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Chapter 12

I Am Used as a Political Fulcrum by Jay Hubbell to Pry Out Sam Stephenson

One day William Chandler, of the Sault, came into my office. He loved politics and no sooner had Joe Steere landed in the Sault to recover from an attack of Lenawee enteric, than he was placed on the circuit bench to succeed Judge Goodwin.

The Chandler and Oren families were mixed up with mine back in the old Ohio days. I had gone to school with Mrs. Chandler at Purdue, and had been taught by her very superior mother. Mr. Chandler asked me if I would like to go to Congress. I was only a little past thirty and had not thought of any office, let alone Congress. I had been in so many fights that my opinion was that I could not have been elected dog catcher, and I told Chandler so. He scarcely listened to me.

Ours was the twelfth district. It had been formed geographically in various ways. Just then it comprised the entire Upper Peninsula or about one-third the area of the entire State, divided into fifteen counties, and had a population of about two hundred fifty thousand. From Canada to the Montreal River east and west, and from the mouth of the Menominee to Keweenaw Point north and south, inclosed a formidable region. Its interests were lumbering, iron ore mining and copper mining. Now agriculture, then just beginning to be seriously considered, forms an important pursuit, with prospects of ultimately yielding more than all the others.

There were lines of political cleavage between the various interests. Sam Stephenson, of Menominee, was our representative. He was a brother of Uncle Ike, and their fraternal ambitions could not be carried in the same basket, as one lived in Michigan and the other in Wisconsin, separated by the Menominee River.
It was good for them to be so near together, because they each nourished a proper desire not to be outstripped by the other and they could keep tab on each other. They were wholesome men of their type and period. Only one way was there to get anything and that was to buy it. Hence their life could be summed up: get money and buy what you want. They were honest according to prevailing standards, generous when they could see what they were getting for their giving, profane in language, chin likely to be a nicotine delta, canny in a trade, forceful in business, crude and rude and uncouth in matters, manners and education, endowed with homely horse sense and enough courage. They were both rich and getting richer sawing pine lumber and selling it.

I have never been able to determine the place of such men. Mostly I have thought they performed a needful function and occupied a legitimate sphere. They got their timber from the Government directly or otherwise at small cost, almost nothing. They cut it ruthlessly and the waste was scattered everywhere they lumbered, and allowed to burn and destroy great, uncut forests and even villages and lives, as witness Peshtigo and many other places.

There was a need for economical house material all over the growing nation. It was thus adequately supplied. One cannot have his cake and eat it too; nor can he have trees and wheat in the same field. Greater care and selection in lumbering would have increased the cost of home building during a critical period, and would have delayed farm development. Consequently, I do not join with those who curse the Stephensons and their congers.

Sam Stephenson had just bought a seat in the House of Representatives, just as he would purchase a plug of tobacco or a bottle of bone liniment. It did not matter to him whether Henry W. Seymour, of the Sault, had occupied it only a brief few months since the untimely death of Representative Seth Moffatt, of Traverse City. It just “belonged to the feller that could git it,” was the way Sam sized it up, so he turned his labial nozzle on Mr.
Seymour and injected a stream of tobacco juice in his eye, after the manner of squids.

When that benign gentleman got through rubbing his eyes he could not find his seat in Congress. It was not a gentlemanly thing to do perhaps, but Sawlog Sam got what he was after, which is the object in life a great many have.

Now it appears that Mr. Seymour got in because Mr. Chandler and other friends were able to tie the tails of the copper and iron and sawlog cats together, and throw them over the district political clothesline. Down in Chippewa County we were in the minority and flocked with nobody. Our only hope was in a scrap by the others.

Jay Hubbell, of Houghton, who was called “Two per cent.” because of his dextrous assessment of postmasters for campaign purposes while in the House of Representatives and chairman of the Congressional Campaign Committee, hated Sam Stephenson plenty. I do not know the origin of the feud, or whether it extended beyond political boundaries or not. Hubbell was a strong man, educated as a lawyer, resourceful and the foxiest politician in the district.

I did not know that he had ever heard my name. But he had, and just as horsemen have their eye out for likely colts, he had his at the political periscope. Down he came to the Sault and deposited a bug in Mr. Chandler’s ear, where it was to abide until it could be transferred to mine. I wore no ear laps in the summer and they got me.

Mr. Hubbell had no use for me. He did not tell me so; nor did he exactly tell Chandler that he had not. But he was not delicate about admitting to the latter what he kept from me, and that was his master hunger just then was to beat Sam Stephenson. The scheme was to have favorite sons in enough counties to split things up, and thus make Stephenson’s renomination impossible. I was to carry my home county of Chippewa and possibly Mackinac and Luce, and even might keep things stirred up in Schoolcraft. Carl Sheldon was brought out in Houghton County.
John Q. Adams, of Negaunee, and Colonel C. Y. Osburn, of Marquette, were candidates in Marquette, the heart of the iron region.

