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Article Summary: Sheldon, a Republican progressive, favored government regulation of corporate activities and a broader investment field for state funds. He left the state after his single term as governor. Extended visits to his Mississippi property had prevented him from building a durable political organization in Nebraska

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Photographs / Images: George L Sheldon; Rose Higgins Sheldon; house in Nehawka in which Sheldon was born and reared; Sheldon while he was commander of Company B of the 3rd Nebraska Regiment under Col William Jennings Bryan; Sheldon at the 1907 cornerstone-laying ceremonies of the YMCA building at Columbus; Sheldon as collector for the Internal Revenue Service in Mississippi during the Hoover administration; state maps showing Nebraska gubernatorial election results, 1906 and 1908

THE POLITICAL CAREER OF GEORGE L. SHELDON, 1907-1909

By VIRGINIA SPEICH

George Sheldon, first native-born governor of Nebraska, came by his Republican politics naturally. His father, Lawson Sheldon, who settled in Cass County in 1856, was elected Republican representative to the Territorial Legislature in 1857; he later served as senator in the second, third, fourth, and eighth sessions of the Nebraska Legislature.¹ Lawson Sheldon became a political and economic force in Cass County. In this he was aided by his friend Isaac Pollard, who had come to Nebraska with him; by his brother Amsdel, who followed him; and by members of the Tefft family, who married into the Sheldon or Pollard families. In time the Pollard-Sheldon-Tefft combination practically controlled Cass County Republican politics.

Into this politically minded Republican family, George Lawson Sheldon was born on May 31, 1870. He was educated to be a politician from the time he entered district school until he finished his formal education with a *cum laude* B.A. degree from Harvard. As an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, his activities centered about debate, journalism, Republican politics, and ROTC, in which he captained Company A (later the Pershing Rifles). During the Spanish-American War, he aided in raising a company of Nebraska volunteers who served under Col. William Jennings Bryan. His political career

received impetus when he became chairman of the Republican Club at the university, and he served on the state central committee as early as 1894. Later he became chairman of the Cass County Republican Central Committee and was treasurer for seven years of the district central committee.²

After graduation from Harvard, Sheldon settled at Nehawka, apprenticing in the family business, farming, and raising cattle. Then intervened the Spanish-American War. It had a decisive effect upon his life, not because of his military career, but because his army unit passed through the fertile Mississippi Delta country, which so impressed him he decided to invest in it. On May 16, 1902, the *Nehawka Register* reported Sheldon purchased 1600 acres of land in Mississippi and thereafter made numerous trips to his plantation until he settled there permanently in 1909. His absences from Nebraska were irregular, but between 1902 and 1907 he was in Mississippi many months of each year.³

After entering politics seriously in 1903, he at first returned to Nebraska only for important political meetings. His divided residency undoubtedly affected his Nebraska career. One may wonder if his entry into the race as the Cass County candidate for the Nebraska senate may not have been an attempt by his family to keep him interested in Nebraska politics. On September 20, 1908, the *Lincoln Star* commented:

It struck the members of the family that it wouldn't be a bad thing to have a Sheldon in the senate. Lawson Sheldon had intended that his son be a luminary in politics and it appeared that the time was ripe for injecting the Cass County man into state affairs. No one knows just how it was done but it is surmised that George Sheldon was elected to the Senate when the members of the Sheldon-Tefft family congregated and said yes.

It was a family affair and when the family agreed the thing was done. Avoca, Weeping Water and Nehawka were in line, Plattsmouth was easy, and with this backing the rest of the county didn't see any need of opposing Sheldon, particularly when both the family and the portege [*sic*] were well liked and were known to have a sterling record in the county.

Incidentally, there was an election. It was a mere incident because Sheldon was elected when the family said so. The ballots were for Sheldon and the present governor had entered state politics.

Although Sheldon often expressed disinterest in public office, he showed political skill. He inspired confidence, which initially attracted conservatives, progressives, and independents alike to his cause.⁴

The adjectives reporters most often used to describe him were "honest," "simple," and "trustworthy." He was deliberate in speech, handshake, and action, slow to start, slow to make up his mind, but once started he was noted for persistence. He seldom acted until he was sure what should be done; he seldom made promises; he insisted that no strings be tied to his nominations; he insisted upon freedom of action. A man with convictions and courage, he believed in the right of man to express his own opinions.⁵ A *Lincoln Star* reporter described him in 1908, saying:

There is a certain terrestrial sweep about the Sheldon physique and manner, a sort of Kinkaid land act atmosphere, that allows of big comparisons. His exterior is kindly, fertile like the rich soil of land where he was born, willing to return to those who till it in friendship what they deserve, but underneath which there are springs hot and cold, diversified strata of diversified material, some of it all-fired curious, and if you go deep enough a red hot volcano that would make Mr. Pain envious and which, if it ever gets in operation, will make Pitchfork Tillman sound like a babbling infant.⁶

Sheldon represented Cass County in the senate sessions of 1903 and 1905. During his successful campaign in the fall of 1902, he had spent part of the time "a thousand miles away . . . down on his plantation in Mississippi, digging up the elusive blackberry and pulling the pungent poke weed out of 500 acres of land."⁷ Apparently he had been of the opinion that his political fences in Nebraska were in good repair. Sheldon began his legislative career in January, 1903, and was considered active for a freshman senator. Impatience (if indeed he had any) to return to farm and plantation is shown only in his vote against all long senate recesses. He was placed on good committees: rules, privileges and elections, claims and finance, ways and means. His chairmanship of the public lands and buildings committee familiarized him with state institutions and with the system of paroles and pardons. Medical affairs, military affairs, and miscellaneous cooperation committees completed his assignments. Later he became chairman of the committee on employees.⁸

Knowledge gained in committee assignments, which familiarized him with the machinery of state government, served him well when, as governor, he became noted for his interest in state institutions, especially those serving the veterans and the militia. Senator Sheldon did not introduce the first bill into the session of 1903, but he introduced the next four — one of which was to

legalize decrees of district courts relative to tax foreclosures; another was to legalize sheriffs' deeds. Some bills he introduced were at the behest of worried Cass County farmers. One defined state boundaries and provided jurisdiction over parts of Nebraska moved by means other than accretion along the Missouri River. Another required railroads to provide suitable waiting rooms and sanitary facilities; still another was to open, maintain, or vacate certain roads. Other bills reflected his interest in land and cattle.⁹

Sheldon early showed interest in economy and debt reduction. One law which he had championed saved counties money by allowing supervisors to avoid costly contract bridge building through purchase of material in the open market and hiring labor directly. Sheldon, concerned about the state's floating debt of \$2,400,000 in general fund warrants at 5 percent interest, felt it was there because assessors tried to protect their neighbors against state and personal taxes and because of the 5-mill limit on state taxation. Three Sheldon bills that passed affected supervision of medical and mortality matters. Perhaps the bill that pleased him most established firmly the status of the Nebraska militia.¹⁰

The session of 1905 heralded the progressivism of 1907. Three bills Sheldon advocated in 1903 passed in 1905: those which improved railroad stations, defined state boundaries, and provided payment of costs in misdemeanor cases, making prosecution of offenders more certain. He also successfully sponsored a uniform weights and measures bill, a cemetery association bill, and a bill clarifying certain justice fees. As chairman of the senate committee on employees, he instituted changes which brought greater economy into the government. He is best remembered, however, for the Sheldon Mill Levy Act to pay off the floating state debt. It provided a one-mill levy to pay outstanding warrants. When he became governor, this act and his economy in government cut the state debt by about 80 percent.

In Nebraska, as throughout the nation, Rooseveltian progressivism was on the ascendancy. Sheldon lined up aggressively for all reforms proposed in 1905, among them the anti-pass law and the proposed railroad commission. In 1906 reform had gained the advocacy of most important state politicians and



Republican George L. Sheldon served one term as governor of Nebraska, 1907-1909.

Sheldon was boomed by the Republican Party as its "Roosevelt" or its "La Follette." As a prospective gubernatorial candidate, the Democrats early recognized him as the man to beat. The *Adams County Democrat* started its campaign against him before he became an official candidate, when it said: "Sheldon, the distinguished Cass County gentleman who has undertaken to reform the republican party in Nebraska, talks as boldly as a populist mid-road brigadier did in 1896. He is a calamity howler of the highest class." It predicted that if he were elected he would soon forget his anti-railroad talk and be "whooping-er-up" for the "grand old railroad party" as usual.¹²

One story had it that he was first introduced as a potential candidate at an old settlers' picnic when Senator Elmer J. Burkett became disgruntled at his reception and withdrew, affording Sheldon an opportunity to take his place. Another is that while in Mississippi he was urged by telegram from Nebraska backers to run for governor. He refused twice but was finally persuaded, accepting on March 30, but not announcing his candidacy until June 16.¹³ The big fight of the campaign was against the railroads, then politically influential in the state. Their chief weapon was the free pass, which allowed legislators friendly to railroad interests almost unlimited transportation. The power of the railroad-controlled political machine, though weakening, had been too strong in 1905 to get the anti-pass act and other legislation passed which the roads opposed. Young aggressive leaders like Sheldon set out to break the power of the railroads over the Republican Party. Their attack started in the convention of 1905, and by the time of the convention in 1906 most of the work had been done. The big struggle had taken place in the Lancaster County convention, where the machine, realizing it was beaten, gave in almost gracefully. Sheldon was nominated for governor on the second ballot.¹⁴ The Republican platform endorsed Roosevelt and the national platform, especially the protective tariff and the antitrust program. Within the state it condemned the railroads for suing for redress from valuation placed upon their property by the state Board of Equalization and Assessment. The GOP expressed determination to make railroads pay "a fair share" of taxation, including terminal tax to cities. Other anti-railroad planks supported the State Railway Commission and an anti-pass law. Enactment of a

direct primary law was demanded, as well as election of senators by direct vote and an employer's liability act.

