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THE FLORIDA PRESS AND THE DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY OF 1912

by GEORGE N. GREEN

TWO NORTHERN GUBERNATORIAL elections in 1910 brought to the fore potential presidential candidates for the Democratic Party. These two men were Judson Harmon, the mustachioed professional politician and governor of Ohio, and Woodrow Wilson, the austere history professor and president of Princeton University and the governor of New Jersey. Florida and Georgia were the only two southern states where Democratic primaries would determine who would receive the states' delegation vote at the Democratic national convention in July 1912. This was the first presidential primary in Florida's history.¹

As governor of New Jersey, Woodrow Wilson had rebuked the Democratic political bosses who had helped elect him in 1908, and he had energetically pushed progressive reforms in his state which had alarmed conservatives throughout the nation. Most of Florida's newspapers, overwhelmingly conservative, opposed Wilson's reforming program and veered away from his presidential boom. As a result, his prospects of capturing Florida's Democratic delegation declined under the fusilades of the state press in the winter and spring of 1912.

When the Pensacola Evening News learned that Wilson had once applied for a Carnegie retirement grant, it charged that these pensions were being financed by "Andrew Carnegie's gold," the fruit of Republican tariff protection. The paper described it as "gold gathered in the blood and tears of the Homestead strike, when children starved, women wept, and workmen were shot to death on their doorsteps."² The Carnegie grant matter was men-

1. Arthur S. Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1945), 38, 55, 308. See also *Laws of Florida* (1901), 160-65. The presidential primary law of 1901 was apparently interpreted as being optional and was ignored for a decade. In 1911 a joint committee of the Florida legislature recommended that the state's primary laws be thoroughly examined and the following year the Democratic state committee provided for a presidential preference primary. This primary became mandatory in 1913. See *Laws of Florida* (1913), 254.
2. *Pensacola Evening News*, January 16, 1912, quoted in Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 91.

tioned several times during the pre-convention campaign, although little notice was taken of the fact that at the time he applied for the grant Wilson was an unemployed professor without visible means of support and without any clear political future.³

Wilson admitted voting the "Gold" Democratic ticket in 1896, as the only alternative between William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley, but he insisted that he had faithfully supported the regular Democratic ticket ever since. The *Pensacola Evening News* printed a letter from one of the governor's political enemies in New Jersey, claiming that Wilson had not even bothered to vote in 1908. The *News* added its own vitriolic opinions on the subject, and ignored Wilson's written denials. Finally in March 1912, Wilson was moved to comment to Frank Mayes, editor of the *Pensacola Journal*, the city's other newspaper, on the extraordinary persistence of long-lived lies.⁴ The charges were finally refuted when seven members of the election board of Wilson's New Jersey ward sent an affidavit to the *News*, testifying that the governor had voted in 1908.⁵ This affidavit, however, did not restrain the anti-Wilson papers in Florida from printing "revelations" that the governor had rarely, if ever, voted the Democratic ticket.⁶

Despite the opposition of all but seventeen Florida papers, Wilson's Florida campaign was from the beginning a strong movement. United States Senator Nathan P. Bryan, together with several other prominent Floridians, endorsed Wilson. These Democrats included W. P. Watson, labor leader and member of the state democratic executive committee from Orlando; Secretary of State H. Clay Crawford of Tallahassee; J. F. C. Griggs, a lawyer from Appalachicola; and Dr. John Stagg, a Presbyterian minister from Orlando, who claimed that Wilson was chosen by God for the deliverance of the American people.⁷ Several small town newspapers also announced their support for Wilson.

Woodrow Wilson clubs were organized in Jacksonville, Pensacola, Miami, St. Augustine, and Tampa. Students at the Uni-

3. Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 90.

4. Mayes was editor of the *Pensacola Journal*, the leading pro-Wilson paper in Florida.

5. Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 98-99.

6. See, for example, the Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly True Democrat*, March 12, 1912, and the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 6, 1912.

7. Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 308-09.

