

The Chambersburg Valley Spirit, 1850-1861

THE decade before the Civil War was a turbulent era which created many problems and tensions for political parties and personages. Because so many of the newspapers of the period were closely allied to a political party, or even to a particular faction within the party, they tended to mirror this turmoil. These newspapers were not only influenced by party ties, they were also highly personalized entities displaying the opinions, biases, and idiosyncrasies of their editors.

The *Valley Spirit* prided itself on its Democratic regularity. Thus it serves as a reflection of the attitudes and problems of orthodox Democrats during these years. There is also a consistency in its point of view in that its founding editor, John M. Cooper, remained with the paper until June 1860, and his successor, George H. Mengel, was Cooper's protégé. Both editors, self-acknowledged orthodox Democrats, held strong views which are easily discerned in the columns of their paper.

The *Valley Spirit* was founded in July 1847 in Shippensburg, a town twelve miles northeast of Chambersburg, with Cooper's brother-in-law, Peter S. Dechert, as publisher.¹ Shortly thereafter, it was moved to Chambersburg, the county seat of Franklin County, a prosperous area located in the Cumberland Valley along the Mason-Dixon Line. Chambersburg was a thriving town of approximately 5,000 people.

Franklin County was called the "green spot" by the Whigs because they collected a bountiful harvest of votes every fall. Rarely in state or national elections did they fail to obtain a majority. This pattern held through the 1840s and into the early 1850s during which

¹ *History of Franklin County Pennsylvania* (Chicago, 1887), 254.

the *Valley Spirit* carried on a spirited battle of words with the dominant newspaper in the county, the *Repository & Whig*.²

The *Valley Spirit* was a weekly of four to six pages at the beginning of the 1850s, expanding to eight pages as circulation increased. It did not emphasize local news. Even its national coverage was not extensive, although it often printed important speeches in their entirety. The front page was given over mainly to moral advice, heroic and patriotic tales of the past, interspersed with national news taken from metropolitan newspapers. The heart of the paper was the editorial page where political news and highly partisan opinions were printed. The rest of the paper consisted of advertisements and notices.

Like many newspapers of the era, the *Valley Spirit*, was often vituperative, as the following quotation concerning John W. Forney and his Philadelphia *Press* demonstrates.

John W. Forney's Black Republican dung-spreader . . . The Philadelphia *Press* is a reaking pest-house of personal defamation—a filthy sewer of stinking slander—a noisome receptacle of rancorous abuse. Its editor's propensity to libel the great and good is not displayed occasionally but every day. . . .³

The *Valley Spirit* maintained consistent regularity as promulgated by the state party and the Democratic administration in Washington. The local Democrats also were generally a regular lot in following the lead of the party. Thus the paper and its Democratic readers were usually in harmony. Cooper gained enough political prominence to serve as a secretary at a Democratic state convention and to receive minor and short-lived national patronage positions.⁴

Passionate orthodoxy led the *Valley Spirit* to save its most virulent attacks for those whom the editor considered renegade Democrats. This accounts for its vilification of Forney, a former close associate of President James Buchanan who had broken with Buchanan over the question of patronage. Other heterodox Democrats were seared by the acid of Cooper's pen. Simon Cameron, at the time a Democrat

² *Ibid.*, 252. The *Repository and Whig*, which dated back to 1790, went through several name changes. It will be referred to here as the *Repository*.

³ *Valley Spirit*, Aug. 24, 1859, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, May 5, 1853, p. 2; Mar. 12, 1856, p. 4; Mar. 23, 1859, p. 4.

and later a Lincoln cabinet member, was labeled "a traitor to the Democratic Party," "a corrupt scoundrel," and "the greatest political rascal of this generation."⁵ David Wilmot, a Democratic northern Pennsylvania congressman and later a Republican candidate for judge and governor, was branded "unprincipled" and "a heartless agitator" with "a treasonous heart."⁶ Other Democratic heretics were similarly excoriated.

The opposition was often treated more kindly. The only popularly elected Whig President during this era, Zachary Taylor, was generally called no worse than "weak," "incompetent," and "mediocre," which was mild indeed for the *Valley Spirit*.⁷ It was usually content merely to trumpet the various customs house scandals during his administration. President Millard Fillmore was even more gently treated, except during the heat of the 1852 presidential campaign when his administration was presented as corrupt and incompetent.⁸ The paper dealt more harshly with state-wide opposition officials or candidates, such as Governors William F. Johnson and James Pollock. However, their treatment at the hands of Cooper was no worse than that suffered by Governor William F. Packer, a Democrat who had the temerity to disagree with Buchanan over the Lecompton constitution for Kansas.⁹

Of course, when reviewing the past, the *Valley Spirit* found the Whig Party to have been constantly on the wrong side of issues such as the bank and tariff.¹⁰ The bank question was easily disposed of by representing it in terms of the people versus "the bank aristocracy." The tariff was a much harder question for a loyal Democratic newspaper, since Pennsylvania generally favored a high tariff. A number of times the *Valley Spirit* boldly proclaimed support for a low tariff on the grounds that a high one helped the rich and hurt the poor, consumers, and workingmen.¹¹ Usually, however, it avoided this issue unless provoked by the *Repository*, or asserted

