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Article Summary: Omaha provides an opportunity for the study of the successes and failures of reformism in the Progressive era. An analysis of why municipal reformers were elected in 1918 and why they met defeat so soon might contribute to the understanding of Progressivism at the "grass roots" level. There were at least two separate groups of reformers: radical reformers favoring moral legislation such as prohibition and the other "Progressive" reformers who were more moderate who sought structural governmental changes.

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Photographs / Images: Fire-damaged Douglas County Courthouse following the riot of September 28, 1919; Victor Rosewater, editor of the *Omaha Bee*; Samuel R McKelvie, governor of Nebraska from 1919 to 1923; Table 1: Percentage of Votes for Reformers in 1918; Edward P Smith, mayor of Omaha in 1918; Police Commissioner John Dean Ringer; Table 2: Percent of Vote for Reformers 1918 and 1921



*Fire-damaged Douglas County Courthouse following the riot of September 28, 1919.*

## THE POLITICS OF REFORM IN OMAHA, 1918-1921

By LOUISE E. RICKARD

On September 28, 1919, Omaha's "reform mayor" was all but lynched in what was described as a race riot. Although the riot was touched off by the alleged rape of a white girl by a Negro, the disorder also reflected widespread dissatisfaction with the policies of the reform administration. Mayor Edward P. Smith and his fellow municipal reformers had been elected only sixteen months before, and that triumph had been the first electoral victory for Omaha reformers in the Progressive period. The riot, however, symbolized the failure of reformism in practice, and the next election confirmed the popular repudiation of reform as the voters overwhelmingly defeated every reform candidate. Omaha would thus seem to offer a good opportunity for the study of the successes and failures of reformism in the Progressive era. An analysis of why these municipal reformers were elected in 1918 and why they met defeat so soon might contribute to our understanding of Progressivism, about which too little is known at the "grass roots" level.

As Samuel P. Hays has pointed out, many historians sympathetic to the ideals of Progressive reform have tended to accept reformers' words as an accurate indication of their actions. Because reforms were proclaimed to be more moral, more rational, and more efficient, they seemed to such historians to be self-evidently more desirable. The motives for change could be ascribed to the universal desire for "progress"

rather than to the interests of specific groups. Notes Hays: "Consequently historians have rarely tried to determine who the municipal reformers were or what they did, but instead have relied on reform ideology as an accurate description of reform practice." This reform ideology, which appeared in classic form in Lincoln Steffens' *Shame of the Cities* (published in 1904), asserted that the urban political struggle involved a conflict between public impulses for "good government" and a corrupt alliance of "machine politicians" and "special interests."<sup>1</sup>

Two writers who dealt with the reform movement in Omaha also accepted this standard interpretation. Partly because they shared the values of the Progressive reformers, they viewed the politics of reform as a struggle between good and evil. As they saw it, the reformers represented the public or at least the "better element" of Omaha. Arrayed against them were the "special interests" of the big corporations allied with Thomas Dennison, the city "boss," and his "gang" of underworld elements. In explaining the failure of reform in Omaha, John F. Showalter, an Omaha schoolteacher, wrote that Boss Dennison was able to discredit the reform administration by importing criminals into the city, a plot which saw its climax in the 1919 riot. George R. Leighton, an editor of *Harper's Magazine*, tended rather to emphasize the power of the special interests as the explanation for the reformers' defeat. Both authors agreed that the reformers' failure was caused by the superior strength and evil activities of their enemies.<sup>2</sup> A careful examination of the reform movement in Omaha from 1918 to 1921, however, reveals that the failure of reform there cannot be attributed so much to the strength and nature of the opposition as it can be to the inept actions and the inconsistent objectives of the reformers themselves.

The reform movement in Omaha cannot be understood as even a reasonably unified effort to achieve certain goals. Rather there were at least two separate groups of reformers which can be distinguished. One group consisted of radical reformers who favored moral and sumptuary legislation such as prohibition. In the other group were "Progressive" reformers, moderates who sought structural changes in government, such as the commission plan, and efficiency and economy in governmental administration. The terms radical and moderate, respectively, will be used for these two groups, since no other names were

consistently used for them. The newspapers described the moderates as "rational," "progressive," and "practical"; the radicals were called "moral reformers" or "prohibitionists." By avowed opponents the radicals were scorned as "fanatics" or "goody-goodies." Although these two groups of reformers were not hostile toward each other, before 1918 they had never formally cooperated in an election campaign. Since 1906, in fact, each of the two groups had made two unsuccessful attempts to oust Mayor James C. Dahlman, a Democrat, whom they considered to be Boss Dennison's tool.

In the elections of 1906 and 1909, the representative of the Law and Order League, a prohibitionist organization, had failed to defeat Mayor Dahlman. Before the next city election, however, moderate reformers had come to believe that the adoption of the commission form of municipal government would put them in power and also give Omaha favorable publicity as a progressive community. In most cities which had adopted the commission plan, businessmen were usually successful in being elected to office, often on a reform ticket. In Omaha, however, Dahlman and the other incumbents were confident of their ability to hold on to power as city commissioners. A plan was adopted which called for a seven-member commission elected at large on a nonpartisan basis, but in the 1912 election, the "Citizens Ticket" of the moderate reformers was defeated by the Dahlman supporters. By 1915 the progressive reformers believed that they had new cause for hope, having persuaded the state legislature to pass a permanent election law specifically designed to eliminate crooked elections in Omaha. But the reformers were disappointed again; Dahlman, who was to become known as "the perpetual mayor of Omaha," began his fourth term in office.<sup>3</sup>

By this time it must have been apparent to the reformers that neither group alone could dislodge the Dennison-Dahlman organization. Besides the necessities of practical politics, there were numbers of other factors working toward a coalition of all reformers in 1918. The prohibitionists scored a major triumph in 1916 when the voters of Nebraska approved an amendment to the state constitution prohibiting the manufacture or sale of liquor. Although the enforcement of the new law was not all that the prohibitionists had desired, they had succeeded in writing their moral values into law, a great

accomplishment in a society which reveres law. More importantly for the reform groups in Omaha, prohibition meant that Tom Dennison's gang was seriously weakened, thus promising the reformers a good chance of taking power in the city if only they could work together.

