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SIDNEY J. CATTS: THE ROAD TO POWER

by WAYNE FLYNT*

THE SOUTH PRODUCED a bumper crop of political demagogues between 1890 and 1920. This unparalleled but dubious array of luminaries included James E. Ferguson of Texas, Huey Long of Louisiana, James K. Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, Tom Heflin of Alabama, Tom Watson of Georgia, Cole Blease, "Cotton" Ed Smith, and Ben Tillman of South Carolina, as well as many others. These politicians broke the back of conservative Bourbonism with their emotional appeals to the religious and racial intolerance of the newly powerful masses of voters. Once in office they frequently championed social and economic reform such as the abolition of the convict lease system, restriction of child labor, ameliorative labor legislation, woman suffrage, shifting tax burdens to corporations, railroad regulation, expanded educational opportunities, and many other creative measures.

Florida escaped the demagogic politics of the era with the single exception of Sidney J. Catts, who served as governor from 1916 to 1920, but who remained one of the state's most powerful citizens until 1930. When one considers the total impact that Catts had on Florida politics it seems strange that he has been so thoroughly relegated to obscurity. William T. Cash, member of the state legislature under Catts and a man whose observations on the Florida Democratic party contain remarkable intuitive insight, considers the Catts' era to be a political watershed.¹ Before this time, from William D. Bloxham's first term as governor in 1881, until the end of the Napoleon B. Broward-Park Trammell era of reform in 1916, the dominant issue had been the extent of power and function

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1. William T. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida* (Tallahassee, 1936), 134.

of corporations and their political influence in Florida. The prosperity of the Catts era, however, directed the thrust of Florida politics to the highly controversial issues of Catholicism, prohibition, and clique politics.

Catts introduced a remarkable variety of changes to Florida politics. He was the only man in the state's history to marshal predominantly religious and moral issues to win the governorship; he was the only man between Reconstruction and Claude Kirk to defeat the Democratic party in Florida; he was the only successful candidate to bolt his political party and run as an independent; and he was the only gubernatorial candidate who stumped the state with twin revolvers prominently displayed. Never before had a Florida governor so thoroughly employed the spoils system, nor had so many public officeholders ever lived in such dread of being summarily ousted from their jobs. Never had a Florida governor faced a legislature which disliked him so thoroughly as was true of Catts, and there have been few Florida politicians who have experienced such a rapid political eclipse as he did.

Florida was cast in the mold of all the other one-party southern states. Without party cohesiveness, every man "looked out" for himself; Democratic primaries attracted a wide assortment of political novices who hoped that political gimmickry together with deadlock between experienced office seekers would propel them into public office. In such a milieu of personality politics, no one enjoyed a greater advantage than the colorful, bombastic Sidney J. Catts. Born on July 31, 1863, at the family plantation near Pleasant Hill, in Dallas County, Alabama, he attended Auburn University, Howard College at Marion, Alabama (now Samford University), and Cumberland Law School (Lebanon, Tennessee), though only the last of these awarded him a degree.² Attracted equally by preaching and law, he tried both in succession, then struck a balance between them in his political career. During the decades from the 1880s until 1910, he served as pastor of Baptist churches at Tuskegee, Fort Deposit, Sandy Ridge, and Mt. Willing, becoming a popular revivalist and a secondary power in Alabama Baptist

2. Sidney J. Catts to W. T. Cash, August 12, 1929, in Catts File, Florida State Library, Tallahassee.

convention politics.³ He married Alice May Campbell in 1886, and in 1903 he reported that children were the greatest riches in the world, and "we have a fine mess of them."⁴

Already Catts' career was characterized by his political involvements, religious bigotry, and violent temper. At the 1904 Baptist state convention, he spoke on "the Preacher and Politics."⁵ Apparently applying his own advice, he served as captain of the Macon Guards while pastor at Tuskegee.⁶ In 1903, while pastor of the Fort Deposit church, he ran for a congressional seat in the fifth district and lost to Thomas Heflin.

The racial environment of Alabama together with religious fundamentalism bequeathed Catts a rich heritage of demagogic appeals. While lecturing at the Bible Training School at Tuskegee Institute in 1900, Catts announced that he had been "struck with awful force by the cruelties of the Roman Catholic Church towards others when in her power." History was a kind of godly conspiracy to humble the Catholic church: the Protestant English had repulsed the Spanish Armada; Russia had defeated Napoleon and the French Catholics; "while in the new world every movement of Jehovah seems to be directed against the temporal power of the Pope, and for enlightenment and good government."⁷ Catts' prejudice was multi-racial, and he exposed black conspiracies with the same gleeful enthusiasm which he directed at Catholics. When two Boston pastors speaking at Tuskegee Institute advocated integrated schools, Catts proposed to "change his commentaries into works on military tactics-his pen and plow into a sword and . . . go down to Dallas and Lowndes [black belt counties] and organize the boys for war."⁸

His temper and his penchant for thoughtless reaction often made his ministerial career tempestuous. At the close of a vigorous sermon to his Fort Deposit congregation on a sultry summer day in 1904; he appealed for a mission offering. Quiet settled over the congregation as Catts wiped the perspiration from his neck and vigorously fanned himself with a palmetto

3. *Alabama Baptist*, August 27, 1902.

4. *Ibid.*, March 18, 1903.

5. *Alabama Baptist State Convention, Report for 1904*, 46.

6. *Alabama Baptist*, January 4, 1900.

