THE OMAHA ILLUSTRATED BEE

NUMBER 331. Entered Second Class at Omaha Postoffice—Published Weekly by The Bee Publishing Co.—Subscription, $2.50 Per Year. DECEMBER 31, 1905.

Silas A. Holcomb, Nebraska's Greatest and Most Successful Populist

Career of the Man Who Has Been Signally Honored by His Fellow Citizens in Many Ways and Who Has Filled High Offices in the State

THE first and the last, the beginning and the ending, the Alpha and Omega of populism, Silas A. Holcomb, when he passes today from the stage of public activities into the background of private life, draws the curtain upon the career of the people's independent party militant and "tolls the knell of (its) parting day."

Judge Holcomb was not the founder of the populist party, nor even its first candidate elected to public office, but he was the first in Nebraska to win substantial victory under its banners; he was the first governor elected in this state, which, with Kansas, formed the storm center of that turbulent era of political and social discontent which brought forth and for a time, nurtured this illustrious organization. Twice Silas A. Holcomb was elected governor and once a member of the supreme court, his official term covering a period of ten years, continuously. The last two years of his career on the supreme bench, from which he retired as the old year passed out, he was the chief justice.

Practically, therefore, Silas A. Holcomb was not only the longest reigning populist, but in his ascendancy the party had its advent and in his retirement its official light goes out in final extinguishment.

Around the time, more than the name, of Judge Holcomb, clusters a series of events memorable in the political annals, not alone of Nebraska, but of the nation. It is not necessary that the plot of his play be laid on the stage of national politics. True he held none but state offices, but he figured prominently in the national councils of his party's management, and moreover that famous tidal wave of political unrest which swept him into office, beat back upon the shores of other states and washed away the ancient sands of old party regimes. On its crest Llewelyn rode into power in Kansas, Waite in Colorado, Pennoyer in Oregon, and, after Holcomb, Poynter in Nebraska. This turbulent breaker changed state legislatures, it shattered the national congress, it altered men's political views from one end of the country to the other, it dethroned old leaders and set up new ones, it dismantled the oldest of political parties, with which, paradoxical as it may seem, it coalesced; it created the greatest upheaval of generations; it subverted conditions of a lifetime; in short, it established an epoch in American politics.

Drama of Many Elements

It is upon such an historic drama that Judge Holcomb draws the final curtain. And the ending of the play and the passing of the players are fraught with more significance to Nebraskans than to the people of any other state, because it was in this state, together with Kansas, that the plot was laid and the denouement effected. Nebraskans, to be sure, may not hail with uproarious applause the memory of this fact, for in many respects they paid dearly for this undue popularity. Judge Holcomb, the last of the populist pilots to leave the helm of their states' ships, may not properly be classed among the ultra radicals of this radical sect, for he admits now, that the battle is over, he did not approve all the doctrines of populism during the early stages of its existence. But he still believes in its fundamental principles and believes they are even more vital today than when first espoused by the party.

Numerous elements combined to bring into being the populist party. It was the culmination of a series of events that had been steadily moving toward the goal of positive political action for a long period of years. The Farmers' Alliance, the Knights of Labor and other similar reform factors which had been working out their own uncertain destiny along corresponding lines, crystalized at last into one political body and the name of that body was the people's independent party.

But these elements were merely contributory. The immediate causes which made and unmade populism were contrary to common tenets, and were derived from more visible and apparent sources. In the light of the immediate facts of its being it is no stretch of the imagination to say that the populist party was a paradox; its birth and death anomalies. Grover Cleveland, the enemy, created it; William J. Bryan, the friend, killed it.

Popular discontent under the first Cleveland administration reached the boiling point and out of the crucible came the populist party. Popular contentment, with the principles and policies of Bryanism, absorbed the populist party and produced a new democracy.

In this theory of the coming and going of populism Judge Holcomb believes. He admits the populist party, as a party, is dead, yet he maintains the principles on which it was founded and for which it fought still live and shall live until other parties and other leaders have passed away; that these principles are paramount today and are being embraced year by year by the best men of both big parties. He believes the nation is better for the populist party having lived. He believes the populist party enunciated principles and promulgated doctrines on whose triumph the destiny of the nation depends. And he believes that as sure as principles are eternal, so sure is their triumph inevitable.