The continuing scandal concerning the Omaha police force and revelations of misconduct at the county level also provided impetus for a coalition of the reform forces. The police force had been denounced for years as incompetent and corrupt, but in 1917 and 1918 some of the scandal was made public. In the summer of 1917, an investigation of the police force was held but was denounced by reformers as a whitewash. More sensational revelations came in February, 1918, during the trial of Johnny Lynch, one of the county commissioners. Although most of the testimony at the Lynch trial concerned corruption at the county rather than the municipal level, the trial tended to confirm the reformers' suspicions that official misconduct was responsible for the unbridled crime, gambling, and bootlegging in Omaha. Moreover, the unsatisfactory investigation of the police force showed that reformers would have to gain control of municipal government in order to effect changes in the police department. Outside pressure was not enough to stop the police scandal, a reflection upon the city of Omaha that the progressive reformers could not tolerate.

Another factor initiating the reorganization of the reform element was the existence of a group opposed to Dahlman within his own party. Organized as the Jacksonian Club, this dissident faction of the Democratic Party in Omaha was amenable to reform, especially prohibition, and by 1918 was moving toward cooperation with Republican reformers, especially in local politics. The Jacksonian rivalry with the other faction of the party, the more powerful Dahlman Democracy Club, was closely associated with the liquor issue, the Jacksonians being the "drys." The controversy within the Democratic Party in the state over the liquor question had been intensified in 1910 when William Jennings Bryan abandoned his earlier neutral position and embarked on a moral crusade for prohibition, thus losing the leadership of the party in Nebraska since the majority could not accept his stand on this issue.<sup>4</sup> The party minority, however, endorsed the idea of a moral crusade,

and in Omaha many Jacksonians were leaders of prohibition organizations.

It was apparent that the serious division within the reformers was not between Republican and Democratic reformers but between moderates and radical reformers. Prohibitionists of both parties had already been working together in the "Committee of 5,000," an organization dedicated to securing not only the adoption of prohibition but also its proper enforcement, principally by supporting candidates for public office who favored its aims. Most supporters of prohibition elsewhere were more concerned about legitimizing their cultural values by writing prohibition into law than with effective enforcement. Even if the law was honored in the breach, society had to recognize the official dominance of the values of the prohibition group.<sup>5</sup> Members of the Committee of 5,000, then, must be seen as radicals within the prohibition movement; they wanted not only a recognition of their dominance but also the actual elimination of the illicit alcohol from society. In contrast to the radicals, the moderate reformers lacked this moralistic attitude, even when they sympathized with prohibition. As eminently respectable citizens, the moderates supported compliance with the prohibition law but did not seem to be eager to embark on a crusade against its violators.

It is likely that the event which persuaded the moderate reformers to join the prohibitionist group was the unsuccessful investigation of the police force. Moderates realized that they needed political power to achieve their aims, and the prohibitionists possessed a good organization and a sizable number of supporters. The prohibitionists had also been unsuccessful in Omaha elections on their own, and they were eager for power to achieve their aims. Moreover, it is likely that neither side understood that their goals were fundamentally different. For example, one of the most important issues was corruption in the police force, and all reformers advocated a thorough reform of the police department. But the moderates wished first to eliminate the public scandal, which they believed was damaging Omaha's image as a progressive city. They also wanted an efficient force capable of controlling crime, but the moderates apparently had no idea that the main goal of the radicals was to rid Omaha of bootlegging, prostitution, and immorality in general. For this task a capable police force was no more than a



*Victor Rosewater, who edited the Omaha Bee favored "moderate reform."*

necessary tool. But since all agreed on the primary aim of cleaning up the police force, it probably seemed unwise to dwell on the differences between the reformers. At any rate, a coalition of the two reform elements was effected under the auspices of the Committee of 5,000, and an "allied" slate of candidates was formed for the 1918 election. The alliance was an uneasy one from the beginning, however, since fundamental differences between the aims of the two groups were never reconciled. Even in the campaign of 1918, there were signs of division within the reform camp, divisions which were to grow ever more serious.

The first move of the reformers in the campaign was made by the Jacksonian Club, which unofficially sponsored a "citizens' patriotic" banquet to promote the candidacy of Edward P. Smith, a prominent Omaha lawyer known to all as "Ed." A well-known Democrat, Smith was a specialist in interstate commerce law and served as attorney for the Omaha Grain Exchange. Although an active campaigner for other Democratic candidates, Smith had never before run for public office himself but was probably the type of prominent citizen the Progressives desired to see in office. Although he supported prohibition in 1918, he was not a member of the Committee of 5,000 and can

reasonably be termed a moderate reformer.<sup>6</sup> At the banquet Smith gave what was described as a "patriotic speech"; he urged support of Woodrow Wilson and "cautioned capital and labor along the lines of patriotism." The speech of Nathan P. Dodge, a leading businessman, was in the same vein; he suggested the organization of a "service league" which would "help beat the kaiser and elect Ed Smith." In contrast, Harland L. Mossman, a prohibitionist, had a different appeal: "Let us sweep the bolsheviki out of the city hall," he urged.<sup>7</sup> Smith was announced as a candidate for mayor and a committee was to be chosen to pick the rest of his ticket.<sup>8</sup>

This early formation of a group to support a certain combination of candidates followed the usual pattern for this supposedly nonpartisan election in Omaha. According to Progressive doctrine, the primary election was a free field for candidates to seek nomination individually without regard to party affiliations. In actuality, as Victor Rosewater, editor of the *Omaha Bee*, complained: "The competition regularly resolves into a contest between two or three combinations arranged by the candidates themselves, or by friends, or clubs, or organizations, promoting their fortunes." The slates could be revised in accordance with the result of the primary election, the losers being dropped and replaced by outsiders who had demonstrated their special strength at the polls.<sup>9</sup>

