

Capable in Public Service

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CAPABLE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

By EMORY H. ENGLISH

The passing of George Evan Roberts at so recent date makes it difficult to realize that the active life of this distinguished Iowan largely was spent in the years of the long past. But few of those now engaged in our everyday affairs ever knew or even heard of him. This is another day and age. And at ninety even the most active of other days and years reach the eventide, when the duties and cares of a useful life long since have been laid aside, although memory carries on, and the mental pictures of individuals and events troop by, bringing contentment, peace of mind, and at long last—oblivion.

From humble beginnings, but with exceptional capacity and determined industry and energy, he forged ahead in his profession, grasping with intelligent comprehension the rudiments of governmental procedure, observed the currents in the ebb and flow of commerce and trade, and comprehended the influence of sound financial policies and monetary practices upon the business and prosperity of the nation and the world. Not only did he have keen perception, but was so capable of expressing himself with clearness and logic, that his analysis of intricate subjects made them seem to be simple and quickly understandable by everyone. His services in public station became invaluable, and his writings and addresses continued to influence and direct the thinking of the nation long after he retired from activity.

Early in life through his newspaper and political contacts he was chosen by the Nineteenth General Assembly as the Iowa state printer, and as such state officer served three terms from 1883 to 1889. As customary and in accord with the provisions of its bylaws, Mr. Roberts automatically became a member of the Pioneer Law-makers Association of Iowa twenty years after his first year of official service. Responding to a notice of a

comparatively recent biennial meeting of the association, he wrote to the secretary from his home in Larchmont, New York, regretting his inability to attend, but recalling men then still living with whom he had associated. First he mentioned his acquaintance with Judge John A. Storey, then of Adair county, who was one of the speakers at this meeting, and who told of the Twentieth General Assembly moving over from the old temporary brick capitol building located where the soldiers and sailors monument stands, to the present capitol. Judge Storey is still living, and resides in Des Moines, his legislative service dating back farther than any other present association member. In his letter Mr. Roberts said:

I always thought highly of John A. Storey, from Greenfield, I think. I would like to write to him; please let me know if that still is his address. I knew the Van Alstine family, northwest of Fort Dodge, from early days. They were subscribers to the *Fort Dodge Messenger* when I was learning the printer's trade in that office. They were early settlers, a long drive from Fort Dodge in the old days. A fine family, but I am not sure that I know "H.S."

Of course I know B. F. Gue, Governor Carroll and R. G. Clark, and practically all of the list of past presidents of the association, down to and including Emory English, excepting John T. Clarkson, whom I knew of as a labor leader. I recall B. F. Clayton, but do not connect him with Jasper county. I have him from Pottawattamie. How about it?

Of course I knew Charles Aldrich, a highly intelligent man. He was in the Nineteenth General Assembly, and voted for me. My first term as state printer began before the new capitol was occupied. He introduced a bill forbidding the giving of railroad passes, of which much sport was made. It was said that he had more passes than any other man in Iowa, which after all proved nothing against his bill. Perhaps he had a better appreciation of the need for the law than anyone else. He did a great service to the state in securing the establishment of the Historical department.

In 1896 I got up a pamphlet "Iowa and the Silver Question," which was based upon a series of price quotations on farm products, taken from the file of the *Dubuque Herald* in the historical collection. I think the *Herald* file was one of the first given to

the collection. The price compilations were made by the two sisters of A. B. Cummins, the comments were my own. The printing and distribution were handled by the Republican state committee. I had not consulted Mr. Aldrich, but we happened to meet in Des Moines just as it was going to press. I had stated that the figures were compiled from the files of the *Dubuque Herald* in the Iowa State Library. I was thinking of the Historical department as a part of the State Library, but Mr. Aldrich was excited at once. He knew that the pamphlet was to be widely distributed by the state committee, and wanted credit to be given to the Historical department. Of course I was quite willing to make it so, and we went to the printing office and had it fixed as he wanted.

The Historical department is a real monument to him, and he foresaw that it would be.

EARLY NEWSPAPER TRAINING

Mr. Roberts' life was devoted to three great realms of public service. First came the years of editorial work at Sioux City and Fort Dodge; then as director of the U. S. mint in governmental duties with U. S. Secretary of the Treasury Lyman J. Gage, and finally in banking circles at Chicago and New York.

The training received on the *Sioux City Journal* under the tutorship of George D. Perkins, and with Ed. Heiser, came during the formative period of his editorial work, and it was thorough—never to be erased or forgotten. His clear, concise and logical manner of statement, together with his remarkable grasp of details, to a large extent came from the teachings of these masters in newspapering; likewise his well-known bent for political affairs and accurate insight into state and national governmental activities, and to them Roberts always acknowledged his obligations. In recording his passing in a recent issue the *Journal* paid tribute to this friend saying:

In 1878 Mr. Roberts came to the *Journal* and served for a time as its city editor. That was when Geo. D. Perkins was building up his small daily into a widely read newspaper. The two men, employer and employe, became fast friends and remained so up to the of Mr. Perkins' death many years ago. There also was implanted in the heart of Mr. Roberts an affection for the

Journal that lasted through the years of his long life. He always held this newspaper in affectionate regard. As this is written there looks down from its frame on a wall in the *Journal* editorial rooms a handsome picture of this old friend, autographed by himself. Beneath it is, "With best wishes to the *Journal* family always. Geo. E. Roberts."

