Article Title: Post Office Primaries: An Experiment in Direct Democracy and Postal Reform

Full Citation: J Dennis McGuire, "Post Office Primaries: An Experiment in Direct Democracy," *Nebraska History* 58 (1977): 307-322.

URL of article: http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1977POPrimaries.pdf

Date: 12/14/2011

Article Summary: Progressive reformer Dan Voorhees Stephens of Fremont became the United States Representative from Nebraska's Third District. This article examines Stephens' contribution to postal reform—the post office primary system—to show how the system worked, and to illustrate how elements of the progressive philosophy molded his program.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Dan Voorhees Stephens, James P Latta, Victor Van Camp, James Brady, O E Walters, Doc Gates, Gilbert W Hitchcock, S C Lynde, Charles Mulloy, Seymour S Sidner, J J McCourt, Cass Grove Barns, G A Diels, John R Moackler, John H Knoell, W R Wilson, John Martin, N W Smails, Marc G Perkins, C R Schaeffer, John Peterson, Frank Hanlon, H L Walker, H F Haman, Roy Chappel, Marion James, L Wiegand, Fred Koehne, Oscar Widman, C H Christensen, George Springer, Otto Plambeck, J F Rohn, Alfred B Schoenauer, John Boyer, John Boyer, John E Hugg, W M Condon, Michael Paul Rogin, S D Phillips

Place Names: Fremont, Nebraska; Central City, Nebraska; Norfolk, Nebraska; Albion, Nebraska; Boone County, Nebraska; Hartington, Cedar County, Nebraska; Bloomfield, Nebraska; Humphrey, Nebraska

Keywords: Postal Department; Nansen preferential ballot; *Bloomfield Monitor; Albion Argus; Plainview News;* Platte County Democratic Central Committee; Oregon Pledge Law; Progressive Era

Photographs / Images: Congressman Dan V Stephens; Nansen preferential ballot used in 1915 Fremont election [Postmaster Election Ballot]

POST OFFICE PRIMARIES: AN EXPERIMENT IN DIRECT DEMOCRACY AND POSTAL REFORM

By J. Dennis McGuire

In the election of 1912, the presidency returned to Democratic hands for the first time since the 1890's, and the Democrats gained control of both houses of Congress.[1] The flames of progressivism had been fanned by President Woodrow Wilson's election, and in Nebraska the progressive movement had substantial momentum. The 1913 Nebraska Legislature found itself divided not by party affiliation but by ideology. It was divided between conservatism and progressivism, and according to the eminent Nebraska historian and Populist legislator Addison E. Sheldon, these differences showed themselves through fights over the increase in progressive legislation. Progressives in the 1913 session gave Nebraska a new insurance code, a revised initiative and referendum, laws to protect women workers, a minimum wage, workmen's compensation, and a non-partisan judiciary.[2] In the midst of this furor of progressive reform, Dan Voorhees Stephens of Fremont became the United States Representative from Nebraska's 3rd District.

Stephens, a Democrat and a strong supporter of President Wilson, was elected to the 62nd Congress to fill the vacancy left by James P. Latta, and served in the United States House of Representatives from November 7, 1911, to March 3, 1919.[3] While in office, Stephens was a champion of postal reform. The purpose of this article is to examine Stephens' contribution to postal reform—the post office primary system—to show how the system worked, and to illustrate how elements of the progressive philosophy molded his program.

According to Sheldon, postal appointments were traditionally based on active political services for United States senators and

congressmen who had the national administration's backing: "The basis for each postal appointment was the party service rendered by each appointee. In some cases very unpopular and even unqualified persons were appointed."[4] Post offices were grouped into four classes according to the amount of revenue they generated. In 1911, President William Howard Taft placed all fourth-class post offices under the jurisdiction of the Civil Service Commission.[5] Thereafter, positions to fourth-class post offices were filled by competitive examination, and there could be no change of postmasters except for moral cause, death, or resignation.[6] But congressmen retained the power to nominate postmasters for first-, second-, and third-class post offices. Thus the congressman had the prerogative of naming whomever he wished to fill these postitions. Stephens devised a system of primary elections in order to select the person whom he would name to fill a vacancy.[7]

Congressman Stephens had been in office for an entire year before the idea of post office primary elections occurred to him. On September 30, 1912, a Wilson and Marshall League had been formed in Central City for the purpose of aiding the Wilson campaign. After the election had been won, the league did not disband. In harmony with the Democratic Party's belief in majority rule, the league declared its opposition to the endorsement by members of the league or the county central committee of "any person for federal office within the county, unless that person shall have first received the endorsement of a majority of the Democrats in his village or city, expressed through a properly advertised caucus called for that purpose."[8] Feeling that such opposition was legitimate, Stephens suggested to his Central City constituents that they hold a primary election to decide on a postmaster. Hence, on December 21, 1912, an open primary was held at Central City. Five candidates had filed and E. H. Bishop won with a plurality of the votes.[9]

