

Joe Folk, the Booodle Fighter

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ST. LOUIS, Aug. 25.—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—I came to St. Louis to see Joseph W. Folk, the young Tennessee Hercules who is trying to clean the Augean stables of this boodling municipality and boodling state. A young man, a poor man and a stranger—for he came to St. Louis but a few years ago—he has been fighting the millionaires of the city, many of whom belong to the old families; he has routed the boodlers who are ready to spend millions to down him and has already a score of them in the penitentiary and others awaiting trial. Mr. Folk has made boodling a crime in the eyes of Missourians. He stands before the people as the representative fighter against it and has become candidate for governor upon that issue alone. He promises, if elected, to purify the state legislature and state politics and his friends think him the coming man for president of the United States on a similar issue in 1908.

Before I give you my talk with Mr. Folk let me show you the man. I have had a good chance to study him, for I spent last Sunday evening with him at his house on Delmar avenue. He lives in a rented two-story cottage, worth perhaps \$5,000, which stands out in strong contrast to the great mansions of the boodlers farther up town. He received me in his library on the second floor, a little room with a store of good books. There was laughing and chatting in the parlor as I entered the house, and its surroundings were those of peace and goodfellowship rather than of a man hated by and fighting against one of the longest parties of both city and state.

Mr. Folk impresses me as a man who keeps himself well in hand. He is not nervous. He looks healthy, and I doubt whether he knows he has a stomach. He is all force, and his whole capital, physical and mental, is ever at his command. He has the iron jaw of a fighter, reminding me at times of Napoleon, McKinley and Samuel J. Randall. Indeed, he looks much like Sam Randall. He has a dark face, a big head, broad and full over the eyes, a big nose and big, outstanding ears. His eyes are large and full, smiling at ordinary times, but flashing fire when he discusses the outrages which the boodlers have perpetrated upon Missouri and his determination to down them. He is clean-cut, dresses well and looks well.

Mr. Folk is a young man. He was born in Tennessee thirty-four years ago and graduated in 1890 from the Vanderbilt university at Nashville. He came to St. Louis to practice law, and was doing well when he got into politics.

I don't think Folk aimed at a political career. He wanted to be a lawyer, and used politics as a side issue. He was a southerner, however, and the southerner sucks in politics with his mother's milk. The boys discuss politics in the schools and Folk took to the stump before he was out of college. As soon as he settled in St. Louis he became interested in its politics and threw himself into the fight for the love of it.

Then there was a street car fight, and the strikers asked him to act for them. He did so, and a little later he was made the candidate for circuit or district attorney. He was elected, and it then became his duty to look into the administration of the city and its legislative enactments. He had been chosen to prosecute thieves and criminals. Others had been chosen before, but they had discriminated in such prosecutions. Folk came into office with a new pair of eyeglasses. He could not see the difference between a millionaire and a pauper, between a politician or a boodler and the ordinary citizen. Among the first criminals arrested were some illegal voters of his own party.

It was announced that they would be prosecuted and the boodlers were thunder-struck. Colonel Ed Butler, their chief, a man who had started life as a horseshoer and made millions as a ring politician, called upon Folk for explanations, saying: "Why, Mr. Folk, these men voted for you; you don't mean you are going to prosecute them?"

"I certainly do mean it," replied Folk. "There is no reason why I should not do so because I have been benefited by their wrongdoing. I had nothing to do with their voting illegally. Suppose I were vice president of the United States and the president should be assassinated, and I should thereby become president, would you have me not prosecute the assassin because the act made me president? I certainly will prosecute them," and prosecute them he did.

That was the beginning. Folk extended his prosecutions to the boodlers themselves, and he has uncovered one of the greatest sinks of municipal corruption ever known to the United States. He says he believes that other cities are equally bad and that the purification which is now going on in St. Louis will be gradually extended to other parts of the country.

