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SIDNEY J. CATTS AND THE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY OF 1920

by WARREN A. JENNINGS

IN 1920 FLORIDA stood on the threshold of her "great boom;" economic optimism prevailed. However, to many people within the state one obstacle stood in the way of bountiful prosperity - "Cattism," a term of derision applied to the political principles and campaign tactics of Sidney J. Catts, the governor of the state. Only four years before he had risen from obscurity to notoriety. A more disruptive and divisive personality has seldom appeared on the political scene of any state. There was no middle ground in the opinions of the politicians or the public about this political parvenu; he was either admired or detested.

Born in 1863 in Dallas County, Alabama, Catts had grown up in a typical rural environment, but unlike most of his childhood associates he had acquired a higher education. He obtained a law degree from Cumberland University in 1882 and for three years practiced law while managing his mother's plantation. At this point there occurred an event which deflected Catts from his intended legal career; he attended a "revival" and was converted. He became a rural preacher, instead of a practicing attorney, and held various pastorates in Alabama until June, 1911, when he accepted a call to be pastor of the Baptist Church in DeFuniak Springs, Florida. After three years he resigned this position to become Florida agent for a small fraternal life insurance company. While traveling around the state, Catts conceived the idea of running for governor and the issues that would enable him to win. A big, robust man over six feet tall and weighing approximately two hundred pounds, he was a typical extrovert whose greatest political asset was his vigorous style of oratory.¹

By capitalizing upon and playing up anti-Catholic sentiment, Catts soon gained tremendous strength in the primary of June 1916. This amazed many politicians who had at first felt that his candidacy was a joke. When the votes were counted, he was first by a small majority, but so much confusion had been engen-

1. The only biographical study of Catts is John R. Deal, Jr., "Sidney Johnston Catts, Stormy Petrel of Florida Politics" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Florida, 1949).

dered by the "second choice" provision of the Bryan Primary Law of 1913 and the claims of voting irregularities that the state Supreme Court was asked for a ruling. Catts was counted out. Undaunted, he ran on a Prohibition-Independent ticket in November and was elected governor by a sizable majority over the Democratic standard bearer. Thus becoming the first chief executive of Florida since Reconstruction days who was not a regular Democratic nominee, Catts was anathema to party officials. This fact made it almost certain that many of his proposals would be defeated in the state legislature.

The new governor had a very definite and constructive program. He sought to set up a state insurance commission, boys' and girls' industrial schools, and a bank guarantee and reserve fund to insure depositors against loss of funds. He wanted a reduction in the legal rate of interest from 8 to 6 per cent. He advocated the initiative, the referendum, and the recall and attempted to increase the number of state Supreme Court justices. He was instrumental in setting up a system of certification for school teachers, requiring them to take oral and written examinations. During his administration the compulsory school attendance law was passed. There was a general improvement in state institutions and the Florida Farm Colony for Epileptic and Feeble-Minded was established. Most of Catts' program failed, however, and he was even unable to secure the repeal of the Bryan Primary Law. His administration was an expensive one, but when he left office there was a surplus of \$2,000,000 in the state treasury.²

As early as 1917 it was rumored that Catts would run for the office of United States Senator, and on June 16, 1919, he issued a statement declaring his intention to do so. His opponent was to be the incumbent, Duncan Upshaw Fletcher. Fletcher's father, like Catts', had been an officer in the Confederate Army, and both had suffered economic reverses as a result of the war. Though the elder Fletcher's loss was more severe, for his plantation had been in the path of Sherman's march through Georgia, he had made a more successful recovery than Catts' father. His son Duncan received a law degree from Vanderbilt in 1880 and hung out his shingle in Jacksonville, Florida, the following year.

2. *Ibid.*, 175.

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He soon succeeded eminently as both a lawyer and a politician.³

Fletcher was at first a member of the "Straight-out," or reform, faction of the Democratic party and worked closely with Napoleon B. Broward. But he began to drift away in 1897 from his former associates. He served in the state legislature and was mayor of Jacksonville for two terms. His appointment in 1905 as counsel for the Florida East Coast Railroad was evidence of his complete break with the "Straight-outs."⁴ From 1905 to 1908 he was chairman of the state Democratic Executive Committee and helped activate Florida's white primary. He resigned this position to run against Broward for a seat in the United States Senate. In this campaign Fletcher took a progressive stand; he advocated a federal income tax and regulation of trusts and monopolies. He promised to seek tariff revision and federal improvement of waterways and harbors. In the runoff primary against Broward, Fletcher polled the larger number of votes. As a result, the state legislature unanimously elected him to the Senate.

