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The Alliance Party and the MINNESOTA LEGISLATURE of 1891

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IN THE GENERATION following the Civil War, Minnesota politics were as turbulent as frontier politics are usually supposed to be. The troublesome issues faced by a new state and the aggressive personalities who assumed political leadership conspired to make it so. The principal arenas of political conflict during this period were the biennial Republican state conventions and the state legislatures. Both were notoriously unpredictable. For example, Alexander Ramsey's immense prestige did not save his "dynasty" when it came under attack in the Republican convention of 1873, and in 1875 the legislature rejected his bid for a third term in the United States Senate. In 1883 Senator William Windom was defeated for re-election, and his successor, Dwight M. Sabin, was permitted to serve only a single term. In 1888 it was generally agreed that Governor Andrew R. McGill had given the state a creditable administration, but he was denied renomination by his party.¹

Although Minnesota politics were fluid

during the first decades of statehood, this was not evident in state elections, for the habit of casting decisive majorities for the Republicans became well established in the years after 1860. A Democrat occasionally was elected to Congress, but from 1860 through 1888 the Republicans won every contest for state office and held overwhelming control in every legislature.

The election of 1890 marked a sharp break in this pattern. When the returns were tabulated, it was clear that the period of unchallenged Republican supremacy had ended—at least temporarily. By an extremely thin margin, the Republicans managed to re-elect Governor William R. Merriam and other state officials with one exception. The post of state auditor went to Adolph Biermann, who enjoyed the combined support of the Democratic and Farmers' Alliance parties. The outcome of this contest carried significant implications; it suggested what might be possible if permanent Democratic-Alliance fusion could be effected. As it was Governor Merriam could hardly claim electoral endorsement of his administration. His plurality over Judge Thomas Wilson, the Democratic candidate, was fewer than twenty-five hundred

¹ See Harlan P. Hall, *Observations; Being More or Less a History of Political Contests in Minnesota from 1849 to 1904*, 121-154, 196-201, 206-214 (St. Paul, 1904).

votes, and he received less than forty per cent of the total ballots cast.²

If the state returns were discouraging to Republicans, the Congressional results were disheartening. Although the incumbent delegation had been solidly Republican, in the 1890 election only one district, the Second, was salvaged by the Grand Old Party. In this southwestern Minnesota area, John Lind was returned to the House by a margin of less than five hundred votes.³ The First, Third, and Fourth districts, which at that time included the Twin Cities as well as the southeastern and the south central counties, were captured by the Democrats. In the Fifth District — roughly all of Minnesota north of Swift County — Kittel Halvorson, the Alliance candidate, was the victor.

That agricultural discontent was chiefly responsible for the 1890 electoral upset is indicated by the surprising showing of the new Alliance party, the farmer's self-proclaimed spokesman. Although it was not yet four months old at election time, the Alliance party's candidate for governor, Sidney M. Owen, polled 58,513 votes, nearly a fourth of the total cast for the office. In addition to electing a third-party Congressman, Alliance voters contributed to the victories of two of the three successful Democrats in the Congressional races. Approximately a third of the members of the new legislature were Alliance party men — enough to prevent the organization of that body by either the Democrats or the Republicans.

THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE of the Alliance party in the campaign of 1890 marked a stage, not a beginning, in the history of Minnesota agrarian protest politics. In the 1870s the Patrons of Husbandry, better known as the Grangers, held the center of the agrarian stage. Grange vitality declined, but within a very few years the complex of organizations making up the Farmers' Alliance movement had come into being. The Alliance had much in common

with the Grange and also with the Greenback party, another expression of agricultural discontent in the 1870s and 1880s. All three, in varying degrees, called for an inflationary monetary policy and the invocation of state police power and federal regulatory authority to control freight rates, marketing practices, and money lending. The 1890 platform of the Alliance party included all these demands.⁴

Throughout the 1880s the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance had eschewed third-party activity. Instead it had operated as a pressure group within the two-party system. For a time this strategy appeared well conceived. In response to Alliance pressure, the legislature of 1885 established a three-man railroad and warehouse commission as a "strong" regulatory body, enacted several laws defining and prohibiting discriminatory railroad practices, and set up a system of grain inspection at terminal elevators. In 1886 the Republican party wrote into its platform a series of reform demands presented jointly by the Alliance and the Knights of Labor. In the fall elections, a substantial number of legislative candidates committed to Alliance objectives were named.⁵

Thus Alliance hopes had never been higher than at the opening of the legislative session of 1887. Yet within a few weeks these hopes came crashing to earth. The powerful bipartisan (but predominantly Republican) reform bloc in the legislature led by Ignatius Donnelly split into two embattled fac-

² For voting returns discussed in this and succeeding paragraphs, see *Minnesota Legislative Manual*, 1891, p. 554-571, 574-576.

³ Lind is, of course, better known to Minnesota political history as a Democrat. His party allegiance shifted from Republicanism in 1896.

⁴ See *Minneapolis Journal*, July 17, 1890. Two works dealing with agrarian protest politics in the Midwest are John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis, 1931), and Russel B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics* (East Lansing, 1951).

⁵ A detailed discussion by Donald F. Warner of the Alliance activities outlined here and in succeeding paragraphs may be found in "Prelude to Populism," in *Minnesota History*, 32: 130-140 (September, 1951).

ROLLER mill
at Stephen, 1890



tions, and only a small part of the Alliance program was enacted into law. For the next two years the Farmers' Alliance was so weakened by war between these factions that its influence with Republican leaders shrank to the vanishing point. As a result, some members of the Alliance felt that the organization should sponsor the creation of a new third party.

IN 1889 the basis was laid for a Farmers' Alliance renaissance. At its annual state convention, which met in March, a truce—though necessarily a tenuous one—was negotiated between the factions, and plans were made for an ambitious membership drive. Ignatius Donnelly made a substantial contribution to both these projects. For the time being he set aside his own ambition to be president of the state Alliance and agreed to the selection of a compromise candidate for this post. Since Donnelly's aspiration to lead the movement was the principal issue at stake between the factions, his forbearance was essential for internal unity. As Alliance state lecturer, Donnelly also lent his great forensic talents to the organizational drive. His success was striking; in 1889 and 1890 Alliance locals multiplied at a phenomenal rate. By March,

1890, when the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance again assembled for its annual convention, the organization was formidable.

