

An Early Indiana Political Contest

By HENRY LANE WILSON, Indianapolis

William E. Barton, in his *Life of Lincoln*, refers to Daniel W. Voorhees, of Covington, Indiana, and James Wilson, of Crawfordsville, Indiana, as among those who were intimately associated with Lincoln as lawyers practising from 1854 to 1856 in the Eighth Judicial Circuit of Illinois.

In those days, the higher courts of justice were movable affairs, traveling from town to town by fixed itineraries. There was little ceremony, either in the practice before the courts, or in the daily living. The rigid exclusiveness and rules of reserve and privacy prevailing today had not yet arrived.

Lincoln's contacts, therefore, with these two young lawyers, one a Democrat and the other a Republican, must have been frequent, and their hours out of court marked by enlivening political discussions relating to the burning issues of the day. One imagines that by the fireside of an evening, after a long and vexatious day in court, the conversation must have turned on the Ordinance of 1787, the Missouri Compromise, and lastly, on the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which was the culmination of the efforts to extend slavery, and the vital issue which finally brought on the Civil War. That such discussions did frequently occur is evidenced by the files of old newspapers of that period, and by musty letters which have recently been brought from forgotten places into light.

Stephen A. Douglas, too, was active in practice in the Eighth Judicial Circuit, and neither side lacked for active defenders or proponents. How much these two young men—Voorhees and Wilson—carried away from these discussions is difficult to say, but in 1856 they became the acknowledged representatives of the two different schools of political thought. At this precise time both the Whig and Democratic parties

were disintegrating on the slavery issue, and the young Republican party was then being built up by dissenters from both. Wilson became a Republican, and Voorhees, whose antecedents were probably Whiggish, became a Democrat. In 1856 the Democrats of the Eighth Congressional District of Indiana, comprising the counties of Tippecanoe, Warren, Fountain, Montgomery, Boone, Carroll and Clinton, nominated Voorhees, of Fountain county, for Congress, and the Republicans nominated James Wilson, of Montgomery county. At this time both men were about thirty years of age, and both were practising lawyers of wide repute.

The background of these two men furnishes some interesting contrasts and some similarities. Both were born of prominent and well to do parents, and both had been highly trained in legal and political matters. Wilson graduated from Wabash College at the precocious age of seventeen, read law with Tilghman A. Howard, took his degree at the law college of Indiana University, and fought through the Mexican War from beginning to end, entering Mexico City with General Winfield Scott. He had been thoroughly trained in the classics, in Greek and Roman literature, and in the Bible, and his speeches were full of biblical and classical allusions. He had a clarion voice, and in its use he could move vast audiences to sympathy and tears. He stood six feet tall, had light brown hair and blue eyes, was fastidious in dress, sentimental, and of a formal courtesy. He possessed unflagging industry, and absolute concentration to whatever cause he espoused. Wilson was of pure Scottish blood, though his father was a Kentuckian and his grandfather a Virginian.

Voorhees' antecedents were not unlike those of Wilson in some respects, and in others they differed. He was born of Dutch ancestry in Butler county, Ohio, and came to Indiana at a very early age. Educated at Asbury University, and trained much on the same lines as Wilson, he was his equal in culture as he was in other things. Like Wilson's, his mind was replete with imagery of the Bible and the classics, and he, too, had a voice of singular richness, and a manner of rare persuasiveness. He was fastidious in dress, and courtly in manner; stood the equal in height of Wilson, and possessed an equal presence.

In the month of May, 1856, Voorhees and Wilson were nominated by their respective parties for Congress. Vast crowds

attended the nomination conventions. More than twelve thousand people attended the convention at Lafayette which nominated Wilson, and there were probably as many attending that which nominated Voorhees. From the day of their nomination the entire Eighth District was engrossed in political discussion and debate, and the air was replete with charges and counter charges, vituperation and praise, eloquence and wit.

