Pioneer Politics

Politics constituted one of the most exciting phases of the commonplace life of the Iowa pioneer. The leading men in the community attended the party conventions. The newspapers supported their favorite political parties with amazing zeal and commented upon governmental activities in the minutest detail. Candidates went on extensive stumping tours, and the people looked upon the political speech as something of a social event.

When Iowa was young, a man was either a Democrat or a Whig. Nobody voted for "the man" in preference to "the party." In fact, criticism of their party was regarded by some as a personal insult. The newspaper editors claimed an affiliation with one party and wrote in derision of the other. Often their editorials became mere personal denunciations. For instance, the Iowa City *Standard*, a Whig paper edited by William Crum, spoke of the dignified Ver Planck Van Antwerp, graduate of West Point and relative of President Van Buren, as "the thing which says it edits that filthy and demagogical sluice of Loco-focoism, the *Reporter.*" Whereupon the editor of the *Reporter* addressed a sharp rejoinder to the stylish Mr. Crum as "Silly Billy — the last crum of creation."

The issues of the campaigns were argued in the papers in a most caustic, personal, and partisan manner. In long, tedious articles editors would discuss the tariff, the national bank, the subtreasury bill, the pre-emption law, the adoption of a state constitution, or whatever was before them. Each paper would denounce the candidates of the other party for their stand upon some issue and very likely retort to a similar accusation of the opposing editor. In reply to a charge of the Davenport *Gazette* that the Whigs had refused to pass a pre-emption law the *Standard* declared, "Now we appeal to every man — Whig and Locofoco alike — to answer if the above is not in all its parts a lie? We should like to know what editors of a public newspaper, claiming to be respectable, mean by lying after that fashion. The Whigs passed the only truly honest pre-emption law that was ever enacted. And that very feature of *honesty* is, probably, what renders it obnoxious to such lying scamps as the editors of the *Gazette*." Not only did the newspapers lampoon each other in regard to the principles and policies of their respective parties, but they attacked the conduct and character of the candidates as well.

But in spite of the strict adhesion to party lines, the pioneer respected a strong personality. It is said that the generous nature, public spirit, cordial manners, and upright administration of the Land Office won Augustus C. Dodge many supporters.

"I know," said a voter, "that Mr. Dodge is a Democrat, and the candidate of the Democratic party, but you cannot draw party lines on him. His opponent says there is no use in electioneering against him, that you had as well sing psalms to a dead horse as preach Whiggery or Henry Clay where Guss Dodge is."

Some time before an election the candidates often stumped the state, making speeches and holding joint debates. Such gatherings were usually held in the open air and were attended by the whole neighborhood. The speakers, unrestrained by the reporter, the cartoonist, or the cold print of a morning daily, would give unbridled rein to story, illustration, invective, quotation, gesture, and passionate appeal.

Often such meetings ended with a barbecue. Hard cider was a common campaign stimulant, and the voters came to eat and drink as well as to think. In October, 1848, the Democrats held a barbecue in Jefferson County for the purpose of considering the qualifications of the presidential candidates. Cass and Butler banners floated everywhere. A band playing patriotic airs led a procession two miles long, composed of seventy carriages and many men and women on horseback. After a bounteous dinner occupying tables which totaled a quarter of a mile in length, Lincoln Clark and General Dodge addressed the cheering throng.

But there was more to a stumping tour of the

state than the fun and frolic of a barbecue. When rival candidates held joint debates they often traveled together, sharing common hardships and hospitalities. They rode across the prairie on horseback, forded or swam streams that were swollen by rain, ate at the same table, and usually slept in the same bed. Stinging sarcasm and sharp rejoinders characterized their discussions, but off the stump party differences were ignored and they were friends. Sometimes they rode all day without food, and on one occasion at least dined ravenously on such meager supplies as tea and onions.

There is scarcely a party platform in the history of Iowa that does not pledge the honesty of public officials. Yet pioneer politics was not without discreditable transactions. Party advantage was sometimes placed before public welfare. Elections were occasionally tumultuous, ballots were miscounted, and voting was anything but secret. Each party printed its own ticket.

Democratic government was still regarded as an experiment. There was a general, subconscious feeling among the people that republican institutions were on trial. All seemed to accept a common responsibility for the success of self-government so that critics would have no opportunity to point to a serious failure. Certainly there was little apathy toward politics among the pioneers.

ROY V. SHERMAN