

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

The Lesson Of the Spring Election

What we escaped. What we got, and what we may have in the future.

Probably very few of you would believe that at one time during last Monday night or early Tuesday morning, there was a drunken mob of disappointed workers for the labor ticket who filled the streets about the Board of Elections office and Vine Street and seemed at one time very likely to carry out their threat to burn the city. They had been told early in the evening, apparently on the authority of the Board of Elections of the success of their candidate for the mayoralty, and then later, having this report contradicted by the same authority they waxed wroth and not having any representation in that Board, and being jealous and suspicious by reason of their ignorance, they very naturally supposed their man was being fraudulently counted out.

Their demonstrations were, I am told, startling for a time, but the counsels of their soberer and wiser brethren prevailed and the crowd finally dispersed, without committing any violence. I was at the time asleep, after a long day's work at the polls but I have this from a friend – a reporter tis true but one who had no extra edition to sell when he was making this statement to me.

If less than half the people who forgot to register or failed to vote for other causes had voted last Monday the Labor Ticket, we should have seen the Labor Ticket elected.

I have been at some pains to look into the position and antecedents of the candidates upon that ticket, and cannot more forcibly call the attention of the Club to the full extent of the calamity from which we barely escaped, than by giving you briefly the result of my investigations.

The candidate for Mayor W. H. Stevenson, is what is called a boss brick layer, which does not mean a particularly skillful brick layer but merely one who gets work for himself and others. Mr. Stevenson's name is on the black list of the Retail Dealers Association as one of those who never pays his bills. To make such a man Mayor of the city of Cincinnati, with the opportunities and temptations which would surround his position, aside from the effect which his election would have upon Labor Element, would be dangerous to say the least.

The candidate for the Judge-ship of the Superior Court was a young man by the name of Bruck, who is honestly engaged in setting type in the office of the Cincinnati Enquirer, and so far as I could learn he pays such bills as he is able to contract.

The Labor Candidate for the City Solicitorship is the least objectionable of the candidates on that ticket. Mr. J.W. Schrage has become somewhat notorious by reason of sundry street fights in which he has seen fit to indulge, in connection with his Editorship of the Express News, but he writes vigorous English and probably knows as much law as the City Solicitor elect.

The Treasury of the City of Cincinnati, it was proposed by the Labor Party, to give over to the care of Dennis Mahoney Esq., who cleans castings for the Favorite Stove Works; and, if muscular Christianity is all that is needed in that office, Mr. Mahoney would fill the office beautifully, for he has some local reputation as a light weight and is a very good Catholic.

For the Police Court Judgeship, Jacob Hass was proposed, who formerly was a cabinet maker at Mitchell's Factory, but was discharged for drunkenness and then took up the more congenial business of Saloon Keeping. Having recently served a term in the Work House, he could minister sentences with a full knowledge of what they meant, and probably in that respect would be a better officer than some who have never had his wide experience but deserve it.

For Clerk of the Police Court, Frank L. Rist, a Printer at the Methodist Book Concern; and for Prosecuting Attorney E. T. Fries, a clerk in the O & M R. R. Office, were not worse than the regular nominations.

There is no city of its size in the country which is so completely given over to the mercy of partisan politics in municipal elections as Cincinnati. In spite of its boasted enlightenment and advanced civilization, claiming to be ahead of its sister cities in music and the arts, it lacks that first requisite of good government, an independent newspaper, and to this defect in our institutions can be traced I think much, if not all, of the political disgrace which has humiliated us during the past few years. We often hear the shocking condition of our municipal affairs attributed to the low moral tone which is said to prevail in our city, but I think it can be safely said that the moral tone of the people of Cincinnati is as good as the average; but the trouble with us is, that our attempts to correct abuse have had no direction, no guidance; our good citizens take no united action, and hence accomplish nothing. There are a great number of our people who always vote without regard to politics at our municipal elections; but their efforts are uncoordinated and ineffective. It is impossible for the rank and file of independent voters to inform themselves of the character and qualifications of every candidate for office; they can obtain no trustworthy information from the newspapers in reference to the candidates because neither paper will publish anything against its own party nominees, and what the opposition paper says of the candidate is unworthy of belief; therefore many an independent voter who would vote for good government without reference to the politics of the city's servants, not being informed as to the character of the respective candidates, finally votes his party's ticket as a last resort.

