

Recollections of the Campaign of 1856

By Edwin P. Harter, Huntington, Indiana

During this presidential campaign the writer lived at "Slabtown" or Millersburg, now called Collamer. The name of Slabtown was acquired from some of the first huts built there which were made of "slabs" procured from a saw mill that my father operated there at that time. This mill was an "up and down" cut with the saw in a large frame and it cut lumber with a "stump shot" on it and it cut so slowly through the log that the sawyer often went to sleep during the cut.

The campaign of which I write was the one between Fremont and Dayton on the Abolition ticket and Buchanan and Breckinridge on the Democratic ticket for president and vice-president. At that time there were about an equal number of ox teams and horse teams and the abolitionists or Republicans in derision named their ox teams "Buck and Breck". Such teams were driven or guided by the names and the oxen readily responded to them.

Late in the campaign Cassius M. Clay, a nephew of Henry Clay, was billed to make an abolition or Republican speech at Huntington, Indiana. It was rumored that such a speech would not be permitted in Huntington which at that time was strongly Democratic and anti-abolition. This attracted much attention and added largely to the crowd.

Springfield, (now South Whitley), Collamer, Liberty Mills, and North Manchester arranged to "pool" their delegations and fixed on Claysville (which I think is now Bippus) as a meeting place. Each delegation had its own music, consisting of a fifer, a bass drummer and one or more tenor drummers, as bands were unknown at that time in our part of the country.

I recollect that John Summers was our bass drummer and he beat on one end of the drum and then on the top of the drum on the other end and he created an impression in my mind that he was a wonderful musician.

We met at the appointed hour at Claysville and "organized"

by electing Mr. Parker as grand marshal. He was from Liberty Mills and at that town had laid in a liberal supply of plain whiskey which was easy to do owing to the fact that Judge Comstock had located a distillery at that place and the price of whiskey was only 15 cents per gallon, (no tax). Right here I want to deny, not from actual experience, but from observation, the oft repeated statement of the older liberals that the "long ago" whiskey would not make one drunk.

I think it was then that it acquired the name of "40 rod" whiskey, as that distance was the limit that a half pint could be carried on the "inside". I have seen the "swamp angels", come into Collamer on horse back, wearing their red backed jackets or vests, (they were North Carolinians), and in half an hour all be too drunk to get on their horses, after drinking Judge Comstocks whiskey, which was kept in the back room of Bobby Reeds store with a tin cup on the barrel. The whiskey was free to all customers.

It was noted that while Mr. Parker was full he could still ride his horse, owing to long practice under such conditions, and the further fact that his horse seemed to understand the situation and materially aided the rider in retaining his seat. I distinctly recollect the scare he gave me by seeming to go to one side and then straightening up only to go as far to the other side. However, he made the trip without being unhorsed.

When the "delegations" were made into one, it was said to be a mile long. It was composed of over a hundred men and women equally divided on horse back and huge farm wagons, now called "floats". These wagons or floats had from two to twelve horses attached to each with riders on the "head" horses of the wagons with four or more horses. Each delegation had a wagon with a pole twenty-five to thirty feet high guyed to the corners and with the stars and stripes floating from the pole, (there were no telegraph or telephone wires to interfere then).

I most distinctly recollect one wagon with twelve horses that carried twenty-six ladies dressed in white, each one representing one state in the union with the name of the state on a

strip pinned across her shoulder and one lady in black with "bleeding Kansas" on her strip. At that time there were twenty-six states in the union and the territory of Kansas had a miniature war on hand trying to keep it from being admitted as a slave state.

This wagon met with trouble at the Clear Creek hill. The wagons were of the old kind with "linch pin" axles and pine tar for lubricant and the heavy load caused the tar to take fire going up the hill. Water was needed and some thoughtful fellows ran back down to Clear creek and carried water in their hats and put out the fire. The speaking was to occur in a grove on the south side of the river. We crossed the canal near where Washington and Jefferson streets cross on a bridge and we crossed the river below where the Jefferson street bridge now is.

I climbed into the forks of a tree and heard the speech. It was my political baptism. Mr. Clay was six feet tall, straight and fine looking and he looked very impressive to me. The first words I did not hear, as I was on the ground but I was told he took out a document that he said was the constitution of the United States as he might have occasion to refer to it, then he produced a book that he said was the holy Bible and he remarked that he might want to read something in it; then he laid a long old fashioned "horse pistol" in front of him as a paper weight and he said it was for any man that dared to interrupt him. After this occurred, I got in the tree fork and heard all the speech. I distinctly remember him saying you scamps in referring to the democrats and the laws they passed such as the "Fugitive Slave" law, etc.

The meeting was a great success with no disturbance and was attended by large delegations from Wabash, Marion, Ft. Wayne and other small towns, but the campaign was a failure as Fremont and Dayton were defeated and I was almost broken-hearted.

Dr. Edwards of South Whitley and Rev. Hugh Wells of Columbia City both took active part in the campaign. The defeat in this election led up to the glorious victory in the next in which we elected the greatest of all presidents, Abraham Lincoln, whose name and services are now revered by the members of both parties in the north and south alike, altho we had to teach the south that this union could not be divided.

During the time of which this article refers to there were lines of travel designated as "underground" railways through which slaves from the south passed on their way to Canada and freedom. One of the "stations" consisting of a cellar with beds and food was kept at North Manchester, Indiana, by a quaker, Morris Place, by name. Owing to friendly relations between our family and Mr. Place, I learned something of the plan to assist escaping colored men. The line of travel ran near to where we lived and my father was occasionally called on to help those escaping. They travelled by night and slept in the daytime to escape being captured.

It seems strange now that at that time owing to the fugitive slave law it was a crime in Indiana to give a poor man a crust of bread or a drink of water, if he had any negro blood in his veins and was escaping slavery.

The events related in this article were but forerunners to the one big event that was soon to follow when Ft. Sumter was fired upon in April, 1861.