The platform on which Democrat Ashton C. Shallenberger ran for governor was similar to that of the Republicans, and both resembled Populist platforms of the 1890's. The Populists themselves had split, becoming the progressive element in the Republican Party and the liberal element in the Democratic Party.¹⁵

Sheldon campaigned aggressively, going as far west as Alliance, where he impressed an editor (probably partisan) as a deep thinker, a profound political student, and a man thoroughly conversant with state affairs. To campaign he teamed with state Attorney General Norris Brown, a candidate for the Senate. While Brown smote the trusts, lumber dealers, elevators, and other big business groups, Sheldon attacked the railroads. He had studied their rate books thoroughly; his speeches charged injustices in Nebraska rates and called for adjustment by the railway commission. On passenger fares he favored a graduated rate that considered the earnings of each road. Sheldon made political capital of a *World-Herald* statement that the corporations had marked him for political oblivion. Although Sheldon's anti-railroad campaign attracted comment, there was a statewide lack of enthusiasm and the vote was lighter than usual. Sheldon won by a vote of 97,858 to 84,885 over Shallenberger, losing only twenty-two of ninety counties.¹⁶

Sheldon soon experienced the trials of a successful gubernatorial candidate when swarms of office seekers descended upon him. Refusing to make any commitments until inaugurated, he stated that merit rather than political pull would decide appointments. The *Omaha Daily Bee* — which meant its editor Victor Rosewater — proposed that Sheldon should become the Nebraska "Roosevelt." Rosewater, who had inherited his father's influence in the Nebraska Republican Party, wanted the governor to carry the "big stick," introduce administration bills to cover the platform — thus counteracting railroad influence — and endorse bills he favored. Sheldon refused, having enough confidence in the legislature to feel that he and it could work together, each department of government in its own field. Only if the legislature seemed to dissent from the platform did

Sheldon feel he would have to exert pressure. The governor-elect declared his independence of party leadership, at least in the legislative-pressure field.¹⁷

Shortly after the election he left for Mississippi to arrange plantation affairs. This ridded him of office seekers, but their importunings followed him. On January 1, 1907, he returned to Lincoln to prepare for inauguration. Governor Sheldon's inaugural address on January 3 "struck the keynote of the new political era in Nebraska," according to the *Nehawka Register*. It showed conservatism in relation to spending; he gave priority to pledges against extravagance and higher taxes; he stated his determination to maintain strict economy and to decrease the floating debt during prosperity. Those wanting to take trips at state expense gave up hope; the governor condemned junketing. Concerning investment of school funds, he said state and federal securities afforded too limited a field and too low an interest rate for profitable investment. Since the state debt was being reduced, funds might lie idle and produce no interest unless the constitution and current laws were altered to meet the needs of changing times.¹⁸

He opposed tax laws which gave a premium to the out-of-state investor and said tax discrimination against home capital should be ended. The debtor class, he felt, should not have to carry extraordinary burdens of taxation. Stating the need of assessing property equitably, Sheldon struck at the railroads, which objected to carrying their fair share of taxation. He pledged himself to do everything possible to collect back taxes from the roads and to assess equitable new taxes against them.

Campaign pledges must be kept, Sheldon insisted; an anti-pass law must be passed, powers and duties of the railway commission defined, and railroads forbidden to seek enjoinder of rates set for them. Congress in turn should be asked to forbid common carriers to enjoin the enforcement of rates set by a state commission on intrastate commerce while an appeal pending in federal court. Since he was responsible for state institutions, he asked for authority to remove summarily the heads of institutions. His inaugural address closed with words that were the keynote of his administration:

I bear no malice toward anyone, not even to the great corporations that have so strenuously opposed . . . the establishment of common justice . . . Their rights must

*This photograph of
Rose Higgins Sheldon
hangs with those of
other governors' wives in
the Executive Mansion
in Lincoln.*



be protected, but when they abuse their privileges . . . they must be held to strict account. The welfare of our State demands that they must not be put out of business, but they must be put out and kept out of Nebraska politics.

I fully realize that this reform movement is not a crusade against wealth, but rather a movement against graft and greed, and the abuse of power. It has for its object the establishment in this state . . . of government by the people and for the general welfare of the state. Legitimate interests must be protected. Conspirators against the common good and violators of the law must be prosecuted. The law of the land must prevail.¹⁹

The legislators justified the governor's faith in their ability to carry out their campaign pledges. Since both houses were overwhelmingly Republican, they had the majorities needed to carry out their promised reforms.²⁰

To control the lobbying hosts that converged upon Lincoln, the house of representatives voted to eject any lobbyist who appeared on the floor while it was in session. Later it passed an anti-lobbying act. When the senate tabled the bill, Governor Sheldon requested its passage, and it was eventually enacted. The governor submitted two bills to correct an error that had invalidated bonds of villages which had established lighting or heating systems.²¹ Otherwise the legislature received little public prompting from the governor. The legislature not only

carried out the Republican pledges but, in enacting the two-cent fare bill, also carried out a Democratic pledge. Historian Addison E. Sheldon (no relation to the governor) summed up the effect of this legislature's action upon Nebraska when he wrote:

The legislative acts of 1907 mark more important and permanent changes in the political structures of the state than any other session. They registered the high point of the revolution in public thought which began in 1890. They have been followed by counter-revolutionary waves, but their permanent results still remain. And the ideas which they express have not ceased working in the Nebraska mind and the Nebraska government.²²

The two-cent passenger rate bill worried Governor Sheldon. It was not a graduated rate bill, and, since it set a flat rate, it might be unconstitutional. His first impulse, since it had been passed almost unanimously by both houses, was to let it become a law without his signature. Since the emergency clause might not be valid without his signature, however, he finally agreed to sign it a few minutes before the time allotted by law for his signature expired. He was much criticized for his attitude.²³ Sheldon vetoed fifteen bills and two budget items, most of them to keep his pledge to reduce state debt. He vetoed appropriations for bounties on wild animals and most of those providing for the construction of buildings at state institutions on the grounds that state finances did not warrant it. Kearney, unhappy over the loss of \$85,000 for new wings on the Normal School, brought a writ of mandamus against the secretary of state because he had not authenticated the act providing for the addition. The supreme court, however, upheld the veto.²⁴

With protection of bank depositors gaining support in Nebraska, the legislature passed a bill which would have compelled incorporators of banks to show paid-up capital and property of sufficient cash value to protect depositors, the amount to be determined by the population of the town affected. Sheldon felt that it would disturb bankers and that it should not be passed with the emergency clause. Sheldon antagonized Omaha by vetoing an act that would have validated its illegal action of giving possession of valuable streets to railroads. He also vetoed a fire insurance bill, a tobacco bill that punished but hardly restrained minors from smoking, a weed-mowing bill that might have caused hard feelings among neighbors, and a bill which allowed too much delay in settling

petty controversies.²⁵ Some bills were passed over his veto. Sheldon's attitude toward public reactions to his decisions is well exemplified by a statement published during the two-cent rate conflict:

It is not always an easy thing to give the people what they want. . . . They do not always know just what they want. . . . It requires tact and diplomacy to make them understand that it is not always possible to give them their desire in just the way they think they should have it. Sometimes . . . you want something very much, and when you get it you find that you are not at all pleased with it.²⁶

No matter how unpopular his decisions, he did not hesitate to follow his own judgment. But he listened to the opinions of others and carefully weighed their viewpoints before making decisions. At times when undecided about legislation, he accepted the judgment of the legislature.

Except when campaigning, Governor Sheldon was reluctant to be quoted. Reporters described him as, a hard man to interview; he was expert at parrying questions and willing to talk about anything (co-education was a favorite topic) except politics. If he did talk politics, usually what he said was not for publication.²⁷ This reluctance, coupled with a paucity of documentary records, makes it difficult to arrive at an evaluation of the governor and his work. Most of his personal papers burned with his Mississippi home in 1930.²⁸ The Sheldon documents in the Nebraska State Historical Society's collection of governors' papers are incomplete. Some documents submitted to the legislature (e.g., correspondence on utilization of Genoa Indian School lands) seem to be lost. Enough records remain, together with newspaper reports, however, to give some idea of Sheldon's evaluation of his own administration.²⁹

He was determined to have a clean administration. When a charge of graft relating to the passing of an optometry bill was made, he conducted a careful investigation. No decision apparently was issued, but James C. Hutson, a principal in the case, was reappointed to the optometry board.³⁰ Sheldon carefully investigated each of many cases called to his attention concerning inmates in the boys' and girls' training schools, the insane asylums, and the soldiers' home. The governor followed a similar procedure in each case. He studied each letter, then wrote to the head of the institution involved requesting a report and recommendation. He usually accepted the report and rarely

made a suggestion. He then replied to the petitioner; his letters tended to be terse. When he had to say "no" to a request for release of a child, he did not prolong the agony. The governor was required by law to hear the cases of all convicts requesting parole or pardon. This he did and detailed records were kept, though they now appear lost.³¹

Sheldon was criticized for contracting convicts to private employers. Few records concerning such agreements appear in the files; those that do most often concern convicts ready for parole. However, the Deshler Broom Factory protested the competition from the Lee Broom and Duster Company, which used convict labor and free buildings and power at the penitentiary. The use of convict labor at 45 cents a day was detrimental to competition with free labor which paid \$2.00 to \$3.00 a day. If convicts were used, the Deshler firm felt, the state should receive full value for their labor. Despite the low pay rate for convict labor, the penitentiary was almost self-sustaining when Sheldon became governor. Governor John H. Mickey stated in 1907 that the penitentiary cost the state less than nine cents a day per inmate. More to the governor's taste were letters from soldiers in his former command seeking federal back-pay allotments. His answers were warm and heartening and give the impression that he was a good officer concerned about the welfare of his men. The governor's interest extended to the inmates of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Homes in Grand Island and Milford. He was concerned because those wishing entry had to declare themselves paupers and because of the forced or voluntary contribution of a percentage of pensions over \$12.00 to the homes. When agitation broke out over the contributions, the governor directed the commandants to discontinue the practice, at least temporarily.³²