Fletcher ran again in 1914 and was re-elected, this time by popular vote.⁵ His legislative record was one of party regularity, for he consistently supported President Wilson's policies. He was sponsor of the Hollis Farm Loan Act of 1916 and author of the Merchant Marine Act, which resulted in the expenditure of \$50,000,000 in the shipyards at Jacksonville, Tampa, and Pensacola.⁶ A conscientious worker, Fletcher made certain that his state received its full share of waterways improvement money. A large, bald man of calm demeanor, he was the personification of Senatorial dignity.

Catts' influence on the primary of 1920, however, was not to be confined to his own effort to secure the Senatorial nomination.

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3. Fletcher's life has been the subject of two studies: William James Wells, "Duncan Upshaw Fletcher, Florida's Grand Old Man" (unpublished MA thesis, John B. Stetson University, 1936), and Gertrude H. Stephens, "Senator Duncan U. Fletcher-Legislator" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Florida, 1951). Also see William C. Carlton's sketch in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. XXII, pp. 194-5.
 4. The best account of this early split within the Democratic party is found in Samuel Proctor, *Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, Florida's Fighting Democrat* (Gainesville: University of Florida press, 1950), *passim*.
 5. The 17th Amendment, which provided for the popular election of United States Senators, was adopted in 1913.
 6. Stephens, "Senator Duncan U. Fletcher," 90.

"Cattsism" became an issue in many contests for office, and the voter's choice was frequently determined by whether the candidate wore the stigma of "Cattsism" or not. The *Tampa Morning Tribune* succinctly described the situation to the voters in an editorial concerning all the state and local candidates for office: "There is but one choice . . . all the way through, . . . Cattsism or anti-Cattsism."⁷ This issue was nowhere more apparent than among those seeking the gubernatorial nomination.

Cary A. Hardee was one of the first to announce his candidacy for governor. A banker from Live Oak, he had been born on a farm near Perry. At seventeen he was teaching in rural schools while reading law. Admitted to the bar, he served in the state legislature and was Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1915. A man with deep-set eyes, thin face and a pompadour, he had a great deal of confidence. "I believe the people want a man of my type and I believe they are going to choose me," he told the editor of the *Pensacola Journal*.⁸ Like Fletcher, Hardee had a "cool and collected manner" and was a "conservative in everything."⁹ His campaign was to be in sharp contrast to that waged by Catts four years before. "I have no hymn of hate to sing," he said, "no vituperation to pour out on the heads of my opponents."¹⁰

A man similar to Hardee in background and appeal was John W. Watson, a businessman from Kissimmee and Miami. He was a fruit and vegetable grower who had been in the hardware business for almost forty years. He had spent eleven sessions in the state legislature and had served one term as Speaker of the House of Representatives. A man with a prominent chin and straight, determined mouth, he advocated tax reduction, restrictions on labor unions, good roads, and Everglades drainage.¹¹ While he bid for the same type of vote as Hardee, his appeal was too obviously sectional and he had little support outside south Florida.¹² Many observers felt that he could win if Hardee were not running,¹³ but on May 5 Watson withdrew from the race. He gave

7. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 6, 1920.

8. *Pensacola Journal*, March 9, 1920.

9. *Tribune*, May 29, 1920.

10. *Jacksonville Florida Times Union*, March 9; *Tribune*, May 29, 1920.

11. *Ocala Weekly Banner*, February 13; *Tribune*, February 19, 1920.

12. *Times Union*, January 29, April 3, 1920.

13. *Tribune*, March 10, 1920.

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as reasons business and legal matters, but one can hardly escape the conclusion that Watson was partially motivated by a fear of taking votes away from Hardee and enabling the latter's competitors to win.¹⁴

Of an entirely different political complexion were the other two candidates. The more prominent of them was Van Cicero Swearingen, Catts' friend and appointee to the office of Attorney General of the state.¹⁵ He, too, had been a farm boy, and at one time he had earned his living as a blacksmith. He had served as judge, "reform" mayor of Jacksonville, and member of the state legislature. His appointment to office by Catts had given him a badge of "Cattism," and there can be little doubt that he appealed to the same people to whom his mentor appealed and took a similar stand on many issues.¹⁶ He, like his opponents, was an advocate of better schools and roads.

