

Governor Stark and the Machine

When in the 1936 campaign I announced as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for governor, I had no illusions as to the result. I have watched politics in Missouri reaching back to the days when, as a boy, I used to gaze in awe at Senator Vest as he and his cronies swapped yarns about the Civil War in the old Madison House lobby, and often the tall, stooped form of Senator Cockerell joined the circle; and so later I recall when Col. Bill Phelps was at the height of his power, and when such colorful characters as "General" Billy Rider, and "Fire Alarm" Flanagan ornamented the sessions of the Legislature; it was during this period that the late Senator William Joel Stone became the Plumed Knight of the Missouri Democracy, and I shall ever prize highly the close friendship that grew up between us — I have seen many political leaders come and go in Missouri, but Stone was the ablest and most daring of them all, and except that he was a master political strategist, and never asked for quarter from an adversary, he was a statesman of the first rank, and a man of the highest personal integrity.

I refer to the above forgotten history merely as evidence that, politically speaking, I have seen a lot of water go over the dam, and therefore when I entered the gubernatorial contest my only hope was that I might help to arouse the people of our State against the infamy of the Pendergast machine, and thus contribute my modest part toward its end; in discussing the candidacy of Governor Stark during the campaign, I freely paid tribute to his high standing as a man and citizen, but having received the endorsement of the big Kansas City boss, I predicted that when he became governor he would "go along", and I think this was the belief of many others who are familiar with practical politics, and thus when during the campaign Stark repeatedly insisted that he was for "clean elections", I took it with a grain of salt. However, when the Governor failed to name new election commissioners in Kansas City while the Legislature was in session I began to wonder, and when later in a conference with Pendergast it was stated in the newspapers that he had flatly refused to reappoint Bellemere and Aylward I realized that something

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unusual was happening, and as time has passed my attitude for the Governor's courage

has become one of unstinted admiration. Briefly here are the high lights of Stark's acts since he took office, all of which have been body blows to the machine:

First, he appointed a board of election commissioners in Kansas City who have struggled heroically to put an end to the crookedest elections the Nation has ever known, and in this effort the machine has bitterly fought them every step of the way, and with good reason; by casting tens of thousands of ghost votes the machine has not only ruthlessly controlled Kansas City and Jackson county for years, but by rolling up a beastly and fraudulent majority it has been able to nominate and elect a Charley McCarthy U. S. Senator, and to name its favorites to other high state offices, including Justices of the Supreme Court. Not in the palmy days of Croker and Murphy did Tammany yield a power so far-reaching or ruthless, and so the Mellon machine in Pittsburgh, and the Vare machine in Philadelphia, were mere sideshows in comparison. In late years the machine has reached out into the State, and thus during recent elections small and extremely practical Pendergast machines have been on the job in almost every county.

Second, when former State Superintendent of Insurance R. E. O'Malley impudently criticized certain acts of the Governor, the latter promptly kicked him out, and since O'Malley was a particular pet of the big boss, this demonstrated that the parting of the ways had definitely arrived.

Third, the Governor announced that when in the future the different state departments need legal advice they shall look to the Attorney General, and by this he served notice on the pet lawyers of the machine that the buzzard's feast of recent years at Jefferson City was at an end, and that this announcement caused wailing and gnashing of teeth nobody can doubt.

Fourth, he declared that in his opinion the impounded fire insurance funds at Jefferson City belonged 100% to the policy holders, and instructed the

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attorneys representing the State to proceed accordingly, and as everybody knows, the Supreme Court sustained him, and again there was wailing and gnashing of teeth, and these lamentations continue to be a smoldering fire.

Fifth, when Maurice L. Milligan came up for re-appointment as U. S. District Attorney at Kansas City, the Governor lost no time in letting it be known that he favored the retention of this courageous prosecutor, and thus if any doubt still existed that he has rolled up his sleeves to compel honest elections in Kansas City, this put an end to all such speculation — Stark knows that so long as the prosecution of election crooks in Kansas City rests with officials controlled by the machine the work of his election commissioners will be a case of love's labor lost.

Sixth, some months ago the Governor declared war on slot machines and other gambling devices, and instructed the Attorney General to go after them, and soon or late this crusade will knock at the door of Kansas City where the underworld has long regarded gambling as a prescriptive right.

Seventh, in declaring that the old age pension rolls must be purged of those who have been placed upon them through a political "pull", the Governor made a demand that is certain to cause grief in Kansas City where there are twice as many persons on the rolls as in St. Louis which has twice the population.

Eighth, recently the Governor named John M. Cleary to fill a vacant circuit judgeship in Jackson county, and the machine promptly announced that it will defeat him in the August primary.

And now what do the foregoing acts mean? They mean that, politically speaking, something new under the sun has happened in Missouri during recent months — that without any blowing of trumpets, Stark has become the spearhead, against the most corrupt political machine that ever shamed a great commonwealth, and this at a time when the Democratic politicians of our State, from the highest to the lowest, have been crawling upon their bellies before the big boss. And the Governor has thrown down the gauntlet in this fateful battle single-handed

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and alone, and it is high time that, irrespective of party, those who love decent government in Missouri became aroused to this fact, and got behind him, and it is with this hope that I am making this statement. I say that the Governor is fighting the machine

single-handed and alone because, since most politicians are cowards, they are sitting on the fence to see how the battle will end ere they shout, "The king is dead, long live the king!"

