

CHAPTER XXV

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1892

When debate was King in University of Wisconsin, a presidential election stirred the student body mightily and perhaps never more so than in 1892. The candidates were Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison. The issues were tariff and, in Wisconsin, the Bennett Law - an innocent-appearing law recently passed, requiring every child of school age to be taught at least one hour a day in the English language. For once, Lutherans and Catholics, always before bitter political enemies, were agreed. This was an attack, they said, on their parochial school systems, for some schools of both denominations taught only German.

This was the heyday period of railroad passes. When the legislature was in session, it was a dumb student who paid carfare for a visit home - just apply to your representative for a pass and it was forthcoming. The Graduate School was dull, the election was interesting, so the students hopped to it. The Seniors went out stump speaking - riding on passes - being met by brass bands and taking part in the great whirlwind campaign. But, alas, Grandfather was not yet twenty-one, hence his campaign speeches would not be accepted and for him there were no brass bands and exciting adventures. He stayed home to attend classes at the Graduate School while his roommate and most of his friends stumped lustily for Harrison.

The most irritating feature of this was that Grandfather alone among the crowd was a Democrat. He had inherited this political connection

from his father, who in turn had inherited it from his father, who had been a loyal supporter of Andrew Jackson. At the next campaign, Grandfather was not able to follow Bryan on his "free silver" campaign and cast his first presidential vote for a Republican, but at the time he was a "dyed-in-the-wood" Democrat, quite out of luck, unable not only to make stump speeches, but even to vote.

Cleveland, much to the surprise of our crowd, won in a landslide and, in Wisconsin, with the added complication of the Bennett Law, the Democratic sweep was clear beyond anyone's ability to comprehend. Grandfather now got his turn to laugh. He pointed out to his roommate and other friends just how many less Republican votes there were in the towns in which they had orated than there were at the previous election when they had not orated.

But with the election over, life had become inexpressibly dull down in the opera house, away from college life and on work which was not to be our life work, for we all planned next year to enter the law school. Was there any way out? One day Haskell, a joint debate colleague and, as related before, quite ahead of the crowd in worldly lore, offered a suggestion. Probably we had enough credits to merit a diploma with a little work "in absentia". Why not quit at the end of the Fall term and teach school? All set to figuring their records - Grandfather alone had sufficient credits. He had never thought of teaching - but "Bully idea, let's try it for the rest of the year."

A notice appeared on the University bulletin board that Wausau High School needed an assistant. Grandfather offered to go, was accepted

and his college days were over. He completed a few needed credits while he taught and returned for his diploma and the Senior festivities in June.

Probably before closing the chapter, I ought to tell you of the newly elected legislature. In many election districts, the Democrats had never had enough votes to make it worth while to conduct a campaign and in these districts the name of someone - no matter whom - was put on the ticket for assemblyman or state senator, just to fill in the space. Due to the landslide, these misfits had been elected. Some of them could not read or write, some had to sit near another member who would coach them by saying "vote Aye, boys."

In strange contrast to the "unwashed Democrats" who had been elected to the legislature was the leader of the Democratic party - Col. Vilas, a man of large wealth and unusual culture, immaculate in dress, with silken whiskers trimmed in latest New York style, and with a silver voice and a ready flow of beautiful and effective English that won for him recognition as one of the foremost orators of his day. Mark Twain, in his memoirs, writing of the great dinner given General Grant upon his return from a trip abroad, at which the greatest orators of the nation vied with each other, gives Col. Vilas highest commendation of all.

This motley and unkempt legislature elected Col. Vilas United States Senator. (In that day United States Senators were elected by legislature.) It was a strange and colorful sight when Senator Vilas, looking like a traveling model for a New York smart tailor, stepped upon the platform in the Assembly Chamber and delivered a vote of thanks to this strange mob of ill-kempt legislators, speaking in his most cultured English with quotations from Horace and other Latin authors.

Col. Vilas served his term in the Senate with distinction, and afterward had it not been for petty politics, would have been chosen president of University of Wisconsin - a task for which he was admirably fitted. Col. Vilas had a deep interest in education and at his death left his large fortune to the University of Wisconsin.