

Farm Vote Shows Breaking of Old Party Lines

West, Having Tasted Power, Will Hold It, Says Political Observer—Next President from West of Missouri River

The writer of this article was selected by the Democratic National Committee to take charge of the important division of agricultural publicity during the recent campaign. There is probably no person better qualified to speak concerning political conditions in the West, which were the deciding factor in the Presidential contest.

Mr. Odell is nationally known as an agricultural economist and writer. He was formerly Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics and Publicity for the State of Nebraska and more recently editorial writer for the Clover Leaf Organization of daily papers in the West.

By Frank G. Odell.

POLITICAL post-mortems are useless except as they may serve to indicate constructive policies for the future. The outstanding fact in the recent Presidential election is the potency of the West in national affairs. By the term "the West" is included that territory lying between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean. Every one now recognizes that the West decided the election. How to hold this newly acquired political allegiance now becomes the chief problem of the Demo-



Frank G. Odell.

cratic organization, and how to gain its lost confidence is alike the chief perplexity of the Republicans.

Let it be said, in passing, that the recent phenomenal reversal of political form in the West is a victory for democracy rather than for the Democratic

Party. The West has passed the partisan stage.

The case of Kansas reveals a political miracle. Republican as Pennsylvania since its admission to the Union, with possibly one exception, Kansas makes all politicians sit up and take notice. Governor Arthur Capper was re-elected as a Republican by a majority estimated at 130,000. Then those incomprehensible jayhawkers walk right over the party line and give a 25,000 majority for Wilson. This is even more remarkable than the result in California.

North Dakota is another evidence of similar conditions, though in a lesser degree. Here some 40,000 farmers, affiliated with the American Society of Equity, formed a nonpartisan political organization and captured the Republican primary, nominating their candidate for Governor and electing him in November. This same movement gave Wilson his majority in North Dakota.

Then take a look at Washington. In this State Senator Miles Poindexter comes back on the Republican ticket by 55,000 majority and the State goes for Wilson by some 7,000.

All of this means more than the mere settlement of one Presidential contest. It means chiefly that the West has in one election become the real dominant force in national politics, and that if it retains its political balance it will probably continue to harvest a large and profitable crop of ice in future campaigns.

Old political traditions have been shattered. New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Illinois are no longer pivotal States if present conditions become permanent. Trust the West to see to it that these conditions do become permanent.

The Farmers' Alliance movement of the eighties and its political progeny, the Populist Party, are but historic memories—a sort of political legend to those who did not live through those stirring days. This agrarian propaganda was the natural result of the economic pressure under which the Western farmer of that day existed. His unrest sought its natural outlet in organization, speech-making, and final political action. He was then a faddist, a crank, and a "corporation baiter!" But most of the legislation for which he then contended, against shaking of heads and wagging of beards by ultra conservatives, has long since been enacted by Republicans and Democrats as part of a great constructive policy.

Witness the establishment of public service commissions in every State; the abolition of the free railway pass; the enactment of unfair competition laws to protect farmers' organizations in the fundamental right to trade collectively in their products, &c. The legislation and jurisprudence of every State and of the nation as a whole bear ample testimony to the long-continued influence

of the agrarian agitation of the eighties and nineties.

This developed incidentally a habit of political free thinking which has its reflex in the present generation of Western farmers. This has never been so apparent or so potential as on Nov. 7, 1916.

It is idle to say that this or that political family quarrel was the determining factor in this election. The farmers and the women of the West did it—and they did it deliberately, knowing what they wanted to do. A proper conception of this fact is essential to the understanding of coming political conditions.

The farmer is the real conservative. He is to be relied on as the natural balance of power to resist the inroads of radicalism. This may seem odd in view of his recent political actions, but it is nevertheless true. Through his organizations and his slow but constructive mental processes he has made more permanent and beneficial impression on the economic and political structure of this generation than any other class in American life.

Out in the West a new economic movement is in the making. The rapid settlement of the trans-Missouri country and its transcendent importance in the breadbasket of the nation have stimulated land values and given rise to a rapidly increasing tenant class on the farms. This is bringing about another agrarian revolution in the near future. Tenant farmers are organizing in all the Western and Southwestern States for co-operative buying and selling, for protection of their market and incidentally and inevitably for such measure of political action as they may deem necessary. In this connection the case of North Dakota is quite in point.

There are in the State of Minnesota alone something over 700 of these farmers' co-operative societies. They are all prosperous and earning dividends on their small capitalization, besides securing better prices for their members. In the grain belt, comprising ten States, there are several thousand such organizations with a membership running into the millions. They now practically control the local country market through their organization and are reaching out to establish themselves at the terminal centres. The politics of Minnesota, the Dakotas and the great Northwest, clear out to the coast, is in a state of seething turmoil because of this new condition.

While this is distinctly a renaissance of the agrarian revolution of the eighties, involving somewhat of radicalism, it nevertheless comprises in its membership the bulk of the real conservatives of the West—those who are bound to the soil by the tie of present or hoped-for ownership of the land. The biggest economic problem today in the life of the nation is to put these people on the land to stay and to make their labors contented and profitable.

This problem of the West is not a political but a business problem. The rapid growth of the farmers' co-operative movement necessarily involves friction with established business interests. The local merchant, the jobber, and the manufacturer must adjust their business relations to this new condition. For it has come to stay. The farmer has begun to find himself in a business way. The co-operative movement is an established economic entity.

All of this implies the need of a better acquaintance and understanding between the farmer and the business man. Particularly is this true in the national sense. The West has discovered that it can do without the political help of the East. It will continue to assert its political independence, for, whatever his faults, subservience and modesty are not to be charged against the Westerner. If he should seem a bit cocky over the recent election, please reflect that his self-assertion is not without good reason.

No sounder advice could be given to East and West alike than that of cultivating better acquaintance and securing a mutually profitable viewpoint of the new economic relation which is inevitably coming. Organized business has the money with which to do this most important job. Will it exhibit the common sense required to carry out so obviously sensible a program?

The political activities of 1918 and 1920 must necessarily take into account the newly found political independence of the West. The Democratic Party has no mortgage on the Westerners who supported President Wilson this year. Should his policies continue as generally satisfactory to the West as they have been during the last four years, and should the Democratic Party develop a consistent program of legislation in the interests of social justice, it may well hope to retain the allegiance of the West.

The preliminaries of this political battle will be fought out in the Congressional elections of 1918. The Republican organization of the West is shot full of holes. It may find itself in the next two years, but it will have to do more than make promises. The Western farmer has no more interest in the old tariff controversy than he has in Egyptology. He now controls his home market pretty completely, and he hopes to put the fear of God in the hearts of the politicians so successfully as presently to stop a lot of the gambling and juggling of the terminal markets which boosts the cost of living, for which he is made the goat in the public mind.

The writer is not inclined to indulge in prophecy, but the signs of the times seem to indicate that the West has come into national politics to stay. It may well be possible that the next President may come from west of the Missouri River, and that the East has lost its power of political control for a generation.