The slate of the Committee of 5,000 included Ed Smith and four Republicans — J. Dean Ringer, William G. Ure, Roy N. Towl, and Henry W. Wulf — of whom the latter was also named on the slate put forward by union labor. Towl was a civil engineer and Ure was a former county treasurer. All four of the Republicans were members of the Committee, but the one most clearly identified as a prohibitionist was Ringer, a South Side lawyer who had been chairman of the Douglas County Dry Committee in 1916 and thus county leader of the fight to adopt prohibition. Ringer had had very little political experience, although he had served as city attorney for South Omaha before it was annexed by Omaha, and he had attracted considerable attention for his prosecution of two police commissioners for failure to perform their duties. Called by his opponents the " 'Lily White' Puritanic exponent of Blue-lawism," Ringer was the darling of the leaders of the Committee of 5,000, and his

later actions as Omaha city commissioner made it apparent that he was a genuine fanatic who viewed public issues in moral terms and who found it impossible to compromise. His position as the leading radical on the reform slate was underscored by his announcement that he wanted to be police commissioner. His slogan was "the candidate with a purpose," but his purpose was not simply to clean up the police force, as moderates may have believed, but to use the force to lead a crusade against immorality in Omaha.

The lack of complete harmony among the reform groups was apparent when the *Omaha Daily News* announced its choices. Although the *News* was often considered the organ of the Committee of 5,000, the paper's slate of six included only three of the Committee's candidates. In selecting candidates the paper was not exclusively concerned with prohibition, and all six of its men supported the typically Progressive reform of municipal ownership of public utilities. Besides Smith, Ure, and Ringer, the *News* favored one incumbent, Daniel B. Butler, a former Dahlman protege who had recently broken with the mayor. The other two members of the slate were Harry B. Zimman, a Republican lawyer who had previously been a city commissioner, and Thomas P. Reynolds, a labor leader who was better known than Henry Wulf but not a member of the Committee of 5,000.<sup>10</sup>

Although Mayor Dahlman did not announce a slate or do much active campaigning, the results of the primary held on April 9 showed Dahlman leading the field of seventy-five candidates. However, the mayor's vote did not equal that of 1915, although the total primary vote was greater because of the annexation of the city of South Omaha and three other suburban areas. It was perhaps also ominous for Dahlman that three of the candidates of the Committee of 5,000 placed within the top seven, and so did Zimman and Butler. The defeat of Albert C. Kugel, the police commissioner, reflected the continuing scandals and investigations in this department.

With the preliminary contest over, campaigning began in earnest. Slates were altered and new members added, the two main factions announced platforms, and the newspapers offered their advice to voters as well. The slate of the Committee of 5,000 now became known as the "Citizen's Ticket" or the "Allied Candidates" after the addition of Zimman. The seventh

spot on the ticket was left open. Dahlman announced that his group would consist of the incumbents, except for the defeated Kugel, plus labor-leader Reynolds. Butler immediately announced that his name had been placed on the slate without his consent, and Reynolds and the incumbent Thomas Falconer also issued statements disclaiming their association with the Dahlman slate.<sup>11</sup>

Next the two factions issued platforms. William F. Baxter, a prominent businessman and chairman of the Allied campaign, announced the platform for the reform slate. As might be expected, the reform platform attempted to appeal to both moderate and radical reformers. The Allied statement favored the Progressive aims of home rule for Omaha, municipal ownership of public utilities, city planning, and a program of public health and sanitation. Although some radicals tended to support blue laws, the platform denounced such legislation, possibly in order not to alienate moderate support. Three key planks called for reforms. One appealed to moderate reformers by promising economy in government and pledging to "conduct the affairs of the city on nonpartisan business principles." Both radicals and moderates could agree that reorganization of the police force was "imperative," but the platform went further, maintaining that the reformed force "must suppress bootlegging" — an objective closer to radicals' aims than moderates' desires. The third reform plank catered exclusively to the radical reformers. Urging the establishment of social centers, it asserted that "the city must protect the moral welfare and promote the education of our young people." The aims of the moderates did not include the use of city government to protect public morals.<sup>12</sup>

Mayor Dahlman announced his platform two days later. It lacked the neat businesslike organization and numbered points of the reform platform but was somewhat similar to it in content. The mayor agreed with the reformers in supporting home rule for the city, municipal ownership of public utilities, and economy in government. Dahlman even promised to enforce prohibition, but his earlier lax enforcement of liquor laws made his sincerity questionable. The two groups were thus separated by the issue of radical, or moral, reform, and by the record of the administration. In this campaign, Dahlman's great weakness did seem to be the record of the last three years.

Although no hint of corruption ever touched the mayor himself, the police force was considered a public disgrace and the voters had already dismissed the police commissioner. Public attention was again drawn to governmental scandals when a grand jury was convened at the end of March to investigate allegations of graft by city and county officials, favoritism in awarding contracts for supplies, and vice conditions in general. However, reformers found the grand jury report disappointing, since it uncovered virtually nothing new.

Even during the campaign there were signs of the divisions among the Allied forces. The *World-Herald*, a Democratic newspaper representing the party's wet faction, tried to separate Republican and Democratic reformers by charging that the reform ticket was "simply a republican ticket with one democrat, Smith, taken on." It suggested that the Republicans would refuse to support Smith for mayor after the election. A more serious sign of trouble for the reformers, however, was the fact that there was another reform ticket in the field. Sponsored by the Omaha Church Federation in conjunction with the Douglas County Dry League, the "Good Government" ticket was identical to the Allied slate — with one notable exception. Harry Zimman was left off because he was a Jew. The sponsors of this ticket were interested not merely in moral reform but in the dominance of Christian (generally Protestant) morality. As one of these religious extremists later declared in a letter to the editor on censorship, "the state must stand for Christianity."<sup>13</sup> The promotion of another reform ticket probably did little damage to the Allied slate — the practical effect was only to withhold support from Zimman — but the existence of a radical group unwilling to compromise at all to create a united reform effort would later spell trouble for the reform coalition.