⁵ *Ibid.*, Nov. 23, 1850, p. 2; Jan. 21, 1857, p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Sept. 10, 1856, p. 4; Apr. 8, 1857, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Mar. 9, 1850, p. 2; Apr. 27, 1850, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, July 15, 1852, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Feb. 17, 1857, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Jan. 4, 1851, p. 2; Aug. 26, 1852, p. 2; Nov. 29, 1854, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1850, p. 2; Sept. 21, 1850, p. 2; June 26, 1851, p. 2; July 26, 1852, p. 2; May 26, 1857, p. 4; Sept. 15, 1858, p. 4.

that it was a nonissue because it has been settled to everybody's satisfaction.¹² However, to draw voters to the Democratic fold, it at times would indicate support for moderate protection.¹³ The *Valley Spirit's* appeal to high tariff voters could be cynical. More than once it indicated that the only way to get a high tariff was to support the winning party—the Democrats.¹⁴

Foreign policy was an area where Cooper often found it difficult to restrain himself so as to be consistent with the Democratic administration. The editor was highly nationalistic and expansionist, an enthusiastic adherent of manifest destiny. He enjoyed praising the Pierce administration's active interest in Central America and Cuba.¹⁵ Even more to his liking were Buchanan's expansive ideas, which included projecting American power into Central America, acquiring more Mexican territory, and the introduction of a bill in January 1859 to buy Cuba for \$30,000,000.¹⁶ He enthusiastically supported the seizure of Mexico.¹⁷ The paper's views on Cuba were long held. As early as 1850, it had felt that Cuba should be captured by the United States and had criticized the Taylor administration's inaction, or possibly even collusion with Spain.¹⁸ The filibustering activity of William Walker was approved; his government in Nicaragua was the "best ever," "firm, liberal and enlightened," and Walker "courageous."¹⁹ Only the greatest loyalty to the Democratic Party could bring the editor to fall behind—albeit halfheartedly—Pierce's preventing reinforcements for Walker and, later, Buchanan's arrest of Walker.²⁰

American seizure of territory in Latin America and elsewhere was justified on the grounds that it would be beneficial for the countries involved.²¹ The United States could supply such advantages as a

¹² *Ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1855, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Oct. 5, 1850, p. 2; Dec. 14, 1850, p. 2; Oct. 6, 1858, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Oct. 5, 1850, p. 2; Oct. 6, 1858, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, June 4, 1856. For background on this topic see Philip Shriver Klein, *President James Buchanan, A Biography* (University Park, 1962), 232, 237.

¹⁶ *Valley Spirit*, Jan. 19, 1859; Klein, 317-325.

¹⁷ *Valley Spirit*, Dec. 1, 1858, p. 4; Feb. 23, 1859, p. 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, June 8, 1850, p. 2; Mar. 16, 1850, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, May 7, 1856, p. 4; June 4, 1856, p. 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1856, p. 4; Jan. 13, 1858, p. 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 24, 1853, p. 2; Apr. 18, 1855, p. 4; Feb. 6, 1856, p. 4; Jan. 13, 1858, p. 4.

republican form of government, peace, stability, and morality, with the implication that the natives could not produce these for themselves. This nationalism led the newspaper to support an early example of gunboat diplomacy, the American naval expedition to Paraguay to redress an affront to American honor.²²

Hostility to Britain was one of the papers tenets. The editor steadfastly backed the policy of Pierce and Buchanan in the Caribbean because it was opposed to British action there.²³ Cooper acceded to the arrest of Walker because it removed an excuse for British intervention in Nicaragua.²⁴ One of the benefits of American intervention in Cuba suggested by the *Valley Spirit* was the elimination of British meddling there.²⁵ This bias led him to oppose Britain in such military conflicts as the Crimean War, the Arrow War in China, and the Sepoy Mutiny in India.²⁶ He had the pleasure of accusing the British of filibustering in the Arrow War, something the British had accused the Americans of in Central America. That the *Valley Spirit* would take the native (Asian) side in the Sepoy revolt demonstrates the editor's hostility to the British in that the newspaper usually took a hostile line to dark-skinned people.

There were limits to the activist foreign policy favored by Cooper. His paper strongly opposed intervention in distant China on the premise that it served no moral purpose and would cause trouble at home.²⁷ The paper's aversion to Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian revolutionary, who, it claimed, demonstrated a "meddling propensity," was probably due to an isolationist fear that the United States would be drawn into European affairs.²⁸

A disruptive domestic problem for Cooper was the sudden rise of the nativist Know-Nothing (American) Party. The first mention of the Know-Nothings in the *Valley Spirit* came in the June 15, 1854, issue after the surprise victory of the American Party in Philadelphia.²⁹ While the *Valley Spirit* advised local Democrats to beware

²² *Ibid.*, May 4, 1859, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, June 4, 1856; Klein, 231-232, 317.

²⁴ *Valley Spirit*, Jan. 13, 1858, p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Apr. 18, 1855, p. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Apr. 16, 1856, p. 4; Feb. 4, 1857, p. 4; Aug. 19, 1867, p. 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, May 26, 1853, p. 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Aug. 4, 1853, p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

of this new political entity, there was no sense of the immediacy of the danger it posed. Within a few weeks, however, the Know-Nothings won an upset victory in a special election to fill a vacancy on the Chambersburg town council. More surprising, the victor, Jason Snider, a Democrat, was not generally known to be a candidate. The margin of victory was also astounding; Snider received 174 votes to 25 for the Democratic candidate and 23 for the Whig candidate.³⁰ Even Alexander K. McClure of the *Repository* had not realized the existence of the Know-Nothing effort,³¹ although Chambersburg was a Whig stronghold and a large proportion of Snider's votes must have come from the Whigs.

