

Clinton Politics in 1903

When Councilman James Peterson made a business trip to the Pacific Coast in the summer of 1903, he was unaware of the political complications that were to spring from his absence. He was one of five Republicans on the city council of nine members. After his departure, the partisan balance was even, but Mayor W. B. Farver, a labor union man, had Democratic sympathies. Presently his actions convinced the four remaining Republicans that the absence of their colleague was to be converted into a Democratic advantage, and so they began to play a game of obstruction, stalling for time until Peterson should return.

Underlying the furor aroused by these events were hot political and municipal rivalries. Party lines were sharply drawn in local elections at that time. The Republican councilmen who had been elected in March, 1902, were W. L. Callender, C. S. Cone, T. J. Litster, James Peterson, and H. S. Wilson; the Democrats were T. W. Hall, S. C. Hamilton, M. D. Madden, and L. C. Moeszinger. While national politics were inapplicable to most city problems, the members of the council were often influenced by party allegiance.

Political passions were intensified by intramural jealousies. Although the old town of Lyons was legally a part of Clinton, the north and south sections of the city had been joined in a union of convenience rather than affection. On many questions of public policy the interests of the two sections of town were in conflict. On this occasion the atmosphere was charged more highly because the Republican councilmen were south-side men while the Democrats and the mayor came from the north or Lyons side.

As might be expected, the two newspapers, one Republican and the other Democratic, reflected the political feeling of their constituents. Indeed, the editors were more bitterly partisan than the councilmen, particularly when the principal cause of the controversy was the allocation of the public printing. The Clinton *Herald*, Republican, was managed by A. D. Dailey whom the *Daily Advertiser*, the Democratic champion, called "idiotic". According to the *Herald*, Lewis E. Fay of the *Advertiser* "led the mayor around by the nose".

In this accumulation of combustible ill will only slight friction was needed to touch off an explosion. On April 14, 1903, the public printing for the year was given to the *Advertiser*. Peterson being absent, the mayor's vote to break the tie between the four Democrats and four Republicans

on the council decided the issue. The chagrined Republicans argued that the mayor had no authority to vote on money bills. There was also a moral question involved. Farver had broken his promise to Peterson, who was out of town for the day, not to allow the printing matter to come up at this meeting. Nevertheless, the action was official and effective.

The Republicans, of course, being normally in the majority, were unhappy. They thirsted for revenge and awaited an opportunity to turn the tables on their Democratic opponents. On June 9th the council, on motion of Peterson, voted to rescind the action on printing that was taken in April. But the mayor vetoed this resolution a week later. Some said Fay had cracked the whip during the interval. Obviously the Republicans could not muster the two-thirds vote necessary to override a veto.

A climax was reached on the night of June 16th when the council meeting ended in a strange manner. After long argument about the printing allocation and the mayor's arbitrary conduct, Callender moved to adjourn and reconvene as a board of health. This parliamentary maneuver was promptly ruled out of order. As a protest against what they considered an effort to prolong the meeting unnecessarily, the mayor and the

Democratic councilmen sauntered out of the chamber. When Mayor Farver returned, the Republicans were gone. The session thus broke up without adjournment, and so the council technically remained in continuous session for over a month. The *Herald* censured the Democrats, advising the Republicans to adopt a dilatory policy until the unholy alliance between Fay and Farver was dissolved.

By this time Peterson had gone to the Pacific Coast on business that would keep him out of town most of the summer. Under these circumstances the Republicans were fearful that their foes would seize the opportunity to press through other distasteful legislation. A council meeting on July 14th failed to produce a quorum, for as the *Herald* had prophesied, the Republicans did not appear. This "rump" council nevertheless instructed the mayor to draw warrants compelling the insurgents to attend on July 16th. The next day Mayor Farver issued a proclamation warning the absentees to be present unless they preferred compulsion. When this threat was ignored he changed his method from command to enticement. No political questions would be raised to embarrass them, he promised, but urgent business had to be transacted — the authorization of the city payroll and the renewal of some sixty saloon

licenses. In comparison with these matters the mayor thought the printing question was petty.

The *Herald* looked at the affair in a different light. The issue, according to Editor Dailey, went far beyond public printing, although that matter was significant as an indication of the trend of events. The real problem was "that two-men power, Fay and Farver, in the affairs of the city shall come to a close, even if all city legislation ceases". The business men of Clinton were supporting the Republicans, for every one recognized how, in the absence of Peterson, "they would be made the objects of unjust treatment on the part of the mayor".

