

How Oregon "Stood Pat"

George Judson King, in Twentieth Century Magazine

Whatever may be the status of public opinion elsewhere as to the merits or demerits of the direct primary, the election of United States senators by a vote of the people, the initiative and referendum and the recall, it may now be put down as a settled fact that they "have come to stay" in Oregon. The last election furnished final evidence, and the most virulent opponents of the new order of things freely admit it. The descendants of the men and women who traveled three thousand miles in ox-carts to found this state will, with true Anglo-Saxon instinct, hold whatever measure of power over the affairs of their government they have secured—and will add more.

The issue which determined the selection of a democratic governor in this overwhelming republican state was not national, such as a revolt against the Payne-Aldrich tariff bill. It was not even partisan. It was "assemblyism." And "assemblyism" meant to the voters of Oregon a well planned, powerfully organized attempt on the part of the old bi-partisan machine, which once ruled the state, to overthrow the whole "system" established by the people, and especially the direct election of United States senators by the famous statement number one method.

The Hon. Jay Bowerman, the republican candidate for governor, when the president of the state senate had favored and voted for this proposed "assembly plan," which was little more than the old convention system of nominations under a new name. It was defeated but not killed. The leading state paper later announced editorially that: "The republicans of Oregon intend to repudiate statement one. They intend to suggest in assembly or convention candidates for the primary, and will put the knife into each and all who declare for statement one." Thus spoke the old leaders, and the republican rank and file immediately awakened to the serious import of the situation. The leaders held their assembly as a sort of object lesson to the people, made their "suggestions," and when the smoke of the primary election had rolled from the field a vast majority of the "assembly candidates" were found to have been defeated. Mr. Bowerman was, however, nominated, thanks to a divided field and powerful support. Not far had the campaign progressed when Mr. Bowerman discovered what a fatal blunder had been made and came out strongly as a statement one candidate. But too late; and Oswald West, the democratic nominee, always a firm supporter of the whole group of methods involved in the "Oregon plan," received 35,000 votes which normally would have gone to a republican, and was elected.

Other candidates were wiser in their day and generation, and a traveler in Oregon who is a thoughtful observer of telephone poles, barn doors and wayside trees, may still see displayed numberless lithographs bearing the magic words, "Vote for _____ ANTI-Assembly candidate for _____," well, anything, from dog-catcher to state senator. A large majority of the newly elected legislature is of this persuasion, but in that body will appear only seven democrats.

Of one piece with the assembly plan was the proposal, also aided by Mr. Bowerman, and submitted to the people, to revise the constitution. No doubt that document needs revision. It has not been renovated since 1851, and to this day carries the provision that negroes cannot vote, and other archaic things. But looming larger than this need in the minds of the people was the fact that the men most earnest about "revision" were noted opponents of the initiative and referendum, which is held as the foundation of the whole popular system. The voters believed they scented a scheme afoot to frame a new constitution and "leave the initiative out." Rather revise by amendment from year to year, said they, and the vote on the new constitution stood: Yes, 23,142; no, 59,065; majority against, 36,831. So it too went the way of assemblyism.

Oregon may be regarded as a sort of political experiment station. A new method of political action is being tried out—that of direct participation by the people, with the legislature, in enacting laws.

As a result, an Oregon campaign is an interesting affair. One hears something besides the interminable "party" din, the trumpeting of the virtues and vices of candidates, the usual tom-tom and fireworks. Of course these things obtain, but in addition a vast deal of attention

is paid to "the measures;" they divide honors with the candidates.

Sometimes it is known a year and a half in advance that a certain question will be up for decision at the following election. All petitions for proposed laws must be filed four months prior to election day. Then begins the educational campaign in the newspapers, debating societies and among the statesmen assembled at grocery stores. About a month before voting day there goes forth from the secretary of state to each voter, through the mails, the publicity pamphlet, in which are printed all the bills and amendments to the constitution to be voted on, together with arguments for and against each, as may be furnished by its friends or opponents, they paying the cost of paper and printing for the space taken in the pamphlet. From 1904 to 1910, inclusive, this pamphlet, printing, mailing and all, has cost the state of Oregon \$47,610.61. It is the voter's text-book, and school begins in earnest. The electors do not have to depend upon partisan newspapers for their knowledge, and the subsidized press is shorn of its power, as is the crooked politician. The voters have every opportunity to be accurately informed. I visited the meetings of farmers' granges and labor unions and found certain measures set down as regular subjects for debate on the program. Likewise in men's clubs, in churches, in high school debates and meetings all over the state the discussion was going on. The issues were "taken out of politics," and so could be reviewed without danger to tender partisan toes. There is now proposed a movement to open up the school-houses to people's forums for the discussion of these questions in the future, somewhat after the Rochester plan.

A grave responsibility is thus laid upon the people, and if mistakes are made the wicked legislature cannot be blamed. That the voters feel this responsibility is beyond question. It has a sobering influence and sets them to thinking as nothing else will. Inquire of men like J. J. Johnson, lecturer of the state grange, who have first-hand and intimate knowledge of what happens in the homes of the masses of the people, and you will be told that "a majority of the voters strive earnestly to inform themselves and vote for the best interests of the whole people."

