Editor's Pages

INDIANA FIFTY YEARS AGO

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The conditions prevailing in Indiana in 1890 were quite different from those of 1865. When I invited readers to take a look at Hoosierdom in 1840 and in 1865, I was writing about situations that I knew nothing about from personal observation. In the year 1890, I had been out of high school for a short time. I had not yet been able to go to college, except for a four-months course in bookkeeping that I had taken in a business college. I had found no satisfactory job, and I fear that I took life too seriously for one of my age. I read everything that I could get my hands on in the time that I had at my disposal, but that did not mean a great deal. My opportunity to learn by observation was also sadly limited. I could not travel any and my contacts with people who could have enlightened me in regard to current domestic and world problems were too few. What I say about Indiana as it was a half century ago, must be based largely on what I have learned during the past fifty years.

The McKinley Tariff Act and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act were passed in 1890, and Hoosiers like most other citizens of the United States believed that the tariff and money issues were fundamental. It is interesting to reflect today on how little the leaders of the nation sensed what the coming years would bring in the way of economic developments. Benjamin Harrison of Indiana was in the midst of his presidential term. As an able lawyer, he had won political support by his vigorous defense of the existing economic system. He was cold, relentless and uncompromising in his logic. Like nearly all of his class in his day, he was certain that there was nothing wrong with this great country except that it was infested by a good many people who argued vehemently that there were defects in our economic system and offered their panaceas to the public. To Harrison, it was the panaceas that were dangerous, not the alleged defects in our social and economic set-up. Had the able and honest conservative leaders of the Republican and Democratic parties of the 'eighties and 'nineties made a determined effort to discover the disease instead of fighting the symptoms, they
might have rendered better service to the generation that was to follow them.

General Alvin P. Hovey was Governor of Indiana in 1890, having been elected in 1888. He died in November, 1891, and was succeeded by Lieutenant Governor Ira J. Chase. Even to citizens who were living then, these names almost fail to register. It is only to a few of those who reach high stations that history gives more than a line or two. Indiana governors are elected in the years of presidential contests, and, almost invariably, the party that carries the state for its national ticket elects its candidate for governor. In a number of presidential contests since the Civil War, Indiana, being a very doubtful state, played a significant part. Its electoral votes were vigorously sought. The contest of 1888 found the major parties running neck and neck in the country as a whole. Money was poured into pivotal Indiana, where that election was one to which we can not point back with pride. Vote buying had become common even in country districts and citizens of high standing in both parties indulged in the purchase of "floaters," though one party was able in that campaign, when the protective tariff was the main issue, to raise much more money than the other. The plurality of Harrison over Cleveland in 1888 was less than 2500 votes. In 1892, Cleveland carried the state by a plurality a little above 7000. Clearly Indiana was a close state fifty years ago.

Mainly as a result of the political corruption of 1888, but partly because the reform was spreading over the land, the Indiana Legislature passed the Australian Ballot Act in 1889. I distinctly recall the voting as it was done in 1888 and earlier, when each party prepared its own ballots for the printer. A voter could deposit his ballot in the ballot-box, taking it already folded from his pocket, or he could get it at the window of the polling room and fold it in the presence of others. If a "floater", he could receive his ballot from a vote buyer, or one who understood the bargain that had been made, and deposit it in the box under the scrutiny of the interested watcher. It can be readily understood how the Australian Ballot, though not perfect, is far better than the so-called secret balloting system which it superceded.

The population of Indiana by the census of 1890 was 2,192,404, the gain for the decade being much smaller than for any previous decade since that from 1820 to 1830. The
state was gaining, but not rapidly. It seemed that Indiana was destined to remain mainly agricultural. This would mean that the state would escape extensive industrialism with rapid growth of urban centers. It would also mean that a very large percentage of the young people born and reared in the state would be drawn away year by year and decade by decade. In truth, while there has been industrial expansion in the state, the growth in population has not been rapid since 1890. Following the census of 1870, the number of members in the national House of Representatives was increased from eleven to thirteen, giving Indiana fifteen presidential electors. Since that increase, there has never been another but because of the relative rate of population growth, a decrease came after 1930. The number of Representatives being reduced to twelve, Indiana elected but fourteen electors in 1932 and in 1936, and will choose that number in the present year.

To the new generation of today, the Indiana of 1890 must seem more like that of 1865, or 1840, than like the present Indiana. Life in this new stream-lined age seems to center so much around automobiles, radios, moving pictures, airplanes, electrical appliances, purchases wrapped in cellophane and mechanized warfare that existence in 1890 would seem like living in another world or age. Nevertheless, something can be said in favor of the situation in that far-away time. Food, clothing, fuel, leisure, entertainment, books, education—all these could be had at much less expense than now. To a great degree, the essentials of a comfortable and interesting life were available to people in that day. It is to a large extent the multitude of non-essentials, which must be obtained at any sacrifice now, that were lacking to the people of 1890. Furthermore, it must be admitted that the marvelous inventions that have come in the last fifty years are not all beneficial to mankind. Indeed, some of them lend themselves so readily to the destruction of life and property, that one fears, at times, that civilization may not survive man's own ingenuity.

Our Indiana of fifty years ago was no paradise, but it was possible to live happily and wholesomely. Our educational system had reached a high level. It was necessary to struggle in order to succeed, but one could fight the battles of life with a good deal of hope. The world was not in such a hurry
as now, but there was a great deal of virtue in the lower tempo of that day. We can never go back to the conditions of fifty years ago. No people have ever recaptured a vanished golden age. In fact, no such age ever existed. Nevertheless, the people of every new era can and should reach back into the past and regain good things that have been discarded or lost, if possible, when more valuable than the things that have replaced them. It is some of the finer, intangible features of life that I am thinking about. When these are sought after, many past periods are rich mines that may be profitably worked.