

## A PITTSBURGH POLITICAL BATTLE ROYAL OF A HALF CENTURY AGO<sup>1</sup>

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**D**URING the second half of the nineteenth century America witnessed the emergence of increasingly corrupt, powerful, and ruthless political bosses, some of whom resorted to unethical and even unlawful methods of obtaining offices for their "picked" candidates. "Czar" Martin Lomasney commanded Boston; Big Tim Sullivan directed the Bowery; William Tweed ruled New York; Israel Durham guided Philadelphia; George Cox controlled Cincinnati; Roger Sherman managed Chicago; Ed Butler dominated St. Louis; Abraham Rief led San Francisco; and Christopher Lyman Magee and William Flinn ruled Pittsburgh.

The Magee-Flinn machine was the ablest and most effective political organization ever known in Pittsburgh up to that time. Both Magee and Flinn had much in their favor for becoming political bosses. To begin with, they had a growing town too busy to concentrate on the merits of honest and efficient government, two political parties not very well organized, and a clear field for dominating their own party which had control of the city, county, and state patronage. Both men, however, had other objectives besides becoming party leaders: Magee wanted traction franchises for his street railway company, while Flinn desired contract grants for his construction firm, Booth & Flinn. To accomplish their goals some type of organization had to be firmly established, hence, the Magee-Flinn political machine.

After gaining authority in the Republican city and county executive committees in 1880, and giving Pittsburgh a new municipal charter drawn up and approved by the bosses in 1887, the "right" men were placed in offices in the municipal government where they would be able to fulfill their leaders' wishes.

As a political machine the Magee-Flinn organization was extremely effective. Year after year the "Ring," as it was commonly called, was able to win every election campaign because of its ward and precinct organization, the personal interest of the city job holders, and the political

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chicanery employed whenever the machine was fearful of losing its authority.

A reform movement got under way in 1895, and in the mayoralty campaign of 1896 the "Ring" forces were almost unseated from power. That time their candidate, Henry P. Ford, polled only a six hundred majority vote. After that the "Organization" mustered strength: the wards and other election districts throughout the city and county became well organized, more patronage was dispensed, and by 1899, Magee and Flinn had become state senators, thereby securing a bigger voice in both local and state politics.

For years the Municipal League, a reform element led by prominent business and professional men, waged a mighty political battle of words in condemning machine methods and tactics. In order to win any election they realized that they had to consolidate what strength they had by aligning themselves with the Democrats. This they did, but due to the lack of money and political know-how, they were always easily defeated.

The turning point of the Magee-Flinn organization came in 1900. A rift developed between William Flinn and Pittsburgh's public works director, Edward M. Bigelow, because of the latter's insistence that city contracts receive more competition from bidders. As time wore on this split widened until Bigelow was forced to resign from his job. The firing of Bigelow was a costly mistake for the machine because Bigelow was immensely popular. It remained for his brother Tom to avenge him by organizing and financing his own political machine. Within three years the ring forces had their power wrested from them forever.

In December, 1901, the Stalwarts, led by Thomas W. Bigelow, made plans to capture the councilmanic election in February, 1902. Each ward was to carry on its fight for representation in council and choose its own candidates, while the Stalwart organization would collaborate with a citizens' committee made up of one hundred members to win the office of city controller.

On the twentieth of December the Stalwart leaders along with thirty-five hundred voters of Pittsburgh met in Old City Hall and amid great enthusiasm adopted resolutions creating the Citizens' party. They declared the party's objectives were to "defeat efforts to elect dishonest and incompetent men as public officers, prevent the perpetration of fraud upon the taxpayers, and to secure and maintain economic and

efficient government." David D. Bruce, a former Municipal Leaguer, became the party's chairman.

On the first of January, a Citizens' party committee met, and A. T. Karr of the Fourth Ward asked for advice on the alleged incorrect or fraudulent registration in his ward. He declared that the assessor had ninety more names on the registration lists than there were voters in the district. He also said that many people were known to oppose the machine but had not been registered. He then showed a large number of tax receipts for those voters and pointed out that he had been unable to get the authorities to place the names of the holders on the registry list. He emphasized that there were 200 more names on the registration list than there should have been. All told there were 621 registrants, or 338 more than there were votes cast in the last election. The same day these facts were made public the Democratic party pleaded to have the bosses removed from power, and the Citizens' party aligned itself with the Democrats in an all-out effort to stymie another machine victory.

It was a very active campaign, particularly when it came to a battle of words. One voter referred to Senator Flinn as a "Czar of Tyranny" not exceeded by the "Czar of Russia," and to Pittsburgh's government as being without parallel in the world as far as corruption and political vice were concerned. He further remarked that he wanted to repudiate the statement made that the Citizens' party stood for the three "B's," "Bigelow, Blusterism and Boodle," and to add that there were the three "F's," "Fraud, Flinn and Freebootism," clearly applicable to the entrenched "organization."

Two days before the election, more unscrupulous machine methods were revealed. In the Thirteenth Ward agents of the "Ring" had made a desperate attempt to purchase the Citizens' candidates. They offered one nominee for council all his expenses, "\$500 for items forgotten and \$2000 in addition to compensate for disappointed ambitions." In each instance the men approached refused to betray their party. It was also brought out that gangs of 150 to 175 repeaters were leaving Philadelphia for Pittsburgh to vote the "regular ticket." These men had even been promised police protection, so it was charged.

All the work and scheming of an almost perfectly organized political machine could not withstand the aroused sentiment of the people. John B. Larkin, the reform candidate, won handily over his opponent, Joseph E. Lewis, by 8,000 votes. The "Organization" also lost their majority in

both branches of council. Only in a few wards, where the pay roll controlled the election boards and hundreds of voters, did the machine candidates display any strength.