Division also appeared among the Dahlman supporters. Just as the *Daily News* could not entirely agree with the Committee's choice of candidates, the *World-Herald* could not endorse all of the Dahlman slate. Creating its own ticket, it supported four incumbents and three of the reform group. This improbable slate included both Smith and Dahlman, and also Walter Jardine, the only candidate which both slates rejected, possibly because of his notoriously poor labor record.<sup>14</sup>

Although the reformers conducted a vigorous campaign, few expected the results of the May 7 election. Dahlman, the



*Samuel R. McKelvie served as  
governor of Nebraska  
from 1919 to 1923.*

heretofore “perpetual mayor of Omaha,” the man who led the field at the primary, was finally defeated. The Allied candidates managed to elect all but one of their slate of six. Ed Smith would be the new mayor, and J. Dean Ringer would be in charge of reorganizing the police department. Of the Dahlman ticket only Thomas Falconer and Butler were elected, and they had attempted to dissociate themselves from the city hall crowd. It had not been a complete victory for the reformers since one member of the group, Wulf, had been badly defeated, and since Butler got the highest number of votes; but it seemed clear that Omaha voters had wanted a real change in municipal administration.

The various newspapers had a number of reasons for the outcome of the election. In general, they pointed to the natural desire of voters for a change and to the fact of state prohibition, which destroyed or damaged the old liberal machine. The *World-Herald*, which had supported Dahlman, also pointed to his major blunder of the campaign, his charge that Smith had been guilty of favoritism while serving on the Exemption Board, the body which decided the draft status of all the men in the area. Smith had a son serving in France, and Dahlman had no

proof for his allegation. The resulting publicity damaged only Dahlman. The *Omaha Trade Exhibit*, the organ of the local retail merchants, expressed an opinion which may well have been typical of many progressive reformers. In explaining the reform victory, it revealed in the best traditions of Babbitt that

the business men of this city, the big men who are responsible for the city's rapid growth and wonderful progress determined to have a four-square city, a well regulated and well balanced city, and one whose political machinery and city government would be a true representation of the place in business and social affairs in this great trade territory that Omaha now holds.<sup>15</sup>

The most complete analysis of the election from a prohibitionist viewpoint came from the *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, edited by William Jennings Bryan's brother Charles. The election, it told its readers, "marks the end of machine rule" in Omaha. The fact that the *World-Herald* and the *Daily News* supported some candidates of the opposing slate "prevented it being made a clean straight fight between the two elements in the city," but nevertheless, "the reformers have won decisively." Most significant was the election of Ringer, a "former Lincoln boy and football star, [who] made his campaign directly upon the issue of a clean Omaha." The Dahlman slate was defeated because "the departure of the saloon had destroyed the strength and coherency of the old vote-producing machine that depended on the saloon as the financing agent and gathering place for voters of a certain type."<sup>16</sup>

All of these explanations of the election are inadequate. The explanation that the voters desired a change is little more than restating the obvious. Clearly, those who desired a change outnumbered those who did not, since five new men were elected. The papers were probably right in claiming that prohibition and Dahlman's unfortunate charge of favoritism against Smith were factors in the reform victory. However, it would be valuable to identify which parts of the voting population favored a change in the administration. Certainly it will not do to say that "the people" wanted a change, and using the term "the better element" also tells little about the sources of support for reform.

One way to determine the sources of support for the reform group is to analyze voting behavior by wards in terms of the characteristics of the population as found in the 1920 United States census. Using the Pearson product-moment correlation

coefficient,<sup>17</sup> the average vote for the reformers in 1918 was correlated with a number of other variables. There was an important relationship between the pattern of reform strength in May, 1918, and the pattern of voting for the Republican candidate for governor in November of that year. Although the Republican candidate, Samuel R. McKelvie, was elected governor, he lost the city of Omaha. This fact suggests that the victory of the municipal reformers cannot be accounted for solely by the factor of Republican partisanship. Nevertheless, the statistical correlation between reformist strength and Republican strength was a high .78, indicating that the wards which favored the G.O.P. also tended to support reform.

The division of opinion on prohibition obviously has an important bearing on the municipal election. The high correlation of reformist voting with Republicanism would suggest a connection with prohibitionist sentiment, since most observers have agreed that many Republicans did tend to favor prohibition.<sup>18</sup> Within the Democratic Party, prohibition was an important issue in the election of the national committeeman in 1920. The pattern of voting in Omaha for the dry candidate for committeeman shows that wards that supported him also tended to favor the reformers; the correlation is .46, which is not particularly high, but does indicate a positive relationship. The best measure of prohibition sentiment is, of course, the vote on state prohibition of November, 1916. Unfortunately this cannot be statistically correlated with reform voting because the ward boundaries were completely changed in 1917. In general, however, the sections of the city that favored the reformers in 1918 had supported prohibition two years earlier.

To determine the influence of socio-economic status on the voting for reformers, four factors were used. Since more direct measures such as average income or occupational distribution were not available,<sup>19</sup> I have used data indicating how many children in each ward were attending high school and college, as well as illiteracy rate, as indicators of socio-economic status. The correlation coefficients for all are high (.78, .63, and -.78, respectively), indicating a strong relationship between reform voting and high socio-economic status. The illiteracy rate probably also measures the incidence of certain immigrant groups, but it does distinguish the low status, generally working class, areas of the city. It is reasonable to conclude from these

statistics that the reformist "better element" tended to be middle class as well as Republican.

There also seems to be a relationship between voting behavior and the ethnic composition of the wards. It was found that the reformers got more votes from areas with a high proportion of "old stock" white Americans and fewer votes from the immigrant districts and Negro areas. A correlation of .55 with native-born voters of native parents indicated that this group tended to support the reformers, while results of  $-.42$  and  $-.40$  respectively showed that the foreign-born and the Negro areas tended to vote against the reform candidates. Country of origin was an important factor in influencing the voting behavior of the foreign-born. In general, wards with British and Scandinavian immigrants were more favorable to the reformers than were other immigrant districts. Another indication of the connection between immigrants and reform strength can be seen from the voting in 1918 on an amendment to the Nebraska constitution providing that only citizens could vote. Previously, immigrants could vote in Nebraska on "first papers" — that is, the declaration of intent to become a citizen — pending actual naturalization. The voting on this amendment has a relatively high correlation of .68 with reform strength. It would appear that those who favored reform were also somewhat hostile to immigrants. It is possible that they saw municipal reform as coincident with downgrading the political power of ethnic groups.