There was a time when the Commercial and the Gazette each occasionally rose above party, to the consideration of the real merits of the candidates for city offices, and always with good results, but since the miscegenation of June 1883 the hyphenated organ of the Republican Party has been issued for revenue only, and without any regard for the interests of Cincinnati. For four years the people of Cincinnati have been at the mercy of two political rings, sometimes concentric, and almost equally corrupt, simply because the taxpayers have had no newspaper to speak for them. Our two great newspapers have had other interests than the prosperity of Cincinnati to influence their actions – The editor of one lives in Washington, and one of the editors of the other, pays his taxes in a neighboring village, while his partner when not engaged in editing an organ elsewhere,

has apparently but little thought for the terrestrial affairs of our city except insofar as they can be made to aid him in his plans for the success of his party at large. The national reputation of these gentlemen, and their newspapers, depends not upon the well-being of Cincinnati, but upon Ohio's importance in national elections as a pivotal state; and therefore I think the interests of Cincinnati have been sacrificed to the needs and demands of national politics.

“It is happening to Chicago today as it has happened to Chicago's prototype, New York, and to Cincinnati, that while the able editors of their great and ambitious journals were attending to the business of all mankind outside of their own cities, and regulating the movements of the universe, their own home affairs had become the prey of scoundrels, destructives and plunderers. Those municipalities as well as individuals succeed best who mind their own business.” –which Commercial Gazette frankly published with this stock disclaimer

“So far as Cincinnati is concerned, the editorial page of the Commercial Gazette has been filled incessantly for sixty days with matter relating to our local affairs. We have had more to say of Cincinnati politics within that time than the Ledger has contained about the political affairs of Philadelphia in twelve months. We speak simply of course of quantity – others must judge of the quality. We were at least quite in earnest and industrious about the tendencies of the town.”

These references to Cincinnati politics however, have been such as the renewed publication of the Fourth Ward A. figures and other “last year's birds nests” calculated to ignite the Republican heart, for fear some misguided Republican citizen would be so weak as to vote for example for the Democratic candidate for the Superior Court because he knew him and thought him a better lawyer than he who is now the Judge elect, such an incident as the Sherman experience at the Birmingham hotel, was used for the same wicked design of making our Republicans more partisan at the coming election – not one word looking to the good of the city, such as pointing out the bad spots on the Republican ticket.

Speaking of that Sherman incident, I think the Commercial Gazette forgot the best part of it and as our citizens have many of them failed to get the whole story – I think I'll give it just as I find it in the NY. Evening Post of the 30th.

“Sen. Sherman has “gone back on” his chief organ, the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette, in the most heartless manner. When he was in Birmingham, Ala., the other day an old Bourbon Hotel-keeper refused to allow a party of colored men to call upon the Senator. It was merely a manifestation of the race prejudice which is still found everywhere in the country – which not very long ago denied an educated colored gentleman entrance to the dining-room of a Broadway hotel in the city, and which a few weeks ago notified negro members of the Grand Army that they could attend an entertainment of their organization in a Broadway theater only on condition that they would be stowed away in the gallery. But the Commercial Gazette broke faith in a double-leaded editorial article, declaring that a new form of irrepressible conflict appears, and that if the Democratic Party should carry the Presidential election next year, it would “give the old Confederate interpretation of the Constitution of the United States, and wipe out the limitations of reconstruction upon

the present form of the slave power. Unfortunately for the newspaper, however, it had hardly announced this great “issue” for the next national campaign, when Sen. Sherman, being questioned as to the episode, brushed it aside as of not the slightest consequence: “That amounted to nothing. I learned afterwards that he was one of the few left of the old type of Southern nigger-haters, and I suppose that and the temptation to gain a little notoriety for himself and an advertisement for his hotel impelled him to act as he did. It did not disturb my temper in the least. I simply paid my bill and left. I always reserve the right to receive as my guests whomever I choose. What pleased me most was that the representative people of Birmingham of all shades of opinion, condemned the man and apologized for the act. I assured them all that I attached no significance whatever to the incident.”