The two candidates threw themselves into the campaign with all the ardor of youth. Every community was roused to political activity; none was too remote or unimportant to be overlooked. The battle raged from schoolhouse to schoolhouse, from county seat to county seat, by the fireside and at the village corners. Extreme bitterness marked the attitude of the press. The Democrats were denounced as slave drivers, fire eaters, and law breakers; Republicans were called woolly heads, fanatics and destroyers of the Union. Voorhees was described by the Republican press as a demagogue, a falsifier and an ignoramus; Wilson was described by the Democratic press as a temperance crank and a tricky politician. There was little dignity displayed by the partisan press on either side; the blows were vigorous and the lines of division sharply drawn. The candidates, however, had been bosom friends from childhood, and no word derogatory to the character of his opponent was spoken by either.

In the midst of the campaign Voorhees issued a challenge to Wilson for a joint discussion of the issues:

BRAMBLE HOUSE
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
June 30, 1856.

James Wilson, Esq.

DEAR SIR:

Being placed in nomination by our respective political friends as opposing candidates for the same office, it suggests itself to my mind as being eminently proper and right that we should discuss together in the ensuing canvass those questions and principles which now so deeply engage the public attention. With this view I propose to you that we meet at your earliest convenience and arrange our appointments and the terms of discussion, preparatory to going before the people of this district in a candid, fair and friendly way for their suffrages.

Hoping to hear from you soon on this subject, I am, with sentiments of unchanging personal regard,

Very truly yours,
DANIEL W. VOORHEES.

The challenge was accepted without comment by James Wilson, and the agreement was fully formulated as follows:

We agree to discuss the slavery question and all other questions legitimately before the people in this canvass in each county seat of the several counties that compose the Eighth Congressional District—the time and conditions of the discussion to be settled hereafter by a committee selected.

JAMES WILSON

Lafayette, August 1, 1856.

DANIEL W. VOORHEES

At a subsequent meeting of the two candidates it was agreed that the joint discussions should be held at Attica, Crawfordsville, Lafayette, Williamsport, Frankfort, Lebanon and Delphi, and on the dates fixed, they took place. These meetings were in the nature of triumphal processions, the adherents of both speakers flocking to them in vast numbers with rival bands and processions. The audiences were afire with partisan zeal, and vociferous in their expression. People by the thousands, not only from various parts of Indiana, but from Ohio and Illinois, followed the speakers from place to place.

In those days there were no shorthand reporters, and only speeches written out in full were afterwards printed. Literal reports were not made. All the people heard all of the joint discussions, and their publication was not essential to intelligent understanding of the issues. So far as this joint discussion is concerned, only general outlines and pertinent phrases here and there can be found among newspaper files. From these files, however, one may gain a good deal.

Three significant facts in connection with this joint discussion should be noted:

1. That it occurred two years prior to the Lincoln-Douglas discussion on the same question.
2. That Wilson and Voorhees were both university bred men, whereas Lincoln and Douglas had received only a common school education.
3. That the line of argument in both discussions was identical.

The joint discussion opened at Delphi, where Wilson forcibly outlined the history of the pro-slavery movement, beginning with the alleged violation of the Ordinance of 1787 in the Missouri Compromise, and the subsequent steps culminating in

the enactment by Congress of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which Wilson contended was in violation of the Constitution, and extended the right to hold slaves as property to every state of the Union. He said in part, referring to the Missouri Compromise:

Here is the cause from whence is sprung all our woes! Here the error—deep, radical and fundamental. In what? In the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. In the deliberate declaration that the previous legislation of this government in regard to its territories is unjust, oppressive, and unconstitutional. I did not agree to that repeal then—do not now. I thought I saw arms bristling all around the Bill. I have seen my fears realized. Not in the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, but in the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. What is the meaning of this Bill? Does it mean that thirty one states have groped their way into the Union in utter ignorance of the great principles of government, and as Territory after Territory has been organized into states the people had no conception of their duties and rights? I ask the gentleman to illuminate this point.

