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# RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



**The Book That Should Be In  
Every Rhode Island Home**



# My Five Senators

BY WILLIAM H. EDWARDS

**T**HIS IS A footnote on Rhode Island history. It is almost a footnote appended to a footnote. Its seeming inconsequence is perhaps redeemed by the general course of events to which it attaches itself, namely, the struggle for constitutional reform in our state. That struggle is a never-ending one, though at the moment it lies in a coma.

One is reminded too, when one reaches down to a footnote, of the sad case of the university professor of classics, who spent a lifetime specializing on Greek nouns, only to wish in the end that he had devoted his career to the dative case alone. However, "something too much of this," as Hamlet remarked in another context.

In the hot and far-away June of 1924, there was in progress in our white capitol building, on Smith Hill (as we used to call it), a bitter contest between Republicans and Democrats. The Democrats wished to pass a bill providing for the calling of a constitutional convention. The convention would have been charged primarily with two constitutional reforms — re-districting the state Senate and abolishing the property qualification for voting required under certain circumstances.

The Senate was based on what one may call without (at least) political offense a *rotten* borough system. Providence, for example, with its 200,000 odd population, had one senator. Block Island (the Town of New Shoreham) and the Town of West Greenwich had, by way of further example, one senator apiece, with a combined winter population of between 1000 and 2000.

The property qualification disqualified citizens from voting in financial town meeting (or, in the case of cities, from voting for the city council) who did not pay taxes on \$134.40 (or some such amount) of property.

These ancient survivals of "rural, agricultural, pioneer America" were of great value and importance to the Republicans, whose strength lay primarily in the rural districts and not among the industrial workers in the cities.

The situation was much like that in the England of 1832 when revolution was only narrowly averted by Lord Grey's Reform Bill of that year, which decreased the number of *rotten* boroughs and somewhat broadened the classes of people entitled to vote. Rhode Island took another 100 years to accomplish similar reforms, showing that our little commonwealth was a champion of champions among the upholders of the *status quo*. And though the sticky times we went through in 1924 (the year we are dealing with here) and 1935 (when a "bloodless" revolution occurred) were unpleasant, we never were worked up to the pitch that the English people found themselves in a century earlier. Perhaps this is a cause for historical regret.

In 1924 we had a Democratic governor, William S. Flynn, a Democratic lieutenant governor named Felix A. Toupin, and some young, zealous and hard-hitting Democratic Senators like Robert E. Quinn (now Chief Judge of the U. S. Military Court of Appeals and a former governor and superior court judge). Though the Democrats were in a slight minority in the Senate they believed that by filibuster and sticktoitiveness and the use of the gavel by the presiding officer of the Senate (Toupin) they could force the rural Senate majority into agreeing to the bill calling for a referendum on a convention.

By June tempers were high, Toupin was carrying on a running and undignified fight with the *Journal*, the *Journal* was carrying on a fight for law and order against Democratic politicians (without much mention of the ends sought, which in the hindsight of 1969 seem very mild indeed and easily achievable by any sensible



Governor William S. Flynn

Photos courtesy of  
Providence Journal  
and Providence Public  
Library.





*William C. Pelkey  
Chairman, Republican State Committee*



*Ernest L. Sprague  
Deputy Secretary of State  
He wasn't allowed to leave his post  
for forty-two hours.*

legislative assembly); and rambunctious and many-columned headlines prevented Rhode Island citizens from being bored.

The filibuster began in earnest about 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 June. I remember the day because our college class at Brown was having its fifth reunion. One of our class, Dan Coggeshall, was the Senator from Bristol and a Democrat. On that Tuesday evening a number of our class went to the state house to see Coggeshall and make a presentation to him. We tramped into the holy of holies, the Senate chamber, which looked like Grand Central in the old days on a Friday in summer, and presented him with a live turtle. Dan greeted us affectionately and accepted the box with the turtle in it. It is important to add (for reasons apparent later) that there was no gas bomb in the box. With that the turtle disappears from history. We went back to the campus.

The filibuster to wear the Republicans down went on all that night, all the next day, and all Wednesday night. When the Thursday Journal was issued, the filibuster had been going 39 hours. There are certain medical feats (connected with Lieutenant Governor Toupin and his continuous presiding) that have never been fully explained. But the continuity of the session is a historical fact.

Between 8 and 9 a.m. on Thursday, 19 June, a bomb or broken phial of glass exploded in the Senate chamber and let off some bromine gas which quickly brought the session to an end. Senator Sherman went to Jane Brown Hospital, Bill Pelkey, Republican state chairman, was "carried prostrate from the chamber." Six Senators were overcome by the gas. The state and the newspapers were outraged; the Journal offered a \$1000 reward for identification of the miscreant who had set off the bomb. The sense of outrage might have been less among the law and order people if they had known, as is generally conceded now, that the gassing was the work of an out-of-state agent hired for the job by a prominent Republican.