Scabies among cattle in western Nebraska brought a flood of complaints which resulted in a quarantine line being drawn across the state by the state veterinarian Charles A. McKim. Eventually a trip to Washington was made by the governor to secure cooperation for inspection from federal officials. Federal inspectors from the Bureau of Animal Industry had at one time also served as state inspectors of cattle in intrastate shipment. When a federal court declared inspection by federal agents invalid because it regulated intrastate commerce, the state was

caught without funds for inspection.³³ After an outbreak of scabies in the spring of 1907, a federal quarantine was placed against cattle raised in western Nebraska. Since no inspectors were available to issue shipping certificates for cattle in intrastate commerce, all cattle from quarantined areas had to be placed in quarantine pens. Both South Omaha and the railroads protested the discrimination.³⁴

The pinch of the federal ruling was not felt immediately. Eastern-county feeders were not seriously affected until fall; then high grain prices discouraged feeding. However, all state cattle were quarantined. Only by consigning cattle out of state, then stopping in South Omaha, could the rule be circumvented. Since he was without financing or plan, the governor delayed while he investigated the feasibility of the Bureau of Animal Industry being requested to inspect feed lots and ranges and to enforce treatment of scabied animals. He also considered the appointment of county inspectors to be paid by the cattlemen using them. His sudden call for a meeting of cattlemen caught associations unprepared when compulsory dipping of cattle everywhere was recommended. The governor then revised state regulations on quarantine and inspection, hoping for B.A.I. cooperation. Since the state was unwilling to accept federal regulations in their entirety, the B.A.I. withheld action. The B.A.I. would not accept the governor's quarantine line dividing the farming and range areas of the state, nor were the cattlemen willing to accept it as long as inspection was inadequate. The governor continued to look for a compromise satisfactory to all.³⁵

Finally, to secure first-hand information and to resolve state and federal differences concerning quarantine, inspection, and the leasing and fencing of range land, Governor Sheldon and a delegation of cattlemen went to Washington. On March 28, 1908, the *Nebraska State Journal* reported that more than half of Nebraska was to be relieved of the cattle embargo and that three-fourths of the state was to be free of quarantine. Scabies was to be regulated by local quarantine under state authority. The range area evidently approved the governor's action, for with the exception of Thomas County, the Panhandle and Sandhills voted solidly for him in 1908. The cattle-feeding counties were not as enthusiastic.³⁶

Many other causes for support or non-support were developing, the Nebraska Pure Food and Drug Act among them. Many requests for clarification of the law and complaints against inspectors poured in. But the governor did not become as personally involved as he had in the cattle quarantine case. He frequently sent complainants a copy of the law.

But he could not escape involvement in questions concerning the removal of local officials from office. The Sackett Law of 1907, (87, 1907 *Laws of Nebraska*) placed upon the governor and the attorney general the duty of removing any local official who failed to enforce the law. The governor had received many non-enforcement complaints concerning saloon closings, anti-trust regulations, gambling, pool halls, etc. He had been requested to remove the Lincoln police chief and to investigate the Omaha Board of Fire and Police Commissioners. Rumor had it that Sheldon accepted complaints against county commissioners for letting politics determine which newspapers received printing contracts.³⁷

The Wayne liquor case, brought by the Wayne chapter of the Anti-Saloon League through its attorney Elmer E. Thomas, became a legal test. The governor was asked to remove members of the Wayne City Council for refusing to revoke the license of a liquor dealer accused of having sold to a minor. The charge was failure to enforce the liquor law, commonly known as the Slocumb Act. This was a very important test case of the Sackett Act and the governor's responsibility under it. He sidestepped neatly and after a hearing refused to remove elected officials from office. Instead, he directed the attorney general to file a suit of mandamus in the Nebraska Supreme Court asking that the councilmen be compelled to revoke the license.³⁸

The governor's decision to use the courts rather than the removal power delegated to him by the Sackett Act relieved the pressures upon him, but it made action by the Anti-Saloon League more difficult. Instead of the comparatively inexpensive method of appealing to the governor for action under the Sackett Act, the league was forced into taking the more expensive method of court action. As we shall see later, this had political repercussions.

Other Sheldon papers which remain in the Nebraska State Historical Society's files show the breadth of affairs — and the trivia — that required a governor's attention. The governor gave preference to the business transactions of the state. For example, he wanted a better contract for use of convict labor for manufacturing in the state penitentiary, but for lack of applicants he had to re-contract with the Lee Brown Company at a raise in wages from fifty to fifty-five cents a day. To provide more work for inmates of the penitentiary and the boys' industrial home, he investigated the possibility of making brick from local clay. Perhaps the governor's biggest task was the investment of more than a million dollars in permanent state funds. He was determined to keep state money invested at the highest possible rates of interest and at the lowest possible brokerage fees. Some correspondence concerned the direct purchase of the securities of other states. He was so impressed with the yield of Idaho bonds that he sent the state treasurer to Idaho to make the purchase.³⁹

That editor Victor Rosewater of the *Omaha Bee* opposed some of the governor's policies is shown by his editorial comments when the question of the reinvestment of the permanent school funds (\$7,700,000) was under consideration. He was not impressed by the apparent 1 percent to 1½ percent annual profit offered by investment in out-of-state securities. Instead, he felt that the more than \$3,000,000 might better be invested in in-state securities to provide quicker turnover, to gain lower brokerage fees, and to permit the use of the funds by Nebraska firms. This course, Rosewater felt, would be popular with the taxpayers and the public. He felt that good real estate security offered the best possible investment but that it was dangerous in that it afforded opportunities for favoritism and "financial juggling" in making the investments. Rosewater also felt that, since a state constitutional amendment involving state investments was pending, out-of-state investments should be stopped and the funds retained until they could be invested so that the benefits accrued within Nebraska. Governor Sheldon continued to make out-of-state investments.⁴⁰

Sheldon liked to keep details in his own hands, delegating authority to his appointees but expecting exact accounting from them. He supported their decisions and evaluated their



The house in which George L. Sheldon was born and reared is located in Nehawka. Built about 1859, the house is extant but on a nearby location.

judgments, at times appearing as a stern, just judge uninfluenced by sentimental issues. He favored punishment for crime and past mistakes. Accounts were scrupulously checked and state funds carefully accounted for, and there was little opportunity for graft under his watchful eye.

The governor spent some time in travelling for the good of the state and gained praise for his interest in promoting state businesses. His most important trip, politically speaking, was to the Lakes-to-Gulf Deep Water Convention at Memphis in October, 1907. President Theodore Roosevelt attended, and both Governor Sheldon and Victor Rosewater talked politics with him. A point at issue there was the definition of the citizenship of interstate corporations. Should they, for purposes of jurisdiction, be made citizens of states where they incorporated? The 1907 Nebraska Republican Convention had favored forbidding federal courts to issue injunctions against state officers charged with enforcement of state statutes. A New York paper reported that at Memphis, Roosevelt had quarreled with Sheldon over the suggested restriction of federal courts.

The *State Journal* denied a quarrel but acknowledged that the matter had been discussed and Roosevelt now knew more of Nebraska conditions and of the attempts by railroads to set aside laws by court action. The President promised to look into the subject of federal injunctions and the governor considered calling a special session of the Nebraska Legislature if the courts found the railroad commission unconstitutional.^{4 1}

By 1908 the governor was being mentioned as a possible candidate both for the U.S. Senate and for the vice-presidency. On a trip to California to present the silver plate service to the battleship *Nebraska*, he was feted in Denver, Colorado Springs, Santa Fe, and Pasadena. At Santa Fe he was acclaimed as "one of the most progressive and energetic executives in the Union," and Pasadena toasted him as the "next Vice-President of the United States." One of his staff members intimated that the project of booming Sheldon for the vice-presidential nomination had been discussed and that, if the suggestion took hold, a formal announcement of his candidacy might be made. From California, Governor Sheldon returned to Washington to attend the White House Conference on Conservation. In Omaha, while enroute, he discouraged attempts to boom him for the vice-presidency, indicating he had no chance for nomination and that he had no further political ambitions, not even for the Senate seat. He said, "I want to get out of public life as soon as I can, and will be content when the day comes and I can go back to my farm." At the conference the governor spoke in support of the conservation program, stressing that the people's interest needed to be aroused. He praised the work of the Department of Agriculture and the experimental stations and pledged that Nebraska would do its share for conservation.^{4 2}

But Sheldon continued to be considered for the vice-presidency. He was not supported by Roosevelt, even though he seemed a "natural" to oppose Bryan in the West. At the Republican National Convention that summer, Sheldon persuaded the Nebraska delegation not to support him, but he did receive ten votes from the Wisconsin delegation. Thereafter he concentrated his political efforts on winning the governorship for a second term. He was unopposed for the Republican nomination in the first state-wide primary ever held in Nebraska. His Democratic opponent again was Ashton C. Shallenberger. Sheldon evidently thought his own political

fences were in excellent shape in 1908, but he soon realized that his opponents within the party had not been idle. Victor Rosewater, who led the Douglas County delegation, dominated the party through his control of delegates. He also enjoyed the force of his own politically powerful *Omaha Daily Bee*, a formidable opponent of the little *Nehawka Register*, which trumpeted Sheldon's cause from his home county, Cass.⁴³

To appreciate happenings within the Nebraska Republican Party in 1908 and their effect upon the career of Governor Sheldon, the major political conventions of the year must be studied. There were three: the state convention in Omaha, March 12, to choose delegates-at-large to the national convention; the Republican National Convention in Chicago in June; and the second state convention September 22, to adopt a state platform. The first state convention proved surprisingly harmonious. Most controversies over delegates had been settled amicably. When the state central committee met in Lincoln in January — a meeting which Governor Sheldon seems not to have attended — Victor Rosewater gained the state convention for Omaha, the first time in nine years it had met there. He won again when the Kidd plan for primaries was approved instead of the Whedon plan.