But the problem of unity was still an urgent one. The 1889 arrangement of electing a compromise candidate to the presidency and employing Donnelly as state lecturer was renewed by the 1890 convention, much to the chagrin of Donnelly's friends. With great reluctance he accepted the decision, but during the summer of 1890 he made it clear that he would not again tolerate what he considered a denial of his rightful due.

The 1890 convention was also obliged to face the issue of future Farmers' Alliance political strategy. Expressions on the floor and numerous resolutions from Alliance locals indicated that independent political action commanded stronger support than ever before. Donnelly, however, opposed the immediate creation of a state-wide third party; he proposed instead a concentrated effort to elect friendly legislators and local officials. Other Alliance leaders were thought to favor fusion with the Democrats, or at least exploratory moves in that direction. In the face of divided opinion, the convention did not definitively settle the question of a third party. Instead the



DONNELLY, "the Minnesota Don Quixote"

issue was referred to the local Alliances, where before spring yielded to summer the rank-and-file members made it clear that they favored third-party action. As a result, at a special convention on July 16, 1890, the Minnesota Alliance party was brought into existence by the overwhelming vote of 394 to 28.⁶

Alliance factionalism asserted itself, however, when the convention turned to the problem of nominating a gubernatorial candidate. Donnelly was a determined contender for the honor; his opponents, who were supporting R. J. Hall, the president of the Farmers' Alliance, were equally resolved to block Donnelly's nomination. For a time it appeared that the new party might dissolve before it was launched. This eventuality was avoided by the nomination of Owen, editor of *Farm, Stock and Home*, a widely read agricultural biweekly. With

the same reluctance manifested at the March convention, Donnelly's supporters accepted Owen and the other candidates on the state ticket.

TO A CONSIDERABLE EXTENT Owen and the Alliance held the initiative during the 1890 campaign. In meeting the challenge of the new party, Democrats and Republicans alike emphasized their agreement with basic Alliance contentions about the plight of the farmer, the "wickedness" of monopolies, and the urgent necessity to legislate economic imbalances out of existence. Although subsequent campaigns were to be marked by Republican and Democratic efforts to capitalize on alleged third-party extremism, this was not the case in 1890. The campaign centered about the question of which party was best equipped to enact a reform program.

To assume that this was the only issue, or that the election's outcome depended solely upon the farmer's interpretation of his situation would, however, be erroneous. Other problems, related and unrelated, played a role. The Republicans gained little from their association with the Harrison administration, largely because the McKinley tariff was exceedingly unpopular. Opposition to it was a leading plank in the Alliance platform, and in part the Democratic sweep of Minneapolis and St. Paul was attributable to resentment of Republican protectionism.⁷

The general reputation of the state administration created additional liabilities for the Republicans. Suspicion that Merriam had "boodled" his way into party

⁶ For the proceedings of both conventions, see the *Journal*, March 7, 8, July 16, 17, 1890. See also *Great West* (St. Paul), July 25, 1890; Donnelly to Merriam, June 1, 1890. Donnelly Letter Book. The Donnelly Papers are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁷ On the Republican campaign, see the *Journal*, October 17, 1890; *Northfield News*, August 2, November 1, 1890. For Republican editorial explanations of the election results, see issues of the *Journal* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 6, 1890; *News*, November 8, 1890.

leadership, and a conviction that he personified the power of money in politics, was obviously grist for Alliance mills. But the Democrats were also in a position to make capital of these charges, especially in Hennepin County, where Merriam suffered additional handicaps.⁸

The comic-opera census war between Minneapolis and St. Paul was fought in the early summer of 1890. One of its by-products was the creation of an atmosphere in which it was almost impossible for St. Paul and Minneapolis politicians to co-operate. Under the circumstances, Merriam, who was a St. Paul banker, and his closest associates became victims of Minneapolis' hostility for St. Paul. A spirited but unsuccessful drive against the governor's renomination was launched by Hennepin County Republicans. Its principal result was that the county was denied its traditional representation on the Republican state ticket. Whatever the cause—the McKinley law, Merriam, or both—the Republican party suffered a catastrophic defeat in Minneapolis and Hennepin County. The incumbent Republican city administration, which suffered some liabilities in its own right, was swept out of office; and nineteen Democrats were elected to Hennepin's twenty-one-man legislative delegation, a situation that contributed substantially to the deadlock in the 1891 legislature.

AS 1890 receded and 1891 approached, political observers directed their attention to the forthcoming legislative session. The Democrats had made substantial gains in both chambers, and the Alliance had been successful in enough races to create a stalemate. Perhaps the novelty of the situation

can be exaggerated. Blocs, *ad hoc* and otherwise, had been a feature of preceding legislatures, and party discipline had often been conspicuously absent. For thirty years, however, formal Republican supremacy had been a fact, and now it had been broken. The question of the moment was what balance of forces would take the place of the Republican majority which had organized previous legislatures.

The balance-of-power position of the Alliance party meant that its legislators held the most important key to the situation. To a great extent, the initiative lay with Donnelly, although he had been excluded from the inner circles of the Alliance movement before and during the campaign. However, his successful race for the Senate from his own county of Dakota made him a member-elect of the forthcoming legislature—an obvious advantage—and his political and legislative experience far exceeded that of his Alliance colleagues. Many of them were substantial farmers or merchants who had served in local offices or, at most, a term or two in the legislature. Donnelly's political career, on the other hand, extended back to 1860, and included service as lieutenant governor, Congressman, and state legislator. His literary work had gained him prominence, and his position at the forefront of every agrarian movement since the 1870s had made him the "Mr. Reform" of Minnesota politics.⁹

"The sky is luminous with promise."¹⁰ This was Donnelly's assessment of the outlook immediately after the election. Perhaps his exuberance reflected satisfaction that the Alliance movement had reached a summit hitherto unattained, but in view of his unsatisfactory relations with the Alliance leadership, it is more likely that he was thinking of personal vistas opened by the election's outcome. His experience clearly qualified him to lead the Alliance legislators at a time of challenge and opportunity; the successful exercise of such leadership might increase his influence in the affairs of the party.

⁸ The charge that Merriam "boddled" is discussed by Hall in *Observations*, 201. On the Hennepin County situation below, see the *Journal*, March 3, July 7, 14, 24, 25, 1890; *News*, May 24, 31, July 12, August 16, 1890.