Trouble enough I made for all hands. I did not know that my part was to be only that of a tool. So I went at the thing slam-bang. I was familiar with the campaigns of Henry Clay and Abraham Lincoln. Their districts were not wilder nor larger than the one I had to cover. In fact, bears and wolves and wildcats were thicker in our part of Michigan than they were in Kentucky in Henry Clay’s time. Schoolhouses were as far apart. Trusty rifles hung on many-pointed antlers, and there were thousands of Indians who only went on whiskey war paths.

I determined to campaign every school district in the Upper Peninsula. How else could I win without money to buy my way? It was the first campaign of the kind ever conducted in this way in our part of the State. My knowledge of hunting and woodcraft and my life on the Menominee range gave me certain advantages, and I made the most of them I could.

Quite quickly my candidature developed from an incident to a menace. At first Uncle Sam gave no sign of knowing of it; then he roundly haw-hawed and then he sent out agents and money in plenty to head me off. I really liked the people, especially those in remote settlements, and some of them liked me. The old system obtained. Caucuses began to be held and I was successful in more townships and counties than anybody had estimated. Sometimes when our side won, the more bitter and resourceful would send contesting delegations. This was particularly true in Delta and Iron counties. Every political trick known, running the gamut of money, bulldozing, cajolery, lying and promises, was resorted to. Our side might have been as guilty as the other if we had been supplied with the same weapons. We did not use money because we had none to use.

Jay Hubbell and his schemes were lost sight of in the curiosity that was aroused by the queer campaign I was making. I walked and worked night and day, attended socials in churches for which Uncle Sam had donated the principal part of the building
fund; went to country dances and called at hundreds of houses where a candidate had never been before. Came the Congressional Convention. It was held at Ironwood, a victory for me because Gogebic County was for me and the local atmosphere would be favorable. I had carried, or claimed to have carried, eight of the fifteen counties and had that many delegations on hand. That did not give me a majority because the larger counties, such as Houghton, Marquette and Menominee, were against me and had candidates of their own. It was while the convention was being organized that I discovered the real part that I had been expected to play. The old bosses, such as Hubbell, Duncan, Parnell, Maitland, Walters and others, were willing to beat Uncle Samuel, but they did not want me by a jugful. In fact, if it came to a show down between Stephenson and me, they would have been for gruff old Uncle Sawlog, who at worst was one of them in being a part of the “interests,” only then they did not call them that. I had more votes than any other candidate and was permitted to organize the convention, or at least to think that I did. Voting started. Once I came within four of the nomination. That was my high water mark.

Report was made to my floor managers that John Duncan, of Houghton, really preferred Uncle Sam to Carl Sheldon, their home candidate. In fact, the fight was not the field against Stephenson any more than it was the field against me. I was consulted and decided that the Duncan report bore earmarks of truth. We threw my support solidly to Sheldon, and he was chosen. I had gone into the hall at the rear and stood behind Sheldon, who was seated in a chair. When the lid blew off, as Sheldon was nominated, I gave a big, bursting, boyish yell of victory and grabbed Sheldon’s hat, as I thought. Waving it in the air I somehow got sight of it. Not a hat at all, but a wig. His toupee had burst its shoe wax moorings. Snatched as baldheaded as a billiard ball, there he sat in a gold-mouthed, glowering rage, caring nothing about his honor and only seeking the return of his thatch, which I had waved aloft like the banner of the beard of the prophet at Goek Tepee.
We had nominated a man not only with solid gold teeth, like the Sultan of Johore, though not set with diamonds, but one who wore a wig. I was responsible for this. Would the common people stand for it?

Our district was as strongly Republican as though it had been politically pock-marked. There was no doubt of Sheldon’s election if he could be kept at home. He was. It transpired that he had no such native ability as Stephenson and was not as effective as a representative.

As for myself, I became a political factor, not by virtue of either ambition or design, but only because I always went with all my might at whatever my hands found to do, and this had not been an exception.

There are no bitternesses quite equal to local ones, no matter whether political, religious or of other kinds. They come near to one; there is immediate friction which is aggravated by being seen as well as felt. The source is always within striking distance and that makes for frequent striking and multiplied inflammation. One has to learn to joust and like it; to hit hard and also take blows and to discharge the whole matter as soon as it is over. Not adopting such a philosophy the participant is either knocked down and thrown into the discard, or is made into a grouch, whose very temper becomes his undoing. “Be just as good an anvil as you are a hammer,” was the tabloided advice given to me when a boy, by a veteran of many a battle, who had not a mean wrinkle in his heart and then of course not in his face.

It was a good thing for me that I learned this, because I have been pounded incessantly from youth until the present, and really I think I have improved all the time in every way. While leaving me very far from the unattainable on earth goal of human perfection, I have enjoyed going on the way.