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WILLIAM V. KNOTT AND THE GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN OF 1916

edited by WAYNE FLYNT*

SOMETIME around 1958, William V. Knott recorded his impressions of the 1916 gubernatorial contest for a graduate student in New England. Much of this material was already available, especially in the master's thesis by John R. Deal, Jr., "Sidney Johnston Catts, Stormy Petrel of Florida Politics" (University of Florida, 1949). Deal interviewed Knott and emphasized many points covered in this account. This is, however, the most complete and authoritative account yet published of the infamous "Sturkie Resolution" which played a critical role in the campaign. The manuscript is also a most complete revelation of Knott's critique of the "Bryan Primary Law" which eliminated run-offs by providing for first and second choice balloting.

William V. Knott, who was born in 1863 and died in April 1965, had risen to political prominence in a conventional and prescribed fashion. He had been a Democratic loyalist, open to change but allied to the conservative forces which had long controlled Florida politics. He had served as state treasurer and was state comptroller at the time of his candidacy. Political friends had urged him to run, thinking he would win easily with the help of men who had long run the party apparatus at the local and state levels in Florida (sometimes called the "courthouse gang"). Frederick Hudson, a Miami attorney with political ties in South Florida had a chance, according to prognosticators, of upsetting Knott. Ion Farris from Jacksonville won backing from organized labor and many urban reformers who hoped that he could assume leadership of the "progressives" within the party. The most unlikely candidate was Sidney J. Catts, an Alabama Baptist preacher who had begun secretly to campaign for the state's highest office in 1914. Few political observers, including William Knott, considered Catts even a remote challenge. Knott shared Catts's church preference and had met him some months earlier at the Florida Baptist Con-

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vention, where his only impression had been wonder at the clergyman's remarkable ability to remember names. This account by Knott touches the major issues, although it ignores the agrarian revolt of inarticulate north Florida farmers against the narrow and pejorative control of the Democratic party. Ultimately this revolt may have had as much to do with Catts's election in 1916 as the policies and blunders which Knott recalls.

The question is asked: What was the origin of the organization known as the Guardians of Liberty, and what influence did it have on the Florida elections of U.S. Senator and Governor in 1916?

The Guardians of Liberty was an anti-Catholic organization with a number of active clubs throughout the state, and it influenced considerably the Florida election results in 1916.¹ The prohibition question was important at the time and this, together with some other minor matters, also influenced the results of that election. The development and activity of the Guardians of Liberty are briefly described as follows:

About 1914, a stranger, one Billy Parker, came to Florida from the north and made a series of violent anti-Catholic speeches on the street corners of Jacksonville.² His rants soon attracted a sizable following. Anti-Catholic sentiment spread to the extent that a secret organization was formed, called the Guardians of Liberty. Its purpose was to defeat any Catholic candidate for political office. The Catholic population of Florida was comparatively small, and until that time it had been many years since any political distinction had been made between Catholic and Protestant.³ Guardians of Liberty clubs were then

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1. The Guardians of Liberty had been organized in 1911, and by 1916 claimed a membership in the hundreds of thousands. Headquartered in New York City, it boasted a leadership consisting of high-ranking military officers, businessmen, and even some rabbis. It was semi-secret, favored separation of church and state, attacked parochial schools, and was often compared to the Masonic orders.
 2. Billy Parker was an aggressive young Scotsman from Pennsylvania, a Republican and street preacher, who arrived in Jacksonville in 1914.
 3. Southern Baptists with 57,732 adherents were more numerous than any other white Protestant sect in Florida in 1916, with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, close behind. Roman Catholics were a distant fifth in size of communicants with only 24,650 members, with seven and one-half per cent of the total church population of the state. Financially it was even weaker, lagging in sixth place in value of property.

formed in various parts of the state, and the organizing program was greatly aided by Thomas E. Watson of Georgia and his "Jeffersonian" magazine. Watson was a brilliant writer of his day, and he was bitterly anti-Catholic. In fact his magazine seemed to be published chiefly against the Catholic Church. The Jeffersonian had a large number of readers in Florida, and in addition to helping establish new Guardians of Liberty clubs, it was to be influential in its own right in the approaching Florida election of 1916. After a number of clubs had been organized in the state, fluent speakers were sent from place to place to address their meetings and to further anti-Catholic feeling. It was against this background that the elections were to be held.

