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DAVID SHOLTZ: NEW DEAL GOVERNOR OF FLORIDA

by MERLIN G. COX

DAVID SHOLTZ, New Deal governor of Florida, was not of the familiar cloth from which Florida governors are made. He believed when he began his campaign in 1932, that only a candidate who was cut from an unfamiliar pattern could be elected governor. Alfred Green and Roger West, who were associated with him in the practice of law in Daytona Beach, at first ridiculed Sholtz' plan to run without the support of the "court-house ring" in Volusia County. But David Sholtz wanted to be governor, and so he paid the filing fee, entered the race, and convinced a majority of the Florida voters that he was sincere. In the second primary he received the largest majority ever recorded for a candidate in the history of the state to that date.

The surprising triumph of David Sholtz in 1932, reflected the economic conditions of the period. A cheerfully enthusiastic optimism was an asset for any gubernatorial aspirant in those days when Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal was restoring hope to a depressed nation. Sholtz convinced many of those who listened to his stump speeches that he would provide jobs for all good Floridians, that he would reopen the closed schools with a nine-month school term, that teachers would be paid in full, and that the children would be furnished free textbooks.¹

The elections of 1932 also illustrate the observation of V. O. Key, Jr. in describing Florida's political institutions. Key believed that the mass influx of new voters, "a multiplicity of state factions, a dispersion of leadership in exaggerated form, and a discontinuity or lack of persistence in the grouping of voters into factions" is liable to turn a first effort to be elected governor almost into a lottery. It was possible, according to this interpretation, for anyone with strong home-town strength to become gov-

1. W. T. Cash, *The Story of Florida*, 4 vols. (New York, 1944), III, 8.



Governor David Sholtz (reproduced from W. T. Cash's *The Story of Florida*, Vol. IV).

ernor of Florida.² But does this analysis explain how a native of Brooklyn, New York, a graduate of Yale University, with virtually no support from recognized local and state political organizations, could be elevated to the highest position in Florida politics in time of great economic crisis?

David (Dave) Sholtz was born in Brooklyn, October 6, 1891. His parents were Michael and Annie (Bloom) Sholtz. Michael Sholtz was born and received most of his formal education in Germany. At the age of fifteen emigrated to the United States, settling in New York, where he made fortunate investments in land and other property. The three Sholtz children - Dave, Rosalie, and Ethel - were all well educated. After attending public schools in Brooklyn, David became an honors student at Yale, graduating in 1914. He received the Bachelor of Laws degree in 1915, from Stetson Law School in DeLand.³

The year that young David Sholtz went off to Yale, his father visited Daytona, Florida, and liked it so well that he decided to invest in its future. He erected the first concrete bridge across the Broadway approach to the Halifax River⁴ and started a new electric plant in the Halifax area. He so admired the Brooklyn Dodgers that he built another Ebbets Field in Daytona Beach as a training camp for the team. The Dodgers trained at this field only one year, 1916, but they won the pennant that year.⁵

David Sholtz began practicing law in Daytona in 1915. Roger West, junior law partner in the firm of Sholtz, Green and West, remembers him as a "kindly person with a sincere interest in helping people." As a dynamic public speaker, Sholtz has been compared to Huey Long. He seldom, if ever, used notes and always gave an impression of complete sincerity. This urbane Yankee convinced Florida crackers that he too was a fighter against political bossism. Sholtz used a friendly smile, a warm handshake, and a convincing approach to serious issues to project himself

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2. J. E. Dovell, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary*, 4 vols. (New York, 1952), II, 806, citing V. O. Key, *Southern Politics* (New York, 1944), III, 88-89.
 3. Cash, *op. cit.*, III, 8.
 4. Ianthe Bond Hebel, *Centennial History of Volusia County, Florida, 1854-1954* (Daytona Beach, 1955), 10.
 5. Interview with Henry Pollitz, April 30, 1964. Pollitz, who managed Daytona Beach's Ebbets Field in 1916, is now retired and lives in Daytona Beach.

into the lives and problems of others. "The ladies thought him handsome and children loved him," recalls Henry Pollitz, who was associated with Sholtz throughout the gubernatorial campaign of 1932, and later served as director of the license bureau in Tallahassee.

