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Article Title: Tom Hoctor and the Magic City: The South Omaha Annexation Fight, 1890-1915

Full Citation: Emmett C Hoctor, "Tom Hoctor and the Magic City: The South Omaha Annexation Fight, 1890-1915," *Nebraska History* 64 (1983): 256-292

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1983Hoctor.pdf>

Date: 3/25/2014

Article Summary: North Omahans worked for twenty-five years to bring about the annexation of South Omaha. Tom Hoctor led repeated attempts to defeat the merger.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Thomas Hoctor, John H Morehead, Alexander H Swan, C R Schaller, John J Flynn, John C Watson, Edward Rosewater, John Paul Breen, Mike Lee, John M Tanner, Harley G Moorhead, James Dahlman, William A Redick, Frank Koutsky

Nebraska Place Names: South Omaha, Omaha, Lincoln

Keywords: Thomas Hoctor, Alexander H Swan, Union Stockyards, *Omaha World-Herald*, *South Omaha Democrat*, *Omaha Daily Bee*, Trans-Mississippi Exposition, John Paul Breen, Mike Lee, Omaha Commercial Club, South Omaha Commercial Club, Howell Greater Omaha Act, Parriott-Broome amendment

Photographs / Images: the Thomas Hoctor family about 1906; Thomas Hoctor and two other young pugilists about 1886; South Omaha city hall and police station; Guy Spencer cartoon, "More annexation talk" (*Omaha World-Herald*, July 25, 1909); South Omaha City Council, 1895; last South Omaha City Council, 1915

Tom Hoctor and the Magic City: The South Omaha Annexation Fight, 1890-1915

By Emmett C. Hoctor

On June 20, 1915, the village of Dundee and the city of South Omaha officially ceased to be autonomous municipalities. Governor John H. Morehead's call for a special election on June 1, 1915, to decide whether the two communities would be annexed to Omaha signaled the end of the municipality of South Omaha, and the political doom of Democratic Mayor Thomas Hoctor, who had been the city's chief booster for a generation. South Omaha City Clerk Thomas Flynn received the governor's proclamation calling for official annexation to Omaha 10 days after its receipt. Flynn noted at the bottom of the document "received June 10th 1915 AD, at 4:21 o'clock PM."¹

Both municipalities sought legal relief, and fought annexation to Omaha in the state District Court. Dundee drew out the inexorable process of annexation for almost two years—until February 14, 1917. More practical South Omaha attorneys and city officials, convinced that the writ of mandamus issued by Justice William A. Redick on June 29, 1915, would not be reversed in a higher court, capitulated. After trying to obtain a supersedeas bond—to delay the action—and a new trial, South Omaha became part of greater Omaha on June 30, 1915.

The union was a "shotgun marriage," John Paul Breen, an Omahan who worked for annexation, acknowledged. The fact that legal maneuvering tactics were still necessary to obtain an estimated 26,000 new citizens for greater Omaha was indicative of the strained relationship that had existed—with but few hiatuses—since South Omaha showed up as a minor rival to its northern neighbor.²

The annexation was the culmination of 25 years of concerted effort by North Omahans to bring about a merger. The

forces and persons who worked for and against annexation during the quarter century of South Omaha's existence are examined herein.

At first thought South Omaha's annexation might be considered normal. It has been common for older communities to absorb smaller communities with contiguous borders. On the environs of Omaha there were once clusters of self-contained towns, which are now lost in the larger community: Albright, Benson, Blakesly, Briggs, Clontarf, Debolt, Dodge, East Omaha, Elk City, Elkhorn Junction, Florence, Gibson, Ireland's Hill, Irvington, Lane Mercer, Parkvale, Saratoga, and South Omaha.

When South Omaha's city limits were affixed in 1897 with the northern boundary only one-half mile from Omaha, it was inevitable that growth would bring about rivalry--and conflict. The first settlers in the vicinity of South Omaha arrived in 1854, but by 1884 there were only 12 families in the area. The idea of founding a town in the area called "the summit"³ is credited to entrepreneurs Alexander H. Swan of Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Omaha real-estate developer, C. R. Schaller.

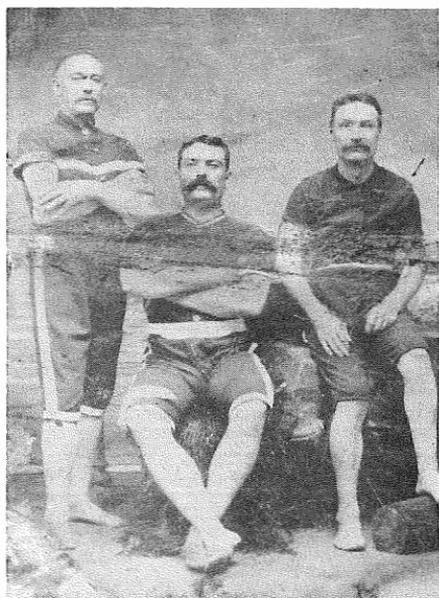
In 1882 Swan reportedly viewed the site that would one day become the nation's largest meatpacking complex and contemplated the development of a great industry. Leverett M. Anderson joined Swan in planning pens to rest and feed stock before sending animals to local and eastern packing plants.⁴

The plan found backing among Omahans such as William A. Paxton, C. R. Schaller, John A. McShane, Thomas Swobe, and Frank Murphy, who formed two companies: The Union Stockyards of Omaha Ltd., capitalized at \$700,000 on December 1, 1883, and the South Omaha Land Syndicate, which purchased 1,875 acres at \$1.67 per acre, and incorporated on January 1, 1884. Leaders of the two companies even then noted that the "principal place for trans-acting business was to be Omaha," the colossus to the north.⁵

Soon thereafter on July 18 an area for a township was registered with the Douglas County clerk's office. The town was to be called New Edinburgh in honor of a wealthy Scotsman, who had originally agreed to supply financial backing. But the area became known as South Omaha, a name naturally evolving through its proximity to the larger town.⁶ According to the *American Real Estate Criterion* in May of



The Thomas Hocter family about 1906: daughter Angela (front row, left), parents Patrick and Julia Hocter, daughter Margaret, Tom Hocter, son Emmett (back row left), son James, sister Mary Hocter Madden, wife Pauline, and son Charles. Charles is the father of author Emmett Hocter.



Thomas Hocter (center) and two other young pugilists, about 1886.

1886, it would be "only a question of a few years. . . [before] South Omaha will be to Omaha what Brooklyn is to New York."⁷

Migration by workers to outlying areas of South Omaha increased with the growth of the packing industry. In August, 1884, the first stockyard was opened; production began in early 1885. New industry in the vicinity meant growth and growing pains for the community. Area residents looked askance at newly arrived Chicago laborers and their "uncivilized" ways. Their behavior became so rowdy that someone painted the epithet "wild Indians" on a boarding house where many stayed. This action resulted in that area of South Omaha becoming Indian Hill, and to this day elementary and junior high schools carry the name. The influx of workers brought "homeless men who cared little for appearances. . . those who were looking forward to a future home [and who] began early to agitate the question of municipal organization."⁸

The population reached 1,500 in 1886, and civic-minded local residents petitioned the Douglas County commissioners for village status. They wrote:

We are exposed without any protection against tramps and murder [etc], having not jail nor church, one school house. . .one saloon for every twenty inhabitants, one gambling house, two houses of ill fame, one justice of the peace, one deputy sheriff (he paid by three corporations, no constable proper here).⁹

After gaining village status on October 16, 1886, South Omaha was declared a city of the second class on December 3, 1887. City officials then campaigned to get South Omaha recognized as a city of the first class to enhance its status and increase its taxing powers.

Emerging as city clerk of the new municipality was young Thomas Hoctor, the son of Irish parents Patrick and Julia, who had arrived in South Omaha in 1875. They lived in one of the town's first houses built in 1854¹⁰ and had "the distinction of living in South Omaha territory before the town was thought of."¹¹ Patrick had once farmed where the city stood.¹² City Clerk Tom Hoctor had spearheaded the drive to have South Omaha declared a city of the first class.¹³ The Hoctors enjoyed a sort of aristocrat status among the Irish.

On June 8, 1889, Governor John M. Thayer issued the proc-

lamation making South Omaha a first class city. From April, 1900, through April, 1902, South Omaha's first-class status was maintained by claiming a population ranging from 25,000 to 40,000 citizens.¹⁴ The figures were inflated, a practice common to most towns in that period resulting from rampant boosterism.

Such civic pride in South Omaha found expression in 1891 in an address delivered by J. B. Erion before the Board of Trade and reprinted in newspapers. Erion dubbed South Omaha "the magic city" in the April 25, 1891, edition of his newspaper the *Eagle*. Although used earlier to describe Lincoln and Hastings, only in South Omaha did "magic city" become a slogan embraced by the citizens.¹⁵

Thriving South Omaha industries soon created envy among citizens of Omaha, whose officials began to discuss annexation of its bustling working-class neighbor. By April, 1890, agitation for a merger between the two Omahas was spreading. The South Omaha city council decided to record its displeasure and put it to a vote of the citizens on May 8, 1890.¹⁶

The *Omaha World-Herald* in its before-the-election editorials was seen as favoring the merger. The *World-Herald* pointed out that South Omaha officials canvassing the recently annexed area of Albright, "a South Omaha suburb," found it still in need of "walks, lights, and almost every comfort."¹⁷

Another reason given by the *World-Herald* for the proposed merger was to clean up the town and "civilize it." A man reputed to be from a suburb recently annexed to Chicago was quoted concerning the benefits to be derived from annexation:

Now boys if you want to be led by a gang of saloon keepers who sap you of your hard-earned wages and send you home with an aching head, vote against annexation. But [vote for annexation] if you have regard for the purity of your homes and for your wives and mothers and sweethearts and if you want to be able to take them to church of a Sunday morning without having them insulted by a gang of bummers, who flock like flies around our open saloons.¹⁸

Those citizens who favored annexation had their views thoroughly expressed in the press, as did those opposing the merger. A rally in Germania Hall brought 500 citizens to an anti-annexation meeting.¹⁹

Early on election day, May 8, 1890, the *World-Herald* reported that "the streets [in Omaha] filled with a constant

succession of streams of men going from one voting place to another." However, the next day a less-enthusiastic reporter noted that "nobody would have known it was election day of any kind in Omaha. It was hard for the clerks in the precincts to keep awake...[and] absolute indifference" was the rule.²⁰

South Omahans were naturally aroused. The *Omaha Daily News* in 1915 called the election "one of the hottest fights ever in South Omaha." It said the corporations wanted annexation, as did the big packers, who took an unusual interest in the outcome. Packinghouse laborers, conversely, usually opposed what the packers wanted.