Reflecting upon the success of the experiment, Stephens said that the primary system was in strict accord with the party slogan, "Let the People Rule." On the other hand, the congressman seemed a bit wary that the plan would not always succeed as it had in Central City, and he confided in Bishop: "I don't care to have it understood that the election plan was my own suggestion."[10] But within a month he had acquired the confidence in the primary and had decided to utilize it throughout the 3rd District.

Only Democrats could file as candidates for postmaster, but Stephens felt strongly that Republican patrons of the office should be allowed to vote, so he encouraged each election committee to call an open primary.[11] The "Open Primary Law" was a progressive reform passed by the Nebraska Legislature in 1909. "Until then, only registered members of a party could vote in its primary; the new system allowed voters to vote in any one primary they wished, regardless of party affiliation."[12]

Stephens believed that direct appointment of postmasters was an unnecessary burden on congressmen, and many of his friends and supporters agreed. After the successful Central City primary, the chairman of the Merrick County Central Committee, Earl E. Boyd, wrote to Stephens: "We have found the right solution for this very vexing problem and . . . all of us have shifted the responsibility nicely upon the people themselves."[13] And in a letter to a Central City friend, Stephens said:

> This thankless job of recommending candidates for postmasters is not part of the constitutional duty of a congressman, and has been placed upon him by the executive through force of circumstances, because the President could never have personal knowledge of the merits of candidates.
>
> It has grown to be such a burden on congressmen . . . as to seriously interfere with the legitimate duties of his office as a legislator. On presidential years practically half or more of his time is taken up with this question of ascertaining the merits of candidates and giving everyone a fair and impartial hearing.[14]

Besides being a burdensome duty and a "thankless job," Stephens believed that too much political weight rested upon the appointments. In the first place, he found discontent to be universal, no matter whom he chose to fill positions, and that when election time came, his success at the polls depended greatly on whom he had appointed, rather than on his success as a legislator. Secondly, he was convinced that "primary elections for postmasters would be fair to the people and fair to the congressmen, who are rent in twain as a result of acting as a buffer between the president and the people. . . . Rule by the people is impossible when the people do not choose directly their servants." Stephens viewed the post office primary as an important step which would popularize this fundamental principle underlying government by the people.[15]

It is important to note that many Progressives did not advocate "direct democracy" proposals simply because they wanted to return government to the people. Michael Paul Rogin, assistant professor of political science in the University of California at

Congressman Dan V. Stephens.

Berkeley, argues that to many Progressives "the function of direct democracy was to aid social strata that had difficulty organizing groups to strive for government power themselves. The idea was to bring about rule by the unorganized middle class."[16] These progressives thought that direct democracy would eliminate the power of special interest groups and political parties, thus allowing the people to elect prominent and capable men to office. This elitist attitude simply asked that the people "recognize and select expert and efficient leaders and to follow their lead."[17]

Another progressive principle utilized by Stephens' philosophy was a characteristic moralism combined with a dislike for political machines. Stephens questioned the moral right of a congressman to pay off his political obligations by giving away post office jobs. "He has about as much moral or legal right to name a postmaster as he has to choose a ruler of the Fiji Islands."[18] The congressman's moralistic reasoning did not dampen the cry of those who advocated the spoils system. Many felt that the primary plan "removes all encouragement to party workers as they have nothing to expect in return for their service to the party."[19] Stephens felt, however, that it would be better for party men who have fought the political battles to earn their rewards through the popular vote rather than through political bosses. Stephens wrote to one postmaster hopeful: "It is possible under this system of distributing post offices and other appointive offices in the gift of the President, to raise a corruption fund that would control a

general national election. The way to cure it is to have the appointive power wiped out."[20]

Fourteen months after the initiation of the post office primary as standard procedure in his district, Stephens stated: "My rules simply take the post offices out of the spoils class by letting the Democrats of each office decide whom they want. They can let the Republicans vote if they choose to do so and they usually choose to let them vote. By this I cannot profit by my appointments." He likewise boasted that the corrupting influence of spoils in office was entirely removed from politics in his district.[21]