In 1916 Sholtz was a candidate for the Florida legislature, surprising his opposition with strong grass-roots support from both the eastern and western parts of Volusia County. Nonetheless, once elected he ran into strong opposition from the "courthouse ring" that had ruled the county for many years. Sholtz tried to secure revenge by introducing a bill in the Florida legislature which would have divided Volusia into two counties with county seats in both DeLand and Daytona Beach to correspond to what he described as two contrasting cultures.⁶

When the United States entered World War I, Sholtz received a commission as ensign in the United States Navy, serving on the censorship board. He was stationed in Key West and Havana, Cuba.⁷

Sholtz returned to his law office on South Beach Street in 1921, just as the boom was beginning and the area was filling up with many new settlers. A few years later, 1926, the Florida land boom had collapsed, depression quickly followed, and money became scarce in Daytona Beach, as it was everywhere else. Few clients could pay their bills, except those that Sholtz represented; or so it seemed to other attorneys. "When the attorney's fee of \$5,000 was presented to one such client, the payment was forthcoming immediately, and the check was really good," recalls Sholtz' junior partner. There were other instances, however, when Sholtz gave unstintingly of his services to some poor widow about to lose her home. If Sholtz overcharged wealthy clients, his friends remembered that he gave freely of his expert services to the needy.⁸

In 1925, while Alice Mae Agee of Norfolk, Virginia, was visiting Daytona Beach, she met David Sholtz and they were married on December 28, that same year. Michael was the only

6. Reminiscences of W. J. Gardiner, Daytona Beach attorney. Interview March 14, 1964.

7. Cash, *op. cit.*, III, 8.

8. Reminiscences of Roger West, Daytona Beach attorney and former member of the Sholtz law firm. Interview February 27, 1964.

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child born of this union, but Carolyn and Lois were adopted, and a fourth child, an orphan boy, lived with the family, although he was never legally adopted.

Sholtz was an energetic man and very active in civic affairs. He helped organize the Daytona Beach Rotary Club, served two years as president of the Daytona Beach Chamber of Commerce, and for two years was president of the East Coast Chamber of Commerce. In 1927, he became president of the Florida State Chamber of Commerce. It was partly because of his experience meeting Floridians in all walks of life throughout the state that Sholtz concluded that he could be elected governor.

He announced for the Democratic nomination for governor in 1932, against two former Florida governors, Cary A. Hardee and John W. Martin. Stafford Caldwell, Charles M. Durrance, Arthur Gomez, Thomas S. Hart, and J. Tom Watson were also gubernatorial candidates in the first primary. Durrance, a member of an old Florida family, had graduated from Stetson University and the University of Virginia Law School. Caldwell, a Baptist, had served as attorney for the Florida East Coast Railway and other Flagler interests.⁹ Almost all of Sholtz' opponents possessed the traditional qualities necessary for victory in Southern politics, which Sholtz lacked. How could this upstart Yankee from Brooklyn who did not deny a Jewish ancestry, in an era when Hitler's anti-semitism was spilling over into Florida, seriously hope to become governor of Florida? Sholtz was vigorously opposed by the strong political organization in his own county headed by Francis Whitehair. Apparently few in the state seriously expected David Sholtz to win the nomination except the ever-optimistic Sholtz. The "experts" freely predicted that former Governors Martin and Hardee would capture the majority vote and oppose each other in the runoff.¹⁰

The political prognosticators, however, were failing to take into account either the Sholtz personality or the Florida scene during the depression. The economic crisis which began in Florida after the "boom bubble" burst in 1926, had worsened by the close of Governor Doyle Carlton's administration. The state government was in debt, a violation of the Florida constitution, and

9. Dovell, *op. cit.*, II, 802.

10. *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, March 25, 1932.

more than 150 Florida cities and towns were in default on their bond obligations. St. Petersburg announced a tuition charge in her public schools and was imploring childless citizens to pay tuition for poor children. Vast suburban developments stood as monuments of men's folly in the land boom, during which most Florida municipalities had expanded their debts and city limits too rapidly. Wages were low and hours were long. The *Miami Herald* want-ads advertised for women to iron in a laundry for one dollar for a nine-hour day. Jobs were offered to men and boys that paid board and lodging and a dollar a week. On the outskirts of Miami stood a large hotel, beautiful in design, erected at a cost of millions to house winter guests. It was not quite completed when the boom collapsed. During the depression it became a chicken farm, with incubators and coops in what was supposed to have been luxurious bedrooms.¹¹ Similar conditions existed all over Florida. Aside from the inadequate winter tourist trade, Florida's economy was at a very low ebb, and Federal money was not yet available for relief or public works. The election of 1932 must, of necessity, be viewed against this background of economic crisis.