As election day neared, the Omaha corporations and packinghouse firms vowed that their employees would vote in the affirmative. The secret, publicly printed Australian ballot was not then used. Ballots were printed prior to the election by both pro- and anti-annexation factions and were circulated widely among voters. Employers saw to it that workers got pro-merger ballots, a subtle form of intimidation some voters thought.

City Treasurer Tom Hocter and City Clerk John J. Flynn, did their own electioneering on election eve. They visited with packinghouse employees at their homes, supplying them with anti-annexation ballots to be cast at the polls. The plan worked too well. Following the election 300 employees known to have voted "wrong" were fired from the packing plants. Some of those fired retold the story with pride years later.²¹

The Hocter-Flynn nocturnal visits paid off for South Omaha, where the merger was defeated by a majority of 98 votes. The proposition was defeated 825 to 727 after both Omaha and South Omaha ballots had been counted.²² A historian of the period observed that following the election there evolved "an attitude of disquietude," indicating the election didn't settle much.²³ The victors were apprehensive that they had won only a battle, not the war. However, the *World-Herald* changed its advocacy of annexation to a passive approach. Added support for South Omaha came in 1894 from William Jennings Bryan, who became a friend of Tom Hocter.

The election didn't end agitation for annexation. From several different sources South Omaha sovereignty soon came under renewed attack. On February 3, 1893, the Nebraska

Supreme Court nullified former Governor Thayer's proclamation awarding South Omaha first class status, it being common knowledge that South Omaha had been "a few hundred short" of having the required population to do business legally.²⁴

By 1894 local citizens, aware that the court had called into question the city's taxing powers, were less than punctual in paying taxes. One group of "tax protesters" objected to the city council about the \$2.00 a year property tax. They were not satisfied with explanations and obtained a lawyer. He appealed the case to the Nebraska Supreme Court, which at length decided in favor of South Omaha, thus reaffirming its taxing powers. There were those who believed that the tax protest was but a ruse by Omaha leaders to stir up discontent. Tom Hocter, now treasurer, assured those who believed that taxes would be less after merger, that the opposite would prove true. He noted that South Omaha levied 27 mills tax, while Omahans paid 42.²⁵

In 1895 a threat to South Omaha came from the Nebraska Legislature. Senator John C. Watson of Nebraska City introduced a bill which at first reading attracted little attention from South Omahans. In essence the bill was designed to repeal sections 1 and 2 of the General Laws of 1889, thus voiding legislation that had allowed South Omaha to attain first class status. The city treasurer quickly labeled this bill "a plot to bankrupt South Omaha."²⁶

A special city council meeting was called to discuss counter measures:

The meeting was small. . . .but the very best citizens were present, such as Melcher, McMilan, Morgan, Cressey, Meyers, Watkins, Jetter, Scott, [Thomas J.] O'Neill, Bell, Hocter, Lane, [Frank] Koutsky, Smith, Ryan, Wilcox, Pritchard, and others. . . .Hocter spoke at length on the subject. He had noticed from the time doubts were raised as to the municipal standing of the city, until the supreme court decision last November, taxpayers in general will not pay their taxes. . . .Since the decision was rendered, \$47,000 in these back taxes (of \$60,000 owed) had been collected. This would indicate that the taxpayers would act, were the Watson bill to become law, for they would not pay a cent. Bank confidence would be utterly destroyed in the city, and not a dollar could be raised from any source with which to meet expenses. In his opinion, it was absolutely necessary to stop the passage of the bill.²⁷

A delegation led by Mayor Ed Johnson and Treasurer Tom Hocter was appointed to lobby against the Watson bill. A rumor that the mayor was really working for the annexa-

tionists was denied by Hoctor, who was mentioned in news stories "as the most interested man in Douglas County in amending or killing the bill." And the credit for persuading Representative A. L. Sutton of South Omaha to introduce legislation amending the bill was attributed solely to the "canvassing powers of Tom Hoctor."²⁸

The South Omaha press seemed confident that Hoctor's men would triumph: "Unless the men sent to Lincoln today fail to do their duty, the Watson bill will either be a dead or roasted herring, or amended so as to allow South Omaha to enjoy her municipal rights. . . . There need be no alarm over the possibility of failure, there is not a man in the delegation but who is heart and soul against annexation." The men would not allow a "shadow of an excuse for Rosewater and his victims to continue the agitation," the article concluded.²⁹ Many South Omahans felt that Republican Edward Rosewater was behind the bill, since his *Omaha Bee* was used as a sounding board for annexation rhetoric.

In the Nebraska Legislature Representative Sutton pushed through an amendment suggested by the South Omaha delegation to allow a census, which would establish population totals. Local citizens breathed a collective sigh of relief: "A feeling of uncertainty was always entertained by South Omaha's delegation that the amendment might be considered class legislation, [and] therefore a standing danger to municipal independence."³⁰

This victory in South Omaha's struggle for independence was looked upon by Rosewater of the *Bee* with disdain:

Who will pay for the proposed census of South Omaha and what will it profit the property owners when made? The city is now groaning under a burden of debt and the January salaries have not yet been paid. There is not money enough to meet the running expenses of the city. Why take a census for the sake of gratifying a few local politicians whose party fealty is born of a desire for office.³¹

Following South Omaha success in amending the Watson bill, sentiment for outright annexation escalated. The two Omahas fought a protracted legal battle over a tract of land where neither municipality had jurisdiction until 1897, when the Nebraska Supreme Court decided in South Omaha's favor.³²

By 1900 creation of a greater Omaha was again in the minds of Omaha business and political leaders. In the summer of

1902 members of the Omaha Real Estate Exchange, the Omaha Commercial Club, and city officials framed a committee to look into possible ways to accomplish their goal. In January of 1903, a scheme for the consolidation of Douglas, Saunders, Sarpy, and Washington Counties was advanced. On January 15 the *World-Herald* reported the reaction of the South Omaha City Council, summarized by Thomas J. O'Neill, who asserted that "he would positively waste no time with any plan which contemplated at any time, or would bring about in any way, conditions which would finally annex the Magic City to Omaha."

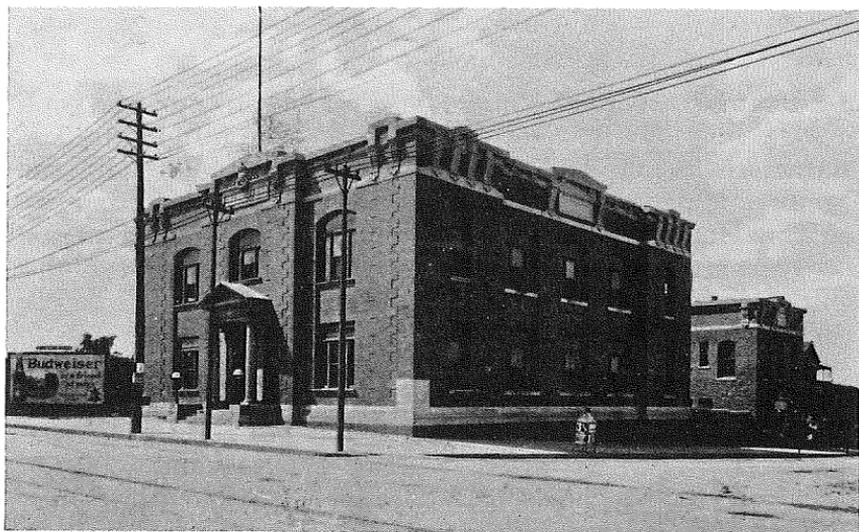
A committee chosen by the council urged in the *World-Herald* on January 18 that the citizens and taxpayers of the city at once take the necessary steps to complete an organization for the purpose of defeating all such "unholy schemes and plots as the ones outlined in the press and that every local citizen of our municipality be invited to take part, and use his influence and purse if necessary to defeat the consolidation-annexation-amalgamation scheme."³³

While South Omaha was growing and maturing, so were the political horizons of the city's biggest booster, Tom Hctor. Because Tom seemed to exert extraordinary political and social influence in South Omaha, it is appropriate to inquire into his background and select statements pertaining to him in the contemporary press. Tom Hctor had the support of the strong Irish and German minorities in South Omaha. His father was Irish, and his wife, Pauline Paulsen, of Danish extraction, was born in Germany. Hctor received support from other minorities, including blacks. Although Hctor was a Democrat, South Omaha Republicans often supported him, especially when he was working to retain the city's independent status.