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versity of Florida organized one of the first chapters of the Woodrow Wilson League of College Men. The clubs were designed to raise funds and sponsor rallies, but since they functioned in only a few cities, they were unable to exert much real effect on the outcome of the primary.⁸

Two nationally prominent Democrats stumped the state for Wilson. Dudley Field Malone, city attorney of New York and famous trial lawyer, spoke at the Hillsborough County Courthouse, February 23, 1912, and outlined Wilson's political philosophy. Branding the Republicans as long-time pawns of the moneyed interests, he insisted that Wilson was free of entanglements with the old Democratic party bosses. He had once spurned a gift of \$1,500 for Princeton University, Mr. Malone recalled, because it had been proffered by someone who wanted to further certain non-democratic ideas. The Tampa audience, according to a local news account, responded cordially to Malone's speech.⁹

A crucial factor affecting the outcome of the primary was the intervention of William Jennings Bryan, the Nebraskan who had thrice received the Democratic nomination but who had carried his party down to defeat on each occasion. Bryan in the spring of 1912 was not yet committed to any candidate, and he insisted that he was neutral. It was believed, however, that he favored a progressive. If so, this would eliminate all potential candidates except Wilson and himself. For several months Bryan had been receiving letters from various parts of the country warning him that the other candidates might combine to defeat Woodrow Wilson. Such warnings might be construed as attempts to sway the avowedly neutral Bryan into a pro-Wilson position. For instance, Colonel Edward House, leader of the Wilson forces in Texas, informed Bryan in December 1911, that financier J. P. Morgan was violently opposed to Wilson, and that ultra-conservative William Randolph Hearst seemed to be favoring conservative Alabama Congressman Oscar Underwood.¹⁰ Bryan became obsessed with the idea that Oscar Underwood was "a reactionary lackey of Wall

8. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, January 12, 17 and February 28, 1912; Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 345-46.

9. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 29, 1912.

10. William Jennings Bryan and Mary Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (Philadelphia, 1925), 159; M. R. Werner, *Bryan* (New York, 1929), 168-69.

Street" and therefore had to be crushed in his apparent darkhorse bid for the Democratic nomination. Bryan was determined to hold the whip hand in the Florida primary, the first that pitted the progressive Wilson against Congressman Underwood. His objective was to stymie Underwood at all costs, but at the same time he did not want to endorse Wilson.

Bryan acted hastily in his efforts to achieve these goals. He did not seem to realize the extent to which his personal prestige was being damaged in the South because of his verbal assaults on Underwood, whose leadership and integrity were widely hailed in Florida. Most Florida newspapers deeply resented Bryan's attacks.¹¹ The conservative press reminded its readers that the only time the Democrats had elected a president since Bryan became politically active was in 1892 when Bryan opposed the party's nominee.¹² The conservatives openly wondered, with some justification, how Bryan, a delegate to the national convention, could insist that primaries should instruct their delegation and yet, at the same time, proclaim that he would vote for neither Harmon nor Underwood no matter who won the Nebraska primary.¹³

Wilson's Florida managers may have realized that, given the power of the state's press and politicians, Bryan's support was of questionable value, but there was little they could do about it. How does one refuse the support of the titular head of the party if he proposes to campaign for one's candidate? How could the champions of a progressive aspirant for the presidency afford to rebuke the man who had led the liberal wing of the party for almost a generation?

Wilson himself appeared on the Florida scene shortly before Bryan. He spoke to a packed house at the Duval Theater in Jacksonville on April 18, 1912. Some 2,200 persons applauded his speech, which endorsed a low tariff, the popular primary, and the blocking of special privilege legislation.¹⁴ But this was his only Florida appearance; he continued his Georgia speaking tour the next day. He did not speak again in the state before the primary.

11. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 27, 1912; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 27, 1912.

12. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 15, 1912.

13. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, quoted in *ibid.*, March 29, 1912.

14. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 19, 1912.

