

## A Mass Convention

The present generation of Iowa voters, accustomed since 1908 to the direct primary as the means of nominating party candidates, may have the advantage of an improved method, yet they miss some of the thrills that voters now of middle age and older used to get from the dramatic incidents of the old caucus-and-convention system.

Before the primary law was enacted, in most of the counties of Iowa each political party did its principal business for the year by holding one delegate convention. That was an important occasion. A few counties in the State, however, had adopted a voluntary primary system for making local nominations, and this left, as about the only business to be done by the county convention in any such county, the selection of county delegates to the State convention. Most voters regarded this job, on all ordinary occasions, as sufficiently unimportant to be left to the politicians. It was, therefore, hardly practicable to run all the machinery of caucuses in every precinct for that single purpose, so mass conventions were frequently substituted. These mass gatherings were usually perfunctory, having a small at-

tendance made up mainly of active politicians at the county seat.

Ringgold County adopted a voluntary primary system in 1893 for the nomination of county officers, and resorted to mass conventions for the selection of State delegates. Such was the local setting when a real contest over the governorship broke out in 1901 between A. B. Cummins and several opponents. The peculiar circumstances of that campaign led to one of the most notable mass conventions ever held in Iowa.

Ringgold is a small county, and in those days, before equal suffrage, had a Republican strength of almost exactly 2000. Of its Republican voters, 1021 came to Mr. Ayr, the county seat, on June 27, 1901, to vote on the governorship, and it is believed that on no other occasion in the State have more than fifty per cent of the voters of any party gathered at any county seat for any political purpose.

The dominant figure of that fight was Dr. Percy L. Prentis. For the last quarter century of his life which ended in June, 1928, Dr. Prentis was in the government service, as immigration inspector and superintendent at Sault Ste. Marie, Winnipeg, Vancouver, Chicago, and Detroit. He came to Delphos and began the practice of medicine about 1893. Two years later, at twen-

ty-five years of age, he was elected State Representative. In 1899, after a stirring contest in the primary, he obtained a third term, being the first man so honored in Ringgold County.

More background must be supplied. The two southern tiers of counties in Iowa, responsive to the C. B. & Q. railroad influence, were dubbed the "Burlington reservation." J. W. Blythe of Burlington, general attorney for the C. B. & Q., was the most powerful political figure in southern Iowa, and the fountain of favors such as free passes. Ringgold County always had a latent tendency towards insurgency, though seldom making it effective against the overwhelming influences which controlled that quarter of the State. The leading political manager of the county was R. H. Spence, then a member of the Republican State committee and aspiring to the chairmanship. J. H. Tedford and his son, Howard, were editing the *Ringgold Record*. F. E. Sheldon and Homer A. Fuller were young men of influence and activity. Indeed, men from all parts of the county took an active part in that memorable struggle. One name, particularly, must not be omitted from the list — H. H. Wilson, to whom all of his associates in the Cummins crowd deferred when it came to making decisions in matters of political strategy.

Dr. Prentis, after his reelection in 1899, announced his candidacy for the speakership of the House. He was rated as a supporter of Senator J. H. Gear, who was J. W. Blythe's father-in-law and a candidate for reelection to the United States Senate. An interview which appeared in a Des Moines paper anonymously (erroneously believed by Dr. Prentis to have emanated from Edward H. Hunter) stated with excessive frankness that Prentis would withdraw from the speakership race when told to do so. His response was to withdraw, at the same time announcing his support of A. B. Cummins for Senator. Although Cummins was beaten by Gear in the senatorial election by the legislature in January, 1900, the groundwork had nevertheless been laid for his successful candidacy for the office of Governor in 1901. At the State convention of 1900, his friends were in control, nominating W. B. Martin for Secretary of State and G. S. Gilbertson for State Treasurer.

Kept warm by attacks on the administration of Governor Leslie M. Shaw, the Cummins gubernatorial candidacy went into the campaign of 1901 under a full head of steam. When Dr. Prentis and his friends decided to make a fight for the Ringgold County delegation, their worst handicap in that dry district was Cummins's past

record in opposition to prohibition. They had a fortuitous aid, however, in the fact that in two townships there were many voters who came from Cummins's birthplace, Greene County, Pennsylvania. When the conservative county committee met, they fixed June 29th as the date for the nominating primaries, and defeated G. A. Tennant's motion to submit a gubernatorial preference on the primary ballot. The calling of a convention to pick delegates to the State convention was left to the county chairman, Lloyd Talley.

The Cummins men made the most of the refusal of the county committee to permit a preference vote on Governor, and succeeded in arousing much indignation. The interest in the governorship quite overshadowed the county contests. In fact, the whole campaign was so completely influenced by the factional dispute that the local candidates were labeled pro or anti Cummins. Demands on the county chairman to announce the convention date were insistent, and finally on notice of about eighteen days he set the time for Thursday, June 27th, two days before the primary.