The good Republicans of Cincinnati were told the other day by the Commercial Gazette, as they are constantly told as each local election comes along, that never in the history of the city was it so important for them to vote a straight party ticket as at that particular time – when the editor knows perfectly well that no such crisis exists, and that many of the candidates of his party are unfit for the positions to which they have bought or otherwise improperly secured their nominations, and he knows to that the only necessity for voting straight ticket is that the editor may reap the glory of having it telegraphed all over the country, and particularly to the National Capital, that Hamilton County has again gone Republican, from which follows the conclusion that Hamilton County being the Keystone of the state of Ohio, the editor of the Commercial Gazette is a great success as an organist and occupies a very important position with reference to the National Republican Party and must be provided for accordingly. All this is wrong. We ought to have for our city the undivided allegiance of one morning paper, and a paper that has learned, and is willing to teach that partisan politics have nothing to do with filling the city offices. In my criticism of the course of our papers I have referred only to the Commercial Gazette because I think more is to be expected of it and more good can be done by it than any other one of our papers. The leading editor of the Commercial Gazette has had an influence by reason of his personal character which no other editor has enjoyed. His readers are the best class of our citizens and those from whom the largest intelligent nonpartisan vote should come. In local affairs we ought to be able to turn to our Commercial Gazette as thousands of people still confidently do, and take its advice in local elections with safety. The time has come when we are threatened by the labor organizations. The Commercial says our only safety lies in the Democrats coming over and voting the Republican ticket, and I suppose the other paper says vice versa, but if neither will think of the city and forget their party the Labor Party may capture us next time I fear.

It is because the conventions of both parties for the last few years in this county and city have been able to rely with absolute certainty upon the individual support of their party organ no matter how disgraceful was the character of their nominations, that they have dared to offer to the people of the city such tickets as they have put forth. This certainty of the support of the party ticket by the party press has had much to do with demoralizing our conventions – for it has made a certain class of candidates for office reckless of anything it might cost to get the desired nomination. In a community that is blessed with an independent newspaper, a man who is unfit for the office which he seeks, will before

he buys or gets it through any other unworthy means, or even before he accepts it, realize that the chances are great that his unworthiness will be exposed, and he will hesitate before he will throw away his money in buying his nomination or paying his assessment in vain. But in the city of Cincinnati every inducement is offered to such men to obtain their nominations unworthily, because they can rest assured, when once they've secured them that neither of the organs will say ought against any candidate of their party, no matter what are his antecedents and what may be said against them by others can be put aside as a campaign lie, so they are safe to get at least the vote of their party. All of this could be cured if our papers would forget their politics and consider our city and it's good alone.

Take for instance our last Republican Convention. I believe there never was a worse assembly in Turner Hall. I saw George Richards the dishonored and disgraced clerk of the Police Court who had been prosecuted by Mr. Coppock in the course of his duty, working like a beaver with such men as the notorious Squire Sanderson among the delegates, against Mr. Coppock's nomination, and what was more disgraceful still, the character of the delegates was such, that he could succeed. No further comment upon that body is necessary. It dishonestly "deaconed" its ticket as we would say of a barrel of apples packed with some presentable fruit at the top, and several rotten apples below. To those who did not look below the surface, Mayor Smith's name made the ticket appear very fair, and as compared with the labor ticket it is unquestionably preferable, but as a cold-blooded selection by the good people of Cincinnati, of their city officers it is not a cheering list. Let us look at some of its striking features. The City Solicitor of Cincinnati has probably had much important litigation on his shoulders as any other member of the Hamilton County bar; so much indeed that the city would save money by paying him \$10,000 a year and making his solicitorship a life office. Boston pays her solicitor \$20,000 and New York \$25,000 but our penny wise policy gives ours only \$3500 which, though it will not secure a leader of the bar, is enough to get very respectable ability, and if the terms were longer we should do quite well with what this salary will bring. But the Republican Convention at the request of George Richards refused to renominate Mr. Coppock. I do not forget that there was one serious thing said against Mr. Coppock, and that was that he had become so wicked as to vote for his brother, a dreadful Democrat, for the Common Pleas bench after the Bar Association had recommended him to do so. For the next two years the legal advisor of this city will be a young man perhaps of good ability but almost entirely without experience who about a year ago was employed as a reporter on the Enquirer.