Bryan meanwhile arrived at Jacksonville on April 26, where he charged that both Underwood and Harmon were reactionaries, which he defined as persons wanting to see America under the oppressive yoke of Wall Street. At Tampa and Orlando Bryan labeled Underwood the "candidate of Wall Street."¹⁵ His effect on the Florida primary, however, judging from his reception in the press and the outcome of the voting, was somewhat negative. His rash and extravagant accusations probably cost Wilson more votes than were gained.¹⁶

In the winter of 1911-1912, before the primary campaign was underway, it appeared that Governor Judson Harmon would be Wilson's major Florida opponent. He opposed virtually every facet of progressivism: popular election of senators, shorter working hours for women, corrupt practices legislation, regulation of public utility corporations, and even the enforcement of current corporation taxes. Harmon's idea of reform was to slash federal spending to the point where it would cost no more than a dollar per person to support the federal government.¹⁷

Albert W. Gilchrist, outgoing governor of Florida, endorsed Harmon early in February 1912. The governor strenuously supported the convict lease system which he considered humanitarian, and his political machine had been identified with eastern finance capital and reactionary politics. Gilchrist did not relish having to make a specific political commitment, but as governor he could hardly avoid endorsing someone for president during the campaign. He had no particular praise for Harmon, and claimed that he was seeking only the most available candidate. He believed, or said he believed, that Harmon was the only Democratic candidate who could carry Ohio and New York, and that anyone who carried Ohio automatically swept New Jersey, Connecticut, and Delaware.¹⁸

15. *Ibid.*, April 27, 1912.

16. Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 312.

17. "Judson Harmon-His Record and His Views," *Outlook*, C (January 27, 1912), 175-83; Burton J. Hendrick, "Judson Harmon: Progressive Candidate," *McClure's Magazine*, XXXVIII (April 1912), 619-24.

18. Sister Mary E. Staid, "Albert Waller Gilchrist, Florida's Middle of the Road Governor" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1950), 31, 34, 36, 64, 81, 84, 87, 98; Tallahassee *Weekly True Democrat*, February 9, 1912; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 477.

Florida's conservative press, in the meantime, had lined up behind Governor Harmon's candidacy. The *Key West Journal*, *Arcadia Enterprise*, *Clay County Times*, *Sanford Herald*, and *Tampa Morning Tribune* announced that they were setting aside sentimental preference for Wilson, a Southerner, and would support the man who had the best chance of winning.¹⁹ At the time, however, Woodrow Wilson was clearly the strongest Democratic candidate so far as the whole country was concerned.

The *Tampa Morning Tribune* announced that it would support Harmon because Florida was not being flooded with his literature. The paper claimed that this lack of propaganda indicated that Harmon's candidacy was a case of "the honor seeking the man" rather than the machine-tainted opposite.²⁰ The Tampa paper never mentioned this reason again; perhaps the editors came to regard it as too banal. The *Tallahassee Weekly True Democrat* printed the endorsement of Governor Harmon by Samuel Pasco, former United States Senator from Florida and former Grand High Priest of the Royal Arch Masons. Senator Pasco claimed that Harmon was both progressive and conservative and was, therefore, the man to nominate.²¹ Whether the senator and the Tallahassee paper really believed that anyone could be both conservative and progressive is debatable; Harmon's views were certainly not progressive. The editor of the *True Democrat* described Harmon as "a conservative of conservatives."²² A few days later, however, this editor wrote that he favored Harmon because he was progressive!²³ Perhaps Wilson's popularity in Florida had been called to his attention.

The *Key West Citizen* claimed that Harmon was favored by most Floridians, including the leading statesmen and citizens, although there is no evidence to warrant such an assumption.²⁴ In the extant Florida papers there are no pro-Harmon letters to the editor, no accounts of Harmon clubs, and no announcements

19. These papers are quoted in the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 14, 17, 1912; *Tallahassee Weekly True Democrat*, March 8, 1912.

20. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, quoted in *Tallahassee Weekly True Democrat*, February 9, 1912.