7. Catts to editor, *ibid.*, February 1, 1900.

8. Catts to editor, *ibid.*, May 2, 1901.

leaf fan. Finally he announced, "I don't intend to stand here long and see you sitting like frogs waiting for it to rain. If I cannot have the support of my congregation, I shall offer my resignation." And to the dismay of the congregation, he did resign. He returned to Dallas County to farm and to preach, until he was "called" in 1911, to the First Baptist Church of DeFuniak Springs, Florida.⁹

Shortly after accepting this Florida post Catts resigned, apparently because of low salary, and entered the insurance business.¹⁰ His job took him into the small towns and hamlets of the state, and here he could view first hand the many forces which were altering Florida's political life. Casual observers might attribute the growth of religious intolerance to Catts, but it seems more probable that the rural and small town population were really sharing a common prejudice. Until about 1910 Florida had been more tolerant towards Catholics than many other southern states and had even elected a few to high public office. The changing religious climate in the early years of the twentieth century has been attributed to the influence of Tom Watson and his *Jeffersonian* newspaper which began a series of "exposes" on the "Roman Catholic hierarchy" in 1909.¹¹ Though Watson was a Georgian, his paper numbered many Florida subscribers, and excerpts were frequently reprinted in local newspapers. Secret societies such as the Patriotic Sons of America and the Guardians of Liberty began to spring up throughout the state, and their anti-Catholic bias clearly became a popular cause. The issue only awaited political exploitation.

The itinerant insurance salesman apparently decided to try his luck at Florida politics sometime in 1914, and he quietly began organizing his campaign support some two years before the 1916 Democratic primary.¹² When Catts declared his candidacy for governor in 1915, the announcement rated only small notice in the Florida newspapers. The leading candidates were Ion Farris, a Jacksonville progressive, and State Comptroller W. V. Knott of Tallahassee. Most of the so-called "courthouse ring"

9. *New York Times*, May 29, 1921.

10. John R. Deal, Jr., "Sidney Johnston Catts, Stormy Petrel of Florida Politics" (Masters' thesis, University of Florida, 1949), 16.

11. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 123.

12. *Lakeland Telegram*, quoted in *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, July 17, 1916.

Democrats favored these men. State Senator F. M. Hudson of Dade County, Catts, and the other minor candidates were generally ignored by the press. Knott was considered the leading candidate, and he conducted a restrained campaign, claiming even at the height of the race that his duties as comptroller required his presence in Tallahassee.¹³ His platform—which endorsed economy in government, equalization of tax laws, larger pensions for Civil War veterans, and improved roads—was bland and uninspiring. Throughout the campaign, Knott remained on the defensive against charges that his lax policies had caused a wave of state bank failures.

Several issues dominated the campaign and propelled Catts into the governor's office. Though submerged by his more emotional appeals, Catts employed older progressive rhetoric to rail against corporations and railroads which paid less than their fair share of taxes. He also endorsed better education, particularly vocational training.¹⁴ A second issue to capture the popular fancy was Catts' attack on T. R. Hodges, the state shell fish commissioner. The 1913 Florida legislature had passed an act regulating and taxing the state's shell and oyster fishermen. The latter had angrily ignored the act, and the legislature finally authorized \$15,000 to purchase a steamer, the *Roamer*, to patrol the gulf coast. So many fishermen had threatened the life of Commissioner Hodges, that he had ordered the ship armed with two one-pound cannons. They were never fired, even though one deputy was killed by a fisherman.¹⁵ Catts made Hodges the brunt of his attacks in the fishing villages along the coast, insisting that as governor he would have vetoed the legislature's appropriation to purchase the *Roamer*.¹⁶

A third event which worked to Catts' benefit was the passage of the Sturkie resolutions. Meeting on January 6, 1916, amidst a climate of increasing religious intolerance, the state Democratic executive committee passed two resolutions written by John M. Barrs, a prominent Jacksonville attorney, and intro-

13. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, May 4, 1916.

14. See account of a typical speech by Catts, *ibid.*, March 4, 1916. Cash altogether ignores the continuation of this older economic theme in Catts' 1916 campaign. See Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 123-33.

15. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 6, 1916.

16. *Ibid.*, March 4, 1916.

duced by R. B. Sturkie, committeeman from Pasco County. The Sturkie resolutions involved two highly controversial clauses: the fourth pledged the voter not to be influenced by any religious belief or sect with which a candidate was affiliated; the fifth pledged that the Democratic voter was not a member of any secret organization which attempted in any way to influence political action. The resolutions, adopted with only one dissenting vote, were not aimed specifically at Catts, even though he was not then considered a prime contender. However, they raised a storm of protest when made public. Spontaneous public rallies adopted scathing petitions to the state committee attacking the resolutions. County Democratic executive committees in Hillsborough, Brevard, and Gadsden counties were among those demanding repudiation of the resolutions, and the Florida State Federation of Labor, meeting in Tampa on February 2, 1916, called for the reconvening of the state executive committee and the repeal of the Sturkie resolutions.¹⁷ Conservative former Governor Albert W. Gilchrist and progressive incumbent Governor Park Trammell both declared that the resolves were discriminatory against certain candidates.

Florida newspapers sided with the state committee two or three to one, and warned that if the Sturkie resolutions were rescinded, religion would become the principle question in the gubernatorial primary. W. V. Knott blundered into an enthusiastic endorsement of the committee action, a move which ultimately helped defeat him.¹⁸ These belated efforts to save the resolutions collapsed in late February when state Chairman George P. Raney of Tampa bowed to strong pressure and summoned the state committee to reconsider its actions. When, in a heated session, the committee rescinded the resolutions by a twenty-six to fourteen vote, the Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union* predicted that Floridians could "now look for the nastiest, most abusive campaign that Florida has ever known, and it will probably be attended with loss of life."¹⁹ Some political analysts have concluded that Catts would not have been elected

17. *Ibid.*, January 27, 30; February 3, 6, 9, 22, 1916, for public protest meetings in Tampa, Leesburg, River Junction, Bushnell, Palmetto, and Lake Helen.