With the discovery of Know-Nothingism in its own backyard, the *Valley Spirit* stepped up the tempo and shrillness of its attacks on the new political threat. One of its reasons for doing so was its opposition to the *Repository*, which had already taken a nativist, but not a Know-Nothing, position. Moreover, there was potential political advantage to be gained from taking an anti-Know-Nothing stance. Franklin County had a large German population and pockets of Catholicism (fifty Catholic families in one valley in the northwestern part of the county alone).³² Opposing Know-Nothingism, which represented hostility to foreign elements and Catholics, made good political sense; indeed, Cooper had been using the anti-nativist theme even before 1854. And finally, it seems that Cooper had a sincere dislike for nativism. His editorials on the subject were numerous and consistently vehement. This was further indicated when he began aiming more rancor at the *Transcript*, the Know-Nothing paper, than at the *Repository*, his traditional target. Cooper's attitude toward the *Transcript* was no doubt further stimulated by the fact that the leading personage at that paper was Frederick Stambaugh, a former Democrat.

In tune with the newspaper's hostility to Know-Nothingism, local Democrats passed a resolution opposing the Know-Nothing movement and its anti-foreign, anti-Catholic platform, even to the point of demanding a pledge from every Democratic candidate that he

³⁰ *Ibid.*, July 5, 1854, p. 1.

³¹ Alexander K. McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1905), I, 197-198.

³² *Valley Spirit*, Oct. 24, 1855, p. 4.

had nothing to do with the movement.³³ During the campaign of 1854 the Know-Nothing-nativist issue became a central one in Franklin County.³⁴

The election of that year indicated that the Democrats probably lost less than 200 votes to the American Party, while two-thirds of the Whigs defected.³⁵ Analyzing these results, the *Valley Spirit* wrote the obituary of the Whig Party. Perceptively realizing that some new opposition group would appear,³⁶ the newspaper concentrated on the Know-Nothings instead of the Whigs. It fervently declared its undying opposition to them in such statements as the following: "We intend to fight them as long as we can pull a trigger or draw a blade."³⁷ The *Valley Spirit* continued to use this issue to tar the opposition long after the demise of the American Party. In fact, after the merger of the *Repository* and the *Transcript* in August 1855 to form the *Repository & Transcript*, the *Valley Spirit* referred to the paper by the Know-Nothing-associated name "*Transcript*" even after that designation had been dropped from the masthead.

While all the preceding issues vexed the *Valley Spirit* at one time or another, the set of problems that was of constant worry to the newspaper was sectional. Cooper's chief concern was maintaining the unity of the country. He favored compromise on almost anything to avoid alienating the South. The abolitionists who agitated the country and aroused the South were the editor's chief villains. Thus, Wilmot was criticized not merely for being an unorthodox Democrat; far worse, he was an abolitionist. Cameron was not evil merely because he opposed the regular faction of the party, but rather because his strategy was antislavery and anti-Catholic.³⁸ Anybody that Cooper perceived as being in league with the abolitionists was viewed unkindly.

The *Valley Spirit* had given immediate and enthusiastic support to the Compromise of 1850. An especially strong editorial argued

³³ *Ibid.*, Aug. 30, 1854, p. 4.

³⁴ This was also true of Schuylkill County. William Gudelunas, Jr., "Nativism and the Demise of Schuylkill County Whiggery: Anti-Slavery or Anti-Catholicism," *Pennsylvania History*, XLV (1978), 236.

³⁵ *Valley Spirit*, Oct. 18, 1854, p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Nov. 29, 1854, p. 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Mar. 14, 1855, p. 4.

³⁸ See Klein, 216.

that without this Compromise there would be civil war.³⁹ Its support did not wane; in 1852 the newspaper praised it as the "great treaty of peace between the North and South."⁴⁰ The *Valley Spirit* even dared to disagree with the *Washington Union*, one of the leading regular Democratic newspapers, over this issue. When the *Union* stated that the Democratic platform of 1852 did not support the Compromise, the *Valley Spirit* took strong exception.⁴¹ The pro-Compromise stance paralleled the state Democratic position, although in some areas, such as Pittsburgh, the Democrats dropped the issue.⁴²

Support for the Compromise included strong backing for its fugitive slave law, which involved the federal government in the apprehension of runaways. The editor approved this position on the grounds that the law must be maintained so that the South would have its rights.⁴³ He attacked Whig Governor William Johnson for opposing repeal of a state law, passed during a previous Democratic administration, which denied state facilities for catching slaves.⁴⁴ In fact, the newspaper continued its support of the fugitive slave laws as late as January 1861, when it suggested incorporating them in the Constitution as a solution to disunion. The next month it opposed a personal liberty bill in the legislature.⁴⁵ Protectors of Negro fugitives were vehemently censured as "slave-stealing Yankees."⁴⁶

The *Valley Spirit* believed in popular sovereignty as an excellent means of dealing with the question of slavery in the territories. The newspaper joined local Democrats in opposing the free soil position.⁴⁷ Their assumption was that the handling of the problem by the territories would maintain the Union. Naturally, Cooper supported

³⁹ *Valley Spirit*, Oct. 5, 1850, p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Apr. 10, 1852, p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 8, 1853, p. 2.

