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RISE OF THE "BUSINESSMAN'S POLITICIAN": THE 1924 FLORIDA GUBERNATORIAL RACE

by VICTORIA H. MCDONELL*

THE 1920s IN Florida reflected the enormous social and economic changes that were occurring throughout the United States. The conservatism of the period, exemplified by high tariffs, the passage of the Volstead Act, and the growth of right wing groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, performed an uneasy counterpoint to the new currents of change. Urban growth, rapid economic development, and the proliferation of transportation and communications facilities foretold the future complexion of American life. As Floridians approached the 1924 gubernatorial campaign they were faced with two alternatives: electing men who were committed to holding on to the past or placing into positions of leadership individuals who could carry the state forward to ever-increasing growth and expansion.

Two new phenomena facing the political candidates in Florida were the land boom and woman suffrage. The roots of the boom can be traced to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the Atlantic and gulf coasts began to be developed. Henry M. Flagler and Henry B. Plant built a number of lavish hotels, but until after World War I these resort areas mainly catered to the very rich. In the post-war period, efforts were begun to make the state the winter home for the entire nation. Chambers of commerce, backed by civic clubs, real estate promoters, railroads, and bus lines, tried to entice northern tourists to the Sunshine State.¹ Cities grew at a phenomenal rate, and national businesses began setting up branches in Florida to meet the needs of the rising population.² Tourists from all over America and even

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1. William B. Hesseltine and David L. Smiley, *The South in American History* (New York, 1941; rev. ed., Englewood Cliffs, 1960), 530; See also several articles in *Reviews of Reviews*, LXXII (November 1925), 477-516 for an excellent example of the enticing literature written about Florida during the boom.
2. According to the *Fifth Census of the State of Florida Taken in The Year 1925* (Tallahassee, 1926), 9-61, Florida's population increased 30.4 per cent from 1915 to 1925. Nearly forty-five per cent of the state's in-

from Europe responded to the romantic lure of the semi-tropical paradise and began streaming into Florida by train, by bus, and by the then less-reliable automobile.

To accelerate these trends, Floridians looked to their elected officials for two things: the means to attract more industry and good roads to encourage more touring motorists. To achieve the former, a constitutional amendment abolishing state income taxes and inheritance taxes was introduced. It passed the state legislature in 1923 and was on the ballot for ratification by the people in the 1924 general election. The groundwork for good roads had been laid with the 1915 creation of the State Road Department, but by 1924 it was not developing fast enough to meet the needs of Florida's rapidly expanding economy. The people looked for a gubernatorial candidate in 1924 who would act swiftly and decisively to complete the network of roads.

The woman suffrage movement had been one of the many reform movements of the progressive era. The Florida Equal Suffrage Association had been organized in 1913. It was not until women's active role in World War I won them many new male supporters that the nineteenth amendment giving women the vote passed the United States Congress in 1919.³ Florida legislators had considered amending the state constitution to grant Florida women the ballot at every session since 1913, but the measure had always failed. Even after the federal woman suffrage amendment passed, Governor Sidney J. Catts refused to call a special session of the legislature to consider ratification, feeling that it could not pass.⁴ Three-fourths of the states did ratify the amendment by August 1920, but this was too late for Florida women to have any impact on the 1920 gubernatorial election. Gary A. Hardee had received the Democratic nomination in the June primary that year and was therefore assured of victory in the general election. Thus the 1924 gubernatorial primary was the first major state election in which the women could form an important political bloc.

There were six gubernatorial candidates to begin with, but

habitants were urban in 1925, thus making Florida the first southern state to approach urban status.

3. A. Elizabeth Taylor, "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (July 1957), 42-60.
4. It was not until 1969 that the Florida legislature formally approved the nineteenth amendment.

Charles B. Parkhill of Tampa, former justice on the Florida supreme court, shortly withdrew from the race. Remaining were John Wellborn Martin, former mayor of Jacksonville; Worth W. Trammell, brother of United States Senator Park Trammell; Charles H. Spencer, successful Tampa farmer and chairman of the Democratic executive committees of Hillsborough County and the first congressional district; Frank E. Jennings, former speaker of the Florida House of Representatives; and former Governor Sidney J. Catts.

