

THE JOSEPH LANE PAPERS IN THE ROBERT S. ELLISON COLLECTION

By OSCAR OSBURN WINTHER

Few men are so illustrative of the American tradition of self-made frontiersmen as is Joseph Lane—Southerner, “Marion of Indiana,” and one-time first citizen of Oregon Territory. Lane’s home had been southern Indiana, and like so many of his neighbors, his antecedents were from below the River. Born in North Carolina in 1801, at three he was taken by his parents to Kentucky; and then at fourteen, young Joseph moved across the Ohio to Indiana. There Lane married Mary Hart who bore him ten children—six sons and four daughters.

Lane began life in Indiana as a store clerk. He subsequently served as an Indiana state legislator, rose from private to major general in the Mexican War, was first Governor of Oregon Territory, four times Oregon’s territorial delegate, one of Oregon’s first two United States senators, and vice-presidential candidate on the Breckinridge ticket in the national election of 1860. The remaining twenty years of Lane’s life were spent, not unhappily, in almost complete retirement on his land claim, “Mountain Ranch,” twelve miles from Roseburg, Oregon.

On the basis of material at her disposal, Sister M. Margaret Jean Kelly, in 1942, had published by the Catholic University of America Press what remains the latest and most ably written political biography of Lane, entitled *The Career of Joseph Lane, Frontier Politician*. This book,

however, has one serious drawback, one readily admitted by Sister Jean, who wrote in the preface: "It was not possible to see a collection of Lane letters now in the possession of Mr. Robert S. Ellison, which might have contributed some new facts concerning Lane's career." As a memorial to the now deceased Robert S. Ellison, his widow donated to Indiana University the valuable Ellison Collection of Western Americana which includes the aforementioned Lane papers. The manuscripts exceed three thousand items and possibly equal the combined number of Lane manuscripts known to exist in the Oregon Historical Society Library and elsewhere.

The papers do not alter to any appreciable extent Sister Jean's account of Lane's ancestry and early youth. Lane remains descended from a long line of industrious, capable, Indian-fighting frontiersmen, some of whom held official positions. There is, however, one 1847 letter from Lane's cousin, W. D. Suckie, revealing family relationships that may not have been known even to Lane himself. Suckie extolled the Lanes as brave fighters, especially an uncle, Captain Charles Lane, who, during the thick of an Indian battle, lived to receive the news of his own death. As for himself, Cousin Suckie apologizes for "never having filled any office higher than that of a representative in the Legislature."

There is no new evidence that Lane's formal education exceeded that of his fellow one-time Kentuckian and Hoosier, Abraham Lincoln. One item credits young Joseph with four months' attendance at a country school four miles from home, to and from which the future politician walked barefooted. With the exception of Joseph Lane, who through self-education achieved above-average literacy, it

is probably not incorrect to say that the Kentucky and Indiana Lanes were either illiterate or semiliterate. In spite of J. Quinn Thornton's charge of insobriety against Lane, there is evidence that the General not only was abstemious but that he never ceased urging his sons to be sober, honest, substantial citizens. To Lafayette he would write: "Now my good Son be steady sober and industrious, keep good company, converse with sensible men . . . , be moral upright and just" Of his daughters, Lane likewise expected good character, and he seemingly exercised the paternal prerogative of passing upon prospective sons-in-law. The crumpled condition of the following letter from one seeking the hand of his daughter, Winifred, betrays, for example, a negative answer to one ardent suitor who had written the General: "I seek you for my Father. I own towards your Miss Winnie, a most deep, and irrepressible affection. Nature through my most lonely and yearning heart, compels me to make known to you my intentions."

Missing in the collection is a single item in the handwriting of Lane's obscure wife, Mary Hart. Moreover, there is but one solitary letter from Lane to his spouse, and the subject of this letter is confined to the General's horse named, significantly enough, Joseph. During Lane's stay in Washington, D.C., the horse had been left on the farm at Roseburg in care of Son Simon, and to Mrs. Lane the General wrote: "Simon must see him, feed him well and let him run out in the pasture as much as he can his shoes must be taken off, and run barefooted all winter

Your husband

Joseph Lane"

For all his homespun virtues, blocking the road to personal promotion was not among them. The accident

of war made Lane a national hero, and the General did nothing to stifle the praise that came his way. For instance, as he sat in Camp Taylor, March 7, 1847, nursing a hole in his arm made by a 14-mm. ball, and grieving the loss of his black horse in the Battle of Buena Vista on the preceding February 22nd, Lane wrote his son Ratliffe in Indiana that he so feared the loss of War Correspondent Morrison's report on the great battle that he, Lane, had prepared a copy of it which he was enclosing for release in the event of such loss. The reason is apparent when one reads Lane's version of Morrison's report, namely:

"Nexe [*sic*] came Gen Joseph Lane of the Indiana Brigade He was on the field, from the onset to the close of the action and never did any man devote himself [so much] to his duty. The thickest of the fight had no terrors for him, and to an observer it would seem he was Heaven defended, for he was continually passing in all directions amidst a cloud of bullets. He is however severely wounded through the right arm, the ball passing about midway between his shoulder and elbow through the centre of the arm yet not breaking the bone."