⁴² Michael Fitzgibbon Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860* (New Haven, 1969), 85-87, 97; Philip S. Klein and Ari Hoogenboom, *A History of Pennsylvania* (New York, 1973), 147.

⁴³ *Valley Spirit*, Apr. 12, 1851, p. 2; Aug. 9, 1851, p. 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Apr. 12, 1851, p. 2; Aug. 16, 1851, p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1861, p. 4; Feb. 27, 1861, p. 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Nov. 23, 1860, p. 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Mar. 2, 1850, p. 2; Mar. 1, 1851, p. 2; Oct. 4, 1854, p. 4; Dec. 6, 1854, p. 4.

the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the pro-slavery Lecompton constitution for Kansas. These stands, of course, were Democratic Party policy. However, Cooper was particularly vehement on these issues; he was not merely following party discipline, with him they became matters of principle, ones he held to even though he knew that his position was not popular.⁴⁸ The newspaper praised the popular sovereignty approach embodied in the Kansas-Nebraska Act; the way of Pierce and Buchanan was the Constitutional way. Cooper argued that opposition to the act caused disruption and disunion, that trouble in Kansas was created by abolitionists, agitators, and Republicans who "want riot and murder and treason to prevail in yet a while, that they may grasp the spoils of office—at the price of Kansas blood."⁴⁹ However, the paper modified its position by indicating that it did not want slavery in any new states. In any event, as there would not be slavery in Kansas since it was not suitable for that climate, there was no point in disturbing the Union by resisting useless southern attempt to implant it.⁵⁰

This unswerving support for the administration position was maintained on the Lecompton constitution as well. Although the Democratic state convention supported that constitution, it was a divisive issue for Pennsylvania Democrats,⁵¹ one that caused Governor Packer and John W. Forney to break with Buchanan. Chiding the *Democrat* in neighboring Fulton County for its opposition to the Lecompton constitution,⁵² Cooper equated Kansas statehood under that constitution with peace and tranquility and accused those opposing it with wrecking the federal Constitution. Democratic opponents were "deserters" and "traitors."⁵³ The rival Topeka faction in Kansas was constantly derided and its armed supporters usually referred to as "ruffians."⁵⁴

Cooper argued that for the good of the Union, the South must obtain its just rights; otherwise, civil war was possible. For this

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Jan. 18, 1860, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, July 16, 1856, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Sept. 8, 1854, p. 4; Sept. 3, 1856, p. 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 10, 1858, p. 4; Holt, 240; Klein, 311; Klein and Hoogenboom, 157.

⁵² *Valley Spirit*, Feb. 10, 1858, p. 4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Feb. 3, 1858, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Nov. 28, 1860, p. 4.

reason, it was necessary to support the Compromise of 1850, the fugitive slave laws, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Lecompton constitution, and the Dred Scott decision. Thus, the *Valley Spirit* sympathized with the southern point of view. Not only was it hostile to abolitionists, it preferred slave owners to those who helped fugitive slaves. Cooper even defended the right of the South to prevent abolitionists from speaking there.⁵⁵ He printed an extremely negative review of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the reviewer claiming that the book was abolitionist propaganda necessitated by the success of the Compromise of 1850 and, to boot, a very poor literary work whose fame would not last.⁵⁶ The reviewer believed that masters treated their slaves well and that the slave was "ignorant partially brutalized," without the capacity to suffer. On the other hand, the review of *A Southside View of Slavery* by Nehemiah Adams, a northerner friendly to slavery (it kept crime under control in the South), was most favorable.⁵⁷

Cooper favored John C. Calhoun's opinion that the territories belonged to all of the states and, thus, during the territorial period, slavery could not be banned.⁵⁸ He admitted that defense of the South by some northern Democrats created problems for the party in the North, but he approved that course.⁵⁹ In fact, to put the South in the best light possible, Cooper was willing to make an invidious comparison between Pennsylvania and Georgia.⁶⁰ This required slanting facts by using statistics on population and agricultural production without taking into account climate and the size of the states.

As if to balance, the *Valley Spirit* showed distaste for southern "ultras." Usually the "ultras" were attacked in the same breath with the abolitionists as evil fanatics who would disrupt the country. The paper strongly condemned Preston Brooks for canning Charles Sumner. In fact, Cooper was co-secretary along with his archrival, Alexander K. McClure, the former editor and owner of the *Reposi-*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, May 9, 1860, p. 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, May 12, 1853, p. 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Jan. 24, 1855, p. 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Mar. 16, 1850, p. 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Jan. 18, 1860, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Oct. 1, 1856, p. 4; Oct. 8, 1856, p. 4.

tory, of a meeting called to protest Brooks' action. However, even while condemning Brooks, Cooper was careful to disassociate the South from the incident.⁶¹

The *Valley Spirit* frequently denied that it was proslavery, even claiming to oppose the institution. But it followed the party line in maintaining that slavery could not be eliminated because the Constitution guaranteed its existence.⁶² However, the paper's bias was clear: "We have nothing to fear from the millions of slaves in the South except their liberation."⁶³

Not only was the paper hostile to slaves, it disliked all blacks. The following is representative of numerous negative references to them.

