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FLORIDA'S 1926 SENATORIAL PRIMARY

by WAYNE FLYNT

F HISTORICAL SPECULATION were profitable, few Florida elections would offer more possibilities than the Democratic Senatorial primary of 1926. An election which ended as a routine skirmish between an entrenched incumbent, Duncan U. Fletcher, and a relatively obscure politico, Jerry W. Carter, could have been a struggle for political survival. To fully comprehend the possibilities of 1926, it is necessary to review some historical antecedents.

William Jennings Bryan had forsaken the Great Plains and moved to Miami in 1916. The "Silver Tongued Orator" was interested in reviving his political career. Already a three-time loser in presidential competition, Bryan envisioned a restoration of his national reputation by winning a place in the United States Senate. In 1922 a persistent rumor hinted that Bryan would seek the Senate seat held by Park Trammell. The *Tampa Times* and other state papers coveted the value of a senator with such national prestige. On February 15, 1922, Bryan announced his willingness to be drafted as a candidate, but he had "no thought of entering into a contest for the office."¹

Many papers fancied the idea of Bryan representing Florida and predicted an easy victory. On the other hand, Park Trammell would not surrender without resistance. Even papers supporting Bryan's candidacy acknowledged that the only way he could gain the nomination was to enter the primary and defeat Trammell. Although the "Great Commoner" made a tour of the state, speaking at towns such as Tampa, Miami, Clearwater, and Haines City, he was not willing to risk humiliation at the hands of Florida voters, and the entire issue was dropped.

The years between 1922 and 1925 brought change to Florida. Amid rampant land speculation, the total population rose to 1,263,549. The urban population increased 295,078, or 30.4 percent, between 1920 and 1925. Dade County experienced a phenomenal 160.6 percent increase, from 42,753 to 111,532, in

1. See *The Commoner*, February, 1922; also the *Miami Daily Metropolis*, February 15, 1922.

a half decade. Only Hillsborough County, which increased 51 percent to 133,384, and Duval County led Dade in population. The peninsula state had 9,200 miles of highway by 1925, and 5,500 miles of railroad tracks.²

One permanent factor in changing Florida was the desire of William Jennings Bryan to occupy a Senate chair. In 1925 he longingly evaluated his chances of unseating veteran incumbent Duncan Fletcher. Early in the year Bryan sent the editor of the *Sanford Herald* his reasons for desiring the senatorship. "If this matter strikes you favorably," he wrote, "and you have an editorial along these lines, I wish you would send me a number of copies . . . so I can send them to other papers that are friendly."³ The *Tampa Observer* published an editorial strongly endorsing Bryan, and the *Clay County Times* editor joined what he hoped would become a band wagon.

Across the state in Jacksonville, twenty-one railroad brotherhoods held a joint meeting to determine their preference in the coming election. They requested Jerry Carter, state hotel commissioner and a pro-union progressive, to find an opponent capable of defeating Fletcher, a man they associated with railroad and corporate interests.⁴ Carter first tried to persuade a state senator from Nassau County to run. Next, he approached former Governor Cary Augustus Hardee who had just left office. Hardee also declined to oppose Fletcher, offering his indebtedness to the incumbent Senator as the reason." Following this rebuff, Carter changed strategy. He went to Tampa and talked to some close friends of Doyle E. Carlton, a highly respected young politician and orator. Carter argued that Fletcher was at a low ebb in his career and Carlton could beat him. Carlton's associates viewed the plan favorably, but Fletcher's Tampa supporters, advised of these political machinations, sponsored a mass meeting. At this rally Carlton was mentioned as the 1928 gubernatorial candidate in order to remove him from the senatorial picture.⁶

Having failed again, Carter decided to approach William Jennings Bryan with the proposition. As previously noted, Bryan had

2. *The Fifth Census of the State of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1925), 9-21.