⁹ See John D. Hicks, "The Political Career of Ignatius Donnelly," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 8:80-132 (June-September, 1921).

¹⁰ Donnelly to W. W. Mayo, November 6, 1890, Donnelly Letter Book.

He had not given up his ambition to be president of the Farmers' Alliance. The organization's new convention was scheduled for December 30, 1890, on the eve of the legislature's convocation. Donnelly had actively campaigned for the presidency at least since July, and he was in an advantageous position to press his bid for the office. His prospective role in the organization of the Senate, and perhaps of the House, enabled him to hold out the lure of legislative patronage in return for support of his candidacy.¹¹

Donnelly's campaign was successful. By a vote of 542 to 105, the December convention elected him to the presidency of the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance.¹² It might be added that his control of the Alliance was not seriously challenged in the years that followed; it can also be said that never again did the organization wield the power it did in 1889 and 1890. As an inspirational reform evangelist Donnelly had few rivals. Unfortunately, he seldom demonstrated a sustained capacity to manage a situation which required conciliation and compromise.

PREOCCUPATION with the campaign for the Alliance presidency did not keep Donnelly from thinking about the forthcoming legislative session. In fact, his bid to head the Alliance and his aspiration to dominate the organization of the legislature were parts of a single plan to re-establish his leadership of the farmers' movement. He was particularly eager to control the distribution of legislative patronage. He was also determined to secure for himself the chairmanship of the Senate railroad committee, to obtain dominant positions on other key committees for his Alliance colleagues, and to bring about the election of an Allianceman to the speakership of the House. If these objectives could be realized, the new party would have offices to dispense, the Alliance program presumably would fare well in the legislature, and Donnelly's title to third-party leadership would be indisputable.¹³

Immediately after the election he began to initiate plans and negotiate agreements to accomplish his objectives. He wrote personally to fellow senators-elect in an effort to secure their adherence to his bloc. The task of contacting House members was entrusted to C. P. Carpenter of Farmington, publisher of the *Dakota County Tribune*, who had served as chief clerk of the House in 1889 and hoped to secure the position again. With some reluctance, Donnelly pledged his support to E. T. Champlin of Garden City for the speakership. A prominent Blue Earth County farmer who had served in two previous legislatures, Champlin had the backing of established leaders of the Alliance party and was looked upon with favor by Democrats with Alliance leanings, for he had won his House seat on a Democratic-Alliance fusion ticket. Donnelly also agreed to back Fred Van Duzee of Luverne for secretary of the Senate. Like Champlin, Van Duzee had strong support among southwestern Minnesota Democrats and Alliancemen.¹⁴

As the opening day of the session approached, it was not clear what partisan combination would best accomplish Donnelly's ends. The presumption was on the side of a Democratic-Alliance coalition, but it was not certain that such an arrangement could be negotiated. Champlin's candidacy

¹¹ On Donnelly's campaign for the office, see Warner, in *Minnesota History*, 32: 140; Donnelly to A. M. Morrison, November 12, 1890, and to J. Q. Cronkhite, November 18, 1890, Donnelly Letter Book.

¹² For accounts of the convention, see the *Pioneer Press*, January 2, 1891; *Martin County Sentinel* (Fairmont), and *Great West*, January 9, 1891.

¹³ Donnelly's plans are set forth in his circular letter to local Alliances, November 15, 1890, Donnelly Papers; and in a letter to Henry Feig, November 22, 1890, Donnelly Letter Book.

¹⁴ Donnelly to Eric Sevastson, November 13, 1890; to F. M. Currier, G. A. Glade, and A. Y. Eaton, November 15, 1890; to E. T. Champlin, November 26, 1890. See also letters to Donnelly from W. W. Mayo, November 8, 14, 1890; Jay La Due, November 11, 1890; C. P. Carpenter, November 14, 24, 1890; J. H. Baker, November 15, 1890; E. T. Champlin, November 16, 1890; and F. M. Currier, November 22, 1890, Donnelly Papers.

did not command full Democratic support, and Carpenter's aspirations were opposed by F. J. Smalley, the state Democratic leadership's choice for chief clerk.

From time to time, disquieting rumors of counterplans gained credence. One report had it that "organization" Democrats were confident of their ability to attract enough Alliance legislators to their ranks to control the House independently of Donnelly and Champlin. On the eve of the session it was rumored that a sufficient number of Democrats would support Republican Representative Frank E. Searle of St. Cloud to assure his election as speaker. Such rumors, coupled with Donnelly's innate distrust of the Democratic leadership, led him to explore alternatives to Democratic-Alliance coalition. Among them was an utterly impractical plan to organize a "reform" bloc consisting of Alliance legislators and enough disaffected Republicans and Democrats to constitute a majority. Donnelly also approached Lieutenant Governor Gideon S. Ives with a proposal that he reserve key positions on important committees for Alliance senators in return for Alliance co-operation with the Republicans in organizing the Senate. Ives rejected the proposal.¹⁵

The legislature convened on January 6 with the deadlock still unresolved. But before the end of the day, the election of Van Duzee as secretary of the Senate indicated

that a Democratic-Alliance coalition had assumed control of that chamber. During the next few days other details of the coalition agreement came to light. The lieutenant governor was stripped of his customary power to appoint committees; six committee chairmanships were allotted to Alliance senators and thirteen to Democrats; Donnelly was given the coveted chairmanship of the railroad committee. Detailed arrangements were also made for the division of legislative patronage.¹⁶

A similar combination ultimately organized the House, but there agreement was not reached until the third day of the session. The principal difficulties were over the speakership and the post of chief clerk. At the start, Alliance members backed a Champlin-Carpenter combination for these offices, while the Democrats supported Representative H. C. Stivers for speaker and Smalley for clerk. Newspaper reports affirmed that Alliance determination to secure the chairmanship of the railroad committee was an additional point of contention between leaders of the two parties. On January 8 a compromise was worked out, and the way cleared for a Democratic-Alliance coalition. Champlin was selected speaker, Smalley became chief clerk, and committee chairmanships were distributed equally. The Democrats were given the right to select the first chairman, the Alliance the second, the Democrats the third, and so on. As anticipated, the Democrats' first choice was the House railroad committee.¹⁷

REPUBLICAN reaction to the formation of a Democratic-Alliance "combine" — as the coalition came to be called — was swift and sharp. Republican senators signed a protest containing three major points: that the Democratic-Alliance majority had acted illegally in stripping the lieutenant governor of his authority to appoint committees; that the Republican "plurality" had been deprived of its rightful number of committee assignments; and that farmer

¹⁵ On November 15 Donnelly wrote to Major J. M. Bowler: "I think a combination of D's and A's probable." Donnelly Papers. For information on the various rumors and plans, see the *Journal*, January 2, 1891; Donnelly to John Diamond, November 27, 1890; to Mayo and to J. P. Jennison, December 1, 1890; to Ives, December 18, 1890. Donnelly Letter Book. See also Ives to Donnelly, December 20, 1890. Donnelly Papers.