It would be a blessing to Pennsylvania if slave owners, instead of merely retaking their runaways, would carry off nine out of every ten negroes in the State. We admit that there are a few colored men among us who conduct themselves creditably. It is our duty to respect all such and treat them kindly. But a vast majority of them are lazy vagabonds. We must watch or they will prey. Larceny is their delight, honest labor is their aversion. They stay up all night to steal a chicken or a stick of wood rather than work all day to earn a dollar. In the fall they crowd our courts and fill our jails—many of them we verily believe, committing some petty theft on purpose to get warm winter quarters. In the spring and summer they rob our gardens, cornfields and orchards. Between what they steal and what we pay for keeping them in prison and poorhouse, they cost us as much as would transportation to Africa, whither it is hoped both bond and free will eventually find their way, never to return to this country to curse it.⁶⁴

The same editorial contained terms such as "worthless blacks" and "stinking negroes." The newspaper was horrified at the suggestion of these inferior people being allowed to vote or to marry whites. In extremities such as these the paper used headings like the "Beginning of the End" or "Save Us From Abolition."⁶⁵ In brief, the paper insisted: "The Democratic Party maintains that our government was formed by white men to be controlled by white men for the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, June 11, 1856, p. 4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Mar. 2, 1850, p. 2; Aug. 17, 1850, p. 2; Mar. 26, 1854, p. 2; Aug. 20, 1854, p. 4; Sept. 3, 1854, p. 4; Oct. 3, 1860, p. 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, May 4, 1859, p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Aug. 31, 1850, p. 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Oct. 17, 1860, p. 4; Oct. 31, 1860, p. 1.

prosperity and happiness of their race.”⁶⁶ In fact, it looked down on all dark-skinned people. For instance, the editor stated that Indians (India) were acceptable because they were Caucasian, and that their only drawback was their dark skin.⁶⁷

In its search for moderation and the preservation of the Union, the *Valley Spirit* was willing to praise leading members of the opposition, such as Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Both had taken a moderate position on sectional issues, and had supported the Compromise of 1850. As the Whig Party disintegrated, the *Valley Spirit* tried to lure old-line Whigs, those who stayed aloof from the Know-Nothing Party and later from the Republican Party, into a coalition with the Democrats to preserve the Union. The editor claimed some success in this effort.⁶⁸

To effect this alliance, he had to change some of his terminology. Before the disintegration of the Whig Party, the editor generally used “liberal” to describe the Democrats; the Whigs were the “conservatives.” From the context of the paper’s editorials, a liberal “generally meant favoring the people and democracy as opposed to a conservative,” which meant favoring aristocracy and property. For instance, in describing the opposition after the 1854 election, they were called “conservative and backward.”⁶⁹ However, “conservative,” in the sense of trying to “conserve” the Union, became a useful term. By 1858 the term “conservative” was being used positively and by 1859 the defeat of the opposition in 1856 was said to have been caused by the “great conservative element.”⁷⁰ The opposition was “radical” or “socialist.”⁷¹ The *Valley Spirit* reprinted an article from the Philadelphia *Pennsylvanian*, the leading orthodox Democratic paper in the state, which expressed annoyance with the Republicans for calling themselves “conservatives.”⁷² Probably it would have been more accurate for the *Valley Spirit* to have claimed to be conservative all along, as it was allied to the faction of the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1860, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 24, 1867, p. 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Sept. 15, 1858, p. 4; Klein and Hoogenboom, 155; McClure, I, 307.

⁶⁹ *Valley Spirit*, Nov. 29, 1854, p. 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Sept. 21, 1859, p. 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 16, 1859, p. 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Oct. 24, 1860, p. 4.

party of Buchanan and former Governor William Bigler which was generally so considered.⁷³

Although Cooper worked arduously for unity in the nation and unity in the Democratic Party, in 1860 all his efforts ended in failure and frustration, which engulfed both the newspaper and its editor. The Democratic Party had remained more or less united even in the face of insistent divisive forces until 1860, when presidential politics proved too explosive. Under Cooper the *Valley Spirit* had been favorable to Vice President John C. Breckinridge, but the paper was not overwhelmingly committed to any one. The Democrats, after failing to name a candidate at Charleston, finally nominated Stephen A. Douglas at Baltimore, but only because the southern faction withdrew to Richmond where it backed Breckinridge. This caused a schism at the *Valley Spirit*. In January 1860, Dechert and Cooper had sold the paper to George H. Mengel & Company, with Cooper remaining as editor. Mengel came from a prominent Democratic family in Bedford County and held views similar to Cooper's. But Cooper wanted to oppose Douglas because of what he considered Douglas' heresies, while the new owners wished to support him because they felt he was the regular candidate.

This disagreement led Cooper to resign on June 6. He did not agree with Douglas' views on popular sovereignty and was annoyed that Douglas, by virtue of his restrained comments on the issue, had seemed to oppose the Dred Scott decision. Moreover, he also felt that Douglas, by dividing the Democratic Party through his disagreements with Buchanan, had caused its defeat in preceding years.⁷⁴ Cooper had not always been hostile to Douglas. Into the mid-1850s he had praised him highly, mainly because of Douglas' support of the Compromise of 1850—especially the fugitive slave section—and his introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Cooper had suggested that Douglas might make a good presidential candidate.⁷⁵ But the *Valley Spirit* became reserved in its comments after Douglas opposed Buchanan on the Lecompton constitution. However, even though Douglas and Buchanan had had a parting of the

⁷³ Klein and Hoogenboom, 149; Klein, 261.