Although the specific planks in their respective platforms were not very different, each candidate exhibited a highly individualistic style of campaigning. This has led some observers to believe that there were no important issues in the campaign, only personalities.⁵ There were a number of issues, however, and it was the subtle differences in the way the candidates proposed to deal with these matters that determined the election's outcome. The most important issue, mainly because of Martin's emphasis on it, was road building. Increased tourist trade would immediately result everyone believed. The State Road Department's past record became the point of contention for most of the candidates. A second major issue was drainage of the Everglades. Geological tests had indicated that the area could become a rich agricultural region if properly drained. Numerous attempts to drain the Everglades had been made in the past, but none had ever succeeded. State legislative reapportionment was a third issue. Although Florida's constitution provided for periodic reapportionment, neither house had been reapportioned in over thirty years.

Other issues included reorganizing the state court system in an effort to make justice more accessible to the poor, improved public education, reform of the state prison system, and a proposed amendment to abolish the so-called Bryan Primary Law. This law had been inaugurated in 1913 and was designed to save the state money by making run-offs unnecessary. Voters cast two votes, one for a first-choice and one for a second-choice candidate. Should a voter's first-choice candidate be eliminated from the top two positions after the first-choice votes alone were counted, his second-choice— if it had been cast for one of the two leading candidates— would be added to determine the winner of the primary.

5. Interview with former State Senator J. Turner Butler, Jacksonville, August 11, 1967.

While it was a fair and logical system, the Bryan Primary Law was complicated and often confused voters.

The candidate who seemed to be most out of touch with the times was Charles H. Spencer, who ran under the slogan, "Probably Florida's Farmer Governor."⁶ A native of the Suwanee River section of Florida, he had lived in Hillsborough County for forty years, making a living as a farmer and merchant.⁷ Presenting himself as a progressive Democrat, Spencer wanted the state to become self-supporting rather than concentrating on how tourists or industry could aid Florida economically. He proposed to hold on to Everglades land for settlers and schools, and he vowed not to give "another acre" to corporations.⁸ He believed that the sale of Everglades land should offset state taxes, and thus he billed himself as a "tax buster and not a booster," and he promised to oppose state and national income taxes. As an enticement to the agricultural vote, he proposed that the state should buy and operate fertilizer plants, selling to farmers at cost. Spencer proposed a cheap solution to the problem of roadbuilding, but he failed to stress it as a major plank in his platform. He called for the use of muck from the lakes for filler and coral rocks from the canal banks as a road base. Moreover, he advocated a state-owned railroad bed parallel to the highway from Tampa to Miami which, he stated, would bring the state \$500,000 annually. He proposed free textbooks for schools and open meetings of the governor and his cabinet. Nearly all of these programs were very liberal for the time; his proposal of a state-owned railroad even bordered on being socialistic. Why Spencer's broad platform received so little support in the campaign seems strange. One explanation can be found in the fact that he emphasized the agricultural potential of the state and de-emphasized his proposals for roadbuilding and schools. He ignored the tourist trade completely and alienated support by his opposition to the establishment of new corporations in Florida. Spencer was never a serious contender; not one newspaper seems to have supported him.

Trammell had a long and prestigious background of public service to support his campaign. Born in Polk County, he was a

6. H. Clay Crawford, *Statements of Candidates: Primary Election, 1924* (Tallahassee, 1924).

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

member of the Florida legislature in 1903, superintendent of the Hospital for the Insane, assistant United States attorney for the northern district of Florida, assistant attorney general for eight years, and at the time of the 1924 campaign he was a successful Miami attorney. He endorsed legislative reapportionment, lower taxation (by providing that all property be on the tax books), good schools, properly trained teachers, increased teacher salaries, and good roads with stricter supervision by the State Road Department.⁹ While advocating many of the same programs as Spencer, he emphasized his goals in more conservative terms. Trammell's major campaign error was his failure to highlight one or more of these planks. The result was poor voter recognition; he was never a serious threat in the campaign. Many believed that Trammell thought he could win on the strength of his brother's name.¹⁰