The South Omaha *Nebraska Daily Democrat* said this of Hctor in 1894:

[Thomas Hctor is] one of the most competent and accommodating public officials that South Omaha ever had. His friends are not confined to one party. . . . His honesty as an official has never been questioned. . . . [He is] of a genial disposition, kind hearted and generous; he is one of the most popular men in the city. He speaks and writes German and has a Bohemian clerk, so that he is enabled to attend to the work of all nationalities.³⁴

In later years the convivial Hctor's popularity fell among those groups that came to accept the "dry" prohibition stand



South Omaha city hall and police station. Courtesy of D. J. Randolph. . . . (Below) Cartoonist Guy R. Spencer in the July 25, 1909, Omaha World-Herald sketched this representation of Omaha trying to entice South Omaha, Benson, Florence, and Dundee to accept annexation.



of Edward Rosewater's *Omaha Bee*, but he still enjoyed a good press. Perennially in office and possessing the rotund physical characteristics of the cartoonists' typical politician, the Democratic press seemed never at a loss for words in describing Tom Hocter. A short article in the *World-Herald* written a few years after annexation observed that Hocter had begun his political career by "throwing his hat into the ring" before reaching legal age.³⁵

At the age of 26, on October 27, 1892, Hocter and Frank Boyd, brother of Governor James E. Boyd, served as co-grand marshals of South Omaha's delegation marching in an Omaha parade. The festivities celebrated Grover Cleveland's election to the presidency. Thousands watched and hundreds marched with such notables as William Jennings Bryan, J. Sterling Morton, George L. Miller, and Governor James E. Boyd. Prominent Democrats then went to the Paxton Hotel for dinner and grandiloquent speech making. It was at events like these that young Tom Hocter gained the friendship of such men as William Jennings Bryan.³⁶

An Omaha reporter said of Hocter: "It is no use trying to get around the fact, you can't beat Tom at anything. . . .He is to the Democrats (South Omaha) what William Jennings Bryan is to the liberal Democrats of the state."³⁷ Another said, "Hocter never made a promise he could not keep, nor failed to keep those he made. . . .Every man who ever made Hocter's acquaintance feels the magnetism of his presence and the grasp of his hand is warm and genial, indicating the generous disposition of an honest man."³⁸ The *Daily Democrat* said: "There is probably no other office holder known to all classes. Every chick and child in South Omaha knows Tom Hocter." Hocter was called "the best single-handed campaigner that ever came down the pike."³⁹

When Hocter's name was found in print, it was not necessarily connected with politics. Often the newspapers included the human side of the news when Hocter was concerned. Anecdotes might pertain to Tom's day-to-day activities. Readers found articles about his love for dogs; the night his house was robbed and the dogs were all locked in the barn; and his other mundane activities—all seemingly of interest to South Omahans.

But there was criticism, too. He got most of it from the

Republican *Daily Bee*. An article entitled "Tom Wilman's Mistake" obviously referred to Hoctor. It presented the story of a young farm lad seduced by drink who became "a ward politician." Tom, the article said, found "his friends among saloon men and saloon frequenters. . . with bleared eyes and bloated face."⁴⁰ The reformer in the redoubtable Edward Rosewater scorned those who found recreation in gambling-drinking houses and enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh. Hoctor felt that saloons and places for men to gamble should be allowed to exist and that the income they generated used to support local charities. South Omaha had a "donation fund" collected from such establishments and used by "associated charities."⁴¹

When local sentiment in South Omaha eventually took a puritanical turn and the majority wanted a "lid" clamped on, Hoctor got the council to close all businesses on Sunday. If it was wrong to drink or gamble on Sunday, it was just as wrong to get a haircut or buy a suit.⁴² Because of his conviviality and no doubt his Irish Catholicism, Hoctor lost some political support during the reformist Populist period. The Democratic South Omaha press commented on it in apocryphal conversation it said had taken place between Rosewater and Hoctor:

[Rosewater] "You're a good fellow Tom, but it won't do to have a Catholic on the ticket this fall. . . ."

[Hoctor] "I thought you were against religious proscription? . . ."

"Colonel Hoctor vowed that he'd be blankety-blanked if he'd let any renegade Republican tell him how to run his affairs."⁴³

Some Hoctor critics wondered how an Irishman could do anything other than follow his "Catholic Highness [pope]" and even brought up the Molly Maguires, an Irish organization which promoted labor violence 20 years previously in Pennsylvania.⁴⁴

Among Hoctor's most notable achievements were those performed during his two terms as a Douglas County commissioner, the first beginning in 1895. Hoctor served on the committees for charity, taxation, and bridges and roads. Showing technical acumen in a paper read before the board, Hoctor argued for a uniform system of road building, evaluated various grades of cement for paving, and argued strongly against allowing the poll (head) tax to be worked out instead of paid. These were the days when a man might repair a section

of road to pay his tax. Hocter called this haphazard system a "great inadequacy." The achievement of optimal street drainage was another crusade. He urged wide-tired wheels for horse-drawn vehicles to prevent deterioration of roads. One of the most lasting of Hocter's recommendations concerned the numbering and lettering of county roads. Those traversing Douglas County today use his system.⁴⁵

Joining other leading citizens of South Omaha, Hocter used his political and personal magnetism to promote a site near South Omaha for the projected Trans-Mississippi Exposition. As a member of the Douglas County Commission, he sponsored a resolution that resulted in streamlining a road from 13th Street to Fort Crook (South Omaha city limits to what is now Offutt Air Force Base). It was hoped that the Riverview Park area would be improved thereby. (It is now the site of Henry Doorly Zoo.) The site, however, did not attract exposition officials to South Omaha.⁴⁶ When Omaha secured the exposition instead, South Omaha tried to secure positions on the board of directors. In a characteristic display of chauvinism the *South Omaha Tribune* predicted:

The next turn of the kaleidoscope will reveal to the admiring stare the voluptuous form of Thomas Hocter holding down a seat at the festive and heavily vianded round table at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition directory.⁴⁷

Although not chosen one of the original 50 directors of the exposition Hocter replaced John A. Wakefield who resigned. His assigned duties included the department of promotion and operation of two concessions on the midway: The "Afro-American village," which had its name changed to the "Old Virginia Plantation," and "Trained and Fancy Dogs," on the west midway. With the advent of the Greater-American International Exposition in 1898, Hocter was elected to the board of directors.⁴⁸

During the decade between 1895 and 1905 Hocter tasted defeat at the polls for the first time in a bid for Douglas County sheriff. He lost to incumbent John McDonald by three votes. He was successful in the race for Douglas County deputy auditor, serving one two-year term. In the mayoral race of 1904, Hocter lost narrowly to Republican Frank Koutsky, 2,084 votes to 2,068.

It was during Mayor Koutsky's administration that the next battle between the two Omahas was fought. In this, especial-

ly in later rounds, Omaha turned from courting local opinion to work for legislative initiative to gain annexation. One such measure introduced in the Nebraska Legislature in 1905 provided for the annexation of the city of South Omaha to the city of Omaha.

South Omahans of all political persuasions banded together immediately to fight the bill. Popular sentiment was such that a local reporter observed, "It would take a fine-tooth comb to rake up any person favoring annexation."⁴⁹ Members of the South Omaha Commercial Club organized a special train to carry protesters to demonstrate before the Legislature in Lincoln. At 8:30 a.m. March 5 a delegation estimated at nearly 500 marched to the Burlington Station on L street. Each participant in the three-block-long parade wore a badge with the inscription "South Omaha opposing annexation bill."⁵⁰

After arrival in Lincoln, 400 to 500 protesters marched the mile from the station through the business district to the State Capitol. Leaders were permitted into the legislative chambers to present their grievances, including a petition containing the signatures of 3,000 persons opposing annexation. Legislators were impressed, especially Douglas County Representative Michael (Mike) Lee, who had been pro-annexation. Lee agreed to drop a bill he had introduced, his decision being affected, it was said, by the manner in which South Omahans "took charge."⁵¹ While Lee's bill permitted a referendum in the affected areas, other bills were not so generous. Senator L. C. Gibson introduced several bills aimed toward annexation by ordinance.⁵² He too found that legislative support evaporated after the demonstration.

In the minds of South Omahans the real instigator of the bills was the editor of the *Daily Bee*:

The fact is Editor Rosewater is the father of the notion. . . . The Lee bill was conceived in a desire to get more and surer control of all political interests. . . . He might then entrench his political position, make solid his prestige and work his way into the United States Senate or something of that kind. But what would South Omaha get of it? Nothing but humiliation, depreciated values, and commiseration, generally. It is a bad scene hatched by a bad political ring, and perpetrated entirely with a view of changing the political machinery [so] as to enable the Omaha machine to get full control.⁵³

These words of W. J. McCrann, president of the South Omaha

Commercial Club, were printed in the *World-Herald*.

In April, 1906, Tom Hoctor was elected mayor of South Omaha by defeating Republican W. P. Adkins 2,335 votes to 1,735. James Dahlman, Omaha's cowboy mayor, was successful in the same election in Omaha.

As South Omaha continued to grow with the packing industry, Omaha renewed its battle for annexation. In the 1907 session of the state Legislature, the issue was brought up again by members of the "Douglas delegation."⁵⁴ Annexation was again proposed by Representative Michael Lee through referendum. Representative A. R. Harvey and Senator B. F. Thomas' bills were unabashed attempts at annexation by ordinance.