18. *Ibid.*, January 28, 1916.

19. *Ibid.*, February 25, 1916.

without the Sturkie resolutions.²⁰ The state committee action did appear, in light of the campaign being waged by Catts, to be aimed at him.

Aware of the latent religious prejudice in Florida, Catts fanned anti-Catholicism into one of the most divisive political issues to affect state politics until the ascendancy of racial arguments in the mid-twentieth century. The former minister was aided by fundamentalist revivalists such as the Reverend Billy Parker who demagogued their way across the state spreading the most outrageous tales and by the more subdued and "respectable" anti-Catholicism of responsible denominations and a number of religious newspapers.²¹ Fuller Warren, who served later as Florida governor, wrote that Catts "hanged the Pope to every oak tree in West Florida."²² The arguments of Catts and his cohorts were as ridiculous as they were sensational: Catholics planned an armed revolt to take over America and were storing arms and ammunition in the cellar of the Catholic "cathedral" at Tampa. In fact, there was no cathedral in Tampa, but that did not deter Catts. Anyone not of Catholic persuasion would be persecuted and tortured, according to the stories that spread throughout Florida. Catts attacked President Woodrow Wilson for appointing a Catholic as his secretary, and he defended the politically powerful and rabidly anti-Catholic *Guardians of Liberty*.²³

The issue threw Florida politics into a dither. The *Gainesville Sun* noted: "Never in the history of Florida has politics been worse mixed than at the present time. Personal friends hold aloof from discussing political candidates in many instances simply because religious prejudice has entered into the fitness of men for office and feeling is so tense that they realize it is useless to discuss the merits of candidates."²⁴ Although most Florida newspapers deplored the rising tide of political bigotry, the issue obviously had caught the imagination of state voters. Democratic-oriented newspapers began to publish exposes of the *Guardians of Liberty* to try to minimize its influence, but even

20. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 127.

21. For one illustration, see "Catholics and the Bible," *Florida Baptist Witness*, November 2, 1916.

22. Fuller Warren, *How to Win in Politics* (Tallahassee, 1949), 175.

23. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, March 4, 1916.

24. *Gainesville Sun*, quoted in *ibid.*, April 12, 1916.

Ion Farris, while condemning religious prejudice, hastened to point out that he was a Methodist.²⁵

Catts effectively sold his arguments to Florida voters in one of the most colorful races in the state's history. He was the first candidate to use an automobile to campaign in Florida. Most of his rivals seldom strayed from the towns on or near the railroad lines, but Catts used his Model T Ford to visit isolated hamlets which had never heard a gubernatorial candidate before. Because of alleged plans to assassinate him, Catts claimed that he had to speak "with both hands on my pistols, which were loaded in every chamber [and prominently displayed]. Often I would have to show them to men in the audience and tell them I would not hesitate to use them, before they would let me alone."²⁶

The Democratic primary on June 6, 1916, was probably the most confused in Florida's political history. The Bryan Primary law which governed the voting provided for first and second choice ballots in lieu of a runoff. Many citizens misunderstood the procedure and cast only first choice ballots; some election officials later insisted that they were not aware that second choice votes were supposed to be counted, and over 100 precincts reported returns without tallies of second choice votes. In other precincts second choice votes were tallied in a variety of ways. Knott and Catts led the race, and each charged the other with fraud. When it was announced that Catts was the winner with 33,429 votes to 33,169 for Knott, the latter went to court demanding a recount. Catts insisted that he would run in the general election no matter what the outcome of such legal moves. Following two months of complicated maneuvering by both sides, the Florida supreme court ruled on August 9 that Knott had won by a margin of twenty-one votes.

If the Sturkie resolutions had undermined Knott in the primary, the disputed recount completely demolished him in the November election. Newspapers which had opposed Catts in the June primary now endorsed him. The *Tampa Tribune* vehemently condemned the recount, and the Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union* warned the state Democratic executive committee

25. Jadtsonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 27, 1916.

26. *New York Times*, May 29, 1921.

against trying to force Florida Democrats to vote a straight party ballot in the November elections. The Sanford *Herald*, which had backed F. M. Hudson in the primary, now endorsed Catts, and stated flatly that he had won the Democratic primary.²⁷

There seemed little doubt that Florida voters had favored Catts for governor, since he had led Knott by a wide margin in first choice votes. While confusion reigned among Democrats, the Prohibition party met in late June and nominated Catts for governor. Then, on October 10, he consented to have his name certified as the Prohibitionist candidate in the general election.

Catts' political organization became an amalgamation of those who had supported him from the beginning and the party regulars who joined his organization after June. His primary victory had been engineered by a variety of political amateurs: J. V. Burke managed his campaign; W. W. Flournoy, a DeFuniak Springs attorney who handled his appeal to the supreme court; W. Bryan Mack of the Pensacola *News* provided liaison with the newspapers; and Van C. Swearingen, former mayor of Jacksonville, and Dr. W. H. Cox, a member of the state Democratic executive committee from Tampa, handled his efforts in West and South Florida. Jerry W. Carter, itinerant sewing machine salesman, first had heard Catts on the Chautaugua circuit, and he enthusiastically offered his own considerable skill among West Florida "crackers." Important new recruits began endorsing Catts after the June primary. Former State Senator J. S. Blitch of Williston had been a leader in the protest against the Sturkie resolutions, and he stumped the state for Catts.²⁸ James B. Hodges of Lake City, an attorney and one of the most adept politicians in Florida, had used his influence on behalf of Knott in the primary.²⁹ He was aware, however, of Catts' appeal and was attracted to him. Concluding that Catts had won the June primary, in August he offered his full assistance.³⁰ He collected funds, circulated petitions, led the pro-Catts minority on the

27. See Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 23, October 12, 1916.

28. *Ibid.*, January 29, November 2, 1916; Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 130.