Additional excitement and ill-will were caused before the election by the famed "Sturkie Resolution." A prominent Jacksonville attorney, J. M. Barrs, had been city attorney for many years, and had taken an active part in Florida politics. He was a close friend of Nathan P. Bryan, then U.S. Senator and candidate for reelection. Barrs was interested in promoting I. L. Farris for governor. Barrs conceived the idea, and he prepared a resolution, intended to prevent secret political club members from participating in the Democratic Primary Elections.⁴ The resolution was introduced by R. B. Sturkie, Chairman of the Resolutions Committee, and was adopted by the Democratic State Executive Committee at its meeting in Jacksonville, January 6, 1916, with but one opposing vote. It seems that Sidney J. Catts, candidate for Governor and purported member of Guardians of Liberty, attended the meeting and knew the purpose of the resolution. He told J. V. Burke, supporter of Guardians of Liberty, that he just as well withdraw his candidacy.⁵ Burke told him to stay in the race and that he would help to make the resolution unpopular. Burke established a little political sheet to aid in the purpose, and Catts took to the field along with several others.⁶ Together, they succeeded in making

4. The most controversial section of the "Sturkie Resolution," introduced at the January 6, 1916, meeting of the State Democratic Executive Committee, was section four which required that voters not be influenced by any religious test or belief, denomination, or sect with which the candidate was affiliated.

5. Burke was Catts's campaign manager.

6. The Jacksonville *Free Press* became Catts's organ during the campaign.

the resolution very unpopular, not only with the Guardians of Liberty, but with others as well. They were so successful that the Committee met again and rescinded the objectionable features of the Sturkie Resolution. Thus, Catts was not barred from the Democratic Primary Election because of his non-Catholic views, or his suspected membership in the Guardians of Liberty. But by this time many people had become incensed, and so this change in the Sturkie Resolution did not seem to help the situation much. Up to that time no one had thought Catts would have any show at all in the election. It was felt that the real race would be between two other candidates, namely, Hudson and Knott, with the odds favorable to Knott.

At this point it is well to explain another circumstance, mechanical in nature, that was to influence the Governor's race especially. The 1916 primary was the first election to be held under a new law that provided space on the ballot for a second choice vote. This was intended to avoid a second, or run-off, election between the two highest candidates. The law provided that the election should be decided between the two highest candidates and, of these two, the winner would be the candidate who received the greatest total of first and second choice votes combined. Confusion and error resulted from the new law. In the first place, many people did not vote a second choice for fear it would affect their first choice vote.⁷ Then, the tally sheet was not understood by many of the inspectors in the election, and they did not make a correct count of the vote by reason of this misunderstanding. Because of this the Governor's race, which was a very close one, became confused; the results were long delayed, involving a re-count and court approval. After this election the new law was changed back to the old system.⁸

U. S. Senator Nathan P. Bryan was running for re-election in 1916, for a second term in the U.S. Senate. In his first term race he had been supported strongly by his close friend, Pete Dignan, who was a highly respected member of the Jacksonville City

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7. The Guardians of Liberty conducted a secret campaign to persuade its members to vote only for a first choice candidate, thus denying the leading contender any second choice votes.
 8. The "Bryan Primary Law" remained a controversial political issue for many years, but despite widespread criticism and the opposition of Governor Catts, the legislative proposals for "reform" were as bad or worse than the Bryan law, and so it was not changed until after Catts had left office.

Council. One of the city parks had been named for Dignan, although the name was changed after the election. Dignan was a member of the Catholic Church, and prior to the anti-Catholic activity of the Guardians of Liberty, Bryan had promised his endorsement to Dignan for the Jacksonville postmastership. With the development of anti-Catholic sentiment, a protest was made to Bryan because he was supporting a Catholic for a Government appointed post. But Bryan refused to withdraw his endorsement of Dignan, even though the Post Master General went so far as to suggest that he do so when it became apparent that opposition was developing against Bryan because of his endorsement. Although Bryan himself was a Methodist, bitter resentment continued to rise against him in spite of his integrity and the good record he had made during his first term in the U. S. Senate. The feeling in Jacksonville grew to be so strong against him that the anti-Catholic leaders held meetings with a view to finding someone else they could support for the senatorship in opposition to Bryan. Park Trammell at the time was Governor of Florida and had already announced his candidacy for Congressman of the First District, in opposition to H. J. Drane who was a candidate against S. M. Sparkman. The leaders of the anti-Catholics made an urgent appeal to Governor Trammell to switch his candidacy and run for the Senate instead of for Congress, in opposition to Bryan. They promised him such strong support that finally he agreed, and he announced his candidacy for the Senate. Trammell won the election, thus defeating Bryan and two other candidates, namely Ex-Governor Gilchrist and Perry Wall. The Guardians of Liberty had prevailed. Winning this primary election and thus becoming the Democratic nominee was tantamount to winning the general election in the fall, unless some unusual circumstance developed, as was the case in the Governor's race during this election.⁹

In the Governor's race in 1916, there were five candidates to enter the Democratic primary. Listed in alphabetical order, they were as follows: Sidney J. Catts, an ex-Baptist preacher,