Despite the bitterness and animosity of the contest the election was one of the quietest and most orderly ever held. This was due to the fact that the Citizens and Democrats together had made preparations to thwart any attempts of the "Ring" to steal election boards, bulldoze voters, or allow illegal votes to be cast. Thousands of fraudulent votes were not cast because of the vigilance of the minority election officers and the Democratic and Citizens' poll watchers.

The scene at Republican headquarters was like that of a funeral. When Flinn was questioned as to what he thought of the returns, his only answer was: "I have nothing to say."

The people, on the other hand, went wild with joy. Many gathered at Exposition Park to read the returns. As one significant bulletin was read a quartet of young men broke out into song with these impromptu verses:

Isn't it a shame, a measly shame,  
To keep Billy Flinn out in the rain,  
Open the door and let him in,  
They opened the door and Larkin came in.

The Pittsburgh newspapers rejoiced that the city had ranked itself with New York in rebuking sordid politics, but stressed the need of maintaining an aggressive and effective organization to make the victory complete in 1903. To be sure, the bosses had plenty of fight left and they used every ounce of strength in an effort to win the recorder-ship battle the following winter.

By then Tom Bigelow had become a political boss in his own right. In December, 1902, he announced that the thirty-eight members of the Citizens' Central Committee had nominated William B. Hays as their candidate for recorder. Hays was delinquent tax collector under Recorder A. M. Brown and had been the right hand man of Bigelow in the last two campaigns. The Democrats then held their convention and, despite vigorous protests from many party leaders who thought he was not the best choice, Hays was endorsed. It was even charged that Hays' backers had bought up so many delegates that money more than men had won him the nomination. Bigelow stood firm and declared that Hays would win despite opposition from the Democratic party. The

newspapers in town remarked that this type of attitude by the Citizens was indicative of a first-class ring, the boss system, and the intolerable machine.

The Republicans held their convention early in January in Old City Hall. This time the "Organization" hid behind the cloak of reform by mentioning Dr. Cadwallader Evans, the Citizens' county chairman, as a possible candidate. Many ward workers, however, wanted a man of their own "stripe" and therefore repudiated the idea. District Attorney John C. Haymaker was finally chosen by acclamation.

As the campaign wore on both parties accused each other of lying, cheating, and scandalizing the taxpayers. Max Leslie, the Republican city chairman, said that he had definite knowledge of the Citizens' party bringing repeaters from the East, and also that he had affidavits to prove certain employers were offered large sums of money to work up sentiment among their employees in favor of candidate Hays. To this the Citizens replied: "Recollect the fight last November and recall the fight in February and you will find Leslie is reiterating the same charges he made then against us. . . . Leslie is doing the baby act. Realizing that he is licked, he is resorting to lies of every description."

Controller John B. Larkin actively campaigned, and during his speech-making tour he told his audiences that the machine wanted nearly \$1,000,000 for street repairs. He pointed out that in 1902, \$214,000 was appropriated, but only \$109,000 was spent. He explained that the "Ring's" purpose for asking for so much repaving was to swamp the city in debt and therefore embarrass the reform element in councils. If the money had been granted, he said, the machine would have used it to pay off the various wards in the city for the votes they had turned out. Max Leslie's ward, the Seventeenth, which had less than 500 acres of land, would have received \$146,500, or nearly one-sixth of the whole pool, but the Nineteenth, Bigelow's ward, covering 1,319 acres, would be given only \$13,000.

Shortly afterward, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* reported that sixty per cent of the members of the police and fire bureaus were supporting Hays, after attempts had failed to whip the "under-a-hundred-a-month" men into line for Haymaker. Of the thirty fire captains in the city's service, fourteen had gone over to support the Citizens' candidates. There was also a rebellion among the police. At every preceding election, whenever the machine was fearful of defeat, policemen would terrorize the

saloon keepers into believing they would lose their liquor licenses if they did not work for the "Ring" ticket. But in 1903 the situation was somewhat different. Where, before, the threatening visits were made by patrolmen, they were now made by inspectors and captains, but few of them would take orders to do that kind of work.

The campaign drew to a close with both sides claiming victory. The *Dispatch* stated in its editorial, entitled, "Between Pot and Kettle": "There has not been in many years an election in which both sides offered so little to the independent and honest voter who wishes to vote solely for good government in the interest of the whole people, unswayed by the profits of cliques or corporations. . . . The voter must choose for himself, as best he may, and digest the consequences as they follow."

The final tabulations showed that Hays won the recordership by a majority of over seven thousand votes. Tom Bigelow had kept his sacred pledge to crush the Republican ring and put its engineer, William Flinn, out of politics. The *Pittsburgh Leader* pointed out that the election had demonstrated "finally and absolutely" that the people rule, and that no ring or machine could maintain a monopoly of power, however "fortified or however skillful."

Thus the Magee-Flinn political era came to a close. Oddly enough the people of Pittsburgh had won their battle for good government with the assistance of another machine, that of Tom Bigelow.

Had not Magee died in 1901 the machine might have ruled indefinitely. He was one man in the "Organization" whom everybody seemed to like and admire. Flinn, you might say, was the party whip, and a very effective one, too. If anyone dared to step out of line, Flinn would crack the party lash and the disobedient ones were expelled. But it was Magee who acted as a steadying influence. Without him, Flinn could not have kept the machine intact. This was clearly illustrated during the election years of 1902 and 1903 when machine members openly and defiantly refused to follow the dictates of their leader. Flinn sensed that he alone could not lead his forces to victory, that the task of maintaining supremacy was futile. As a matter of fact, shortly after his partner's death, Flinn mournfully said: "When Magee died, I died politically too."