Personal Popularity of Holcomb

It has been said Silas A. Holcomb was bigger than his party. However that may be, he outlived his party and accomplished what none of his Nebraska colleagues accomplished. He carried the state for governor by an abnormally large plurality after the party had passed over the summit of its power; after it had, as a party, attained the maximum of its strength. Then, even after the force of populism had been spent, he, still as a populist, was elected to the supreme court. But it must be remembered that Judge Holcomb, nominally and really a populist, all this time was the "fusion" candidate, and in his race for the supreme bench received support not only from the waning fragment of populism, but the democratic party, and drew heavily from the republican ranks. Indeed, in his first race for governor, when Tom Majors was foisted upon the republicans as their candidate, Holcomb split the republican party and went into office with a handsome majority, notwithstanding every other republican was elected from 5,000 to 9,000 majority.

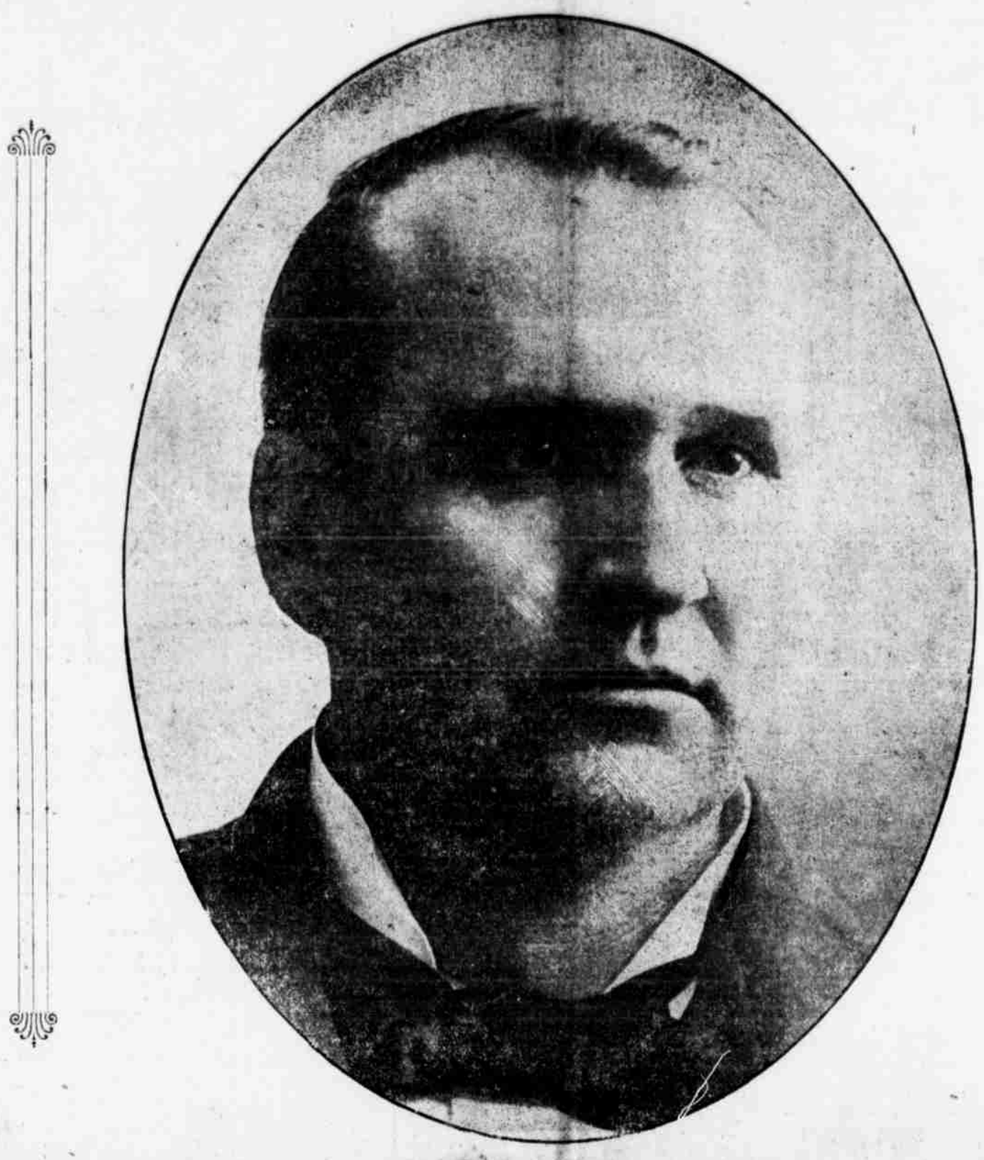
As a vote getter Holcomb was always unique. Friends and opponents concede this fact. Richard L. Metcalfe, now associate editor of Mr. Bryan's Commoner, who for years has been an active democratic leader, says Holcomb was not only a strong candidate, but he was a man of unusual judgment in all matters of politics. His perception was clear and far-reaching. He could be depended on when no other could to give the advice that, followed, led to successful results.