9. Many Guardians of Liberty considered Trammell and Catts a "team," and worked hard for both candidates. Trammell had endeared himself to the Guardians by prohibiting a Catholic parochial school in St. Augustine from teaching black children.

originally from Alabama; I. L. Farris, ex-Speaker of the House, then State Senator from Jacksonville, and a very fluent speaker; F. M. Hudson, State Senator from Miami, ex-President of the Senate; W. V. Knott, State Comptroller, former State Auditor and State Treasurer, respectively; credited with an established record for economical administration and efficiency in public service; F. A. Wood, retired banker, former House Member from St. Petersburg. All the candidates were Protestants, but none made a fight on the Catholics except Catts; and all but Catts had had political experience in Florida. It was for this latter reason that no one expected Catts to get very far in the election. But in view of the final outcome of the contest it might be well to state some of the facts concerning this candidate.

As stated, Catts was a Baptist preacher. He was raised in Alabama and had run for Congress in that state, but was defeated. He came to Florida about 1911 to take pastorate of the Baptist Church at DeFuniak Springs. This was a rather small church compared to some of the other denominations and it was supported largely by the Baptist Mission Board. After being there for some time he gave up the church because they would not raise his pay.¹⁰ He was then engaged for a time traveling over the state representing some fraternal insurance agency. He became sympathetic to the anti-Catholic furor as represented by the Guardians of Liberty and he identified himself with the movement. Apparently he sensed the political possibilities that might come from the prejudice and division that was being preached, so he came out as an anti-Catholic candidate for Governor.¹¹ Among other things, he charged that the Catholic Convents were in use for storage of arms to be used in a possible conflict with the U.S. Government. He promised to make a search, and to eliminate such arms if elected Governor. He made the most of enmities and differences of opinion wherever he could find them. For instance, he made a point particularly of attacking T. R. Hodges, who was Shell Fish Commissioner at the time. Hodges was a good man, and a good official, but he

10. The church at DeFuniak Springs had long been a stormy pastorate, and personality clashes as well as salary were issues in Catts's resignation.

11. Catts's anti-Catholicism was not altogether expedient; Alabama Baptists had produced a torrent of literature and oratory warning of the "Catholic Menace" in the late nineteenth century, and Catts had demonstrated a strong nativist bias before his activity in Florida.

liked to make a show. He had the enmity of a great many fishermen of the state. Catts cultivated this enmity, and encouraged opposition to Hodges. It was in the country districts especially that Catts did his campaigning.

In the primary election, June 1916, Catts and Knott were the two leading candidates for Governor, with Catts leading Knott with less than 500 votes. The other three candidates received about the same number of votes each, but considerably less than the two first named. Reports of results were slow coming in from many of the precincts, due to the confusion and misunderstanding that resulted from the new election law. Information came from various parts of the state that errors were apparent on the face of a lot of tally sheets, mostly against Knott. The canvass was contested and the matter was decided by the courts, involving re-counts by precinct inspectors under court order. Lawyers were at every step in behalf of Catts, while he and others were speaking over the State, charging that Catts was being robbed of his votes.¹² Nothing was being done in the campaign for Knott during this period, pending the court decision. The Supreme Court declared Knott to be the winner and, therefore, the nominee of the Democratic party for Governor in the general election of November.¹³ Catts then switched parties and got his name on the ticket for the general election as the candidate of the Prohibition Party, by virtue of a certificate supplied by a Mr. Johnson, President of the Prohibition Party, to the effect that Catts was the nominee of that party.¹⁴ The names appeared on the ticket in alphabetical order, without designation of any party. Many people were confused and

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12. There is evidence of some remarkable vote changing by both camps. The most distressing case involved major shifts in first choice ballots in Madison County which aided Knott. No one implicated Knott or even accused him of unfair tactics; the late returns do suggest the possibility that some of his aides on the local level may have tampered with returns. The same is true in several boxes which Catts carried.
 13. The Supreme Court decision was not issued until October 7, exactly one month before the general election. In the interval between the June primary and the October court decision, Knott had refused to campaign actively, perhaps a fatal decision.
 14. The chairman of the Prohibition Party was John C. Coffin, and it was he who handled the private negotiations with J. V. Burke on the night of August 4 which led to Catts's nomination by the Prohibition Party.

doubtful as to whether Catts had been cheated in the primary election. Mr. Catts was elected Governor in the November election.

LESSON OF THE 1916 ELECTION LED TO TWO
CHANGES IN THE LAW:

- I. Going back to the second primary system to choose between the two high candidates.
- II. A provision barring from the general election ticket the name of anyone who had been defeated for the same position in the primary election.