29. J. B. Hodges to T. J. Appleyard, April 7, 1916, Box 13; Appleyard to Hodges, April 7, 1916, Box 13; W. V. Knott to Hodges, May 14, 1916, Box 12, James B. Hodges Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville. Hereinafter referred to as Hodges Papers.

30. Hodges to James B. Alexander, May 4, 1916, Box 12; Hodges to B. B. Johnson, August 26, 1916, Box 20, Hodges Papers.

state Democratic executive committee, spoke at innumerable rallies, and used his influence to neutralize Democratic office-holders in the general election.³¹

Knott had profited from the endorsement of most Florida newspapers and virtually all prominent Democratic officials, including United States Senator Duncan U. Fletcher and Governor Park Trammell. Knott charged that the Sturkie affair had been a "frameup" between Sturkie and Catts. According to him, Catts would not vote for Democratic Presidential nominee Woodrow Wilson. Knott also charged that Catts was saying in the rural areas that if he lost in November, he would march to Tallahassee with 10,000 citizens armed with rifles and take the governor's seat by force.³² A Knott lieutenant, addressing a rally in Brooksville, denounced Dr. W. H. Cox, Catts' manager in South Florida, as having been a Populist in the 1890s and a Socialist until 1912 when he had supported the Bull Moose ticket.³³

Catts redoubled his own efforts between June and November. He made seven trips across the state. With little money available, he would take up collections after an address in order to pay his car expenses to the next stop.³⁴ Crowds were enormous, and local newspaper reports called his rallies the largest ever held. His issues remained largely the same as in the primary. He attacked the Catholic church, which he alleged had provided the funds for the June recount; he claimed that a group of Catholics in Appalachicola had threatened to assassinate him. He attacked the declining morality of high school coeds who were trying to see "how low they could cut their dresses at the top and how high they could cut them at the bottom." He also advocated manual training schools. At every rally he blasted the party machine and the "Court of Supreme Contempt" which had "stolen" the Democratic primary from him.³⁵ Catts' political efforts were enormously successful; he swamped Knott by a vote of 39,000 to 30,000.

31. Lewis O'Bryan to Hodges, November 9, 1916, Box 13; Hodges to Hal W. Adams, September 21, 1916, Box 12; Hodges to W. H. Cox, October 25, 1916, Box 12; Hodges to A. W. Jackson, March 20, 1917, Box 13; J. R. Rogers to Hodges, October 10, 1916, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

32. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, August 7, 24, 1916.

33. *Ibid.*, November 6, 1916.

34. *New York Times*, May 29, 1921.

35. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, August 24, October 17, 1916.

The principle issues in the Democratic primary had been religion, the shell fish commissioner, and the Sturkie resolutions; in the general election the issue of clique politics and the questionable recount provided additional assets for Catts. But a full explanation of his triumph would have to include another factor, Catts' identification, with the common man. By his appeals against corporation rule and his endorsement of reform, he stirred the masses. Jerry Carter coined a phrase which a great many Floridians believed: "The crackers of Florida have only three friends left: God Almighty, Sears and Roebuck, and Sidney J. Catts."³⁶ In analyzing the election, the *Florida Baptist Witness* admitted that anti-Catholicism and the policies of the state executive committee had aided Catts, but it added: "Somehow the common people felt that Catts is one of them, and that he is interested in them."³⁷ Other contemporary observers noted the same phenomenon: Sidney J. Catts had reached the democratic masses, the little people, in a remarkable way.

The unusual governor's inauguration on January 2, 1917, was the first indication of the new Catts' style and program. For the first time a parade of cars replaced the buggies of earlier years, and the 5,000 persons who jammed Tallahassee witnessed the spectacle of fifty gaily decorated automobiles, including Catts' faithful Model T which carried a large sign proclaiming, "THIS IS THE CAR THAT GOT ME HERE."³⁸ As if to presage his later difficulties with the Florida legislature, the Democratic justices of the state supreme court refused to take their designated places in the parade until persuaded to do so by Catts' attorney, W. W. Flournoy.

In his inaugural address Catts claimed that his victory represented the triumph of "the everyday masses of cracker people" over political rings, corporations and railroads, the state press, Negro voters, the state judiciary, and the power of the Catholic hierarchy. He outlined his legislative philosophy in folksy terms for his listeners: no state funds for sectarian education, freedom of speech and press, no state appointments for any man "who owes his allegiance to a foreign national poten-

36. Interview with Jerry W. Carter, May 15, 1964, Tallahassee.

37. *Florida Baptist Witness*, June 29, 1916.

