

Young Men for Old

Few men have had the privilege of being intimately connected with the political history of Iowa for the span of half a century. Yet this is the distinction achieved by William B. Allison whose political career began with his appointment as military aide to Governor Kirkwood in 1861 and ended with his death as United States Senator in 1908 — a period of forty-seven years of practically continuous public service.

Having served four terms in Congress as Representative it was not unnatural that Mr. Allison should aspire to a seat in the United States Senate — an ambition which led him to enter into an unsuccessful contest for the office in 1870. But no sooner was this election over than plans were made for the struggle that would occur two years later when a successor to Senator James Harlan would be chosen. Even at this early time, Allison, somewhat against his own inclinations, was urged by his friends to again enter a race in which he had so recently been defeated. The actual campaign, however, did not claim public attention until the summer of 1871 — but from then until the end of the struggle in January, 1872, a contest ensued between the supporters of the two candidates which is known as one of the most spectacular in the history of Iowa.

The Harlan-Allison campaign was primarily one of personalities — a struggle that “teemed with bitter and abusive personal attacks.” Indeed, it appears from an examination of the records that no event in the lives of the contestants was considered too trivial for exploitation as political capital. This was particularly true in regard to Senator Harlan, and although most of the charges against him were disproved or without any foundation they furnished his opponents with ammunition which had a distinctly harmful effect upon his campaign. According to one account the Republicans of Iowa seemed “eager for a pretext to transfer their allegiance”.

Senator Harlan had seen much of public service and was getting on in years. In fact, the argument was used in the campaign that he had for nearly twenty years lived almost entirely in Washington — as Senator and Secretary of the Interior — and was therefore too far out of touch with “the spirit and needs of the people of Iowa to represent them faithfully”. On the other hand Mr. Allison — a man in the early prime of life though not without experience — lived in that section of the State which had never had a Senator in Congress. In a narrow sense the northern part of Iowa had not been adequately represented, for even the State officers up to that time had most generally lived in the southern portion of the State. Thus sectionalism in its most provincial form entered the political arena.

One of the high lights of the campaign was “an

insidious attempt" to lessen Senator Harlan's chances in the election by appealing to "sectarian prejudice". It appears that some doubt had arisen in the minds of certain members of the Methodist clergy as to the Senator's standing in the church and in response to an inquiry Dr. John P. Newman, pastor of the church that Mr. Harlan attended in Washington, wrote a personal letter to an Iowa minister which was intended to give the Senator a "clean bill of health". Moreover, the letter urged that he be given proper support in the coming contest. Unfortunately this letter came into the possession of the editor of the Dubuque *Herald*, a Democratic organ, and was given considerable publicity.

It was a favorite partisan assertion that the "Newman Letter" had been lithographed and sent to Methodist clergy all over the State in an attempt to "array the membership of the Methodist church solidly under the Harlan banner". Both Mr. Newman and the Senator denied the charge, but the wave of indignation seemed only to increase. The newspapers discussed the matter — with considerable heat if not much light — and by sheer persistency tended to prejudice the people against Mr. Harlan.

Both candidates, having held public office, were criticized on the basis of their records: both were accused of official corruption and of using their positions not as a public trust but as a means of personal gain. It was alleged that Harlan had been the cause of a gigantic steal from the government through a

padding of the pension roll; that Allison while a member of Congress had used his influence to get a subsidy for a railroad in which he was a stockholder. Harlan was accused of using his franking privilege to distribute campaign literature in his own behalf; Allison was said to hold free-trade ideas. If there had been only a modicum of truth in the array of charges and counter-charges neither candidate was entitled to the vote of any honest man.

Throughout the campaign partisanship was tuned to the highest pitch and the candidate with the longer public record proved the better sounding board. As one writer put it "the powerful malcontents" were "not Allison men in any strict sense" but were "simply and hotly anti-Harlan."

Following the general election, however, in which the State went overwhelmingly Republican the contest rather narrowed its scope — every effort being made to influence the newly elected legislators. The campaign was nearing its close. Both sides in the struggle held numerous conferences and caucuses previous to the meeting of the General Assembly. The Savery Hotel in Des Moines teemed with political activity.