The Whedon plan had proposed that the primary election be mandatory without any option of county caucuses and that the presidential preference indicated should be binding upon the state convention and included in instructions to the delegates to the national convention. The Kidd plan proposed the use of the direct primary as an expression of presidential preference by the voters, but left its use optional with the county commissioners. An amendment, also favored by Rosewater, left it to the counties to request the primary ballots and made the use of the prepared primary ballots optional. After the First District pre-convention meeting in Lincoln selected Senator E. J. Burkett a delegate to the national convention, Rosewater, Sheldon, Sen. Norris Brown, and Judge Allen W. Fields (a slate of candidates the *Bee* had been supporting) were named delegates-at-large. Rosewater and Sheldon each had the promised support of some two hundred delegates before the convention met — Rosewater by vigorous political action, Sheldon despite his disclaimer of personal interest.⁴⁴

On March 13, 1908, the *Nebraska State Journal* had quoted Governor Sheldon as follows: "I have not been and am not now a candidate to go to Chicago in the sense of being personally interested in the matter. . . . I have not been a candidate but if it is your choice that I go to Chicago I shall be pleased to go and assume the obligation and responsibility."⁴⁵

It was probably this and a statement at the Cass County convention which caused the following comment in the *Omaha Bee* on March 17:

The democratic *World-Herald* thinks Governor Sheldon should employ a censor for his speeches instead of a stenographer to avoid having later to explain them. Neither would be necessary if the particularly hostile papers did not purposely distort and misquote what he says. The governor, however, wants to realize that the *World-Herald* is constantly on the watch for a chance to trip him up and to see to it that the chance is not given.⁴⁶

The endorsement of William Howard Taft as the preferred Presidential candidate was secure before the state convention met. Rosewater had long been supporting his nomination; Sheldon had supported Taft at the Cass County Convention because "Roosevelt was not available." Most Lancaster County delegates preferred to draft Roosevelt but lacked support of the western Nebraska delegates, who were convinced that Roosevelt was not available. Frank A. Harrison, Republican independent, gadfly, and virulent opponent to Rosewater ambitions, preferred Robert La Follette of Wisconsin but lacked delegate support.

A dispute over the Platte County delegation, where the county committee (reputedly under railroad control) chose to ignore the results of the primary and to appoint its own delegation to the convention, was settled easily. The *Nebraska State Journal* reported on March 13 that the railroad crowd had gone "through the transom" without debate. It is interesting to note that the convention resolutions commended the legislature *before* the governor for the governmental record that had been set. Taft was guaranteed support, but it is also interesting to note that Tony Donahue, a representative of union labor, voted against Taft, boasting he had the support of 5,000 labor union members in so doing. Selection of national committeemen was left to the national convention delegates, thus avoiding an anticipated fight over the selection of Victor Rosewater. Editorials on the spring convention revealed the

political situation in Nebraska. Both the *Nebraska State Journal* and *Omaha Daily Bee* commented that it had been many years since the party had met with so much harmony.⁴⁸ In its editorial column called "More or Less Personal," the *Nebraska State Journal* commented on young Rosewater and group politics:

The fact became apparent early in the proceedings that the young man succeeded in becoming very nearly the whole thing in this convention. His conciliatory policy secures support from all quarters, and the suspicion that he may use a rapier on occasion makes men with political ambitions fear to oppose him. Shrewdness, industry, and sweet oil helped by an occasional nonchalant twirl of the big stick have apparently made him a real party leader in the state, a position his father spent an embittered life trying to reach. . . .

The fact was that the old timers didn't even get a look-in at this convention. If the forces that formerly ran things in the state are still trying to do business, they are putting a new set of men to the front to do their work. The old ones are so discredited that no one dares to talk with them. . . . They couldn't even get through the motions of pretending to run the convention.⁴⁹

On March 14 the same column reported a Lincoln man was accusing Rosewater of being reactionary at heart, an opinion in which the *Omaha World-Herald* concurred. The unnamed man felt there was an underground compact between the railroads and Rosewater for controlling the convention, with a national committeeman's post as the payoff to Rosewater. If true, said the *Journal*, it was beautifully carried out:

The Convention on the surface at least was free from corporation influence and had a more progressive tone than any held in the state for the last twenty-five years. Even the celebrated Convention of 1906 which resulted in the nomination of Brown and Sheldon was not a marker to it.⁵⁰

Rosewater himself seemed in high good humor after the convention. When the *Lincoln News* and the *Fremont Star* debated where and by whom the state platform was adopted, he informed them it was roughed out by the chairman of the resolutions committee in a room at the *Bee* building, and two rank outsiders — newspapermen — had a hand in smoothing the phraseology. He had not been as facetious on March 10 when he stated that the "peculiar" primary law called for a state convention in September solely to promulgate a platform; therefore, the coming convention should avoid usurping the privilege of that convention to leave room for the implementation of the national platform and for state issues that had developed in the interim.⁵¹



Capt. George L. Sheldon commanded Company B of the 3rd Nebraska Regiment under Col. Williams Jennings Bryan. This picture was probably taken in camp at Panama Park or Pablo Beach, Florida.

Governor Sheldon was the last of the Nebraska delegates-at-large to arrive at the national convention in Chicago. As he was being propelled toward the vice-presidency, he received much attention from delegates from other states, especially those dissident Republicans from Iowa hoping to use him to offset the boom for Senator Jonathan P. Dolliver. Sheldon's main adherent was Senator Elmer J. Burkett of Nebraska, who as late as June 12 was conferring with President Roosevelt and the secretary of war concerning the vice-presidential nomination. Burkett at that time believed that if Dolliver could be eliminated as a candidate, Sheldon had an excellent chance for the nomination. The *Bee* remained strangely silent concerning the governor's possible candidacy for the vice-presidency, and, when Rosewater was elected national committeeman by nine votes, the governor did not support him.⁵²

Sheldon's candidacy for the vice-presidency did gain support from every Nebraska delegate, with the possible exception of the governor himself. Characteristically, he insisted that the place should seek the man rather than the man the place. The

consensus of the delegates was that Nebraska should have its candidate in the limelight but that he should not be thrust into a "scramble for preferment." On June 17 a *Bee* editorial mentioned Governor Sheldon among vice-presidential possibilities but gave more support to the Iowa candidate, Governor Albert B. Cummins. When the vote for the vice-presidential nomination was taken, Governor Sheldon withheld his name to favor the incumbent, Vice-President Charles W. Fairbanks. Although the Nebraska delegation wished to cast a complimentary vote for their governor, he persuaded them not to do it.

National Committeeman Victor Rosewater campaigned vigorously for William Howard Taft as President of the United States but campaigned much less vigorously for the re-election of George L. Sheldon as governor of Nebraska. For his enthusiastic pre-nomination work for Taft, for his control of one of the most influential Republican newspapers in the Midwest, and for his personality and his ability to get things done, Rosewater was placed in charge of Taft's western campaign.⁵³

State press and political reactions to Rosewater as national committeeman for Nebraska were varied. Frank A. Harrison, in a letter published in the *State Journal*, expressed himself vigorously:

Those in control of the party machinery and some in office have sought to turn the direction of affairs over to an unscrupulous schemer in Omaha, who in turn expects to use the party for the benefit of special and corporate interests up there and incidentally wants a few things for himself. . . There will be some who still prefer the Bryan personality when it comes to following a state boss.⁵⁴

The "More or Less Personal" editor of the *Journal* was forthright:

A private letter from Chicago indicates that Victor Rosewater is the whole thing so far as Nebraska goes. . . . It is presumed that Vic will take advantage of his new position to ask for the removal of republican headquarters from Lincoln. He may have enough influence to bring the change to pass. The Elder Rosewater always wanted the committee in Omaha so he could direct the work. The young man is much smoother and more successful. If he goes after headquarters, Lincoln can kiss it goodbye.⁵⁵

On June 30, 1908, the *Omaha Daily Bee* included on its editorial page quotations from other newspapers around the state in relation to Rosewater's national committee position. The *Oakland Independent* thought that it was to be expected as

Rosewater's influence boosted Taft. The *Bradshaw Republican* felt that the reform element in the party had been "snatched bald-headed and completely unhorsed." The *Howells Journal* felt that Rosewater's enemies in his own party would have to work overtime to keep him out of the Senate. Both the *Fremont Tribune* and the *Neligh Leader* felt that Rosewater had harmonized factional differences in an election year. The *Grand Island Independent* expressed a show-me attitude, since Rosewater's record showed that he had voted with the most progressive men in the party. Possibly he might be able to speed up the reactionaries, but the *Independent* would wait to admit that it was mistaken in believing a better choice could have been made. The *Wood River Sunbeam* only hoped Rosewater would work as hard for the party as he had for himself. Certainly Mr. Rosewater was not the most loved or the most trusted man in the party.

And the governor? The *Bee* reported that he was back "with the appearance of a man who has had a load lifted from his shoulders, carefree and happy as a lark and full of Republican ginger . . . only an hour behind schedule."