On July 16th, the *Herald* again accurately predicted there would be no meeting. The Democrats convened in a crowded council chamber. The mayor issued a warrant to Police Chief O. H. Rundgren, but the chief returned at 8:45 reporting his failure to locate the four missing councilmen. Thereupon the rump council voted to remain in session until the absentees were apprehended, and another meeting was set for July 18th. The *Advertiser* next day commented that boys will be boys, and "occasionally men are elected to public positions who are more at home in a kindergarten than anywhere else".

Where were the four councilmen? The mys-

tery was easy to solve. After learning of the mayor's intentions, they had walked across the Clinton high bridge and were safely picnicking at the popular resort, Stony Point. The *Advertiser* insinuated that the "quartet now famous as artists in the good old-fashioned game of hide and seek" might be hiding out in the bushes a few miles north of Clinton, but everybody knew that the insurgents were enjoying a leisurely vacation just across the river where they were safe from search warrants. They kept in communication with Clinton, supplies were sent over by boat, and their families visited them. The four were prepared to stay, not all summer like General Grant, but "all winter if necessary". When one of the Democrats telephoned across to learn how they were faring, the reply was, "I am up in heaven having a good time. St. Peter wants to know how Tom Hall is and if he is coming up here before long."

City affairs were almost at a standstill. Even the baseball team had to take second place to this novel attraction which drew newspaper reporters from Chicago. The *Advertiser* lamented the serious effects of the quarrel upon civic business. City employees had not received their wages, merchants were suffering, public works were stopped, the renewal of saloon licenses was being delayed — all because of Republican obstinacy.

Why didn't the rebels have the good sense to admit defeat?

On July 18th the Republicans offered a compromise, with former Mayor George D. McDaid acting as mediator. They were willing to attend a special meeting of the council to allow bills and to act on saloon permits. There was to be no other council meeting before August 11th if Peterson did not return before then. Councilman Hall was the only Democrat to sign the proposition, so the rump meetings of July 18th and 20th were repeat performances in which the Republicans did not participate. The Democrats were furious because the Republicans could now blame them for hindering civic progress by refusing to compromise.

By this time the play was running out and the actors themselves were bored. The insurgents were tiring of their vacation, while the Democrats, being in Clinton, had to listen to the criticisms of the public as well as worried city employees and saloon keepers. On July 22nd the quartet returned, after having reached an understanding on the same terms that were offered four days earlier. Peace prevailed in the crowded council hall. "They say there is much joy at the repentance of one sinner, but when they came in four at a time the joy was unbounded." After striking a printing item from the agenda, the council set business

moving again by allowing accumulated claims and issuing saloon permits.

In order to eliminate the principal cause of friction, nothing was said about the public printing. But behind the scenes an agreement was being formulated which ultimately proved satisfactory to all concerned. Instead of all the business being given to one newspaper, the work was to be shared by both, and other printing companies in Clinton were given some special jobs. This *modus vivendi* was apparently in operation during the remainder of the year. On January 12, 1904, the council adopted a formal resolution governing the publication of ordinances and other public acts in the newspapers. This must have guaranteed that the readers of either the *Herald* or the *Advertiser* would be informed of the official acts of the council, for on March 8, 1904, the council authorized certain claims, among them being items providing for the payment of \$134.50 to the Clinton Herald Company and \$130.75 to Fay Brothers. In other words, the cost of publishing matter which required publicity was divided equally between the two newspapers.

The quarrel in 1903 served a useful purpose. The people of Clinton decided to purge the city administration of politics. In the spring of 1904 two coalition tickets, composed of both Republi-

cans and Democrats, were proposed for the March election. Among the names presented for the Citizens' ticket by the nominating committee, of which Fay of the *Advertiser* was a member, were those of three of the insurgents of the previous summer, Callender, Cone, and Wilson. Obviously the *Advertiser* had forgotten how during the height of the controversy it had predicted that none of the Republican councilmen would ever again be elected to public office. In addition to the three named above, Peterson was the Citizens' candidate for mayor, and Democratic councilmen Hall, Moeszinger, and Madden were recommended to retain their seats. The Peoples' ticket was composed of men who had not been associated with the previous administration.

When the votes were counted after the election of March 28th, it was revealed that the Citizens' ticket had won a striking victory. Only in the fourth ward where W. H. Poston ran for alderman on the Citizens' ticket against P. J. Melvin was the Peoples' candidate successful. Thus did political passions cool and harmony reign again in the council chamber where only a few months before cantankerous hostility had prevailed.

CARL B. CONE