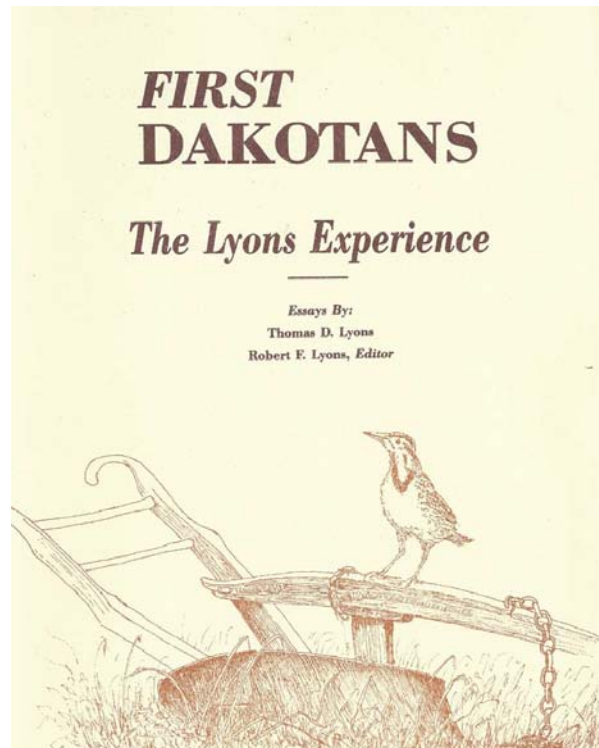


# “Politix” in Dakota

"When hearts beat hard, and brains, high-blooded, ticked."--*The Ring and the Book*.

By Thomas D. Lyons

[**Thomas. D. Lyons** (1883-1948), was the oldest son of **Richard F. Lyons** (1848-1934) who with my grandfather, William led a wagon train of 44 Irish immigrants from Iowa to Dakota Territory. There he was befriended by Mr. R. F. Pettigrew, "the Republican boss of Dakota Territory" who invited him to organize the Democratic Party and to be a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Sioux Falls which led to the creation of North and South Dakota on November 2, 1889. Richard's name is inscribed in the rotunda of the State Capital at Pierre. He was mayor of Vermillion (1917-1918). Tom paints the political landscape of those early days and the "the beginning of a friendship which ended only with the Senator's life". - Robert F. Lyons, Feb., 2011]



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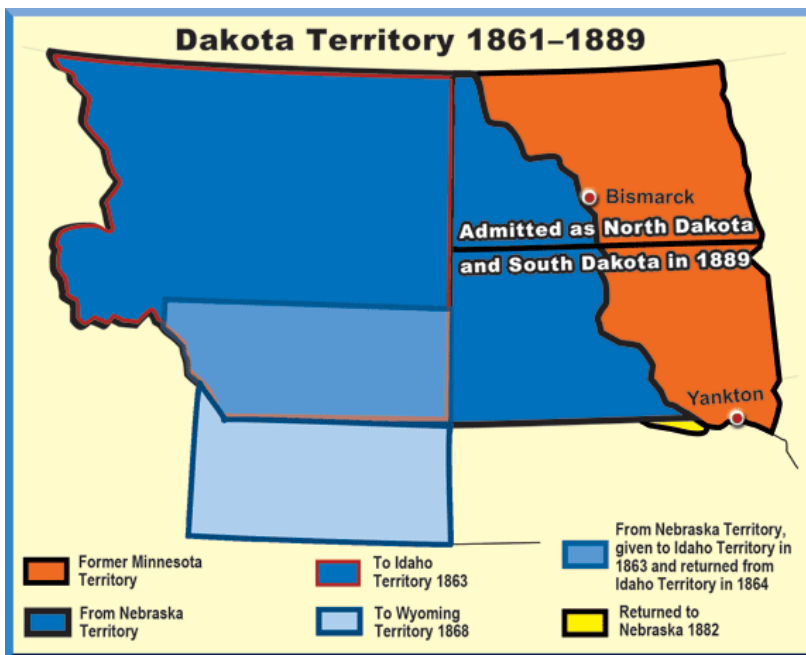
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**WHEN MY FATHER** brought the wagon train from Burr Oak, Iowa, to Prairie Queen, Dakota Territory, in the 70's, he had a letter in his pocket from the Vice President of the Milwaukee Railroad to Mr. R. F. Pettigrew, Attorney at Law, Sioux Falls, D. T. My father presented this letter, together with the requested filings of the wagon-train company, to Mr. Pettigrew late one May afternoon. After a pleasant chat, he arose to leave, whereupon Mr. Pettigrew said, "What time do you get up in the morning?" My father replied, "Well, we are all farmers, and can't sleep after daylight, but I suppose you don't want to see me earlier than tomorrow afternoon, or perhaps not that soon."