"He was the best politician I ever dealt with," Mr. Metcalfe recently said. "I never had an adviser or counselor in whose judgment I placed as much confidence. Judge Holcomb has saved the forces of fusion many a vote and guided them around many a dangerous or embarrassing place. I've often thought he was gifted with a natural intuition in such matters. Certainly he was a profound student of men and events."

Personal Appearance of the Man

As a political candidate several elements combined to make Holcomb a potent factor. His make-up played no unimportant part. He was a man of powerful physique, standing over six feet in height and weighing 250 pounds. As he used to say, "I weigh a quarter of a ton." He was in the full bloom of vigorous manhood, and though at first rather awkward in some of his movements, had a commanding appearance. In addition to this the man had the power of convincing those with whom he dealt, of his own sincerity. When he made his debut in politics, however, Holcomb could not have been charged with being the most urbane man in the state. Indeed, his appearance was attractive, because it was unique and interesting. Yet there was no evidence of a studied attempt at eccentricity. Sincere by nature, as well as by intention, seemed apparent.

As a gubernatorial nominee in 1894 Holcomb presented an unique figure. Massive in form, young and decidedly democratic in manners and dress, he left an impression wherever he went. He was scracely 37 years of age when he took the nomination of the populist and democratic parties and went out into the state to beat Tom Majors for governor. He had held but one elective office, that of district judge out in Custer county. He was not the most familiar figure in the state, by any means. And having lived the simple, pastoral life out at Broken Bow so long, he was not and did not pretend to be authority on fads and fashions. And here is where his old-time friends tell a good joke on him, in whose humor the judge himself finds great amusement now.



SILAS A. HOLCOMB.

When he burst into the arena of state politics, invested with the honor of the gubernatorial nomination, he showed that while impressed to some extent with the gravity of the situation, he had not fully comprehended the scope of the dignity to which he had just been elevated.

He had equipped himself with a long Prince Albert black coat, such as statesmen wear, thus indicating a lack of utter indifference to existing conditions. His friends were both gratified and dismayed. The thought of the Prince Albert was good; it was generally commended. But the coat itself was not adequate; that is, it did not fill the bill. It was long, but not long enough. It needed at least a foot more length to bring it up to present vintage. Metcalfe, Benton Maret and some of the other "cityfied" fellows conceived the necessity for prompt and radical measures. They held a council of war. Each one wanted the other to go to the judge and suggest the wisdom of getting another coat, one that would go nearer to his knees and whose sleeves wouldn't hook on his elbows when he went to make a gesture. They cast lots and the lot fell to Maret, who, by the way, was Mr. Holcomb's private secretary when he was governor. Maret didn't relish the task, but performed it nicely with his native suavity, and the judge came out with a garment that gave general satisfaction.

Memories of a Hot Campaign.

It probably would be a far-fetched claim to say that that second coat cut a vital part in the campaign, but whether it did or did not, the man who wore it came out with flying colors—elected by 3,300 majority over his republican opponent, while every other republican nominee went into office with fat majorities. In his second race for governor, against John McColl, he was elected by 23,000 majority.