The candidate supported by most Florida newspapers was Frank E. Jennings, a Kansas native of Virginia ancestry, who had moved to Florida while still a young man. He had served on the State Plant Board and had held a number of political offices in Jacksonville. Elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1920, he became speaker the following year. With this background Jennings expected to muster considerable political support throughout the state. His campaign slogan was "An All Florida Candidate With a State Wide Vision, Progressive and Constructive."¹¹ He described his platform as "safe, sane, and forward-looking." He favored a "fair and just" road program, with the State Road Department board kept intact and advocated legislative reapportionment.¹² His public statements were generalizations of vague, unformulated programs, and undoubtedly, his platform was the most "safe and sane" of all those presented. In these respects Jennings was the weakest of the candidates. The tenor of the times was far from being sane; lavish excesses were in fact the order of the day. Jennings's main support came from the smaller communities, where the boom fervor and its accompanying demand for an increase in the tourist business had not taken hold to the extent that it had in the cities.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Interview with James T. Vocelle, Vero Beach, November 24, 1967.

11. *Statements of Candidates.*

12. *Ibid.*

The surprise dark-horse of the election was former Governor Sidney J. Catts. At first most Floridians believed that Catts had little chance to win. He was waiting for the outcome of a trial in which he was charged with irregularities during his 1917-1920 administration. Catts, however, waged an extensive campaign, visiting every part of the state in his "Model T" Ford. He began building support particularly in West Florida, a traditional Catts stronghold. He campaigned vigorously among the rural voters, telling them that the poor Florida farmer had only three friends in the world, "Jesus Christ, Sears, Roebuck, and Company, and Sidney J. Catts." They believed him and vowed support of the few but strong planks that comprised his platform. Catts stressed continued enforcement of the prohibition laws, continued progress in road construction, better schools, and good government in general.¹³ Catts's strength derived from his charismatic personality, and he discussed fewer issues than any other candidate. John Martin realized at once that Catts was the man to beat, and he oriented his campaign tactics towards that end.

Martin was in 1924 a native of Marion County; his early years were spent working as a clerk and tobacco salesman for \$3.00 a week while studying law at night and on Sundays. His years as a salesman were not wasted in terms of his later political career; he had a friendly, outgoing personality, and he met many people who later remembered him. He was admitted to the bar in 1914, and enjoyed a highly successful law practice in Jacksonville. During this period, he often campaigned for other officeseekers because of his ability to speak extemporaneously.¹⁴ Except for a minor post as interim customs inspector, Martin's first public office was mayor of Jacksonville. In his 1917 race for that office, he introduced the two themes that would characterize his 1924 gubernatorial campaign, demands for "liberality and common sense" and for a "businessman's administration."¹⁵ He was elected mayor by a very large majority,¹⁶ and was re-elected in 1919 and 1921, each time with even larger majorities. During his three terms of office, he handled successfully the problems of the post-

13. John R. Deal, Jr., "Sidney Johnston Catts, Stormy Petrel of Florida Politics" (M. A. thesis, University of Florida, 1949), 191.

14. Interview with J. Turner Butler, Jacksonville, August 11, 1967.

15. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, February 4, 1917.

16. *Ibid.*, February 7, 1917.

World War I economic slump and the inflation of the early 1920s and the accompanying strikes. He supported the paving of streets in Jacksonville and welcomed automobile enthusiasts. Both actions became important planks in his 1924 gubernatorial platform.

The success of Martin's campaign can best be attributed to his acute perception of the state of mind of the people of Florida in 1924. The booming economy of the state had given Florida a kind of brassy aura, and the governor, Martin believed, should exhibit a similar quality. He should be daring and imaginative, a living advertisement for the splendors of the sub-tropical paradise of oranges, palm trees, and white-sand beaches. Cary A. Hardee, the incumbent governor, had been more restrained in his administration. Martin correctly believed that the voters wanted a change; they needed a governor "who would not hold himself so much in the background."¹⁷ Martin fit the description perfectly. His speeches reflected the desires of most voters. He emphasized the one issue that people thought would help their pocketbooks— good roads. A system of paved highways meant an increase in industry and the tourist trade, and as these grew, Florida would grow more prosperous. Martin promised "to build roads from one end of the state to the other, before the people now living are in the cemetery."¹⁸

He campaigned in every part of the state. He had the support of many metropolitan newspapers— *Tampa Tribune*, *Florida Times-Union* of Jacksonville, *Clearwater News*, *Ocala Star*, *Miami Daily News*, *Gainesville Sun*, and the *St. Augustine Record*. Jennings received the support of many small-town papers such as the *Panama City Pilot*, but these communities were not tourist-oriented. The areas which would benefit most from tourists endorsed Martin.