3. Quoted in Morris R. Werner, *Bryan* (New York, 1929), 310.

4. Interview with Jerry W. Carter, Railroad and Public Utilities Commissioner, March 1, 1962.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, November 21, 1962.

already expressed some inclination to run. Though noncommittal in his reply, Bryan strongly hinted he would run if victory were assured. He commissioned Carter to tour the state sampling opinion and provided the necessary expense money.⁷ While Carter was thus engaged, Bryan became involved in the evolution controversy, and despite Carter's optimistic report, the "Commoner" declined to run. Bryan's old reluctance to stake his national prestige on a state race certainly influenced his decision. So the politician turned devout headed for his last forensic battle at Dayton, Tennessee, and Carter returned to Jacksonville with a sad report for the railroad brotherhoods.

The railroad workers, still determined that someone should oppose Fletcher, turned to their unsuccessful envoy. Carter, never one to pass up a political hassle, accepted. Since Carter had little money, the railroad brotherhoods raised \$2,600 for his campaign.⁸ By January, 1926, rumors spread across the state that Carter would oppose Fletcher for the senatorship.

Jerry Carter was a democrat, a "cracker" in the tradition of Napoleon B. Broward. He was born in Barbour County, Alabama, on August 11, 1887. Although he attended school a short time at Del Rio, Tennessee, he was largely self-educated. It is impossible to determine when he began participating in politics. For Carter, interest in things political was apparently more of a genetic heritage than an acquired interest. After an electioneering dispute in Tennessee, he moved to Florida. Within a few years he was back at his first love, working for Sidney J. Catts in the 1916 gubernatorial campaign. The grateful governor appointed Carter hotel commissioner, a job he maintained under Governors Hardee and John W. Martin. In 1924 Florida's "Mr. Democrat" was elected delegate to the National Democratic Convention, running second only to William Jennings Bryan.⁹ Carter and Fletcher were distant friends until the senatorial election of 1920. In that year Carter managed Catts' unsuccessful race against Fletcher. The hotel commissioner, an able pamphleteer, drew some satirical cartoons featuring Fletcher, and the friendship cooled.

7. *Ibid.*

8. This amounted to approximately half of Carter's total expenditure during the campaign. *Ibid.*, March 1, 1962.

9. William T. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida* (Live Oak, 1936), 190-191.

Shortly before Carter announced his candidacy, Dr. John A. Van Valzah entered the race. Van Valzah, a resident of fast-growing West Palm Beach, had served in the state legislature, but was politically inactive at the time of his announcement. His candidacy, announced on March 20, drew little interest. Rumors of Carter's candidacy multiplied after an interview published in the *Tampa Morning Telegraph*. According to Carter, the state needed a younger man in the Senate, one "capable of organizing the political forces there." Florida had "not been represented by a vigorous man of progressive ideas."¹⁰ On April 7, 1926, Carter confirmed the rumors in a letter to the papers announcing his candidacy, and then set up his headquarters in the Cherokee Hotel at Tallahassee.

The favorite in the campaign was the incumbent, Duncan Fletcher. First elected senator in 1908, he was reelected in 1914 and 1920. In these elections, he constructed a powerful coalition of conservative-business and farm voters.¹¹ In 1926 Fletcher looked notably older than in his other races. His face was wrinkled, his mustache and hair white with age. In general appearance he was somber, almost stoic. Never a spectacular senator, he worked diligently for Florida. In 1913 as chairman of the Rural Credits Commission, he framed a bill establishing a system of privately controlled banks, operating under federal charter, to aid farmers in attaining credit. A man who knew the value of the "pork barrel," he also did much in his first eighteen years to improve Florida's port and waterway systems. With this record, Fletcher began the campaign confidently.

During the early days of the race, Carter was handicapped by his reputation as a wit. He founded the "Royal Order of Ancient and Hopping Fleas," an organization which included national political figures such as Tom Watson and numerous Florida politicians. One of his most famous capers was the attempt to nominate his wife as Vice-president of the United States at the 1924 Democratic National Convention. Although personally well liked and generally respected, Carter's campaign initially was dismissed as a

10. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, Carter papers, scrapbooks, and clippings; in possession of Jerry W. Carter, Tallahassee, Florida. Hereafter cited as Carter Collection.