¹⁶ *Journal*, January 6, 1891; *Pioneer Press*, January 6, 11, 1891. Key votes at the opening of the session revealed the following division in the 54-member Senate: Republicans, 26; Democrats, 15; Alliance party, 13. In the 114-member House, there were 40 Democrats; 41 Republicans; 32 Alliance party members; and one vacancy created by a disputed election.

¹⁷ *Journal*, January 7, 8, 9, 1891; *Pioneer Press*, January 7, 9, 20, 1891.

members of the Senate had been denied their share of committee posts. Republican newspaper comment followed the main lines of the protest and, in addition, interpreted the combine arrangement as a cynical scheme entered into for the control of patronage by two groups inherently incapable of co-operation on policy matters.¹⁸

Due allowance has to be made for the partisanship underlying these allegations, but the combine scheme was inherently vulnerable at several points. True, there were areas of agreement between the Alliance and the Democratic parties on such issues as the tariff. In the campaign both had battled a common enemy—the Republican party—and the election had seen fusion arrangements in several contests.

To a generation accustomed to the existence of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party, a Democratic-Alliance combination might seem perfectly logical, but there was another side of the coin. Until 1896 the acknowledged leader of the Minnesota Democratic party was Michael Doran of St. Paul, a pronounced conservative in the Grover Cleveland sense. No doubt the unprincipled boss image of Doran created by his political opponents was less than just, but there can be no question that he was thoroughly unsympathetic to the Alliance movement and determined to prevent his own party from becoming an instrument for the enactment of the Alliance program. Minnesota's leading Democratic daily, the *St. Paul Globe*, shared Doran's point of view.

Some Democratic legislators were not responsive to Doran's leadership, but this did not automatically make them sympathetic to the Alliance party. For example, in the Hennepin County delegation several Minneapolis Democrats were advocates of Henry George's single tax. A few were enthusiastic supporters of employer liability legislation, the eight-hour day, factory inspection, and prohibition of child labor. Leading the latter group was S. A. Stockwell, then at the beginning of his phenomenally

long career in the Minnesota legislature. These issues, however, offered a slender base for co-operation with the Alliance party. Its members were, on the whole, suspicious of the single tax. Alliance platforms had given endorsement to labor's most important demands, but rank-and-file Alliance members were at best lukewarm supporters of the measures. No doubt many of them feared that the eight-hour day and bans on child labor might be applied to agriculture.¹⁹

The Democratic legislators from rural Minnesota were not a particularly cohesive group. On questions of public policy they were about as divided as their Republican colleagues. Some had been elected with formal Alliance support—Dr. W. W. Mayo of Rochester, for example—and others were basically sympathetic to Alliance demands. However, most of them were freshman legislators. They were not, therefore, as influential in party councils as men like Senator Henry Keller of Stearns County and other veterans from traditionally Democratic districts. On the whole, such leading Democrats had little in common with the Alliance. Thus it cannot be said that the combine partners were sufficiently compatible on public policy issues to assure the harmonious development of a legislative program.

THE COALITION also faced other problems. Republican possession of the governorship was an obvious handicap. Politically it would have been extremely unwise for Merriam to block the enactment of a reform program, but little incentive or opportunity existed for him to exert his leadership in the development of such legislation. Moreover, neither the Alliance party nor the Democrats had a surplus of experi-

¹⁸ See *Pioneer Press*, January 11, 15, 1891; *Sentinel*, January 16, 1891.

¹⁹ Open meetings between Single-taxers and Alliance-men were not particularly harmonious. See *Pioneer Press*, January 30, February 6, 1891.

enced leaders. The latter had not controlled the legislature for over a generation, and the Alliance had to rely on Donnelly who, for all his brilliance, was not an effective legislator. Factionalism also constituted a danger; the session was to show how effectively outbreaks of intra-Alliance dissensions could disrupt a legislative program. Still another handicap was lack of editorial support. Then, as in later years, the Minnesota press was predominantly Republican.

Considered together these difficulties appear formidable, but perhaps they were not insurmountable. Certainly there was in 1891 a sense of urgency about reforms long overdue, and a deep anxiety about the plight of the farmer. If platforms and campaign pronouncements have any meaning whatever, it should have been possible to enact a minimal reform program. Spokesmen of all parties were agreed that shippers, and especially small shippers, were entitled to legislative protection against railroad discrimination; that something had to be done to improve the farmer's bargaining position at the local elevator level; that high interest charges had to be dealt with; and that the state's wage earners needed more legal protection against the hazards of the factory than they were getting.²⁰

The responsibility facing the legislature of 1891, and particularly the combine leaders, was to translate these areas of agreement into law. Admittedly this was a difficult assignment. Tensions within the combine had to be contained insofar as possible, and maximum agreement on essentials cultivated. Republican help had to be courted on behalf of measures which could not command full Democratic-Alliance support. To enact a reform program under such circumstances required skillful group diplomacy and the application of



"THE Farmer in Control"

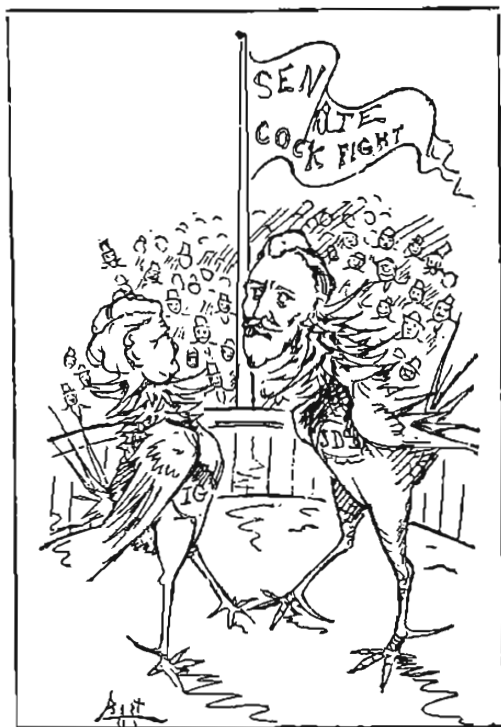
the arts of compromise rather than the techniques of political evangelism. The leaders of the combine were unable to rise to the challenge.