The road issue was the most widely discussed plank in Martin's platform. He stressed the need for "immediate construction of a system of state highways, applying business methods to the construction."¹⁹ He criticized the state road program for its delay in getting underway, and laid this blame at the door

17. William T. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida, Including Biographical Sketches of Prominent Florida Democrats* (Tallahassee, 1936), 136.

18. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, May 2, 1924.

19. *Statements of Candidates*.

of the State Road Department.²⁰ In a speech at Tampa, he promised:

If the road department of this state does not build roads with haste, with economy, and with some degree of sense, I will not hesitate to remove the tardy ones from office and give you competent men in their place who will give you service. I will not hesitate to get rid of them and hang their political scalps out to dry on the Capitol door at Tallahassee any more than a farmer would hesitate to hang out a coon skin to dry.²¹

On the issue of Everglades drainage he promised that as governor he “would inaugurate some practicable way of reclaiming the Everglades with the least possible delay.”²² He wanted the area to be developed as homesteads for World War I veterans, and then for others.²³

While roadbuilding and Everglades drainage were the two major issues, Martin discussed other things. He called for a higher standard of proficiency in public schools and state institutions of higher learning. He favored the proposed amendment to abolish inheritance and income taxes, believing that this would attract new industry and affluent people to Florida. He charged that the state convict prison at Raiford had lost \$97,000 in 1923 alone “by raising cotton for the boll weevils and vegetables in competition with the farmers of the state.”²⁴ He planned to utilize convict labor on his roadbuilding program, and advocated convicts “making automobile license tags.”²⁵ Not only would the prison become self-supporting, but it would bring in extra revenue for the state. Having served as mayor of a large city, Martin was familiar with the inequities that existed in representation between the rural and urban areas, and he supported the proposed constitutional amendment that would result in more equal representation. The long and costly process of carrying a case through the state court system was another issue that Martin criticized. He argued that court reform would not only make

20. John W. Martin to J. E. Dovell, November 5, 1951, quoted in J. E. Dovell, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary*, 4 vols. (New York, 1952), II, 779.

21. *Tampa Tribune*, May 23, 1924.

22. *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, May 2, 1924.

23. *Tampa Tribune*, May 23, 1924.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

justice more available to the poor, but also would prevent politicians and wealthy men from taking the law into their own hands.²⁶ Finally, Martin also stood strongly behind the proposed amendment to abolish the Bryan Primary Law and to re-establish the two primaries system.

Martin's reception as he travelled around Florida demonstrates the enthusiasm which he generated. Such accounts also reflect the differences in campaign practices between the 1920s and today. In an era that had limited use of the radio, no television, and poor transportation facilities, a candidate had to take himself to the electorate physically to ensure that his views were understood. Candidates used local rallies and barbecues to appeal as much to the emotions of the people as to their minds.

From May 28 to May 31, 1924, Martin campaigned in West Palm Beach, Miami, and St. Petersburg.²⁷ His West Palm Beach rally is typical of many of his campaign stops. The evening began with a banquet at the Palms, a luxurious restaurant in West Palm Beach. Later he headed a "rousing street parade" which included the West Palm Beach city band with 100 banners and as many fuse-lit torches.²⁸ Martin, as well as the other candidates, often ended such rallies speaking from the back of a truck or some other makeshift platform in order to be heard, with no amplification, by as many people as possible.

Whenever candidates spoke, other candidates and speakers were invited to share the platform. This practice proved disastrous for Frank Jennings in his rally at Lakeland. After attacking Martin in his speech, H. C. Petteway, former mayor of Lakeland and an ardent Martin supporter, was urged by the crowd to reply to the charges. Apparently there were more Martin supporters than advocates for Jennings present. According to the newspaper account, "Mr. Petteway's address was frequently interrupted by vociferous applause, and at its conclusion, what amounted to a demonstration for Martin took place."²⁹

The kinds of things that Martin's opponents charged him with reveal the concerns in the minds of Floridians of the period.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *St. Petersburg Times*, June 1, 1924.

28. *St. Augustine Record*, May 29, 1924.

29. *Tampa Tribune*, May 25, 1924.