The *World-Herald* said the Thomas bill was the brain child of Omaha city councilman Harry B. Zimmen and long-time South Omaha opponent John Paul Breen. "Breen has been dreaming that he is going to get us somehow, or rather he thinks he is. . . . He really seems to be getting desperate in his efforts," the paper quoted a South Omahan. The progress in the Legislature of the "John Paul Breen force bill" and "Breenized annexation" was followed closely by its opponents, and it was noted that "the composer of the burlesque commonly billed as annexation by legislative enactment, isn't very popular in this city."⁵⁵

Mike Lee's legislation was but slightly more palatable to South Omahans. It called for a merger when two-thirds of the citizens in the affected area voted in the affirmative, after 10 percent of the population in both cities had appealed to the Board of Douglas County Commissioners for an election.⁵⁶ The bill was not seen as a serious threat because South Omahans were predominantly opposed to annexation. But well-informed citizens of South Omaha were always mindful that bills could be amended at the last minute. There was fear that Lee's bill might be amended so as to allow a "plot to combine the votes" in the affected areas.⁵⁷

The annexation issue generally split along geographical rather than party lines in late 1906 and early 1907. Always beating the drum for annexation were the *Bee* and members of the Omaha Commercial Club. They stated their case repeatedly in the *Bee*: Annexation would bring improved police and fire protection, lower taxes, higher property value,

and less political corruption—the latter a dig at Hoctor forces.⁵⁸ To this the *World-Herald* noted that these same arguments had been used to seduce the “forlorn Sheelytown.” How much of the *World-Herald* opposition flowed from its belief that annexation was not particularly important and how much from its fierce opposition to most *Bee* crusades is not known. If Omaha wished to unite the outlying communities for everyone’s benefit, the *World-Herald* inquired, why had not the “little village of Clontarf” been annexed first since it lay between the two Omahas?⁵⁹

After an anti-annexation demonstration took place in the auditorium of South High School, the *Bee* wrote disparagingly about “dignified teachers [who] hoisted themselves upon radiators and smiled, and made eyes at politicians.”⁶⁰ The *World-Herald* was quick to reply:

When it becomes necessary to attack the characters of as noble a crowd of young ladies as ever graced the educational world . . . you could take all the manhood possessed by a correspondent who would be guilty of such a dirty and scurrilous attack and the publisher who would countenance it, and jam it into a hummingbird’s bill, and shoot it into a red ant’s eye and the ant wouldn’t wink. Somebody ought to get a powerful microscope and hunt the microbe up that wrote the disgraceful stuff and poison him with a speck of insect powder.⁶¹

The *World-Herald* noted that “nine tenths of the [South Omaha] city voters look upon annexation as something akin to pestilence.” One former member of the *World-Herald* staff, Ed Mayfield, then editor of the *St. Louis Union*, wrote his ex-colleagues, “I noticed that most of the little squirt guns who are rushing into print and favoring annexation for South Omaha, are men I never heard of. The talk they put up sounds like it came from carpet-baggers. Watch the annexation bills; they are loaded.”⁶²

When the *Omaha Bee* charged that it was but a “gang of politicians” who were fighting annexation in South Omaha,⁶³ the *World-Herald* responded:

It has been alleged by the annexationists in the city (Omaha) that the only ones who are fighting annexation are office seekers. It must be said in all fairness that the vast majority of those who are the . . . bitterest workers against the question never held office in the city and never intend to. They are men who have no taste for politics and for holding any elective or appointive office.”⁶⁴

Merchant John Flynn used the World-Herald to air his views on annexation, as did others in South Omaha:

There is so much said of annexation that is not born of truth, through newspapers that are unfair because they will not allow a free discussion of both sides. . . . It is easy for the man without any interest or perhaps a fading claim in the city to shout himself hoarse for the change. But the one whose all is here and is satisfied with present results, be he the limb of a big corporation or the owner of a small one, may wisely think twice before he favors annexation.⁶⁵

However cathartic public expressions of this kind might be, South Omahans knew that their salvation could only be found in the Legislature. Mayor Hoctor journeyed to Lincoln to invite Governor George L. Sheldon and the Legislature to attend dedication ceremonies for the nearly completed City Hall at 24th and "O" streets.⁶⁶ On Saturday, February 23, 1907, thousands of South Omahans crowded around the new edifice to listen to a string of speakers. As a huge block and tackle hoisted the cornerstone into place, Mayor Hoctor spoke with emotion:

I need hardly say that this occasion appeals to me personally with peculiar force. From boyhood my life has been spent here. This city has been the scene of my success and failures, and I have contributed my time, energy and means to assist in the transformation of our clay hills in this proud city.

It is the culmination of our long efforts to secure a home for our city affairs worthy of their importance, and with deepest emotion I lay the cornerstone of this, the City Hall of the City of South Omaha. I dedicate this structure to the future greatness and prosperity of our city and the happiness of our citizens.

In ages to come, when South Omaha is only the ruins of an ancient city, the generation that will find the little sealed stone will wonder at its contents, they will marvel at the history of a city with such wonderful growth in twenty years. The little metallic box that is sealed within the cornerstone contains a brief history of the city, the last monthly reports of the officials of the city, the city ordinances, and the rules of the council and the fire and police board are also enclosed, surrounded by copies of the daily papers and a half-tone engraving of Mayor Hoctor.⁶⁷

That evening 200 guests of the South Omaha Commercial Club assembled at the Greer Hotel for the largest banquet ever held in the city. State Representatives J. Benson Walsh and H.

R. Henry, and Senators W. R. Patrick and L. C. Gibson had accepted the invitation. Toastmaster A. M. Gallagher's speakers, proud of their new building, were apprehensive about the future of their city. The titles of their speeches reflect it: "Wrongs of Forcible Annexation," by John M. Tanner, publisher of the *South Omaha Democrat*; "Independent Citizenry," by Robert Wheeler; "What Makes a City," by J. B. Watkins; and "Are You with Me in Lincoln?" by Mayor Hocr, which included this statement: "By going to Lincoln with me in a great body on Wednesday next, you will assist in killing the bill that is threatening to annihilate you as a city."⁶⁸

In a communication of February, 1907, to the Nebraska Legislature, the South Omaha Commercial Club wrote:

We wish to protest against any bill providing for annexation of South Omaha to any other city or municipality without the free expression of our citizens by a majority vote. To force annexation otherwise we contend, would be unfair to a deserving people for the following reasons. South Omaha has an unequalled record. . . We have fourteen public schools that will compare with any in the west. The total cost in South Omaha exceeds \$62,000 in all for the mental, moral, and social education of our Americans. Upon which the future depends for South Omaha.

We have twenty-one churches looking after the moral and religious side of our community. The first of the year was thrown open the door of a new hospital for the relief of the afflicted to a cost of about \$20,000. South Omaha gives employment to between eighteen and twenty thousand, we have under construction a nearly completed new \$70,000 City Hall. We have miles of paved streets. We have just started a \$250,000 sewer system and have placed bonds for \$40,000. Water and gas mains have been extended miles in every direction. The past eighteen months we have an interurban entering our city and another line in an advanced stage of construction. The building permits issued in 1906 represented \$650,000. Considering the above we ask that the citizens decide annexation by a majority vote of our own people.⁶⁹

On February 27, 1907, South Omahans gathered at the City Hall to move by excursion train to Lincoln to protest forcible annexation. Upon Mayor Hocr's arrival a procession marched to the Burlington Railroad viaduct on the west end of 13th street, with Franek's band and quartet leading. Dr. W. J. McCrann, president of the South Omaha Commercial Club, carried a four-foot representation of President Roosevelt's "big stick," decorated with streamers of the national colors. Funeral director Morgan Heaffy offered bouquets to women in the procession.

Mayor Hoctor visited owners of the packing houses, asking them to close so that their employees could go to Lincoln⁷⁰ and declared February 27, 1907, a city holiday. Schools were closed in order that children might accompany their parents to Lincoln. Saloons remained closed until 8 p.m. Placards proclaiming "Gone to Lincoln to Kill Annexation" were displayed on prominent businesses on 24th street. . . . Very little business was transacted,"⁷¹ a reporter observed.

Estimates of the number of South Omahans who traveled to Lincoln varied with newspaper reports--from 1, 000 to 2,000. The most probable guess is 1,200 to 1,400.⁷² The Burlington train that carried citizens from South Omaha numbered 12 coaches, one added at the last minute to accommodate the larger-than-expected crowd. Still some 200 could not find room. Passengers paid \$1.00 for a round-trip ticket.

Upon arrival in Lincoln the multitude fell in behind Commercial Club President W. J. McCrann's Square Deal Club in a loose confederation and marched to the Capitol. The *Citizen* reported:

It was one of the most enthusiastic crowds ever seen in Lincoln which disembarked from twelve coaches at the Burlington station. . . and began wending its way through the streets, marching behind Franek's band of South Omaha. Every man wore a red badge and every woman a white one, containing the words "South Omaha Protests Against Forcible Annexation."

The parade stretched out a distance of about four or five blocks on its way to the capitol. At its head marched several men bearing a "big stick," somewhat larger than life size and arrayed in the national colors. Two large square banners flaunted these tidings to everyone along the route: "We Are Not Politicians"; "South Omaha, Our Home, Our City"; "Leave Well Enough Alone"; "Kill the Force Bills"; "Square Deal for South Omaha"; "Commercial Club Booster"; "Who Needs Annexation".⁷³

The "Song of South Omaha" put to the air of "My Maryland" with words by an unknown South Omaha poet, evoked patriotic fervor as marchers sang. Four stanzas long, the final lines were:

Go read the story of thy past,
 South Omaha, South Omaha,
 What glorious deeds, what fame thou hast,
 South Omaha, South Omaha,
 So long as time's great cycle runs,
 Or nations weep the fallen ones,
 Thou'lt not forget thy patriot sons,
 South Omaha, South Omaha.⁷⁴

Reaction to what the *Lincoln Evening News* characterized as “an all-conquering host” and what the *Lincoln Star* described as “Lincoln laid seige,”⁷⁵ resulted in a 40-line ditty by a *Lincoln Star* reporter, also sung to “My Maryland.” It had an irreverent theme and ended somberly:

Now how about your purpling skies,
 Omaha, South Omaha,
 And “tasseled corn fields?” put me wise,
 Omaha, South Omaha,
 And what of rivers running red,
 What of hogs and cattle bled,
 And odors as of something dead,
 Omaha, South Omaha.
 If your big sister on the East,
 Omaha, South Omaha,
 Would now absorb you, man and beast,
 Omaha, South Omaha,
 I wouldn't think of standing out,
 You do not know what you're about,
 She'll get the worst of it no doubt,
 Omaha, South Omaha.⁷⁶

Inside the Capitol, South Omaha's delegation made again its pleas to stop annexation. Mayor Hoctor, W. J. McCrann, and T. J. O'Neill spoke before the Senate and House committees on cities and towns.⁷⁷ This time Mike Lee was not badgered. His “benign” proposal seemed no threat.⁷⁸

