



A Tempest in a Teapot—Governor Poynter’s Appointment of William V Allen to the United States Senate

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Article Summary: Several Nebraskans proved eager to fill an unexpected Senate vacancy in 1899. Populist William Jennings Bryan wrote in support of William V. Allen, whom Governor Poynter did appoint. Bryan’s action permanently offended another prospect, Democrat Gilbert M Hitchcock, and caused a rift between Democrats and Populists.

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A TEMPEST IN A TEAPOT? —
GOVERNOR POYNTER'S
APPOINTMENT OF WILLIAM V. ALLEN
TO THE UNITED STATES SENATE

BY PAOLO E. COLETTA

MONROE Leland Hayward, the junior United States senator from Nebraska, died on December 5, 1899, leaving the appointment of his successor to Governor William A. Poynter. Among the Democrats eager to succeed Hayward were William A. Thompson of Grand Island and Gilbert M. Hitchcock, owner-editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*. Populist hopes centered on William Vincent Allen, who had completed a full term in the Senate on March 4, 1899. Also "a bit hopeful" was Edward Rosewater.¹ Since Poynter had been elected as a Democratic-Populist (mostly Populist) fusionist,² Rosewater's aspira-

¹Victor Rosewater, "Life and Times of Edward Rosewater," Ms., Nebraska State Historical Society, p. 258.

²Poynter had defeated Hayward for the governorship in 1898 by the close vote of 95,703 to 92,982. The Republicans carried the first and second congressional districts and fusionists the other four. The Republicans returned to power in the legislature of 1899, how-

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tions must have been founded on the stuff of dreams rather than on reality. Nevertheless, the question of succession provided meat for fruitful debates for several weeks, and a study of it gives insight into the political conditions of the Nebraska of the day.

The *World-Herald*, the most important Democratic newspaper in the state, naturally demanded the appointment of Hitchcock. Editorial after editorial written by the capable Richard L. Metcalfe praised Hitchcock as a fusionist and countered the numerous attacks launched against him by Rosewater in his *Omaha Bee*.³ Hitchcock was also the favorite of the Douglas County Democracy, of the Jacksonian Club of Omaha, and of the Silver Republicans of both Douglas County and Omaha. Indeed, the leaders of the Douglas County Silver Republicans called in person on Governor Poynter on December 8 to demand that he appoint Hitchcock. The Democratic and fusionist country press, meanwhile, eulogized Hitchcock and warned against Rosewater's attempt to "dictate" the appointment of a Republican. Even Colonel Bix, who wrote an extremely interesting column in the *Lincoln Journal*, wrote an open letter to Poynter in which he strongly advocated the appointment of Hitchcock.⁴

On December 11 William Jennings Bryan, who was spending the winter in Texas, sent Governor Poynter a telegram that becomes more meaningful when it is understood that the Republican-dominated legislature had elected Hayward over Allen in a vicious struggle early in 1899 and that the term of John Mellen Thurston began in 1895 and would end in 1901. Said Bryan:

Papers announce a spirited contest between Allen, Hitchcock, and Thompson for Senatorship. I think good

ever, by 73 to 60, and chose Hayward over Allen for the Senate. (J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *An Illustrated History of Nebraska* [Lincoln, 1910-1920], III, 266.)

³An excellent example is the double column editorial in the *World-Herald* for December 8, 1899, p. 2.

⁴*Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), December 9, 1899.

faith requires the appointment of Allen. He is the most prominent populist in the United States. He made a splendid senator and all parties joined in endorsing him for re-election and he received the unanimous support of the fusion members of the legislature. While both Hitchcock and Thompson deserve anything within the gift of the people I believe it would be a grave political mistake to turn Allen down if he wants the place. A democrat can be selected for the long term to succeed Thurston. If we win the Presidential contest we will have offices enough to reward a large number of democrats and populists. I hope success will not be jeopardized by a fight between our own people. You can show this to Hitchcock and Thompson. Will come to Nebraska if you think best.⁵

On December 11 also, Bryan wrote letters to Thompson and to Hitchcock. Thompson, he said, deserved an explanation. In addition to the reasons adduced in his telegram to Governor Poynter, Bryan felt that Allen, although defeated for the Senate early in the year and now enjoying a comfortable judgeship provided by Poynter, was still considered by him and by many others as "senatorial material." Bryan was aware that some of the Nebraska Democrats felt that he himself had received most of the benefits of co-operation so far as the Democracy was concerned. Nevertheless, he had had Populist opposition in his own races for the Senate⁶ and had failed of success in his race for the presidency. Whatever the Democrats had won in Nebraska, they had won largely if not entirely through Populist aid, while the Populists had succeeded in taking away from the Republicans offices which the Democrats alone could not have won. Moreover, only the fusion of all the reform forces could carry both the forthcoming national and state elections. If Allen were appointed now, the Democrats could have the senatorship for the long term, a larger share of the state offices and, "if we win the presidency there will be offices for all." The appointment of a Democrat now would engender friction that

⁵Bryan to Poynter, December 11, 1899, copy in Bryan Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶See the writer's "William Jennings Bryan and the Nebraska Senatorial Election of 1893," *Nebraska History*, XXXI (September, 1950), 183-203.