As Stephens laid the ground rules for the primary system, he allowed the Democratic Party a considerable degree of freedom. The local Democrats could decide in caucus whether or not to hold a primary. If at this caucus, it was decided not to have a primary, then the caucus was to elect its choice for postmaster.[22] Further, if it was decided to have a primary, the local Democrats could decide what sort of primary they wanted—either a closed primary in which only Democratic patrons could vote, or an open primary.[23] The *Albion Argus*, a Democratic newspaper, heralded Albion's open primary:

> Everyone who is a legal voter living within the jurisdiction of the Albion Post Office or gets mail over a rural route from Albion may vote . . . Republicans, Bull Moosers, Progressives, Reactionaries, and Prohibitionists may touch elbows with the Democrats on that day. Only women, Chinamen, and horse thieves are ruled out.[24]

Although Stephens favored the open primary plan and always recommended it, he felt that he had no right to say to the Democrats of any town that they *must* let the other parties vote. That was for them to decide.[25] However, if debate and haggling arose over what sort of primary to hold, Stephens usually felt obliged to intervene and settle the issue.[26] He ordered an open primary to be held at Norfolk,[27] and when factional strife at Albion threatened to deadlock the election committee, Stephens almost intervened there as well.

The Albion primary provides a good example of the political problems encountered in the open primaries and succinctly illustrates how Stephens' rules worked to counter these problems. The rules described the method by which the election committee was to be selected. The responsibility for assuring that the primary was conducted properly was given to the local Democratic committeeman, who automatically assumed the chairmanship of the election committee.[28] Each candidate furnished him with a

list of men whom that candidate preferred to represent him on the committee. The committeeman was to make up his committee by selecting one of the male members from each candidate's list.[29] The committee's first task was to verify that each candidate was indeed a Democrat:

> The committee should reject all candidates who have not been consistent adherents of the Democratic party. If any candidate should have his party allegiance challenged the committee may, if in doubt, require the candidate to file a sworn statement to the effect that he is a consistent adherent of the Democratic party and that he voted, if he had the right to vote, for the last two Democratic Presidential candidates, which evidence shall constitute his eligibility as a candidate at a postmaster election.30

On the passing of the candidates, those approved were to meet with the committee to decide whether the primary was to be open or closed. Thus the primaries were designed to be free from the influence of caucuses. After the election Stephens would then recommend the winner of the primary to the postmaster general, who would conduct an investigation of the man to be appointed. With the postmaster general's verification, and with the approval of the President, the "appointee" received his post.[31] In the end the people did not have the last word in the matter. For this reason, the exercise was called a "primary" as opposed to an "election."

At Albion on February 2, 1914, Victor Van Camp, the Boone County committeeman received a telegram from Stephens, which informed him that he had been appointed to chair the Albion election committee. After considering the matter he declined the appointment on February 11, giving the excuse that he did not want to become the butt of factional strife.[32] Moreover, the Boone County Central Committee was disturbed with Stephens' rule calling for the committeeman to select his committee members from lists submitted by the candidates. Stephens informed the central committee that it should not meddle with the primary plans, because the members of the committee were not, as a body, patrons of the Albion Post Office. He told them that each candidate was to have his representative on the election committee to insure that a committee composed of enemies biased against certain candidates would not be possible. Further, Van Camp should not have balked because there was minimal responsibility attached to selecting the committee members.[33]

The dissent over the method of selecting the election committee was overshadowed by a larger controversy. Actually, the county central committee resented not being allowed to elect a

postmaster or vote to call a primary in caucus. In reply, Stephens told James Brady, an influential central committee member:

> Whenever I have left it to the members of the County Central Committee who were patrons of the office to form the election committee, anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of them have failed to take any notice of the call or to participate in the proceedings and it invariably becomes necessary for the chairman to hurriedly appoint other men to take their places and these hurriedly appointed men were often unsatisfactory to the candidates and the people.[34]

After Van Camp declined Stephens asked Brady to take the responsibility of committeeman. But Brady disqualified himself by filing as a candidate for postmaster, so on Stephens' order, Brady delegated the responsibility jointly to Victor Van Camp, O. E. Walters, and Doc Gates.[35]

In conference Brady and Van Camp decided to call a caucus with Van Camp as the officiating officer. Stephens warned that since caucuses could be manipulated, the entire plan would be attacked as a political scheme by critics in Albion. He again asked them to follow his rules, which maintained that *if* a caucus were called, the only thing which that body could decide was whether to have an open or closed primary. Under no circumstances could a postmaster be named in a caucus.[36] The caucus in early March voted 111 to 89 to hold an open primary on March 21.[37] On primary day a blizzard impeded full voting. S. D. Phillips won over James Brady, 287 to 175.[38]