Religion was a factor of paramount importance. In the twenties, any taint of Romanism, atheism, or any other religious "ism" outside of Southern Protestantism, was almost certain political doom. Martin was accused not only of not being a Christian, but of having given a bad check in payment of his church dues. He refuted both charges, declaring that he was a member of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville and had never given anyone a bad check.³⁰ Where it was claimed that he was a Mormon and therefore a polygamist, he mockingly implored: "Don't let even a hint of that get back to my wife!"³¹

As the election approached, it became apparent to Martin that Catts's strength was increasing. On April 23, he stated, "If the people think Catts has no strength and are wondering where he is going to get his vote, let them go to West Florida. I have just returned from there."³² Martin believed that the first choice votes would be close between Catts and himself. In order to prevent Catts's election, therefore, he warned his supporters that "it is important that a second choice vote be given to one of the other candidates if what has come to be called the 'Catts menace' is to be obliterated from the campaign."³³

Election results bore out Martin's political astuteness. In the primary June 3, Spencer received 1,408 first choice votes and did not carry a single county. Trammell, likewise, did not carry a single county, receiving 8,381 first choice votes. Frank E. Jennings was third, carrying only Hillsborough, Lake, Leon, and Polk counties—nearly all west-central counties. He polled 37,962 first choice votes. Catts won in twenty-five counties and carried all of West Florida.³⁴ Martin, with 55,715 first choice votes, carried the rest of the state. In the tabulation of second choice votes, Catts received 137 from Spencer, 858 from Trammell, and 5,072 from Jennings, bringing his total to 49,297.³⁵ Martin received 248 sec-

30. *Ibid.*, May 1924.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Deal, "Sidney J. Catts," 192.

33. *Tampa Tribune*, May 23, 1924.

34. Catts won Baker, Citrus, Clay, Franklin, Gadsden, Hamilton, Hardee, Hernando, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Lafayette, Okaloosa, Putnam, Santa Rosa, Sumter, Suwanee, Taylor, Wakulla, Walton, and Washington counties. *Report of the Secretary of State of the State of Florida For the Period Beginning January 1, 1923 and Ending December 31, 1924* (Tallahassee, 1925), 12.

35. *Ibid.*

ond choice votes from Spencer, 2,870 from Trammell, and 14,221 from Jennings, increasing his total vote to 73,054, and decisively giving him the Democratic nomination.³⁶

It took several days for all first and second choice votes to be counted and recorded, and Martin did not claim victory until June 8. His victory statement promised:

The prosperity of the state as a member of the national body, the integrity of its business dealings, the development of its agriculture, and the proper enforcement of laws enacted by the legislative department shall not be neglected so far as the grace of God gives me knowledge and the law gives me power to serve them.³⁷

The general election, November 6, was more significant for the constitutional amendments, which were ratified, than for a spirited governor's race. The Republican candidate, W. R. O'Neal, received 17,499 votes but failed to carry a single county.³⁸ Martin received 84,181 votes.³⁹ The Bryan Primary Law was abolished and the two primaries system was reinstated. The voters also passed the amendment which forbade an inheritance and income tax. The action pushed an inflated economy further toward the unregulated speculation which eventually undermined it.

The 1924 election was unique in many respects, It was the first major election in which women voted, and, apparently many exercised their right. The *Panama City Pilot* noted that in Bay County the women's vote was heavy:

That they changed the results in many cases is undoubted, and they have demonstrated that they can and will vote, and that they know how to vote, even such a long ticket as was handled. They now constitute a factor in our elections that will have to be reckoned with.⁴⁰

With the election of a governor dedicated to promoting the

36. *Ibid.*

37. *St. Augustine Record*, June 9, 1924.

38. This was the largest number of votes received by a Republican candidate for governor since the nineteenth century and is a reflection of the number of Republicans migrating to Florida at this time.

39. *Report of the Secretary of State*, 12.

40. *Panama City Pilot*, June 12, 1924.

boom economy and with taxes on inheritances and incomes removed, the Florida “boom in paradise” shifted into high gear. And with the inauguration of Martin’s ambitious roadbuilding program and the expectations of Floridians rising over the prospects of increased industry and tourism, Florida leaped from its past agricultural orientation into a modern, urban-oriented future.