Some pages were wearing anti-annexation badges. Not a few legislators expressed their sympathy for the South Omaha petition. Representative H. R. Henry of O'Neill commented, “I believe in fair play. Forcible annexation has always been obnoxious to me.” Senator W. R. Patrick of Papillion agreed: “Any movement that contemplates the taking away of our municipality and placing it under the guardianship of another whose local government is no better, should not enjoy respectful consideration.”⁷⁹ The Douglas County delegates were not so easily dissuaded. They made no effort to recede from their positions and declared that they would fight to the last for annexation.⁸⁰

However, the public display again was enough to change many legislators' minds, and annexation died without a struggle in the House, March 8, 1907. South Omahans breathed a collective sigh as they had two years previously.⁸¹ As the issue

of annexation abated, so did the political fortunes of Hoctor. He lost the mayoral election in 1908 to Republican Frank Koutsky, 2,192 votes to 2,112. He refused to contest the election as his supporters wished and returned to his real estate business. In 1912 Hoctor ran again and defeated Republican August Miller and Socialist W. W. Lutmen. He was exuberant but recognized that difficult years were ahead for South Omaha. In his first address to the city council after his election Hoctor said:

In taking up the duties I relinquished some years ago with a sense of relief, I feel keenly both the honor and the responsibility conferred upon me. . . . The decision of the District Court with reference to charter amendments places us in a rather embarrassing position—and I respectfully suggest you call upon the legal department of the city immediately for a definite opinion as to whether or not the original 12 sections contained in Senate File No. 93 were purposely enacted into law as special legislation.”⁸²

Hoctor was voicing concern about legislation South Omaha State Senator John Tanner had failed to have repealed in 1911. While the bill did not expressly deal with annexation, it was a warning to many South Omahans.

Omaha's next move in extending hegemony over South Omaha was accomplished in the 1913 session of the Legislature (House Roll No. 137). The bill, thought to be the work of John Paul Breen, allowed a charter amendment to be passed by the Omaha City Council stipulating that municipalities receiving utilities from Omaha could be annexed by Omaha. Breen had also helped Republican Samuel Hoff of Douglas County compose his House Roll No. 348, which would have allowed annexation on January 1, 1916, with no consenting vote required.⁸³

During Hoctor's administration election results were contested by former Mayor P. T. Trainor and City Clerk Perry Wheeler, resulting in the State Supreme Court order for a special election for a three-year term. Hoctor won reelection over Frank Koutsky and other candidates, giving him his third incumbency. The vote tally was Hoctor 2,106, Koutsky 1,821, Socialist 31, Progressive 35. During Hoctor's third administration the *Omaha Daily Bee* stepped up its annexation campaign. Now its main argument for annexation was that it would destroy the “political machine and give the citizens all

the benefits that Omahans enjoyed." State Senator N. P. Dodge of Dundee introduced legislation to curb the "political machines" in both Omahas,⁸⁴ a signal that purity may have been lacking in both municipalities. The constant exacerbation of the issues in the *Bee* began to take a toll in South Omaha, where confidence in leadership eroded.

It may be asked: What was the motivation of Edward Rosewater in his power offensive to annex South Omaha? Although the relationship is not yet clear, it is apparent that Rosewater and Omaha Mayor James Dahlman were political cronies. Omaha City Boss Tom Dennison and Rosewater were also allies:

Dennison's training in the organization and techniques of political power came from Edward Rosewater. Rosewater was the editor of the then influential *Omaha Bee* newspaper, and Dennison has been referred to as "the creature of the *Bee*" and of Edward Rosewater. Recognizing in Dennison a man of potential, Rosewater selected him as a political protege, took [him] in hand and educated him in city politics and the organization of votes, it is said. Credence to the connection is provided by the *Bee's* competitors, the *Daily News* and the *World-Herald*, warning readers in the early 1900s about the Rosewater-Dennison machine.⁸⁵

Rosewater's motivations for pushing annexation were probably to further his own political interests, and the interests of those he controlled.

It was during Hocter's third incumbency (1913-1915) that the annexation forces were able to secure legislation guaranteeing fusion. Even the most ardent supporter of the South Omaha municipality knew by 1913 that the two cities were moving inexorably into one community. The process had become one of cultural diffusion. In December, 1889, an electric trolley line between the two cities ran from 22nd and Ames avenue in Omaha to 24th and N street in South Omaha. Many packinghouse workers now lived in Omaha and experienced mixed allegiances.

So common became talk of merger that Mayor Hocter willingly formed a charter-revision committee to ascertain how the question could be decided fairly. In the 1913 Legislature more bills were introduced by Douglas County men to facilitate annexation. Representative James A. Davis introduced a bill which received wide attention among South Omahans. Hocter's charter-committee favored the Davis bill,

which called for a merger election only after 10 percent of the voters in both cities had separately petitioned for one. In the election 25 percent of the voters in each area were required to vote in the affirmative. The *Bee* rejected this proposal.⁸⁶ John Paul Breen called the Davis bill "foolish," explaining:

It's like telling a man to run around a house twenty times before he can come in, and when he gets to the door on the twentieth lap, a man is waiting with a club; then he is started off on twenty more laps, and the next time he stops there are two men waiting.⁸⁷

Another old hand at annexation legislation, Mike Lee of Douglas County—that "shrewd and grizzled Hibernian"—introduced yet another bill, which eventually died in the "sifting file." No plan found sufficient support by legislators who rejected forcible annexation.⁸⁸

When the Legislature convened in 1915, the Douglas County delegation renewed its assault on the "peculiar condition" of South Omaha. The sentiment of those straining for annexation was best summarized by disgruntled Progressive Jerry Howard: "It's either annexation, or it's me for mayor."⁸⁹

Senator E. E. Howell of Douglas County sponsored a bill reputed to be the "brain child" of John Paul Breen, who commented that except for Representative John C. Barrett of South Omaha and Senator N. P. Dodge of Benson, the measure enjoyed wide support.⁹⁰ The Howell "Greater-Omaha" bill, as it was called, had originally included for annexation to Omaha: South Omaha, Dundee, Benson, and Florence. In the process of amending the bill, legislative debate and resulting newspaper editorializing over "forcible annexing" brought continued squabbling over the method of annexation. Senators W. C. Parriott and Frank M. Broome sponsored an amendment requiring only a majority vote in the affected areas, thus ensuring swift annexation. Parriott contended that the measure would cause "home rule" to be put in effect—"home" apparently meaning *Omaha* to Parriott.⁹¹ This maneuver stirred Representative Barrett to renewed opposition.

Senator Howell himself recognized the chicanery that was taking place, calling the Parriott-Broome amendment "a dishonest move," and warned of "intrigues galore" in the Legislature.⁹² Senators and representatives were assured that

once the Senate bill by the Douglas County delegation was passed, the House version of the bill would give office seekers in the affected areas a one-year breathing period to adjust. Elections would be held in 1916, and the annexation vote postponed one year. The South Omaha city council and Mayor Hctor were taken in by this ploy. After it became apparent the House bill would not be so amended, they complained to the Legislature and the governor.

Within days after the Parriott-Broome Act passed, South Omaha officials began to realize that political realignments were taking place. On May 1, 1915, *Democrat* Editor John M. Tanner, long-time South Omaha booster, resigned from the park board to work for Mayor Jim Dahlman in the upcoming mayoral election. Dahlman, who had once failed in his bid for governor, commented upon Tanner's decision: "It means the disintegration of the anti-annexationists." Tanner realized that with annexation Dahlman would award all printing contracts.⁹³ On June 6, 1915, after South Omaha had been officially annexed, Tanner was recommended by Senator Howell to head the engrossing and enrolling room at the Legislature.⁹⁴ Tanner, it should be noted, used his *South Omaha Democrat* to fight annexation for many years, even when he knew the battle would be lost.

The final wording of the Howell Greater Omaha bill provided for a "vote in the affected areas in not less than thirty or more than sixty days." The act, carrying the emergency clause requiring the governor's signature to become law, stipulated that the "combined and total vote" would determine whether or not annexation would occur.⁹⁵ The *Omaha World-Herald* lamented the passage of the Parriott amendment:

As much as the *World-Herald* desires a Greater Omaha and greatly as it deplores the unwise and unfounded opposition, it cannot consent to the doctrine that the end justifies the means. It cannot protest against imperialism abroad, against . . . the denial of the rights of local self-government abroad, and then advocate those very same evils be imposed upon several thousands of good Nebraskans.⁹⁶

Citizens of South Omaha were disheartened by the turn of events, though the defeat was not unexpected, the *Bee* said:

News of the amendment providing for a vote as a unit, and not in separate municipalities, was received in South Omaha yesterday evening with mixed feelings. The anti's were displeased because it ensures passage of the amend-

ment. . . . The anti's in South Omaha were plainly disheartened. . . . The Parriott compromise providing for the vote in the whole territory counted as a unit, was fought by them up to the last minute.⁹⁷

The *Bee's* hints about Mayor Hocr's feelings toward the Parriott amendments were answered in his letter to the paper:

In view of the fact that there have been intimations in your paper recently to the effect that I might not be really displeased if Senate File No. 2 was passed, permit me to reiterate my position with reference to annexation. I always have been and now am absolutely opposed to annexation without a majority vote of each municipality affected by the measure.⁹⁸

Legislators debating the bill in its final form made reference to objects raised by South Omaha officials and the *World-Herald*. After a heated debate in the Legislature and many attempts at killing or amending the bill, the Howell Greater Omaha Act with the Parriott amendment and emergency clause passed 55 to 44 (4 abstaining).⁹⁹ The narrow victory gives credence to the contention that without the promised amendments to the House version of the bill, it would have been defeated. The act was passed on March 30, 1915, and signed by Governor John H. Morehead the next day with a pen he presented to Gould Dietz, lobbyist for the Omaha Club.¹⁰⁰

The *World-Herald* commented on the presentation:

Governor Morehead quite properly presented to Gould Dietz, for preservation in the archives of the Omaha Commercial Club, the gold-pen with which he signed the Greater Omaha bill. . . . The referendum vote called for is a pure formality with its outcome assured in advance—a needless trouble and a needless expense imposed upon Omaha to salve the legislative conscience which was pricked by the "forcible" feature of the annexation measure. . . .