After the Senate's thirteen Alliancemen and fifteen Democrats had united to organize that body, an acrimonious debate developed on the subject of the Republican protest. The debate was precipitated by a series of parliamentary moves by Donnelly to prevent the protest from being entered in the *Senate Journal* — moves which in the end were unsuccessful — but time and again during the first two weeks the subject generated heated discussion. When its potentialities were exhausted, allegations about the improper use of money in the contest for United States Senator in 1889 were exhausted for examination. Since the successful candidate in the race had been William D. Washburn, with whom Donnelly had fought more than one political duel, this topic, like the protest, had great controversial possibilities, which were exploited to the fullest. The debate ended when the Senate authorized the printing of ten thousand copies of a transcript of the 1889 legislature's investigation of the bribery charges.²¹

The opening debates set the tone for

²⁰ These basic reforms were called for in Governor Knute Nelson's inaugural message two years later. See *Pioneer Press*, January 5, 1893.

²¹ *Pioneer Press*, January 21, February 5, 8, 13, 1891.



CARTOON entitled "The Daily Exhibition in the Senate Cockpit"

the 1891 session. Zealous preoccupation with irrelevancies and bitter controversy over trivialities became the mark of daily Senate routine. Had the division continued along partisan lines, it is possible that a legislative program might have been enacted. But the acrimony was not long confined within a Republican versus combine context—a serious matter, for the latter dominated the Senate by only two votes. When the major bills of the session came up for consideration, Democrat was frequently at odds with Allianceman, and at times Allianceman bitterly opposed Allianceman. Usually these disagreements were accompanied by charges of bad faith and broken promises.

SUCH A SITUATION developed when interest and usury legislation came up for debate. The main issue was not the percentage definition of the legal interest rate, or even what the maximum contract in-

terest rate should be. Rather it was a question of what penalties should be prescribed for exceeding the maximum contract rate. One group of senators favored forfeiture of both interest and principal as the maximum penalty for violation. Others insisted that such action would be unnecessarily punitive, and that it would drive capital from the state. A few wanted to repeal existing legislation, which provided for forfeiture of interest, and eliminate entirely any ceiling on the contract rate.²²

When the issue reached the floor, Donnelly supported a bill introduced by Republican Senator Charles R. Davis of Nicollet County, which in its original form provided for forfeiture of both interest and principal. Although Donnelly's position was the logical one for an Alliance senator to take, his moral right to support the Davis measure was challenged by several Democratic colleagues. According to Senator J. W. Craven of Carver County, one of the conditions agreed to at the time the combine was formed was that the Davis act would be sidetracked in favor of one to be drafted by the Senate banking committee—a bill which, as it turned out, was less stringent than that drafted by Davis. Now, said Craven, Donnelly not only had the bad grace to oppose the committee's version, but he also accused its sponsors and supporters of "corruption."²³

Most of the Senate Democrats supported the banking committee's bill and a mild forfeiture clause. So did a number of Alliance senators. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of March 3, 1891, reported that Senator E. E. Lommen of Polk County defined his position by quoting from a constituent's letter: "If you want to send this whole upper country to Hades by the shortest route, then pass all these [interest] bills at once." Senator John Hompe of Otter Tail County agreed with Lommen. On the other hand,

²² *Pioneer Press*, February 27, 1891.

²³ *Pioneer Press*, March 1, 1891. Senator Keller gave the same version of the agreement. See the *Press* of April 16, 1891.

several prominent Republicans, including Senator Frank Day of Martin County, were vigorous advocates of a stringent forfeiture clause.²⁴

The stand taken by Lommen and Hompe may have given plausibility to suspicions that the Alliance party, at the time the combine was formed, had agreed to back a "weak" interest bill for the sake of legislative patronage. But it would be unfair not to recognize that legislators from such counties as Polk and Otter Tail were placed under strong pressure by the tight-money situation in their districts. The pressure was intensified by the persistent emphasis upon the relationship between "strong" interest legislation and an even tighter money situation.

The *St. Paul Globe* of March 16, 1891, quoted the *Windom Reporter* as saying that loan companies in Cottonwood County were "holding up" credit applications pending action by the legislature. If a stringent usury law was passed, according to the *Reporter*, the companies would suspend business entirely. On March 18 the *Globe* carried a letter written by John Lathrop, onetime secretary of the Farmers' Alliance, which stated that in Lac qui Parle County interest rates of from twelve to eighteen per cent were being advertised, the existing ten per cent ceiling notwithstanding. The penalty for seeking legal redress, said Lathrop, was a "black-listing" which would effectively deprive the complainant of any source of credit.

THAT it was difficult for legislators from areas most directly affected to ignore the ominous implications raised by opponents of a stringent usury law is beyond question. However, many farmers had joined the Alliance movement in the hope of securing relief from excessive interest rates. By its own definition, the Alliance party was more uncompromising on the usury is-

sue than were the older parties. Yet some of its elected representatives were taking a stand considerably more compromising than that taken by many Republicans. "What seems strange," editorialized the *Grant County Herald* of March 19, 1891, "is the utter variance between Alliance precepts at election times and practice of Alliance legislators."

Donnelly's efforts to build support for "strong" interest legislation gave intra-Alliance disagreement widespread publicity. On March 6 the *Great West* carried a letter signed by him as president of the Farmers' Alliance. In rather temperate language, it presented the case for his own stand on forfeiture and called attention to the danger that several Alliance legislators might not support his position when the issue came up for decision. The dissenting legislators were not dealt with severely; charitably Donnelly noted that many of them were inexperienced and hence susceptible to threats about credit stringency. Alliance members were urged to exert all possible pressure on the waverers so that the party could maintain a solid front on interest legislation.