The fourth and final candidate to file was Lincoln B. Hulley, the President of Stetson University and a senator from Volusia County. In his advertisements he called attention to the fact that he possessed "two bachelor of arts, one master's and three doctor's degrees."¹⁷ Some of the newspapers surmised that Hulley was inspired by a former President of Princeton, Woodrow Wilson, who had become governor of New Jersey and gone on to bigger things. Hulley's support was only nominal and he antagonized many voters by going into public schools during the campaign and drilling the students in cheers for himself. He and Watson, however, filled only minor roles in the political drama in Florida in 1920. The main participants were Swearingen, Catts, Hardee, and Fletcher.

Catts opened his campaign early. He toured the state in his Ford "flivver," using the same tactics and many of the same issues he had so successfully exploited in 1916. He made little effort to set up an itinerary, but went wherever he pleased, primarily into the rural areas. He would simply roll into town and start speaking. He relied principally on circulars rather than news-

14. See *Times Union*, May 6; *Banner*, May 14, 1920.

15. Thomas F. West had been re-elected as Attorney General in 1916. He resigned this position to accept appointment as justice of the Florida Supreme Court to the unexpired term of Thomas M. Shackelford. Swearingen was sworn in as Attorney General on September 4, 1917. See *Times Union*, September 1, 5, 1917.

16. *Tribune*, June 6, 1920.

17. *Banner*, March 12, 1920.

paper advertisement, no doubt because of an almost total lack of support by the press. By January 1920 his campaign was in full swing. Many people were disturbed by his apparent strength, and not the least of these was his opponent.

Fletcher did not make formal announcement of his intention to seek re-election until March 5, 1920,¹⁸ though it was understood long before then that he would do so. In his notice he called attention to the facts that there were only seven Democratic senators who were his senior in service, that he was ranking Democratic member of the Senate Committee on Commerce, and a member of the Democratic Steering Committee.¹⁹ Fletcher hoped to begin his campaign by the middle of March, but he was delayed in Washington by the League of Nations debate and was twice forced to postpone his return to Florida. He finally left the capital on March 20, after the defeat of the peace treaty, with the avowed purpose of remaining in the field until after the primary of June 8.²⁰

Fletcher spoke first at a rural school near Ocala, at a Farmer's Union meeting, but said little about politics. He extolled the virtues of education, then lauded the farmer and noted that he "was not reaping the full reward of his toil."²¹ He pointed to the benefits brought to farmers by the farm loan bank and reminded his audience that he was the initiator of this system. Next day, March 27, he spoke in the courtroom at Live Oak, Hardee's home town. The train which brought him from Jacksonville was accompanied by two airplanes engaged by the Live Oak Chamber of Commerce. In his speech Fletcher opened up on Catts, disparaging his record as governor and condemning him for campaigning when he should have been concerned with his gubernatorial duties.²² The senator again talked of the benefits of the farm loan measure, and called attention to his part in the Merchant Marine Act and the opportunities it had brought to Florida.

Fletcher was a competent speaker but not especially eloquent.²³ Throughout his entire canvass, in marked contrast to

18. *Tribune*, March 5; *Times Union*, March 5, 1920.

19. See campaign circular issued March 5, 1920 in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

20. *Tribune*, March 21, 1920.

21. *Banner*, April 2, 1920.

22. *Times Union*, March 28; *Banner*, April 9, 1920.

23. "Not a spellbinder," *ibid.*, April 16, 1920.

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the demagoguery of his opponent, he maintained a quiet demeanor, speaking on the value of his congressional experience, the number of important committee memberships he held in the Senate, and how well he had handled his "stewardship" of public office.²⁴ He constantly elaborated on his work for the improvement of harbors and rivers and his part in bringing military installations to Florida. Nor did he forget to mention how he had secured large Federal appropriations for the eradication of the citrus canker.

