

THE PALIMPSEST

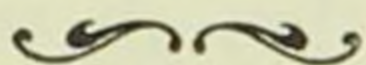
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The Campaign of 1840

In 1840, the Whig Party nominated for President William Henry Harrison, the hero of the battle of Tippecanoe. The Democrats selected Martin Van Buren for reëlection. For the first time in the election of a President effective use was made of campaign songs. To the tune of "The Old Oaken Bucket" George P. Morris wrote for the Whigs:

The iron-armed soldier, the true-hearted soldier,
The gallant old soldier of Tippecanoe.

Equally popular was:

Farewell, dear Van,
You're not our man;
To guard the ship,
We'll try old Tip.

And when the early election returns of those States which voted in August and October came in, A. C. Ross of Zanesville, Ohio, wrote to the tune of "The Little Pig's Tail":

What has caused this great commotion, motion, motion,
Our country through?
It is the ball a-rolling on,
For Tippecanoe and Tyler too, Tippecanoe and Tyler
too!

The spirit of the campaign had its effect in the Territory of Iowa, though the citizens were not eligible to participate in the Presidential election. According to an early historian, the most popular Whig song in the Territory was:

Cold water will do for the Locos,
And a little vinegar stew;
But give us hard cider and whisky
And we'll vote for Old Tippecanoe.

In the Iowa political campaigns of 1838 and 1839 the election discussion had been concerned primarily with the personal merit of the candidates. Indeed, there were those who felt that inasmuch as the people of the Territory could not vote for national officers they should not be influenced by national issues. This viewpoint seems to have prevailed in the Territorial legislature. Although factional caucuses apparently operated in some instances, it is clear that they were not the dominant factor in the lawmaking procedure of the first Iowa Legislative Assemblies.

In 1840, the electors in the Territory of Iowa were scheduled to cast their ballots for local and

Territorial officials. Although party lines were not clearly drawn, it was evident that political organization was beginning to play a more prominent rôle in Territorial affairs. Essentially an individualist, the Iowa pioneer was nevertheless influenced by the social contact afforded by political campaigns. He saw himself associated with others who thought alike, and his sense of democratic power expanded. On the other hand, differences of opinion in national politics seemed artificial and immaterial in comparison with frontier needs on which there was no basis for party division.

W. W. Chapman, Delegate to Congress from Iowa, expressed the typical hostility to partisan politics in the spring of 1840. Referring to a proposal that the Democrats should hold a Territorial convention, he deplored any such action and requested that partisan discussion of Territorial legislation be curbed until the adjournment of Congress in July, because it was his feeling that "no western measure has, or can succeed upon the support of one party alone, because the whole of neither of the parties can be united upon these measures." He also felt that there were bills pending in Congress "which either party in that body, on becoming excited against us, might defeat without a struggle".

If the "craving appetite of party spirit" could be appeased only by a convention in May, he felt obliged as the representative of the Territory to withhold his name from "any Convention of a partizan character — at least, until I have disposed of the trust already confided to me; and the success of which I am sure requires during the session of Congress a strict neutrality. I would prefer success in our present measures," declared Chapman, "coupled with retirement from office under a conscientious belief of having rendered service to my constituents, and done some good for my country, to a nomination by a partizan convention, with defeat of measures important to the prosperity of the Territory staring me in the face."

This open letter, published in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, had an immediate effect. Throughout the Territory of Iowa the question of having or not having political conventions was discussed. Essays pro and con appeared in the public press. But with attention fixed only upon success in the forthcoming election, the politicians went ahead with their plans for the election of party men.

As early as February names were offered for the attractive position of Delegate to Congress. In March the Democrats made plans for holding county conventions to select delegates to a Territorial convention which would in turn nominate a

candidate for Congress. Opposition to this plan was well stated in a series of resolutions adopted at an "Anti-Caucus Meeting" held at Fairfield on April 8th. "Whereas the people of this Territory have no voice in the approaching election of President of the United States, and are more deeply interested in laying the foundation for a wholesome System of Laws, and a judicious form of State Government, whenever they shall be required to ask for admission into the Union, than they are in fomenting political jealousies, and bitter party distinctions.