The appeal may have had some effect. A week later the Senate voted to include a forfeiture clause in the pending legislation. A few days later the interest bill passed on a preliminary reading by a vote of 33 to 16, with 6 Republicans and 10 combine senators making up the opposition. Two weeks earlier the House had passed a bill which included a forfeiture clause. The 1891 session did not, however, produce any interest legislation. An effort in the closing hours to suspend the Senate rules so that the bill could come up for final passage failed by twelve votes to command the necessary two-thirds majority.²⁵

SENATE consideration of railroad legislation generated as much intramural combine disharmony as did the debates on usury, although the final record was not as barren. In mid-February a coalition, comprised

²⁴ *Pioneer Press*, February 28, 1891.

²⁵ *Pioneer Press*, March 3, 4, 13, 16, April 19, 1891.

of virtually all the Republican and four combine members of the Senate, inflicted a humiliating defeat on Donnelly, who, it will be recalled, was chairman of the railroad committee. Temporarily dominated by the coalition, the Senate voted to discharge from the committee the so-called Hompe bill as a substitute for a more far-reaching measure authored by Donnelly himself. Hompe was an Alliance party stalwart, and a prominent member of the anti-Donnelly faction. His sponsorship of the bill did little to improve the already strained relations between him and Donnelly. Enmity between the two men was further aggravated by their differences over usury legislation. The result was an open feud, which was kept alive for many months through the exchange of fiery personal missives in the *Great West* and other reform papers.²⁶

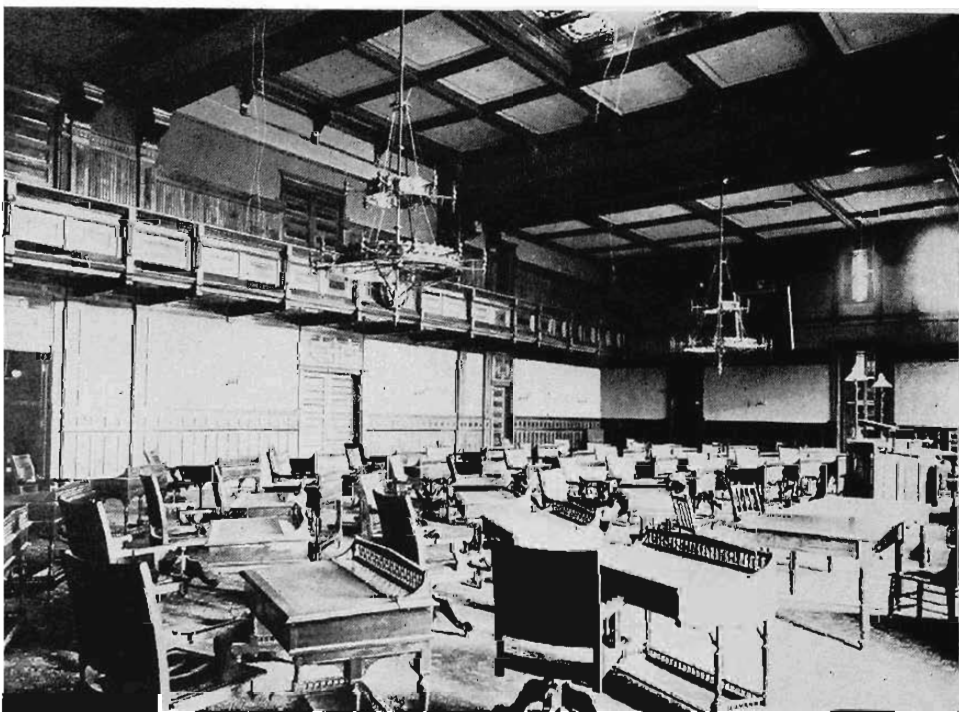
Meanwhile, with a good deal less emotion, consideration of railroad legislation had been initiated in the House. There Alliance hopes were embodied in a comprehensive bill introduced by Representative F. M. Currier of Blue Earth County. Essentially, it was similar to the sidetracked Donnelly bill. Its most controversial provision called for a mandatory "distance tariff," outlawing preferential rates on goods

shipped to terminal points. The distance tariff had long been an accepted Alliance doctrine. Spokesmen for the organization had frequently asserted that terminal rates not only added to the shipper's burden, but also contributed to an unhealthy concentration of commerce and industry in the Twin Cities. The Alliance argument asserted that Iowa's more balanced geographical growth was attributable to the distance-tariff provision in that state's railroad code.²⁷

The Currier bill commanded strong support in the House. As might have been expected, Twin City legislators, for the most part, opposed it, but compensating support was forthcoming from many rural Republicans. It was, however, insufficient to tip the scales in the bill's favor. Although the measure was recommended for passage by a substantial majority, when it came up

²⁶ On the Senate's action, see the *Pioneer Press*, February 15, 1891; *Great West*, February 20, 1891. For a sample of Donnelly's polemics, see *Great West*, March 4, 1892. For Hompe's, see *Ugeblad* (Fergus Falls), February 18, 1892.

²⁷ The full text of the Currier bill as originally introduced is carried in the *Pioneer Press* of January 20, 1891. For a statement of the Alliance point of view on the distance tariff, see Donnelly's "Address to the Farmers of Minnesota," in *Great West*, October 18, 1889.



THE House
chamber in the
second Capitol

for final consideration party lines were a complete shambles, and it lost by a vote of 56 to 48.²⁸

The legislature had not, however, said its last word on railroad legislation. Opponents as well as supporters of the Currier bill were deeply concerned about the chaotic state in which the authority of the railroad and warehouse commission had been left by the United States Supreme Court's decision in the case of the Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Company *vs.* Minnesota. Early in 1890 the court had declared unconstitutional the 1887 legislature's grant of rate-making power to the commission, because the Minnesota law failed to provide for judicial review of the commission's exercise of this power. The court ruled that the 1887 law deprived the railroads of rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.²⁹

Provisions designed to correct the omission and to restore the commission's authority were included in both the Currier and Hompe bills. The latter was passed by both houses in the closing days of the session and was subsequently signed by the governor. It probably gave the railroad and warehouse commission as much authority as the Supreme Court decision permitted. The Hompe bill was a significant piece of legislation, but a general determination to preserve past reforms rather than effective combine leadership was responsible for its passage.³⁰

ANOTHER important enactment of the 1891 legislature was the Australian ballot law. That it passed in spite of the combine was so obvious that Democratic-Alliance spokesmen could claim no credit for it.