He reported himself as satisfied with the platform although he had wanted planks respecting railroad evaluation of property, publication of campaign contributions, and the election of U.S. Senators by the people.⁵⁶

After the Republican National Convention, GOP politics in Nebraska went into a lull, at least so far as the governor was concerned. He devoted so much time to reviewing the revision of county tax rolls and the work of the Board of Equalization and Assessment that he did not file for re-election until the late afternoon of August 1. Had he failed to do so, the Republicans would have had no candidate for governor and no way to vote for one except by write-in.⁵⁷ Analysis of the political climate in the state became the order of the day. Frank Harrison, who had taken over the *Nebraska State Capital*, repeated his accusations of Rosewater's alliances with brewery interests and of the liquor support secured for Sheldon in 1906 through a Rosewater deal with Mayor James Dahlman. In one edition he stated that the primary law may have been deliberately botched to place the selection of political committees and platform into the hands of the machines.⁵⁸

Harrison later speculated that a partnership existed among the railroad employees' association, the breweries, the Personal Rights League, Jim Crow, and the Jim Haynes League. By early in September he was convinced that Shallenberger had made his peace with the breweries and would get their votes. Of Sheldon in the same article he said:

It seems that after George Sheldon woke up and rubbed his eyes a little, he discovered that he was being used as an asset to the liquor interests and no person believes that Sheldon can be used as an asset when he is really awake. . . . George Sheldon will shake off his Omaha incubus, declare his principles without stuttering, and receive the votes he ought to receive as a decent man and as a native born Nebraskan.⁵⁹

The Nebraska State Railroad Employees Protective Association was growing. In June its membership roll of 10,000 members professed an active interest in politics based upon the premise that what was good for the railroads was good for the railroad workers. Propaganda convinced many trainmen the 2-cent rate, increased railroad taxes, regulated freight rates — all of the railroad control legislation passed in 1907 — threatened their wages, if not their jobs.⁶⁰ By August 22 the *Alliance Times* thought the railroads were opposing the Republican state ticket by duping the employees into voting against it.⁶¹ So did the *Sunday State Journal*. Its survey found that the organization comprised about 12,000 of the 22,000 railroad employees in the state. The organization, like the opponents of the county option, planned to gain domination of the senate, where control of a smaller number of men than in the house would be sufficient to block legislation. Not only did the organization plan to control the senate, it hoped to control the State Board of Equalization and Assessment as well — the governor, the secretary of state, the state auditor, and the commissioner of public lands and buildings. Shallenberger, the *Journal* reporter thought, had already been endorsed by the protective association.⁶²

While the governor attended to the routine business of the state, Rosewater worked in Chicago on the Taft campaign and ran the *Bee* and state politics on the side. William M. Hayward, state Republican committeeman and state chairman, accepted the position of secretary to the Republican National Committee for which he was recommended by Rosewater. J. Warren Keifer, Jr., the vice-chairman, agreed to direct the state campaign until



In November, 1907, Governor Sheldon spoke at the cornerstone-laying ceremonies of the YMCA building at Columbus, Nebraska.

the new committee elected a head, Keifer, legislator from Nuckolls County who was running for re-election, had never worked actively at state headquarters and was not familiar with the methods used in conducting Republican campaigns. Hayward's acceptance of the national office left the Nebraska headquarters without an experienced leader. Many of the usual Republican workers were lukewarm in 1908, some preferring Bryan to Taft for President. Others disliked Rosewater and felt that Sheldon was still affiliated with him. Few but officeholders helped in Republican headquarters, and the response to pleas for workers from out-state was poor. Some of the old timers were discouraged because of the lessening of their power, and even more were discouraged by the loss of railroad passes that had been their reward for political participation. An appeal was made for the Negro vote; the *Bee* blandly told them to remember who had signed the Emancipation Proclamation.⁶³

One active group before the autumn Republican convention in Grand Island was the bankers, who opposed the bank guaranty plank supported by Governor Sheldon. The bankers planned to pack the convention and its committees with men opposed to the plan by using the machinery set up by the primary law. To understand the maneuver, it is necessary to

look at the law. The law, which Frank Harrison felt might have been deliberately botched to place control in the hands of the political committees, provided that nominees for county offices were to select a delegate from each precinct. Later the delegates were to choose a chairman for the county central committee and to select one delegate to the state convention. In each congressional or judicial district the nominee was to select his own committee. If there was more than one nominee, each was to have an equal voice in the selection. Here there was a question of district participation, but the law specified "nominees for county office." There was also a question as to whether the legislative candidates should be consulted.⁶⁴

Rosewater objected to the primary law because it governed convention membership, which made the party platform. Since there was to be but one member from each county, this gave the majority of votes to the less densely populated areas of the state and so promoted minority rule. Douglas County, with about 10 percent of the state GOP vote, had but one delegate; so did any county with a minor Republican vote record, however small. The six congressional districts had a fixed vote; the First Congressional District had seven, the Second had three, the Fourth had eleven. The other districts had sixty-nine among them. The Third and the Sixth districts, Rosewater pointed out, could control the convention.⁶⁵

In 1908 bankers took advantage of a new selection process, either asking to be appointed as delegates or recommending their choices for delegates. They had the deepest personal interest in the platform. Having no offices to lose in the coming election, they killed every resolution concerning bank guaranty without fear of voter reprisal. Bank guaranty became the major platform issue. Bankers opposed any law providing that banks be compelled to deposit a percentage of their funds to cover the failure of any bank. Some delegates did not object to a voluntary program. Others felt that it would be as sensible to propose that all borrowers guarantee the payments of other borrowers.⁶⁶

Governor Sheldon, feeling that the protection of depositors' money in state banks would be a key issue in the campaign, decided to fight for his plank. When the resolutions committee, consisting of three bankers, three lawyers, and one lumberman,

reported the platform without the desired plan, Sheldon carried the fight to the floor, but his proposed plank lost 48-15.⁶⁷ The platform was also silent on county liquor option—which Sheldon had come to favor—but, since it was highly controversial, the issue was never raised. The governor lost the two planks he favored the most. Some changes were pledged in the primary election law, which had allowed members of one party the opportunity of voting for the weakest candidate on the opposing slate. The delegates also added planks opposing issuance of watered stock, supporting irrigation programs, and calling for a change in tariffs controlling trade with the Philippines. Otherwise the platform was adopted as recommended, and the *Bee* hailed it as consistent with Republican Party doctrine. It lauded the repudiation of Bryan “vagaries,” such as his support of bank deposit guaranty; Rosewater had decided weeks before to make the Democratic bank guaranty plank a major issue in the national campaign for the election of Taft.⁶⁸

In general the Republican party campaigned on the record of Governor Sheldon and the 1907 legislature. The platform promised continued support of progressive legislation but presented no concrete plan for achieving it. The state Democratic platform supported a bank guaranty law and promised progressive legislation, but it was more detailed than the Republican proposal about the means of achieving it. The reassessment and correction of over-valuations of private property as compared with the valuation of railroad property was stressed. The Democrats favored home rule for Omaha and more progressive labor legislation.⁶⁹ To combat the Democratic charges that the state Board of Equalization and Assessment had unduly raised assessments, the *Bee* published a map showing exactly where and what changes had been made. Governor Sheldon made the refutation of these charges the key issue in his campaign.⁷⁰

Shallenberger had a stronger platform to run on than did Sheldon, who was forced into approving a platform that did not contain planks he had wanted. Every time he supported the idea of bank guaranty he was in disagreement with the state campaign and the national ticket. Both men campaigned well, but Shallenberger campaigned more aggressively. He was sup-

ported by the strong Bryan organization that was determined to carry the state. Bryan was not making the mistake in 1908 that he had made in 1900, when he had campaigned little in Nebraska and had lost the state to President McKinley. Sheldon, on the other hand, was campaigning in 1908 for Taft, who was much less popular in Nebraska than his predecessor Roosevelt had been. Governor Sheldon was handicapped by the aggressive opposition to the bank guaranty law of the *Omaha Daily Bee*, which called the "Oklahoma Plan" one that bred wildcat banks and encouraged speculation. It would be fatal, the newspaper said, to business bankers, who had to support financially the unsound risk takers in the banking world.⁷¹

The railroad corporations kept in the background, allowing the railway employees' association to carry on the fight against Sheldon. County option was one of the hottest issues, but both candidates tended to avoid it. Sheldon was known to favor county option, while Shallenberger straddled the issue. The brewers, who had immense influence in Douglas County, threw their support to Shallenberger. The Personal Rights League endorsed Shallenberger and other candidates known to oppose county option. As the campaign went into its final days, Nebraska Republicans realized their over-optimism about state victory. The *Nebraska State Journal* warned that much of Sheldon's support would have to come from out-state and that the governor's friends should intensify their efforts in his behalf. "The brewers are able in Omaha," it stated, "to reach influential people of all classes and can even chill the enthusiasm of Republican papers."⁷²

Campaigning intensified. The Bryan headquarters in Lincoln increased its aid to the state Democratic campaign. Printed materials concerning assessments, property valuations, and reevaluations, and attacks on the state's taxation and equalization policies had been anticipated by the governor. He promptly repudiated them. But he was not prepared for the E. Arthur Carr and Elmer Thomas letters, which were distributed by the Democrats to a list of church and temperance people throughout the state just three days before the election. It was late on Friday, October 30, that these letters were issued. They may well have been the factor that cost Sheldon re-election. Carr, on stationery of the United Civic League, claimed that Sheldon

opposed the temperance cause.³ The Elmer Thomas letter, on stationery of the Allied Temperance Association, claimed that Governor Sheldon had made a deal in 1907 to gain the brewers' support and that his conduct since had been consistently favorable to them. Thomas alleged that the governor had allowed the Root Bill, designed to prevent liquor sales in "dry" territory, to become law without his signature. He made the same allegation in relation to the Gibson Bill, designed to prevent brewers from engaging in saloon business. It was a matter of public record that the governor had signed both bills.⁷⁴ Governor Sheldon answered the Thomas charges on November 2. Many of the newspapers attacked the authors of the allegations, denouncing their ploy as a Democratic trick planned at Bryan headquarters.⁷⁵

