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Aaron V. Proudfoot—1862-1936

By FRANCIS I. MOATS*

The political pattern of the United States prior to World War I was shaped to a great extent by the influences of the frontier. It was the age of individualism in the economic world and in the political world, as well. It was the age that produced the great industrial magnates of the late nineteenth century. Functions of government as relating to the individual citizen were relatively few and these were administered largely at county, township, city and village level—all subdivisions of the state government. Federal officials were fewer than now and seldom did the great mass of citizens have any occasion to contact them, nor even pay any direct tax for the maintenance of government at that level.

Educational opportunities as viewed from the level of our present-day public school system were more limited, although not ignored. Few were the communities that could not boast of its one-room district school, and by the close of the nineteenth century high schools were general in all county seats and in some smaller towns—available but not compulsory. But, for the great masses of children outside of these population centers, the one-room rural school had to suffice. Formal education was far less important in the late nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century as a factor in developing community leadership than in our own time. Yet, if secondary schools were limited to population centers, opportunity to attend any college was far more restricted. It is doubtful whether any large percentage of rural youth had college aspirations prior to the turn of the century. It was an age of self-education and an age when qualities of natural leader-

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ship were determining factors with respect to who would rise to positions of qualified leadership.

Aaron VanScoy Proudfoot was a typical product of that environment. His father, Jacob Proudfoot, migrated from northern Virginia (now West Virginia) in 1855, and settled on a farm in southern Warren county, Iowa, but removed to Liberty, a small village in northern Clarke county, in the spring of 1856. He had been a village blacksmith at Taylor's Drain, Barbour county, Virginia, prior to his trek to the Iowa frontier. In this Clarke county village he set up a blacksmith shop which he continued to operate until his death in 1898.

During his early years at Liberty, Jacob served as postmaster for the community and for some years mail was delivered there by stage coach. Jacob related that he was self-appointed greeter for strangers and travelers during those early years and that groups of wandering Indians occasionally passed that way. That he rose to prominence in his community and county is shown by the fact that he was chosen to represent Clarke county in the house of representatives of the state legislature and served in this capacity during the session of the Sixteenth general assembly of Iowa in 1876.

There is no evidence available to indicate that he met with any serious opposition, but he was not a candidate for re-election in 1878. One who serves in the state legislature must look to other sources than his compensation from the state for his livelihood and a tradesman's income, except the small allowance from the state then paid, would cease while he was attending the session. Therefore, it is not surprising that he should have failed to seek re-election. This experience, while only an incident in the life of the senior Proudfoot, may have been the spark that lighted the flame of ambition in young Aaron and started him on a career that was to make him one of Indianola's foremost citizens and prominent in the state's affairs.

A NATIVE IOWAN

Aaron VanScoy Proudfoot was born in 1862, the youngest of seven children—five boys and three girls. He was the only one of them born in Iowa. There appears to be little in his childhood and teen-age years that marked him for distinction. In his own brief autobiography he refers to the times that he held a candle to provide light for his father in the blacksmith shop and to the fact that he was educated in the village school at Liberty. He relates that he "entered Simpson college in the fall of 1881 and at the same time entered the law and abstract office of Creighton and Hayes in Indianola, from which he entered the office of Hall and Hartman who took over the abstract business of Creighton and Hayes." This afforded him not only opportunity to provide for his college expenses but to begin the study of law in the law office. He was to remain in the office of the Hall and Hartman law firm until 1892, when he was elected to the office of clerk of the district court of Warren county, a position to which he was elected for three successive terms, a total of six years.

Aaron was enrolled in the preparatory department of the colleges from the fall of 1881 to the close of the school year 1882-83, and completed most of the preparatory work for college entrance. He then enrolled as "special" for the college year 1883-84 without classification. He received no diploma from the college nor does it appear that he ever attained to the rank of college freshman.

So Proudfoot was not one to regard formal education in an institution of higher learning as essential to success in his chosen field of law. He relates in his autobiography that he "applied himself diligently to the study of law not only while in the law office of Hall and Hartman but also while in the office of clerk of the district court." His period of self-study, he relates, covered a period of fourteen years.

In 1898, he appeared before the supreme court of Iowa as an applicant for the examination for admission to

the bar. There were fifty-eight candidates who took the examination at this time and of that number, Proudfoot's name stood at the head of the list—the top ranking candidate. He was, therefore, admitted to the bar in Iowa in 1898. His third two-year term as clerk of the district court would end at the close of that calendar year and on January 1, 1899, he opened in Indianola a law office of his own, which he maintained until his death in 1936.