Occasionally Fletcher felt the necessity for denouncing his opponent who, it must be admitted, was extremely vulnerable, Fletcher especially criticized Catts for practicing the "spoils system" and removing many state and local officials from office. And he accused the governor of gross nepotism. On January 6, 1920, Catts had appointed his son, Rozier D. Catts, harbor master for the port of Key West.²⁵ Rozier resigned this position after just two months, but while he held it the public was treated to the spectacle of the Catts family occupying no less than seven state positions. According to Fletcher these brought into the coffers of the first family of the state no less than \$32,200 a year in salary and fees.²⁶ The payroll sheet read as follows:

Daughter, Catts' private secretary	Salary	\$ 2,000
Daughter, secretary to the State Board of Institutions	Salary	\$ 1,000
Son, Naval Stores Inspector	Salary	\$ 4,000
Son, Adjutant General	Salary	\$ 3,000
Son, Harbor Master	Fees	\$ 1,000
Son-in-law, Tax Collector of Duval County	Fees	\$14,000
Governor	Salary	\$ 6,000
Governor's contingent fund		\$ 1,200
TOTAL :		<u>\$32,200</u>

An argument that Fletcher had used against Broward he now brought to bear against Catts. He reproached the latter for spending too much time campaigning when, according to Fletcher, he should have been attending to his duties as governor. Others expanded upon this theme. Judge William B. Young

24. *Ibid.*, April 16, 1920.

25. *Times Union*, January 11, 1920.

26. *Tribune*, March 28, 1920

of Jacksonville wrote to the *Florida Times Union* advocating an amendment to the state constitution which would prohibit any governor from becoming a candidate for another office while still serving as chief executive of the state.²⁷ Hardee, who often sounded as if he were running against Catts, replied to this letter. He promised, if he were elected, not to seek another political position during his term of office.²⁸

Another telling blow aimed at Catts by Fletcher was the charge of having raised the state property tax to new heights. The tax rate when Catts took office was 6 mills. It had been increased by 1920 to 12 mills.²⁹ There were, of course, many valid reasons for this rise, and even Fletcher had to admit that some increase was necessary. Prohibition had dried up one lucrative source of tax money. The war had called for a large expenditure of state funds, as did the improvement and increase in state institutions and welfare programs. Inflation, rife during these years, consumed funds at an alarming rate. Even so, the accusation that Catts had raised taxes was an effective argument with a public that was reacting against high prices. Many people felt that Catts was a spend-thrift, and looked for relief to a man like Fletcher, who was thought of as a "conservative,"³⁰ and who in private affairs was careful with his money.³¹

A typical polemic by the governor was a speech at the courthouse in Madison on February 5. A large, attentive audience was present despite inclement weather. Catts praised the condition then existing in the state prisons, hospitals, and industrial schools. While doing so he held up for public admiration a ring given him the previous Christmas by the prisoners at Raiford Prison Farm in gratitude for the inauguration of the honor system in that institution. Catts denounced President Wilson, the League of Nations (which was upheld by Fletcher), and the whole situation in Washington. He promised to clean up the federal government as he had the state. On this occasion he spoke only briefly against the Catholics, though he predicted that the one county he would lose west of the Apalachicola would be Escam-

27. *Times Union*, March 20, 1920.

28. *Ibid.*, March 25, 1920.

29. *Tribune*, March 5, 1920.

30. *Times Union*, February 11, 1920.

31. Stephens, "Senator Duncan U. Fletcher," 116.

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bia, where he would be defeated by the many Catholics in Pensacola.³² Speaking elsewhere, Catts found other means of attacking Fletcher. He criticized him for his opposition to child labor legislation and derided him for sponsoring the Guam Bill, which, Catts said, would have made that island a penal colony for undesirable "anarchists and reds."³³

Catts, as usual, did not confide his verbal blows to the issues or candidates. The Catholics were again, as in 1916, raked over the coals. Whether he was as severe in his denunciations of them as before is debatable. In the rural areas he spoke very harshly, but it appears he was more moderate in his fulminations in the larger towns. How sincere he was in the matter is open to question for even while blasting the Catholics he appointed one of them sheriff of Brevard County. This was a tactical blunder because it opened him to an accusation of being inconsistent.³⁴

The governor felt that another charge brought against him was so serious that he did public penance for it. He had appointed a Negro as probation officer in Duval County. For this Catts apologized in a speech in which he stated that while farming in Alabama he had carried arms and maintained "a private cemetery for the reception of the less desirable of his negro employes [sic] from time to time."³⁵ This was a reference to an incident that had occurred while he was a youth. He had killed a Negro but had been acquitted on a plea of self-defense.³⁶

Another matter that caused an inordinate amount of debate between the two contestants was the "Camp Wheeler affair." Catts claimed throughout his campaign that on one occasion during the war he had visited Camp Wheeler, a National Guard training camp near Macon, Georgia, and had found thousands of Florida boys ill with pneumonia being neglected and improperly cared for. Hundreds, he said were dead or dying. Accordingly he had hurried off to a snowbound Washington where he stood knee-deep in snow sending telegrams to the proper officials. As

32. *Times Union*, February 6, 1920.

