

Vote-buying was the norm in late-1800s elections

Negotiation between the Republican and Democratic parties in Monroe County to curb the buying and selling of votes in the 1905 election was a positive step toward honesty. Indiana was not the only state where people seemed to be looking the other way on election day when fraud was rampant, but Hoosiers had acquired a bad national reputation in that respect.

To understand the problem one has to go back to the fall of 1888, when an Indiana University professor by the name of Richard H. Dabney sent a letter to the editor of *The Nation*, published in New York.



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

Dabney described the Nov. 6, 1888, election in Bloomington.

Dabney alleged that Indiana had approximately 30,000 "floaters," persons who sold their votes for money or whiskey; that the going rate in 1880 for a bought vote had been a "crisp two dollar bill," but

that by 1888 the price had gone up to "three glittering five-dollar gold-pieces."

As for the Bloomington election in 1888, Dabney said that he observed floaters being brought to the polls in groups of five. By way of explanation, it should be noted that in those days each party printed its own ballots with only its own candidates on them. In a fraudulent voting transaction, the floater was paid to take one of the ballots to the polling place and turn it in as a vote. As the name implies, floaters stopped by several precincts in the course of the day. According to the professor,

both parties were buying votes.

Had that been the only observation of Dabney in his letter the editor of *The Nation* might not have taken much notice of it, since floater voting was rather widespread across the country. But the IU professor also included some very colorful and serious allegations — that known floaters were corralled, confined by party officials in certain places on the night before the election (to prevent their opposite party numbers from recruiting them) and given plenty of liquor to keep them happy during the hours of the night.

Furthermore, Dabney said that the lodge hall of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was used as one of the places of confinement, thus angering at least one of the members so much that he decided to resign from the organization.

He added that the five-dollar gold pieces were turning up at butcher shops in the days after the election. More serious, however, was another allegation: "If it were not so serious a matter, it would be amusing to learn that a lady of this place, who went to purchase butter on

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