on the one hundred and eighty-eighth ballot and the final vote — sixty-three for Holmes and thirty-four for Dolliver — was made unanimous for the nominee on motion of R. M. Wright of Webster County.

When the nomination of Holmes was announced there were "loud calls for that gentleman" but he could not be found in the hall. A committee was appointed to notify him and when he appeared on the platform he "was greeted with a round of cheers and applause". He accepted the nomination with a speech in which he extolled the Republican party, denounced the policies of its Democratic opponents, and thanked the convention "for the highest honor of his life, tendered by a constituency as intelligent and progressive as any on earth."

Dolliver was then presented by Chairman Harrison as "a future congressman from this district," and he proceeded to make "one of the most captivating speeches that ever came from a man under such circumstances." He began by referring to one of Doré's illustrations of Dante's *Inferno* which shows a man standing erect and holding at arm's

length his own head, while he gestures gracefully with the other hand. Dolliver had forgotten what the artist intended this figure to represent, but he was impressed with the thought that "we whose heads have been amputated by the amiable warrant of this convention might fitly adopt that work of art as a faithful sketch of the exercises in which we are now engaged."

From this happy beginning to its graceful close, his speech was "perfect in tone and style and irresistible in manner." His wit was never keener than when applied to himself, nor his humor more contagious. He referred to the variety and amount of advice he had received from all quarters on the matter of becoming a candidate and accepted the conclusion that the convention had acted upon his own conviction that his nomination at this time would have resulted in his ruin. "I am not here," he said, "to air any distress either personal or political. It is a fixed article of my political creed to set the welfare of the republican party above all the fleeting shadows of personal advancement." While he had lost his summer's work, he would have all inquiring friends understand that it did not lie in the power of any caucus or convention to disturb in the slightest measure the absolute good will with which he accepted the misfortunes of political life.

"In the case at hand," said he, "my philosophy is aided by the fact that the outcome of the convention is in every way worthy of the applause it has re-

ceived, so that all personal considerations are swallowed up in a genuine enthusiasm for the chosen candidate of the republican party. I leave the convention, as I entered it, with the most cheerful sentiments toward everybody, and especially toward those whose superior skill in the practice of the movement cure has enabled them to cover me up; and in the same cheerful frame of mind I promise them that I shall dig out, and with the platform of the republican party pasted in my hat, and the straight ticket in my hand, I shall have no trouble finding an open field for such service as I may be able to render to the common cause."

Although the nomination of Major Holmes was accepted favorably throughout the tenth district, the disappointment of the supporters of Mr. Dolliver was none the less keen. Governor Cyrus C. Carpenter is said to have shed tears over the result. While Dolliver's defeat was primarily ascribed to the fact that he was a "mere boy in appearance" he nevertheless "captivated the delegates who had voted against him" and greatly strengthened his political position. His friends were not disheartened and it is not surprising that plans were soon laid to secure the nomination for him two years later.

Two months before the convention met in 1888 the press of the district began to boost Dolliver. Editors described his excellent qualities and asserted that the only objection to him was his youth. They

agreed with his opponents that Dolliver could afford to wait but maintained that Iowa could not "afford to keep its best talent waiting a chance for development." They declared that Dolliver's ability to make speeches was not his only qualification, although that was certainly a recommendation, for no man could make the kind of speeches he did without a profound knowledge of political history and a thorough acquaintance with political issues, past and present. After all, what was the "crime of being a young man"? There were other young Congressmen the Fort Dodge *Messenger* informed its readers. "Robert M. LaFollette, the alert member from the Madison (Wis.) district" was "a younger man when first elected than Mr. Dolliver was when first a candidate". Moreover, the people of the Wisconsin district had not been disappointed in their experiment of electing "a beardless boy whose first prestige was won only a few years ago by carrying off at Iowa City the first prize in the interstate collegiate oratorical contest." Indeed, throughout the entire history of the United States it was pointed out, nearly all the men who had achieved unusual distinction in public life had been schooled in it from youth.