"Oh, well," replied Mr. Pettigrew genially, "I am a farmer too, so drop in as soon as you have breakfast." My father answered, "Well, that will be right at 6:00 o'clock." The next morning, shortly after six, my father was at the small frame one-story building which bore a board sign announcing to the world, "R. F. Pettigrew, Land Office." Mr. Pettigrew pushed over the Land Office certificates showing that my father and his fellow members of the wagon train had legally filed on 480 acres each of fine Dakota land--160 acres homestead, 160 acres preemption, and 160 acres tree-claim. Mr. Pettigrew had proved fully as efficient as his friend, the Milwaukee Vice President, had prophesied. It was self evident that the Land Office Register and his subordinates did not keep union hours when Mr. Pettigrew had business earlier.

My father told us that Mr. Pettigrew's fees for his legal service were ridiculously low, but Mr. Pettigrew waived all thanks and all discussion of the meagerness of his fees with a question prompted by his real life interest, which was politics. He said, "Mr. Lyons, what is the politics of the members of your wagon-train company? I observe a great many Irish names in the list, and I have been wondering if you have any Democrats in the crowd." (Mr. Pettigrew was, even then, before he was 30 years old, spoken of as the Republican boss of Dakota Territory.) My father answered, "Well, Mr. Pettigrew, I am bound to be candid with you--we did have one Republican in the crowd when we left Burr Oak, but the boys found out about it and dropped him into the Big Sioux, at Luverne. I never heard whether he managed to swim back to the Minnesota shore, or went down the river to Sioux City." Pettigrew got a good laugh out of this, but said, "Well, I'm glad that your crowd are Democrats. You may be interested in knowing that we haven't any Democrats in Dakota Territory. And a good many people think we don't need any of them, either. But my observation is that you never know what the future holds and of course the day might come when we need Democrats in Dakota."

This was the beginning of a friendship which ended only with the Senator's life. Due to the