So, with most of the leaders gassed but recuperating and the Republicans in the hands of Philip Joslin (later a Superior Court judge), Harold Andrews (later a judge also) and Claude Branch (who in his 80's is still going strong), my brief and crowded hour of glorious political life with the Republican party began.

I had been a practicing lawyer for a little over two years. Much of my work was as an assistant to Claude Branch. He called me (I was trying a case, a never-ending jury-trial-waived case in the Superior Court) and asked me to come to the State House. Death-like vacuity reigned there. We descended thence to the Providence Biltmore Hotel and a certain suite which constituted the command headquarters, for the moment, of the Republican party.

The Republican Senators were hiding for the very good reason that Toupin had threatened to use the Senate's powers to return them to the Senate chamber. The Republican Senators couldn't face that.

I was given the names of five senators who were reposing, as I recall it, in four different rooms on different floors. They were trying to get some sleep after 48 hours of agony at the State House. One or two had had some firewater, but most were cold sober. One at least had been overcome for a time by the bromine gas.

My procedure was as follows. I knocked on the given door again and again. Finally a sleepy figure appeared, looking a bit like Caliban and clad in improvised night dress. One of the five was wearing a cotton union suit and looked very uncomfortable on a hot June afternoon when there was no air conditioning. In each instance I smiled to show I was friend (at least technically and for this purpose only) and not foe and spoke in substance as follows: "I am William Edwards. You don't have to remember that. I am working for Claude Branch whom you know for his work on the (capitol) Hill. All the leaders like Bill Pelkey are laid up because of the gas bomb. Phil Joslin and Branch are in charge. It has been decided that you all are to go over the state line into Massachusetts where Toupin's process can't



reach you. Please dress as fast as you can and come to Room Such-and-Such for further instructions."

And they came within a few minutes, without protest or inquiry. It amazed me that they didn't even question my authority or wonder if I was not leading them into a trap. Some of my fellow Democrats of later years may argue that these circumstances showed what dummies they were. But I am inclined to think that, though none of them showed the fire of Theodore Roosevelt or even the zest of Richard Nixon, they were probably just worn out with the filibuster and gassing and that it would be unkind to judge their political fortitude by their sheep-like behavior on this occasion.

In room such-and-such, there was much milling around, much discussion of routes, much talk of the places to which they might retreat in our neighboring Commonwealth. One lady present, a prominent Republican, suggested she had a summer place in Massachusetts only a few miles away. "Come there," she said, "and you can hear the crickets crick and you can make up your sleep." Senator B turned to Senator L and said aside: "We don't want to go with this lady. Let's go to Fall River and find some friends of our own." These were not his exact words; but this after all is a family magazine and accordingly some Bowdlerization is appropriate.

Finally all was arranged. The game of cops and robbers was now at its apogee. We were all to go down in the freight elevator to escape observation — my five, Senators B, L, S, A and M, myself, an assistant manager of the Biltmore and one or two more. Senator S, a fine man and appearing not to like the company, confided to me where he was going. Senators A and M were cooperative, and L fairly so. Senator B was obstreperious. When we reached the ground floor at Eddy Street, he tried to rush forward into a taxi that was not for him. "No, no, Senator," I shouted at him, "not your taxi," and pressed his animated shoulders back against the wall of the hotel. He was a foot taller than I, but I restrained him till his vehicle arrived. A small crowd had gathered, but Toupin and his sergeant-at-arms were not among them.

Well, the fleeing senators were all rounded up subsequently at Rutland, Massachusetts, and stayed there till the year 1924 had ended and a new General Assembly had been elected.

I had one small postscript. Three days later — on Sunday during dinner — I had a 'phone call. The caller was cautious, suspicious, and a fast talker. "Is this William H. Edwards? — Do you work for Claude Branch? — Were you at the State House and other places Thursday? — Well, this is William C. Pelkey; and where is Senator Salisbury?" "At the Parker House in Boston," I replied. And so ended my service as a worker for the G.O.P. and the guardianship of my five senators.



*Providence Police Chief O'Neil  
He kept fifteen patrolmen on duty at  
the State House for three days.*

*Democratic "filibusterers" held a re-  
union in 1948 with Gov. Flynn and  
reporters who covered Senate in '23  
and '24. Shown here in foreground,  
Greene, Toupin. Others (l-r) Patten,  
Quinn, Flaherty, McGrane, Harris,  
Flynn, Hammond, Steere and Barry.*