⁷⁴ *Valley Spirit*, June 6, 1860, p. 4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Jan. 24, 1851, p. 2.

ways on December 3, 1857, the *Valley Spirit* held its fire.⁷⁶ This restraint was the more surprising considering that Forney, whom Cooper rabidly hated, was Douglas' chief supporter in Pennsylvania. In early 1858, while mildly criticizing Douglas for opposing Buchanan, Cooper could still consider him a "great statesman," and in early 1859, while attacking Douglas indirectly, he indicated that he still might support him for President after 1860.⁷⁷ By the fall of 1859, however, the newspaper was making strong sallies against the "Little Giant," calling him "traitor to his party" and "less than honest and incompetent."⁷⁸

But to George H. Mengel Douglas was the true popular and regular nominee to whom the faithful should rally. In his own way, Mengel was trying to maintain the unity of the party as Cooper had done before him. He attacked the Baltimore seceders, accusing them of disunion, while branding the northern supporters of Breckinridge as "traitors."⁷⁹ Those in the party who did not unite behind Douglas were "parasites of the administration."⁸⁰

Through July 1860, the *Valley Spirit* remained ardent in its support for Douglas, a position taken by most other Democratic newspapers in the state. It listed forty-five papers supporting Douglas, eight supporting Breckinridge, and ten neutral. Significantly, the leading Democratic newspaper, the *Pennsylvanian*, was reported to be neutral.⁸¹ For a time Mengel organized local meetings for Douglas, but before long found reasons to change his stand. First, Forney was the key man in the Douglas organization in Pennsylvania, and Mengel disliked him no less than Cooper did. Second, in August a strongly pro-Douglas paper, the *Times*, commenced publication as a rival to the *Valley Spirit*. Then, the Democratic National Committee began urging fusion to maintain unity.⁸² Further, on July 9, Buchanan stated his position, which was that both nominations were irregular, and that he favored Breckinridge because he advocated

⁷⁶ Klein, 301, 304.

⁷⁷ *Valley Spirit*, Feb. 10, 1858, p. 4; Jan. 26, 1859, p. 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Sept. 28, 1859, p. 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, June 27, 1860, p. 4; July 4, 1860, p. 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, July 18, 1860, p. 4.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, July 25, 1860, p. 4.

⁸² Klein and Hoogenboom, 159.

Constitutional protection of property while Douglas would allow it to be thrown out by a territorial vote.⁸³

Under this pressure the state committee meeting at Cresson came up with a fusion method which would provide Democratic electors who would give their support to the strongest candidate.⁸⁴ This was almost identical to a plan put forth and turned down at the committee's Reading meeting. The Cresson plan was accepted by many Douglas supporters, but not by the Forney faction.

By August 15, the *Valley Spirit* had accepted the compromise. However, the newspaper continued its support for Douglas and criticized the neighboring *Fulton Democrat* for shifting to Breckinridge.⁸⁵ The new theme of the paper throughout early September was to push the unity plan devised at Cresson. However, signs of a further shift were apparent when the *Valley Spirit* opposed a pro-Douglas resolution which was passed at the Franklin County Democratic convention by a narrow margin. The newspaper maintained that because the county Democrats were so evenly divided, it was better to work for unity than for any particular candidate.⁸⁶

In mid-September, Mengel and his paper, along with such leading Breckinridge men as George W. Brewer, William Stenger, and former *Valley Spirit* publisher Peter S. Dechert, called for a "unity" meeting. Significantly, not included among those listed was James Nill, a leading local Democrat and editor of the strongly pro-Douglas *Times*. The unity meeting, to which the *Valley Spirit* applied one of its favorite labels—"conservative"—chose a county Democratic committee in opposition to that chosen at the regular county convention. The rival Democratic county committees had only three overlapping members out of a total of thirty-one.⁸⁷

The next week the *Valley Spirit* made a complete reversal in its presidential endorsement. In a blistering editorial, Mengel switched to Breckinridge.⁸⁸ Actually, very few words were expended in favor of the candidate. Most of the endorsement was an attack upon

⁸³ Klein, 348.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁸⁵ *Valley Spirit*, Aug. 15, 1860, p. 4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1860, p. 4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Sept. 19, 1860, p. 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Sept. 26, 1860, pp. 1, 4.