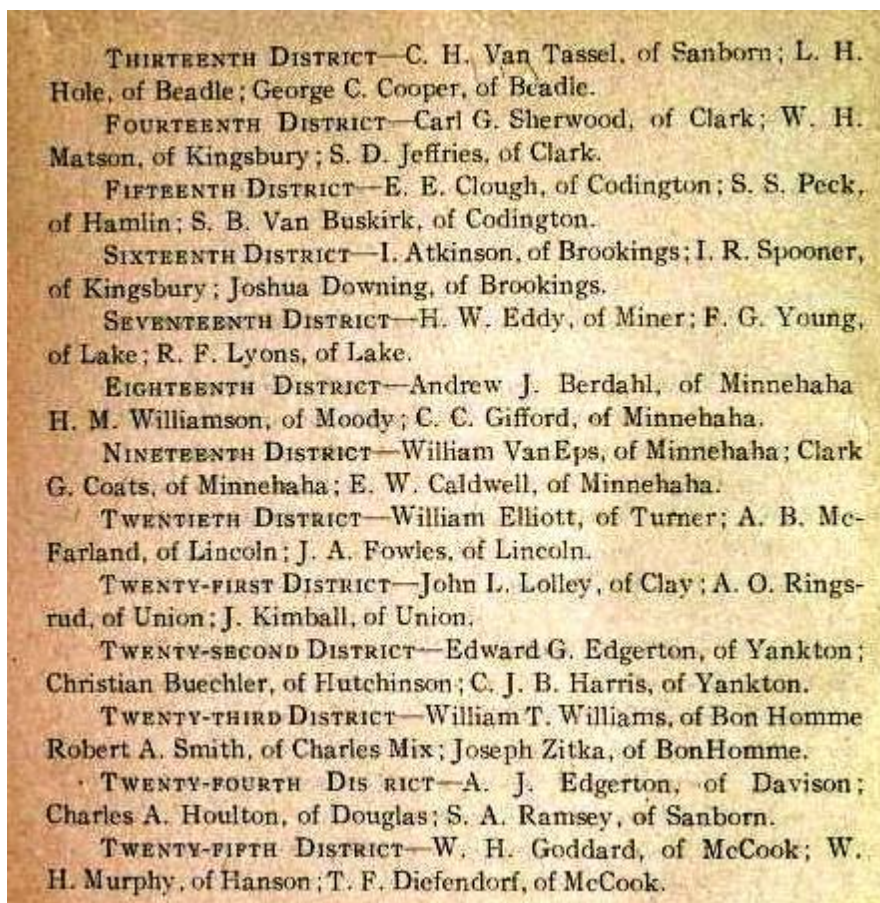


tremendous area of Dakota Territory (equal at one time to the combined areas of Oklahoma and Texas), it was difficult to arrange a territorial-wide meeting. The representatives from Laramie County in the southwest and from the Pembina District in the northeast were a widely separated (taking transportation difficulties into account) as Chicago and El Paso. A few years after my father's arrival in the Territory, when R. F. Pettigrew had been elected Delegate in Congress from Dakota, there was strong

agitation for statehood, and a general desire to have a meeting at Sioux Falls to discuss the question. The Republican Territorial Convention was scheduled to meet there, and Mr. Pettigrew invited my father and Tom Walsh (later Senator from Montana) to attend, under a formal safe-conduct guaranteeing that there would be no abuse of Democrats in that Republican Convention. My father and several other friends attended under this arrangement, and the peace protocol was scrupulously kept until the last hours of the convention. Then a "bloody-shirt" Republican got the floor and proceeded to lambast the Democrats with his favorite quotation--"I did not say that all Democrats were traitors--what I said was that all traitors were Democrats."

Tom Walsh excitedly seized my father's arm and said. "Dick, what can we do with that damn fool? Frank Pettigrew ought to stand by his word." My father arose and made a point of order against the gentleman's remarks, stating that he and other Democrats had traveled 450 miles to attend the meeting, merely for territorial purposes, under an agreement that not one word of criticism of Democrats would even be suggested. Mr. Pettigrew, who had been absent, came into the hall at that moment and most vigorously stated that my father's point of order was well taken, should be sustained, and that the speaker who was abusing the Democrats was as senseless as a wild ass of the Asian steppes. The convention by a gale of laughter applauded the ruling of the chair, sustaining the point of order, and the cognomen "Wild Ass of the Prairie" clung ever after to Major Pickeral, the over-patriotic Grand Army orator.

In 1889, when my father was elected delegate to the Constitutional Convention at Sioux Falls, the Republican Party was in charge of the convention, and Mr. Pettigrew was said to be in charge of the Republican Party. In any event, he saw to it that his old friend and client was appointed on all the important committees. My father had another very pleasant experience connected with the convention. The Democrats unanimously opposed constitutional prohibition, and nominated a full slate of convention officers, which was, of course, foredoomed



Constitutional Convention 17th District - R. F. Lyons, Lake

to defeat. Their candidate for chaplain of the convention was Episcopal Bishop Hare, with whom my father formed a warm and lasting friendship.

### **Cleveland**

In 1892, when, to the surprise of all the Dakotans, Grover Cleveland was elected President, Senator Pettigrew pointedly advised my father that Cleveland was going to drive all the western Democrats out of the party with his gold standard policies, and jocularly urged my father to make ready for re-baptism as a Republican. The Senator added, "I have observed, though, that the Irish Democrats are just about as likely to leave the Catholic Church as they are to quit the Democratic Party." My father replied, "Frank, if you will read history, you will find that the Democratic Party opposed the ostracism of Catholics and Irishmen when your Republican Party and its predecessors, the Whigs and the Know-Nothings, made intolerance one of their principal doctrines. One of the great calamities," my father continued, "was the defeat of Stephen A. Douglas for the Presidency. There would have been no Civil War and no consolidated government, with the twin evils of the tariff and the trusts, if he had been elected. Slavery would have disappeared anyway, by a compromise, and payment of compensation, and there would have been no race hatred." "Well," said Pettigrew, "it was the fire-eater of the South, like old Ben Tillman today, who wrecked your party at Charleston, in 1860. Secession began there, but, of course, it was a blessing for the Union, because it brought Abraham Lincoln into the presidency, and gave us the party of free men and free homes. Speaking of Catholics, one of the best Republicans and most patriotic Americans I know of is Archbishop John Ireland, of St. Paul. I had dinner with him and Jim Hill the other night, and they are both hoping for the day when William McKinley will be President."

President Cleveland's second administration was indeed ill-starred, from the standpoint of western Democrats. He vetoed the pension bill and went fishing on Memorial Day, and these events brought forth a terrible berating from the Grand Army Republicans. Then times got hard, and the most active occupation in the land was that of the sheriff, crying foreclosure sales. The West was in revolt. The eastern Democrats opposed the income tax, and voted for the repeal of the Sherman Silver Act, thereby, according to Senator Pettigrew, fastening the gold standard on the country.

