

Minister Who Would Be Governor of Florida

Having Won the Democratic Nomination, the Rev. Sidney J. Catts Is the Centre of Stormiest Political Fight in State's History

ABAPTIST minister in a country village in Southern Alabama mopped the perspiration from his face at the end of a vigorous sermon, and after a hymn had been sung he undertook to collect several hundred dollars for missions. That was ten years ago. The minister was soon to attend the State Baptist Convention, and he made it clear that he did not desire to carry with him a report of short collections.

He proposed that subscriptions be opened with gifts of \$15. That amount was considered large by members of his congregation, among whom there were few who felt able to give this lump sum. Most of the people in that community were farmers who had faced hard times almost continuously since the close of the civil war. It was with a great deal of hesitation that three or four persons finally had the courage to give the donation asked.

"Well, now, who will give \$10?" asked the preacher.

A hush, emphasized by the wind in the pine grove sheltering the church, fell upon the body of worshippers. The only interruption to the pastor's exhortations was the bray of a hungry mule hitched outside, announcing as accurately as a timepiece the hour for the midday meal.

The minister began to show signs of impatience. His florid complexion changed to a deeper shade of red. He more frequently applied his handkerchief to his face and neck. His collar already had wilted. Having failed at length to obtain a single response to the call for \$10 donations, the minister suddenly shook his forefinger at his congregation, and said:

"I don't intend to stand here long and see you sitting like frogs waiting for it to rain. If I cannot have the support of my congregation I shall offer my resignation."

The worshippers were astonished. They fixed their eyes on their pastor, and remained as motionless and silent as real frogs in a pond into which a stone has been thrown. The threat produced no other results. In a few minutes the minister raised his hand, pronounced a short benediction, and, without saying another word, went home.

The Rev. Sidney J. Catts, who then resigned the pulpit of Bethel Baptist Church, at Fort Deposit, Alabama, is now the central figure in the stormiest political fight in the history of Florida. Several weeks ago the State Canvassing Board gave him the certificate of nomination for Governor by the Democratic Party, as a result of the primary of June 6, and nomination formerly has been equivalent to election to that office.

Mr. Catts's fight for the Democratic nomination for Governor was made with the support of the Guardians of Liberty and a large number of Prohibitionists. If he should be elected on Nov. 7, his would be a unique political victory, inasmuch as a preacher will have stepped out of the pulpit on a religious plank into a Governor's mansion.

The most bitter animosities have developed between the two main political factions within the Democratic Party of Florida, and it is feared that serious consequences may follow. Friends of Mr. Catts are much concerned over his personal safety. Within the State and without they have warned him of the possibility of assassination, but his courage has not wavered, and warnings apparently have served only to increase his efforts to clinch his victory.

The primary vote was so close that it was eight days after the election before Mr. Catts was declared the gubernatorial nominee. The figures totaled by the canvassers showed that he had a majority of 260 over his nearest opponent, State Controller W. V. Knott. The clergyman polled 30,092 first choice and 3,337 second choice votes, while the State Controller had 24,720 first choice and 8,449 second choice votes.

The defeated candidate straightway

announced that he would contest the nomination of Mr. Catts, and subsequently began mandamus proceedings to have a recount in certain counties, where, he charged, there had been irregularities in counting the second choice votes. If the results should be reversed, the present nominee says that he will hold to his certificate of nomination and run independently. His opponent, in a statement issued several days ago, said he was informed that the followers of Mr. Catts proposed to march 10,000 strong with rifles to the State Capitol and seat him in the Governor's chair if force were necessary to establish his claims.

"Had I been the losing candidate and Mr. Knott had just one vote in the lead, I would gracefully have bowed to him and taken my defeat in silence," said Mr. Catts in a statement appearing in the Florida Metropolis of Jacksonville after his nomination. "As it is, the tables are turned, and I appreciate everything my friends have done for me. I wish to assure them I will give them the best administration it is in my power to give."