In the first, Cary Hardee campaigned on his record as governor from 1921 to 1925, but the slogans of Coolidge prosperity seemed somewhat out of key by 1932. Former Governor Martin, who took credit for paving most of Florida's roads, promised that if elected for a second term he would guarantee that everyone would have "a dollar in his pocket and a smile on his face."¹² Martin received 66,940 votes in the first primary, which surprised no one. The Democratic leadership, however, had no logical explanation for the popularity of David Sholtz, who was in second place with 55,406 votes.¹³

Sholtz campaigners recall how he had "beat the bushes" for votes, stumping the state from end to end and speaking in every county. His tailor says that Sholtz lost so much weight during the campaign that his trousers had to be altered almost every time they came in for cleaning.¹⁴ Sholtz received a strong en-

11. B. Bliven, "Warmth for Sale," *New Republic*, LXXVIII (March 7, 1934), 98-100.

12. Dovell, *op. cit.*, II, 802.

13. Allen Morris, *The Florida Handbook, 1963-1964* (Tallahassee, 1964), 191.

14. Pollitz interview.

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dorsement from his home town newspaper, the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, and its editor, Herbert Davidson, even went to Tampa to help win the support of the *Tampa Tribune* for Sholtz.¹⁵

The second primary was one of the most bitter in Florida's political history. Martin, recognizing the strength of his antagonist, turned Sholtz' alleged Jewish ancestry into a major issue in the campaign. Sholtz was in fact an active member of St .Mary's Episcopal Church in Daytona Beach, but Martin secured sworn depositions from Germany trying to prove Sholtz' Jewish ancestry. Sholtz tried to ignore this smear type of campaign and refused to be angered by it. A Sholtz worker, campaigning in West Florida defined an Episcopalian as "something midway between a Methodist and a Baptist." Sholtz himself talked about the serious economic and educational issues facing Florida, smiling and shaking hands all the time. People liked his friendly, easy-going manner, and believed him to be sincere. Sholtz discussed the depression crisis in detail, and promised that if elected there would be jobs for the hungry and unemployed, and that the closed schools would be opened for a full nine-month term each year. There would be free textboks for everyone and tax millage reductions for small homeowners.¹⁶

Campaign contributions were slow in coming in and money was hard to come by in depression Florida. Jack Bird, who campaigned with Sholtz, remembers how they walked up and down Beach Street in Daytona begging for money to mail out a few campaign letters. "Unable to advertise on the radio because he couldn't get the money," Bird recalls, "we learned about Mayor Curley's success with loudspeaker attachments on trucks. We traveled from place to place and spoke to the people. If loudspeakers would work in Boston, why wouldn't they work in Florida? Whenever we had a potential audience of ten people," Bird said, "I would stop the truck. Then Dave would begin speaking about free school books, real pay for teachers, and jobs for the unemployed. Then fifty to a hundred people would gather. Dave would ask them to sign a little pledge card to support him, and they usually signed it. Yes sir, Dave Sholtz defeated the biggest

15. Interview with Herbert Davidson, editor of the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, April 15, 1964.

16. Dovell, *op. cit.*, II, 802.

machine in the history of the state of Florida. On election eve the gamblers placed odds at two hundred to one.”¹⁷

When the second-primary ballots were counted, Sholtz had received the Democratic nomination for governor. Political analysts were surprised, as were many people in Daytona Beach and Sholtz' political opponents throughout Florida. This had been the first try for state office by Sholtz, and he had received the largest majority ever recorded for a candidate in the history of the state.¹⁸ In the general election Sholtz defeated W. J. Howey, the Republican candidate, by a vote of 186,270 to 93,323. It was a practice of Florida Republicans to vote in the Democratic primary and then switch back to the Republican ticket in the general election in November. Republican voters in 1932 represented 33.4 per cent of the total vote cast in the governor's race.¹⁹

