

When the Circus Comes to Town

Highs and Lows of Chicago's
Presidential Nominating Conventions

by James E. Thompson

Presented before a meeting of the Chicago Literary Club

November 2, 2020

If I were to ask this broadly educated audience, an audience particularly attuned to the impending presidential election – if I were to ask you which state has given us the largest number of our presidents you’d certainly know that it’s Virginia with eight: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Henry Harrison, Tyler and Taylor. You probably also know that Ohio runs a close second with seven.

But what about our own state of Illinois? We have produced only one, but a good one by the estimate of some. Our license plates proudly hail Illinois as the *Land of Lincoln* – but no, that’s fake news. Lincoln was born in Kentucky. The only true son that our state has delivered to the White House is Ronald Reagan. So, with just one, it appears we are an also-ran in the business of presidents. But, though we can claim parentage only once, Illinois has been present at the *birth* of more presidents and presidential nominees by far, than any other state. Illinois, more accurately, Chicago, has been the midwife to 12 different presidents and 16 presidential victories. To say it another way, Chicago has been the ground of 25 presidential nominating conventions that produced 10 Republicans and six Democrats who took office. By these measures, and ignoring what are mere accidents of state birth, Illinois, and specifically our city, is far more important in the pantheon of presidents than any other state in the nation. And while it’s the election nights that produce the nail-biting moments, it’s the nominating conventions with their prodigious wrangling, conniving, cheating, lying, accusing, strong-arming and capitulating that give us the stuff of great political theatre. In

earlier times a question of the nominee was often not settled until days and nights of arm twisting and deal making. Only then was the nominee “born.” They were often long and agonizing deliveries.

In 1860, Chicago’s first and greatest presidential offering came in a hastily constructed, log cabin style hall called The Wigwam. It was located at what is now Lake Street at Wacker Drive. New York Senator William H. Seward was the strong favorite going into the convention. But a one-time, one term Illinois Congressman was also in the running.

Abraham Lincoln had failed in two attempts to win a Senate seat, yet Illinois was now giving its total support to him. What’s more, Lincoln had a man in his corner with formidable connections and resolve – Joseph Medill, publisher of the Chicago Tribune. Medill not only supported Lincoln, he gave a diffident Lincoln the courage to go forward. Lincoln had told Medill, “See here, you Tribune boys have got me up a peg too high. How about the vice-presidency?” Medill shot back, “It’s the president or nothing. Else you can count the Tribune out. We’re not fooling away our time and science on the vice presidency”.

The Tribune and other vigorous locals used their home field advantage and used it mischievously. They packed the Wigwam, using counterfeit tickets created at a local print shop. With forged signatures, they took over Seward’s reserved cheering section. The home crowd was loud and overpowering. Lincoln showed up strong after the first ballot. The second brought him neck and neck with Seward. After the third ballot, Lincoln was only 1.5 votes shy of the nomination.

Medill ran to the Ohio delegation. Their candidate, Gov. Salmon Chase, was a distant third. Medill teased away four votes, promising, without any authority, “Tell Chase he can have anything he wants.” Lincoln was on his way to the presidency. Salmon Chase became his Secretary of the Treasury. Chicago’s savvy political dealing, from the bottom of the deck when necessary, started long ago.

Democrats chose Chicago four years later nominating Gen. George B McClellan¹ to run against his old boss. Lincoln beat him handily. A rather more successful general, more successful in a number of ways, Ulysses S. Grant, won the 1868 Republican nomination at the Crosby Opera House, just down the block on Washington between State and Dearborn. His nomination was unopposed.

In 1880, a dignified looking fellow, reserved and thoughtful, arrived in Chicago and entered the new Interstate Exposition Building at Michigan and Adams, right where the Art Institute now stands. He was a soft spoken bearded man, who was also born poor, and also born in a log cabin. He came with a purpose but with no desire or even the thought that he might be nominated for president at this convention. James A. Garfield was a 17-year congressman from Ohio. He was an abolitionist and a Civil War general of serious accomplishment. He was also a professor of ancient languages, and a college president. A brilliant and persuasive speaker, it was Garfield’s job to nominate Senator John Sherman of New York for the presidency.