21. *Tallahassee Weekly True Democrat*, February 23, 1912.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, March 8, 1912.

24. *Key West Citizen*, quoted in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 19, 1912.

of Harmon support from anyone except newspaper editors and a few politicians.

The *Florida Times-Union* in Jacksonville insisted that the nation's greatest need, beside tariff reform, was rigid and impartial enforcement of the law as written. The *Times-Union* believed that Harmon had proved himself on this issue when, as attorney general under President Cleveland in the 1890s, he had been ordered by the president to bypass an indictment aimed at a cabinet member. Harmon, said the *Florida Times-Union*, had courageously refused to obey.²⁵ Actually, Harmon had not refused to obey, he had merely withdrawn from the case, apparently without even protesting.²⁶

The *Tampa Morning Tribune* was impressed with Harmon's fiscal ideas, especially his advocacy of a curtailment of administrative duties so as to lower the cost of government to a dollar per person per year. Apparently the government during the Taft administration was costing eleven dollars per head.²⁷ Historians, however, have never classified Taft as a free-wheeling spender plagued by a wasteful bureaucracy. In any case, Harmon lacked qualifications for claiming politico-financial wizardry. His plan for better tax administration had been defeated by his own party in Ohio, and Harmon had not even fought for it.²⁸

During March the conservative press in Florida continuously denied the charges that it planned to transfer allegiance from Harmon to Oscar Underwood. Underwood's Congressional Ways and Means Committee had decisive influence in framing money bills and in selecting the members of other important House committees. His successful leadership from this post in 1911, notably his role in drafting a tariff reform bill, easily thrust him into a favorite-son movement in the state of Alabama.

Senator John Bankhead of Alabama had assumed leadership of the Underwood campaign by October 1911. He mass produced collections of articles containing endorsements of Underwood, tariff information, and descriptions of Underwood's activities in

25. Jacksonville Florida Times-Union, quoted in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 20, 1912.

26. Dumas Malone (ed.), *Dictionary of American Biography*, 21 vols. (New York, 1932), VIII, 277.

27. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 21, 1912.

28. "Governor Harmon and his Legislature," *World's Work*, XXII (July 1911), 145-53.

Congress. Newspapers circulating these collections were granted financial compensation, ranging from ten dollars to papers having a circulation of less than a 1,000 to fifteen dollars to papers with a circulation of more than 1,500. In February 1912, Bankhead insisted that papers publishing supplementary articles were not committing themselves to Underwood's cause. Wilson's manager argued, however, that the transactions constituted unethical journalism. Ethical or not, the articles were a master stroke. Hundreds of Florida farmers, who doted on their country weeklies, learned about Oscar Underwood for the first time.²⁹

The *Tampa Morning Tribune* illustrates the tortured path followed by the conservative Florida press as it switched allegiance from Harmon to Underwood. In February, for instance, the *Tribune* was clearly in the Harmon camp. Its editorial page was crowded with homilies and political slogans: "Harmon for Harmony," "Oscar Underwood seems to be everybody's second choice for the nomination-that is to say, everybody outside of Alabama," and "Wilson is determined that the Democratic party shall be neither Bryanized nor Ryanized, but he can't avoid its being Harmonized."³⁰ Then suddenly in March the *Tribune* began devoting much space to the activities of Underwood in Congress, and it endorsed him for vice-president. At the same time it also noted, quite inaccurately, considering later events, that Harmon's strength was increasing every day.³¹ The *Tribune* denied the charges made by Wilson's supporters that eastern financiers were backing Underwood in Florida for the express purpose of blocking Wilson's nomination.³² The *Tribune* did not say how Underwood's campaign was being financed, although earlier, Bankhead had said that Underwood clubs in Alabama were providing the necessary cash. Later, it was discovered that financier Thomas

29. Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 360-61. The *Daytona Gazette-News*, which had not discussed anything as remote from Daytona Beach as the presidency all year, on March 16, 1912, suddenly blanketed four of its ten pages with Underwood propaganda. As seemed to be the custom then in Florida papers, national political issues were largely avoided. Endorsements favored Underwood because he was a "real man" or "faithful in his friendships."