One hot afternoon in the summer of 1895, the Senator called at the Redstone Mercantile Establishment to see my father. There was with him a tall, hazel-eyed, handsome young man, with long raven-black hair, whom the Senator introduced as Democratic statesman from Nebraska. When this gentleman departed for the hotel, the Senator remained behind, to leave with my father a birthday gift of a quart of choice "liquor," saying that the gentleman who had just departed was a "white ribboner." He added, "He's a spellbinder, though, from the forks of the creek. His delivery is just as good as Will Sterling's, although he is not as strong on reasoning power and logic as Will. He has made a study of the money question too, and I think you and he, and all the other western Democrats, had better get ready to support a silver man like McKinley for President." My father said that if he were as good an orator as Will Sterling, then he was a "grass-cutter." He added that the best orator the Democrat had, in his opinion, was John G. Carlisle, then in Cleveland's Cabinet. He then

said, "Frank, it looks to me as if Mark Hanna and the Gold Democrats are going to run your party, and you will have no place to light except in the bandwagon of `Silver Dick' Bland."

Sure enough, there was tremendous excitement in the Redstone Mercantile Establishment in June, 1896, when the Sioux Falls *Press* carried a boxcar headline to the effect that Senator Pettigrew and a dozen other Republican Senators had "walked out" of the Republican National Convention at St. Louis, when that convention adopted the "money plank" dictated by Mark Hanna.

But a still greater thrill came the second week in July, when the news came of the speech of a young man from Nebraska, known as the "boy orator of the Platte." There was a magnificent picture the next day in the Chicago *Record Herald* entitled, "The Cross of Gold," and under it, "Pen-portrait of the Honorable William Jennings Bryan, whose speech, yesterday, on the money question, makes him a possibility for the presidential nomination."

My father looked hard and earnestly at this picture, then he said, "Well, by George, that's the young fellow Frank Pettigrew brought in here a year ago, when he left me that bottle of Canadian Club. Well, this is a surprise!" That night, he read the speech aloud to us, and said, "I believe he will be nominated and elected."

### **Bryan**

In October of that year the news came that William J. Bryan had electrified the East with his magnetic eloquence, and that silver crosses were blazing in a triumphal trail of victory from Florida to Maine. There was a feeble rumor that even South Dakota, the ramparted stronghold of Grand Army Republicanism, was wavering. The news came that Bryan would sweep through Dakota like a prairie cyclone. Senator Pettigrew consulted my father as to routing his tour. Bryan spoke at Sioux City at 9:00 A.M. to 30,000 people; made eight speeches between there and Sioux Falls; spoke for an hour at Sioux Falls to 50,000 and the word came that he was en route to Huron and would pass through Redstone at 6:00 P.M., but that the train would not stop because the railroad officials would not consent. Ten thousand people had gathered at Redstone. My father hitched the Hambletonians to a buggy, and we drove the fifteen miles to St. Mary's in an hour. There my father telegraphed a railroad magnate in Chicago and had an answer back immediately that the Bryan train would stop seven minutes at Redstone. We drove on to Vilas, put the team in the livery barn and boarded the train when it stopped for the Milwaukee crossing. In just a few minutes my father was in earnest conversation with Senator Pettigrew and other State leaders, including the Democratic candidate for Governor, Honorable Andrew E. Lee, of Vermillion. At the news that my father was on the train, Pat Wickham, General Mark Sheafe and Hugh Smith rushed forward, and when he produced the telegram authorizing the stop at Redstone, they hugged him. Senator Pettigrew said, "We'll soon be there. I'll notify Clancy [the man who had charge of Bryan's arrangements]. Come on, Tom," he said to me, "and shake hands with the next President."

My father and I followed him down the aisle of the car, which was full of smoke. Near the other end, a big bulky man was stretched out asleep, covered with an overcoat. In a minute or two Clancy