EARLY ACTIVE IN POLITICS

Soon after his arrival in Indianola, young Proudfoot identified himself with the Republican party and became active in politics. For four years in succession he was chosen chairman of the Warren county Republican central committee. He was regularly a delegate to the county convention of his party and on several occasions was a delegate to the Republican state convention. Here he soon became known for his resonant voice and on several occasions was made the convention's reading clerk. In 1904, he was chosen presidential elector from his congressional district and cast his vote for Theodore Roosevelt. Also, he was active in community affairs, serving for several years as city solicitor and another several years as secretary of the Indianola school board.

But Proudfoot's great public service was to begin in 1908, when he was elected to the state senate from his district comprising Clarke and Warren counties. He was to serve two terms of four years each in that office and was destined to become a candidate for the office of governor of the state in 1912, but failed to receive the nomination by his party. In 1916, he became a member of the board of trustees of Simpson college and the next year, 1917, was made president of that board—a position he was to hold for nineteen years or until his death in 1936.

Even more spectacular was his rise to national prominence in the affairs of the Methodist church. The general conference of that church made him a member of

the council of its board of benevolences in 1920 and four years later made him a member of this board's successor, the World Service commission, a position he was to hold the remainder of his life and which gave him national prominence in the Methodist church. The Des Moines conference of that church chose him as a delegate to their general conferences of both 1924 and 1928.

ENTERED STATE SENATE

Proudfoot became a candidate for the state senate in the June primary, 1908. He had no opponent within the party and thus became the Republican nominee in the November election. There were no sharply drawn issues in the ensuing campaign and he was elected by the normal party vote of the senatorial district of 2596 votes to 1641 cast for his Democratic opponent.

From the time he entered the senate in January, 1909, until the close of his four year term, he was looked upon as one of its leaders. His resonant oratory, his command of effective language and his dynamic personality all contributed to leadership so valuable and necessary in legislative bodies. He was named chairman of the senate committee on educational institutions and chairman of the committee on penal institutions and pardons. In addition to these important chairmanships, he was selected to membership on the important appropriations committee. He was also appointed to membership on the judiciary committee, and several committees of lesser importance. It fell to him to assume leadership in formulating legislation affecting educational institutions and he initiated the measure creating the child welfare department at the State University of Iowa. He served on all conference committees affecting these institutions and at the same time was sponsor or co-sponsor of all legislation curtailing the sale of liquor or its manufacture in any form. Later he was in the senate when the eighteenth amendment was ratified by the Iowa legislature.

When the second session of his term was convened

in 1911, Proudfoot was ready to assume a position of even greater influence than that of his first session. He was continued on the same committees as in the previous session and with the advice of his friend, former Sen. W. H. Berry, of Indianola, who also had served for several years on the state board of parole, its regulations were materially amended. Proudfoot had not only sponsored that measure but was one of the sponsors of a measure materially revising the regulation of fraternal insurance organizations, with which he was familiar through his prominence in the A.O.U.W. order. As this second session was drawing to its close, he was appointed a member of the strategic senate sifting committee of seven members. He was thus recognized as an outstanding member and perhaps the leading parliamentarian of the senate.

DISTRICT RULE INTERRUPTED SERVICE

He did not choose to become a candidate for reelection, because custom in his district had decreed that the office should be alternated between the two counties. Senator W. H. Berry had attempted some years earlier to break the precedent, but had failed. Senator Proudfoot had become one of the most prominent men in the state senate and his friends were reluctant to see him step aside to await probable subsequent election for another term in the senate after an interval of four years.

The *Indianola Herald* on numerous occasions had suggested the candidacy of W. H. Berry for the office of governor in the June primary of 1912. Berry toyed with the suggestion during the fall of 1911, but in early December he announced that after a survey of probable support, he had reached the definite conclusion that he would not have sufficient support to warrant a campaign. (See article on W. H. Berry in ANNALS OF IOWA, Vol. XXII, No. 2, pp. 110-126, October 1953.)

The refusal of Mr. Berry to be drawn into the campaign as a candidate led the *Indianola Herald* to announce in its issue of January 12, 1912, that "Since

Berry is out of the race we have no candidate for Governor . . . We believe," that paper continued, "we have the right man down here for lieutenant governor. Senator Proudfoot has not given us his entire confidence as yet concerning the matter; but from favorable comment throughout the state since the *Herald* mentioned his name for that office, we feel that his name would be formidable."