38. Warren, *How to Win in Politics*, 176.

tate or foreign ecclesiastical power"; prohibition of the "whiskey traffic"; rotation of public offices by "putting in new men as far as we can do so practically"; equalization of taxes so as to tax more heavily large private fortunes, corporations, and railroads; changes in the primary law; provisions for initiative, referendum, and recall; police inspection of all "closed" institutions such as convents and parochial schools; taxes on all church property other than churches and parsonages; creation of an industrial school for boys and girls where they could learn practical trades; and regulation of freight rates.³⁹ To conclude the day in the new style, the governor and his wife refused to attend the inaugural ball and excluded the traditional "punch" from the inaugural banquet.⁴⁰

The most obvious success for the program outlined by the governor was in filling state jobs. Catts' appointments are inter-related to his dismissal of state employees and his attempt to create his own political machine. The governor had the power to fill approximately 1,800 jobs with his appointments, and never before had a chief executive utilized this power as fully as Catts. He dismissed hundreds of office holders, many of whom were guilty of flagrant corruption, replacing them with his own political cronies. The sheriffs in Monroe, Citrus, Clay, and Duval counties were removed for tolerating prostitution, for drunkenness, and for "absence from the state." Dozens of local justices, county commissioners, tax collectors, and other functionaries were discharged. Investigations by J. Will Yon, state auditor, revealed widespread financial shortages among many county tax collectors. Catts even dismissed his own political allies where conditions warranted, and he frequently ignored the pragmatic advice of his lieutenants by removing powerful local politicians who were found guilty of malfeasance.⁴¹ Years later, a political observer who was a foe of Catts in the state legislature acknowledged that many of the dismissals were justifiable and that "there were grounds for complaint in nearly every case."⁴² Often

39. See inaugural text in Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, January 3, 1917.

40. *Christian Index*, quoted in *Alabama Baptist*, January 17, 1917.

41. Catts to Hodges, April 14, 1917, Box 13; Catts to J. W. Perry, April 14, 1917, Box 13; Hodges to Catts, November 14, 1917, Box 25, Hodges Papers.

42. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 132.

Catts reappointed suspended officials when investigation revealed that the charges lodged against them had been falacious.

Politics did become involved, however, in these dismissals. Catts' closest advisor, James B. Hodges of Lake City, used his newspaper to embarrass anti-Catts politicians for imbibing too freely.⁴³ Catts requested state appointees who were not in harmony with his administration to resign, and when resignations were not forthcoming, dismissals followed.⁴⁴ The most notable example of political removals was T. R. Hodges, state shell fish commissioner. Despite a pitiful letter from the commissioner to J. B. Hodges begging his help in saving his job, the governor fulfilled his campaign pledge and fired the commissioner.⁴⁵ Some discharged officials with political power persuaded the legislature to pass relief bills to continue paying their salaries. Although Catts lobbied to prevent such bills, they frequently passed.⁴⁶ The 1919 legislature alone passed acts to pay more than \$18,000 to reimburse a dozen fired officials.⁴⁷ One representative unsuccessfully proposed a constitutional amendment forbidding the governor from removing officeholders. Catts protested that opposition to his dismissals came primarily from Catholics, newspapers, the Democratic political ring, and corporations which had directed state affairs for more than thirty years.⁴⁸

Appointees to the vacancies created by these dismissals and by resignations came from the inner circle of Catts' loyalists who had engineered his election. The governor's closest advisor on patronage was James B. Hodges, who screened all applicants and evaluated their loyalty to Catts.⁴⁹ The governor leaned heavily on Hodges for political advice and gave him a

43. J. S. Smith to Hodges, June 29, 1917, Box 25, Hodges Papers. The Jacksonville *Free Press* had been established during the 1916 campaign as the official Catts' organ. Hodges assumed operation of the paper sometime in 1917, and operated it with the help of A. B. Cargile, editor of the Lake City *Florida Index* as an administration paper.

44. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 13, 15, 1917.

45. T. R. Hodges to Hodges, December 4, 1916, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

46. Hodges to Catts, February 24, 1917, Box 13; Catts to Hodges, April 3, 1917, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

47. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, September 1, 1919.

48. Undated pamphlet, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

49. Catts to Hodges, January 19, 1917, Box 13; Hodges to McQueen Chaires, January 11, 1917, Box 13; Hodges to Judge Otis R. Parker, January 15, 1917, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

relatively free hand on patronage in northeast Florida.⁵⁰ As reward for his loyalty and service, the governor funneled lucrative legal business to him including many pardons cases.⁵¹ He also appointed Hodges to the state board of control and the state plant board, a dual post which involved higher education and plant diseases.

Catts appointed J. V. Burke as his secretary. J. S. Blicht, a key engineer of the 1916 victory, was named state tax commissioner in 1917. Then when Burke resigned because of eye trouble, Blicht became the governor's secretary at an annual salary of \$3,000. In 1918 he was appointed superintendent of the state prison farm at Raiford. Catts named Jerry W. Carter as state hotel commissioner, but a long legal battle ensued before Carter finally assumed the office in 1919. Bryan Mack received the 3,000 a year post as secretary of the board of control, and Joe Earman, Palm Beach newspaper publisher, and W. W. Flournoy were named to the board. Despite the renomination of J. Clifford R. Foster as Florida adjutant general in the June 1916 Democratic primary, Catts refused to reappoint him, claiming that twelve years was long enough for any man to serve. Instead, he appointed his political ally, J. B. Christian, a Tallahassee watch repairman who had been a boyhood friend of Catts in Alabama. Catts renamed Attorney General Thomas F. West to the state supreme court, and offered the position of attorney general to Hodges. The latter declined, however, since he would have to stand for re-election to a full term in 1918.⁵² Van C. Swearingen, former mayor of Jacksonville, received the appointment, and he won a full term in the 1918 elections. Dr. W. H. Cox, manager of Catts' Tampa headquarters, was made state health officer, and his South Florida campaign secretary, C. T. Frecker, was appointed chairman of the state board of health. The governor also provided for his own family. K. R. Paderick, his son-in-law, became Duval County tax collector; his son, Sidney Catts, Jr., became the third man to fill the adjutant general post; and his daughter, Ruth, replaced Blicht as personal