In these investigations Mr. Folk found that millions had been spent for votes. In our talk Sunday night he told numerous stories, describing how the city had been robbed, citing instance after instance of enormous boodling. Said he:

"For twenty years past St. Louis has



JOSEPH W. FOLK.—Photo by Strauss, St. Louis; Copyright, 1903.

been in the hands of a ring just large enough to control the city legislature and override the mayor's veto, and this ring has levied blackmail upon every license, privilege and franchise granted by the city. Laws have been unblushingly sold to the highest bidder. The ring has tried to sell the waterworks, the courthouse and the union market for its own enrichment. Nothing has been safe from its avarice, not even the sewer pipes in the ground. It has had its regular schedules of bribe prices, based upon what each business would stand, ranging from a few hundred dollars for a switch bill to thousands of dollars for a franchise. Indeed, I believe as much as \$10,000,000 has been paid out in blackmail on such accounts.

"The business has been done by a continuous gang of nineteen and their subordinates," continued Mr. Folk. "It took nineteen votes to control the city council, and these nineteen men passed upon what legislation should be enacted and how much they should be paid for each act or franchise. At one time the combine received \$47,500 for an ordinance to light the city. The bargain was made on the floor of the house of delegates and the money was handed over to one of the combine. After voting the nineteen met at the house of one of their number, and the host sat at the piano and played 'Home, Sweet Home,' while the money was distributed in \$2,500 lots."

I asked Mr. Folk about the Central Traction deal of 1903, out of which a New York promoter made almost \$1,000,000. He replied:

"That was for a franchise which covered nearly all the street railways of the city. The promoter, a man named Snyder, gave \$250,000 in bribes to the municipal assembly to get it. He paid twenty-five out of the twenty-eight members of the house of delegates \$1,000 each and the seven members of the council from \$10,000 to \$17,000 each. One councilman took \$25,000 from other parties to vote against the franchise, but returned it when he found that he could get \$50,000 from the promoter to vote in his favor. He gave back the first amount, saying he did not think he could honestly earn it. That franchise was sold by the promoter for \$1,250,000, so that he made a clean million out of the transaction. The city did not receive one cent for all the streets given away."

"That was the case in which Uthoff figured, was it not?"

"Yes," was the reply. "Uthoff was the man who got \$50,000 for his vote and gave back the \$25,000 which the opposing parties had given him to vote for them. The promoter, however, had promised Uthoff \$100,000 upon his saying that \$50,000 was not enough, and with this understanding

Uthoff gave him back the \$50,000, expecting to get \$100,000 the next morning.

"That night the promoter left for New York, taking all the money with him. Uthoff had voted for the bill and had nothing. He took a pistol and followed the promoter to New York. They met at the Waldorf hotel, and there, under the influence of a bottle of champagne, Uthoff was made to compromise his claim of \$100,000 for \$5,000 cash. At the same time he signed a statement that he knew the promoter was not corrupt, and that he believed he would be as far from offering a bribe as he (Uthoff) would be from accepting one if offered."

One of the queer cases described by Mr. Folk during our conversation was the attempted bribery of a man named Meier in the central traction bill. The promoters thought they could carry the franchise without Meier, but they wanted his vote in case one of the other boodlers failed them. They went to his son and handed him \$50,000, saying: "My boy, we are not sure of our majority, and if we need your father's vote we are willing to pay for it. Give this money to him and tell him that he is to vote for the bill if his vote is required to pass it. In that case he is to keep the money, but if it is not needed he can vote against the bill and you can return the money to us. The boy took the money. The vote was taken and his father's vote was not required. Thereupon the promoters asked young Meier for the \$50,000, but were refused in language somewhat like the following:

"I don't intend to give that money back. I did not give it to father, for that would be trying to bribe him, and I don't think you ought to have it for you have tried to use it to corrupt us. I think I will just keep it for myself." He did keep it, using it for a start in business.

The conversation here turned to the gubernatorial campaign, and I asked Mr. Folk what he would do if he were elected. He replied:

"If I become governor I shall see to it that bribery is exterminated in our state legislature. The first time a legislator takes a bribe I will send a message to the general assembly asking for his impeachment. I will not allow a corrupt lobby to exist at the legislature, and the day of the sand-bagging legislator will be at an end. I shall use all my power to put corrupt men out of the party organization, and will do what I can to purify party politics. I shall recommend laws forfeiting franchises obtained by bribery and protecting witnesses who testify in bribery cases. In short, I intend to do all I can to wipe out bribery and corruption in the state of Missouri."