The chief interest in Lane is in the field of politics. It was politics and the conduct of public life (never the quest for financial success) that made almost full call upon the General's time following his appointment as territorial governor. The manuscripts bulk for the years 1848-1861, and his correspondence was largely with political figures. Lane had the friendly ear of President Pierce, and he won a battle in Washington to have most federal appointees for Oregon Territory appointed from among Oregon residents. In this respect, Oregon fared better than neighboring territories. As one might expect, the Delegate was

constantly besieged by office seekers. Here is one example: "Mr Lane I want to ask a favor of you . . . what I want is this I want you to gite me apintment of Light House keeper . . . it is an office I can fill as well as Eney boddy . . ."

By 1855, national politics began to take precedence over Oregon's political affairs so far as Lane was concerned. The rise of the Republican Party ("Nigger Republicans" to Lane) and the growing schism in the Democratic Party during the fifties compelled Lane to reformulate his political ideology.

Lane was a Southern Democrat living in the North. Until passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, his position appears clear and unchanging; he was a hard-shelled Democrat who fervently upheld the Constitution which to his way of thinking safeguarded states' rights. Throughout the Pierce administration and well into that of Buchanan, Lane adhered strictly to the party line. When factionalism began to emerge within Oregon's Democratic ranks or elsewhere, Lane first refused either to recognize differences or to take sides. He wrote to Asahel Bush, as late as 1858: "I could part with my wife and all my children as easy as I could do anything to weaken the Democratic party, or disturb its organization, and I assure you that I shall do neither the one nor the other."

The election of Buchanan in 1856 was a great triumph for Lane and his cohorts in Oregon. Reminiscent of a recent election, one good Democrat at Astoria, upon receiving the unexpected news of Buchanan's victory, wrote to Lane: "Old Skinner has been organising his black Republican gang below, for a grand demonstration, for the last month. They are confounded with the news . . ."

With the approach of the election of 1860, however, one finds Lane still ardently supporting the Union but

fearful of its disintegration. Lane, who respected Douglas, had nothing but contempt for squatter sovereignty. He believed that slavery could not and should not, under any circumstances, be prohibited in the territories. To L. F. Mosher, a son-in-law, he wrote, February 4, 1858: “. . . I think that it is safe to say that should the Lecompton Constitution be rejected that we will not have a union three months from that day.”

It was this avowed dual support of both the Union and states' rights that caused Lane, the Senator, to become widely considered as a logical and available compromise choice for the number-one place on the Democratic ticket in 1860. The following letter from A. F. Hedges to Lane is fairly representative of literally scores addressed to the Senator: “We regard your nomination for the Presidency as allmost certain, in fact I believe that you are the only man in the party that can be Elected.”

From Connecticut, February 4, 1860, Lafayette Lane wrote his brother, Simon: “. . . I should judge that Father stood [stands] the best chance to be the nominee of the Charleston convention in as much as all of the conservative papers of [the] north have his name at the heads of their columns for president and in the South if he is not their first choice he is invariably their choice for vice.”

Also in February, the astute Whig, Jesse Applegate, viewed Lane's candidacy as follows in a letter addressed to Lane: “. . . Douglas' pop[ularity] in the north is unavailable as he will be rejected by the South.” Next to Douglas, added Applegate, “. . . you are the most popular man in the free States and as acceptable to the South as a native. For these reasons I feel almost certain that I shall cast my vote against you next November, and in my opinion there

is but one man in the Union that can beat you for President—Edward Bates of Missouri.”

When the time came for the Charleston Convention to meet (April 23, 1860), Lane, for once in his life, did very little to further his own cause. He remained in Washington. While the convention was in progress he wrote this to his son, Lafayette: “I am the only person that I am acquainted with that remains cool and unconcerned. I cannot to save my life want or desire the no[mi]nation, the only wish that I have on the subject is that a good sound trustworthy man may be selected such a one as can be elected.”

The then fifty-nine-year-old Senator was confident, though, that Douglas could not possibly become the Party’s choice. Then again, at Richmond and Baltimore (following the recess), he reaffirmed a desire not to be considered a candidate: “I don’t wish to be nominated and I would be very reluctant to accept if nominated.” At another time he wrote: “I would rather be right, than to be President by yielding to any wrong.”

The outcome of the convention is generally known; the delegates who withdrew from the main convention nominated John C. Breckinridge and accorded Senator Joseph Lane second place on the ticket—and Lane accepted.

Regarding Lane’s career from this point on, Sister Jean has stated the problem thus: “There is an unexplained gap in Lane’s correspondence for the period preceding and immediately following the election so that his exact opinion and feeling as to the result of the election are not easily determinable.” One might add that this situation has contributed to the oft-stated belief that Lane supported a move to establish a Pacific Republic.