30. These teachings appeared in the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 16, 17, 18, 1912.

31. *Ibid.*, March 2, 7, 11, 1912.

32. *Ibid.*, March 20, 1912.

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Ryan had donated \$35,000 for Underwood's southern campaign.³³

Early in April, the *Tribune* reprinted an article from the *Florida Times-Union* which reported that someone in Wilson's Washington campaign headquarters had charged that Governor Harmon and Champ Clark, speaker of the House of Representatives and himself a leading contender for the nomination, would not be included on Florida's primary ballot. Almost buried in the article was the assertion that there was really no need to remove Harmon and Clark from the ballot; however, neither had campaigned in Florida and both knew they could not win in the state.³⁴ This last phrase was written in the past tense, and by the end of the article the *Tribune* had convinced itself that neither Harmon nor Clark were on the ballot, and that the man the paper had been endorsing for weeks as a sure winner suddenly had no chance of winning. Considering the serious nature of this accusation, and considering that the *Tribune* had scoffed at every other utterance from the Wilson men, it seems incredible that the newspaper would so readily believe, let alone endorse this charge, unless the *Tampa Tribune* already knew that the accusation was true. The next day, after Frank Mayes accused the Tampa paper of apostasy, the *Tribune* denied that it was deserting Harmon.³⁵ But on the following day, the Tampa paper printed the names of prospective delegates to the national convention who would vote not just for Harmon, but for either Harmon or Underwood. And on the bottom line of the editorial page, buried in the corner, was the announcement that Harmon's name would not appear on the ballot in Florida.³⁶

The next few days the *Tribune* indulged in general praise of Harmon, claiming, for instance, that he had refused to become a self-seeking partisan like Woodrow Wilson.³⁷ This support of Harmon, however, was buried under an avalanche of Underwood endorsements from the *Miami Herald*, *Summerfield Chronicle*,

33. Evans C. Johnson, "Oscar W. Underwood: the Development of a National Statesman, 1894-1915" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1953), 258-59.

34. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, quoted in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 2, 1912.

35. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 3, 1912.

36. *Ibid.*, April 4, 1912.

37. *Ibid.*, April 5, 1912.

Key West Journal, *Starke Telegraph*, *Live Oak Democrat*, and the *Pensacola News*. There was also the *Miami Herald's* explanation that the opposition to Wilson had never centered on one candidate, and the confession from the *Pensacola News* that Harmon had never had much strength in Florida.³⁸

Underwood and Wilson were the only contenders in the presidential primary after Senator Bankhead held a conference the first week of April with Will Price, chairman of the Florida Democratic executive committee. Price, without consulting the members of his committee, ordered Harmon's and Clark's names struck off the official party ballot. This action was not only presumptuous, but it was also a violation of the resolution of the state Democratic committee to print the names of all known Democratic presidential candidates on the ballot.³⁹

By early April the Underwood movement was well organized. Oscar Underwood clubs sprang up overnight, the rest of the conservative press leaped on the bandwagon, and Florida was inundated by political haranguers. Senator Bankhead and Congressman Tom Heflin of Alabama joined Governor Gilchrist and Florida politicians and newspaper editors in stumping the state for Underwood.⁴⁰

United States Senator Duncan U. Fletcher, former mayor of Jacksonville, was probably the most prominent Floridian refusing to take part in the campaign. Fletcher was presiding over the Southern Commercial Congress in Chattanooga during most of April, and he seemed reluctant to participate in the Florida primary. The senator made no effort, however, to restrain his law partner, James Dodge of Jacksonville, from campaigning for Underwood. In a letter to Dodge, Senator Bankhead wrote from Washington: "We cannot afford to lose Florida, so keep the boys whooped up and let us know from time to time how things are going."⁴¹ Then, just three days before election day, Fletcher's Washington office issued a very brief statement describing Under-

38. *Ibid.*, April 4-22, 1912.