The losers of the Albion primary bitterly called upon Stephens to investigate Phillips' campaign, claiming that it had been conducted dishonestly.[39] This drive to unseat Phillips continued for three years, until in February of 1917, a postal inspector demanded investigation anew. James Brady wrote to Senator Gilbert W. Hitchcock, making it clear that should Phillips lose his seat, Brady considered himself open for the job, and wished to be appointed. Dan Stephens stood by the people's choice and informed Senator Hitchcock that the Postal Department had no intention of making any change.[40]

Closed primaries were not as common as open primaries, mainly because Stephens discouraged them when he could, and the local people usually respected his opinions and suggestions when they were preparing the ground for an election. The town of Hartington in Cedar County decided to conduct a closed primary on January 31, 1914.[41] The losing aspirants of this primary complained that the winner, S. C. Lynde, was actually a Republican, and that Republicans had voted in the primary.

Whether this happened or not, it was one problem that a closed primary election committee had difficulty in regulating. Supposedly, an open primary would have eliminated such problems.[42] Stephens refused to reopen the matter at Hartington, pointing out that Lynde had received not a mere plurality, but a majority of the Democratic vote.[43]

Stephens complicated his innovative primary plan by introducing a new balloting system known as the "Wisconsin preferential plan" or the "Nansen preferential ballot." The Nansen system was useful in elections in which more than two candidates were running for the same office. Stephens employed this plan at the Fremont primary on January 28, 1915, the debut of the Nansen system in Nebraska. Nine aspirants to the office of postmaster had filed in Fremont. Each voter expressed his preference for *each* candidate on a scale of one to nine, and the votes were counted in the order marked on the ballot. At Fremont failure to observe the instructions printed on the ballots resulted in seventy-two ballots being thrown out, and it took twelve hours to count 1,876 ballots. With the Nansen method of counting, it is possible for the candidate who pulled the highest number of "firsts" to lose the election, as was the case in Fremont. Charles Mulloy received the highest number of "firsts," but N. W. Smails received more "seconds" and "thirds," which gave him the election.[44]

Prior to urging the Fremont election committee to use the Nansen system, Stephens explored its ramifications. Would it be possible for the small choice candidates to influence their followers and have them vote the last choice for their opponents? If so, would such a voting pattern still reflect the wishes of the majority?[45] Stephens corresponded with astute friends about the matter, and Fremont Superintendent of Schools Seymour S. Sidner eased his doubts about the preferential system. Sidner pointed out that in a race with ten contenders in the field, only one-eighth of the vote could go to each man if they all ran close. Thus the Nansen plan would divide the opposition and open it up so that certain candidates might have a better chance to come out ahead. Sidner cautioned Stephens that the names on the ballots should be rotated to prevent giving the highest person on the ballot some advantages over those at the bottom.[46]

The aftermath of the preferential primaries brought the usual criticisms before the public. The Republican *Bloomfield Monitor*

accused the Nansen system of giving free encouragement to the personal animosities of the voter against his neighbor: "The candidates might be all good and competent men, but the voter must search within his soul for reasons—be they political, religious, business-oriented, or a personal grudge—to disqualify those candidates who are not his first choice." The *Monitor* bemoaned not the choice of the people but the system used, which "makes an overloaded cuspidor of the losers in the race."[47]

Aside from criticism from the press, there were those in Bloomfield who privately criticized the preferential plan. One loser at Bloomfield told Stephens that the Nansen method should be discontinued. In defense of the Nansen system, Stephens cited the Norfolk primary where the candidate won on a very narrow plurality:

> At Norfolk, the candidate winning received only 452 votes out of a total of 1,750 votes that were cast. His nearest rival received 448 votes, making a total of 900 that these two candidates received, leaving 850 votes divided up among several remaining candidates. Now, it must be quite apparent that, had these 850 voters been asked to express their preferences, as between the two leading candidates, the results might have been different. The people might have wanted the man who received only 448 votes, instead of the one who received 452 votes. So my effort has been to develop a system that would actually register the preferences of the people to the minutest degree, and the Nansen system appears to do that.[48]

Even though the regular method of voting could, in cases where four or more candidates filed, result in a postmaster elected by a minority, the people seemed willing to accept the results while the preferential plan was new and did not seem to please the electorate. This factor figured largely in Stephens' decision to abandon the preferential system. In a letter to J. J. McCourt, a critic at Bloomfield, Stephens wrote:

> The trouble is, the Nansen System is new and the people are not used to it, and therefore affords a new source of complaint, which has almost led me to the conclusion that it is not worth the bother, as a permanent practice. I am inclined to think I shall not use it again, not because I do not believe in it, but simply because men whom I regard very highly do not like it, and are perfectly willing to use the plurality system.[49]