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50. Catts to Hodges, January 4, 1918, Box 25; Catts to Hodges, September 14, 1917, Box 25, Hodges Papers.
 51. Hodges to Catts, February 10, 1917, Box 13; Catts to Hodges, September 30, 1918, Box 28; J. L. Kilby to Hodges, April 9, 1917, Box 13, Hodges Papers.
 52. Hodges to L. E. Roberson, September 3, 1917, Box 52, Hodges Papers.

secretary. Perusal of twenty-nine boards whose members were appointed by the executive reveals that over 100 were Catts' appointees. During the last year of Governor Park Trammell's administration, 1915-1916, only five members of state boards resigned, and none were suspended. In 1919-1920, while Catts was still "cleaning house," there were fourteen resignations and four suspensions.⁵³

A torrent of abuse was directed at Catts' nepotism and his politically inspired appointments. From a more detached perspective, the analysis is hardly as bleak as the governor's contemporary critics charged. When his political appointees were found to be incompetent or corrupt, Catts summarily dismissed them, as with state health officer W. H. Cox and Adjutant General J. B. Christian. Many of Catts' appointees performed admirably even as judged by the governor's opponents. The accomplishments of Joe Earman as chairman of the board of control and later of the board of health, were universally praised, as were those of Jerry Carter as state hotel inspector, and Blich as superintendent of the state penitentiary at Raiford. W. T. Cash, no friend of the governor criticized Catts' meddling among his appointees to the state road department, but admitted that "on the whole Governor Catts' appointments averaged up to those of other governors, and he introduced a number of men who have since become outstanding."⁵⁴

There were particularly dire predictions about Catts' meddling with the board of control which had charge of the University of Florida, Florida State College for Women, the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind, and Florida A. and M. College. In order to gain control of the board, Catts decided not to reappoint the very popular P. K. Yonge of Pensacola, who had served for many years as chairman, because the Knott faction would then have enjoyed a three to two margin over his own cohorts.⁵⁵ Yonge privately proposed that the incumbent board elect a new chairman before the new governor could act, but retiring member Frank E. Jennings dissuaded him with the

53. Compare board memberships listed in Florida, *Report Secretary of State, 1915-1916*, 11-19, *Report Secretary of State, 1919-1920*, 13-26.

54. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 133.

55. F. F. Bingham to P. K. Yonge, June 22, 1917, Box 4, P. K. Yonge Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History. Hereinafter referred to as Yonge Papers.

admonition that such a move would obviously be playing politics.⁵⁶ This advice may well have prevented radical purges of university administrators by Catts. Both Presidents A. A. Murphree of the University of Florida and Edward Conradi of Florida State College for Women feared the worst with Catts' election. Murphree pleaded in private correspondence, "Ye Gods! Save the State from this horrible political autocracy."⁵⁷ The fears were unfounded, for after Catts obtained the appointment of Bryan Mack as secretary, Earman as chairman, and Hodges, H. J. Brett of DeFuniak Springs, and John B. Sutton of Tampa, as members of the board, he seldom interfered. Earman commented privately that Catts instructed his new appointees to eliminate politics from the board, and Earman guaranteed that this policy would be followed.⁵⁸ Correspondence of board members during the Catts' administration reveals little interference by the governor in their affairs. Governor Catts did honor an election promise by endorsing de-emphasis of classical education in favor of increased stress on vocational training. Hodges reflected the same philosophy on the board, but there is no indication of any Catts' pressure in correspondence with Hodges.⁵⁹

Catts' opponents actually accused him only of the heinous crime of appointing his friends, most of them novices, to public office. But given the emotion generated by the 1916 campaign, the governor certainly would not have retained friends of W. V. Knott in office, nor would he have appointed his political enemies. As for nepotism, which the governor freely admitted, it was a widespread custom of the time, and it was being practiced by every elected cabinet member with the exceptions of Van Swearingen and one other cabinet official whose children were too small to work. Since the Democratic party machinery declared war on Catts and blocked him at every opportunity, he had no alternative but to build a separate political organization.

While the storm over Catts' dismissals and appointments still raged, Tallahassee welcomed the state legislature to town

56. Frank E. Jennings to Yonge, June 11, 1917, Box 4, Yonge Papers.

57. A. A. Murphree to Yonge, July 3, 1917, Box 5; J. G. Kellum to Yonge, May 8, 1917, Box 4, Yonge Papers.

58. Joe L. Earman to Yonge, August 23, 1917, Box 5, Yonge Papers.

59. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, July 1, 1917; Hodges to Bryan Mack, November 22, 1920, Box 25, Hodges Papers.

in April 1917. According to one observer the new legislature, filled with old line Democratic politicians, hated Catts.⁶⁰ However, many newspapers adopted the attitude that the governor should be given a fair chance; and in perhaps the strangest development of his administration, Willis M. Ball of the conservative *Florida Times-Union* of Jacksonville requested that his paper become the "official organ" for the governor.⁶¹ Whether such an arrangement was reached or not, the *Times-Union* was remarkably sympathetic in its treatment of the Catts' administration. J. B. Hodges researched the attitudes of the new legislators toward the governor's proposals. Senator M. L. Plympton and Representative W. J. Roebuck of Columbia County pledged loyalty to Catts; Representative Arthur Gomez of Key West consistently sponsored the governor's programs in the house; and Senator James E. Alexander of DeLand, a former Catts' classmate at Cumberland University Law School, led his forces in the state senate.⁶²