²⁸ *Pioneer Press*, April 4, 1891.

²⁹ 134 U.S. 418-466 (1890).

³⁰ For its provisions, see Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1891. p. 178-185. On its passage, see the *Journal*, April 9, 14, 1891.

³¹ See *General Laws*, 1891. p. 23-66. Reports on passage of the bill and Democratic objections to it may be found in the *Pioneer Press* and the *Globe* for April 17, 1891.

When the Keyes bill, as the secret ballot measure was called, came up for consideration, a deep split developed between Democratic and Alliance legislators. The issue was not whether a secret ballot should be adopted; virtually everybody wanted that. But the Democrats objected strenuously to a provision in the Keyes bill which made it mandatory for the elector to place a check by the name of every candidate for whom he was voting. Instead, Democratic spokesmen wanted a ballot which would permit the voter, were he so minded, to indicate in a box at the top that he wished to vote for all the candidates of a given party. Democrats argued that the ballot prescribed by the Keyes bill discriminated against the foreign born and placed their right to vote under the control of Republican employers. This reasoning made no impression on either Republican or Alliance legislators, whose solid front was formidable enough to push the bill through both houses.³¹

Combine sponsorship of other reform measures was, in general, ineffective. When unsolicited Republican support was forthcoming, a bill had a chance; when its fate depended primarily upon combine solidarity and leadership, it was usually consigned to oblivion. Although a Congressional reapportionment law, made necessary by the growth of population recorded in the census of 1890, was enacted more or less as a matter of course, the list of measures that failed is impressive. No important labor legislation was passed. An attempted compromise on the single tax, which would have left each community free to adopt it for its own financial needs, failed miserably. A later generation may doubt the wisdom of such a measure, but a friendly disposition toward it by the Alliance would have contributed greatly to amity within the combine's reform wing. A proposed constitutional amendment which broadened the state's authority to regulate elevators and warehouses failed to clear its first hurdle when it lost in the Senate by one vote.

A bill, introduced by Donnelly, to tax the mortgage holder's equity in real estate fell by the wayside. Another measure authorizing school districts to furnish free textbooks to pupils died in committee. And so it went.³²

Republican orators subsequently made much of the fiscal "excesses" of the 1891 legislature. Their case rested on an increase in the state tax rate from 1.7 to 2.2 mills; on a bill for legislative "sundries" which exceeded that of the 1889 session by some fifteen thousand dollars; and on a substantial increase in total appropriations. In rebuttal, combine spokesmen pointed out that Republican sponsored amendments, offered in the certain knowledge that they would command the few required combine votes for passage, were at least partly responsible for the increased level of spending. There was an element of justice in the complaint, but it was the combine which had to bear the responsibility. Expenditures and taxes had been raised at a time when the combine controlled the legislature; and to hard-pressed farmers, extremely sensitive to every increase in financial burdens, this apparent extravagance was the vital point.³³

Thus the record of the legislature of 1891 was not impressive. At the beginning of the session expectations had run high. The end of a generation of Republican legislative domination was believed by many to herald a new era which would effect a wholesale redress of grievances. Yet out of all the reform measures thrown into the legislative hoppers, only two important ones survived: a railroad bill which fell far short of Alliance expectations and promises; and an Australian ballot law which the Democrats had stoutly opposed. Over against this record were all the measures that had failed, and an increased financial burden. Most galling of all was the legislature's failure to enact an interest and usury law.

IN THE DAYS before the problems of the Middle East competed for attention

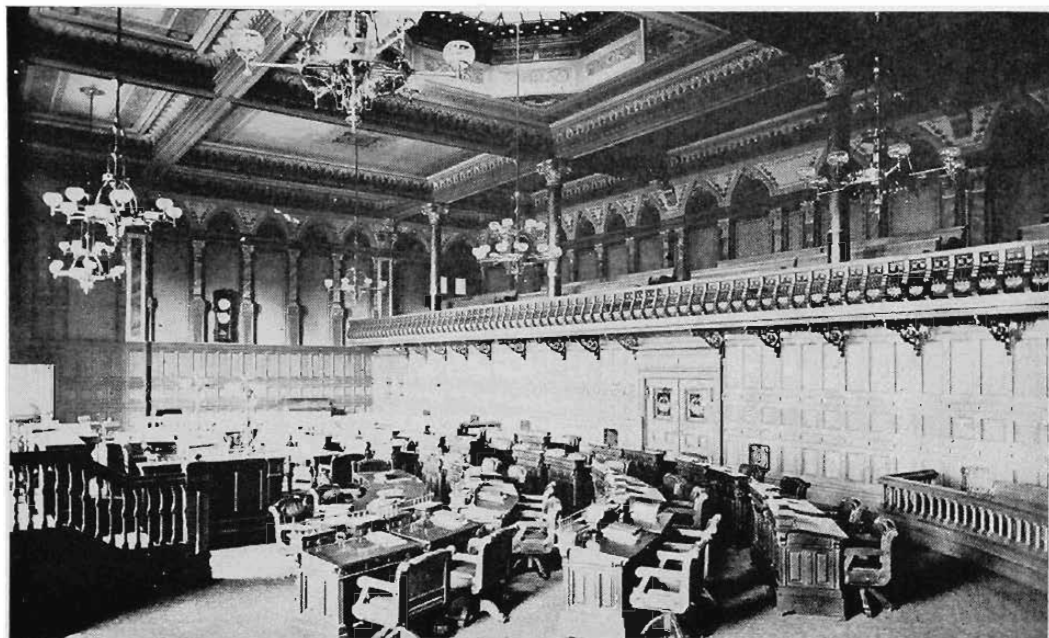
with those of the Middle West, and when even Washington, D. C., seemed fairly remote, evaluating the performance of a recently adjourned legislature was a more popular journalistic enterprise than it is in the 1950s. Usually the verdicts were not couched in pure black or white terms, and partisanship was only one of several factors influencing judgment. Occasionally — as in 1893, 1895, and 1901 — the white predominated to the point where superlatives were employed.

Superlatives were used in 1891, too, though not for the purpose of pointing up the legislature's virtues. To the *New Ulm Review* of April 15, 1891, the session's legacy was "nothing but a bill of expense for salaries and postage stamps." In its issue of April 24, the *Martin County Sentinel*, Senator Frank Day's paper, called the session the most extravagant in the history of the state and attributed its meager accomplishments to Republican influence. The *Moorhead News* was quoted by the *Sentinel* of May 8 as lamenting the extent to which every taxpayer had been penalized by the legislator's "inexperience and extravagance."