The Republican senatorial caucus was held on the night of January 10th — the third day of the session of the Fourteenth General Assembly. Sixty-one votes were necessary for a choice. On the informal ballot Allison received sixty votes, Harlan thirty-eight, and James F. Wilson twenty-two. The first

formal ballot gave Allison fifty-nine and Harlan forty-two, but on the second formal ballot Allison received two votes more than necessary.

Thus the long drawn-out contest came to an end. At the joint convention of the two houses on January 17, 1872, the decision of the Republican caucus was ratified. William B. Allison became one of the United States Senators from Iowa on March 4, 1873 — a position which he held continuously until the day of his death on August 4, 1908.

No man in the history of this Commonwealth has ever received the "long continued and almost universal support and confidence of his constituents" as did Senator Allison. The severe and bitter contest with Senator Harlan appears to have exhausted all concerted opposition to him. Indeed, with each succeeding election after 1872 until the campaign just before his death the dissenting voices against him dwindled in number. Even party lines practically disappeared in 1896 when he was the unanimous choice of the Republicans of Iowa as well as of a majority of the rival camp.

Although he had been reëlected to the Senate almost without opposition upon five different occasions, Mr. Allison was, during the campaign of 1908, confronted by an opponent who made it necessary for the supporters of the Senator to put forth every effort in his behalf. The Allison-Cummins contest became in some respects the replica of the one between Harlan and Allison thirty-five years earlier.

There was, however, a very striking difference between the two campaigns in that the latter brought the claims of the rival candidates directly before the people. This was due to the fact that the people of the State were to have their first opportunity in June, 1908, to nominate party candidates at a direct primary election. So the campaign resolved itself into an elaborate and thorough-going attempt to win popular support by means of public speeches in all of the principal cities and towns of the State.

The campaign opened at Council Bluffs on November 25, 1907, when Senator Allison's colleague, Jonathan P. Dolliver, in the course of a public address declared that Governor Cummins was in reality debarred from entering the race. It appears that when Mr. Cummins desired the support of the Allison faction in his campaign for the governorship in 1906 he had written a letter to William H. Torbert stating that he was "not a candidate for Senator Allison's place". Thus was the "Torbert Letter", like the "Newman Letter", injected into the contest — a document concerning which each side in the controversy made its own interpretation.

Governor Cummins formally announced his candidacy on December 15, 1907, when he "emphatically denied" that he had ever promised not to be a contestant against Senator Allison. It is one thing not to be a candidate at a particular time and quite another to promise "never to be". According to one editor, however, the whole controversy was with-

out point since no such promise could be considered "binding upon the people of the State of Iowa."

As in the Harlan-Allison campaign considerable political capital was made of the inability of the incumbent to properly represent the people — in this instance because of his "age and comparative feebleness". On the other hand the younger aspirant "was charged with unscrupulous ambition". So the battle of words continued up to the very eve of the primary.

Both sides in the campaign for the Republican nomination of United States Senator entered the election on June 2, 1908, confident of victory at the hands of the voters. But when the election was over and the ballots were counted it was found that "age and experience" had been vindicated — William B. Allison had been nominated by a majority of ten thousand six hundred and thirty-five votes. And a Republican nomination invariably meant election.

The people's wishes were overruled, however, for on August 4th Senator Allison died. Sorrow was universal. But following a brief period of hushed silence the political machinery began to move again and speculation was rife as to what Governor Cummins would do.

In this matter there appeared to be three courses open to the Governor: he could make a temporary appointment and take his chances with the legislature when it met in January; or he could resign with the understanding that his successor would

appoint him Senator; or he could call a special session of the General Assembly to settle the difficulty. The latter alternative was selected and in response to an executive proclamation the legislature met in special session on the thirty-first of August and proceeded at once to the business at hand.

First of all the primary election law was amended. The new statute made it possible for a second primary to be held on the day of the regular election for the purpose of filling any vacancy that might arise among the nominees for United States Senator — providing the vacancy should occur after the regular primary but more than thirty days prior to the general election. The legislature then proceeded to the task of filling the existing vacancy and on September 8th began to ballot. No candidate could muster a majority, although Cummins was in the lead. Finally the legislature decided to adjourn until after the people had had an opportunity to express their choice at the special primary.

The voters decided the question with characteristic emphasis on November 3rd by recording for Governor Cummins a majority of over forty-two thousand. Accordingly, the General Assembly ratified the choice of the people, and Albert B. Cummins went to Washington to occupy the seat of William B. Allison in the United States Senate.

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