33. *West Palm Beach Post*, May 13, 1920.

34. "It is stated that Governor Catts has appointed a Catholic sheriff of Brevard county. Is this a change of front and does it mean that entirely different tactics will be employed in the approaching campaign?" *Banner*, March 19, 1920. See also *Times Union*, April 6, 1920, "Perhaps the governor is hedging."

35. *Ibid.*, April 29, 1920.

36. Deal, "Sidney Johnston Catts," 97.

a result of his demands, Catts concluded, the situation was soon rectified.³⁷ Fletcher replied that Catts "was not in Washington at all that winter, and there never was a time when snow was knee deep on the streets, much less on the sidewalks, for one day in Washington, and there is surely no need to hunt snowbanks in which to send telegrams."³⁸ Fletcher's version of the affair, which he claimed to have documents to prove, was that only 240 men had died at Camp Wheeler and of these only 48 were from Florida. Furthermore, he said, it was not Catts but he himself who had forced action by the Federal government.³⁹ A similar dispute arose between the two candidates over which one was really responsible for preventing the establishment of a federal leper colony on an island off the coast of Florida.

Besides Fletcher's formidable opposition Catts had other handicaps to overcome if he were to win the primary. He had been unable, despite his many removals of officeholders, to build a strong personal organization on the local level. Most of the party regulars were against him and he had practically no newspaper support. The Macclenny *Standard* helps to explain this fact by praising Senator Fletcher for having done "more on behalf of the newspaper fraternity, by way of preventing the paper manufacturers from going still further with their profiteering antics, than any other individual in Washington. . . . His efforts shall not be overlooked here in his home state," promised the *Standard*.⁴⁰ They were not. Number after number, the papers ridiculed Catts and held up his opponent as a paragon of virtue. There were, it is true, many other reasons why the newspapers opposed the governor. The personal preference of the owners was one factor; they tended to be party regulars and they were businessmen as well. They felt that Catts was not "respectable" and that his actions gave Florida a "poor press" nationally and thus made people reluctant to invest or settle within the state.⁴¹

Florida newspapers were not the only ones concerned with

37. *Times Union*, February 23, May 2, 1920.

38. *Tribune*, March 28, 1920.

39. *Times Union*, April 8, May 2, 1920. "It was at my urgent request that Surgeon General Gorgas, of the Army, went there and remedied the situation during the early fall of 1917." See Fletcher's campaign circular issued March 5, 1920.

40. Quoted in *Times Union*, February 14, 1920.

41. See *Tribune*, May 29, 1920.

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the primary. Due to Catts's colorful methods, the contest received much attention outside the state. The *Baltimore Sun*, for example, commented that if Catts were elected "the current belief in the saving grace of democracy will receive an extremely severe shock. He is making . . . brutal and undisguised appeals to ignorance, prejudice and class feeling."⁴² However, the editors were discerning enough to see that the governor was not a mere apparition that would soon fade from view, that there was some basis for his popular support:

The only conceivable explanation of it is that there have been abuses and grievances in Florida that have given such a man as Catts his chance. The Florida "Cracker" may not have as much schooling as some other people, but it is probable he has a good deal of shrewd sense, and if he did not feel that old factions had discriminated against him in some ways, or that the corporations or the wealthy had been favored at the expense of the poorer classes, Catts could never set the state on fire.⁴³

There were some, then, who could see that Catts' impact on Florida's politics could not be explained by his campaign methods alone.

The contest for the gubernatorial nomination was as bitter as that for the senatorial. The voter was made aware that there was a distinct and definite difference between Hardee and Swearingen. Both waged an intense campaign. The former's supporters attempted to define the basic dissimilarity between the two in the form of a question. "Shall business be assisted to safety," the voter was asked, "and investments made sure, or shall class prejudice and political promises run rampant again as in the past four years?"⁴⁴ Hardee's adherents claimed that Swearingen was the "creator, in large degree, of Catts and in larger degree, the creature of Catts."⁴⁵ They declared that he and Catts were "one and inseparable. They stand for the same things."⁴⁶ While Swearingen spoke for better roads, Hardee dwelt on the importance of a tax reduction. Both men promised the development of inland

42. Quoted in *Banner*, May 21, 1920.

43. *Ibid.*, May 21, 1920.