This newspaper would greatly have preferred to see it brought about with the consent of the governed and so, doubtless, would all Omaha. But Omaha tried it that way, several times, and it failed to work. The "to-be" governed refused their consent. Bold and audacious spirits, reasoning that the end justified the means and more interested in the results than in theories and principles of government, therefore resorted to a way that would work, and won the legislative and executive sanction for it.¹⁰¹

A clause in the Howell Greater Omaha Act had stipulated that outlying municipalities could be annexed if supplied by Omaha with water, gas, electricity, and street-car service. Benson and Florence were not so supplied and hence were not

immediately annexed. Florence officials, according to the April 26, 1915, *World-Herald*, announced their intent to have any vote taken under a combined vote scheme contested in court. Benson may have announced similar intentions.

Dundee continued its suit for separate status until February 14, 1917, when the Nebraska Supreme Court dismissed the case without comment.¹⁰² Faced with strong anti-annexation feeling in Benson and another lawsuit by Florence officials, Omaha may have decided to concentrate on one adversary, South Omaha.

It was apparent that both those favoring and opposing annexation recognized that the legislation was aimed at South Omaha, whose officials sought an injunction to halt the election. District Court Justice William A. Redick, long-time member of the Omaha Commercial Club and recent appointee of Governor Morehead (1915), held there was not basis for action.¹⁰³

The frustration of fighting an uphill battle against insurmountable odds was expressed in the South Omaha press and in casual conversations around the city. Former South Omaha mayor Frank Koutsky expressed his frustration to the *South Omaha Democrat* about his failure to stop the Howell Act:

We played a losing game. However, Henry Murphy and myself will always have the satisfaction of knowing that we did our best, and if anybody thinks it is a snap to lobby against a lot of millionaires with forty strings to their bow, they have another think coming.

Editor Tanner, admitting defeat, predicted: "The antis will make no effort to defeat annexation at the polls. It would be useless. Many of them will not even take the pains to vote, and the vote cast will not indicate the real sentiment of the local people."¹⁰⁴

In Omaha the voter turnout was not as heavy as had been expected,¹⁰⁵ despite attempts by the Omaha "political machine" and packing-house officials to ensure a good turnout. Employees were told as they left work that since "each voter had to sign his name when casting his ballot, it would be a simple matter to check up." In every block there were captains and privates working incessantly. Young women were hired to telephone citizens urging them to vote for annexation.¹⁰⁶

South Omaha Republicans, never too compatible with the Hocter Democrats, now expressed a wish for annexation:

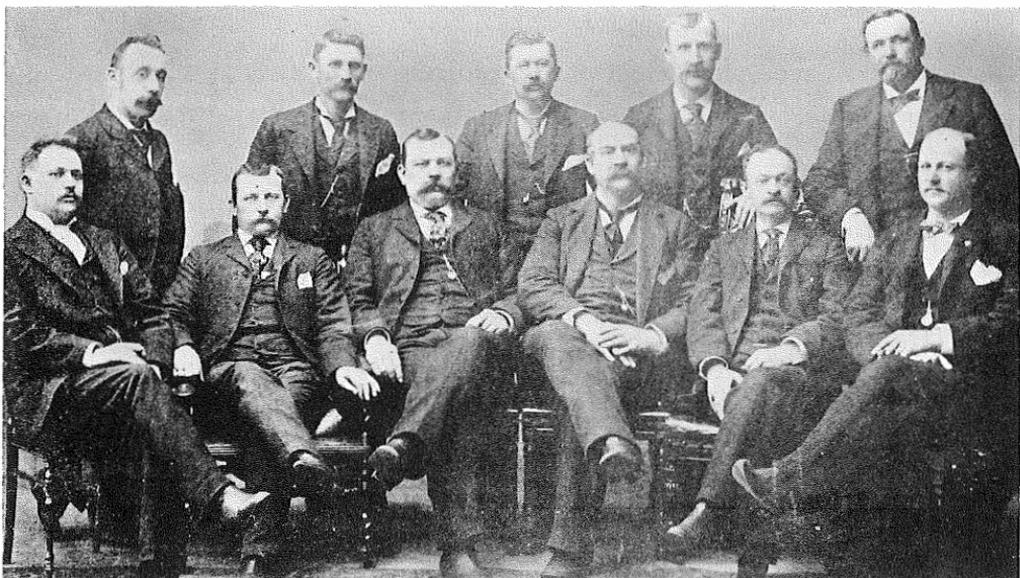
We will bring South Omaha up with a big margin—don't worry about that. When we are annexed, then the responsibility will rest with Omaha to see that our end of the city is given proper treatment, and we will have just one place to go to lodge our complaints if we aren't treated right—the Omaha Commercial Club.¹⁰⁷

Election Commissioner Harley G. Moorhead's announcement of results for all geographic areas showed 9,845 for and 1,585 against, a 7 to 1 ratio for annexation.¹⁰⁸ Dundee voted down the question 301 to 79, over 3 to 1, but South Omaha approved it 1,610 to 760. The voter turnout was unquestionably light in South Omaha considering the population figures for 1915 and estimating the number of registered voters.¹⁰⁹ The estimated population of Omaha was about 175,000, but the city directory gave the combined population of Greater Omaha at 215,000.¹¹⁰

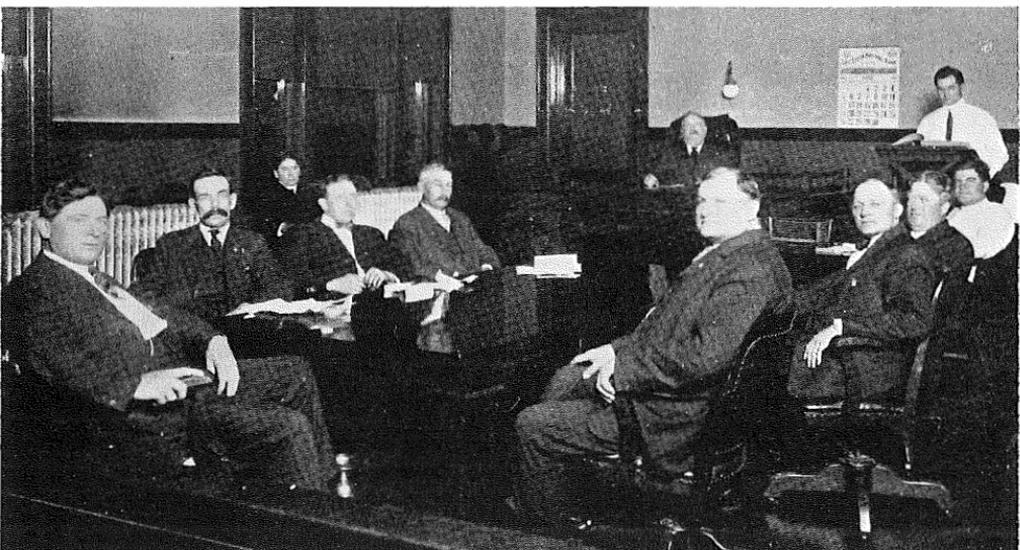
Most of South Omaha's officials were resigned to the idea of annexation, but Mayor Hocter "died hard." On election day he handed out statements from prominent Omahans who urged disapproval. The June 2, 1915, *Bee* doubted that the statements were genuine but presented no proof.

The *South Omaha Democrat*, now the *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, called the whole episode "the rankest piece of highway robbery and injustice ever perpetrated upon a civilized community." Yet the article was also conciliatory. In a piece headlined "You Win—Shake," Tanner said: "We are hooked forever. Let's make the best of it and join hands and forces with Omaha and give the very best that is in us. From now on the Democrat will shout for Greater Omaha."¹¹¹ Tanner had already changed loyalties to Mayor Dahlman at this juncture. Perhaps with the help of his newly found political ally and his friends, Rosewater and Dennison, it became a little easier to win reelection to the State Senate in 1917 after about six years out of office.¹¹²

The month of June, 1915, witnessed the continuing struggle by South Omaha and Dundee municipal leaders to retain local sovereignty. Douglas County legislators and the *Bee* were self-congratulatory, while Mayor Hocter and his legal department were busy preparing briefs that would show Senate File No. 2 to be unconstitutional.



South Omaha City Council, 1895: John F. Franek (front row, left), Jo Maley, Thomas Hocter, Jim Bulla, Ed Johnson, Jack Walters, Pat Hyland (back row, left), Jack Ryan, Henry Miles, William P. Mulally, and M. F. (Mel) Blanchard.



Last South Omaha City Council, 1915: Pat LaVelle (left), Henry Hartnett, Henry Murphy (in rear), Jack Cavanaugh, Tom Alton, Tom Hocter (seated at desk), Johnny Marcell (standing), Louie Cinek, Jay N. Williams, Johnnie Riha, and John Riches.

