CHAPTER XI

COUNTY POLITICS

Wood County was settled by hardy toilers most of whom came here with little or no money and who were essentially democratic in sentiment. Many of them were French-Canadians who had lived under an alien government, which, however liberal it might be in respecting their rights was not what they would themselves have chosen had they been in the majority. Many of them, as also those of other races or nationalities, including the native born Americans—that is those born in the United States—had entered the county when it was a part of Portage County, and before the formation of the Republican party in 1854. A considerable majority of them, therefore, were Democrats, and as such they remained even during, and for a number of years after the Civil War period, which gave the Democratic party a strong preponderance in the county. With the increasing growth and prosperity of this region, however, a new class of settlers was attracted to it, men who had originally been Whigs and were now Republicans, and they continued to come until the two great political parties were almost evenly balanced. Thus elections began to go first one way and then the other, with frequent disappointments to those who were seeking the honors or spoils of office. While this state of things increased for awhile political antagonisms and added to the excitement of elections, the results on the counting of the ballots often proved so unsatisfactory to the leaders of both parties that in self defense they gradually began the practice of making political bargains, one side with the other, with the object of securing surer results and dividing the offices, until the system became so firmly established that the result of an election involving the more important offices could be forecast in advance by those who had inside information.

About 20 years ago, however, owing to the further development of the county in prosperity and wealth and the establishment of large industries fostered by Republican tariff legislation, and perhaps to a few other causes, the Republicans obtained a preponderance of the voting population, and since then the county has been strongly Republican in general sentiment, though its Republicanism has not been to any large extent of the “stand-pat” type, but leaning strongly toward the progressive or even experimental variety, as evidenced in its consistent support of R. M. LaFollette in his candidacy three times for governor and as many times for the U. S. Senate.

The presidential vote, eliminating local issues, reflects with fair accuracy the general political sentiment of a locality, and hence the following presidential election statistics are given, covering the period from 1880 to 1920, to which has been added the vote for governor for the same years, and also for off years, where the figures have been obtained.

1880—The presidential candidates were James A. Garfield, Republican, and Winfield S. Hancock, Democrat, of whom the former received 912 votes and the latter 753. Jeremiah M. Rusk, the Republican candidate for governor received
452 votes, and Nicholas D. Pratt, Democrat, 497. Thus both the presidential and gubernatorial contests showed a fair, but not excessive Democratic plurality, a condition that was maintained with slight fluctuations until 1896. Of the two other candidates for governor, Kamonse, Prohibition, received 57 votes, and Allis, Greenbacker, 326.

1884—For president, James G. Blaine, Republican, received 1,455 votes, and Grover Cleveland, Democrat, 1,699. John P. St. John, Prohibition, got only 7, while Benjamin F. Butler, so-called People’s candidate, received 97. For governor, Jeremiah M. Rusk (R) received 1,468, and Nicholas D. Pratt (D) 1,723. The Prohibition candidate, S. D. Hastings, received 7 votes, and the Greenbacker, W. L. Uttley, 64.

1888—The results of the presidential election were: Benjamin F. Harrison (R) 1,904; Grover Cleveland (D), 1,984; Clinton B. Fisk (Pro.), 41; E. S. Streeter (Labor Party), 73. For governor, W. D. Hoard (R), 1,896; James Morgan (D), 1,986; E. G. Durant (Pro.), 38; D. F. Powell (Lab.), 79.

1892—The population of the county was at this time 18,127. The presidential vote was as follows: Benj. F. Harrison (R), 1,779; Grover Cleveland (D), 2,220; James B. Weaver (Peo.), 36; John Bidwell (Pro.), 54; Democratic plurality 441. In the gubernatorial contest, the Democratic candidate, Geo. W. Peck, had a plurality of 491, his Republican opponent being John C. Spooner. The vote for Cyrus M. Butt (Pop.) and Thos. C. Richmond (Pro.) was negligible.

1896—It was in this year that the political preponderance was reversed. A majority of the people had supported Cleveland, the gold standard Democrat, but balked at Bryan, the apostle of free silver coinage. With a total population of 21,637 for the county, the presidential vote was as follows: William McKinley (R), 2,839; William J. Bryan (D), 1,877. Republican plurality 964. There were four other presidential candidates, who received altogether 97 votes, 54 being cast for Joshua Levering, Prohibition. John M. Palmer, Nat. Dem. (gold standard), received 31; Chas. M. Matchett (Soc. Lab.) and Chas. E. Bentley (Nat. Sil. Pro.) received 6 each. For governor Edward Schofield (R) had a plurality of 814, the Democratic candidate being Willis Silverthorn. The vote for other candidates was negligible as in the vote for president.