The contest was bitter and intense. Sherman was one of four likely contenders for the nomination.² Garfield had mesmerized the packed and

rambunctious convention with his nominating speech for Sherman. After the fourth ballot there had been little movement among the leaders. Oddly, on that ballot a delegate from Indiana threw Garfield's name into the mix. Garfield immediately protested. The voting and counting continued. Seventeen ballots later not much had changed except that Garfield had somehow acquired another 20 votes. He protested again. He did not want the nomination. On the 36th ballot, still deadlocked among the four favorites, the entire convention swung for Garfield.

Garfield was an improbable and still only vaguely remembered President. But he was a man of such character and intelligence that he might have been one of the great ones were it not for the mad man, Charles Guiteau, and the two bullets he put in Garfield's back at a train station in Baltimore six months into his term. Garfield was our second president to be assassinated. Both he and Lincoln started their journey to the presidency with their nominations, in Chicago, 20 years apart.

In 1884 Democrats took over the Exposition Center and nominated New York governor Stephen G. Cleveland (better known as Grover). Following Cleveland's first nomination,³ Chicago provided at least one presidential candidate for eight of the next nine elections. One exception was 1900; William McKinley was nominated in Philadelphia. McKinley's nomination came exactly 40 years after the assassinated Lincoln and 20 years after the assassinated Garfield. McKinley was himself shot with two bullets by an anarchist in Buffalo, continuing

the 20 years pattern of a nominee's death in office. Sadly, it was a trend that would continue.

Among those next eight conventions was the nomination of Benjamin Harrison at the opening of the Auditorium Theatre. William Jennings Bryan took the first of what would be his two nominations at the second of what would be three Chicago Coliseums. It was that one at 63rd and Stony Island at which Bryan delivered his famous Cross of Gold speech.⁴

The final Coliseum convention was held in 1920. (There's that 20-year mark again.) The 1920 convention was another multi-ballot affair. Gen. Leonard Wood and Illinois Gov. Frank Lowder ran neck and neck. Deadlocked over the first eight ballots, party leaders met in a corner suite on the 9th floor of the Blackstone Hotel. In this suite famously dubbed, *the smoke-filled room*, Warren G. Harding, the dark horse, who held only 7% of the vote, was brought out of the shadows on the 9th ballot and won on the 10th. Harding was elected of course but died halfway through his term making him the fourth president since 1860 to die in office who had been nominated in a year that was divisible by 20. And the fates of presidents to be nominated in 1940 and 1960 were yet to be revealed.

The Chicago Stadium took over from the Coliseum and hosted three of Franklin Roosevelt's four nominations⁵ as well as Hoover's perfunctory re-nomination in 1932. The hall was draped in Stars and Stripes bunting left behind by the Republicans two weeks before. A huge banner had been added - the personal welcome of Anton Cermak, Mayor of Chicago. Roosevelt was the clear

leader from the beginning, but he remained roughly 100 votes shy. FDR's campaign manager James Farley approached Mayor Cermak entreating him for 47 votes he controlled. Cermak refused. He was waiting for those votes to accrue more leverage.⁶ In the end, it was John Nance Garner who gave up his own votes and that got him the Vice Presidency with Roosevelt. Having won the nomination, Roosevelt flew to Chicago immediately and became the first nominee to ever give an acceptance speech at the convention. In that speech he promised the American people – using a line that both he and his speech writer felt was kind of a throwaway - he promised a *New Deal*.⁷