In his first message to the legislature, Governor Sholtz praised Franklin Roosevelt as a great national leader: “President Roosevelt has boldly shown the way to the nation and Congress has worked with him for the solution of national problems. I can only ask that you, within all Constitutional grounds, work with me in the solution of our state problem.”²⁰ The governor recommended a reduction in the cost of license tags to “a reasonable tax such as \$5.00;” a conservation department for the state; and “an intelligent, constructive, and discriminating approach to a balanced budget.” To secure the funds so that teachers could be paid in cash instead of script, Sholtz proposed that the income from motor vehicle license tags, the one mill school tax allowed by the constitution and the state's share from pari-mutuel betting at the race tracks be diverted to the school fund. State school funds should be earmarked, he insisted, for teacher salaries and for free school books.²¹

The governor won his greatest battle with the Florida legislature on the issue of free school books. The powerful publishers

17. *Daytona Beach News Journal*, April 30, 1932. Also recollections of Jack Bird and Henry Pollitz who were active during the campaign on behalf of Sholtz. Bird, director of the state road camps during the Sholtz administration, presently resides in Volusia County and was interviewed April 2, 1964.

18. Cash, *op. cit.*, III, 8.

19. Morris, *op. cit.*, 198.

20. *Message of David Sholtz to the Florida Legislature*, Session of 1933 (Tallahassee, 1933), 1.

21. *Ibid.*, 3.

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constituted a formidable lobby against the bill. They entertained many members of the legislature and labeled the Sholtz proposal "socialistic." Sholtz met their challenge by getting to know the legislators, talking to them about his plans for Florida, and impressing them with his sincerity. He even made peace with the political powers in Volusia County, which caused a reaction among some of his supporters in East Volusia who opposed any kind of "compromise." They felt Sholtz had failed them when he had not put the "courthouse ring" behind bars as many claimed he had promised to do.²² But, the legislature approved the governor's program of free textbooks, and he felt that he had won a major victory.

The governor was also concerned about the state road camps, claiming that some "Floridians took better care of their cattle than the state took care of the inmates of these camps." He insisted upon buildings with plumbing and hot water which were "suitable for human habitation in the twentieth century," He ordered investigation of alleged mistreatment of prisoners, arguing that "they too were human beings."²³

Governor Sholtz enjoyed the respect of President Roosevelt and was proud of their close personal friendship and association. He was delighted to ride in an open car with the president in a parade held in Jacksonville. This friendship with the administration certainly did nothing to interfere with the flow of Federal funds into Florida during New Deal days.

In a radio broadcast commemorating his second anniversary in office, Governor Sholtz delivered a fireside address in which he related his achievements to date: "With reference to the financial affairs of the state, I want to call your attention to the fact that at the beginning of my administration, July 1, 1933, there was a deficit of \$2,124,000 in state revenue. At the end of the fiscal year, June 30, 1934, the state budget was balanced and the deficit had been changed into a surplus of \$591,000, a net gain in the financial position of the state of \$2,715,000. Not only that, but we paid off more than \$400,000 of past due obligations which were inherited by this administration." Regarding education, he pointed out that "teachers now receive their

22. W. J. Gardiner recollections.

23. Jack Bird recollections.

checks promptly," and every dollar allotted for teacher's salaries was being used for that purpose. He took credit for having "established" and maintained "a fine relationship with the National Administration." Outlining his future plans to his radio listeners, the governor recommended the creation of a state highway patrol system and the development of a state highway safety program. He also strongly urged that Floridians develop friendly relations with the Latin American countries to the south, pointing out their proximity to the state.²⁴

Governor Sholtz regretted that the state could not provide jobs for all who deserved them, but the government could not afford, he said, to carry the entire burden. "I have followed the policies advocated by our President," he observed, "of giving employment to the greatest extent possible. It would constitute bad faith with the Federal Government, which has expended more than fifty million dollars in this state for relief without one dollar of matching funds by the State, not to do our part in giving maximum employment."