The situation regarding Proudfoot's candidacy remained in a condition of uncertainty for a few weeks, but with an apparent wide assumption that he would be a candidate for the office of lieutenant governor. A political bomb, however, was soon to be exploded when, on February 13, the *Des Moines Register and Leader* carried the following comment:

That Senator Proudfoot is going to be candidate of the Standpat Republicans for the nomination of governor is the latest political gossip.

It is understood that within the last few days Senator Proudfoot has about decided to leave the field for lieutenant governor, for which office he has been considered, and go after the bigger game.

One Republican who is close to Gov. B. F. Carroll said last night, "Senator Proudfoot's candidacy for the nomination would be pleasing to Governor Carroll and the majority of 'Old Guard' Republicans who have been looking about for a third man to enter the race with P. G. Holden and George W. Clarke . . ."

GOVERNORSHIP CANDIDACY ANNOUNCED

The rumor of Proudfoot's candidacy proved to be well founded, for a week later, February 20, he gave to the *Des Moines Register and Leader* a formal announcement of his candidacy and a statement regarding his platform. After praising the last two general assemblies, of which he had been a member, for their accomplishments, he continued: "I shall stand for Republican national policies as announced from time to time in the national platform of the party and I shall advocate the approval and continuance of those policies as carried out in the able administration of President Taft . . . He and his administration are entitled to the continued

confidence and support of the American people and I shall put forth every reasonable effort to further his nomination."

Other points in his platform called for "better public schools with emphasis on improved rural schools, better support of agriculture in various phases;" and he commended the last general assembly particularly for its reorganization of the state board of education (his own measure) and an employer's liability law. It was clear, however, that his chief consideration would lie in support of the Taft candidacy.

The ascendancy of the Progressive Republican movement in Iowa again was being challenged. Cummins had served three terms as governor and was still a senator of the United States with a formidable Iowa following. However, both Clarke and Holden were identified with the Progressives and would be expected to divide that vote.

In this situation, Governor Carroll and others of the Standpat group believed that with an aggressive and able candidate the governorship could be retained by them. This element had canvassed the names of their strong men, and decided upon Senator Proudfoot as most available for their standard bearer, being prominent, able, a vigorous campaigner, meeting every foreseen requirement and fully qualified to be governor.

Issues were slowly crystallizing after candidates had made their public declarations. As late as mid-April all candidates were anxiously awaiting the spring state Republican convention, which would be held in Des Moines April 25, before launching a formal campaign. As this date approached, Proudfoot expressed confidence in his success in the June primary. Commenting in its April 4 issue, the *Indianola Herald* declared that "Senator Proudfoot will be at the Republican state convention. He has strong support and he thinks he is almost certain of nomination." A week before the convention was assembled, he announced that he was opening his headquarters at the Savery hotel in Des Moines

and would be prepared to put forth a vigorous campaign.

The Progressive movement developed decided activity and strength at the convention and it became apparent that many of the mild Standpatters preferred the moderate Lieutenant Governor Clarke to the more positive Senator Proudfoot and that many Standpaters would support Clarke, whose characteristics of fairness as speaker of the house of representatives two sessions and as lieutenant governor were recognized, as well as his ability and experience as a campaigner. The maneuver had merit, but without the full Standpat backing promised, Proudfoot was handicapped. Moreover, the strong Cummins organization was back of Clarke.

An analysis in the *Indianola Herald*, May 9, declared that "Many who are distinctly representative of the Standpat organization manifest a strong disposition of giving to Lieutenant Governor Clarke a support that will be compensatory for the division in the Taft-Cummins fight. Also the so-called liberal elements are counted on for Clarke . . . In the meantime Senator Proudfoot who probably understands as well as anyone that the Standpat element has tried to trade him off now appears less a factional candidate than was originally the case and is more to be regarded as an exponent of temperance and other strictly moral issues."

This was evidence that Proudfoot had been oversold in the first place by his Standpat friends or that they had misjudged the situation when they induced him to become a candidate. Seeking support elsewhere, he raised an issue that in fact was not rightfully in the primary campaign, for Lieutenant Governor Clarke was a dry and neither expected or sought support from the "liberals." By the middle of May the ultra conservative Republicans were showing inability to marshal substantial strength for Proudfoot, and it was becoming fully apparent that his candidacy was rapidly weakening. The extreme Standpatters continued

their support, as well as did a host of personal friends and acquaintances, but the outcome was not in doubt. The issue was clearly drawn between the other two candidates. Proudfoot finally was to poll 23,311 votes or 14 percent of the total, Professor Holden of Iowa State college polled 68,801 votes or 37 percent, while Lieutenant Governor Clarke polled 89,107 votes or 49 percent of the total and became the party's nominee.