Chicago's close ties to the Roosevelt years were tightened by Cermak's successor, Mayor Edward Kelly. In 1940, Franklin Roosevelt was tired and beaten down by the office. He just wanted to go back home to Hyde Park. Ed Kelly, an intelligent, blunt, plain spoken man, who worked 29 years in the Department of Sanitation before becoming mayor, had, oddly, become a close friend and confidant of the patrician and somewhat regal Roosevelt. Late in 1939, Kelly argued to FDR that he was needed more than ever. Roosevelt didn't believe in a third term. Roosevelt lectured to Kelly about precedent. "This is what George Washington had to say about..." Kelly interrupted, "George Washington would not have made a good precinct captain." Roosevelt eventually reconciled himself to a third term.⁸ But he remained coy. He would not campaign. It had to be a draft, a groundswell from the convention that he could not refuse. As the convention opened there was still no firm word from the President. Finally, the head of the convention, Senator Alban Barkley, read a rather oblique statement from the President: "I have no desire to continue as President or to be a

candidate for the nomination, as such, the delegates should vote for whatever candidate they choose.” The crowd went silent, stunned. Moments passed. Then a deep voice boomed throughout the Coliseum, “No, no. We want Roosevelt.” And then another voice, just as booming, “The Party wants Roosevelt. The world wants Roosevelt.” This sparked the tinder of support and soon the crowd took up the chants, for forty- five minutes. It was later learned that this spontaneous outpouring of love was artfully stage managed by Mayor Kelly who wired the speaker system to a microphone buried under the podium. Those chants that started the Coliseum’s roof shaking were from Kelly’s own chief of city sanitation. It came to be known as, “the voice from the sewer.”

In 1944, Roosevelt was less ambivalent about a fourth term.⁹ But again, he wanted to be approached on bended knee. He said, in a manner that our contemporary psychology would brand as passive-aggressive, that he would be “a good soldier and reluctantly accept his party’s desire to re-nominate him for a fourth term.” The real action at the Stadium that July was about the vice presidency. Henry Wallace, the incumbent, was a one-time Republican transformed into a hard, idealistic progressive. Wallace dearly wanted the job for another term and Roosevelt wanted him in the job, but Southern delegates and big city bosses strongly opposed Wallace’s pro stance on unions and civil rights. Wallace was still the favorite of almost 60% of the convention, but Roosevelt quietly let be known his willingness to drop Wallace rather than fracture the party.¹⁰ He said he’d consider William O. Douglas or a party loyalist who could mollify the factions, Senator Harry Truman. On July 20 the Stadium was packed way beyond capacity both by Wallace supporters and fifteen thousand extra

tickets given by Mayor Kelly. As the session opened the shouts were overwhelming, “We Want Wallace. We Want Wallace.” There was a move to begin the voting immediately. Fearing Truman would not have a chance in this Wallace tsunami, Kelly got the fire marshal to declare the Stadium and the convention to be a fire hazard. It forced adjournment. The next day, Ed Kelly and other party bosses went to work and got the votes Truman needed from ten other favorite son candidates. Six months later Truman was sworn in as Vice President. Eighty-two days after that he was President of the United States.

Also in 1944, also in Chicago, 42-year-old Thomas E. Dewey, the remarkably ambitious, mob busting, criminal prosecutor, took the Republican nomination. A man of great energy and organization, Dewey, the prosecutor of Dutch Schultz, Legs Diamond and Lucky Luciano, fanned Republicans’ faint hopes with the promise to indict Roosevelt’s “comfort with communists” and the New Deal and set his own youth and vigor next to the old and tiring FDR. But 1944 was, for Dewey, only a set up for what seemed to be his certain victory in 1948. But, no again. Our recollection of Dewey’s once powerful candidacy has faded. His name is now hooked in our memories mostly by a premature Chicago Tribune headline and the mocking grin of Harry Truman as he held it up to the crowd.

