

MATTY'S MEMOIRS

CHAPTER V

William Cowie is the man who was really responsible for what the newspapers used to call "the infamous aldermanic combine."

By that, they mean the group of aldermen who stood solidly together for 12 years, through thick and thin; come what might, to rule this city. Not always the same men, for the personnel of the group kept changing, but always the same number—just enough to pass legislation over the Mayor's veto.

Cowie didn't mean to bring about the formation of such a group, of course. He didn't mean to do a lot of things, for that matter, that he was forced to do while he was Mayor in 1890 and 1891. But he did it, just the same.

He was the Mayor who investigated the famous prosecution of Alderman John McLennan of the old Eleventh ward.

There would be no point in going over that old case here, in detail. It is enough to say that McLennan, who had been in Common Council four or five years, was accused by Cowie of betraying the trust



FRANK MATTY.

out of the city hall. We've got the power—if we stick together."

Well, we had a long talk, and the upshot of it was that we three agreed to try to form such a combination. We didn't have any secret oaths or anything like that, but we did have an iron-clad agreement. And that was that we would stick together on any vote that we considered important to us, no matter what happened. We agreed not to let the wishes of the party leaders interfere with us, if it became necessary to defy them, and to submit our personal inclinations to the judgment of the majority.

Alderman McLennan was a brother of Peter B. McLennan, who was a Justice of Supreme Court at the time. Peter B. was tremendously popular. The people liked him and trusted him and, naturally, they had a friendly feeling for his brother. John was popular, too, and was a capable alderman.

Cowie's friends advised him to drop the McLennan case, on the ground that he was wrong, anyway, and would succeed in doing nothing but hurt himself, even if he had been right. It was good advice, but Cowie was a Scotchman—and nobody ever saw a Scotchman who wasn't stubborn. He was a rich real estate dealer who got into Republican politics with the backing of the James St. crowd, and because he was honest and capable, he got along to the point of being elected mayor.

His son, Alexander Cowie, is now attorney for the New York Central. When he was a boy, everybody called him "Sandy" and the name still sticks to him.

At the time the Cowie-McLennan fight was on, Tom Merriam was alderman of the Eighth ward, which then included the university section. He was a Republican and a veteran of the Civil War and ran a box factory somewhere up in Water St. He was a great friend of Peter B. McLennan and was one of those who tried to pull Cowie off, only to find that Cowie wouldn't pull.

One day, Charlie Candee and I were in the city clerk's office when Tom Merriam came in. He was red-hot about the McLennan case, and didn't hesitate to say what he thought of the Mayor. Charlie and I helped it along by sympathizing with him, although it was honest enough, for we both knew McLennan wasn't guilty. We talked for a while and Merriam said:

"It's a shame that a Mayor can get bull-headed and ruin an alderman like that. We ought to have some protection. As it is, he can get any of us."

I told him:

"If enough of us would stand together, we could run any Mayor

By
FRANK MATTY
As Told to
JAMES GORDON FRASER

us again, hammer and tongs. And the newspapers began to take it up and hammer us. The Republican papers took the position that we were a lot of grafters, after anything we could get, and that we were demanding a split out of ever franchise we put over. They pictured us as a lot of wolves, banded together for evil. In those days, the papers used to say about what they liked and nobody ever thought of suing them for libel.

Anyway, it didn't do either Cowie or the newspapers much good. Cowie was a one-term Mayor. He could hardly be anything else, for no man could make a success of the job with our combination of aldermen against him.

The next year, the Republicans nominated Jacob Amos and succeeded in electing him over Duncan W. Peck, who was the Mowry-Kirk candidate. Amos only won by about 500 votes. Peck was the prize hard-luck candidate in my experience. He should have beaten Amos and he could have won the next time, when Jay B. Kline took the Republican nomination away from Amos and Amos ran as an independent. It has always been a mystery to me how Peck lost that fight, but he did. Amos beat him by about 200, with Kline a bad third. I guess Dunk talked himself out of that one.

Jake Amos and I grew up on opposite sides of a picket fence, so we knew each other pretty well. I couldn't fool him much, nor could he fool me. We were different types, but I liked him and I think he liked me. He got along better with the aldermanic combination than Cowie did, largely for that reason. But, even at that, he learned that it was the combination, and not him, that had the final word.

Amos and the aldermen worked together on one thing. We made the New York Central pave West Washington St. at its own expense. Several mayors had tried to do that, but had fallen down. And, when we finally put it over, the people thought it was a big thing. It is always popular to beat a railroad. People will forgive you a lot of things if you can report that you have won something for them from a railroad.

For some reason or other, Jake Amos got in with the big men in the New York Central. For a long time, he could get all the passes he wanted from them for his friends. He was pretty liberal with them, too. When one of the boys, or a group of them, wanted to run down to New York to see the sights, I used to go in to Amos and say:

"Can you get four or five passes?"

He would always produce them, and it softened up a lot of the boys toward him. They looked on it as legitimate perquisites of the job.

Well, Amos got through with it, and that brought us up to the election in 1895, the first time we ever elected a Mayor in the fall, as we do now.

And that started the fireworks, for it brought in McGuire.

HAT TRADE EXCHANGE

MANILA, Nov. 3.—The United States is the chief overseas supplier of hats to the Philippines and in turn is the chief market for Philippine hat exports, according to a report from Trade Commissioner E. D. Hester, Manila. Shipments abroad of all kinds of hats from the islands during 1932 had a value of 1,184,000 pesos, of which \$71,900 pesos, or 73 per cent., represented exports to the United States.

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