The City Treasurer elect is a young man about thirty-three years of age, who is rapidly ruining himself with liquor. He has had some experience in the office as assistant, but his moral sense can be estimated from the following incident, which I have from most excellent authority: Before the slate was made up for the Democratic Convention it was proposed to nominate on the Democratic Ticket Mr. Zeigler, who is engaged in superintending the Packing House of the Triumvirate which controls several other enterprises including the Citizen's National Bank. This came to the ears of Mr. Bohrer who took about a quarter of one million dollars, or thereabouts from the regular place of deposit, and deposited it with Citizen's National Bank and when it had been there for a short time, Mr. Bohrer met one of the Triumvirate, and said he had heard that it was

proposed to have Mr. Zeigler run for City Treasurer, that he, Bohrer, disapproved of this candidacy, and if it was not forbidden that he would withdraw the city deposit which was then in the Citizen's Bank. Shortly after, Mr. Zeigler was sent away on business for the Packing House and I suppose after the Democratic nomination was made, the city deposit was withdrawn from the Citizen's Bank. Emile Rehse, the clerk of the Police Court, recently elected, was appointed by Mayor Smith to fill the vacancy caused by the removal of Richards when his shortage was discovered. Emil had been engaged in making watch cases over at the factory of Mr. Dueber in Newport but his father kept a saloon on the corner of Maine and North Court Street where the Court House officials refresh themselves when they get tired of the refreshment furnished at the other two corners of Maine and Court streets. In this way by reason of that weariness and consequent need of refreshment on the part of the officials, Mr. Rehse the elder, got the pull, so to speak, on the powers that make statesmen, and his son was called from the watch case factory to take the place of Mr. Richards when it was found that the public money would not go through Mr. Richards's hands without sticking. This selection was probably made because Mr. Rehse had learned to handle the precious metals without risk to himself, at the watch-factory.

After Emil had drawn the salary of city clerk for some months it was found to be necessary one day, to look at the Minutes of the Police Court, when it was discovered that Emil had kept no minutes at all; and when called to account by the Judge, he admitted that he did not know how to keep minutes. That was "not his trade," as he naïvely said. This occurring shortly before the election, led the Commercial Gazette to roundly abuse Judge Fitzgerald for finding fault with his clerk for not writing up his minutes, and to commend Mr. Rehse for his "honest and manly" admission of his inability to perform the duties for which he was drawing his pay. All of this was published in the papers before the election, but such a matter as Mr. Rehse's unfitness for the office, for which he was a candidate had nothing to do with the question of voting for him and was entirely overlooked by the good Republican Brethren who hastened to the polls to save the city by voting a straight ticket according to the advice of their newspaper.

In the precinct where I act as Judge, which is a very intelligent one as precincts go, there were but three Republican tickets of the 100 odd voted, which had Rehse's name scratched, and two of these were voted by my fellow judge and myself. There were at least two of the Republican nominations which were unquestionably unworthy and the truth should have been told about them.