A summary of the results of correlating these factors with the voting for the reformers is given in Table 1. From these statistics we can conclude that the reformers had their strength in wards that had large numbers of white Anglo-Saxon voters, who had been born in the United States or in northwestern Europe, and were Republican, middle class, and prohibitionist. In 1918 the coalition of progressive and radical moral reformers successfully mobilized these groups behind them. But the victorious coalition represented only an uneasy alliance, not a union, and controversy over the goals of reform was soon to lead to the disintegration of the coalition.

When they took office in May of 1918, the reformers were seemingly in an excellent position to achieve their objectives. Despite the fact that five of the seven members of the new

TABLE 1

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Percentage of Votes for Reformers in 1918 correlated with:

	r
1. Percent of vote for Republican candidate for governor, November, 1918	.78
2. Percent of votes for dry candidate for Democratic national committeeman, April, 1920	.46
3. Percent of children 18-20 attending school	.63
4. Percent of children 16-17 attending school	.78
5. Illiteracy rate	-.78
6. Percent of white native born of native parentage	.55
7. Percent of foreign-born	-.42
8. Percent of Negroes	-.40
9. Percent of vote for alien suffrage amendment	.68

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council had been elected on the same platform, there was little real agreement on the aims of the reform administration. Besides the differences in goals between moderate and radical reformers, there was also opposition to any reform by some of the council members. Surprisingly, this opposition was led by one of the Allied candidates, Harry Zimman, who proved to be especially hostile to Ringer's plans for reform. The most vivid instance of Zimman's opposition to certain aims of reformers occurred when a number of women social workers from a South Side settlement house urged the commissioners to approve a proposed park in the area. A number of residents of the area, mostly immigrants, attended the council meeting to oppose it, since their homes would have to be removed to make room for a park. Zimman ignored the park issue and proceeded to a direct attack on the social settlement, claiming that immigrant parents resented its interference with their children. To the horror of Mayor Smith, he concluded that "it is a mistake to have the social settlement house there. Remove it!"<sup>20</sup> The park proposal was narrowly defeated, but the mayor and other reformers were taken aback to find that the immigrants resented the social settlement and its "Americanization" work, a cause dear to the hearts of many reformers.

The most important cause of controversy within the reform administration was still, of course, the inability of moderates

and radicals to agree on their objectives. Mayor Smith, the spokesman for the moderates on the council, was interested in efficiency and economy in city government as well as the reorganization of the police force. He told a group of ministers in February of 1919, "I have no desire or ambition to have my administration known as a 'reform' administration. I want it known as a clean administration and as a business administration but not as a 'reform' administration." Then he defined his own role as mayor: "My job," he said, "is to sit on the lid of expenditures."<sup>21</sup>

Police Commissioner Ringer saw his job in a vastly different light. He announced his plans not only to reform the police force, but also to use the police to clean up the city. "Omaha shall be made clean of all vice and immorality," he declared, and he gave rigid instructions to enforce the laws against bootlegging, gambling, vagrancy, and immorality. However, Mayor Smith had also promised the voters that his administration would suppress bootlegging and prostitution, and it is likely that the moderates did not at first object to Ringer's crusade against vice. However, they were soon surprised by the vigor of Ringer's campaign as well as by its lack of success. Not only did the police commissioner demand higher wages for police, more money for his department, and more power for himself, but some of his reform plans threatened to tarnish Omaha's image, with which the moderate reformers were especially concerned.

When Commissioner Ringer announced that he favored the continued existence of the women's detention hospital, to which women with venereal diseases were committed, Mayor Smith and the council moderates openly opposed him for the first time. Smith's objection to the hospital was based on his concern for the city's image: "I don't want Omaha advertised as a place where diseased prostitutes can come to be cured. I want the burglar, the bootlegger, the pickpocket and the prostitute to understand that we will not tolerate their presence in Omaha if we can help it."

In contrast to Smith's view, Ringer argued that "we should not run out of the city these people who are suffering from disease," and called Smith's attitude "unchristian."<sup>22</sup> Despite Ringer's protests, however, the moderates succeeded in eliminating the detention hospital. Concern for Omaha's image led



*Edward P. Smith was elected  
mayor of Omaha in 1918  
on a reform ticket.*

the council to defeat another of Ringer's schemes, an electrically operated iron gate on the Douglas Street bridge to catch bootleggers. Zimman told the council, "I'd hate to think of the advertising the city of Omaha would get from such a stunt."<sup>2 3</sup>

Even when Ringer's proposals did not directly threaten the city's image, the council did not support the police commissioner as thoroughly as he believed it should. One problem was that the economy-minded moderates, led by the mayor, were unwilling to grant Ringer the money he wanted for his anti-vice crusade. More serious were Ringer's attempts to remove his enemies on the police force, who he claimed were still taking orders from Boss Dennison's "gang." Civil service regulations forbade dismissal of policemen without cause, but the commissioner believed that the council was also hampering his efforts to purify the department. When the council turned down his plan to base wages on merit rather than seniority, for example, Ringer complained that the council was trying to "tie the hands of the police commissioner." Mayor Smith angrily retorted: "No member of this commission has been upheld as thoroughly as the commissioner of police. Don't tell us we are trying to hamstring you." Despite their opposition to some of

Ringer's schemes, however, the council moderates defended him from the attacks of Zimman and the other outright opponents of reform. In one incident Zimman pointed to dissension within the police department, claimed that policemen had no confidence in their superiors, and concluded that "it is time we are changing the heads of the department to bring about the relief that is necessary." Ringer responded by charging Zimman with advocating the return of the gang's control, and Smith accused him of desiring Ringer's position for himself.<sup>24</sup>

Despite Ringer's failure to win the complete support of the moderates on the council, radical reformers were pleased with his actions. The Committee of 5,000 issued a statement from its executive secretary, Elmer Thomas, claiming that "Commissioner Ringer has done a splendid job this past year . . . . But many of the police are still taking orders from the criminal element, and the city council has failed to vest Mr. Ringer with enough authority to control the situation."