Fremont and Bloomfield remained the only two of the fifty-four eligible post offices to use the Nansen preferential plan.[50]

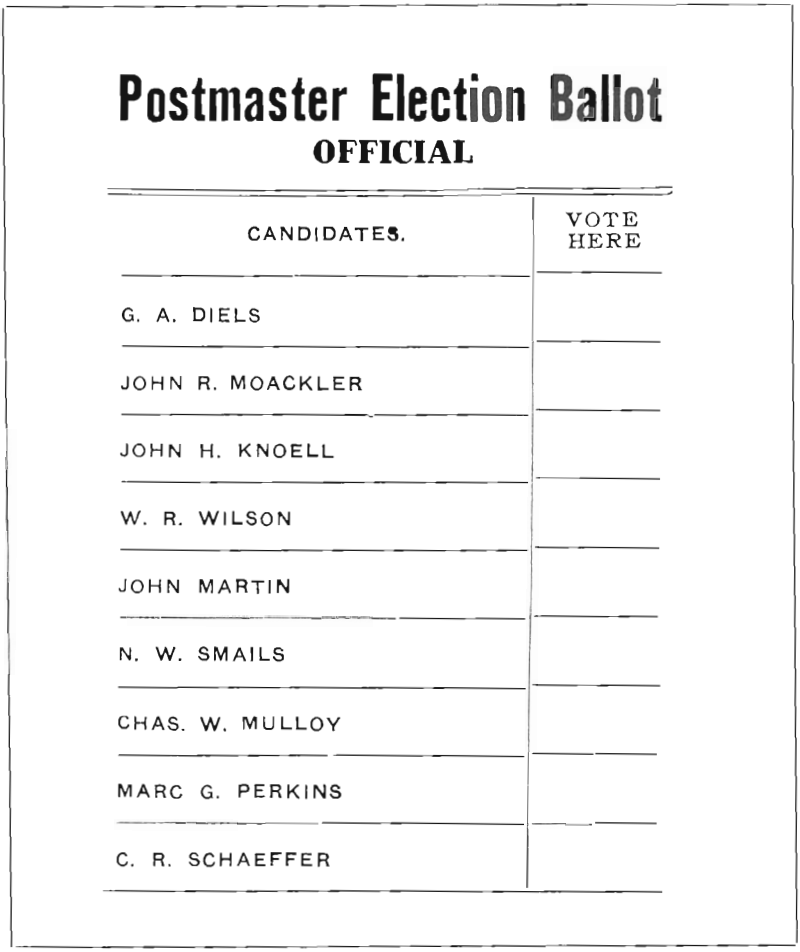
In his rules Congressman Stephens provided the method by which the post office primaries were to be financed. Each candidate for postmaster paid a filing fee, the amount of which was to be decided by the election committee—an amount which, in their judgement, would be sufficient to cover the cost of the election. The amount which remained unspent was to be prorated

and returned to the candidates after the election. Following is a financial summary of the Fremont election in which each of the nine candidates paid a filing fee of $50.00:[51]

FREMONT FINANCIAL SUMMARY

Received from candidates		$450.00
Paid for stamps	$10.77	
Paid John Peterson for getting building in readiness and janitor service	14.40	
Paid Western Union Telegraph Co.	1.20	
Paid Frank Hanlon for candles	.35	
Paid Union Transfer Co. for hauling adding machine	.50	
Paid Kavich for rent of tables and chairs	9.00	
Paid Rexroth for hauling booths	2.00	
Paid Trotter for electric wiring	1.00	
Paid Hammond & Stephens Co. for ruled sheets	1.07	
Paid Herald Co., notice and ballots	1.07	
Paid Hammond Ptg. Co., notice and poll-books	12.75	
Paid H. L. Walker for turning water on and off in building	1.75	
Paid H. F. Haman, Judge	18.00	
Paid Roy Chappel, Judge	18.00	
Paid Marion James, Judge	18.00	
Paid L. Wiegand, Judge	18.00	
Paid Fred Koehne, Judge	18.00	
Paid Oscar Widman, Judge	18.00	
Paid C. H. Christensen, Judge	18.00	
Paid George Springer, Judge	18.00	
Paid Otto Plambeck, Judge	18.00	
Paid J. F. Rohn as secretary	18.00	
Paid express	.51	
Total	$266.46	$266.46
Balance		$183.54
One-ninth to be returned to each candidate		$ 20.39