There is hardly a city in the country except ours in which the law-abiding tax-paying citizens are not aided by the local press in taking a stand for good government at local elections. Baltimore, which has for years been tied hand and foot by a corrupt ring has at last through the aid of its independent press been able to rise to its feet. The stories of Boston and New York are too well known to need more than mere reference. In Milwaukee recently, by the aid of part of the local press, the respectable part of the community joined and overthrew the people's party which threatened to take possession of the city. In Chicago the good character of the press recently secured the enforced retirement of that odious demagogue Carter Harrison. Elsewhere wherever we find good municipal government, we find the citizens have united to get it without reference to their

opinions upon the subject of free trade or protection or whatever may be the dividing differences between the two national political parties. Cincinnati is one of the only localities where the ridiculous fallacy is adhered to, that no man can be an honest man who differs from you in national politics; and therefore that no man so differing, is safe to trust with a municipal office.

Unless the tax-paying and intelligent citizens of Cincinnati unite at the next election we are likely to find ourselves in the hands of a lot of walking delegates; but without direction or organization. They cannot unite to any purpose, and without some newspaper aid they can have no organization. The Commercial Gazette has already I fear begun to make eyes at the laboring party. In its issue of April 7th it says in an editorial referring to the fact that the Labor Party procession when passing the corner of Fourth and Race on the night of the election yelled "rats" "the use of this slang was an insult to the union printers engaged in this office, and occupy it as they have done for several years exclusively, with our free consent and cordial cooperation and goodwill. This is known to every laboring man in Cincinnati who has sense enough to be organized, and it ought to have been known to the procession of our serenaders." This sort of bait will not catch that kind of fish, – in my judgment – and no good can come of such overtures.

Within the past four or five years there have been two or three efforts to clarify the atmosphere of our Municipal Politics by organized independent action at the polls; but none of them have been successful because none of them had any support from the Press. The Municipal Reform Association had in its organization excellent men from both parties and they meant well, but they were called impracticable, and abused and ridiculed by the newspaper, and by all of that large part of a community who live by or through politics and at the formation of the committee of 100 the balance in the treasury of the Municipal Reform Association was turned over to it.

We hear a great deal from the Commercial Gazette about the Highland House Convention and the local Oil Legislature, and the rule of that excrescence upon the Democratic Party which controlled those gatherings, but I have always felt that the Commercial Gazette was largely responsible for the evils that came from that source.

At the time of the nomination of the Highland House Ticket, the decent Democrats in the city of Cincinnati repudiated the Ticket and made up what was known as the College Hall Ticket. It was, almost certainly, impossible to elect the Republican ticket and the editor of the Commercial Gazette might have known it. But rather than serve his State and his City by advising his followers to unite and elect the College-Hall ticket, he elected the Highland House Ticket by allowing the respectable vote to divide itself up between the Republican Ticket and the College Hall Ticket.

At the spring election following the burning of the Court House, the Municipal Reform Association nominated an irreproachable ticket for the School Board, composed of the best citizens from both parties; the Commercial Gazette refused to support it, and instead secured the election of the regular Republican nominees. But no sooner were the members of these School Board thus elected well in their seats, then the Mathers–Foster schoolhouse lot jobs were put through by the aid of the very men who were elected by the Commercial's help, over the ticket of the Municipal Reform Association, and no one

would have supposed from the sad tone of the Commercial about those two notorious transactions that that paper was largely responsible for the circumstances which made them possible.

The lesson that we can draw from the Spring Election is therefore, that in spite of our narrow escape, we have not escaped entirely; that until the people realize that they must organize to protect the property they own in the city, their property is not safe, and in spite of the failures which have so recently discouraged us in the direction of independence in Municipal affairs, the time has again, when we must try once more to impress upon our fellow citizens the folly of letting politics have anything to do with our municipal elections, and the necessity which should draw all intelligent law-abiding and tax-paying citizens together for their common good; and if this cannot be done without a newspaper, we should have the one or at any cost be rid of the other. Onto our children's children we shall suffer from the result of that fatal apathy which permitted the Court House to be burned. Such a thing must not happen again!

C. B. Wilby

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