44. *Tribune*, March 10, 1920.

45. *Ibid.*, June 6, 1920.

46. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1920.

waterways and made some general hints that they were not opposed to "adequate provision" for veterans.

One of the more significant and interesting aspects of this whole primary was the role played by organized labor. It was announced in Washington on February 8, 1920, by spokesmen for the American Federation of Labor, that an effort would be made by the organization to carry on active political work in every congressional district in the country.⁴⁷ Samuel Gompers, the organization's head, intended to wage a strictly non-partisan fight, siding with the friends of labor and withholding support from its enemies. In light of the split within the Democratic party in Florida, a positive reaction by the candidates to Gompers' announcement was to be expected. The response was varied but all the candidates appear to have over-estimated labor's influence.

From the first it was understood that labor would oppose Fletcher because of his vote on the railroad bill which had returned the lines to private operation after the war. At the same time it was said that while labor did not wholeheartedly endorse Catts it would support him till someone better came along.⁴⁸ The governor made an affirmative bid for its backing. He stated in a speech that he had told his son, Sidney, Jr., when he was a soldier that he would never put his foot under his father's table again if he ever fired on a striker.⁴⁹ Swearingen, also, made a positive effort to curry favor with labor though he had every reason to expect its support. As a young man he had been a union member, and later, when a magistrate in Jacksonville, it was said that he had been lenient with strikers brought before him for judgment. On April 6 he was one of the speakers at the annual convention of the state Federation of Labor at St. Augustine.⁵⁰ Growing needlessly fearful, Hardee felt compelled to run a large advertisement in the major newspapers denying that he was the enemy of organized labor.⁵¹

Labor support in Florida in 1920 proved, however, to be more of a liability than an asset. An unauthorized railroad strike broke out on April 8,⁵² and hundreds of carloads of Flor-

47. *Times Union*, February 9, 1920.

48. *Ibid.*, April 7, 1920.

49. *Ibid.*, May 7, 1920.

50. *Tribune*, April 7, 1920.

51. *Times Union*, April 21, 1920.

52. See *Tribune*, April 10; *Times Union*, April 14, 1920.

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ida fruit and vegetables were tied up in the freight yards or left in the fields to spoil. The political repercussions were immediate. A large rally was held in Jacksonville on May 25 and the speakers censured both Catts and Swearingen for being candidates of the unions. Judge Henry Bethune Philips, who was a friend of Fletcher from college days, made the following observation: "In those counties of the state where the fruit and truck growing industries predominate, the people are bitterly opposed to Swearingen, because they know he is the candidate of the Northern radicals, who brought about the railroad and dock strikes which resulted in stopping the shipment of fruits and vegetables, thereby causing the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars."⁵³ At the same time, Dr. Mark B. Herlong warned the audience of a danger he said he saw in the participation in politics by the American Federation of Labor. He accused that group of trying to bring about its own purposes by instructing the Negroes to qualify to vote.

Labor withheld its approval from any of the candidates until the very last moment. Then, on June 6, labor officials issued a statement that they endorsed Catts and Swearingen. Politically it was a kiss of death.

The campaign was not all heavy drama; it had its share of humorous and interesting incidents. The candidates often resorted to mild sarcasm. Fletcher gave a new twist to an old adage when he told the voters at Avon Park not to "swap a good horse in the middle of the stream for a jackass."⁵⁴ Catts replied with a lesson in craniognomy at Winter Haven when he claimed he was more intelligent than his opponent since he wore a larger hat.⁵⁵ Fletcher was a Unitarian and it was reported that Catts spread the word that the senator denied the divinity of Christ. When the governor suggested that each veteran be given 40 acres and \$100 cash, the response was prompt and caustic. For instance, the *Ocala Star* said, "Catts reminds us of the carpet-baggers of the sixties who promised every darkey 40 acres of land and a mule. And we suppose he thinks our soldier boys are about on a par with the ignorant negroes of 50 years ago."⁵⁶ Catts

53. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1920.

54. *Tribune*, June 7, 1920.

55. *Ibid.*, May 21, 1920.

56. *Ibid.*, May 21, 1920.