There would be an interval of four years before Proudfoot could again seek public office. Not infrequently did one who had served four years and who must remain on the sidelines for the next four years find it difficult to re-enter public life. He remained silent as to his intentions and not until early April 1916, did he announce his intention to again be a candidate in the June primary, for the office of state senator. His candidacy met with general approval in his district and no other name appeared on the ballot for that office. In the election that followed in November no attempt was made to raise any issues and he polled just above 60 percent of the total vote of the district.

RETURNED TO STATE SENATE

When the general assembly met in January, 1917, Senator Proudfoot was able to resume most of his old committee positions, but his former important chairmanships were not readily available. He was again appointed to the important committee on educational institutions and as the session advanced, was chosen a member of the strategic senate sifting committee, a committee on which he served during the second session of his first term in the senate. Gradually his natural qualities of leadership and experience gained for him recognition by the new membership in the senate and he stood well with the veterans. In the second session of his second term beginning in January 1919, Proudfoot had regained top position as an outstanding member. He was rewarded in receiving the same strong committee assignments, and this session became the chairman of the senate sifting committee.

However, the custom in his district would decree that another break of four years must elapse before he could seek renomination by his party for the office. It does not appear that afterward he had any desire to ask re-election nor did he ever seek public office again. He could point with pride to his part in reorganizing the state board of education and to the creation of the child welfare department. He had worked constantly for more rigid control of the manufacture and sale of liquor and was happy to be able to support the ratification of the eighteenth amendment. Evidence of the high esteem in which he was held by his associates in the state legislature was the fact that the Iowa Pioneer Lawmakers association chose him in 1935 to deliver the biennial address to that association before the joint session of the two houses of the Forty-eighth General Assembly.

But, if his career in the public life of the state did come to an end with the closing of the 1919 session of the legislature, it could not be said that his interest in public affairs was to terminate. His personality early in life marked him for leadership in any activity with which he chose to identify himself.

Soon after he came to Indianola, he became a member of the Methodist church and throughout most of his life was a member of its board of trustees. He was to become one of the most widely known members of that church in Iowa and his influence extended far beyond the borders of the state.

He was married in the old Methodist church that stood at the northeast corner of the square in Indianola, indicating his close family affiliation with the organization and the place that it held in the life of himself and Mrs. Proudfoot.

SERVICE ON SIMPSON COLLEGE BOARD

Sen. W. H. Berry had served as president of the board of trustees of Simpson college for many years and when he resigned that position in 1917, that board turned unanimously to the selection of Senator Proud-

foot as successor, although Proudfoot had been a member of the board for but one year. He was to serve in that office for nineteen years or until his death in 1936. During that period of service, he presided at all of the annual meetings of the board with but one exception and never missed a session of its executive committee. By his own choice he served throughout the entire period as a member of the committee on faculty, preferring that committee relationship in order to keep closely in touch with the scholastic program of the college. When a president of the college resigned in 1919, the board made him chairman of the committee to select a successor. Proudfoot had enjoyed contact with Dr. John L. Hillman who, when pastor of First Methodist church of Des Moines, had served on the board of trustees at Simpson. Dr. Hillman was Proudfoot's first choice and through his influence was chosen president of the college. "A. V.," as Proudfoot was popularly known, was always proud of his part in making this selection and Dr. Hillman always attributed much of his success in his seventeen years as president of the college to the very fine cooperation of the president of the board, particularly with respect to the financial improvement of the college's affairs. Just as Dr. Hillman was bringing his long term as president to a close, because of age, Senator Proudfoot was stricken with his fatal illness. Thus, both ended their connection with Simpson college in 1936.

LOYAL SERVICE TO CHURCH

For breadth of interests, Proudfoot had few equals and in no other activity did he display quite so much zeal over a long period of time as in his varied church interests. He could scarcely remember a time when he was not a member of its official board and remained a member of this board as long as he lived. As stated, he was married in the old church and was proud to see his daughter, Charity, follow his example with a church wedding when she became Mrs. John Hillis. For many years he taught the men's college class in

the Sunday school and frequently addressed the very large group of men known as the Smith bible class.