In his first message to the state legislature, Catts called for statewide prohibition, the abolition of the convict lease system by utilizing prisoners on state roads, a graduated inheritance tax, enlarged power for the state tax commission in order to properly investigate large corporations which were escaping taxation, creation of boys and girls industrial schools for technical education, abolition of the Bryan primary law, adoption of initiative, referendum, and recall legislation, taxation of church property other than churches and parsonages, and adoption of a bank guarantee law to protect depositors from bank failures. He also devoted a major section of this speech to an emotional appeal for prison reform, proposing creation of the office of Friend of the Convict who would become an advocate for prisoners. He noted the paucity of pardons from the state prison system, a trend which he dramatically reversed, possibly because of bribes by convicts. In a special message in May 1917, he called for reapportionment of the state legislature, deploring the inequity caused by overrepresented rural counties.⁶³ His first address to the legislature was well received by the state press.

60. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 132.

61. Catts to Hodges, April 17, 1917, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

62. Hodges to Samuel F. Flood, March 15, 1917, Box 13, Hodges Papers; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 6, 1917.

63. *Florida House Journal*, 1917, 14-34, 1679-80.

The Gainesville *Sun* reflected the attitude of many of the papers when it noted that "the chief executive is better posted concerning conditions in Florida than many supposed him to be."⁶⁴

Despite favorable comment by the press, anti-Catts forces coalesced in the early days of the session.⁶⁵ Demonstrating a noticeable conservative slant, the legislature ignored reapportionment, abolished the state tax commission, largely ignored education and labor reform, as well as most other actions recommended by the governor. J. B. Hodges played a curiously ambivalent role during the 1917 session; he provided Catts with political advice in an attempt to pressure the legislature into passing the bank guarantee bill,⁶⁶ but he hedged on equitable taxation. Hodges was closely identified with J. E. Hall, general counsel for the Georgia Southern and Florida Railroad. Even before switching to Catts in 1916, Hodges was offering advice on the best way to persuade the future governor that railroads were already paying a fair share of taxes.⁶⁷ It is conceivable that his railroad connections even influenced Hodges to climb aboard the Catts' bandwagon. In April 1917, Hodges advised Hall that Catts had no "disposition to urge any legislation that would be adverse to us, except the enlargement of the powers of the Tax Commission . . ." He especially considered Catts sympathetic to the railroads on "organized labor bills."⁶⁸ Catts' proposals for economic reform were even less a threat than Hodges could know; the legislature not only refused the governor's request that the powers of the tax commission be broadened; it even killed the commission. Catts was able to save the commission only by vetoing the measure, a veto upheld in the house by a thirty-seven to thirty-one vote. He also vetoed a bill abolishing the railroad commission.

The 1917 legislature accomplished almost nothing. Catts got little that he wanted except the sale of the hated ship, *Roamer*, provision for a statewide referendum on liquor sales, and creation of state industrial schools. He vetoed numerous bills, including a two-primary law which he considered even more complicated

64. *Gainesville Sun*, quoted in Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 7, 1917.

65. W. J. Roebuck to Hodges, April 4, 1917, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

66. Hodges to Roebuck, April 10, 1917, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

67. Hodges to J. E. Hall, June 13, 1916, Box 20, Hodges Papers.

68. Hodges to Hall, April 7, 1917, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

and unworkable that the Bryan act. The legislature spent much of the 1917 session amusing itself by passing resolutions to pay the salaries of state officials dismissed by Catts.

Several Catts' lieutenants in the 1917 legislature received tangible rewards for their faithfulness. When the session ended, Catts appointed Representative W. J. Roebuck a state convict inspector, Senator James E. Alexander circuit judge in the seventh judicial district, and Representative Arthur Gomez county solicitor for Monroe County.

On November 15, 1918, Governor Catts summoned a special session of the legislature to implement the newly adopted amendment to Florida's constitution declaring the state dry. During the special session, Catts reversed himself and endorsed the abolition of the state tax commission, saying that it allowed some counties to make very low assessments. He also reversed his earlier stance on the state railroad commission, advocating abolition because the state could thereby save \$70,000 a year. It is possible that Catts' new position was a result of the influence of Hodges who still maintained his close ties with Florida railroads.⁶⁹ Catts obtained his prohibition enforcement laws and repeal of the tax commission, but the legislature balked on the abolition of the railroad commission.

At the 1919 regular session, Catts renewed his 1917 reform program. To his earlier requests, he added a call for federal repeal of the espionage acts which inhibited free speech, university extension education to eradicate adult illiteracy, equalization of property taxation, a franchise tax on corporations (a measure heatedly opposed by railroads), an inheritance tax, stronger child labor legislation, workman's compensation, creation of a state bureau of labor statistics, compulsory universal education through the eighth grade, and a ceiling on interest rates charged by loan companies.⁷⁰ Most of these reforms died in committee, but the governor was more successful in 1919 than he had been two years earlier. Once again, J. B. Hodges provided valuable help in lobbying legislators.⁷¹ The influential *Florida Times-Union* enthusiastically endorsed most of the governor's proposals.⁷²

69. Hodges to John L. Doggett, December 26, 1917, Box 25, Hodges Papers.

70. *Florida House Journal*, 1919, 9-38.

71. Hodges to Catts, March 14, 1919, Box 32, Hodges Papers.

72. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 10, 1919.

