Chicago: a study in municipal elections

BY R. J. DANGERFIELD

A FEARLESS white-haired federal district attorney and a dynamic, vitriolic federal district judge have recently placed the skids under Al Capone. This is news. A fine of $50,000 and a sentence of eleven years for the Lord of Vice and the King of the Rackets ranks as a most important event in the recent history of Chicago. But there are other events which preceded this and have rendered possible the present awakening and house-cleaning of America's second city. Not the least of these events was the defeat of William Hale Thompson.

Big Bill Thompson has been a political phenomenon of first magnitude. He deserves a front seat among the clowns on the Great American Bandwagon. Big Bill, the builder—Kaiser Bill—Bill of the Lincoln-Lorimer League—Bill of the Experts Fees and School-board scandals—Bill, who wished to hit King George on the Snoot—Bill the spellbinder and showman—Bill, the buffoon—and now Bill has fallen, discredited and out, and with his fall Chicago rises, phoenix-like, to cleanse herself and build anew.

One can understand Thompson and his defeat only when he understands the mixing of the races called Chicago. You can get what you want in the "Windy City." It is an a la carte city, wrote William F. McDermott in the July Scribner's. You can ride across the Michigan avenue bridge at midnight with the 2,000,000,000 candle-power of the Lindbergh beacon flaming above you and the lights all about making a dream city of incomparable beauty, while twenty feet below you, on the lower level of the same bridge, are 2,000 homeless, decrepit, shivering and starving men, wrapping themselves in old newspapers to keep from freezing. Chicago does nothing by halves. Everything is grandiose. The Chicago fire, the Haymarket riot, the railroad strike of '94, the Eastland disaster are examples of monumental horror. The World's Fair of '93, the Stock yards, the Merchandise Mart merit the fame they know. Politics is likewise grandiose and unusual: Lorimer, and his expulsion from the United States senate; Morris Eller, and his "Bloody Twentieth;" "Hinky Dink" McKenna and "Bathhouse John" Coughlin, with their incomparable rooming house wards; and last but not least there has been "Big Bill."

The primary

Last fall the press of Chicago recognized the fact that Mayor Thompson would be a candidate in the Republican primary for his fourth term. Thompson's great object was to be the "World Fair Mayor" of Chicago. It will be recalled that the mayor of the city during the fair of '93 was the redoubtable Carter Harrison I., who served five terms (as did also his son, Carter Harrison II).

Thompson was rendered available as a candidate by the state supreme court's reversal of the "experts fees" decision—estimated to have saved him the repayment of over a million dollars to the city. Unquestionably Thompson's administration was discredited last fall. Many of his appointees were said to be stealing everything save the city hall. His continued absence from the city and from his office weakened him considerably. But the greatest cloud over his political and personal future had been this decision of the lower court that he owed the city one million dollars. Had the supreme court failed to reverse the decision Thompson would have been rendered almost penniless. But with the decision in his favor Big Bill was now ready to launch into the fray and assume his role as chief clown in Chicago politics.

In the November election Thompson swung from the Republican ranks to support J. Ham Lewis, Democrat, for the senate. Campaigning against the McCormicks and the Tribune, the mayor promised a speech on the forefathers of the present Medills and McCormicks. The time was set and the Cort theater was packed, but the mayor was in the hospital suffering with an acute attack of appendicitis. Commissioner of public works, Mr Wolfe, read the speech. No newspaper in Chicago or elsewhere ever printed that speech. The only report made was that it "was not fit to print."

Lewis defeated Mrs Ruth Hanna McCormick with the greatest plurality the state has known and the local Democratic politicians took heart. Thompson's switch from the Republican folds to urge the election of Lewis brought him to the front page in larger head-
lines than he had known since his Anti-British campaign ended in a timely death. He became a certain candidate for reelection.

The mayor's bolt to Lewis alienated the official party bosses and if these men could be brought behind a single candidate the Thompson machine would be beaten in the primaries. Otherwise it looked like Bill would be the Republican choice. Negotiations between the leaders of the various factions of the party were consequently undertaken. Snow, Harding, Brundage, Barrett, Lundin and Deneen endeavored to reach an agreement on some likely candidate they could all support. In the midst of these pourparlers, Judge Lyle of the municipal court, who had been made a newspaper symbol for the anti-crime crusade, announced his candidacy. This announcement rendered any agreement impossible. All save Deneen finally lined up behind the militiant jurist. Deneen entered his own nominee—Alderman Arthur F. Alber. A three-cornered Republican primary was assured.