The post office primaries were sometimes met with public enthusiasm, but the candidates as a rule were speculative. Many could not understand why Stephens did not simply appoint one of them as postmaster and avoid the inconvenience of an election. But when a candidate lost an election, mild speculation turned often to bitter resentment. Some candidates leveled poisonous accusations at the congressman, claiming that he had promised them the appointment before the primary plan was instituted, and that Stephens had deprived them of their rightful reward.[52] But the most stinging criticism came from newspaper editors who had not acquired their desired position as postmasters. In March of 1914, for example, Dr. Cass Grove Barns, editor of the *Albion Argus*, accused Stephens of "aspiring to a life of ease by evading the task that falls to congressmen . . . by turning the



Postmaster Election Ballot

OFFICIAL

CANDIDATES.	VOTE HERE
G. A. DIELS	
JOHN R. MOACKLER	
JOHN H. KNOELL	
W. R. WILSON	
JOHN MARTIN	
N. W. SMAILS	
CHAS. W. MULLOY	
MARC G. PERKINS	
C. R. SCHAEFFER	

Detail from Nansen preferential ballot used in 1915 Fremont election. Voters were required to rate choices from first to ninth.

responsibility over to the people." Barns denounced the primary: "It is a handy device to keep Stephens from having to fight the Republicans. . . . What Stephens thinks is a streak of reform and progressivism is only a yellow streak. Better cut it out, Dan, and be a Democrat again." Barns indicated that over thirty Democratic newspapers in the 3rd District were fighting the primaries.[53]

In order to counter such accusations, Stephens defended his primary system in the press. When Editor Alfred B. Schoenauer of the *Plainview News* lost a primary and editorially attacked

Stephens' policies, Stephens publicly replied: "Had I named Editor Schoenauer postmaster, he would have eulogized me often . . . but now he attacks me, indicating that he resents not being subsidized by a post office appointment. This example shows how the appointive power becomes a great corruptor of political morals."[54] Further, Stephens claimed that a few disappointed editors had joined with selfish political bosses to discredit the primary system. The bosses were roundly denounced as "selfish, greedy, political bluffers, who use the people to further their own selfish needs."[55]

The matter of who was to gain the position of postmaster, whether by appointment or by means of a primary, was often intensely political. In order to guard against political manipulation of his system, it was imperative that Stephens lay down concrete rules of procedure. But, the rules were not invulnerable. Not long after the implementation of his primary plan, the congressman was to learn by experience some fundamental lessons which would help strengthen his system. His rules made it plain that whenever there was a contest for the position of postmaster, a primary would be called. If there was no contest, then a primary would be pointless, and Stephens would appoint a postmaster. In the town of Humphrey, this rule backed Stephens into a corner. Some months before Stephens decided upon his primary plan, John Boyer of Humphrey had applied for the appointment and had circulated a petition in Humphrey for endorsements. Practically every eligible voter in Humphrey signed Boyer's petition.[56] He was also unanimously endorsed by the Platte County Democratic Central Committee.[57] Two other men sent in applications, but they were totally devoid of endorsements. After waiting five months Stephens assumed that since there were neither petitions nor endorsements for the latter two applicants, there was no contest and promised to appoint Boyer at the proper time.58 Perhaps Stephens was a bit hasty, for he promised the appointment a full fifteen months before the vacancy occurred. This provided plenty of time for rival factions in the party to engage in political infighting.

John Boyer was supported by the faction led by John E. Hugg, cashier of the First National Bank of Humphrey. Stephens respected and liked Hugg, and the two were politically friendly towards one another.[59] The other faction was led by Dr. W. M. Condon, president of the Bank of Ottis and Murphey of

Humphrey. In the summer of 1913, the Condon faction began to agitate for a primary and encouraged several men to file as candidates. Stephens assured these applicants that had they announced themselves sooner when petitions were being circulated numerously for Boyer, a primary would have been called. To one of these late applicants Stephens wrote: "I note that you state you have been urged to become a candidate even in the face of the fact that practically everyone knows that Mr. Boyer has been recommended. I hope you are not being misled by any designing politician there who is attempting to embarrass me."[60]

Condon harangued Stephens via the mails and the press, accusing him of reneging on his promises to the people: "After having read your lofty statements about 'letting the people rule' and comparing them to the flimsy excuses you have given patrons of this office for refusing them a primary, one cannot help but recall the famous characters of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."[61] If indeed Condon was trying to embarrass Stephens, he was successful. The congressman was in a delicate situation because he had two promises outstanding. The first was a general promise to the people of the 3rd District that they had a right to choose their own postmasters, and the second was a promise to John Boyer that he would receive the appointment. Condon's attacks were breaking Stephens' steadfastness, and the congressman began to weaken. In a letter to John Hugg, Stephens expressed his doubts as to what course to take.[62]