Catts' most notable victories came with the abolition of the convict lease system, reform of state prisons, good highways legislation, and educational reform. The governor had taken a genuine interest in prison conditions, frequently visiting the boys and girls industrial schools and the state prison farm at Raiford. Catts' appointee, J. S. Blicht, made Raiford a national model of penal reform. When a committee appointed by the state legislature inspected the farm, they discovered that in only nine months Blicht had increased revenue by 100 percent and had cut expenditures by fifty percent. He had replaced forty paid guards with foremen selected from the prisoners, and there had been no escapes. Blicht also used trustworthy prisoners as crew leaders, officemen, and watchmen. The superintendent had provided recreational activities, ball fields, and a lecture auditorium. One student of Florida prison reform concludes that the convicts were "better cared for than they had ever been."⁷³ W. T. Cash observed that by the time Blicht died, he was considered "one of the outstanding prison superintendents in the United States."⁷⁴

The time seemed propitious for an end to the convict lease system, and Catts backed a bill to use Raiford convicts to construct and maintain state roads, thus obtaining \$3,000,000 in federal funds for good roads. The state would provide matching funds by the use of the convicts who would be maintained by a two mill tax for good roads. After much haggling the bill became law.

Another major Catts' triumph came in educational policy. He enthusiastically favored a proposal for Joe Earman to launch a university extension program to educate those Florida citizens who could not attend college.⁷⁵ His dream was realized in 1919 when the Turnbull university extension act appropriated \$50,000 to launch the program. The concept proved successful from its inception in 1919.⁷⁶ Thanks to the effective lobbying of Earman and pressure by Catts, the 1919 legislature also restored a \$250,000 cut in the requests of the board of control for higher

73. Kathleen Falconer Pratt, "The Development of the Florida Prison System" (Master's thesis, Florida State University, 1949), 101-02.

74. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 132.

75. Catts to *Palm Beach Post*, April 10, 1918, Box 13, Hodges Papers.

76. Florida, *Report of Board of Control, 1920*, 170-72.

education. The board received virtually its entire request of over \$800,000, enabling major improvements in higher education. ⁷⁷ Finally, the legislature passed a law making school attendance compulsory for children between ages six and sixteen. Partly because of the impetus of this law, school enrollment jumped from 148,089 in 1910 to 225,160 by 1920. ⁷⁸

The legislature also passed a constitutional amendment providing for the taxation of intangible property, a child welfare bill, and established a state farm for the "feeble-minded." It rejected Catts' plea for ratification of woman suffrage, reapportionment, labor legislation, and bank guarantees. Compared to the record of former Florida governors, Catts had reason to boast of his 1919 success. Of course, his victories were qualified by the fact that he did not actually "lead" the legislature. Most legislators despised the governor, and reform was more a matter of intersecting political tangents than of executive leadership. But he was not compelled to advocate progressive programs, and when they were passed he could have vetoed them, as Governor Albert W. Gilchrist earlier had vetoed a measure abolishing the convict lease system.

Catts decided in 1919 to try to unseat Florida's popular United States Senator Duncan U. Fletcher. By this time the state party was effectively united against him, and his own political following had been decimated by his emotional outbursts of temper and unwise political blunders. Of his 1916 allies, the governor had dismissed state health officer Cox for malfeasance of office, chairman of the state board of health Frecker for disrupting the board, and Adjutant General Christian for refusing to carry out the governor's orders. Christian's replacement as adjutant general, James McCants, had been an original Catts' supporter but had resigned because of the governor's constant interference. W. W. Flournoy was so alienated from the governor by 1919 that he entered the United States Senate race to siphon votes from Catts. His Columbia County ally, W. W. Phillips, had broken with him over his handling of the state health board, and Catts almost dismissed W. J. Roebuck because of rumors that he drank whiskey. Only the con-

77. *Ibid.*, 13.

78. *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Florida for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1920*, 12.

stant pacification of Hodges, Jerry Carter, and Joe Earman held the feuding remnants of his coalition together.⁷⁹ Then in December 1920, the final blow fell in an emotional confrontation between Catts and Earman. The event which triggered the breach was Catts' appointment of Edgar C. Thompson as state's attorney in West Palm Beach over Earman's objection. In an editorial entitled "Joe and Sid Have Dissolved," Earman wrote that the last man to talk with Catts was the final influence, that the governor would not honor his commitments, that he lacked "consistency" and "fidelity." "I believed in him," Earman wrote, but "at the finish, he has disappointed me. POLITICS IS HELL."⁸⁰ Hodges tried desperately to patch up the quarrel and miraculously maintained the friendship of both Catts and Earman; but the rift was too deep for healing.⁸¹ Catts ended all hopes of reconciliation by a typical emotional harangue in which he threatened to go to West Palm Beach with a "double-barrel shotgun loaded with buckshot" and have a "final settlement" with Earman.⁸²

The 1920 senatorial returns demonstrated one of the worst political eclipses in Florida history. Catts carried only three counties in his race against Senator Fletcher. The following years brought humiliating charges of peonage, bribery, and counterfitting. Catts weathered all these charges, and with his political influence revived, narrowly lost the governorship in 1924 and again in 1928. Whether judged by the criteria of personal eccentricity, political gimmickry, new departures in politics, reform legislation, religious bigotry, or juvenile temper tantrums, Sidney J. Catts emerged from Florida history bigger than life. He was an individualist who thumbed his nose at the political power structure and won.

79. Hodges to Catts, June 16, 1917, Box 25, Hodges Papers; *St. Petersburg Times*, quoted in Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, January 1, 1918.

80. *Palm Beach Post*, December 12, 1920.

81. Hodges to Earman, December 15, 1920, Box 39; Earman to Herbert L. Dodd, December 16, 1920, Box 39; Catts to Hodges, December 17, 1920, Box 39, Hodges Papers.

82. *New York Times*, December 18, 1920.