"Do you expect to see the anti-boodle issue extend to other states?"

"I think it is already doing so. Public sentiment in regard to such matters is

changing, not only in this state, but throughout the union. Bribery is becoming a crime in the eyes of the people, and nearly every state is now waging war against such corruption. Until our exposures here a bribery case was practically unheard of. Indeed, there is hardly a score of cases in the court reports of the United States. We have had more prosecutions for bribery within the last ten years than within the century back of them. The movement is spreading to other countries and we are now negotiating with the governments of Europe to close their territories against bribe-givers and bribe-takers. Our treaty with Mexico has already been so amended that that country will no longer be a haven of boodlers."

"Will boodling ever become a national issue?"

"I do not know," replied Mr. Folk. "It certainly ought to be a national issue. Its suppression means good government, and unless we can have that the country will go to ruin."

"Give me, Mr. Folk," said I, "your idea as to how bribery could be driven from the United States?"

"It is only by the creation of a healthy, honest public opinion," said Mr. Folk. "You may put the boodlers in prison, but as long as the people are not down upon them and their acts the business will continue to thrive. The boodlers must be taught that boodling is bad politics as well as bad morals; and the voters are the only ones who can teach them this thing. In my work I expect everything of the people of Missouri. If they will help me I feel that I can do much to wipe out official corruption. But it is the people who will have to do it."

"Will you get the support of the democratic party in your fight?"

"We shall have the support of the better element of it and we don't want that of the corrupt element. We hope to drive the boodlers from the democratic party and to make that party an example which will give aid and strength to democracy in every state of the union. No party can be hurt by getting rid of bad men, nor by cutting off its rotten limbs. I am naturally a democrat; my ancestors were democrats and I have never voted for a republican, except where one has been put upon the democratic ticket in St. Louis by party bosses. I believe in the teachings of my party, and I believe above everything in the enforcement of the laws. I know there are democratic rascals, and in the enforcement of the law I shall know no party."

"Then you will not expect to have the support of the machine ringleaders?"

"We don't want the support of the St. Louis machine. I should hate to think I could carry certain wards here which are controlled by that machine. It is in the party for revenue only, and we do not want that kind of a support. If I cannot become governor without promises to any one I prefer not to be governor. If I cannot be free to do my duty as I see it to my party and to the people I would much prefer to retire to private life. I have no favors to ask of the corruptionists and no quarter to give. I defy them. I have been fighting them for two years and will fight them to the end, and I believe that the democratic party and the people will help me."

"How can the public protect itself from the boodlers?"

"They can do so by taking an interest in politics, denouncing bribery and in voting to wipe it out. Every good citizen should go to the primaries. He should attend the precinct, ward and township meetings and see that honest men are nominated. Ninety-nine per cent of our people are honest, but the other 1 per cent of dishonesty is perniciously acting and working while the other 99 sleep. Wake up the 99, and there is no fear of results."

"And then the citizen should urge the enforcement of the laws," continued Mr. Folk. "He should denounce bribery and assist in its detection. There should be a constant search for corruption, and this should be prosecuted without regard to the feelings of individuals. No honest man can be hurt by investigation, and no dishonest one has any right to object because his misdeeds are made public. Publicity and enforcement of the law are the chief antidotes for corruption. Boodlers can be punished by ballot as well as by prisons. The first duty of every citizen is to put an end to bribery in our public life. He should vote against it, talk against it and work against it. When the people look upon boodling as they do upon ordinary stealing, and when the boodler is punished like the ordinary thief, we shall be much further along on the road to purity in politics and to an honest city, state and national government." FRANK G. CARPENTER.

Elope By Trolley

Ralph Smelzer, a Lancaster (Pa.) business man, returned from New York with his bride, who was Miss Anna Mohr of Reading. They were married in New York by Rev. S. L. Sanford. Miss Mohr's parents objected to their marrying because of her youth, and friends watched the railroad stations at Reading to prevent her going away with Smelzer.

The couple eluded the watchers by taking a trolley car out of Reading.