Mr. Roberts, who beyond doubt would have become one of the distinguished newspaper editors of the country had he remained a journalist, was noted for the clarity of his writings. He was accurate, precise, smooth, direct and persuasive. A logical thinker, one who reasoned things out and always was consistent, his bank bulletin which he wrote for many years was one of the most profound discourses on banking and economics published anywhere in the country. He made a scientific study of banking and of the currency system. He was a man widely known in official circles in Washington and one highly esteemed everywhere for his impeccable honesty and his dependable ability.

AUTHORITY IN FINANCE AND ECONOMICS

The leadership that George Roberts enjoyed in Iowa as publisher and editor of the *Fort Dodge Messenger* is better known to newspaper men of other days and those older in political circles. Newspaper circulations were not large then, but his *Messenger* editorials were widely quoted in the state press, therefore just as widely read, and he was in demand at political conventions in the writing of Republican platforms. He never sought nor held public office in Iowa other than as state printer, although he served long and continuously upon state and district Republican committees. He was a profound student of finance and economics, becoming an authority, and it was in this field that he gained a national reputation and high standing.

A noteworthy adventure in politics was the aggressive campaign he waged against William Jennings Bryan, democratic candidate for president in 1896, upon the issue of "free silver." In probably the most amazing and dramatic political convention in the nation's history Bryan obtained a nomination for president, though none other than himself and a few close friends knew of his aspirations, and he was not sure previously that he would be

seated as a delegate. Personally devising the strategy by which he won a place upon the resolutions committee and the opportunity to address the convention, his masterly emotional appeal and skilful oratory captivated the delegates, just as he had planned. His adroitness continued in evidence throughout the campaign.

The issue was one upon which George Roberts was eminently qualified to write and discuss. His keen mind analyzed and exposed the fallacies in the plausible theory of the "16 to 1" ratio proposed for the free coinage of silver. His earlier study of finance during the campaign between Gov. C. C. Carpenter of Fort Dodge and L. Q. C. Hoggat, a one-legged veteran of the Mexican war, paid off handsomely. As stated in his letter quoted above, he issued through the Iowa state Republican committee a pamphlet entitled "Iowa and the Silver Question," which met with instant favor and was reprinted several times to meet demands from its wide circulation. His material for this valuable treatise was securely largely in the newspaper division of the Iowa State Historical department, from files of the *Dubuque Herald*, mentioned by him, which contained commercial reports of James R. Scott, produce market observer and reporter, being statistical statements of prices of Iowa production covering a period of thirty-five years.

This tense campaign centered around the money question, and in support of the democratic candidate "Coin" Harvey issued a booklet with the title of "Coin's Financial School." Roberts quickly discerned that it was meant to confuse and mislead the average reader, and therefore dangerous in influencing public opinion. Promptly he wrote a masterly reply to Harvey's arguments and statements, which was entitled "Coin at School in Finance." This was published and hundreds of thousands of copies distributed broadcast over the country. It not only greatly influenced the voter's attitude, but made Mr. Roberts famous, assisting materially in the defeat of Bryan.

President McKinley acknowledged its helpfulness in his successful campaign and recognized the ability of its author.

Johnson Brigham told in graphic way how the publication of "Coin at School in Finance" led to a meeting between its author and Lyman J. Gage, president of the First National Bank of Chicago. As the account ran, when in 1897, Mr. Gage became secretary of the treasury, he found himself swamped with letters relating to various phases of the financial question, an aftermath of the presidential campaign. Casting about for someone who would judiciously handle this important detail, he asked M. D. O'Connell, of Fort Dodge, then solicitor of the treasury, to tell him all he knew about the author of "Coin at School in Finance." The result of the inquiry was the presidential appointment of Mr. Roberts as director of the mint. To satisfy himself as to the wisdom of Secretary Gage's recommendation, President McKinley sent for Senators Allison and Gear, and Representative Dolliver, of Iowa, and on inquiry found them all of one mind. Thus, without formal application, or the pressure of friends, on the 14th of February, 1898, Mr. Roberts entered upon a new career in the national arena.

Becoming a national figure as an economist he quickly acquired an international reputation, his counsel and judgment being sought by financiers and institutions everywhere. Also for years thereafter he was a frequent contributor to leading journals on themes relating to finance and economics, as well as author of numerous pamphlets and books dealing with present day problems in the joint world of trade and finance, and a speaker at state and national gatherings of bankers, merchants and manufacturers. In 1907 he was elected president of the Commercial National bank in Chicago, where he remained until 1910, when it was consolidated with another institution and he returned to Washington, being reappointed director of the U. S. Mint.