57. Quoted in *Tampa Daily Times*, January 27, 1920.

drew down a lot of scorn upon himself because of a statement in one of his circulars to the effect that the Florida "Cracker" had only three friends: Jesus Christ, Sears Roebuck, and Sidney J. Catts!

The candidates were not particular when nor where they spoke. When Fletcher arrived at Bronson on April 5, he found the circuit court room full; court had convened. The judge, John R. Willis, soon finished charging the grand jury and then suggested that they postpone their deliberations until after they heard Fletcher. The jury was agreeable and the judge introduced the senator to his juridical audience.⁵⁸ On one occasion Catts spoke at a Baptist church following a prayer meeting.⁵⁹ This procedure was a reversal of the usual one for he often closed his speeches with prayer. At Hastings, he ordered a company of the Florida National Guard off the street because its drilling interfered with his speech. "They should know enough to show respect to the governor," was his only comment.⁶⁰

As voting day drew nearer, Catts' prospects definitely waned. Early in the campaign there had been many who believed that his chances were good, but by the middle of April the consensus was that he was finished. Fletcher was drawing de larger, more responsive crowds, while the governor was being repeatedly heckled and abused by his audiences. Individual defections began to take place. Thus on one occasion when he arrived in St. Petersburg, Catts found that no preparations had been made and that he was denied the use of Williams Park because of the desertion of his chief aide in the area.⁶¹ Then whole groups withdrew their allegiance.

Catts had had the backing of the fishermen in 1916 when he had made much over the way the fish conservation laws were being enforced, but he was neither able to retain their loyalty nor bequeath them to his heir apparent, Swearingen. On February 10, at Cedar Keys, the Florida Fisherman's Association unanimously passed a resolution endorsing Hardee for governor. In addition the fishers stated that they wanted "safe and conservative"

58. *Times Union*, April 6, 1920.

59. *Ibid.*, March 13, 1920.

60. *Ibid.*, April 8, 1920.

61. *Tribune*, April 26, 1920.

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candidates;⁶² this certainly was not, in the political vocabulary of the times, a description of Catts.

When it became apparent that the governor was no longer a threat in the primary, a new fear arose; some politicians surmised that he might run as an independent in November. This act would badly split the Democratic vote and almost anything might happen. The state might even elect a Republican! But this bogey was laid to rest at a joint debate on May 1 at Wakulla Springs. Fletcher asked Catts if he would abide by the verdict at the polls in June, and the governor promised to do so.⁶³

In the closing weeks the newspaper barrage against Catts slackened, and the verbal artillery was concentrated on Swearingen. His close affiliation with Catts was emphasized. In an effort to counteract the effect of this invective, Swearingen's backers ran a full page advertisement in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* two days before the balloting. It ended in bold letters: "In Defense of the Masses Vote for Van C. Swearingen."⁶⁴ This pronouncement was followed the next day with another advertisement in which an attempt was made to prove that not Swearingen but Hardee and his campaign manager, Marion L. Dawson, were the true followers of Catts, or as it so succulently stated, they were the real "kittens" of "Old Catts."⁶⁵

By this time the newspapers had come to feel that Hardee was certain to be the new governor. The *Morning Tribune* said, "The situation is reassuring to Florida business prospects, for with Hardee in the governor's office . . . there is a confidence that the state will quickly regain its hold on the would-be investor, and the would-be citizen."⁶⁶

Conscious that their strength was ebbing away, both Catts and Swearingen made efforts to revive the "anti-corporation" sentiment of the Broward Era. The former charged Fletcher with having done nothing about either the high cost of living or profiteering because he was a "corporation man."⁶⁷ Swearingen attacked the press as being subsidized and declared that Hardee also was a

62. *Times Union*, February 11, 1920.

63. *Ibid.*, May 2, 1920.

64. *Tribune*, June 6, 1920.

65. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1920. See also *Times Union*, June 2, 1920.

66. *Tribune*, May 29, 1920.

67. *Times Union*, May 2; *Palm Beach Post*, May 13, 1920.

tool of the corporations and a front man for "special interests."⁶⁸ Hardee calmly asserted that his antagonist was attempting to raise the masses against the classes.⁶⁹

The balloting took place on June 8; two days later the results were known. In Hillsborough County, for example, Catts received 2,148 votes to Fletcher's 4,146. Hardee got 3,947; Swearingen 2,207; Hulley 310.⁷⁰ But the full extent of the political cataclysm was not evident until the final canvass of the vote. Out of a total of 87,311 votes, Fletcher received 62,304; Catts only 25,007.⁷¹ The former had triumphed by almost a 5 to 2 ratio. The governor was victorious in only three counties, Holmes, Okaloosa, and Washington - all in rural west Florida, with a large number of former Alabama residents. It is doubtful that Catts could have done much better even if he had had considerable newspaper help. Significantly, he polled only 357 votes in Palm Beach County out of a total of 1,581, despite the fact that the West Palm Beach *Post* had championed his cause.