could endanger the state and the nation.⁷ Finally, Bryan used a somewhat shopworn shibboleth which had often stood him in good stead, that he was infinitely more interested in the success of principles than of personalities — indeed, he himself was willing to step aside at any time in order to obtain success for principles. He would certainly help Thompson, he concluded, if he could do so “without hurting the cause.”⁸

Hitchcock, one of Bryan's earliest personal friends in Nebraska, had been an avowed Bryan supporter since 1890. He had run for Congress as a fusionist in 1898 and failed. Avid for place and power, he was now incensed with Bryan and sent him the following message: “If you insist on sacrificing me we part company forever.”⁹

Part of the fault for the first break in the Bryan-Hitchcock friendship was laid by James Dahlman squarely upon the shoulders of Governor Poynter. “The Governor has appointed Allen,” Dahlman wrote Bryan on December 14. “Personally I am glad of it. I am sorry that the Governor forced you to take part in the senatorial contest. It was entirely unnecessary. He never intended to do anything else and it only goes to show that he is too small for the position he is occupying . . .”¹⁰

On December 15, Allen, in writing to Bryan, suggested that an appointment to some minor post go to a member

⁷Bryan clarified this point in a letter to Dahlman: “The next legislature will elect two senators and they will serve throughout the entire presidential term. With Allen appointed, the other senatorship will be conceded to the democrats and we shall have smooth sailing in 1900. To have turned Allen down and appointed any Democrat would have been to jeopardize two senatorships, one for four and one for six years, in order to give a Democrat the office for one year. Two senators might determine the complexion of the Senate, for you know the Senate will be close, even if we elect the president and carry the house by a good majority . . .” (Fred Carey, *Mayor Jim: The Life of James C. Dahlman* [Omaha, Omaha Printing Company, 1930], pp. 111-112.)

⁸Bryan to Thompson, December 11, 1899, with copy of similar letter to Hitchcock, Bryan Papers, Library of Congress.

⁹Not dated, but probably about December 12, 1899, *ibid.*

¹⁰Dahlman to Bryan, December 14, 1899, *ibid.*



William V. Allen
(Photo about 1900)

of the *World-Herald* staff. "Mr. Hitchcock seems to be a little sore," wrote Allen, who concluded that the appointment would please Hitchcock and "go some distance towards changing his feeling."¹¹ "Brother Charley" Bryan also wrote that Hitchcock was "sore." Indeed, Metcalfe had wired him a remonstrance against his own endorsement of Allen. Could not Allen and Hitchcock *both* be sent to the Senate the following year? Charles asked William Jennings. Charles hoped that "nothing may affect the splendid fusion sentiment in Nebraska," but his reason was a personal one: "Your friends here and out through the State say in case you are defeated next year that they want you to go to the United States Senate and that Hitchcock must not push in." Moreover, he suggested that the Democratic state convention that fall make no nominations for senator because Thompson, Allen, Hitchcock, and others would stir up such a fight over the nomination that there would be only one happy man and many "defeated sore ones." The defeated ones would then be unwilling to put up a good fight for the ticket and also might "close the gate" on Bryan for senator if Bryan were defeated for the presidency.¹²

On December 18, when Thurston presented Allen's credentials to the Senate, Thompson finally answered Bryan's letter of a week earlier. This remarkable letter gives a vivid insight into the backstage negotiations of himself, Governor Poynter, Allen, Hitchcock, and Metcalfe.

First, Thompson expressed surprise at Bryan's letter. He himself had applied for the appointment because he believed Allen wished to retain his judgeship until the legislature met early in 1901, when he would seek the nomination for the long term. If he failed, he would still have his judgeship. Thompson believed such logic irrefutable. Like Dahlman, Thompson felt that there had been

¹¹Allen to Bryan, December 15, 1899, *ibid.*

¹²Charles W. Bryan postscript to letter by Charles A. Towne to Bryan, December 15, 1899, *ibid.*

no call for anyone to intervene in the senatorial fight. There was never any question about Allen's appointment if he wanted it. "Even great men make mistakes," said Thompson, "and this is one of the mistakes of Senator Allen."

Thompson had called upon Governor Poynter and told him that he would apply if Allen did not desire the post. Poynter said he did not think Allen wanted it, but that Hitchcock did. "All one night" Thompson, Allen, and Poynter discussed the situation. Actually, Thompson and Allen talked and Poynter listened. Allen said he did want the job. Thompson thereupon pointed to two difficulties: 1) Allen would be a "senate figure alone," with no backing in the state, not even that of the *World-Herald*; and, 2) Democrats of Omaha, particularly, would be "sore." Then he suggested and arranged for a meeting with Metcalfe and Hitchcock at the Paxton Hotel in Omaha.