The campaign of 1894 was the great political upheaval for Nebraska and the country at large. It was characterized by the most intense bitterness. Indeed, it was a veritable whirlwind of excitement. Both big parties were split wide open. The republicans had a candidate whom only a part of the organization could endorse and the democrats were divided on national issues. The convention which nominated Tom Majors had terminated in a disorderly demonstration due to the outraged feelings of the anti-Majors men, and this conflict lost none of its bitterness as the campaign progressed. Cleveland democrats, who bolted their state convention, were accused by their silver brethren of being allies of Wall street, and republicans were charged with pandering to capital by high protective tariffs. On the other hand, the combined fury of the republicans and gold democrats was centered on the populists, who were denounced as radicals, unsafe to place in charge of the government; advocates of vagaries and destroyers of state credit. So fiercely was this hurricane of vituperation waged that some people actually seemed to believe that Holcomb's inaugural address would be a sulphuric document, painted in all the lurid colors of a distorted fancy, which conceived the duty of a chief executive to be to sound the alarm for an uprising against the national government. But people who held such irrational views had a harsh surprise. Governor Holcomb's inaugural was about as dispassionate a product as could have come from any mind or been written by any pen. It began, or soon after its beginning, took up the discussion, in the calmest style, of the prosaic though then popular subject of "the actual want of a great number of our people caused by the drouth of last year." He concluded with this declaration: "But every government is in duty bound to provide at public expense the necessities to sustain life to its own needy inhabitants." This he asserted in connection with some recommendation for legislative action. The governor then dealt with the vital questions of irrigation, railroads and elective franchise.

So far from fulfilling any of the wild expectations of insane radicalism Governor Holcomb created even more consternation by his moderate policy in relation of the state to the railroads, as enunciated in these words:

"It is an erroneously conceived idea, and quite prevalent, that the interests of the railway and the people of the state are inimical. In fact, the success of each lies principally in the prosperity of the other.

"I am of the opinion that if a constitutional amendment creating a board of railroad commissioners, with ample power in the premises, could be submitted to the people, it would receive their approval by an overwhelming majority, and I believe this vexed question could be nearer settled satisfactorily in that than in any other manner."

And then, as if not satisfied in pouring hot coals upon the heads of his radical friends or enemies, whichever the case may have been, he sent this thunderbolt of conservatism at them in concluding his message:

"Although possessing various political beliefs, we, as legislators and executive, should have but one great object in view—to discharge the duties incumbent upon us in a good, businesslike manner for the common good. Each of you as a legislator has been elected as an advocate of the principles of some political party, but today you represent all the people of your district. In my capacity I shall earnestly endeavor to be governor of all the people."

It was the irony of fate that Governor Holcomb was addressing a republican legislature, elected with him in this stormy campaign, while his immediate predecessor, Governor Crounse, a republican, was inducted into office by a populist legislature.

Two Sources of Satisfaction

Modest of his own attainments, Judge Holcomb indulges himself just enough to take great pride in one or two of his political adventures. It is a matter of special pride with him that he was always able to poll a big vote—bigger than his party—and draw from the republican ranks, while securing the official endorsement of the democratic party. He took considerable good-natured pleasure in his election to the district bench over F. G. Hamer, but what he finds most satisfactien in is his defeat of Judge Reese for the supreme court and thereby his succession of Judge T. O. C. Harrison, the man who had beat him in 1893 for the same position.

With both of these men Judge Holcomb always was on the most friendly terms and his pride involves none of the spirit of revenge or vindication, but simply that wholesome feeling of exultation born of peaceable triumph. In 1893 Holcomb was the nominee of the populist party for supreme judge. The democrats had two nominees in the field, one for the gold and one for the silver wing, and the republicans had Harrison. Harrison therefore was on the bench when Holcomb defeated Reese in 1899 and was displaced by the populist he had previously defeated.

"Judge Reese was regarded by all odds as the strongest man his party could name," said Judge Holcomb in a recent discussion of the incident, "and of course I was proud of my election."