39. *Pensacola Journal*, April 12, 25, 1912, quoted in Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 366-77; Johnson, "Oscar W. Underwood: the Development of a National Statesman, 1894-1915," 286-87.

40. Link, "The South and the Democratic Campaign of 1912," 311-12.

41. John Bankhead to James Dodge, Bankhead Papers, 1912, State Archives, Montgomery, Alabama.

wood as a statesman and a patriot and announcing the senator's support of his candidacy.⁴²

Florida's conservative press charged that Wilson "smelled" of socialism, and claimed that he was anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, anti-Jeffersonian, and anti-Jacksonian. He cared more for smooth speech than for party success these papers insisted, and they reiterated again the false charge that he had voted the Democratic ticket only once in his lifetime. The initiative, referendum, and recall, which Wilson espoused, were bluntly described as "a retrogression toward Greek mobocracy," "a heresy on the constitution," and "traitorous."⁴³ Even the writings of Georgia's Tom Watson were quoted to show that Wilson in his early articles and books had slighted the South by failing to mention such outstanding men in its history as the Alamo martyr "Fanning" [*sic*].⁴⁴ Watson, according to a Tallahassee paper, hated Wilson because the latter had expressed sympathy for Booker T. Washington after that "black coon was caught at a white woman's bed room door and was deservedly beaten for it."⁴⁵ Some Florida papers claimed that Wilson had left the South as soon as he was able, probably feeling that the region was not good enough for him. Underwood was the only true Southern candidate.⁴⁶

With only two candidates now in the race, the campaign united conservative Floridians behind the "safe" candidate and urban progressives behind Wilson. Probably a great many of the agrarian progressives, the Populist remnants, could not accept the urban leadership of the Democratic progressive movement, as expressed in Wilson's academic phraseology. These men, political malcontents since the 1890s, were more easily led by rural demagogues, such as Tom Watson and Tom Heflin.⁴⁷ In any case, Underwood swept rural Florida, but lost Miami, Jacksonville,

42. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 27, 1912; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 27, 1912.

43. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 1, 1912; *Ocala Banner*, quoted in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 12, 1912; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly True Democrat*, April 2, 12, 1912.

44. Tallahassee *Weekly True Democrat*, April 23, 1912. The "Fanning" referred to by Watson was James W. Fannin and he was not among the Alamo martyrs.

45. *Ibid.*, April 26, 1912.

46. *Ibid.*; Jasper *News*, April 19, 26, 1912; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly True Democrat*, April 12, 26, 1912.

47. Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 477.

Pensacola, Daytona Beach, Ft. Lauderdale, and Panama City. He carried Orlando by only a handful of votes, and Hillsborough County, which in 1912 included both Tampa and St. Petersburg, by five votes. Underwood won the Florida primary by a vote of 28,343 to 20,482.⁴⁸

Another dichotomy in the voting occurs in regard to the press. In six of the nine counties that Wilson carried, he received the support of the local press. The press in seven other counties also endorsed him but this did not help him at the polls. Wilson had spoken only once in Florida during the campaign and the burden of his political activity fell upon the newspaper editors who supported him, notably the eloquent and fiery Frank Mayes. The only congressional district in which Wilson triumphed was the one in which Mayes and his *Pensacola Journal* were located. But over the rest of the state the conservative press held sway. By and large it seems that Florida's editors drummed up the "issues" in a futile attempt to block Wilson's road to the White House. The Florida delegates to the Democratic convention in Baltimore, half of whom were journalists, voted time after time for Underwood, but on the forty-fifth ballot it was their man who withdrew, throwing the Democratic nomination for president of the United States to Woodrow Wilson.

48. However, except for the final count, which may be found in the Charlotte, North Carolina *Daily Observer*, May 10, 1912, election returns are largely incomplete. See the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 3, 1912, and the *Pensacola Journal*, May 4, 1912.