As soon as the nomination of Mr. Catts was certified, it caused general alarm among county officials appointed by the Governor. The headquarters of Mr. Catts, in answer to a flood of inquiries as to his views on patronage, gave out this statement:

Governor Catts says he considers the voice



Bethel Baptist Church, Fort Deposit, Alabama.
Rev. Sidney J. Catts. (In Circle.)

of the people as the voice of God and will recognize selections in the primary honestly made, the responsibility resting with the people. He will only require faithful performance of duty on the part of public officials.

Asked for his views of the threatened railroad strike, the Rev. Mr. Catts recently defined his attitude toward capital and labor in the following statement published in the Florida Metropolis:

The presumption is that capital is able to look out for itself and always drives a sharp bargain. The laboring man is not so well versed, and when a contract, right and just to all, is offered it is always the corporation which drives the bargain. I stand for constructive laws for the corporations. No corporation that is right need fear anything at my hands, despite the warnings being shouted by certain of my opponents. I shall be their friend, just as I am the friend of the laboring man; but they need not expect that I shall go to extreme measures to enforce their requirements of labor.

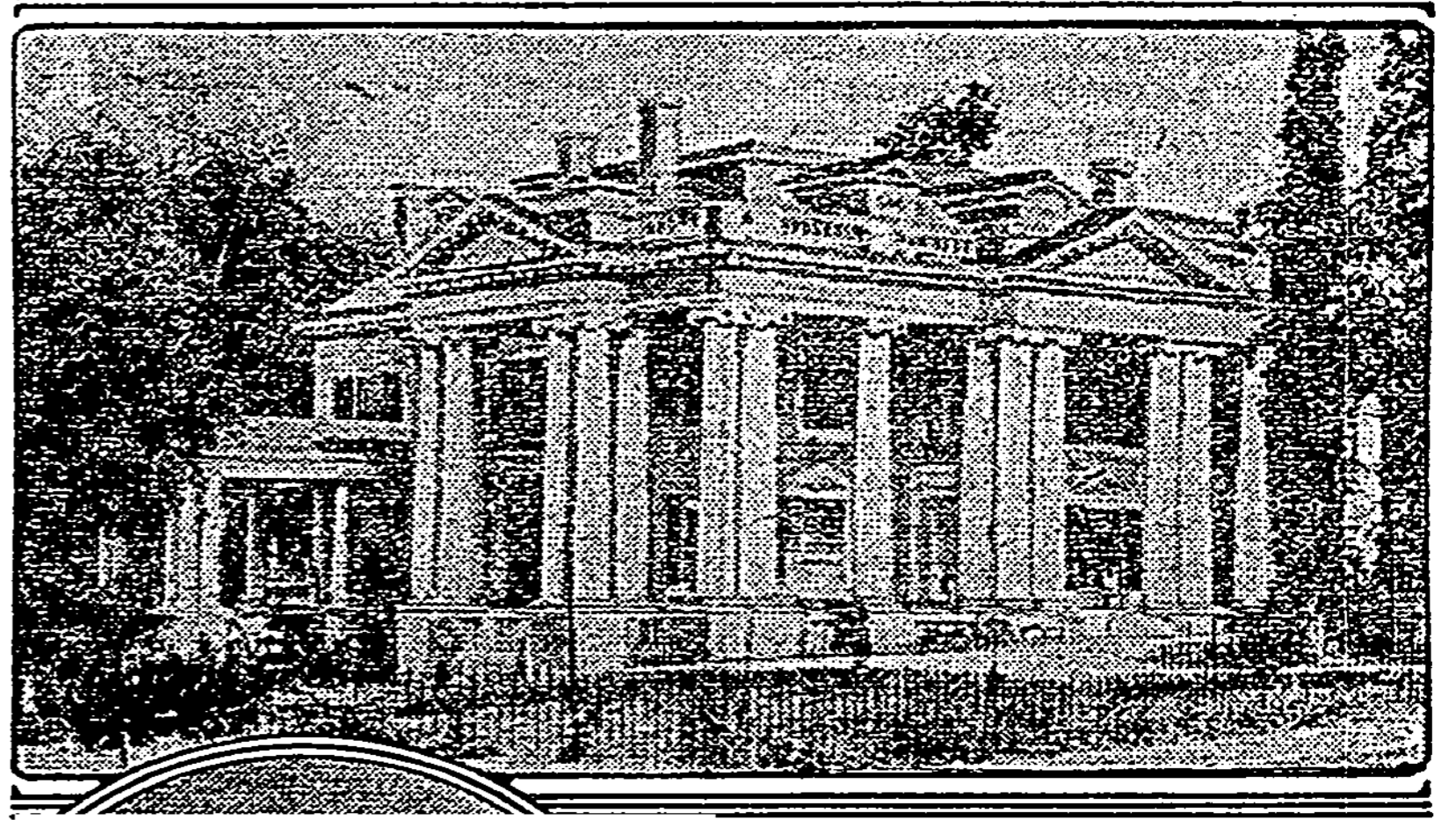
Discussing some of the unusual aspects of Mr. Catts's success, The Tampa Morning Tribune has said, in an editorial:

The successful candidate was an entire stranger to the people of Florida when he announced his candidacy. His first announcements were greeted with derision—as a political joke. It is doubtful if there were more than a dozen citizens of Florida who entertained the slightest idea that he had a possible chance. Yet he defeated four of the strongest and best-known men in the State. He had against him not only these four men and their following, but practically the solid liquor influence, office-holding influence, Catholic influence, and the State press. He made his race practically without a

campaign fund, had no money of his own, and here in Tampa, watching the count of the votes, was without the price of a railroad ticket back to his home at De Funiak. Throughout the campaign he boldly denounced from the stump certain things which no candidate for office in Florida had ever dared denounce, pursuing a campaign policy which had always theretofore been considered equivalent to political suicide. Yet this man, a newcomer, virtually a stranger, with no record of public performance to stand upon, with no part in the history of the

removed to Pleasant Hill, Dallas County, Ala., where he entered upon farming and mercantile ventures, while at intervals he preached to rural congregations.

In the post village of Mt. Willing the Rev. Mr. Catts was holding a protracted meeting one Summer, when he became irritated apparently because there was no demonstration of religious fervor such as he had been able to inspire before his separation from his former church. At



Governor's Mansion, Tallahassee, Fla.



the conclusion of the services he frankly told the good people he was deeply disappointed, and asserted most vigorously:

"Hereafter you need not expect me to come over, here conducting funerals for you, and saying good things of you, trying to fool St. Peter to let you into the Pearly Gates. No, I simply will not tell any more stories at your grave just to soothe your aching hearts."

When he went to the home of one church member to get his horse and cart, his host's wife, an outspoken woman, said to Mr. Catts:

"I know the protracted meeting has done great good, because I heard one man say he was not going to tell any more lies."

Meanwhile rumors were brought back to his former congregation that the minister was drifting further away from religious work. They were surprised, however, when informed that their former pastor had finally decided he had served the Lord long enough, and thenceforth was going to serve S. J. Catts. Subsequently, the Rev. Mr. Catts returned on a visit to his former congregation, and they learned from him that he still was endeavoring to serve the Lord outside as well as inside the pulpit. He preached to them again in their little red brick church, admitting his quick temper, and begged forgiveness of any who were inclined against him. The preacher never was ashamed to acknowledge a weakness, any more than he was afraid to point out the errors of his congregation, and for that reason his congregation never doubted his sincerity.

These are some characteristics that have been discovered by political sleuths employed by Mr. Catts's opponents to go back and uncover his record. They learned a great deal, also, about his temper.

Sidney Johnstone Catts was born near Pleasant Hill, Ala., July 31, 1863. He attended Howard College, a Baptist denominational institution, in 1878, and later entered the Alabama Polytechnic Institute. In 1882 he was graduated from Lebanon (Tenn.) Law School, and two years later he entered the Baptist ministry. He served longest as pastor of the Baptist Church at Fort Deposit, which he left to accept a call to the First Baptist Church at Tuskegee, and he subsequently returned to Fort Deposit. In 1904, just prior to his resignation from the church at Fort Deposit, Mr. Catts was a candidate for Congress from the Fifth Congressional District of Alabama, but was defeated by J. Thomas Heflin, the present Representative.