Story of a Farmer Boy

The life of Silas A Holcomb is not radically different from the life of many other men of his time who have taken prominent place in the affairs of the west. He was by birth and environment a commoner. He came from a country where commoners were in the ascendency, a state which has contributed its quota to the galaxy of the strong men of the nation. He was born in Indiana, in Gibson county, and on a farm, August 25, 1858. On the farm he was reared and in his boyhood became inured to the elements of a rugged life. The story of his childhood and early manhood days reads like that of some of the pioneers of the nation. He worked on the farm in the summer and attended school in the winter. He finally arose to the distinction of a student at a normal school. Able to maintain his equilibrium at such a lofty height of education he launched out as a school teacher and followed this vocation for four years. During this time he prepared himself for college.

In 1878, when Judge Holcomb was just 20, his father died, leaving him with the support of the family on his hands. These grave responsibilities, thrust upon him so abruptly, he assumed with sober determination. He looked around to cast his lot in a place most promising to a young man of his circumstances and the lot fell upon Nebraska. To Nebraska then he came with his widowed mother and younger brothers and sisters in 1879, settling in Hamilton county. He worked on a farm there for a year and then entered the law office of Thummel & Platt at Grand Island. He fairly dug into the dry bones of Blackstone, and after two years had succeeded in bringing to the surface a rich fund of legal lore. In 1881 he was admitted to the bar and the next year the most pretentious event of his life transpired. Of sufficient moment was it to arouse the greatest interest in that community where the chords of sympathy between the simple folk were tightly drawn and thus sensitive to the slightest touch. "Si" Holcomb, the young lawyer, led to the altar Miss Martha Alice Brinson of Cass county. His wife and children always have been the fondest objects of Mr. Holcomb's affections. He is distinctly a home man.

A year after his marriage young Holcomb moved to Broken Bow, where he began the practice of law and resided continuously until elected governor for the first time in 1894.

When Silas A. Holcomb first came into the arena of public life he was a splendid speciman of physical manhood. Strength and endurance were denoted in every fibre of his massive form. He was young—in the prime of life—and looked it. But time has wrought fearful changes. Today as Judge Holcomb retraces his steps from public service back to private life it is the foot of another man, for the tread is unsteady. Even now Judge Holcomb is just 47 past, yet affliction in the form of rheumatism has fallen heavily upon him. Through the long years of his official career, however, Judge Holcomb did not allow his affliction to stand between him and his office. He was a faithful attendant upon business. With him business was paramount to every other consideration. Naturally endowed with indefatigable strength he refused, even for impaired health, to yield or surrender.

When a reporter for The Bee asked the judge a few weeks prior to his retirement about his plans for the future he was uncertain as to them except insofar as his intention to try to regain his health.

"I shall first devote my time to recuperating my health," said the chief justice. "I feel that is my first duty."

"Will you leave the state?" was asked.

"I don't know what that will involve, but I hope it will not necessitate my leaving the state, and I think it will not. I must have plenty of out-of-door exercise, freedom from sedentary habits and matters taxing on the nervous system. Of course if I find after due experiment and upon advice that my condition demands a change of climate I suppose I shall take it. I want to regain my strength."

Personal Opinion of Populism

Shortly before his retirement Chief Justice Holcomb granted a lengthy interview to a reporter for The Bee in his office at the state house. In discussing the origin and career of the party he reaffirmed his faith in the principles on which it was founded, declared they had set in motion the wave of genuine reform now sweeping over the country, had brought relief to the common people in many ways, were now embraced by the best element of both big parties and would continue to live and work good. He said the party, as an effectual organization, was dead, but its voting strength was alive; that both big parties had embraced so much of its inherent doctrine that populists, who cared more for principle than party success, had found the fruition of their hopes realized and they returned to one or other of the old organizations. He expressed the belief the democratic party was able to withstand defeats of the past and live. He expressed the hope Bryan would again be the nominee of the fusion forces for president, and said that while Mr. Bryan was indifferent to the honor he believed if his party called him he would answer.