In evaluating Thomas' statement the *World-Herald* professed not to understand how the Committee could be unhappy with the council when it had endorsed a majority of the commissioners. The answer was, of course, that the reform coalition was breaking up; conflict between moderates and radicals could no longer be avoided when policy decisions had to be made. However, this fact was apparently hard for some of the reformers to realize. In June of 1919, for example, Mayor Smith sent a letter to each of the other commissioners in an effort to achieve harmony among the council members. Dissatisfied with the achievements of the reform administration, he told them that "we quarrel too much in the council chamber. . . . We are not primarily a legislative assembly nor a debating society. We are the directors of a big business institution that collects and spends \$2,000,000 each year."

Although the mayor did not seem to realize it, his efforts were bound to fail; the quarreling only reflected the basic differences on the goals of reform, differences that could not be eliminated simply by reminding the commissioners of their duties as directors of the municipal corporation.<sup>25</sup>

The appearance of a recall petition soon demonstrated that not only Mayor Smith was dissatisfied with the commission. The petition called for Dahlman and his supporters to replace

Smith, Ure, Towl, and Ringer – the only commissioners still clearly identified with reform. Although the petition effort failed on a technicality, it did demonstrate hostility toward the administration by more than 5,000 voters. Many of the petition signers were packing house and stockyard workers, long-time Dahlman partisans.<sup>26</sup> As yet there was no open break in the reform coalition, but in September of 1919 there occurred a series of incidents which discredited the police force and the radicals in the eyes of the moderates.

On September 1 during a raid on a hotel by the police “morals squad,” a frightened young bellboy was shot and killed merely to prevent his escape. The chief of police admitted that the shooting appeared “unjustified,” and opponents of the reform administration, pointing to the high crime rate, claimed that Ringer was chasing bootleggers while “real” criminals were ignored. Scarcely had the public outcry over this episode subsided when on September 25 another incident occurred. One Agnes Loebeck, 19, reported to police that she was returning home from the theater with her escort, 19-year-old Millard Hoffman, when they were stopped by a Negro who robbed them and assaulted her.<sup>27</sup> There seemed to be discrepancy in the story, but police arrested a Negro packing house worker named Will Brown on Miss Loebeck’s evidence. An examining physician found him too twisted by rheumatism to assault anyone. In the emotional atmosphere which prevailed, however, no one took notice of the inconsistencies and improbabilities.

The public outcry, encouraged by newspaper sensationalism, was tremendous, but it seemed to be directed as much at the police as at the Negro. In response to this attack, Chief of Police Marshall Eberstein irresponsibly sought to excuse the police and shift the blame to the courts. Complaining that “our courts are far too lenient,” Eberstein charged that criminals had “received nominal fines, which they paid laughingly and then returned to violating the law.”<sup>28</sup> Certain outraged citizens needed nothing more in the way of an excuse to take the law into their own hands. On Sunday afternoon, September 28, Millard Hoffman led a group of young men to the county courthouse, where the alleged assailant was in jail. Although they demanded the prisoner, it was almost in a carnival spirit, and there was no violence until about 8:00 o’clock at night. The crowd continued to grow, however, eventually setting fire to the courthouse.

When Mayor Smith came to try to speak to them, he was seized and strung up. Rescuers cut the rope before he suffered permanent injury. Finally the Negro was surrendered to the mob, which shot and hanged him and then burned his body in the street.

The results of the riot were far-reaching. Omaha's reform administration, already under attack before the disorder, was now thoroughly discredited. Labor and low income groups had previously been in open opposition to the reformers, but this complete breakdown of law and order probably completed the alienation of middle class groups and those willing to support moderate reform. The city's progressive reformers, those most concerned about Omaha's image, were appalled to find that the riot was getting nationwide publicity. Moderate reformers might well conclude that reform had gone too far when Omaha's image was damaged and when troops were required to maintain order.

The riot had a decisive effect on municipal politics. In particular there seemed to be less quarreling among the members of the council, not because they were now agreed on goals but because all realized that no agreement could be reached. Immediately after the riot, it appeared that the anti-reformers might attract enough votes to secure the transfer of Ringer and the removal of his underling, Eberstein. This plan was foiled when Mayor Smith, still recuperating from his manhandling by the mob, exerted his influence to maintain the status quo. It became apparent that although Ringer could not initiate new programs of radical reform, neither could his opponents muster the votes to oust him. This stalemate could not be broken until the next election, and well before the end of the term both the radical reformers and their opponents were looking forward to the next contest for the voters to choose one policy.

The three years of the reform administration had thus seen a realignment of political forces. Most importantly, moderate reformers had become disillusioned with the idea of a coalition of reformers. Commissioner Zimman, who might be termed a moderate reformer, was so opposed to Ringer's policies of radical reform that he became the leading anti-reformer. Mayor Smith, another progressive reformer, also became increasingly

opposed to Ringer's policies but was unwilling to dissociate himself completely from reform. Whatever the misgivings of the moderates, the radical reformers were convinced of the rightness of their efforts. The only problem, they claimed, was that reform had not gone far enough. As they saw it, the riot showed that the "gang" of Boss Dennison was still powerful and that even stronger measures were required to defeat it. Ringer's actions were defended absolutely. Most moderates could not support this extreme kind of reform, but the only alternative seemed to be a return to Dahlmanism, which they also opposed. Nevertheless, these voters had to decide whether to follow Ringer in a further crusade for moral cleanliness in Omaha or to chance a return to a "wide-open" city under Dahlman. The middle ground had been eliminated; the 1921 election would be a "straight-out" fight between reform and the old order, with little of the ambiguity and slate-breaking that characterized the election three years earlier.