Douglas. A long list of reasons were given for the switch. It claimed that Douglas was not the regular nominee of the party because he had not received a two-thirds majority of the total convention. (In the July 11 issue of the *Valley Spirit*, Mengel had indicated Douglas was indeed the regular nominee as the seceders had chosen not to participate of their own free will.) Douglas' running mate, Hershel V. Johnson of Georgia, was accused of being a disunionist. (In a July 4 editorial Johnson had been praised.) Douglas was excoriated for supporting the right of a territorial legislature to abolish slavery (the same complaint made by Cooper in his resignation statement). It was claimed that he caused trouble by abandoning the Dred Scott decision and the Democratic platform formulated at the 1852 Cincinnati convention (a moderate platform). Even though accused of having no settled views on slavery, Douglas was denounced for stirring up slavery agitation (a cardinal sin as far as the union-preserving *Valley Spirit* was concerned). He was also accused of being in league with Republicans in being returned to the Senate in 1858 and, in fact, favored the election of Lincoln over that of Breckinridge. Further, he was causing party division by not accepting the Cresson compromise, for attacking the Buchanan administration, and for causing the defeat of the Democratic Party for the last two years. (A charge Cooper had also made.) He was further allied with the "traitor" Forney and other friends who favored the Republicans. Finally, this "low politician" was accused of being a "traitor to his party" by trying to take it into the Republican camp.

As for Breckinridge, it was averred: that he was qualified, a statesman, the best candidate, a good man and a good Democrat; that he favored the Constitution, states' rights, and the protection of *all* property (of course including slaves); and that he was against disunion and not a demagogue. His position on slavery was "correct"; he did not seek popularity and stayed home (while Douglas campaigned all over the country), and he would be President of all the people.⁸⁹

Besides Mengel's stated reasons for the abrupt switch, he was no doubt influenced by events of the preceding months, such as Buchanan's endorsement of Breckinridge and the Cresson compromise.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 17, 1860, p. 1.

Also, as mentioned earlier, Mengel's enemies, Forney and the Chambersburg *Times* supported Douglas. Further, the trend in the state and local party seemed to be to Breckinridge. Most of the major local Democrats except Nill had shifted to him. Quite probably Mengel also resented the refusal of some Douglas men to support the party unity effort.

The *Valley Spirit* spent the rest of the campaign firing volley after volley at Douglas and Johnson. There commenced a running battle with the pro-Douglas *Times*, which began with the *Times* being accused of favoring disunity.⁹⁰ The *Valley Spirit* hardly bothered to notice its old arch-rival, the *Repository*, which favored the Republican cause. This conformed with the pattern set by the paper during the campaign. While for the first time ever it devoted the front page to its political efforts, Lincoln was hardly mentioned and almost lost in the vilification of Douglas. It is not surprising that the *Valley Spirit* expended so much energy excoriating Douglas, for its editor had given Democratic orthodoxy and unity a prime place. Heretics and renegades were of serious concern, more to be feared than the opposition. The *Valley Spirit* spent more venom upon perceived renegade or heretical Democrats such as Cameron, Wilmot, Packer, Frederick Stambaugh (the leader of the local Know-Nothings), Forney and Douglas than it did upon the opposition. What comment appeared on Lincoln called him an abolitionist and denied that he was a conservative, but the charges were not made with the usual invectives. Mild derision of Lincoln's appearance and his penchant for railsplitting seemed to set the tone.⁹¹ The strangest charge was that he and running mate Hannibal Hamlin of Maine were not as reliable in favoring a protective tariff as Buchanan and Henry D. Foster, the Democratic candidate for governor.⁹²

The Constitutional Union Party candidate, John Bell of Tennessee, received even less attention. Only twice did Bell draw major comment—once about his potential to cause a split among the unionists and once to connect him with the Know-Nothings.⁹³ Generally, the Constitutional Union movement was seen as benign,

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Sept. 12, 1860, p. 4.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, July 4, 1860, p. 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Sept. 26, 1860, p. 4.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, May 16, 1860, p. 4; Sept. 26, 1860, p. 4.

though potentially siphoning off votes from the Democrats. The only race in which the *Valley Spirit* followed its normal partisan pattern was the gubernatorial. Henry D. Foster, the Democrat, was praised profusely and Andrew G. Curtin, the Republican, was accused of every sin in the book.

By the termination of the campaign, the state committee had withdrawn the Cresson compromise and openly backed Breckinridge, as did most of the Democratic newspapers. The Douglas element in Pennsylvania had pretty much given up by election day.⁹⁴ The voter turnout was about as the *Valley Spirit* predicted, but it underestimated Lincoln's strength and overestimated just about everyone else's.⁹⁵ State-wide, Douglas received 3.6 percent (slightly more than Bell) while Breckinridge obtained about 37 percent and Lincoln took more than half the vote. In Franklin County Lincoln received a vote comparable to his state-wide tally. Douglas in Franklin County more than doubled his state-wide percentage, mostly at the expense of Breckinridge.⁹⁶ The larger vote for Douglas in Franklin County was no doubt due to the fact that there was a newspaper, the *Times*, and a prominent Democrat, James Nill, actively working for him. The election results no doubt rankled the *Valley Spirit*, for it continued to attack Douglas and the *Times* even after the election.

With the end of the campaign causing the likelihood of the disunion that the *Valley Spirit* had long crusaded against and had predicted if Lincoln won coming to pass, Mengel redoubled his emphasis on the unity and southern appeasement themes that the paper had been urging for years. The culprits whom the *Valley Spirit* believed to be causing disunion, the abolitionists, Republicans, and such, were fiercely attacked. The effort to shore up the fugitive slave laws (possibly with a Constitutional amendment) was ardently advocated, as mentioned earlier.⁹⁷ Attacks upon blacks became more

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Oct. 24, 1860, p. 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1860, p. 4.

