

Elections were like 'mass convention' in 1880s

"The agony is over. Tuesday night ended the most desperate scramble for the city offices of Bloomington ever before known here. The contest was the stronger because a nomination by the Republicans is equivalent to an election."

— *Saturday Courier*, April 9, 1881.

The polls were open from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. during that primary election in April of 1881. By 8:30, many of the voters had trooped down to the Courthouse for what the *Courier* called a "Mass Convention."

There the votes of the various wards were counted and the names of the successful nominees were announced. In that particular year the Republican nominees were: C.F. Dodds, mayor; Robert C. Greeves, clerk; William P. Rogers, treasurer; George A. Buskirk, marshal; Thomas Massey, assessor; and Councilmen William B. Hughes, William N. Showers and Andrew J. Hoover.

The newspaper noted that the mayor and councilmen were all incumbents and added, "The ticket is an average one, and it is not like-



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

ly that the Democrats will make any opposition to it, but there may be an independent ticket of some sort in the field."

The *Courier's* primary postmortem was basically tongue in cheek. "The defeated candidates were around Wednesday morning explaining how it all came about. They failed to state that the principal cause was the lack of votes."

Implying that there was a large turn-out, the newspaper informed its readers that every infirm and handicapped person in the city had been hustled to the polls and added, "The poor farm wagon was on hand early."

In May of that 1881, the Republican slate was elected and duly reported on the front

page of the *Courier*. Prior to that May 7 publication date, the editor had apparently decided to go after the city administration with a vengeance.

In a separate story under the heading of "For What do People Pay City Tax," the editor went on the attack. "The way affairs are now managed a number of chronic violators of the city ordinances are permitted to go about the streets drunk, cursing and insulting women, fighting, etc., without arrest."

According to the newspaper, when arrested, those same people couldn't pay their fines and were turned loose after 24 hours. What was the reason for their release? Well, explained the *Courier*, "...the city authorities think it a piece of extravagance to pay 50 cents per day board for prisoners in the county jail."

Complained the newspaper, "The people of Bloomington pay a city tax. For what? Simply to pay the salaries of the city officers and occasionally repair a street crossing or haul off a dead hog?" (Bloomingtonians used to be allowed to keep pigs in their back yards.)

The *Courier* insisted that the way things were handled would lead people in Bloomington to believe they could do whatever they wanted to do without fear of punishment. Furthermore, the newspaper had some specific ne'er-do-well in mind. "We believe that there are at least a dozen persons whom the citizens of Bloomington would be glad to see locked up in jail for life, and would be willingly taxed to pay the cost."

It seemed to the *Courier's* editor that the one-party city government had grown lax since the days when prisoners felt like they were prisoners. "Violators of the city ordinances, unable to pay their fines, were kept at work cracking stone for a day or two and then released on the grounds that it didn't pay."

Grumbled the editor, "The city authorities should remember that the principal thing taxes are collected for is to enforce the law, and the people demand that their rights shall be protected in this regard. Let the officers elected last Tuesday begin their administration by turning over a new leaf."

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5/22/95