Shortly after former mayor Dahlman announced his candidacy, the Committee of 5,000 revealed its choices. Since Smith had decided not to run again, the Committee chose as its nominee for mayor Judge Abraham L. Sutton, a well-known prohibitionist who had been the Republican candidate for governor in 1916. As expected, Commissioners Ringer and Towl were also members of the Committee's slate, but so was the incumbent Falconer, who had been on the anti-reform slate in 1918. It was no surprise that Zimman, a reform candidate in 1918, was not included, since his attitude toward radical reform had been made clear, but the absence of Ure was unexpected. It was revealed later that he had been unwilling to accept the Committee's nomination unless assured that he would not be required to support the prohibitionist Sutton for mayor.<sup>29</sup>

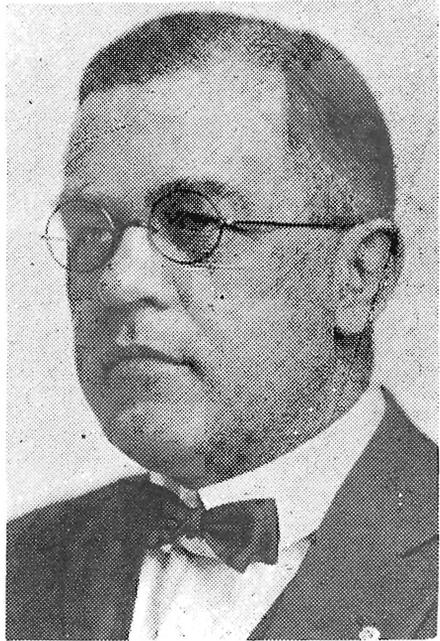
Before the primary election, members of the Committee of 5,000 were confident of their chances, pointing to the fact that the wards that had voted for reform in 1918 had experienced dramatic increases in the numbers of registered voters. Most of the increase was of course due to the registration of women, who had been enfranchised by state law prior to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, but the relative gain of Ringer's wards was attributed to the fact that Dahlman's wards were in "close-in" districts which had been increasingly occupied by commerce and industry. The Committee also reported that over

3,000 voters in the close-in districts had lost their right to vote by the constitutional amendment limiting suffrage to citizens.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the result of the April 5 primary came as a distinct shock to the Committee. Of the reformers only Ringer and Falconer were included among the top seven nominees, and they were in sixth and seventh place, respectively. The reformers could reflect that Dahlman had also led in April of 1918 and had been defeated in May, but now the tide seemed to be running against them, and the job of reversing the results of the primary would be far more difficult in 1921 than it had been in 1918.

As the general election approached, Victor Rosewater, editor of the *Bee* and a Republican progressive reformer, found himself in a dilemma: unequivocally opposed to Dahlman and the Democrats, he also could not approve of the crusading reform spirit with which the Committee's slate was associated. Reflecting on the obvious success of slates at the primary, Rosewater concluded in an editorial that "the inference may be drawn that the city is divided into two camps on an issue that is not paramount, however vital it may seem to its advocates or opponents." Rosewater was most impressed by Ure, who he claimed represented "rational progressive ideas." Rosewater's answer to the moderate dilemma apparently was that stalemate was preferable to either radical reform or Dahlmanism. The *Daily News* and the *World-Herald* lined up for the opposing slates, but the *Bee* endorsed all of the six incumbents who were running for re-election, claiming that they were broadly representative of the community. Perhaps Rosewater hoped that the incumbents might turn to moderate reform if neither of the extremist factions was able to gain control of the council, but his efforts were futile. The main issue of the election was to be Ringer's policies of reform, generally called "moral cleanliness" by one side and "fanaticism" by the other.<sup>31</sup>

The "Progressive Six," the reform slate, had become the "Progressive Seven" when Ure joined the ticket on his own terms. Sutton had receded from his insistence that he should be the pre-election candidate for mayor after several members of the slate had refused to be pledged to support him. Rather than Sutton, it was Ringer who articulated the reform position



*Police commissioner during  
the "reform" years was  
John Dean Ringer.*

throughout the campaign. As leader of the reform slate, Ringer defined the "moral issue" as paramount. At a "prayer and political meeting" at Pearl Memorial Church, he pleaded for support on the grounds that the "morals of the youth of the city are at stake." The Chamber of Commerce had a luncheon at which all the candidates spoke; there Ringer challenged the statement of another speaker that the moral issue was not the most important consideration in a city's greatness. "In my mind the moral issue in the city is the greatest of them all."<sup>32</sup>

The Dahlman slate was known as the "United Seven," and included Butler and Zimman, both of whom had been opposed to Dahlman in 1918. The Dahlman organ, the *World-Herald*, accepted Ringer's definition of the main issue and tried to use it against him by constantly attacking "the spirit of intolerance" and "fanaticism." The United Seven, it said, "are honest, hardheaded, practical men. They represent no fads or isms that could carry them to extremes." While the reformist *Daily News* was addressing editorials "To the Mothers of Omaha," the *World-Herald* was appealing to citizens "who want an ad-

ministration that can combine vision and purpose with common sense and reason.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus faced with a choice between reformism and Dahlman's “more liberal” ideas, the voters on May 3 elected every member of Dahlman's ticket by large margins. The average vote cast for the Dahlman candidates was 30,929, while that for the opposition was 21,855, giving the Dahlman ticket an average plurality of over 9,000 votes. The straight ticket voting was obvious. Despite the reformers' defeat, Elmer Thomas, executive secretary of the Committee of 5,000, announced that it had been a “fine campaign” and he was satisfied. His explanation for their defeat was that “an appeal was made by the opposition to the big corporations, the Third Ward gang [of Tom Dennison] and to racial and religious prejudices.” As might be expected, the verdict of the *World-Herald* was that “Omaha has administered its unmistakable rebuke to the spirit of intolerance, fanaticism, and bigotry. It was the leaders of the ‘Committee of 5,000’ who were defeated and chastised” far more than the candidates whose campaign they managed.<sup>34</sup>