His commanding platform presence combined with splendid oratory created widespread demand for addresses, not only in Indianola but throughout Iowa Methodism and on frequent occasions beyond the state's borders. He was frequently chosen as lay delegate from the Indianola church to the sessions of the Des Moines annual conference, and in the session of 1919 this annual conference chose him alternate lay delegate to the general conference which would meet in Des Moines in 1920. This general conference selected him as member of the council of boards of Benevolence for the four-year period.

The Des Moines annual conference chose him as lay delegate to the general conference of 1924, where he was made a member of the newly created World Service Commission, the new agency which was to take over the duties of the former council of boards of Benevolence, of which he had been a member since 1920. Proudfoot continued his membership on this commission until his death. He also served on the important committee for Episcopacy in both the general conference of 1924 and again in 1928, when he was again chosen by the Des Moines conference as delegate to the general conference.

A WIDELY KNOWN METHODIST

It has been said that no other Methodist in Iowa was as widely known as was Proudfoot. Not only had he played an important role in the business of this church, but he had attracted wide attention through his well-known lecture, "Some Errors in the Trial of Jesus." This lecture was delivered before many audiences both in Iowa and beyond the state's borders, including an appearance in Baltimore, Maryland. He was, without doubt, Indianola's greatest orator and no other man in his county except Senator Berry was as widely known in public life.

Proudfoot could count among his personal friends

who had been entertained in his home several bishops of the Methodist church, several governors of the state, and some Iowa members of congress. On one occasion he entertained in his home a former president of the United States, William Howard Taft. He lived in a stately home on West Salem avenue, a home in keeping with the dignity of its owner, and there his three children were born, a daughter and two sons. The older son, Paul, was killed in a railroad accident at the age of eighteen. The second son, Edwin VanScoy, lives in Indianola and is the father of three children. The daughter, Charity (Mrs. John Hillis), now a widow, who lives in Indianola on the site of the old home, has two sons and two daughters all grown to maturity. It was a home that served as a center for many social and community gatherings and a home where numerous college students found a welcome. Several of these students were indebted to Mr. Proudfoot for the opportunity of earning their college livelihood while attending college by work around his home or office. Some were given loans in addition to their work. Some of these young men became prominent lawyers, others were prominent in the business world and one became a college president.

Proudfoot was a charter member of Lions International club of Indianola, and was prominent in the civic and social affairs of the community.

GRAND MASTER OF A. O. U. W.

As a member of the order, Mr. Proudfoot attended sessions of the Grand Lodge of the Ancient Order of United Workmen of Iowa. He was elected to the office of foreman of the Grand Lodge, one of its subordinate positions, and year by year was advanced through higher positions until he attained the rank of grand master. After this distinguished service, he became a past grand master and served as a member of the board of trustees as a grand trustee for a period of twenty-five years.

During the years of the readjusting of the insurance rates of members of the order and more particularly

when a portion of its reserve assets had been called in question and the sharp decline in farm prices developed, in 1927 Mr. Proudfoot reluctantly resumed the position of grand master. This was urged upon him by the board of trustees because of his ability, his knowledge of the affairs of the grand lodge and his reliability in judgment and action in every station of life ever assumed by him. He was disinclined to take on this work, for it required much time from his law practice. These duties continued until 1932, when in cooperation with the Iowa State Department of Insurance, the organization was merged with and became a part of the A.O.U.W. of North Dakota, the consolidated group afterward changing its name to the Pioneer Mutual Life Insurance Company, with head offices at Fargo, North Dakota. Senator Proudfoot strongly favored this move and in most praiseworthy manner cooperated in negotiating the reinsurance contract, his service as grand master continuing in the meantime.

When he died in 1936, the Iowa senate then in session, memorialized him with a resolution drawn up by Senator Beardsley, praising him for his unusual political record, his life as a citizen and as a Christian gentleman.

To Attain Eternal Life

Get all you can without hurting your soul, your body, or your neighbor. Save all you can, cutting off every needless expense. Give all you can. Be glad to give, and ready to distribute; laying up in store for yourselves a good foundation against the time to come, that you may attain eternal life.—John Wesley.

The Unstable Ages

All centuries are dangerous; it is the business of the future to be dangerous. It must be admitted that there is a degree of instability which is inconsistent with civilization. But, on the whole, the great ages have been the unstable ages.—Alfred Whitehead.

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