

A Convention of "Perfect Harmony"

THE LUSTY quality of frontier politics is legendary, and there is ample evidence that Minnesota was not behind other pioneer communities in the exuberance of its electoral contests. On September 13, 1859, the Pioneer and Democrat of St. Paul printed a routine report of the Dakota County Democratic convention, held "on Saturday last." The nominations, observed the paper, "indicate perfect harmony in the party." Three days later the Pioneer's rival, the Republican Daily Minnesotian, gleefully published the following account of the convention. It was no doubt written by the editor of the Minnesotian, Dr. Thomas Foster, whose political and ethnic biases must be forgiven—he was, after all, a Yankee and a Republican.

The Delegates to the [Dakota County] Democratic Convention met, pursuant to call, at the Cross Roads near Pine Bend. . . . They first assembled in the open air, but subsequently obtained permission from Mr. Willoughby to occupy the upper floor of his large barn. The delegates ascended to the hay loft by means of a ladder on the outside. The meeting room was divided across by a stout tamarack timber firmly secured, so as to separate the outsiders from the delegates. At one end of the room a table was placed, at which sat the Chairman and Secretary. . . . It should be premised that the election precinct in which the Convention met, is a strong Irish one, known as Invergrove; and many of its citizens were in attendance as lookers on; beer and whiskey were on the ground in plenty, to furnish stimulation sufficient for all hands.

The County Treasurer and the Register of Deeds were nominated without material difficulty.

On the Sheriff nomination the tug commenced. John Devlin, the present Sheriff, has been twice elected to office. At the last

term of the District Court at Hastings he rolled dead drunk on the floor of the Court Room! . . . There was, naturally, a strong opposition by all the Americans, Germans, or other nationalities, except by the Irish, to his being again nominated—and even some of the most decent of his own countrymen opposed him. But it was of no use. . . . Squire Bucher, of Lakeville . . . was his opponent. . . . On the first formal vote, Devlin had 18, Bucher 17, and somebody else one. The Convention consisted of 36 members; consequently 19 were necessary to a nomination. The Chairman very correctly decided that there was no nomination, as no person had received a majority of the whole number of votes polled. Devlin's friends asserted, on the contrary, that he was duly nominated, and appealed from the decision of the Chair; under the terror of the bludgeon storm already heard muttering on the outside, a majority failed to sustain the decision of the Chair; and of course Devlin thus wrongfully became again the Democratic candidate for Sheriff.

The Legislative nominations were made. Arah Barton, Michael Waldier and Stephen Newell were nominated without much opposition. Two were yet to be chosen. Charles McGrorty, of Invergrove . . . was a candidate. . . . His friends and neighbors were principally around the Convention. His brother John was in attendance, accompanied by a most significant "big stick," over an inch thick. It became evident it was the determination of the leaders to keep Charles McGrorty from being nominated—by management if they could not by numbers. It should be noted that a resolution had been early adopted to nominate all the candidates entirely *by ballot*. But . . . the Chairman allowed a motion to nominate John Flanigan and H. J. Schaffer by acclamation—which was put through on a rush—and the two declared nominated!

The mutterings of the storm without the tamarack bar . . . became louder and more threatening. . . . The crowd grew every moment more excited. John and the "big stick" fairly shook with rage.

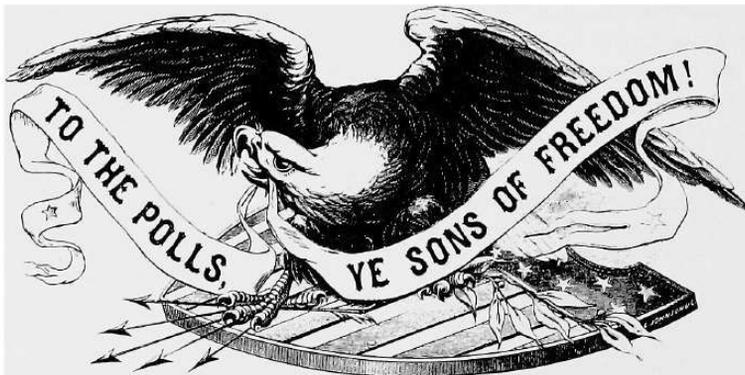
The nomination for District Attorney brought things to a crisis. The opposing candidates were Seagrave Smith, Esq., of Hastings, the present District Attorney, and R. A. Phelan, Esq., an Irish citizen of West St. Paul. The same game that defeated McGroarty was here tried on, this time, however, by the other side; and Phelan was proclaimed nominated! Mr. Smith didn't like this, and made some remarks derogatory to Irishmen. This furnished the long looked for pretext for a row. John McGroarty, with his "big stick" and his body-guard of the Invergrove Greens, had worked around from outside the tamarack timber to the inside, and finally to the back end of the room.

Smith felt the first strokes of the storm. Down he went before the terrible force of the "big sticks." A blow across the mouth cut his lip—another blacked his eye—another raised a huge bump on the back of his head—a bump not known to ordinary works on Phrenology. He was most shamefully abused. A Norwegian delegate from an interior district, quietly sitting at the table, was struck down by a bludgeon, his whole face being laid open by an awful blow, and he was otherwise bruised and beaten in a most desperate manner. . . . As he subsequently descended the ladder, he exclaimed in broken English and in

mournful tones—"Oh, and what was dis all for?" . . .

But the fight still went on. A main purpose of the belligerents seemed the hide of the presiding officer, for some of his rulings. But that dignitary early looked out for his own safety. He first tried to shelter himself by crouching behind Mr. Hillhouse, of Nininger, who . . . refused his protection; and the official then hid behind the fanning mill, expecting that anything that made much wind would shelter him through pure sympathy. He finally escaped in the confusion, it is supposed by dropping out of the rear window, near which a friendly straw stack gave him its protection. . . . Big Doyle, of Lakeville, was heard deprecating further assaults, by crying out, "John! John! what yer doin', John?" as he bowed his head and back before the terrible "big stick." . . . Miller, of Nininger, a tall man, with extended extremities, was described to us as striding with one rapid jump over five or six prostrate Democrats, and then leaping in safety from the window. Others went down the ladder, in all shapes and at all degrees of speed—tumbling, sliding and rolling in a most awful confusion; while still the "big stick" played its part to admiration, keeping time by its thumps to the groans of the wounded, the yells of the victors, and the curses of all hands.

—And so ended the last Democratic Convention of Dakota County—the Convention of "perfect harmony" as the *Pioneer* terms it.





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