awakened him. He was in his undershirt and trousers, and I wondered how he would get his shirt, collar and tie on in time to speak. As he sat up, a man helped him into his unlaced shoe. Another man held a bucket of ice water and a towel. The big man with the black hair splashed ice water all over his head and neck and gave it one wipe with the towel. Then he pulled a silk muffler around his throat, pulled on a big double-breasted overcoat over his undershirt, buttoned it up tight to his throat, put on a black ranchman's hat and followed my father out onto the platform. The crowd was so silent with astonishment that you could hear a pin drop. Then my father said, "Fellow citizens, the Democratic candidate for President refused to go through Redstone without greeting you. I introduce William Jennings Bryan." There was a shout, as exultant and fierce as ever split the welkin at a Roman gladiatorial show. Then the magic of the eloquent orator's voice fused all hearts in that crowd into one with its magnetism. He had expected to speak seven minutes, but the engineer started the train at the end of the third minute; and Bryan said, "It is evident that I leave you unwillingly, but now I must go. I want you each to take this question and decide it for yourselves. What makes our country great is the responsibility of the individual citizen. But, if you need any advice as to whom to put in the White House, I suggest that your own citizens, like the great Republican leader, Senator Pettigrew, and the staunch Democratic leader, R. F. Lyons, are safer advisers for you to follow than Mark Hanna, the Standard Oil magnate, who owns the Republican party." The train had now gathered speed, but the cheer of the crowd could be heard for a quarter of a mile.

I saw that Mr. Bryan took another ice water splash, laid aside his hat, covered himself with the overcoat, and went back to a peaceful sleep. That night, at 9:00 o'clock, he spoke to 50,000 in a Dakota October wind at Huron, and went on and spoke to 30,000 more at Aberdeen at 2:00 A.M. There were no "loud-speakers" then, but everyone heard the golden voice, with its sonorous swell, that, aloft and clear, was sent to the last verge of the vast audience, "as when in the belfry arch is swung the silvery bell."

On the Sunday before election our hopes were high. Hugh Smith and Pat Wickham came with Father Ahern for dinner, and in the afternoon General Sheafe arrived. There was a discussion as to Bryan's chances for election. My father said that we would know something, he thought, in the next hour, as Senator Pettigrew was in a nation-wide conference in Chicago, and had promised to send him a wire. Sure enough, in a little time, the telegram came. My father read it over for almost a full minute without a word. Then he lighted a cigar and passed the telegram over to Pat Wickham. Mr. Wickham also read it in silence and handed it to General Sheafe and Hugh Smith. My mother finally said, "Well, what in the world is the mystery?" My father answered, reassuringly, "Well, Frank says everything is all right. He merely advises against betting on Bryan's election." "Well," my mother said, "that means that it's all over for poor Mr. Bryan." Hugh Smith said, "That's my version of it too. When Frank Pettigrew won't take a chance and bet his money, the chances are slim." "Well," said Pat Wickham, "we will elect Andy Lee, anyhow." And they did.

In 1908 my father was State Chairman, and in January, 1909, Senator Pettigrew invited him and his friends to have breakfast with Bryan at the Senator's stock farm near Sioux Falls. Cakes, sausage and maple syrup constituted the principal dish. At each man's plate there was a fine big water glass of

golden maple syrup. The glass at Bryan's plate really contained maple syrup; the Dakota pioneers each had a glass full of the Senator's celebrated Bourbon. At the end of the breakfast, Senator Pettigrew's blunt speech manifested itself. He said "Bryan, in 1896 we all thought you were going to win. And, maybe you did, and just didn't have the right men doing the counting. In 1900, of course, you had no show; but this last time, Dick Lyons and I were both badly fooled. Tell us just how the hell it feels to get the stuffing beaten out of you three times for the Presidency." The Commoner met the situation nobly. He said, "Senator Pettigrew, and my pioneer Dakota friends, let me answer that statement by quoting your own Dakota proverb, `When a man sleeps on the ground, he's in no danger of falling out of bed.'"

The epilogue is contained in a book entitled "Western Democrat," by the late Arthur F. Mullen, for many years Democratic National Committeeman from Nebraska, and floor leader for the Roosevelt forces at Chicago in 1932. Mr. Mullen comments on Bryan's vote in 1912, against the majority report of the Credentials Committee, which had seated the Pettigrew-Andy Lee-Champ Clark delegation from South Dakota. Mr. Mullen says: "...Dick Lyons, Chairman of the State Central Committee (South Dakota), who had the right to issue the credentials...declared the [Clark] ticket victorious over the Wilson-Byran ticket. The South Dakotans on the Wilson-Bryan ticket were so cognizant of the justice of Lyons's action that they were willing to compromise...."

*So all the passionate hearts are dust,  
And dust the great ideas which burned  
In varying form of love and lust  
'Till the world's brain was turned.*

- All twenty two stories by T.D. Lyons are available on-line at [www.williammarylyons.com](http://www.williammarylyons.com): **FIRST DAKOTANS: The Lyons Experience by Thomas D. Lyons, edited by Robert F. Lyons (1991) (22 stories from Commonweal magazine).** [>Click eBook](#)
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