"Therefore it is Resolved . . . That we deprecate the attempts that have been made, and are daily being encouraged by many of our citizens, who profess to be the friends of the present administration of the National Government, to draw the lines of party distinction between the citizens of this Territory, as a measure that our political interests do not require, and one that is mischievous in its tendency, and wholly uncalled for."

Nevertheless county conventions for the purpose of selecting delegates to a Democratic Territorial convention were held in almost every locality. The editor of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* pointed out that the local conventions had been attended by less than five hundred men. "And

these 500", said the editor, "we verily believe, are in their turn dictated to by less than a dozen men, all but two or three of whom reside in Burlington! Is this Democracy? We thought the majority ought to rule. These are the men who act upon the principle that the people cannot act for themselves, and have taken the responsibility of acting for them. Boys, will you stand that?"

On July 9, 1840, the Democratic party held its Territorial convention at Bloomington. The main problem which confronted Ver Planck Van Antwerp and the other convention managers was the task of selecting a nominee for Delegate to Congress from a large number of political aspirants. William W. Chapman desired reëlection, but the charge that he had Whig inclinations and his public letter appealing for nonpartisanship had sealed his political fate. The delegation from Dubuque County suggested both James Churchman and the perennial candidate, Francis Gehon. But these men were obviously unacceptable to the delegations from the populous southern counties. Doctor James Davis of Des Moines County had been actively campaigning for two months previous to the convention. His nomination, however, seemed likely to split the party.

After a long speech on the merits of the Democratic Party, a typical keynote address, the

political maneuvering began. Davis, "for the promotion of union and harmony", withdrew his candidacy. Thereupon, Gehon, who had been a candidate in 1838 and in the abortive election of 1839, was formally presented for the nomination. Then the convention managers played their trump: they offered for nomination Augustus C. Dodge, a favorite son of the Territory, and one who had a respectable political record and who had not conducted a pre-convention campaign. As if to guarantee their selection, a special rule was adopted, providing that each county was entitled to one vote for each two hundred inhabitants. Such a regulation weighted the convention in favor of the populous southern counties, the area in which Dodge was best known.

According to a Whig onlooker at the convention, Dodge received one hundred and thirty votes and Gehon collected but fifty-seven. A committee consisting of the president and four vice presidents of the convention (George Temple, Samuel Holliday, Silas Smith, John Reynolds, and David Hendershott), drafted a statement notifying Dodge of his nomination by the delegates. On July 29, 1840, he accepted the nomination.

The members of the Whig Party could not have failed to be impressed by the interest stimulated by the Democratic convention and by the har-

mony generated from the nomination of Dodge. But their previous criticism of the county conventions made it inexpedient for them to assemble delegates. Nevertheless, the Whigs managed a political sidestep. Upon "popular request" they issued a call for a "Congress of the People" to meet at Bloomington on July 29th.

After a preliminary address and the adoption of a permanent organization, the meeting proceeded to vote on nominees for the position of Delegate to Congress. Citizens who attended the "Congress" formed in a long line and passed by tellers, giving the name of their preference. If no one received a majority, a second vote was to be taken for the two candidates receiving the largest number of first ballots. At the end of the first balloting, however, Alfred Rich had received one hundred and twenty votes, Philip Viele sixty-one votes, and Stephen Whicher eleven votes. The "Congress" then proposed that local Tippecanoe Clubs or Committees of Vigilance should be organized to promote Whig interests. These local organizations later exerted a pronounced influence on Territorial politics.

During the month of August, Augustus C. Dodge and Alfred Rich stumped the Territory. Rooming together, boarding together, riding together, and debating together, they became warm

friends except upon the political rostrum. Everywhere they were received as the apostles of "Old Tip" and "Little Van". According to contemporary accounts, Dodge had the advantage, both in personality and polemics.

One pioneer related the following story of Dodge's popularity. "I know 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; they forget that they ever were Whigs, or had seen Henry Clay. They flock around Dodge, every one insisting that he must go home with him, and leave me standing like a poor boy at a frolic."