With no previous experience in State affairs, and an extremely poor press agent in his own behalf in telling the newspapers about what he has done, or expects to do, and with no veteran advisers whom he can trust, these things render the above struggle all the more unique and dramatic — no doubt the Governor has spent many lonely hours in his home and office during the last year, but whatever perplexities may have harassed him, this much is clear — he started out to be his own man, and he is making good.

Meanwhile has Stark violated any pledge he may have made to Pendergast back during the primary days? In my opinion, and regardless of what may have passed between them, nobody who has watched the Governor perform since he took his oath of office will believe that he tied his hands in any important respect, for as the old saying goes, "murder will out" — to a man up a tree it would seem that the big boss took too much for granted, and thus he is a wiser if sadder man.

How will the machine strike back at the Governor? No doubt it will strive to elect as many of its followers to the Legislature this fall as possible, and therefore if there ever was a time when the people should scrutinize their legislative candidates mercilessly, this should apply to the approaching primary and election. Again, according to recent newspaper statements the machine will back State Senator Albert Clark of Ray county for the Supreme Court seat now held by William P. Prank, Republican, who is a candidate for re-election; Judge Prank wrote the opinion recently when by a majority of one vote the Court held that the Jefferson City insurance funds should be returned to the policy holders and thus,

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needless to say, Frank is not popular with the machine. There are also rumors that the machine will go after the scalp of Judge James M. Dougless who is a Stark appointee from St. Louis, and who will be a candidate to succeed himself, and thus unless all signs fail, the greatest battle over the personnel of the Supreme Court in the history of the State is in the offing.

During recent weeks, and especially since the re-appointment of Milligan as U. S. District Attorney, many have been saying, "The machine is on the way out", but in my opinion this prediction is premature; undoubtedly between them the Governor and Milligan have greatly weakened it, but whether or not the machine will keep on doing business at the old stand depends on what the voters of Kansas City do on March 29th — if on this fateful day these voters elect the coalition ticket, then the machine will become nothing more than a hideous memory, while if the machine wins, and thus remains in position to intimidate the people of Kansas City, it will continue as an evil influence not only locally, but in State affairs, and as evidence that this is what the machine expects to do, witness the battle that is apparently in prospect over the Supreme Court! In the recent primary the machine cast approximately 86,000 votes, while the coalition forces cast only 38,000, but meanwhile some 90,000 qualified voters remained away from the polls, and on March 29th the latter will have it in their power not only to restore the fair name of Kansas City before the Nation, but that of our great State which has long hung its head in shame; and as self-respecting Americans and Missourians, will they not strike corrupt political bossism a blow that will be on the front page of every newspaper in the Country? Out in the State we who love decent government, and who are helpless in these premises, prayerfully hope so.

My own horseback opinion has long been that in their attitude toward the machine the business interests of Kansas City are divided into two groups — first, those who receive favors from the machine, and who therefore want it to remain in power, and second, a much larger group who hate it, but who for one reason or another fear it, and included in the latter are no doubt thousands of everyday

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citizens; but among the 90,000 who recently remained away from the polls, are there not enough men and women who have the red blood of their ancestors in their veins to strike a blow for decent government in this, the greatest opportunity they have had in years? Do they not owe this much to their election commissioners, and to the Governor and Mr. Milligan who are heroically endeavoring to make honest elections in Kansas City possible?

What an intolerable and humiliating situation it is when business men are compelled to patronize "rackets" that belong to the machine, and when citizens fear that something may happen to their water, telephone or gas service if some precinct captain doesn't think well of them — in these premises have the people of Kansas City much right to criticize the conditions that exist in Russia, Italy and Germany these times?

As one contemplates what has happened in Kansas City during recent years under the rule of the machine, what a sordid picture it reveals! Among the high lights of this picture are the Union Station massacre, and the erstwhile comings and goings of the late Pretty Boy Floyd and other public enemies; the kidnappings of prominent citizens and murders and sluggings that have gone unpunished to this hour, and gambling dens that operate as openly as was the custom in the days of the old West; of hoodlums who terrorize honest business concerns, and which during recent months has caused certain large concerns to consider moving their plants to cities where law and order are maintained, and finally there is the spectacle of the constantly increasing number of convicted election crooks who are heading for Leavenworth and other prisons - in God's name, how much longer will the men and women of Kansas City tolerate these conditions? How much longer will they cower in fear before a machine that has not only shamed their fair city, but the proud commonwealth of Missouri before the entire Nation? In the coming city election the 90,000 voters who remained away from the polls in the recent primary will have an opportunity to put an end to corrupt political bossism in our State, and every Missourian who loves decent government is anxiously awaiting the outcome.