Conferences at all hours of the day and night were kept going in Mt. Ayr by both sides. Business was generally neglected. A county meeting of Cummins workers was held. When men were

asked to go to far corners of the county to "see a man" they made no excuses, but went. The need for sleep was forgotten, and the livery teams of all Mt. Ayr stables were used to the limit of their endurance.

Hon. H. M. Towner of Corning, since Congressman from the Eighth District and Governor of Porto Rico, was then a judge of the third judicial district and a candidate for the State Supreme Court. He was popular in Ringgold County, and the anti-Cummins men made much of the argument that the State delegation should be constituted primarily in his interest rather than in behalf of any candidate for Governor. The voters, however, took the view that the choice of a Governor was the more important problem.

Just before the convention day, a tramp artist came to town and stayed at the Currie hotel. W. K. Currie and the late J. A. McNerney, though Democrats, were giving quiet help to the Cummins men, and they with the artist framed up the first local cartoons which were ever used in Ringgold County politics. These appeared in the *Twice-a-Week News*, published by the writer of this article.

The day dawned clear, with the roads good as that term was then understood. The town was thronged from early morning with earnest men,

excited, perhaps, but not unruly. Not until that morning did the anti-Cummins men disclose who their candidate would be. Then they blossomed out in enormous buttons bearing a picture of Edwin H. Conger. Meanwhile, the supply of small metal Cummins buttons had been exhausted, whereupon the Cummins men also made a splash by printing up large badges of ribbon. As the hour of eleven approached, the crowd, representing all of the sixteen townships and some of them almost one hundred per cent, gathered in the northwest corner of the square, near the band stand.

When Chairman Talley called the mass convention to order, Mr. Spence nominated for temporary chairman, State Senator George S. Allyn, while Dr. Prentis, with a few words of explanation, in a ringing voice proposed John E. Scott, evoking a response of cheers. Then there was a pause, for there was honest perplexity as to a method of getting that concourse counted. As a preliminary the chairman asked the Cummins men to step to the west side of the area and the Conger men to the east side. The division revealed that the west siders were more numerous, whereat another great shout went up. After another delay for consultation, it was decided to let the voters walk from the west through the central corridor

of the court house (the old one that was torn down in 1922), and be counted as they emerged from the east door. This orderly procedure resulted in a count of 565 for Cummins and 456 for Conger.

The Conger men made no further resistance, permitting Chairman Scott to pick the committee to choose the delegates to the State convention. He named the one man from each township who had been previously selected by the Cummins faction for that purpose. Their slate of thirteen delegates, headed by Dr. Prentis, went to Cedar Rapids and on August 3, 1901, helped to give Cummins his first nomination for the office of Governor. From the whole Eighth Congressional District, Cummins received only fifteen votes in the State convention, thirteen from Ringgold and one each from two other counties.

Dr. Prentis evidently thought that there was no political future for him on the "reservation", for about two years later, when he had an opportunity to take a professional post in the immigration service he accepted. It was generally believed that the regular organization considered him too able an insurgent to be left footloose in the Eighth District, and so caused the appointment to be offered through Congressman W. P. Hepburn. It is probably fair to state that the few years of



his activity in Ringgold County were among the most interesting in the county's political history. Dr. Prentis had the qualities which win success in public life — character, ability, force, ambition, personal magnetism, striking appearance, and eloquence. He might have gone far.

Though the insurgents capitalized hostility to what they called the county's "machine", the local effects were largely temporary, for the managing politicians after 1901 were mainly the same individuals as before. R. H. Spence, against whom the hardest drive was made, was actually picked that summer by the Cummins men on the State central committee to be State chairman, and as such the manager of Cummins's campaign.

During that fall a bill from a Des Moines engraving house was presented to the Republican State committee for payment, listing two cuts, made from cartoon drawings sent from Mt. Ayr and used in the Ringgold County campaign. These were the cartoons in which State Chairman Spence had been pilloried by the Cummins men of Ringgold County! To the newspaper man who had ordered and published those cartoons, Mr. Spence related the incident in glee, and said: "I told them that presenting that bill to me was adding insult to injury."

"The mass convention" is still referred to in

Ringgold County political conversation as a landmark. Nearly a third of a century has since sent many of its participants beyond the noise of political battle. Of those still living, many are scattered far and wide, and others have retired from politics. The active survivors have crossed and re-crossed the lines of allegiance many times in later campaigns, but the sentimental line leading down from that day still seems clearly marked in their minds. They have been proud to have participated in a remarkable feat of practical democracy — the unparalleled achievement of bringing more than one-half of all the Republican voters of an Iowa county together at one time in one place to make a political decision.

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