LONGED TO RETURN TO IOWA

In all the years after his leaving Fort Dodge he had a yearning to return to Iowa and continue as a factor in its business and political life, resulting in his purchasing the *Iowa State Register* and the *Des Moines Leader* in 1902, consolidating them and installing Harvey Ingham of Algona as editor. He quickly discovered that long range conduct of the property was difficult, and in 1903 negotiated a sale of the Des Moines paper to Sen. A. B. Funk of Spirit Lake, Sen. James A. Smith of Osage and Sen. Fred L. Maytag of Newton, which deal was finally taken over and consummated by Gardner Cowles and Harvey Ingham, the authority for this and other details of the transaction being Senator Funk himself.

Mr. Brigham also told that it was the ambition of the George Roberts of the eighties to succeed "Ret" (James S.) Clarkson as editor of the *Iowa State Register*. The final purchase of the *Register* and the subsequent consolidation with the *Leader* was the realization of this long cherished ambition. And of the details of the incident, Mr. Brigham said:¹

How often it happens that when in after years one has an opportunity to realize the ambition of his youth, he finds himself strangely indifferent, if not positively adverse to entering into the promised land. In 1902 there came to him the long coveted opportunity to buy the *Register*... "Ret" had turned his half interest over to R. P. Clarkson, (his brother) and "Dick," burdened with the weight of years and many cares, was at last ready to sell.

Roberts shared the solicitude of his friends, Senators Allison and Dolliver, lest the leading Republican daily in their state might pass into the hands of strangers, or of men not in sympathy with their views on public affairs and party trend. To avert such a presumed calamity, Mr. Roberts stepped into the breach without giving the subject of purchase that deliberate judgment which he would otherwise have given it. He would have been glad to retain the property and to devote his remaining years to its management, but the financial situation in 1903 was unpromising and, finding himself unable to dispose of other property without great sacrifice, he gladly availed himself of an opportunity to

turn the *Register*, over to the present management, having all confidence in its friendliness to the men and to the general policies he would see maintained in his home state.

Likewise he disposed of his interest in the *Fort Dodge Messenger* to his brother C. A. Roberts, who continued its publication for many years thereafter.

In the course of his public life George Roberts developed positive ideas leading to advocacy by him of changes in methods of procedure in the handling of governmental affairs. Although never a radical, he was progressive, and outspoken as such. In this respect Mr. Brigham speaks also in revealing way of his attitude:¹

Mr. Roberts' attitude toward comparatively recent tariff and railroad legislation has been misunderstood by many. Naturally progressive, he also, by nature and education, a respecter of time-tried policies. He early arrived at the conclusion that the policy of protection was being carried to extremes. That policy had served a good purpose in expediting the country's development, but he was opposed to a policy of exclusion and consequent isolation. He favored a gradual reduction of rates, always with due regard for interests dependent on the tariff. He would modify our policy with a view to enlarging our foreign trade, and at the same time keeping home industries upon approximately the same basis as that upon which the business of the outside world is done.

Opposed to a high protective policy, were his party affiliations solely determined by his views on the tariff, he would doubtless have gone over to democracy. But, imbued with loyalty to the Republican party and with an equally deep distrust of the Democratic party wherever questions of finance and business policies were concerned, he remained a Republican. Although not in sympathy with the high tariff views of Aldrich and Cannon, he believed those views were honestly held . . . Though progressive in spirit, he was conservatively of the opinion that many of the plans of the new progressive party (1912) for political reform and social amelioration were ill-advised and unsound.

Mr. Roberts is fairly entitled to credit for having been a factor in the development and the direction of public opinion in favor of a revision in our banking laws culminating in the Federal Reserve system. In May, 1907, there appeared in the *North*

¹Brigham, in *Iowa—Its History and Its Foremost Citizens*, Vol. III, pp. 1776-77.

American Review a carefully prepared paper from his pen which clearly and forcibly presented practically all the principles upon which monetary reform has since been established.

WROTE "THE IOWA IDEA" PLANKS

Mr. Roberts was the author of the famed "Iowa idea" planks in the Republican state platform of 1902, adopted without debate or comment, and for a long time credited by some to Albert B. Cummins, who was nominated for governor the first time at that convention. It favored tariff changes and endorsed "the policy of reciprocity as the natural complement of protection . . . and any modification of tariff schedules that may be required to prevent their affording shelter to monopoly." Roberts afterward explained that he had written the two planks at Washington and showed them to Senator Allison, obtaining his approval of them before coming to Iowa in attendance at the convention at Cedar Rapids and securing their insertion in the platform of the party.

But in Cummins' approval of these planks on the tariff, he always said they simply favored the carrying out of the real intent of the protective system, that of securing revenue and incidental protection where monopoly would not result. It was Walter Wellman, the *Chicago Tribune* correspondent, who characterized the platform expression as "the Iowa Idea."

Going to the National City bank in New York with President Frank A. Vanderlip, its president in 1914, becoming the bank's economist and later vice president, widened his career, and he never returned to Iowa to live, although he has ever been considered one of Iowa's outstanding public men. Many of less stature have been accorded wider acclaim. With a burdensome national indebtedness of over two and one-half billion dollars here at home, and the specter of unrest and want now facing the rest of the world, what a blessing it would be to have a man of Roberts' capacity and straight thinking in our government today.

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