On election day I visited voting booths in every section of Portland. The election was so orderly as to be positively tame. Approach a voting tent from a distance of two or three blocks and you could see nothing but a few men entering or leaving the place, or citizens passing by on their ordinary business. It might have been otherwise but for the corrupt practices act, which, by the way, was enacted by the people through the initiative in 1908, after being turned down by the legislature, and so was having its first try-out. Under this act no soliciting of voters is allowed within 300 feet of a polling place. Nor is there allowed any distribution of literature, nor signs, posters, banners, nor even the selling of hot coffee. There were no excited crowds of party workers to pull, haul or bulldoze. The voters came quietly, marked their ballots and went their ways in peace. There was not a single arrest made in Portland over election rows, and even the usual quota dropped off that day.

The ballot this year contained the names of 131 candidates, from which 42 officials were to be selected. Each one had to be marked separately, as the "bird ballot," beloved by the "vote-'er-straight-and-let-'er-go-at-that" politician is long a thing of the past here. There were also the thirty-two "measures."

That looks rather formidable—and it is, which is another argument for the short ballot. Considering everything, the average voter handled the ballot with surprising ease; especially those who made use of the "sample ballot." This is an exact duplicate of the regular ballot, but is printed on differently colored paper and sent out to the voters before the election. Thousands take home these sample ballots, mark the candidates and measures on which they wish to vote, and on election day they are taken into the booth and the official ballot, furnished by the judges of the election, are marked from them. This device lends accuracy and saves time. I held the watch on several voters, inquired of the election judges, and found the average voter remained in the booth from seven to ten minutes. Some took three, others twenty. It was the general testimony of the judges and clerks that

"they know what they want and ask few questions," or "they have made up their minds;" and from numberless conversations with citizens from every walk in life, who chanced to be waiting for their turn at the booth, I began to sense the spirit of this new method of law-making and understand the zest and pride the voters took in getting at things directly. Take that power away from them? Let courts and politicians beware.

But how can the people get time to study thirty-two measures, even granting they have the intelligence to be trusted with their solution? I went to the voters to find out. A general average of 75 per cent voted on the questions; and 25 per cent did not. The latter class gave me the old answer, "I don't take no interest in politics." The other class seemed to take my questions as a reflection upon their intelligence, exactly as voters in Switzerland did when I put the same question to them.

Here is the way one farmer answered me: "Look here, my friend, there is some brains in Oregon outside the legislature. Last session the general assembly had up over 850 bills and resolutions, and forty days in which to dispose of them. If they had cut out the 'functions' and worked ten hours a day straight they would have had about thirty minutes apiece to give each one. Now if they could do that, hadn't I ought to be able to make up my mind on thirty-two in four months? I can't see how electing a man to the legislature makes him so almighty smart all of a sudden. Besides, if they had attended to business and done what they should have done there would not be so many questions on the ballot."

Admitting there was some merit in his contention, I asked him how he had handled the problem.

"Well, in the first place," he replied, "you see the most of the questions had been before the state before and were not new. Why, we've been talking about temperance, taxation, normal schools, fish bills and a lot more since I was a boy and a long while before we had the initiative. So I knew what I was going to do on a good many. I was a little puzzled on some, and when I got the state pamphlet in the mail I read it over and paid particular attention to the laws on which I was in doubt. Then I got a sample ballot a while before election and marked it the way I wanted to vote, so as to sort of fix it in my mind. Then I sent the pamphlet and the ballot back to some of my relatives in Illinois to let them see how we make laws and elect United States senators out here where the people have got something to say. When I voted it took me about five minutes in the booth."

And this man's experience is typical of the average Oregon farmer, workingman and, to a good degree, of the business man. I asked Governor-elect West about it and he replied: "Of course they study that pamphlet. They are the best informed citizens we have. More than that, they are not hunting for graft or special privileges. They try to get at the truth and justice of things. What they want is a fair deal; and they are getting it, too."

My farmer had let in light from a new angle. I suddenly perceived that what appeared to me, an outsider, as thirty-two questions, were not all new to the people of Oregon. On many of them the public mind had been forming for years. This simplified the matter greatly and reduced that portentous "thirty-two" materially. Yet it was felt generally that there were too many questions this year; also that there will not be nearly so many in the future, principally because it is believed the legislature is drawing nearer to the people and will be more representative. The people were not worrying much over the big ballot—no more than in other states—it was the politicians who were the most perturbed, and whoever was being separated from the public crib or grindstone. Some lawyers are worried, others greatly pleased. One lawyer-politician of great prominence—who is this year retiring to private life by invitation of the primary—summed up the opinion of his class when he remarked, "To hell with the whole business!" But none of them seem able to evolve a safe method by which to accomplish the desired relegation.

To adequately review the measures voted on at this election is beyond the scope of this article; only a brief account may be given as a background for judgment.

The liquor question was the most acute in the campaign. The temperance people had proposed a state-wide prohibition amendment and a statute carrying it into effect, both by the initiative. The liquor men proposed a municipal

(Continued on Page 12.)