Upon receiving Election Commissioner Moorhead's notice that voters had approved the referendum, Governor Morehead issued a proclamation on June 10, 1915, declaring annexation official 10 days after receipt of his proclamation. South Omaha City Clerk Thomas Flynn received the proclamation that day and wrote at the bottom of the page, "Received 4:21 o'clock PM, Thomas Flynn, City Clerk." On June 17, 1915, the Omaha City Council empowered Mayor Dahlman and City Clerk William G. Ure to take possession of the city of South Omaha's records and funds.¹¹³

The South Omaha City Council, fully aware of events transpiring in the Omaha City Council, met to discuss the situation. John Cavanaugh (not related to former Congressman John Cavanaugh) addressed the council: "Mr. Hكتور, Senate File No. 2 is unconstitutional and void, and it is desirous to have the question of the constitutionality of said law presented to the Supreme Court." The last entry in the huge City Council proceeding noted that the council would recess until June 21, 1915, when city officers from Omaha were to be present to make formal demand for the city's records and funds.¹¹⁴

The stage was set for a confrontation. It turned out a polite one. At 8:30 on the morning of June 21, 1915, Mayor Dahlman along with the seven city commissioners, City Treasurer Ure, and City Attorney Rhine, arrived to "take over."¹¹⁵ In a friendly gibe at the Omaha guests, Mayor Hكتور remarked that at least he had had the "decency" to make sure the streets were clean. It was a matter of cleanliness and more. In the weeks following the election, Mayor Hكتور had been busy spending South Omaha funds before Omaha could claim the money. Streets were cleaned more than was customary, and 15 additional policemen were hired. Omaha city commissioner Butler had been quoted as saying that as far as he was concerned he was "strong for letting South Omaha go without street cleaning or anything else than what [wasn't] absolutely necessary."¹¹⁶ The humor of the remark perhaps helped ease an otherwise tense moment.

Mayor Dahlman announced: "I suppose you can guess why we are here. We have come to ask you to turn over your records and funds of the city as provided by the consolidation law." To this Hكتور responded that Mayor Dahlman would

have to secure a court order before he would do so, since the city attorney felt that the law was unconstitutional.¹¹⁷ Refused at the door, Mayor Dahlman and City Treasurer Ure proceeded to District Court on June 24, 1915, seeking a writ of mandamus. After several days of argument in court by attorneys for both cities, Justice William A. Redick granted the City of Omaha its writ ordering compliance. The judge, appointed to the bench by Governor Morehead, might have found a decision against a law signed by his benefactor embarrassing. The judge was also a member of the Omaha Commercial Club.

South Omaha City Clerk Perry Wheeler and City Treasurer Patrick J. Martin filed immediate notice of appeal, asked for a supersedeas bond and finally requested a new trial; all were denied by Judge Redick. Attorneys for Dundee listed 26 reasons why a new trial should be granted, all of which were denied without explanation. (See motion for a new trial, Doc. 138, No. 248.)

South Omaha attorneys Samuel L. Winters and Henry C. Murphy (Murphy had lobbied with Frank Koutsky, unsuccessfully against Senate File No. 2 in the Legislature) knew the mind-set of the court but did not appeal to the Nebraska Supreme Court, as had Dundee. After every option had been exhausted in District Court, Murphy declared: "This completes everything as far as opposition to the merger."¹¹⁸

The writ of mandamus issued June 29, 1915, was not answered by realistic South Omaha attorneys. On June 30, 1915, South Omaha officials, excluding Thomas Hoctor, surrendered the records and city funds to Omaha officials. A surprisingly large amount of money was in the treasury,—\$548,000. Greater Omaha could now afford to "take care" of South Omaha.

Dundee, it may be noted, "died at 8:30 AM," July 1, 1915, when its officials turned over city records and funds. After a protracted court battle their appeal to the Nebraska Supreme Court was dismissed on February 14, 1917, the officers of the former city of Dundee being ordered to pay court costs of \$6.20.¹¹⁹

When the legality of the Annexation Act was argued in court, the basic points emphasized by attorneys for both South Omaha and Dundee appear to have been dismissed out of

hand. The objections they raised were three, all in the field of "special legislation":

(1) It was contended that both South Omaha and Dundee had been the objects of "special legislation." Senate File No. 2, South Omaha lawyers contended, was in direct violation of Article 3, Section 15, of the Nebraska Constitution, which prohibited local legislation, thus denying equal protection under the law.

(2) The post of Douglas County election commissioner was charged to have been specifically created for Douglas County with a view toward annexation of South Omaha in stages. The post was designed to be operational in cities of only a certain population class—only Omaha could have been in mind—and thus it too was labeled an example of "special legislation."

(3) Finally, both cities were being annexed under the same legislation and vote; yet only South Omaha was awarded special municipal privileges: a separate sub-treasury, high school, police court, city jail, and public library. Again, "special legislation" was charged.¹²⁰

South Omahans learned on July 21, 1915, that they would be paying higher taxes than they expected.¹²¹ They then remembered the warnings of Hoctor that annexation would raise taxes.¹²²

In 1916 Hoctor lost a bid for election to the Legislature. His unwavering devotion to a separate South Omaha had not won him sympathetic voters in Omaha. He retired from politics and took up farming but kept a hand in real estate and other pursuits. During his retirement Hoctor was able to acquire the real estate needed for Armour and Company to build its meat-packing complex in South Omaha. Still, retirement and its adjustments were not easy for a man who "off and on held office for more than a quarter of a century."¹²³ Hoctor lived most of his remaining years with one of his sons, Charles P. Hoctor, on the environs of Omaha near La Platte, Nebraska. Although weighing well over 300 pounds for most of his life, he looked fit and trim in photos taken of him late in life. He continued to indulge his love for dogs and horses. He and Charles were said to have turned out an occasional batch of homemade "moonshine" during the years of the 18th Amendment, which prohibited intoxicants. On April 14, 1927, while helping his son break horses,¹²⁴ Tom suffered a perforated duodenal ulcer, which caused his death.

At his funeral in St. Mary's Catholic Church, Hoctor's body was viewed by "the largest group of old-time political figures ever to assemble in Omaha's history," the *World-Herald* said. More than 1,200 private citizens came to pay their respects to a politician known in South Omaha as "the man with the heart as big as a sugar barrel." Seven hundred mourners joined a procession 10 blocks long to his final resting place in Saint Mary's Cemetery.

Even his political adversaries had a difficult time finding fault with the old Irishman, partisan that he was. Republican Frank Koutsky commented: "Hoctor held more political offices, literal and honorary, than any man in Omaha. He defeated me once for mayor, and three times I defeated him. I liked Tom Hoctor as a defender of South Omaha, first, last, and always."¹²⁵

Long after the death of Tom Hoctor and that of Mayor Jim Dahlman (died 1930), the two cities were still antagonistic toward each other. In 1941 Omaha Mayor Dan Butler found it necessary to issue a public statement denying that South Omaha had been getting short shrift: "There has been no discrimination," he declared. South Omaha's leading citizens, led by spokesman F.W. Klasmire, charged there had been insufficient funds allotted for city services.¹²⁶

The June 18, 1959, *World-Herald* noted that some South Omahans still remembered their parents and grandparents had been annexed by the colossus to the north. But most citizens did not remember by then the annexation or why the custom of flying flags at half-staff was still observed. It had been 44 years since the governor's proclamation concluded South Omaha's existence as a separate city. At least, the article explained, South Omaha was given "its own police court, jail, and police judge, plus a library, high school, and sub-treasury."

On February 26, 1981, the Nebraska Supreme Court ordered the South Omaha sub-treasury and police court closed as economically unfeasible. South Omaha's community leaders led by Samuel Greenberg immediately reminded the City of Omaha of the provision in the 1915 law giving these functions to South Omaha. The court would not rescind its decision.¹²⁷

Modern-day leaders of South Omaha sought renovation for

the old city hall at 24th and Q Streets. City Councilman Steve Tomasek of South Omaha gave reasons for the project: "There is more than just money involved here. . . . We want to maintain the identity of South Omaha. In the minds of the people, the old city hall is and should remain the city hall."¹²⁸

Representatives of South Omaha and Douglas County officials finally worked out an agreement whereby remodeling of the 76-year-old structure would be undertaken. To commemorate the 1982 rededication of the old city hall and the South Omaha centennial, a photo exhibit and centennial parade were organized. With the cooperation of the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities, the Nebraska State Historical Society, the South Omaha Merchants Association, and the city of Omaha, more than 100 historical photos were displayed. The South Omaha centennial parade was witnessed by an estimated 25,000 spectators—evidence that South Omahans still value their heritage.¹²⁹

NOTES

A number of citations were extracted from scrapbooks of newspaper articles on the life and times of South Omaha politician Thomas Hooctor. Names of newspapers, dates, and pages of reference are provided when possible. Clippings not so indicated are identified by volume and page number in the two scrapbooks. Microfilmed copies of scrapbooks are at the Nebraska State Historical Society, and the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and Creighton libraries.

1. Proclamation by Governor John H. Morehead, June 10, 1915, preceded by Douglas County election commissioner—Harley G. Moorhead's notice of election results. Document No. 1192, Omaha City Clerk's office, City-County Building, Omaha, Nebraska.

2. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), January 28, 1915, June 18, 1959.

3. The area later to be South Omaha was also called "packingtown" and "Tom Hooctor's cornfield." *Pioneer Historical Society, South Omaha* (Citizens Printing Co.), 4; Arthur C. Wakeley, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County, Nebraska* (Chicago: The S. L. Clarke Publishing Company, 1917), I, 235.

4. *Pioneer Historical Society*, 5; Alfred Sorenson, *The Story of Omaha* (Omaha, Nebraska: National Printing Company), 596-602. Ground breaking for the Union Stockyards occurred on April 8, 1884; James W. Savage, John T. Bell, and Consul W. Butterfield, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska, and South Omaha* (New York and Chicago: Munsell and Company, 1894), 600.

5. Savage, Bell and Butterfield, *History of Omaha*, 597.

6. *Ibid.*, 645, 649; *Pioneer Historical Society*, 5.

7. Savage, 641.

8. Savage, 648; *Pioneer Historical Society*, 4-5.

9. Niel M. Johnson, *South Omaha: A Brief History* (unpublished), 5.

10. *Drovers Journal* (Omaha), December 31, 1892; Savage, 636.