At the Paxton meeting, Allen stated that if the Populist governor turned him down he would be branded with the brand of Cain for all time to come. His usefulness for the future and any new ambition would be wiped out. Hitchcock argued that the appointment of anyone but himself would, first, turn down the *World-Herald*; second, turn down all the work he himself had already done and nullify his influence in the future; and, lastly, elevate the *Bee* over the *World Herald*. Although Allen and Hitchcock argued against being "branded," they never considered that Thompson was being branded, too, as appears subsequently. At any rate, Thompson noted that four-fifths of the letters on the appointment received by Poynter demanded the naming of Allen and that the meeting at the Paxton ended without a conclusion.

When Hitchcock, Metcalfe, and Allen asked Thompson if he had heard from Bryan, and particularly if Thompson had asked Bryan for an endorsement, he replied that he had written Bryan that he was an applicant—but only for the express purpose of keeping Bryan out of the

senatorial controversy. Knowing of Bryan's friendship for all the parties concerned, Thompson had received Bryan's letter with somewhat of a shock even though he himself was not a serious contender. Bryan's letter to Hitchcock, however, had proved a rare shock, for Hitchcock was in dead earnest and had fought for the appointment to the very end.

Thus ended Thompson's history of the controversy. What hurt him was the fact that Bryan had published to the world that "Good faith demanded the appointment of Allen." Well, had he or Hitchcock broken the faith? Was Thompson's sincere support of both Allen and Bryan for the last decade now condemned as "bad faith"? Could Bryan give him no credit for being honest in his efforts? How would Thompson feel when he met with the Democratic National Committee early in January? Thompson believed Bryan's interference unjustified. Evidence that outside pressure had also been applied is revealed in his statement that "such outside interference as that of Senator Jones and Stewart and Congressman Towne, and especially our own delegation in Congress, every one of which I have helped to elect, is not appreciated." Thompson's unending love for Bryan, however, led him to forgive the Great Commoner, and in the last paragraph of his letter he told Bryan to get Allen to insure that the Populist state convention called for February 1900 did *not* write a ticket for the Democrats to endorse and that the Populists would meet *after* the Democrats, thus avoiding an occurrence he considered would cause irreparable personal injury to Bryan's presidential aspirations.¹³

On December 19, the day Allen took his seat in Washington, Victor Vifquain wrote Bryan that the fight over the appointment was "A tempest in a tea pot." If, said Vifquain, Hitchcock had received the fusionist vote of the last legislature from start to finish, it would have been dishonest to select anyone else. At Hitchcock's request, he

¹³Thompson to Bryan, December 18, 1899, *ibid.*

had talked with him at length upon the subject and had expressed the view that since Allen had received most of the votes, he deserved the interim appointment.

Was the shortlived contest over the interim appointment "a tempest in a tea pot"? Despite Thompson's comments, most of Bryan's supporters believed that he had done the right thing in supporting Allen. Ed P. Smith, for instance, personally supported Hitchcock and believed that his appointment would have been "good politics." However, "no one" in Omaha, the center of Hitchcock sentiment, had a word to say against Allen, and "all" gave Bryan credit for doing what he thought best in urging the appointment of Allen.¹⁴ So long as Bryan had been asked to take a stand, reasoned Dahlman, Bryan had done the right thing. Even had Poynter not asked his advice, Bryan, as the "Leader," had a *duty* to perform. Ninety per cent of the people outside of Omaha "were for Allen anyway," and the fracas would "all blow over in a week." But in order to ease the strain for Hitchcock and Metcalfe, Dahlman had "laid low," knowing that Poynter could not dare appoint anyone but Allen and that someone would have to be in position to reason with Hitchcock and Metcalfe after Allen's appointment. Rather than blaming Bryan, Dahlman blamed Poynter for leading Hitchcock to think he had a chance.¹⁵

On the other hand, the "sting of ingratitude" open letter Hitchcock sent Bryan upon Allen's appointment was more than a mere break in the Bryan-Hitchcock friendship. It revealed the political ineptitude of Governor Poynter. Moreover, Bryan, with a finger always on the pulse of public sentiment with regard to his own political preferment, henceforth would have to meet the impact of Hitchcock's ambitions. Courtly and dignified, yet one who had a fighting spirit under a gentle exterior,¹⁶ Hitchcock was

¹⁴Smith to Bryan, December 25, 1899, *ibid.*

¹⁵Dahlman to Bryan, December 16, 1899, *ibid.*

¹⁶James M. Cox, *Journey Through My Years* (New York, 1940), p. 104.

greatly grieved by his rebuff and refused to be calmed by the oil Bryan asked Dahlman and others to pour upon the troubled waters.¹⁷ The *World-Herald* supported Bryan in 1900 and in 1908, and Hitchcock was eventually elected to the House and then to two terms in the Senate, but the cleavage of 1899 developed into a division that never quite healed, with Bryan leading one Nebraska faction and Hitchcock the other.¹⁸ Most important, the "tempest in a tea pot" proved an entering wedge between the Democrats and Populists which, as Republicans are pleased to say, hastened the day of the Republican redemption of Nebraska.¹⁹

¹⁷Carey, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁸Robert Foster Patterson, "Gilbert M. Hitchcock: A Story of Two Careers," *University of Colorado Studies*, "Abstracts of Theses for Higher Degrees," XXVI, No. 3, p. 94.

¹⁹Rosewater, *op. cit.*, p. 259.