The presence in the Ellison Collection of 200 letters to and from Lane for the period June, 1860, to March,

1861, and an additional 400 letters for the period 1861 to 1869 will remedy this situation. During the campaign of 1860, Lane worked vigorously in behalf of his ticket, and supporters from many parts of the country wrote him letters of encouragement: "I am a little one horse politician unknown to the public," wrote one from Ripley, Mississippi, and added that he was the "best *Lane* man you ever saw." Another in Milwaukee wrote he would do battle against the abolitionists whether they were "under the black flag of Republicans or the dark flag [of] Squatter Sovereignty." The *New York Herald* supported the ticket and James Gordon Bennett became a great admirer of Senator Lane.

Lane plunged into the campaign because, as he said, "I can see no way that our country can be saved from misrule and trouble but by the Election of the Breckinridge ticket." But as the campaign progressed, disillusionment set in: "Well, I am at my post again and am inclined to think that I will remain and work for the people that I represent," Lane wrote Lafayette, October 18. By then defeat of the ticket seemed very likely, although the possibility of the election going to Congress was recognized. In this event, the Senate might have chosen Lane for the vice-presidency.

With the news of Lincoln's election, Lane hastened preparations to leave for Roseburg immediately after the adjournment of Congress on March 4, 1861, and the termination of his senatorial term. "I will be at home next Spring," he wrote, November 11, 1860, "and go to work and try to enjoy life without public care." "Now I am willing and anxious to quit," he wrote a month later.

Between election day and Lincoln's inauguration, Lane became increasingly convinced that he was taking part in the last "National Congress" and that the states would

“go out.” He believed the “revolution” would “be a bloodless one” and accordingly urged his sons to be calm and continue their customary work.

Son John at West Point was not so easily persuaded. On December 4th he wrote his father: “What ever arrangements you may make for me be sure they are of a military character. I am bound to be in some army. If I fail in getting a Commission in the Army of the *Southern Confederacy*, I shall offer my services to Garabaldi”

Lane remained in Washington to witness the inauguration of Lincoln, and by then he had become convinced that war and not a bloodless revolution would ensue. “May the curses of God follow them [the Republicans] to their grave,” he wrote.

On about March 20, 1861, Lane left the East for Oregon. Moreover, the papers under discussion give no support whatever to the contention often made that Lane connived with Senator Gwin of California to establish a Pacific Republic. Gwin is mentioned by name but once in the entire correspondence and then in an innocuous connection.

Son John, who became a lieutenant colonel in the Confederate Army, wrote letters to his father throughout the war. In one he urged his father to “Move to Texas, do not stay in any country that is opposed to the equality of the states.” But Lane did not move from his “Mountain Ranch.” The only important temptation to which he succumbed during the war years was to intimate to Governor John Whiteaker, of Oregon, that he was available for appointment to the United States Senate to succeed Edward D. Baker, who was killed in action in October, 1861. Lane was not appointed. Throughout the Civil War years, though, Lane steadfastly refused to support the northern

cause. Every man owes a duty to posterity, he wrote in an article, October 7, 1862, not to submit "to a measure violative and subversive of our Constitution nor support a war waged for Conquest and abolition. Let not the curses of future generations rest upon our heads."

The years in retirement were interrupted by an occasional flash from Lane's retreat. Chief Joseph's war, for instance, aroused Lane's fighting spirit, and the seventy-eight-year-old General made an offer to the Governor of Oregon to lead troops in this Indian war.

Correspondence for the closing years of life indicates a drift toward reconciliation with former enemies. He had broken with Asahel Bush over the issues of 1860, but in 1880 Lane asked Bush for his picture to hang in his gallery of friends. Lane and Jesse Applegate forgot politics and wrote warm friendly letters to each other.

Lane remained in fair health until near the end. At the age of seventy-nine he spent the summer prospecting for gold in southern Oregon and wrote that for many weeks he slept nights on the ground. But the following November he wrote Bush that the end was near, that cramps and swollen tendons had drawn his head "down on my shoulders."

Shortly before his death, Lane made the only reference to his religion found in the correspondence. He wrote: "Our family are Catholics Good kind and liberal to all. Entertain all Denominations alike." On April 19, 1881, Lane died, but was buried without religious ceremony.

As for Lane's place in history, I think he is without doubt the dominant, and one of the ablest, figures in Oregon politics for the period 1848 to 1861. An element of luck made Lane a national hero during the Mexican War. A slight reshuffling of the cards of fortune might

well have made General Lane President of the United States in 1861. But be that as it may, Lane's role in national politics was not inconsiderable. Taken as a whole, he must be regarded as a rather unimaginative, practical politician. He had a political philosophy, one based on the states' rights theory, and he believed devoutly in the inseparableness of Democracy (capital D) and party patronage. His was a lovable personality, and now, a full century after his arrival in Oregon, he remains one of the West's more respected men of public life.

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