Mr. Voorhees replied:

Undoubtedly Congress is supreme in the territories, but by that right of supremacy it may delegate its powers to the people of the territory, leaving to the majority of the citizens thereof the decision as to the kind of a Constitution it may adopt. Congress has simply delegated to the territories of Kansas and Nebraska the power to designate the kind of government they wish to live under. Theirs is the right to say "nay" or "yea." The Kansas-Nebraska Bill is a peace making and peace conserving measure. If the people of Kansas want the institution of slavery to exist within their borders, they have the right to say no, and those who run counter to this right are breeding disunion and war.

Mr. Voorhees was evidently arguing defensively. By ignoring the history of the Kansas difficulties he was able to maintain a dignified argument. His abilities were equal to those of his opponent, but his cause was a bad one.

At Lafayette Mr. Voorhees charged the Republican party with advocating the abolition of slavery, and with favoring the clothing of the negro with full social and political rights.

This agitation, sir, is made by fanatics, by negro lovers; by those who seek to destroy our Anglo-Saxon civilization, and the supremacy of the white man, the purity of our social structure, would make America the home of mongrel breeds and decadent morals. I do not favor the institution of slavery; I don't want it here, but they have a right to it elsewhere; property in slaves is not to be distinguished from other kinds of property which are protected by the same Constitution.

Mr. Wilson replied:

The Republican party does not advocate the abolition of slavery. It

recognizes the vested right to hold slaves within the limits prescribed by the Missouri Compromise, hoping for its ultimate extinction by peaceful methods. What it does object to is the further extension of slavery to the territories north and west of the Ohio River. If Congress has the power to extend slavery to one part of the Union, it has the power to extend it to every part. The Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Bill are measures designed to make slavery universal within the Union so that it may come to pass that complete freedom will exist nowhere and slavery will exist everywhere. I do not favor the abolition of slavery within the territory limited by the Ordinance of 1787 and the Missouri Compromise. I do oppose its extension elsewhere. I am no negro lover, but confess to a deep sympathy for the poor slave, escaping from shackles, with his eye on the north star and the hope of liberty in his heart. I shall not become his aid nor abettor, but I decline to be made a human bloodhound in the name of the law.

At Crawfordsville Mr. Wilson said that:

the real, tangible principle of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill universally recognized and accepted by the Democratic party was:

1. That Congress has no power to legislate upon the subject of slavery in the Territories.
2. That the people of the Territories, acting through their Territorial Legislatures, have no power to legislate upon the subjects of slavery.
3. That the Constitution establishes and protects slavery in all the Territories of the United States; and that the people can only decide upon the question of slavery when they form their Constitution, and even this last right has been rendered ineffective by the Federal judiciary, and virtually denied, upon the floor of Congress, by the Democratic party.

The effect of the application of this principle is sweeping and widespread. By it every foot of soil belonging to the United States, all of the Territories, Kansas, Utah, New Mexico, Washington, the Dakotas, Montana and Idaho, all, every inch, no matter where, north or south, is slave soil. Thus the Constitution, which we have been taught to believe was ordained to establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and posterity, has another object, and that is to build up states of slavery and empires of oppression. Such a doctrine I discard, I repudiate, and neither courts nor the instruments of a temporary tyranny will silence my voice.

Voorhees' reply to this not found, either in the Democratic or Republican papers of the day. Accounts of it, however, are very flattering, and it was admitted that Wilson lost something of his usual ease and fluency in his home town. This he had anticipated, but with the further prediction that Voorhees would experience a similar trial when the scene was shifted to his home county of Fountain.