The selection of delegates in the various county conventions showed that Dolliver's following had been considerably augmented since 1886. Concord Township in Hancock County, a former stronghold of Major Holmes, sent delegates to the county con-

vention instructed to vote for Dolliver. Pomeroy, the first town to elect delegates to the Calhoun County convention, was also "solid for Dolliver".

A canvass of the district made a week before the convention seemed to indicate that Dolliver's prospects were excellent. It was said that the entire delegations from Webster, Hamilton, Humboldt, Hancock, Winnebago, and Calhoun counties were for Dolliver, thus practically assuring him of forty votes, while only forty-eight would be required to nominate. It was estimated that Major Holmes would have from eighteen to twenty-one votes, Judge J. P. Conner of Denison would control the eight Crawford County votes, Captain Albert Head of Jefferson would secure the ten Green County votes, and Captain E. J. Hartshorn of Emmetsburg, who had "just been married and ought to have enough to make him contented and happy," would be supported by Palo Alto County and perhaps by some Emmet County delegates.

The contest for the nomination attracted much attention throughout the State but the district convention which met at Webster City on August 20, 1888, was not as spectacular as the one at Algona two years before. The convention met at three o'clock in the afternoon and effected a temporary organization, after which it adjourned until eight o'clock. In the evening the temporary organization was made permanent and Chairman B. I. Sallinger entertained the convention for about twenty minutes

with a "most able, brilliant and stirring speech". The Fort Dodge glee club added zest to the occasion by singing several patriotic and pat campaign songs.

By unanimous consent no nominating speeches were made. At half past eight the convention began balloting, and kept it up, with little interruption, for an hour. On the informal ballot Dolliver received forty votes, Holmes eighteen, Head seventeen, Hartshorn twelve, and Conner eight. The results of the first and second formal ballots were the same, but the following thirty-four ballots cast that evening indicated that Dolliver's prospects were not as promising as had been predicted. On most of the ballots he received only thirty-two votes.

Although there was a great deal of caucusing after the convention adjourned Monday night, the first ballot of the Tuesday morning session showed that no combination for any candidate had been made. Dolliver and Holmes, the leading candidates, polled thirty-two and twenty-seven votes respectively. On the forty-third ballot Dolliver received forty-one votes, on the fifty-sixth he received forty-five, but on the fifty-eighth his vote dropped to thirty-nine.

Several of the "minor candidates" were given generous support on many of the ballots during the morning session but without decisive results. On the forty-seventh and forty-eighth ballots, Hartshorn received thirty votes; on the fiftieth and fifty-first ballots, Senator John L. Kamrar of Webster

City, who had not been considered at first, received forty votes; Captain Head had thirty-two votes on the fifty-fifth ballot, thirty-six on the fifty-eighth, and forty on the eighty-second and eighty-third. Forty-two votes were cast for Judge Conner on the seventy-fifth and seventy-seventh ballots. Finally an adjournment was taken until two o'clock in the afternoon upon the announcement of the result of the ninety-second ballot which stood: Dolliver forty-one votes, Conner thirty-one, Kamrar fourteen, Head eight, and Holmes one.

Eighteen ballots decided the result in the afternoon session. The Holmes men made their best showing by "booming their candidate" up to forty-seven votes. Had he received one more he would have been nominated on that ballot. Indeed, a Crawford County delegate claimed he intended to vote for Holmes but he was "misled by the chairman of the delegation." That count was evidently interpreted as an evidence that it would be impossible for Holmes to secure the nomination. A few more ballots showed that forty-five votes was Kamrar's limit.

The decisive ballot came when the delegates from Carroll, Calhoun, Hamilton, Humboldt, Hancock, Palo Alto, Pocahontas, and Webster counties united for Dolliver, giving him fifty-one votes. When Dolliver's nomination was assured, the disposition to yell became so general that the roll call was continued with difficulty. The vote was immediately

made unanimous, "resolutions were adopted and speeches were made, and the convention adjourned, the best of feeling prevailing." It had taken one hundred and ten ballots before the members of the convention were able to overlook Dolliver's youthfulness, "forgive his brilliancy", and allow him to commence the career of splendid public service and statesmanship that has been a source of gratification to his adherents, pride to his State, and glory to his country.

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