The circus came to Chicago again in 1952. General Dwight Eisenhower, the world’s greatest war hero, faced strong conservative opposition from Ohio senator Robert Taft. But Eisenhower led on the first ballot and soon was nominated unanimously.¹¹ Our more lasting memory might be the drama surrounding the selection of Eisenhower’s vice president. When the junior

senator from California, Richard Nixon, got word he was being considered for VP, Nixon abandoned his stumping for Earl Warren and jumped on the bandwagon. Posters and buttons of Ike and Dick, raised hands and huge smiles, were everywhere following the convention. Soon after the nomination, a scandal broke over gifts the young Nixon had received. The polls said this was a serious scandal. Eisenhower went dark. He didn't talk to Nixon for three days. There were rumors that Eisenhower, indecisive on this, would drop him from the ticket - then, no, we'll keep him; then, again, he has to go. The ambitious and intrepid Nixon offered his counsel. He told Eisenhower, "Sometimes, you have to either shit or get off the pot." Nixon decided to address the country directly. It was a speech brilliantly crafted around a cloth coat and a cocker spaniel. It was a hit with the public. Ike slapped him on the back and said, "You're my boy."¹² But, the General never forgave what Nixon had said to him.

Chicago also nominated Ike's opponent, Adlai Stevenson, at the same Amphitheatre in both '52 and '56. Nixon also won his own nomination there in 1960. Kennedy beat Nixon later that year in no small part due to the first ever televised presidential debate which took place at CBS studios at McClurg and Ontario.

Beginning in the 50's and throughout the 60's television played a bigger and bigger role. Conventions became increasingly stage managed, sanitized, trimmed for prime time. The most vicious partisan quarrels were kept outside our view. Conventions were simply not the wild and raucous affairs they used to be.¹³

There was one enormous exception.

The 1968 convention was a bomb set to go off, fused by a series of events each of such moment that the explosion was inevitable. Lyndon Johnson had given Mayor Richard J. Daley the convention as thanks for long party service, and perhaps for some ballot magic that Daley was alleged to conjure in JFK's election. It was to be an occasion of great pride for Daley and Chicago. Instead, it was the convention we saw unroll and unravel live on tv at the Amphitheatre and in the streets and parks, downtown. The Democrats came to town split with a schism as deep as any we'd seen before - fueled by war in Vietnam and two assassinations, antiwar and campus violence, and riots across the country after Martin Luther King was murdered. These rent the nation and inflamed the party factions. LBJ had announced he was done. His successor, Hubert Humphrey, was the establishment candidate and anathema to the antiwar people. Minnesota's Eugene McCarthy had for a year developed a powerful following but the entry of Robert Kennedy in the race in April split the antiwar vote. RFK's murder in June added to the agony and confusion. There were floor fights over the legitimacy of competing delegations in the South. There were fistfights in the packed aisles where movement was impossible. Reporters were assaulted. National tv anchors shook their heads in dismay and disbelief at what they were seeing inside the hall. There were even more incredible events happening outside, on the streets.

As I wind this up, I hope this little survey helps us to know the outsized role Chicago has played in the making of presidents, and, through a few of these

vignettes, see how Chicago's unique political character not only took shape but changed the shape of the proceedings, the influence of our boss-run power politics on the national stage – Joseph Medill, Anton Cermak, Edward Kelly, Richard Daley. Think too of the great rhetorical artistry that was practiced over the 130 years in these conventions, right across the street or right down the block. Magnificent, stirring words from Garfield, Bryan, Teddy Roosevelt and FDR and many more. And then there's our beloved and immortal Richard J. Daley, who in 1968, explained in his unique version of Chicago-speak, "The police are not here to create disorder, the police are here to preserve disorder." And when at the convention, Connecticut senator Abraham Ribicoff glared down from the rostrum at Daley sitting in the front row and passionately upbraided him for "Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago," our mayor reminded Ribicoff just where he was. Red faced, Daley cupped his hand to his mouth and shouted, "Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch... go home."

Ah, Daley, ah Chicago, --- Hog butcher, tool maker, stacker of wheat, player with railroads, city of big shoulders. Maker of presidents.

NOTES

¹ McClellan, who so aggravated Lincoln by leading the Union troops to near complete repose from the very start of the War, was now the standard bearer under the banner “The Party of Peace.” Again, the contrary McClellan ignored his mandate and stumped for continuation of the war and a complete and utter defeat of the Confederacy. Go figure.

² The most prominent was Grant who would be looking for an unprecedented third term.