This proved to be true. Mr. Voorhees, in his reply at Attica, showed that he was suffering, as had been predicted, from stage fright brought about by the sight of too many faces, some of which he had been taught to regard with awe. His usual eloquence and resourcefulness deserted him, and instead of replying to the specific arguments and charges made by Wilson, he indulged in violent invectives against those whom he called "the enemies of the Constitution, of law and order, of property," ignoring the fact that the people of Kansas were held down by the tyranny of the courts and military forces. He said:

Whether we love slavery or hate it, we must recognize its existence and the right to hold slaves as property. If the right to hold slaves as property is guaranteed by the Constitution as the right to hold other property is guaranteed, then slavery, with the restrictions placed upon it by law, is recognized by the Constitution. Congress is not superior to the people, but derives its power from the people. It is not within the power of Congress to impose or deny the right to impose or exclude slavery in Nebraska. That right belongs to the people of Nebraska and Kansas, when they shall have adopted a Constitution. Whether they vote slavery in or slavery out is no affair of ours. States are sovereign, and the exercise of sovereignty must not be denied by Congress.

One paragraph only of Wilson's reply is available. In referring to the Lecompton Constitution, he said, "I repeat then, that this Constitution is not the work of the people of Kansas. No. It is not *of the people*, nor *from the people*. It is a product of political anarchy, of judicial error, of military force, and a free people will never cease to protest its existence."

It is to be noted that in the election which followed, Voorhees lost Fountain county, and Wilson carried it by a small majority, and Wilson lost Montgomery county, Voorhees carrying it by a large majority. The election, however, resulted in favor of Wilson, who carried the counties of Tippecanoe and Warren by a large majority, and Fountain by a small majority, thus offsetting the considerable Democratic majorities in Boone, Clinton, Carroll and Montgomery. It is worth of note that this Congressional District, then the Eighth and now the Ninth has ever since remained Republican.

The subsequent careers of these two young exponents of different schools of political thought is interesting. When President Lincoln made his call for volunteers to put down the

Rebellion, Wilson resigned his seat in Congress and enlisted. After serving through a ninety day campaign, he re-enlisted and continued in active service throughout the war. He eventually became a Colonel, and was honorably discharged with the brevet rank of Brigadier General. When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he called Wilson from the front to defend the act in a series of speeches through the eastern states, and these great speeches were published in full by the eastern press. At the close of the war, Wilson resumed the practice of the law in Crawfordsville, and again identified himself with politics. But the radical element led by Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner had seized control of the Republican party, and Wilson, a Lincoln Republican, found himself not in accord with the ruling elements. When, therefore, he was tendered an appointment by President Johnson, as Minister to Venezuela, he accepted, hoping to return to political activity when the violent wave of radicalism had spent itself.

But he was fated never to return again to his native country. He was stricken down by yellow fever in 1867, and died at his post in Carácas at the early age of 42 years. The important position which he occupied in the public eye at that time was evidenced by the editorial comments of the *Indianapolis Journal* (now *Star*) on his death. From this I make a brief extract:

Mr. Wilson was in the strongest sense of the term a self made man, and grew to be one of the ablest and best beloved public men of Indiana by the sheer force of his native ability, genius, strong individualism and extraordinary enthusiasm and oratory. . . . It falls not to the lot of many mortals to leave behind as many real mourners as Mr. Wilson. He was not so much a real politician as a patriot. As a popular orator he had few equals. A rare grace of manner, persuasiveness, vehement and earnest eloquence, and a nature that kindled into the white heat of eloquence at the slightest provocation were his. He had the indefinable quality of genius, and he had the virtue of industry.

Daniel W. Voorhees, carrying out the public statement made during the campaign that he "would move out of the district if Wilson defeated him," removed to Terre Haute and engaged in the practice of the law. He rose quickly to eminence as a criminal lawyer, and was employed over a wide section of the country. He was elected to the lower house of Congress as a Democrat, and finally sent to the United States Senate, where his

career was brilliant. For many years he loomed large in the public eye. He was an able man, a highly educated man, eloquent, honest and patriotic, and he died full of honors, and without a stain upon his name.