Meanwhile, Dr. Condon circulated a petition in Humphrey calling for a primary. This petition was signed by all but four men, men who knew that the congressman could suffer from such a petition. Obviously the petition for Boyer and the petition for a primary contained a high percentage of duplicate signatures. Here was a lesson which Stephens learned quickly: petitions, because of social pressures exerted by the petitioner, are not adequate expressions of the desires of the people.[63] People do not consider it a crime to sign two or more petitions, especially if the petitioners are friends or customers. His doubts relieved by reassurances from Hugg that the people would stand behind the Boyer appointment, Stephens sent an open letter to the signers of the second petition explaining his position in the matter. The Boyer appointment would stand.[64] In early October, 1913, the sheriff of Platte County conducted an investigation which showed that the residents of Humphrey were well satisfied with the

endorsement of John Boyer.[65] In late January, 1914, Boyer assumed the postmastership.[66]

Stephens had had a close political scrape. Had he backed down before the Condon faction, he may have had no friends left in his district, or so John Hugg indicated. But he came through it all politically intact, and learned two lessons from the ordeal: first, decisions on whether or not there was a contest were not to be made too far in advance, and second, petitions were not to be relied upon as reflectors of public sentiment.

Dan V. Stephens believed in his post office primaries, and in March, 1914, he confided in a friend that he was working on a House bill requiring that postmasters be elected.[67]

Stephens carried out fifty-four primaries between December, 1912, and March, 1917. On April 1, 1917, by means of executive order from President Wilson,[68] first-, second-, and third-class post offices were placed on the civil service list, taking the matter of recommendation completely out of the hands of congressmen.[69] Thus, post office positions were removed from the political arena.[70]

The post office primaries were a unique contribution to Nebraska progressivism, and Congressman Stephens effectively utilized basic progressive tenets in his program. He had a great concern for the principles of direct democracy and desired to exterminate the influence of political bosses. "In the Middle West," says Michael Paul Rogin, "the direct (open) primary . . . was necessary to combat machine control of the states."[71] Stephens had confidence in the people and the results of the primaries showed him that the people could satisfactorily decide questions of local government for themselves.[72] In feeling that the appointive prerogative of congressmen was a burden, he was merely echoing the discontent of the Nebraska Legislature, which in 1909 passed the "Oregon Pledge Law," allowing the direct election of United States senators. Like Stephens and his postmaster appointments, the Legislature viewed its responsibility for choosing senators as cumbersome, undemocratic, and offensive—offensive because the process often resulted in bribery and other dishonest activities.[73] Stephens' introduction of one of Wisconsin's progressive ideas, the Nansen primary, further reveals his spirit of fairness and democracy.

There were some effective and astute arguments against the post office primaries, arguments which challenged Stephens'

motives for giving up his congressional prerogative. It is difficult to determine his motives or to discern whether those motives were influenced by a possibility of personal gain or by a spirit of patriotic egalitarianism. Other students of progressivism have seen that "in studying political life in the Progressive Era, the fundamental problem of the historian is to make a clear distinction between political ideology and actual political practice."[74] Although Stephens' post office primaries are not well known in the annals of Nebraska history, they were a significant manifestation of Democratic progressivism in the Middle West.

NOTES

1. Allen Weinstein and R. Jackson Wilson, *Freedom and Crisis: An American History*, (New York: Random House, 1974), 2, 576.
2. James F. Pedersen and Kenneth D. Wald, *Shall the People Rule?* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Jacob North, Inc., 1972), 186.
3. *Fremont Daily Tribune*, January 13, 1939.
4. Addison E. Sheldon, "A Bureaucratic Institution . . ." (editorial), *Nebraska History*, 24 (April-June, 1943), 116.
5. Fourth-class post offices generated the least amount of revenue—less than $250 per quarter. Dan V. Stephens to E. W. Galbraith, February 14, 1913, Dan V. Stephens Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska. Hereafter cited as Stephens Papers.
6. Stephens to C. J. Reynolds, March 10, 1913, Stephens Papers.
7. Scope and content note of inventory to Stephens Papers.
8. J. T. McLean to Stephens, November 13, 1912, Stephens Papers.
9. E. H. Bishop to Stephens, December 23, 1912, *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Stephens to Cass G. Barns, October 1, 1913, *Ibid.*
12. Pedersen and Wald, 172.
13. Earl E. Boyd to Stephens, December 24, 1912, Stephens Papers.
14. "Stephens for Public Choice," *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 1, 1913.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967), 197.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Stephens to George A. Agnew, December 28, 1912, Stephens Papers.
19. Merrick County Democratic Central Committee to Stephens, June 10, 1912, *Ibid.*
20. Stephens to George A. Agnew, December 28, 1912, *Ibid.*
21. *Omaha World Herald*, March 23, 1914.
22. Stephens to C. B. Van Kirk, March 7, 1913, Stephens Papers.
23. Stephens to Cass G. Barns, October 1, 1913, *Ibid.*
24. *Albion Argus*, March 19, 1914, 4.
25. Stephens to Cass G. Barns, October 1, 1913, Stephens Papers.
26. Stephens to Charles E. Jones, November 17, 1913, *Ibid.*
27. Stephens to O. E. Walters, January 17, 1914, *Ibid.*
28. Stephens to Cass G. Barns, October 1, 1913, *Ibid.*
29. Stephens to Victor Van Camp, January 28, 1914, *Ibid.*