1900—The population of the county was 25,865. The real issue in both the presidential and gubernatorial campaigns was still between the two great parties, who put forth respectively the same standard bearers as in 1896. The Republican maintained its lately won ascendancy, William McKinley (R) receiving 3,135 votes, while William J. Bryan (D), 1,878. There were four or five other candidates, the Prohibitionist, J. G. Woolsey, receiving 76 votes. E. V. Debs (Soc. Dem.), who now appeared for the first time as a presidential candidate, received 35, and the others even less. For governor Robert M. La Follette (R) polled 3,126 votes, and Louis G. Bonnich (D), 1,895; the Prohibition candidate, J. Burritt Smith, 71; Howard Tuttle (Soc. Dem.), 31; Frank R. Wilk (Soc. Lab.), 5.

In 1902, an off year as regards the presidency, Robert M. La Follette was again elected governor, polling 2,740 votes, while his Democratic opponent, D. S. Rose, polled 1,920.

1904—In this year the magnetic and strenuous Theodore Roosevelt was the Republican standard bearer in the presidential campaign, being opposed by Alton
B. Parker on the part of the Democrats. Mr. Parker had no chance in Wood County, polling only 1,673 votes while Roosevelt polled 4,002. E. V. Debs (Soc. Dem.) had 195 well wishers who tried unavailingy to boost him into the presidential chair. The Prohibition candidate, S. C. Swallow, polled 96 votes. In the campaign for governor, R. M. La Follette again showed his popularity, defeating Geo. W. Peck by a vote of 3,245 to 2,506.

In 1906, an off-presidential year, James Q. Davidson was the Republican candidate for governor and was successful, polling 2,683 votes, his Democratic opponent, John A. Aylward, polling 1,431.

1908—The main presidential contest was between William H. Taft (R) and William J. Bryan (D). Mr. Bryan was again disappointed in his presidential aspirations and Wood County went as the country went, giving Taft 3,013 votes and Bryan 2,498. E. V. Debs carried off 274, and E. W. Chafin, who carried the banner of the Prohibitions, managed to get 132. The result of the vote for governor was: James Q. Davison (R), 3,007; John A. Aylward (D), 2,523; Harry D. Brown (Soc. Dem.), 256; Winfred D. Cox (Pro.), 125.

In the non-presidential year in 1910 the Democratic candidate, Adolph H. Schmitz was successful, polling 2,207 votes, while his Republican opponent, Francis E. McGovern, polled 1,891, making a net Democratic plurality of 316. The population of the county at this time was 30,583.

1912—In this year there were six presidential candidates represented on the ballots. The real contest was between William H. Taft, Rep., Woodrow Wilson, Dem., and Theodore Roosevelt, Progressive-Independent, and the independent candidacy of Roosevelt, which split the Republican party, gave the election to the Democrats in the country at large. The result of the voting in Wood County was: Wilson, 2,523; Taft, 1,742; Roosevelt, 525, showing that in this county Wilson had a majority over the other two leading candidates of 256. E. V. Debs (Soc. Dem.) secured 369 votes; Eugene Chafin (Pro.), 139, and A. E. Reimer (Ind.) 38. The vote for governor went the other way, Francis E. McGovern (R), polling 2,422 votes, and John C. Karel (D), 2,340. The vote given other gubernatorial candidates was small. The Republican plurality for governor was 82.

In the gubernatorial election of 1914 the Republicans were again victorious, E. L. Phillip (R) receiving 1,933 votes, while John C. Karel (D) received 1,883.

1916—In this presidential election Wood County was on the losing side, giving 2,954 votes to Chas. E. Hughes (R), and 2,625 to Woodrow Wilson (D). Allan Benson (Soc.) polled 200 votes, and J. Frank Hanley (Pro.), 86. The Republican plurality was 329. For governor Emanuel L. Phillip (R) polled 3,000 votes and was elected, the Democratic candidate, Burt Williams, receiving 2,416. The other ballots cast were 182 for Rae Weaver (Soc.) and 118 for Geo. McKerrow (Pro.).

In the off year 1918 Phillip (R) was again elected governor, receiving 1,695 votes, and Moehlenpah (D), 1,014.

1920—In this presidential year, owing to causes arising out of the war, which are too recent to be here discussed, the Democratic party was snowed under, the vote in Wood County reflecting the general sentiment of the country. The county cast 6,863 ballots for Warren G. Harding, the Republican candidate, and only 1,051 for James M. Cox, Democratic. E. V. Debs (Soc.) came to the front with 1,665 ballots, and Watkins (Pro.) received 142. In the gubernatorial contest the
difference between the two great parties was not so marked, Blaine, the Republican standard bearer, polling 4,868 ballots, and McCoy, Democrat, 3,483, showing that, aside from special issues, the county was still Republican, though with a strong Democratic minority.

In county politics the election in 1894 carried the Republicans into power, and since that time they have carried most of the county offices at every election, though previously the Democrats had the ascendancy. In 1922 there was no Democratic county ticket. The vote now leans toward the progressive or independent section of the Republican party in state as well as local politics.