³ With a reputation for toughness and honesty he easily defeated the power-hungry and self-aggrandizing James G. Blaine. A few days after his nomination it came out that Cleveland had fathered a child out of wedlock. When this bombshell hit, a friend, looking to make the issue go away, asked, “What shall I tell the people?” Cleveland said, “Tell them the truth.” It was an early lesson and smart crisis management.

⁴ There was of course a third edition of the Chicago Coliseum at 15th and Wabash that hosted the next five Republican nominating conventions: one for Theodore Roosevelt, two for Taft one for Charles Evans Hughes. Taft’s try for a second term and Roosevelt’s try for a third term as a Bull Moose failed. They all lost to Woodrow Wilson.

⁵ That convention was the beginning of the FDR juggernaut, but the first nomination was hotly contested. The party’s moderate wing was seriously resistant to Roosevelt and what his key opponent, the “Happy Warrior,” Al Smith, called Roosevelt’s demagogic appeal to the masses of working men, the setting of class against class, rich against poor.

⁶ Years later, James Farley recalled, with macabre speculation, that Mayor Cermak could have gotten a lot more over the years for timely support of Roosevelt and probably would not then have been in Miami seeking favors where he took a bullet that was intended for the President.

⁷ He also promised, not so incidentally, repeal of the 18th amendment and prohibition.

⁸ There were other strong opponents to the idea of a third term. FDR's old friend and confident, James Farley, said if Roosevelt went for a third term Farley would quit and run against him himself.

⁹ FDR needed to be reelected to finish the war and drive an aggressive domestic policy that included reinvigorating an economy that, despite the war, found more to be unemployed than when he first took office in 1932.

¹⁰ But he would not say it to Wallace. In fact, Roosevelt denied it to Wallace and gave him a letter of support. That letter, predictably ambivalent, was to be read to the convention: "I would personally vote for him," it said, "but I do not wish to appear in any way dictating ...the convention must do the deciding." But there was also a secret second letter. The second letter endorsed both Douglas and Truman. The Party Chairman went public with that second letter adding more to the confusion about where FDR stood.

¹¹ While the nomination was eventually unanimous, the convention itself was characterized by a protracted credentials fight as well as a couple of fist fights on the floor. This was the first convention televised from coast to coast and for many the chance to witness the sacred processes of democracy, or, if you prefer, how sausage is made.

¹² This belied Ike's own discomfort with Nixon. It was a coolness and distrust that continued throughout the next eight years.

¹³ Chicago's last convention was the Democrats in 1996 which gave Bill Clinton and Al Gore the nominations for their second term.

Sources

(Newspaper Article) "May 18, 1860." Chicago Tribune. May 14, 2010.
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/ct-xpm-2010-05-14-ct-edit-lincoln-20100514-story.html>

Furgurson, Ernest B. "Moment of Truth: Scandal in the Election of 1884." HistoryNet,
<https://www.historynet.com/moment-of-truth-the-election-of-1884.htm>

Johnson, Geoffrey, "Forgotten Fate of the Place Where Lincoln Won His Party's Nomination." Chicago Magazine. May 25, 2010. <https://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/The-312/May-2010/Chicago-Republican-Wigwam-Where-Abraham-Lincoln-Won-1860-Presidential-Nomination/>

Onion, Rebecca, "The Art of the New Deal." March 31, 2016. Slate.
<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/03/how-franklin-roosevelt-won-the-contested-1932-convention-and-the-white-house.html>

Millard, Candice. "Destiny of the Republic." Anchor Books. 2011

Royko, Mike. "Boss Richard J. Daley of Chicago." Plume Publishing. 1971

Sauter, R. Craig. "Political Conventions." Encyclopedia of Chicago.
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/ct-xpm-2010-05-14-ct-edit-lincoln-20100514-story.html>

Sutter, R. Craig and Burke, Edward M. "Inside the Wigwam, Chicago Presidential Conventions 1860 -1996." Wild Onion Books. 1996

Troy, Tevi. The Evolution of Party Conventions. National Affairs. Fall 2020
<https://www.historynet.com/moment-of-truth-the-election-of-1884.htm>