30. Stephens to T. S. Rutledge, September 28, 1915, *Ibid.*
31. Stephens to Cass G. Barns, October 1, 1913, *Ibid.*
32. Van Camp to Stephens, February 11, 1914, *Ibid.* Factional problems also occurred at Bancroft, in Cuming County. Bancroft's party was strongly factional, and a chairman who was neither a "wet advocate" nor a "dry advocate" had to be chosen in order to pacify each faction, as seen in Charles Graff to Stephens, July 1, 1915, *Ibid.*
33. Stephens to D.J. Poynter, February 16, 1914, *Ibid.*
34. Stephens to James T. Brady, February 16, 1914, *Ibid.*
35. Stephens to D.J. Poynter, February 16, 1914, *Ibid.*
36. Stephens to James T. Brady, February 20, 1914, *Ibid.*
37. O. E. Walters to Stephens, March 5, 1914, *Ibid.*
38. Cass G. Barns to Stephens, March 23, 1914, *Ibid.*
39. Jones, Watson, Brady, and Wallick to Stephens, March 30, 1914, *Ibid.*
40. Stephens to Senator G. M. Hitchcock, February 6, 1917, *Ibid.*
41. *Cedar County News*, n.d. (late January, 1914), clipping.
42. The open primary was not, however, immune to abuse. For example, in the 1908 gubernatorial elections, 15,000 Republicans, (who could legally vote on a Democratic ballot), goaded on by liquor propagandists, descended upon the Democratic primary and voted for the "wet" candidates. Most of the "wet" candidates on the ballot got nominations. Pedersen and Wald, 176.
43. Z. M. Baird to Stephens, February 2, 1914, Stephens Papers.
44. *Norfolk News*, June 29, 1915, 6.
45. Stephens to A. H. Waterhouse, December 12, 1914, Stephens Papers.
46. Seymour S. Sidner to Stephens, December 17, 1914, *Ibid.*
47. "The Nansen System," *Bloomfield Monitor*, February 18, 1915.
48. Stephens to J. J. McCourt, February 20, 1915, Stephens Papers.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Inventory to the Stephens Papers.
51. Expense report of Fremont primary, Stephens Papers.
52. Stephens to George A. Agnew, August 26, 1914, *Ibid.*
53. "Post Office Election," *Albion Argus*, March 26, 1914, 6.
54. *Omaha World Herald*, March 23, 1914, 3.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Stephens to P. E. McKillip, September 3, 1913, Stephens Papers.
57. Petition for John Boyer, December 2, 1912, *Ibid.*
58. Stephens to P. E. McKillip, September 3, 1913, *Ibid.*
59. John E. Hugg to Stephens, November 30, 1912, *Ibid.*
60. Stephens to Thomas D. Robinson, July 19, 1913, *Ibid.*
61. Dr. W. M. Condon to Stephens, August 28, 1913, *Ibid.*
62. Stephens to John E. Hugg, August 26, 1913, *Ibid.*
63. F. J. Pratt to Stephens, September 19, 1913, *Ibid.*
64. Open Letter, Stephens to Humphrey patrons, September 19, 1913, *Ibid.*
65. Sheriff Henry C. Lachnit to Stephens, October 11, 1913, *Ibid.*
66. Stephens to John Boyer, January 28, 1914, *Ibid.*
67. Stephens to O. E. Walters, March 20, 1917, *Ibid.*
68. Stephens to N. H. Wallace, March 15, 1917, *Ibid.*
69. Stephens to Anton Ruzicka, April 11, 1917, *Ibid.*
70. Stephens to E. W. Galbraith, February 14, 1913, *Ibid.*
71. Rogin, 196.
72. Stephens to Earl E. Boyd, January 7, 1912, Stephens Papers.
73. Pedersen and Wald, 171.
74. Samuel P. Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 55 (Seattle: October, 1964), 169.