Elmer Thomas immediately apologized for his statements, saying he had been misinformed as to the governor's actions, but it was too late. The word of the respected attorney for the Anti-Saloon League was accepted as true by many voters, and the election was lost. The newspapers that tried to correct the charges were suspected of last-minute political chicanery, and the efforts to send out a formal rebuttal from Republican State Headquarters broke down. The rebuttal was never mailed.⁷⁶ Ashton C. Shallenberger was elected governor of Nebraska by a vote of 132,960 to 125,976, a plurality of less than 7,000.⁷⁷ Sheldon's plurality in 1906 had been 12,973. When the returns were in, Sheldon said, "It's all over. I'm tired and I'm going home. Let the people rule." And A.L. Bixby wrote another of his political jingles for the *State Journal* as an epitaph:

TO GOVERNOR GEORGE L. SHELDON

When the railroads combine with the men who sell booze,
 Though the righteous may stand for the moment to lose
 Though the limbs may grow weak that were sturdy and strong,
 Do not faint by the way — it will not be for long
 There will come a glad change in due time, do not fret
 For the Lord reigns supreme over Israel yet,
 If we stick to the text, if we hew to the line.
 He will help us to bump this unholy combine.
 With that thought in our minds, let us cheer up again.
 And go on with the fight — heaven help us. Amen.⁷⁸

Why did Sheldon, who had been a conscientious and efficient governor in a term known nationally for its progressive reform



During the administration of Republican Herbert Hoover (1929-1933), the position of collector for the Internal Revenue Service in Mississippi was held by George L. Sheldon. The above photograph shows him at his desk in Jackson.

legislation, lose the race for re-election in 1908? He blamed the Thomas letter and the brewery interests, but there were also many other factors involved. Although railroad corporation men stayed in the background, they had threatened Sheldon with defeat. The railroad employees' association members were concerned over the rate bills, which they thought threatened their wages. Sheldon actively supported Taft, who was not popular in Nebraska, especially among labor interests. Also, there was a split in the Republican Party. Sheldon had not been able to get the platform he wanted; he would have had to oppose his own party platform and the most influential men in the party to support a bank guaranty law; the same would have been true on county option. Frank Harrison described his campaign as one in which feather dusters were wielded by a brigade of office-hunting politicians.⁷⁹ The *Bee's* stand on home rule for Omaha cost Sheldon some out-state votes. Rosewater, looking forward to the senatorship in 1910, may not have been opposed to eliminating Sheldon, a strong competitor, and the *Bee's* campaign seemed perfunctory in so far as the governor was concerned. He seldom received its editorial support, and Rosewater himself was not available for active state leadership, since he was participating in the national campaign from Chicago.

Sheldon's own political organization had weakened since he had become governor. As a state senator he had been in close touch with the aggressive reform group; as governor he was somewhat aloof from it. He had grown dependent upon others to organize his political campaign; as the senator from Cass County, his family kept the organization under control. Even though he stayed in Mississippi until shortly before the conventions, the spade work was done. The family organization, however, did not function as efficiently at the state level. The *Nehawka Register* could not compete in influence with the *Omaha Daily Bee* and the other important newspapers in publicizing a campaign. A strong man in office, Sheldon naturally made enemies. His stand on county option was known and he had supported temperance reformers in their fight for better law enforcement. Of course the votes he gained from "drys" may have been offset by the votes he lost. His blunt letters may have lost more votes.

Probably the veto of the appropriation for building construction at the Kearney Normal lost him Buffalo County and may have cost him votes in neighboring counties as well. His financial proposals cost him banker votes, whereas the voters did not disassociate him from the banking interests because of the strong campaign against bank guaranties made by Republican papers opposing Bryan. The counties' reassessments did not prove to be a factor against him, since of thirty-one counties whose tax rates were lowered ten opposed him.

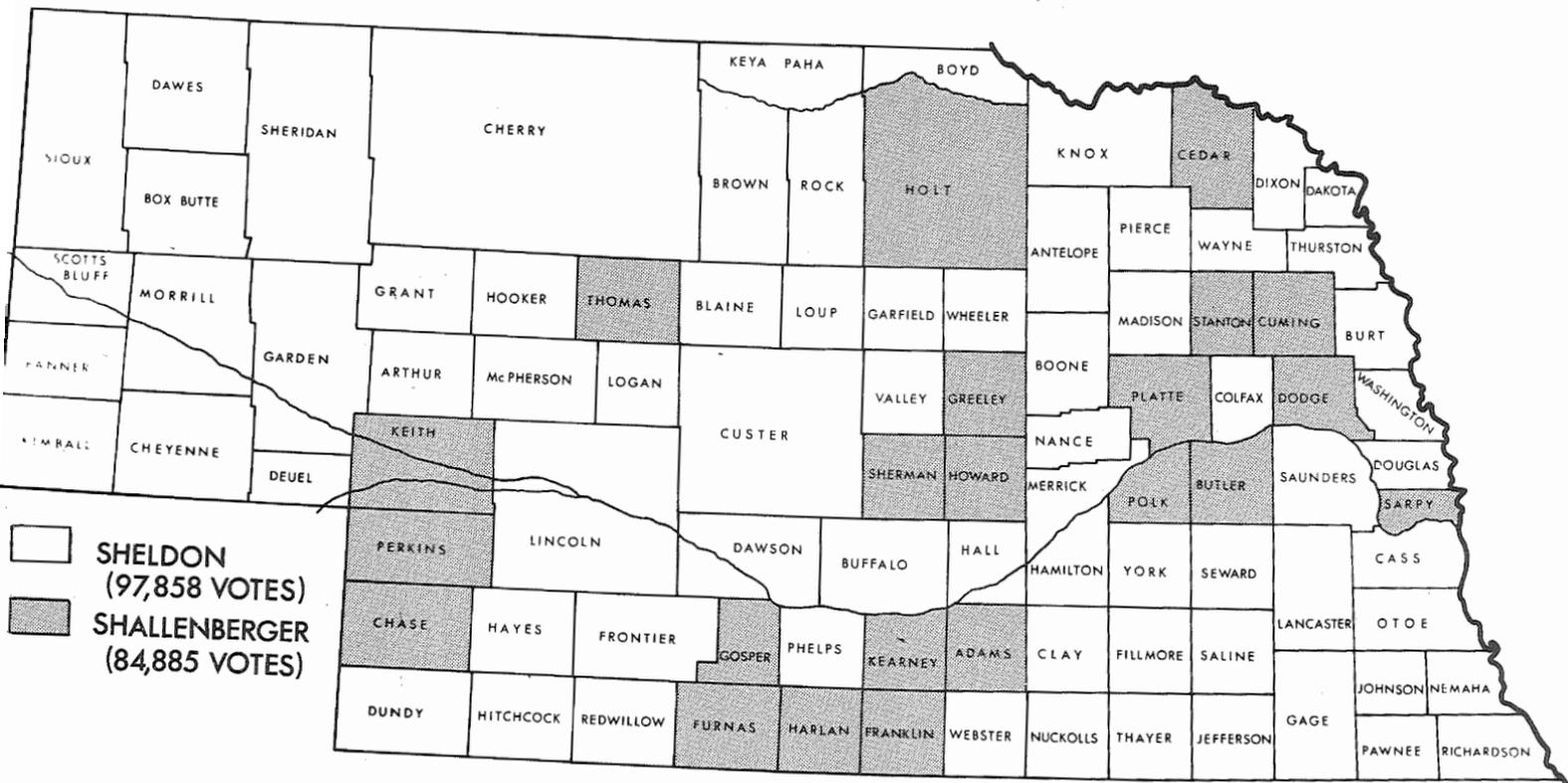
It was Bryan's year in Nebraska. In 1908 his state organization was functioning at peak efficiency, and some of Bryan's popularity carried over to other candidates, including Shallenberger. Also, Shallenberger, with the Democratic party solidly behind him, campaigned more aggressively than did Sheldon, who depended too much on his record. Since Shallenberger's stand on county option was not so well known as Sheldon's, he was able to straddle the issue. One of the decisive factors in the Republican loss may well have been the aggressive reform legislation program of 1907 itself. People fear change and tend to react against those who bring change. Some voters were surfeited with reform and sat out the election; others in the party were attracted by the even more liberal Democratic platform. In summary, the major causes of the defeat were most likely the Thomas letter, Bryan's magnetism, the opposition of corporations, the Republican split, complacency and lack of an aggressive Sheldon campaign, the failure in organization, and "too much" reform legislation.

When Sheldon recovered somewhat from the defeat, he considered recalling the legislature to pass a county option law that he knew would not be passed by the new legislature. To test his support, he sent a confidential telegram on November 7, 1908, to the legislators:

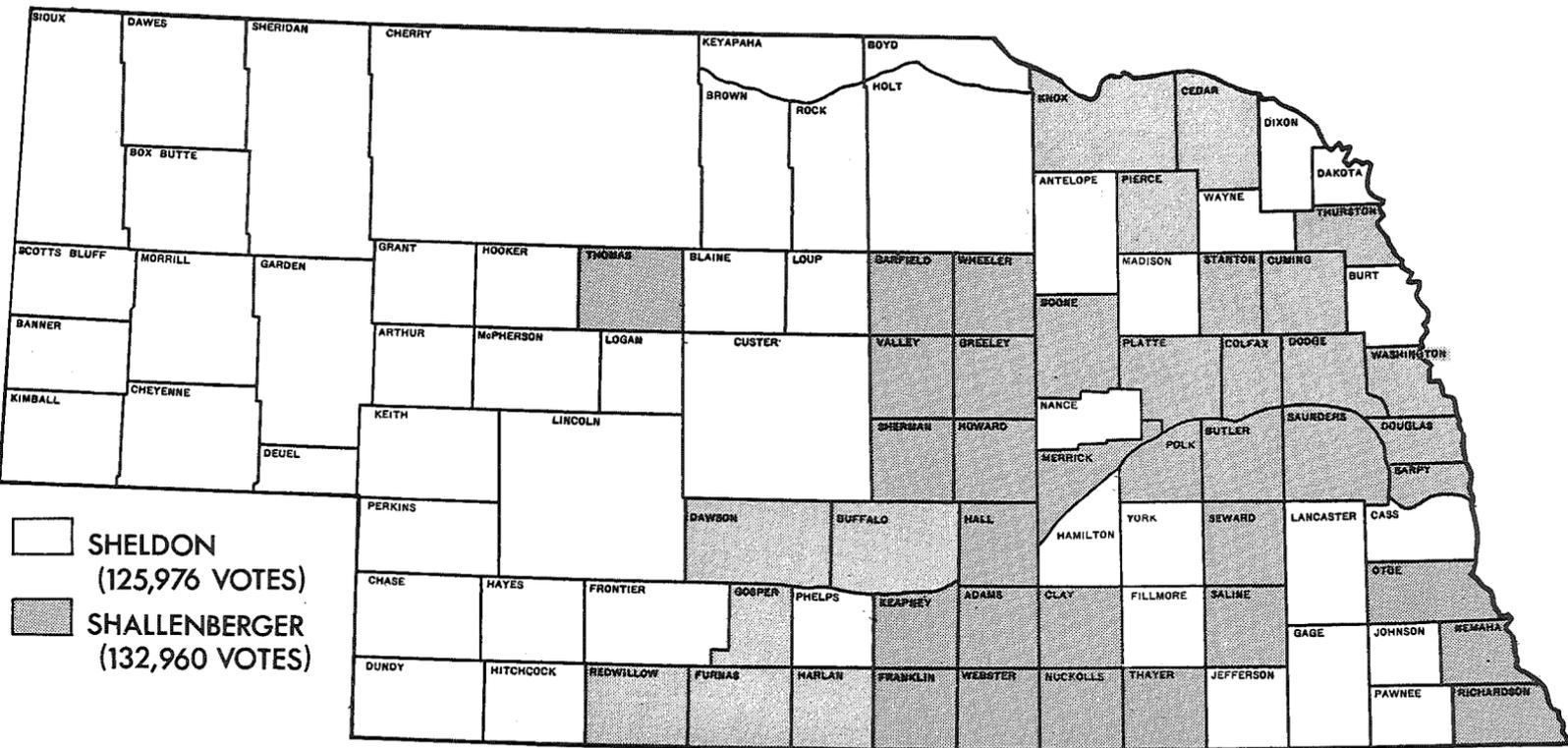
The best legislature Nebraska ever had has still an opportunity to render great service to this State. If I convene the legislature will you support a statutory provision providing for state wide prohibition, reserving to any municipality the right by 3/5 vote to suspend it and dispense liquor under such restrictions as may be provided by law.

George Sheldon, Governor⁸⁰

The call could not be kept secret. The brewery interests, fearing a statewide prohibition bill, sought to influence the legislators. Bankers came out against it, and so did much of the state press;



NEBRASKA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION RESULTS, 1906



NEBRASKA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION RESULTS, 1908

both the *World-Herald* and *Daily Bee* vigorously opposed the move. The governor kept quiet, time passed, and no session was called.⁸¹ But the split between Victor Rosewater and the governor was deepened, and they soon came to the parting of their ways.⁸²

Governor Sheldon made his last appointments, the most important being judges added to the supreme court — three Republicans and one Democrat. Republican influence was to remain paramount on the bench.⁸³ His last act before inaugural day was to appoint a state conservation board to report to the governor, thus carrying out the promise made at the White House Conference on Conservation.⁸⁴ His outgoing message, longer than his inaugural message, gave Governor Sheldon his last official opportunity to impress his opinions of state affairs upon the people of Nebraska. He made the most of it, emphasizing the “outstanding activities” of his administration and recommending proposals for future action. Early in 1909 he returned to Mississippi, taking his family with him, but he returned shortly before the July, 1910, convention to assist in the campaign.⁸⁵

In 1910, Sheldon made his last important political gesture in Nebraska. On February 18 he carefully outlined his “dry” views on the liquor question in a letter to the *State Journal*. In regard to his future political plans in Nebraska he said:

In your resolutions you have asked me to make it known to you whether I prefer to be a candidate for Governor or for United States Senator. . . . I have, of course, a personal preference. I am not at present in close touch with political doings in the state, but it appears to me that it is neither advisable for me nor for the party that I should announce myself for either of the offices mentioned in your benevolent resolutions. I have been tried and once denied. It is therefore for members of the party and not for me to decide. If it is left to me, I shall say no. In no event will I become a candidate on my own initiative.

My interest in politics is not to seek vindication. That is for the vain. Neither am I interested to gratify my personal ambition. I have none such to gratify. My sole interest in politics is to do my part, as God gives me the light, in advocating, supporting, and doing things deemed best to promote our general welfare. I am content to strive with the plain people of our state to the end that our government may be steadfastly for the people. . . .

G. L. Sheldon⁸⁶

This was his swan song. He had invited a draft, which did not materialize. His political future lay in Mississippi, where for many years afterward he fought the battles of the Republican Party and the party organization of that state as well. He was

charged with party irregularity, but some leaders appreciated his work. Long afterward, he led the 1928 campaign for Republican presidential nominee Herbert Hoover in Nebraska and was rewarded with the post of Collector of Internal Revenue for Mississippi. In 1932 he was back again in Nebraska assisting in the futile attempt to re-elect Hoover. At that time he commented that the average farmer was not greatly impressed by the schemes for his "relief" evolved by politicians.⁸⁷

His greatest political triumph in Mississippi was his election to the Mississippi Legislature by his Washington County neighbors. That the conservative citizens around the old river town of Greenville sent a "Republican Warhorse" to represent them in Jackson is an event worthy of comment. He was the first Republican to serve in that body since Reconstruction days. A columnist for the *Delta Democratic-Times* said of Sheldon:

In national politics Governor Sheldon was a man ahead of his time. For he believed, fifty years ago and sincerely that his country's economic trouble could be cured by political action. Responsible people of that day, and time shook their heads in disagreement, but now⁸⁹

Was George L. Sheldon a progressive in political thought? What was his impact upon the state of Nebraska? He was considered a Progressive in the Republican tradition. His record supports this opinion. He favored government regulation of corporate activities, especially those connected with public transportation and communication. He supported state and federal laws controlling the use of the injunction, especially those against state officials who were performing duties required by law. To him the state Board of Equalization and Assessment was a means of controlling the assessments made by local officials. Double taxation on mortgaged property offended him as he tried to take the burden from the debtor and place more of it on the capitalist. He advocated broadening the investment field for state funds. He favored regulation of banking and insurance of depositors' accounts while advocating savings banks and state control of interest rates. Protection of the interests of the consumer gained his sympathy as he encouraged government inspection of food and drugs and pressed for uniform weights and measures. His ideas on health examinations before marriage and on sterilization for criminals and the insane excited severe criticism. He supported the idea of

a court for juvenile offenders, and his penal program was based upon reform. He backed the indeterminate prison sentence, the therapeutic value of labor, and the separation of hardened criminals from those who might be more easily reformed.

The act which broke the control of corporations over bridge building on state and county roads was considered progressive. He proposed it. He advocated the primary election, the rotating of candidates' names on the ballot, the direct election of senators, and the recall. He tried to remove the hold of party machines upon politics by holding democratic elections for convention delegates. In all of these ways he was progressive, but his progressivism was balanced by a strong streak of conservatism. He believed that a state should finance only those programs it could afford and favored — although he did not use the term — “pay as you go” spending. Since many of his ideas were limited in action to the boundaries of the state, one might say his was a state or “grassroots” progressivism. He had no planned, well-constructed program for progressive action, and his activity was largely pragmatic.

George L. Sheldon's influence would have been greater had his interests not been divided between Mississippi and Nebraska during the critical period in his state career. This divided interest, perhaps more than any other factor, prevented his building a strong political organization in the state. His short scope of intense activity in Nebraska politics lasted but six years — from 1902 to 1908.

In almost solidly Democratic Mississippi, Sheldon soon became “Mr. Republican.” But first he concerned himself with the duties on his 1,600-acre cotton plantation in Washington County near Greenville. He introduced new strains of cattle into the Delta and is considered a pioneer in what later became a flourishing cattle-raising area. In re-vitalizing the moribund Republican Party in Mississippi, he ran unsuccessfully a number of times for Congress and for governor, but he did gain a seat in the state legislature. This success, however, was not entirely due to his Republican supporters (who were still decidedly in the minority, Editor Hodding Carter of the *Delta Democrat-Times* pointed out), but because “he was an honorable man, a natural leader, and a likeable neighbor.” At one time he was even chosen a member of his county Confederate Pension Board —

despite his Yankee heritage. While federal income tax commissioner for Mississippi, he moved to Clinton, near the state capital, Jackson. In the 1950's he returned to live with a son Anson at Avon and to be near a daughter, Mrs. Gordon House at Greenville. His wife, the former Rose Higgins of Roseville, Illinois, died in 1949. Governor Sheldon died at Veterans Hospital in Jackson on April 5, 1960, a month short of his ninetieth birthday.^{8 9}