The administration of Martin Van Buren was continually discussed with extended ramifications upon the protective tariff and the national bank. The proposition of voting for or against a State Constitutional Convention was injected into the campaign but elicited little debate.

Although William Henry Harrison was elected President of the United States on the Whig ticket, Augustus C. Dodge was chosen Delegate to Congress from the Territory of Iowa. On the balloting which took place on October 5th, Dodge re-

ceived 4009 votes, Rich 3494, and Churchman, who had "bolted" the Democratic convention and who was later described as being in "an awkward fix", garnered but 92 votes.

As if to explain Whig successes elsewhere, James G. Edwards, the editor of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, stated: "Hundreds and hundreds of whigs voted for Gen. Dodge on account of personal and local considerations." And in spite of the fact that the Whigs lost the Delegacy, they gained other offices within the Territory. In the Legislative Assembly they elected seven of the thirteen members of the Council, a gain of one seat over the previous session; in the House of Representatives the Whigs won eleven out of twenty-six seats, a gain of two members over the previous session.

The procedure for the Territorial election in Des Moines County which was outlined in the Burlington paper may be considered typical. Precinct polling places were listed. For Des Moines County the officials to be elected were: Territorial councilman, Territorial representatives, county judge of probate, county sheriff, county recorder, county commissioner, county treasurer, county assessor, county coroner, county surveyor, justices of the peace, and constables.

Polls were open from nine in the morning until

six in the afternoon. According to a special act of the Second Legislative Assembly, the general election of 1840 was to be held on the first Monday in October. Thereafter the Territorial elections were to be on the first Monday in August. "The manner of voting", according to the statute regulating elections approved by the First Legislative Assembly, "shall be by the electors approaching the bar in the election room, at any time when the poll is opened, and by presenting a ticket, folded in such a manner that no names on said ticket are visible to the judges, who shall deposit the same immediately into a general ballot box".

The Second Legislative Assembly had provided for the popular election of a county treasurer, coroner, a judge of probate, sheriff, recorder, and surveyor. These county officials, added to the slate of offices previously selected by popular vote, made the ballot of 1840 the longest one which had been presented to the Territorial electors. Needless to say, the increase in the number of offices to be filled stimulated local politics, so that more candidates aspired for office in the campaign of 1840 than in the two preceding years.

Whereas the contest for Delegate to Congress was argued in part on national issues, the campaign for local offices and the Territorial legisla-

ture was waged mainly on the personal merits of the candidates. The voters apparently selected sheriffs, recorders, assessors, coroners, surveyors, treasurers, and justices of the peace on the basis of reputation for integrity, competence, or popularity. Even in the legislature, where alignment according to conflicting policies might have been expected to crystallize into Whig or Democratic allegiance, party lines were not evident. Some counties sent Democrats to the House and Whigs to the Council; others were represented by both parties in both chambers.

The people of the Territory, however, were not unmindful of the partisan victory of Harrison. A majority of the citizens appeared satisfied with his election, perhaps because his campaign typified the spirit of the frontier or perhaps because his career and character appealed to common people. The editor of the *Iowa Standard* at Bloomington suggested that the campaign had been "a struggle for principles against power", and that upon the receipt of the news of the Whig victory "the hearts of the people were given over to utter joyousness" so that "men became boys and played their antics over again". Governor Lucas, Secretary Clarke, and the Justices of the Supreme Court, who received their positions by Presidential appointment, must have realized that they

might be succeeded by Whigs. Nor could the hearts of Whig aspirants have failed to be stirred by the prospect of political office.

Although the election indicated that party affiliation was gaining in importance, it was equally clear that the Territory of Iowa was partially immune from the epidemic of national issues. At least the selection of the Congressional Delegate demonstrated that Iowa electors voted for the man instead of the party. But it was equally clear that political machinery for the promotion of party advantage was being organized. By the time of the next election, the opposition to political conventions was reduced to a politician's whisper.

Neither sanctioned nor prohibited by law, this method of selecting candidates illustrates the political sagacity of the pioneers. And nowhere can the belief in democracy and the capacity of the American people to navigate the ship of state upon the uncharted seas of political development be better illustrated than in the campaign of 1840 in the Territory of Iowa.

JACK T. JOHNSON