"The spirit of independence in voting so pronounced at the last general election in the east, and the crystallization of public sentiment favorable to municipal ownership sprung from and are the outgrowth of the teachings of the independent party begun several years ago in the west and south," asserted Judge Holcomb. "In the latter part of the '80s when the party began to assume form and shape as an organized political party the voters of Nebraska were no strangers to an anti-monopoly campaign with its adjuncts of declared hostility to machine politics and bossism. There had been for several years prior to 1889 a mutinous element in the dominant party which, as opportunity presented itself, displayed open opposition to the politicians and the candidates for public office which it was believed had been selected by and to serve selfish interests rather than the interest of the people at large. The Farmers' Alliance and the labor unions had, during the several years of their discussions of the good of the order, reached the deliberate conclusion that politics and the manner in which the affairs of government, both state and national, were administered, was in no small degree the cause of many of the evils of which they were complaining and regarding which they were convinced they had good cause to complain. It was felt that the few—and they the great corporations, the strong and powerful—had altogether too much influence in shaping legislation and in the administration of affairs through public office, and that the interests of the mass of the people were lost sight of; that public office was looked upon as a private snap rather than a public trust, and selfish rather than public interests were subserved. The fundamental conception of the creed of the independent voter was 'equal rights to all and special privileges to none.'

Genesis of Organization in Nebraska.

"The now more popular and vivid characterization of a 'square deal,' 'fair play,' etc., is giving expression to the same idea in more striking language. Before there was any attempt at organizing a national party the independent voters in many counties in Nebraska formed local organizations in opposition to both old parties and especially the dominant republican party, put candidates for county offices in the field and forthwith began the liveliest kind of a political fight, and in many instances captured the county court houses completely or partially. The first campaign of this kind of any considerable extent and proportion was just preceding the general election of 1889. The result was eminently satisfactory to those who had been preaching independent political action. The strength of the movement lay in the membership of the Farmers' Alliance organization and in labor organizations in the towns and cities, especially the society of the Knights of Labor.

"In 1890 a state organization was perfected and full state, congressional and county tickets were placed in the field. A whirlwind campaign followed that resulted in a veritable rattling of dry bones among the old party leaders and politicians. The parades on rally days, miles in length, winding their way through the streets of the county seats were eye-openers to those who had been doing the political thinking and manipulating the caucuses in former days. It at once became obvious that a portion at least of the electorate had concluded to do its own political thinking and acting. They were men of earnest conviction and imbued with lofty political ideals. They wanted a new political deal and also a 'square deal.' They had been studying political history and the science of government around the firesides and were as well or better informed than the average political stump orator.

"When the votes were counted it was found that the people's party candidate for governor, according to the returns, lacked but a few votes of an election. It was the abnormally large vote cast in Douglas county and the unusual majority there received by Governor Boyd that lost the office of chief executive to John H. Powers, the people's independent candidate. The republicans lost all representation in the lower branch of congress, lost the state legislature, many county attorneys and other county officers in different counties throughout the state. In 1891 the district judges were divided about equally between republicans on the one hand and democrats and populists on the other, the two latter parties in many counties working in political harmony. The county court houses continued to fall into the hands of the new party.

Some Well-Remembered Leaders.

"I hesitate to undertake the naming of those most prominent and active in the organization of the people's independent party. The names first coming to my mind are: John H. Powers, C. H. Van Wyck, Jay Burrows, Allen Root, W. H. Dech, O. M. Kem, C. D. Schrader, W. A. McKeighan, J. V. Wolfe, J. H. Edmisten, Senator Allen and a host of others.

"The party kept steadily growing in strength and power until 1896, when for the first time the state offices and the legislature passed to its control with the aid of the Bryan wing of the democratic party. This period may probably be regarded as the time when the party attained the zenith of its strength and power. It was not until December, 1890, that the Ocala (Florida) platform of the National Farmers' Alliance was promulgated. This may be regarded as formal proclamation to the world that this strong industrial organization was about to play an important part in national politics. In December, 1891, the Cincinnati platform was adopted as the result of the combined efforts of the representatives of the alliance and different bodies of labor organizations. This was the birth of

(Continued on Page Two)