11. See James Wayne Flynt, "The 1908 Senatorial Primary in Florida" (Unpublished Master's thesis, Florida State University, 1962).

joke. The Republican editor of the *Tampa Telegraph* wrote of Carter, "He's a good, genial fellow, a dyed in the wool cracker boy who deserves great credit, but in the United States Senate he would 'rattle like a bean in a bladder. . . .'"¹² The *Dunnellon Truth* praised Carter's record but added that he stood as much chance of beating Fletcher as "would a dog with wax legs of catching an asbestos cat in Sheol."¹³ In a final insult the *Tallahassee State* noted, "If Jerry can get all the Fleas [to vote for him], Dunk had better watch out."¹⁴ During the campaign only fourteen papers gave Carter "equal treatment."¹⁵ The Bradenton *Tri-City Daily News*, the *South Florida Developer* of Stuart, and the *Lake Wales Highlander* supported him. The largest paper in St. Petersburg, the *Daily News*, endorsed him and published one entire issue supporting his candidacy. The *Jacksonville Journal* favored Carter in March, but withdrew its support in favor of Fletcher on May 12. Carter noted the newspaper opposition and wrote in one of his campaign documents, "Fighting to oust the money powers that control the editorial expression of newspapers is the fight of the people and Jerry W. Carter is the natural champion from within their midst."¹⁶

Carter drew his most vocal support from organized labor. A. D. Wright, state representative and labor spokesman, wrote that Fletcher voted against all legislation urged by his group, and he praised Carter. The hotel commissioner also had strong labor backing in Miami and Jacksonville. Charles M. Wood, president of the Florida Typographical Conference and organizer for the American Federation of Labor in the Tallahassee area, distributed a letter endorsing Carter.¹⁷ The official publication of the Florida Association of Architects favored Carter in its April publication, and the Tallahassee Typographical Union adopted a resolution on May 7 supporting him.¹⁸

While the unions praised Carter, Fletcher drew laudatory response from across the nation. In Washington the members of

12. *Tampa Telegraph*, January 7, 1926, copy in Carter Collection.

13. *Dunnellon Truth*, quoted in *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, March 3, 1926.

14. *Tallahassee State*, quoted in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 25, 1926.

15. Interview with Jerry Carter, March 1, 1962.

16. *Daily Punch*, May 22, 1926, Carter Collection.

17. Letter from Charles M. Wood, Carter Collection.

18. *St. Petersburg Daily News*, May 15, 1926, Carter Collection.

the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee made no secret of their desire to have Fletcher reelected. In Georgia the *Bainbridge Post-Searchlight* called him "the ablest man that the state of Florida has had in public life in the last half century."¹⁹ The *Atlanta Constitution* also intervened in Florida politics to praise him. In Florida the senator's candidacy brought an avalanche of press support which included the *Sarasota Times*, *Panama City Beacon-Tribune*, *Sanford Herald*, *Palmetto Midnight Sun*, *Tarpon Springs Leader*, *Fort Myers Tropical News*, *Palm Beach Independent*, *Brooksville Herald*, *Eustis Lake Region*, *Pensacola Journal*, *Clearwater Herald*, *Tampa Morning Telegraph*, *Dade City Banner*, *Miami News*, *Tallahassee Smith's Weekly*, *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, *Lake City Reporter*, *St. Petersburg Independent*, *Gainesville Sun*, *Leesburg Commercial*, *North Miami Courier*, *Melbourne Journal*, and *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*. Seldom in Florida's political history has a primary candidate drawn such overwhelming press endorsement. In a remarkable development George W. Bean, national Republican committeeman from Florida, recommended Fletcher's reelection: ". . . the Democratic party has not a harder working or more influential senator, and if he lived north of the Ohio River he would be Democratic presidential timber."²⁰

With such acclaim Fletcher's confidence appeared justified. He predicted an overwhelming victory with a minimum 50,000 vote margin over Carter. Until May, Fletcher remained in Washington, leaving the state entirely to his two opponents. In his announcement as a candidate, Fletcher enumerated his issues and his friends and the newspapers carried the initial burden of the campaign. He based his bid for reelection on two arguments. First, he had a long record of service for the state. Through his efforts, rivers and harbors were improved and better transportation provided; he was responsible for public buildings, adequate postal service, and more veteran's benefits. He helped solve the immigration problem and saved the farmers millions of dollars by his bank system.