NOTES

1. J. Sterling Morton, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Jacob North & Co., 1907), II, 58-59; *Lincoln Star*, Sept. 20, 1908.
2. *Ibid.*; *Delta Democrat-Times* (Greenville, Miss.), April 5, 1960; *Clarion Ledger* (Jackson, Miss.), Jan. 18, 1959; *Omaha News*, Nov. 11, 1906.
3. *Delta Democrat-Times*, April 5, 1960.
4. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 9, 1906; *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln, Neb.), Oct. 15, 1906, June 16, 1908; *Lincoln Star*, Sept. 20, 1908.
5. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 14, 1906; *Omaha World-Herald*, March 17, 1907; House Speaker Walter Seller, Miss. Leg., in *Delta Democrat-Times*, April 7, 1906.
6. *Lincoln Star*, Sept. 20, 1908.
7. *Nehawka Register*, Sept. 26, 1902.
8. *Plattsmouth Tribune* (Plattsmouth, Neb.), Oct. 10, 1902; *Senate Journal: 1903* (Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1903), 10-11.
9. *Ibid.*, 67, 131, 229, 234.
10. *Lincoln Star*, Sept. 20, 1908; Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People*, I (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), 800.
11. *Lincoln Star*, Sept. 20, 1908; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 9, 1906.
12. *Adams County Democrat* (Hastings, Neb.), June 15, 1906.
13. *Lincoln Star*, Sept. 20, 1908; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 14, 1906; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 816.
14. *Lincoln Courier*, Feb. 8, 1902, quoted in Claire Patricia Mulvey, "Republican Party in Nebraska, 1900-1916" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1934), 21, 58, 64-68; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 18, 1906.
15. Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 818-819; *Nebraska State Journal*, Oct. 15, 1906; Carl A. Smith, "Party Alignments in Nebraska, 1908-1916" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1950), 1.
16. See map on page 371.
17. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 12, 18, 1906.
18. *Nehawka Register*, Nov. 23, 1906, Jan. 4, 1907; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 823; Sheldon set an example by paying his own expenses when he went out of state, even on state business. His invariable answer to requests for expenses, except to a few state officials, was that the budget did not allow it. George Sheldon Papers, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln. Hereafter cited as Sheldon Papers.

19. *Senate Journal*, 1907, 114-120.
20. Senate, 28 Republicans, 3 People's Independents, 5 Democrats; House, 69 Republicans, 26 People's Independents, 5 Democrats.
21. *Senate Journal*, 1907, 809-810, 835.
22. Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 824.
23. *Albion Weekly News* (Albion, Neb.), March 13, 1907; *Nebraska Liberal* (Lincoln, Neb.), March 15, 1907; *State Journal*, March 17, 1907.
24. Knute E. Carlson, *The Exercise of the Veto Power in Nebraska* (State of Nebraska, Legislative Reference Bureau Bulletin 12 [Lincoln: Kline Smith Publishing Co., 1917]), 51-52, 66-67; *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Nebraska, Vol. II, 1887-1909* (Report of the Work Projects Administration, Official Project N. 165-1-81-317, sponsored by the Nebraska State Historical Society and the University of Nebraska. Special publication of the Nebraska State Historical Society, 1942), 658-662. Hereafter cited as *Messages*.
25. *Ibid.*, 653-657, 661.
26. *Omaha World-Herald*, March 17, 1907.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Mrs. Gordon (Sheldon) House to Donald F. Danker, April 24, 1960, Nebraska State Historical Society Records, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
29. *Messages*, II, 635.
30. Affidavits, April, May, 1907, Sheldon Papers.
31. The letters concerning Mrs. Search's request to care for her husband in Grand Island Soldiers' and Sailors' Home illustrate his procedure. On Jan. 19, 1907, Mrs. Search appealed to the governor. He requested information from the commandant and on January 25 heard from both the commandant and the doctor in charge. Mrs. Search had her reply on January 29. See also letters concerning the release to Chris Riebold from the Kearney Industrial School. Although the boy would have been taken to Montana, release was not recommended. The governor placed the education of the youth above the reduction in cost to the state; *Messages*, II, 622.
32. M.P. Bird to Sheldon, Feb. 28, 1907; Gallegher to Sheldon, March 6, 1907; Deshler Broom Factory to M.W. Dimery, Jan. 20, 1908; Hugh L. Stephenson to Sheldon, March 11, 1907; Sheldon to Stephenson, March 13, 1907; Fred Koon to Sheldon, Jan. 11, 1907; and Roy Brenna to Sheldon, Jan. 22, 1907 are a few of the letters relating to prisoner labor, Sheldon Papers; J.H. Presson to Sheldon, June 30, 1908, is a letter from the Milford commandant, Sheldon Papers; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 823.
32. R.M. Hampton to Charles A. McKim, Feb. 2, 1907; Hampton to Sheldon, Feb. 4, 1907; McKim to Sheldon, March 2, 1907; Henry Palmer to Sheldon, Feb. 2, 1907; Kinkaid to Sheldon, Oct. 7, 1908; Sheldon Papers. The March 2, 1907, letter from Charles A. McKim, deputy state veterinarian, to Sheldon should be dated 1908. It relates to the cattle inspection situation for the previous year and was probably prepared for the governor's information during his discussion with the secretary of agriculture in Washington in March 1908.
34. A.F. Shytser to Sheldon, Oct. 15, 1907 and R.W. McGinnis to Sheldon, March 20, 1908 are examples, Sheldon Papers.
35. McKim to Sheldon, March 21, 1907; Shytser to Sheldon, Oct. 15, 1907; Hampton to Sheldon, Nov. 9, 1907.

36. See map on page 372.
37. Ridenour Bakery to Sheldon, April 25, 1907; J.B. Jones to Sheldon, July 23, 1907; R.J. Hughes, April 22, 1907; Sheldon to Hughes, April 23, 1907; Babst to Sheldon, Nov. 25, 1907; James E. Leyda to Sheldon, Feb. 22, 1908; Hoagland and Hoagland to Sheldon, June 8, 1908, Sheldon Papers.
38. *Nebraska State Journal*, Feb. 13, 1908; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Jan. 24, 1908, March 6, 1908; *Nebraska State Journal*, March 6, 1908.
39. Sheldon to Hon. William Hughes, April 22, 1907; Sheldon to Senator Frank R. Gouding, Idaho, undated, Sheldon Papers.
40. *Omaha Daily Bee*, editorials on Jan. 23, 27, Feb. 3, 1908.
41. *Nebraska State Journal*: May 29, Oct. 2, 1907; *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 6, 1907; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 827.
42. *Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 26, April 3, 13, 19, May 4, 14, 1908; *Lincoln Star*, May 5, 1908; *Proceedings of a Conference of Governors in the White House, Washington, D.C., May 13-15, 1908*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), 220-202.
43. *Nebraska State Journal*, June 16, 1908; *Nebraska News* (Lincoln, Neb.), Sept. 11, 1908; *Nehawka Register*, Oct. 23, 1908; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 831; Mulvey, "Republican Party" 86, 87, 91-92.
44. *Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 9, 1908; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Jan. 13, March 6, 9, 1908.
45. *Nebraska State Journal*, March 13, 1908.
46. *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 17, 1908.
47. *Nebraska State Journal*, February 21, March 13, 1908.
48. *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 13, 16, 1908; *Nebraska State Journal*, March 13, 1908.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, March 13, 14, 1908.
51. *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 10, 16, 1908.
52. *Ibid.*, June 12, 15, 16, 17, 1908.
53. *Ibid.*, June 16, 20, 1908; *Nebraska State Journal*, Aug. 12, 1908.
54. *Sunday State Journal*, June 14, 1908.
55. *Nebraska State Journal*, June 18, 1908.
56. *Omaha Daily Bee*, June 24, 30, 1908.
57. *Sunday State Journal*, Aug. 2, 1908.
58. *Nebraska State Capital* (Lincoln, Neb.) Aug. 7, 1908.
59. *Ibid.*, Aug. 28, Sept. 4, 1908; Jim Crow was a brewer's paid agent and a distributor of free passes.
60. *Omaha Sunday Bee*, June 7, 1908.
61. *Nebraska State Journal*, Aug. 22, 1908.
62. *Ibid.*, Aug. 23, 1908.
63. *Nebraska State Journal*, Aug. 12, 1908; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Aug. 26, 1908.
64. *Nebraska State Journal*, Nov. 12, 1908; *Nebraska State Capital*, Aug. 7, Nov. 6, 1908.
65. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 7, 1908.
66. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 13, 1908; *Nebraska State Journal*, Sept. 24, 1908.
67. Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 381; Mulvey, "Republican Party," 91-92; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 22, 1908.

68. Mulvey, "Republican Party," 92; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 22, 1908.
69. *Nehawka Register*, Oct. 2, 22, 1908.
70. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 29, 1908.
71. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 28, 29, 31, 1908.
72. *Nebraska State Journal*, Oct. 21, 24, 1908; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 22, 1908; Mulvey, "Republican Party," 94.
73. *Ibid.*, 7, 94.
74. *Ibid.*; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 31, Nov. 1, 2, 1908; *Sunday State Journal*, Nov. 1, 1908.
75. *Evening News* (Plattsmouth, Neb.), Nov. 1908; *Omaha Bee News*, Oct. 31, 1908.
76. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 6, 1908; *Nebraska State Journal*, Nov. 6, 17, 1908.
77. Mulvey, "Republican Party," 93.
78. A.L. Bixby in *Nebraska State Journal*, Nov. 6, 1908.
79. *Nebraska State Capital*, Nov. 13, 1908.
80. *Hastings Daily Tribune*, (Hastings, Neb.), Nov. 9, 1908.
81. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 10, 11, 1908; *Hastings Daily Republican*, Nov. 9, 10, 11, 1908; *Evening News*, Nov. 10, 1908.
82. Mulvey, "Republican Party," 98.
83. *Alliance Semi-Weekly Times* (Alliance, Neb.) Jan. 15, 1908; *Nebraska Blue Book*, 1915, 139.
84. *Mississippi Proclamation on Conservation of Natural Resources* (Jan. 6, 1909), 671.
85. *Nehawka Register*, Feb. 19, July, 30, 1909.
86. *Nebraska State Journal*, Feb. 18, 1910.
87. *Lincoln Star*, Oct. 1, 1932, June 10, 1936.
88. *Delta Democrat-Times*, April 8, 1960.
89. *Delta Democrat Times*, April 5, 8, 1960; *New York Times*, April 5, 1960; *Clarion-Ledger*, January 18, 1859.