In the Democratic camp, Anton J. Cermak demonstrated his political ability by side-tracking the hose of "available" candidates. In the end there was no opposition in the Democratic camp.

The Thompson-Lyle-Albert fight early developed into a personal duel. Thompson, easily the most picturesque of the candidates, accused the "Nusty Judge" and "Lil' Arthu-urt" of being tools of the Chicago Tribune and the Chicago Daily News, respectively. Before packed audiences the mayor exhibited the hallen of which the other candidates were the ends of which he was supposedly anchored in the Daily News Plaza or the Tribune Tower. Bill staged gigantic circus parades in the streets of Chicago and free vaudeville shows in the Cort theater each noon. The principal characters in both were his henchmen, mounted on jackasses, dressed as the "Crazy Judge" and "Artie—with the greasy neck."

"Thompsonism" was used by the opposition to signify the cancerous growth of graft and corruption so prevalent in the city hall. By the followers of Big Bill "Thompsonism" was elaborately portrayed in a handsome rotogravure as signifying the skyscrapers, the parks, the schools and all things worth while in Chicago. Thompson took credit for everything. No shrinking violet is he.

The result of the primary confirmed the worst fears of the "party's sake." But the fight had been too bitter, too many hard names had been uttered to permit of re-unions and reconciliations and the anti-Thompson factions remained antithetical.

The election

Following the primary, a move was made to launch the candidacy of Dr Herman Bundeson, Cook county coroner (incidentally the best vote-getter in the county) as an independent against both Cermak and Thompson. This candidacy could only have injured the chances of the Democrats and assisted in the re-election of Thompson. Bundeson finally withdrew his petition and all of the minor candidates were ruled off the ballot on legal technicalities. These events shattered Thompson's chances of an even break. Factional leaders behind Albert and Lyle remained secretly indifferent while their followers fought Thompson. The Tribune and the News found common cause against the Republicans and the campaign was on.

The Thompson parade swung into fever heat for the last long struggle. The purpose was twofold: to amuse the crowd and to villify the enemy. Cermak's name became an issue; his nationality was hissed; his business ability was mocked. Such words as "bo-hunk" filled the Thompson tirades. Such claims as the following became the order of the day: "Vote for me.... jobs for the Poles.... jobs for the Negroes.... jobs for the Irish.... you can call the city hall the Capital of Poland." "That's my skyline.... I built Chicago."

Cermak, hopelessly outnumbered in oratory and showmanship and clowning, conducted a dignified campaign. He submitted his record of twenty-four years in public office to answer Thompson's insinuations. The apparent sincerity of the candidate, and the social and civic leaders he was able to command as supporters proved the dominant factors in his winning the election.

The highlight of the campaign was reached when Thompson secured, by hook or crook, the obituary written for the Tribune and set into type when it was rumored that the mayor was at death's door during the preceding November. Thompson appeared on the platform with the proof sheets of the obituary containing half-praise and doubtful praise and compared the phrases contained in the obituary with the latest statements from the "world's greatest city." The result set the multitude into hysterics. In its final sprint the Thompson pageant became the lowest of low campaigns, the mayor rendered secure his position as the greatest buffoon in politics. The final spurt typified in more ways than one the mockery of elections in modern democracies.

While confident of victory, it was difficult for the most partisan followers of Cermak to suppose that the Thompson machine could be completely routed or its spell broken. Yet, in the election Thompson carried only five wards in the city. The North Side wards, always Republican, swung to Cermak. Thompson's only strength was manifest in the "black belt," the "bloody twentieth" and the twenty-eighth.

The broom swept clean and the city breathed again. The process of re-habilitation began immediately and the old forces packed to leave the city hall. The first acts of the new mayor were to appoint leaders in civic affairs to office. Professor Charles E. Merriam of the University of Chicago was tendered membership on the school board but refused because he would necessarily have been a minority member among a large group of Thompson appointees. Professor Leonard D. White, of the same institution, was appointed to the key position on the civil service commission. The mayor hired Mr J. L. Jacobs, efficiency engineer, to right the wrongs in the city administration. Only recently there has been a complete housecleaning in the police department. The old force is out and better and cleaner things should result.

Chicago is no ready to begin the great cleaning up essential before the holding of the 1933 "Pageant of Progress." The "Public Enemies" are going—the long list of a year ago has been all but eliminated and a general repair of the police system seems to warrant optimistic predictions. The day of awakening is at hand. The course to a new city is at least laid out and the World's Fair of 1933 should do much to aid its realization. The Great City by the Lake has symbolically moved and Al Capone is bound for Fort Leavenworth.