Governor Sholtz insisted in 1935, that the state was on the road to economic recovery.²⁵ The Florida and national press agreed that the economic outlook was brighter. O. G. Villard, writing in the *Nation*, March 13, 1935, observed: "If one were to judge Florida by the appearance of Miami one would have to say that the depression is over in this state. The streets are thronged with the tourists the city must have in order to live; the nightclubs flourish; there is building everywhere. The F. E. R. A. (Federal Emergency Relief Administration) reports only 4,000 cases on the relief rolls, as against a peak of 16,000 in 1932."²⁶ On March 9, 1935, *Business Week* announced a Florida comeback, but insisted that it was not a boom.²⁷

In his final report as governor, delivered at the inaugural ceremonies for newly elected Fred Cone on January 5, 1937, Sholtz summarized his achievements. He admitted with candor that he had "suffered some disillusionments. Experience has

24. *Radio Address by Governor David Sholtz on the Second Anniversary of His Inauguration*, January 3, 1935 (Tallahassee, 1935), 2.

25. *Ibid.*, 6.

26. O. G. Villard, "Florida Flamboyant," *Nation* (March 13, 1935), CXL, 295.

27. "Florida Comeback; Not Boom," *Business Week* (March 9, 1935), 16.

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proven that one's highest ideals oftentimes are not possible of attainment and of complete realization. There is quite a different perspective from the inside than there is from the outside looking in. Sometimes, it becomes advisable in the common interests and the common good to substitute the practical, at least for the time being, for the idealistic, and secure half a loaf of advantage and betterment than no loaf at all." ²⁸

The governor was proud of the Citrus Commission and Florida Park Service that had been established during his administration, and of the laws extending aid to the needy aged and to the blind. A comprehensive Workman's Compensation Act had been enacted into law, as well as legislation setting up a state welfare board. The state's budget had been balanced and \$2,000,000 in past due bills, inherited from the previous administration, were paid. State appropriations for public schools were increased by more than \$6,000,000 a year; free textbooks were available; the cost of auto tags was reduced \$2,000,000 a year; and state millage was lowered from six and five-eighths to two and one-half mills, the lowest in Florida history. All of this, Sholtz pointed out, had been accomplished without a sales tax, income tax, or a nuisance tax of any kind, and the \$5,000 homestead exemption had not been changed. "Throughout," Sholtz concluded, "I have but followed our President's wise example which in his own words was 'substituting food for words, work for idleness, hope for despair.'" ²⁹ Truly, David Sholtz will be remembered as the New Deal Governor of Florida and many of the achievements of his administration remain today.

Governor Sholtz made enemies. In this regard, his friends point out, he was no different than other Florida chief executives. He was disliked for a variety of reasons. Those individuals who knew him best say that there just were not enough jobs to go around. Each day a line, sometimes a full block long, formed in front of the Capital where the governor had his office. The unemployed had signed a pledge to support Sholtz, many believing that he in turn was promising each individual a job. He could not put them all on the state payroll and there were

28. "Final Report of Governor David Sholtz Delivered at Inaugural Ceremonies, January 5, 1937" (Tallahassee: 1937), 4.

29. *Ibid.*

not enough Federal funds to provide jobs for everyone. As a result, some of the voters were disappointed. Mrs. Cliff Gordon, the governor's secretary for many years, including those in Tallahassee, remembers him as "one of the greatest governors Florida ever had. He was a fine man, a good-hearted man, who wanted to help his fellow man. There was nothing really selfish about Dave Sholtz."³⁰

Sholtz never really retired from public life. His wife, known to her friends as "Allie," wanted a country home, and he purchased one in North Carolina. She wanted to live on a farm, but the governor was not ready yet to leave Florida, and so they bought a second home in Miami. Sholtz ran once more for elective office, but he was defeated in 1938, by the popular New Deal Senator, Claude Pepper.³¹ Sholtz continued his many civic activities and wherever he traveled he was a super-salesman for Florida, its climate and resources.

Scholtz maintained his legal residence in Daytona Beach throughout his life, and returned there in 1952, to promote one of his favorite projects, a bridge across the inlet. Just one year later, a minor automobile accident followed by a heart attack ended his long and distinguished career. He was buried in Cedar Hill Cemetery in Daytona Beach.

30. Interview with Mrs. Cliff Gordon, Brooksville, March 2, 1964.

31. Morris, *op. cit.*, 200.