Swearingen did little better; he obtained 30,240 votes to Hardee's 52,591. Hulley got only 5,591.⁷²

The post-mortems began with the tabulation of the last ballot. The *Morning Tribune* observed that the defeat of Swearingen and every man connected with the Catts family, even down to the county offices, "emphasizes the determination to be rid of the whole thing." It was felt that the people were tired of strikes, tieups and walkouts. "Four years of Cattsism with its appealing prejudices, its personal aggrandizement, its selfishly [sic] hoping to withstand attack by pledging to organized labor, has showed Florida what might be, what would be if de people did not wake up and exert themselves."⁷³ The *Ocala Banner* jovially stated that the governor's administration had emphasized the importance of separation of church and state. "Florida has had her lesson that the pulpit is a failure in politics."⁷⁴ The *Palm Beach Post* could only lament, "Some men who were old-line Catts men, including

68. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1920.

69. *Times Union*, May 2, 1920.

70. *Tribune*, June 10, 1920.

71. *Banner*, June 25; *Times Union*, June 25, 1920.

72. *Ibid.*, June 27, 1920.

73. *Tribune*, June 10, 1920.

74. *Banner*, June 11, 1920.

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Van Swearingen, attempted to get away from Sidney J. Catts and in doing so got what they deserved - DEFEAT." ⁷⁵

After stepping down from the governorship, Catts returned to his farm near DeFuniak Springs and opened a real estate office. Unsuccessful in this endeavor, he went into the patent medicine business. He sought the Democratic nomination for governor in 1924 and made a respectable showing, and in 1928 when the "Catholic question" was again an issue, he came very close to winning the primary. In 1929 he stood trial on a charge of counterfeiting but was acquitted. One of the attorneys that conducted his defense was Cary J. Hardee. ⁷⁶ Catts died in 1936.

Fletcher went on to campaign in the general elections for Cox and Roosevelt. He won easily in November by a majority of 61,892 votes over his Republican competitor. ⁷⁷ He had 16 more years in the Senate ahead of him, dying in office in 1936. Hardee won handily too. "The term safe and sane fits him as well as anyone who has served as chief executive of Florida" was the verdict passed on his administration. ⁷⁸ Swearingen returned to his interrupted law practice where he enjoyed considerable success.

Years after the event, the historian of the Democratic Party in Florida wrote that Catts suffered in the 1920 primary "one of the greatest eclipses in political popularity of anyone who has ever served as governor of Florida." ⁷⁹ What factors account for Catts' overwhelming repudiation by the voters? Probably a reaction against his campaign tactics set in. Certainly the people were less concerned in 1920 about the "Catholic menace" than they had been in 1916. They had just finished a war in which two of their major allies were predominately Catholic countries. Besides, there was the new factor of world communism which appeared to be a much more potent and imminent threat. It must be admitted that Catts' progressive impulses were not fashionable at this time. Many Floridians who had become reform minded under Broward's tutelage had grown conservative by 1920.

Catts' political strength, as expected, had been based primarily on a personal following. His exploitation of the automobile as a

75. *Post*, June 10, 1920.

76. See Deal, "Sidney Johnston Catts," *passim*.

77. *Times Union*, November 17, 1920.

78. William T. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida* (Tallahassee: Florida Democratic Historical Foundation, 1936), 135.

79. *Ibid.*, 133.

campaign device and his demagogic oratory had made voters, who were either indifferent to politics or were ignored by the politicians, politically conscious. His re-introduction of the "spoils system" into state government while he was governor is an indication of his desire to form this personal following into a stable political faction. Such support was necessary to a man who had antagonized the party regulars, the newspapers, the bankers and small loan operatives, and numerous other groups. But his efforts were futile because many observers of the Florida scene in 1920 "already viewed a boom period in the offing, which it would have been a crime to disturb by political agitation."⁸⁰

⁸⁰. *Ibid.*, 134.