⁹⁶ The 1860 presidential election results expressed as percentages, based upon figures from the *Valley Spirit* Nov. 28, 1860, p. 4, are as follows: Pennsylvania—Lincoln 56.7, Breckinridge 37.0, Douglas 3.6, Bell 2.7; Franklin County—Lincoln 56.4, Breckinridge 34.8, Douglas 8.5, Bell 1.0.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

strident. The longstanding policy of the *Valley Spirit* to support the South so as to maintain the Union was taken to extremes. An invidious comparison favoring South Carolina at the expense of Pennsylvania was made after South Carolina had seceded.⁹⁸ Even at the time that South Carolina was seceding, the South by analogy was compared with the thirteen original colonies.⁹⁹ After secession, South Carolina was treated much more mildly than the abolitionists.¹⁰⁰ The pattern of criticizing the North while responding favorably to the South is reflected in the following passages from the paper:

The South has just ground for complaint and much danger to apprehend from a sectional administration . . . but we do not believe that secession from the Union is the best remedy to right her wrongs. We put in no protest against her war-like preparations, we do not object to her arming her citizens, we have no fault to find with her placing herself in a complete state of defense ready for any emergency that may arise requiring her to protect her honor, safety or property. That course is all right—that is patriotic.¹⁰¹

The South demands nothing more than equal rights in the Union. . . . Her next and only move is secession. . . . The Republican Party backed by a few renegade Democrats are clamoring for an army to murder our brethren of the South, and for what?—because they will not consider negroes their equal? Could madness go further? Civil war should be avoided at all cost.¹⁰²

In its frantic efforts to avoid civil war, the *Valley Spirit* even sought to portray Andrew Jackson as a pacifist in the nullification crisis of 1832 so as to make the old hero into a shining example of peace.¹⁰³ However, as the crisis mounted, the paper began to waver in its policy:

In our opinion South Carolina and all other Southern States had good reason to complain to the North. The Southern people have been wickedly

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Jan. 2, 1861, p. 4; Jan. 16, 1861, p. 4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 19, 1860, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1860, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 21, 1860, p. 4.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1860, p. 2.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1861, p. 4.

injured and atrociously abused. . . . But we hold that South Carolina and some other Southern States that have seceded or are about to secede have committed acts that are indefensible and inexcusable.¹⁰⁴

This editorial went on to express understanding for both sides at Fort Sumter. There was mild criticism of South Carolinians firing on a federal ship—this from the newspaper that supported a naval expedition to Paraguay to avenge a minor slight in protocol to an American representative. On the other hand, Secretary of War John B. Floyd of Virginia was called a traitor for taking action beneficial to the southern cause.¹⁰⁵ The *Valley Spirit* generally gave very restrained support to federal actions in relation to Fort Sumter.

As any antiwar publication would be inclined to do, it painted a grim picture of impending war. A number of times the editor stated that the war would bring economic ruin to the North.¹⁰⁶ The April 17, 1861, issue, which was produced after the battle of Fort Sumter, contained an editorial which discussed the horrors of war, emphasized that the South indeed had rights, and continued desperately looking for some compromise to alleviate the problem.¹⁰⁷ Holding the abolitionists and Republicans to blame for creating this state of affairs, the issue carried derisive comments on the formation of the Chambers Artillery Company.

However, the next week the *Valley Spirit* caught the war fever. The editorial masthead was changed to a patriotic motif with such slogans as "Be a Soldier," "Ready, Aim, Fire," and "Stand By Your Flag."¹⁰⁸ There was no more blaming of the abolitionists, Republicans, or the government. There was no more talk of southern rights. Instead, the seceding states were squarely blamed for the war. There were no more warnings about the horrors of war. Instead, the theme was: be patriotic; become a soldier and fight for the flag, right and liberty. There were no more derisive comments about the Chambers Artillery Company, which now drew praise. The editorial page was a throbbing mass of patriotism.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1861, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1861, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Apr. 17, 1861, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Apr. 24, 1861, p. 4.

Thus the *Valley Spirit* at last was forced to give up its most cherished principle, the avoidance of civil war. It had seen its panacea, the Compromise of 1850, fail and, along with it, the fugitive slave laws. The Kansas-Nebraska Act had not worked out in the desired manner and the Lecompton constitution had been rejected. The expansionist foreign policy it favored had been defeated by the sectionalism of the era. Most disheartening for the *Valley Spirit*, Democratic unity had been rent, causing its long-time editor, John M. Cooper, to resign, even though Cooper did return as editor after the war. All in all, this must have been a most discouraging era for both Cooper and Mengel.

The frustrations and failures experienced by the *Valley Spirit* and its editors were symptomatic of those experienced by the Democratic Party as a whole, especially those in the Buchanan faction. Cooper, like Buchanan, opposed the radical abolitionists of the North and the fire-eaters of the South. Both men found their moderate course frustrated and defeated by the split in Democratic ranks caused by the heat of the 1860 election. Both perceived this as in part the fault of Douglas. Both also viewed the southerner Breckinridge as the more moderate choice, even though Douglas was a northerner like themselves. Thus, even though the *Valley Spirit* operated at a distance from the center of politics, it makes an apropos window for viewing the opinions, politics, and problems of the Democratic moderates of this era.

*Pennsylvania State University,
Mont Alto*

RICHARD H. MCDONNELL