Although the percentage of votes for the Republican candidate for governor increased from 1918 to 1920, the reformers did not benefit from this increase in Republican sentiment but lost votes in every ward. This can be explained by the fact that the Republican party, generally favorable to both progressivism and prohibition, was likely to attract the votes of both moderate and radical reformers. The correlation between reform strength and Republican strength in 1918 was high (.78), suggesting that both moderate and radical Republicans tended to vote for the municipal reformers. The corresponding figure for 1921 is considerably lower (.59), indicating the important fall-off of reform strength among moderate Republicans. Apparently many Omaha voters in 1921 saw a distinction between the moderate policies of the Republican Party and the radical ones of Ringer's slate. Between 1918 and 1920, they became more favorable to the Republicans but increasingly hostile to radical reform. Although a number of moderates like Mayor Smith probably chose to vote for the reformers, the drop in the correlation with Republican strength indicates that a significant number of the moderates refused to support the radical reformers. As shown in Table 2, this is the only significant change in the correlation coefficients from 1918 to

TABLE 2

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Percent of Vote for Reformers Correlated with:		Coefficient of correlation	
		1918	1921
1.	Percent of vote for Republican candidate for governor, 1918/1920	.78	.59
2.	Percent of votes for dry candidate for Democratic national committeeman, April, 1920	.46	.50
3.	Percent of children 18-20 attending school	.63	.62
4.	Percent of children 16-17 attending school	.78	.76
5.	Illiteracy rate	-.78	-.75
6.	Percent of white native born of native parentage	.55	.58
7.	Percent of foreign-born	-.42	-.41
8.	Percent of Negroes	-.40	-.47

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1921. The loss of moderate support thus appears to be the most important single factor in explaining the defeat of the reform administration in 1921.

Had radical reform been a success under Ringer as police commissioner, he would have attracted more support, but the police force continued to be a public scandal, leading to bad publicity not only for the radical reformers but also for the city itself. Already unhappy with the adverse publicity, the moderate reformers were completely alienated by the courthouse riot, which created a poor image for Omaha. If Ringer had succeeded in reforming the police force or at least in preventing the riot and the bad publicity that caused the loss of Omaha's good name, the moderate reformers would probably have accepted the radical crusade against vice. Thus the defeat of the reform slate can be attributed partly to the ideological conflict with moderate reformers and partly to the lack of practical success of the radical reformers while in power from 1918 to 1921.

## NOTES

1. Samuel P. Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, LV (1964), 157-169.

2. John F. Showalter, "James C. Dahlman, Mayor of Omaha" *National Municipal Review*, XVI (1927), 111-117; George R. Leighton, *Five Cities* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1929).

3. Victor Rosewater, "Omaha's Experience with the Commission Plan," *National Municipal Review*, X (1921), 281-282; Joseph P. Harris, "Permanent Election Registration in Omaha," *National Municipal Review* XV (1926), 637.

4. Paolo E. Coletta, "The Nebraska Democratic Campaign of 1910" *Nebraska History*, 52 (Winter, 1971), 366.

5. Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

6. Showalter, "Dahlman," 113-114. The author specifically states that Smith was not a "frock-coated reformer" but an intelligent businessman, as if these categories were mutually exclusive.

7. *Omaha World-Herald*, March 3, 1918, 1.

8. Although the voters elected seven commissioners rather than a mayor and six councilmen, candidates often announced in advance which positions they wanted.

9. Rosewater, "Omaha's Experience," 282.

10. *Omaha Daily News*, April 6, 1918, 1.

11. *Ibid.*, April 22, 1918, 1; April 23, 1918, 1.

12. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 20, 1918, 22.

13. *Ibid.*, May 4, 1918, 10; *Omaha Bee*, May 6, 1918, 1.

14. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 30, 1918, 6.

15. *Omaha Trade Exhibit*, May 11, 1918, 5.

16. *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, May 8, 1918, 1.

17. This formula indicates the degree to which two variables occur together. A direct relationship is indicated by a positive result (which is designated "r"), while an inverse relationship yields negative numbers as the value of  $r$ . The more closely associated are the two variables, the closer is  $r$  to 1 or -1. A correlation coefficient of zero indicates no association between the variables. It is important to realize that a high degree of correlation does not prove a causal relationship. That is, just because two variables tend to occur together does not prove that one causes the other; another factor may cause both, or they could even be unrelated, although this is unlikely if nonsense correlations are eliminated. See Louise E. Rickard, "The Failure of Reform in Omaha, 1918-1921" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1968). See also John H. Mueller and Karl F. Schuessler, *Statistical Reasoning in Sociology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), esp. 308-309.

18. It is estimated that Republicans in Nebraska supported prohibition by about a two to one margin. See Coletta, "Democratic Campaign of 1910," 359-364.

19. The Bureau of the Census did not begin asking questions about income until the 1940 census, and information about occupations is only given for the city as a whole. Nor is information about property taxes available, since the records for the period before 1939 have been destroyed.

20. *Omaha World-Herald*, December 31, 1918, 1, and January 1, 1919, 1.

21. *Ibid.*, February 18, 1919, 2.

22. *Ibid.*, January 10, 1919, 8.
23. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1919, 1.
24. *Ibid.*, March 25, 1919, 1; March 29, 1919, 13; February 11, 1919, 1.
25. *Ibid.*, June 14, 1919, 18; June 22, 1919, 1.
26. Rosewater, "Omaha's Experience," 283; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 17, 1919, 1.
27. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 27, 1919, 1.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Omaha Daily News*, April 3, 1921, 1; *Omaha Bee*, April 23, 1921, 11.
30. *Omaha Daily News*, April 3, 1921, 9C; April 6, 1921, 6.
31. *Omaha Bee*, April 7, 1921, 6; May 1, 1921, 1.
32. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 18, 1921, 2; *Omaha Daily News*, April 22, 1921, 8.
33. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 18, 1921, 4; *Omaha Daily News*, April 21, 1921, 6.
34. *Omaha Bee*, May 5, 1921, 1; *Omaha World-Herald*, May 5, 1921, 8.