The second major issue was his seniority. Fletcher was the ranking Democrat on three major committees and was familiar

19. *Bainbridge Post-Searchlight*, quoted in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 10, 1926.

20. *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, June 5, 1926.

with senate rules, procedure, and practice - all acquired only through years of experience. Voters read these arguments in virtually every newspaper and heard them from Fletcher spokesmen at every rally.

Jerry Carter belittled Fletcher's record, charging him with responsibility for increased interstate transportation rates. As a progressive isolationist in the Robert La Follette tradition, Carter attacked Fletcher's vote favoring American membership in the World Court and the incumbent's opposition to woman suffrage. Though progressive when advocating federal provision for the development of American aviation or better care for disabled veterans, Carter also appealed to the southern states rights tradition. He pledged to amend the transportation act to prevent the Interstate Commerce Commission from overriding decisions of state railroad boards. "In our democracy," he said, "the State is the unit of government, the federal government possessing only such powers as are conferred upon it by the states."²¹

The hopeful hotel commissioner began his campaign at Alderman's Ford in Hillsborough County. Adhering to the philosophy of "just saying what I think and what I believe,"²² Carter generally spoke impromptu. His speeches sparkled with wit and humorous anecdotes. In his first speech he denounced Fletcher for voting against woman suffrage and called for improved farm roads and transportation in the backcountry. Carter enumerated other arguments in later speeches. Sensing a potent issue in the question of World Court membership, he rushed to the offensive. Participation in the World Court, he said, would place America at the mercy of alien nations; cost the country \$50,000 a year; result in war if the United States refused to submit a problem to arbitration; mean trial by foreign judges of complaints against America; and bind America to enforce decisions involving other nations.²³ This entire issue was hotly debated across the nation. Speaking in Chicago on February 21, Senator James A. Reed of Missouri announced a campaign to defeat all senators running for reelection who supported World Court membership. Reed, who knew Carter personally, made a series of speeches in Florida attacking Fletcher. Tom Watson, Reed, and Robert La Follette

21. *Smith's Weekly*, April 9, 1926.

22. Interview with Jerry Carter, November 21, 1962.

23. *Daily Punch*, June 3, 1926, Carter Collection.

made speeches in Congress against the Court and sent copies in unaddressed envelopes to Carter. Then he simply addressed the envelopes and sent them over the state.²⁴ Many of Carter's arguments opposing the Court were originally formulated by Reed, La Follette, or some other congressional isolationist.

Fletcher defended his action by showing that the purpose of the World Court was to "settle international differences by rules of justice and reason and not by force. . . ." ²⁵ The *Florida Times-Union* wrote supporting the senator, "Sincere friends of peace by judicial procedure, rather than by war, hope that the action . . . will prove . . . practical." ²⁶ As the battle over Court membership intensified, Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy under Woodrow Wilson, spoke in Jacksonville. He praised American membership in the Court, saying it marked the end of extreme American isolation. ²⁷

Dr. John Van Valzah, bypassed by his two opponents, tried to interject life into his campaign by utilizing an old trick of the political underdog: using a popular opponent to provide an audience. He challenged Fletcher to a joint debate at every county seat in the state. The politically sagacious Fletcher would have none of this and replied tartly, "If you are finding it impossible to interest the people in your candidacy it is not my purpose to accept your self defense challenge and neglect official duties by going over the state to promote your campaign." ²⁸

Carter could not be disposed of so easily. The *St. Petersburg Daily News* cranked up a perennial argument against Fletcher. In a full page editorial the News called the senator the "pet baby of the railroads."²⁹ Fletcher's opponents never tired of reminding him that he had been legal consultant for a large Florida railroad. Carter exploited this image by complaining that during the time Fletcher served in the Senate, intra-state freight rates in Florida increased fifty-five per cent. This increase hurt farmers but helped railroads. The *Tallahassee Daily Democrat* came to Fletcher's defense. The editor noted that during this same time span the

24. Interview with Jerry Carter, November 21, 1962.

25. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, January 29, 1926.