11. A. J. W. Lloyd and D. A. Pearce (ed.), *South Omaha and South Omahans* (South Omaha: Diers-Landis Co., 1910), 35.
12. *Drovers Journal* (Omaha), December 31, 1892; Savage, 636.
13. *Omaha Daily Bee* (evening), February 21, 1889; *South Omaha Tribune*, February 21, 1894.
14. Sorenson, 610; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 58.
15. J. B. Erion, *The Eagle*, April 25, 1891; M. A. Upton, *Magazine of Western History*, IX, (April 10, 1899), 683.
16. Savage, 655; City Council Proceeding of the City of South Omaha, Vol. 1, 205.
17. *Omaha World-Herald*, May 5, 1890.
18. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1890.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, May 8, 9, 1890.
21. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 99; *Omaha Daily News*, May 8, 1915.
22. Savage, 655.
23. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 18, 1959, 16; Sorenson, 655.
24. Savage, 655; *Omaha Daily Bee*, June 13, 1894; Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 81.
25. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 58.
26. *South Omaha Daily Tribune*, February 2, 1895; Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 73, 77; *Omaha World-Herald*, February 6, 1895.
27. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 77; *Daily Tribune*, February 2, 1895.
28. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 78-79.
29. *Ibid.*; *Daily Tribune*, February 4, 1895.
30. *Omaha Daily Bee* (evening), February 2, 1895; *Daily Tribune*, February 4, 1895.
31. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 78. *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 2, 1895.
32. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 23, 1976. Special edition on South Omaha.
33. The city of Omaha was considering the annexation of South Omaha, Dundee, Florence, Benson, and other surrounding localities at least as early as 1902. In that year the Omaha Commercial Club drafted a study outlining the advantages of annexation. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), January 3, 1903; in 1903 the South Omaha City Council rejected a proposed "plan of consolidation" put forward by Omaha representatives W. H. Green and W. H. Selbt. *Ibid.*, January 15, 18, 1903, 2.
34. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 200; *Daily Tribune*, March 15, 1894, October 22, 1895. *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, March 24, 1894.
35. *Omaha World-Herald* clippings, private collection; Hocter was elected at age 20 but would have been 21 at the time of his swearing in. Letter, Emmett F. Hocter MD (son of Tom Hocter) to author, September 20, 1976.
36. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 6-7; Letter, from Emmett F. Hocter to author.
37. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 34, *Omaha World-Herald*, March 20, 1894.
38. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 201.
39. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 27, *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, March 3, 1904.
40. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 143, *Omaha Daily Bee* article by S. W. McCoy.
41. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 25, *Omaha Bee* (evening), clipping, nd.
42. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 51, *Omaha News*, September 19, 1906.
43. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 105.
44. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 209; *The American*, October 13, 1897.
45. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 181, 184; *South Omaha Tribune*, February 10, 1897; *Omaha Bee*, February 13, 1897.
46. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 157, 173; James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition* (Published by Committee on History, authorized by Board of Directors, June 30, 1900, 1910), 279.
47. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 200-201.
48. Haynes, 279. Scrapbooks, Vol. 1, 220, 223; *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 21, 1898.

49. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), March 8, 1905.
50. *Ibid.*, March 9, 1905.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Several of the bills L. D. Gibson sponsored with apparent annexationist goals were Senate File Nos. 44 and 263. Thomas' Senate File 241 had similar aims.
53. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), March 8, 1905.
54. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), February 2, 1907.
55. *Ibid.*, March 2, 3, 1907; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 55.
56. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), January 11, 1907.
57. *Ibid.*, January 13, 1907, *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), February 24, 1907.
58. *Omaha Daily Bee*, clipping, nd; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 63, 74, 93.
59. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), February 16, 23, 1907, 3.
60. *Ibid.*, January 16, 1907.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), January 16, February 1, 1907.
63. *Ibid.*, January 12, 1907.
64. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), January 16, 1907.
65. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), January 16, 1907.
66. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 53; *Omaha World-Herald*, February 24, 1907.
67. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 56-57.
68. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 54; *Omaha World-Herald*, February 24, 1907.
69. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 54; *Omaha Citizen*, March 1, 1907, 1.
70. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), February 5, 1907; *Omaha Citizen*, March 1, 1907; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 54.
71. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 54; *Omaha World-Herald*, February 27, 1907.
72. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), February 25, 1907; *Lincoln Evening News*, February 27, 1907.
73. *Omaha Citizen*, March 1, 1907, 1; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2.
74. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 54.
75. *Lincoln Evening News*, February 27, 1907; *Lincoln Star*, February 28, 1907; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 55.
76. *Lincoln Star*, February 28, 1907; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 55.
77. *Omaha Citizen*, March 1, 1907; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 1.
78. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), March 2, 1907.
79. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 55; *Omaha World-Herald*, February 28, March 2, 1907; Thirty-fourth Legislative Journal, 1915, 816, 817, 826, 827.
80. *Omaha Daily News*, February 20, 1907. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 53; *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), February 28, 1907.
81. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), March 8, 1907.
82. Record of Council Proceedings for the City of South Omaha, Vol. 20, 87.
83. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 75-76; Thirty-third legislative session, 167.
84. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 76; *Omaha Daily News*, February 21, 1913; Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1913), I, 883.
85. Orville D. Menard and Harl Dalstrom, *Omaha* magazine, March, 1978, 13-15, 18-20.
86. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 75; *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 13, 1913.
87. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 76; *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 5, 1913.
88. Thirty-third legislative session, 1,244.
89. *Omaha Daily News*, February 21, 1907; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 76; *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 19, 1907; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 76.
90. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), January 5, 1915.
91. *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 19, 1915. Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 99.
92. Thirty-fourth legislative session, 816-817. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), March 23, April 26, 1915.

93. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 18, 1959; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 76; *Omaha Daily News*, February 21, 1913.
94. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), June 6, 1915.
95. Thirty-fourth legislative session, 816-817, 826-827.
96. *Omaha World-Herald*, January 24, 1915; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 98.
97. *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 19, 1915.
98. *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 15, 1915; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 99.
99. Thirty-fourth legislative session, 816-817.
100. *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, April 1, 1915.
101. *Mayor's Political Scrapbook*, Vol. 12, 38, January 11, 1915-January 17, 1916, Omaha Public Library.
102. Sorenson, 613; Nebraska District Court records.
103. *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, May 29, 1915; *Omaha World-Herald*, May 19, 20, 1915.
104. *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, June 2, 1915, 1.
105. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), June 1, 1915, 1.
106. *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 22, 1915, 8. *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, June 2, 1915, 1. Dorothy Dustin, *Omaha and Douglas County: A Panoramic History* (Windsor Publishing, 1980), 86-87. Omaha-owned vehicles traversed South Omaha buying votes for 50 cents each, according to a descendant of one South Omahan of the period who sold his vote.
107. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), May 18, 1915.
108. Election Proclamation, Document No. 1192; *Omaha World-Herald*, June 18, 1959.
109. *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, March 19, May 10, 1915; *Omaha Bee*, February 19, 1915; Harl Dalstrom, *Old Gray Wolf, Ain't What he Used To Be*, 15.
110. *Omaha Daily News*, June 2, 1915; *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), June 1, 1915; Further information on the number of registered voters: "It [the annexation measure] gives 26,000 voters the right to haul 6,000 voters into line by a brutal plan." *Omaha Bee*, February 19, 1915.
111. *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, June 21, 1915.
112. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 18, 1959; Sorenson, 751-752.
113. Nebraska District Court Records.
114. City Council Proceedings, City of South Omaha, Vol. 23, 213, 254.
115. The June 18, 1959, article in the *Omaha World-Herald*, "Flags at Half Mast? Few Recall Meaning of It," sets the date of the confrontation at June 2, 1915, quoting the *Omaha Daily Bee*. This date cannot be correct. District court records clearly stipulate that legal title was not applicable until that date. A demand was made to South Omaha city officials and that demand was refused on June 21, 1915. See Doc. 138, No. 247-248.
116. *Nebraska Daily Democrat*, June 21, 1915; *Omaha World-Herald* June 18, 1959, 22.
117. *Omaha Daily Bee* (evening), June 21, 1915.
118. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 18, 1959.
119. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), July 1, 1915. Documents from State Supreme Court. When Omaha city officials arrived to take actual possession of Dundee funds, Dundee City Treasurer Ellery H. Westerfield was not to be found. Investigation showed that \$15,000 of the city's money appeared to be missing. The absent city treasurer later turned up in Omaha, claiming to have spent his time away from home in a California sanitarium. The July 31, 1915, *World-Herald* noted that Westerfield, after his return from the west coast, presented the city of Omaha with a check to balance the amount of funds still owed by Dundee. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), July 1, 1915.
120. District Court documents.

121. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), July 26, 1914; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 99-100.
122. William Stewart and John Stewart, *Let Me Not Be Mad Sweet Heaven!* (St. Louis, Missouri: Fireside Books), 7; *Omaha World-Herald*, June 26, 1914; Scrapbooks, Vol. 2, 99-100.
123. Personal recollection of Charles Hoctor and his wife Florence Hoctor.
124. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), April 14, 1927.
125. *Ibid.*; *Omaha Daily Bee* (evening), April 1, 1927; Stewart, 7; *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), April 18, 1927.
126. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), September 7, 1941; the bitterness in South Omaha in 1941 was reflected in F. W. Klasmire's public statement, "We were taken into Omaha the way Hitler is taking European nations and making them parts of Germany. . . . Very few in South Omaha are in favor of being part of Omaha." *Omaha World-Herald*, September 4, 1941.
127. *South Omaha Sun*, February 26, 1981. Conversations with Sam Greenberg, September 6, 24, 1981.
128. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 25, 1981.
129. *Omaha Sun*, September 25, October 6, 1982. Groundbreaking for the projected remodeling was March 24, 1983. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), March 24, 1983.