Partisanship heavily influenced these judgments, but it is significant that Democratic-Alliance organs either defended the session in terms too apologetic to be convincing or joined the chorus of denunciation. The *St. Peter Herald*, then edited by the youthful John A. Johnson, in the issue of May 1 blamed the Republicans for the increased tax rate and the high level of appropriations. In an editorial, the *St. Paul Globe* of April 20 comforted its readers with the thought that a legislature was not to be judged solely by the laws it enacted. The paper maintained that legislative deliberations had educational value,

³² These measures are discussed in the *Pioneer Press*, February 20, 1891; *Globe*, March 14, April 20, 1891; *Journal*, April 1, 1891.

³³ The Republican point of view is expressed in the *Journal*, April 20, 1891; *Sentinel*, May 5, 1891. For the rebuttal, see the *Globe*, April 20, 1891.



SENATE chamber used by the Minnesota legislature in 1891

and they provided outlets for tensions which might otherwise build up to the point of explosion. From this perspective, argued the *Globe*, the legislature of 1891 was a success. In an editorial of April 24, the *Great West*, speaking for the combine's other extreme, took quite a different line. The paper was "thankful indeed" that there were so few Alliancemen in the 1891 legislature, for "if the aroma of that body were to attach to the Alliance party, there would be no more Alliance party in Minnesota, forever."

The Alliance legislators, for their part, declined responsibility for the session's failings. The *Globe* of April 22 published a manifesto, signed by twenty-nine legislators and written in Donnelly's unmistakable prose, which bravely proclaimed: "We are defeated but not disheartened. . . . We call upon the farmers and mechanics and all the hosts of labor to . . . prepare for a great campaign in 1892, for the redemption of the state from the grasp of the classes who now plunder and oppress it."

No pains were spared to demonstrate in the manifesto that the Alliance party de-

served such a mandate in 1892, the late legislative session notwithstanding. Alliancemen, it pointed out, had constituted less than a third of the 1891 legislature's membership. The document also affirmed that "in nearly every instance" Alliance legislators had "voted on the side of retrenchment, reform and good government"; and that an increase in the demands of state institutions was responsible for the hike in taxes and appropriations. The independent existence of the Alliance party was also proclaimed; experience in the late session proved "that in the great battle for reform we can depend on no political party but our own."

The extent to which the manifesto discouraged identification of the Alliance party with the legislature of 1891 obviously cannot be determined. To those who wanted to believe, doubtless it was convincing. Others who remembered that the Alliance party had been part of the legislature's dominant majority may have been more impressed by a comment appearing in the *Sentinel* of April 24: "the late session proves that reformers do not always reform."

MINNESOTA partisan politics of the 1890s were profoundly affected by the reputation which the 1891 legislature, with the aid of its critics, established for itself. Third-party activity was not, of course, abandoned. On the contrary, it entered a more ambitious phase in 1891-92, when the Minnesota branch of the national People's party assumed the assets and liabilities of the Alliance party, which met its final demise in the summer of 1892.

But the People's party was unable to meet the expectations created by the election of 1890. In the 1892 race for governor, Donnelly polled twenty thousand fewer votes than Owen had two years before. The same election cut third-party representation in the state House of Representatives in half, and only one third-party Congressman was elected with a margin of fewer than a hundred votes in an area which Owen and his ticket had swept in the previous election. Democratic fortunes also declined in 1892 despite Grover Cleveland's decisive national victory. Daniel Lawler's race for governor was creditable enough, but his party lost a fourth of its legislative seats and captured only two of the seven Congressional districts.³⁴

Subsequent elections confirmed these trends despite deepening depression and greater economic distress. Up to 1900 there were but two breaks in the pattern of Republican gains. In 1894 Owen, running as a Populist, polled a respectable vote in his race for governor; and John Lind, running as a "People's Democrat" nearly captured the office in 1896 and did so in 1898. Both exceptions are readily explained. Owen was considerably stronger than his party, and he profited from the political weakness of his Democratic opponent, George L. Becker, whose bid was not taken seriously by many Democrats. Lind also had a large personal following, and his opponents did not command the full support of their parties.

Obviously the drift back to Republicanism cannot be attributed solely to the legislature of 1891. Because Cleveland was in

the White House, the Republican party could absolve itself of blame for the intensification of economic distress following the panic of 1893. Minnesota Republicans also demonstrated a capacity to read election returns, as their selection of Knute Nelson to run for governor in 1892 and the impressive record of the 1893 legislature seem to prove. At the same time, the People's party continued to be plagued with factionalism, and it was unable to dispel a widespread suspicion that its leadership was unsound. Republican journalists were happy to emphasize Populist "untrustworthiness," and fears generated by such events as the Pullman strike of 1894 increased public responsiveness to the accusation.

There can be no question, however, that the reputation of the legislature of 1891 lent plausibility to the thesis of Populist "radicalism" and Democratic "irresponsibility." With a zeal not entirely justified by the facts, Republican campaigners of the 1890s pointed to the 1891 session as proof that political "soundness" was a monopoly of the Grand Old Party. The alleged incompetence, extravagance, and general ineffectiveness of the only non-Republican legislature within immediate memory became a political myth, comparable in a limited way to the "Hoover depression," "Truman's war," or the "terrible Eightieth Congress." And a myth which commands belief is a more effective determinant of political behavior than a reality which is ambiguous.³⁵

³⁴ Election results discussed here and below appear in *Legislative Manual*, 1893, p. 462-467, 474-479; 1895, p. 462, 571-585.

³⁵ See a Republican manifesto for the campaign of 1892 in the *News*, October 29, 1892; an editorial in the *Journal*, October 25, 1898; and William H. Eustis' acceptance speech in the same paper, October 4, 1898.

THE PHOTOGRAPH on page 299 is from the collections of the Marshall County Historical Society. Cartoons reproduced on pages 300 and 306 appeared in issues of the *Minneapolis Journal* for February 24 and 5, 1891, respectively. They were the work of Charles L. Bartholomew, better known as "Bart," a leading cartoonist of the period. The cartoon on page 305 is from the *St. Paul Globe* of January 8, 1891. Other photos in these pages are from the society's picture files.



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