26. *Ibid.*, January 30, 1926.

27. *Ibid.*, February 1, 1926.

28. See telegram reprinted in Tallahassee *Smith's Weekly*, April 16, 1926.

29. *St. Petersburg Daily News*, Carter Collection.

price of steel rails increased, as did the average yearly wage. Compared with these compensating increases, the freight rates lost significance.³⁰ *Smith's Weekly* argued that if Fletcher was to blame for the sixty-five percent increase in freight rates, then Carter should assume responsibility for the five to six hundred percent increase in some Florida hotel rates.³¹

More outside help for Fletcher came from Claude Bennett, founder of the Congressional Information Bureau. Speaking in Tampa on March 16, he called Fletcher "the ablest and most useful representative Florida has ever had."³² Despite the assistance of Bennett, Daniels, and the Florida press, Fletcher's campaign lagged. Carter offered a much more strenuous challenge than expected. The *Miami Herald*, which supported the incumbent senator, noted that Carter "is known everywhere and is very generally liked." The paper warned that it "would be suicidal on the part of Senator Fletcher's friends to ignore the candidacy of this gentleman."³³

Evidently agreeing with the *Herald's* analysis, Fletcher returned from Washington in late April. He spoke at Pomona on May 1 to the quarterly meeting of the National Board of Directors of the Farmer's Union. Eager to solidify his farm constituency, he endorsed a system of agricultural production control and cooperative marketing. He also reminded the farm leaders that his farm bank system saved farmers from five to six hundred million dollars a year in interest alone.³⁴ In early May, Fletcher returned to Washington to participate in debate on farm relief bills pending before Congress.

Apparently the reports which reached Fletcher during his brief tour of the state shook his complacency. In the next three weeks, he rammed through legislation designed to help Florida and Fletcher. On May 13, the McLeod-Fletcher Bill passed. This legislation transferred certain Key West property from the Post Office Department to the Department of Commerce. A light house depot would be constructed on the land with a \$200,000 expenditure.³⁵ Next, the senator proposed an amendment to

30. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, April 12, 1926.

31. *Tallahassee Smith's Weekly*, May 28, 1926.

32. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 17, 1926.

33. *Miami Herald*, Carter Collection.

34. *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, May 2, 1926.

35. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1926.

the rivers and harbors bill authorizing a preliminary survey for a channel to connect the upper St. Johns River near Sanford with the Indian River near Titusville. The project would make available two inland water routes from Jacksonville down the east coast to Titusville. The political significance of this legislation was highlighted by a report adopted on May 23 by the presidents and secretaries of thirty-one east coast chambers of commerce. They enlisted in a determined effort to develop an inland waterway from Jacksonville to Miami. To implement this resolution they initiated a campaign in each county to acquaint citizens with the need for such a waterway and the necessity for electing candidates who supported the plan.³⁶ Duncan Fletcher still possessed the magic ability to determine the desires of his constituents.

Despite this legislative fence-mending, Fletcher was concerned. When he returned to Washington in May he planned to remain until the session ended, but reports from Florida evidently worried him. In a press conference on May 14, Fletcher voiced little of his February and March confidence. Several of his friends, "by way of guarding against overconfidence and taking no chances," thought it best for him to come back to Florida. He maintained no doubts about the outcome - "provided all facts and circumstances are properly made known instead of whispered, unfounded rumors and derogatory charges or insinuations that might tend to poison the minds of those not acquainted with the honest and diligent efforts I have made. . . ." ³⁷

Fletcher returned to Jacksonville on May 25, determined to finish off Florida's ambitious hotel commissioner. He spent all day in conferences, notably arranging details for a speaking tour with his campaign manager, Arthur T. Williams. After visiting some prominent local friends, he secluded himself in his room at the Seminole Club to rest for the trial ahead. In the next ten days he campaigned like the Fletcher of 1908. On May 27, he spoke to the annual convention of the Florida Association of Postmasters at Green Cove Springs. In his address, he predicted that Florida would receive a large part of the \$100,000,000 appropriated for public buildings, and he proposed a pay increase for fourth-class postmasters.³⁸

36. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, May 24, 1926.

37. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1926.

38. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1926.

After placating the postmasters, the Senator went to St. Petersburg for a speech on Friday night, May 28. There Fletcher predicted federal aid for improvements at the local port and reminded the voters of his proficiency at manipulating the "pork barrel." From May 28 to May 31, he remained in the St. Petersburg area to speak and politic. On Tuesday, June 1, he made a major address to a number of Tampa civic clubs defending himself against Carter's incessant attacks. He voted against woman suffrage not to deprive women of the vote, but because the bill was an unconstitutional intrusion on the rights of the states to set voting requirements. He was pro-American Legion as his voting record demonstrated. On labor matters he opposed only four of the thirty measures favored during his career by the American Federation of Labor. Regarding freight rates, he could no more control them than he could control the cost of living or wages. Furthermore, he believed American entry into the World Court would not limit the nation's rights. Fletcher closed the speech with a resume of his contribution to de Florida economy and the advantages of his seniority.³⁹

On Wednesday he spoke to other Tampa civic clubs and then ended his visit to the city with a rally that night. The next day he spoke at Bradenton, then at Sarasota on Thursday, and in Miami on Friday. From Miami he traveled back around the coast, speaking as he went. On June 7, election eve, he addressed a rally in Jacksonville. Again he reviewed his record, including his advocacy of veteran benefits and his pro-labor voting record. The rest of the speech was largely a repetition of the earlier Tampa address. A significant feature of Fletcher's ten-day swing through Florida was that all of his major speeches were delivered on or near the coast from Tampa east to Jacksonville. He virtually ignored north Florida except for the Jacksonville area. This contest and future campaigns would be won or lost in powerful Hillsborough, fast growing Dade, and along the coast. Fletcher realized this and geared much of his time and legislation to winning the urban vote. He sacrificed the farm counties in the north for the more populous south Florida areas. Carter was slow to learn this lesson and seemed to gear his strategy to a rural psychology.

39. See *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 2, 1926.

Shortly before the election, Fletcher's campaign was boosted by Mrs. Violet B. King, chairman of the legislative committee of the national auxiliary of United Spanish-American War Veterans. In a letter to the papers, she praised the Senator's support of pension bills, one of which Fletcher had conveniently introduced in February, 1926. Mrs. King's letter was followed ten days later by another tribute praising Fletcher's tireless efforts in behalf of veterans. This second endorsement was written by Col. John Thomas Taylor of the national legislative committee of the American Legion. With these last minute efforts, Fletcher retired to await primary results.

When all returns were counted, Fletcher won by a vote of 63,760 to 39,143 for Carter, and 4,226 for Van Valzah. Carter ran well in the old farmer-progressive areas. We carried Okaloosa, Holmes, and Calhoun counties in the panhandle, and narrowly lost Escambia and Santa Rosa. In north central and north eastern Florida, Carter carried Suwannee, Nassau, Clay, Bradford, Gilchrist, and Flagler counties. But south of Gilchrist and Flagler, he won in only two counties, Brevard and Martin. Fletcher split the north Florida farm vote, lost the labor vote, but carried the cities and booming south Florida.

Had Fletcher not returned to the state for ten last days of intensive effort, Carter's vote would have been considerably larger. Probably Fletcher would have won, but Carter campaigned tirelessly and his arguments might have won by default. In view of the political power of a three term incumbent, Carter ran a remarkable race. Thirty-six years later, Carter remains convinced that a better orator, more prominently known, could have defeated Fletcher in 1926.⁴⁰

For one determined to consider historical "ifs," the 1926 Democratic primary is a bonanza. Had Bryan lived and entered the race against Fletcher, had Carter convinced Doyle Carlton to oppose the incumbent, had the senator decided not to actively campaign, the results might have been different. The 1926 primary was just a bit more than another simple victory in the illustrious career of Duncan Fletcher.

40. It is still Carter's opinion that Doyle Carlton could have beaten Fletcher. Interview with Jerry Carter, November 21, 1962.