

Stratford's Screw Driver Town Meeting Gave All Voters an Equal Chance

Anybody Knowing Anything Wrong With Stratford is Free to Blame it Upon the Selectmen – Where Children Are Late at School Because of Fishing in the Streets.

If Moderator Ivan Morehouse hadn't need [sic] a screwdriver for a gavel things might have been different. But the right of a tool that is universally recognized as the instrument of the "fix-it" man, in the hands of the chairman of the town meeting Monday evening upset everybody. The fact of the matter was that the conventional gravel [sic] was being used elsewhere that evening, and the only thing about the town hall which could be used for pounding purposes was the screw driver. And so Mr. Morehouse used it.

All sorts of mistaken inferences were drawn from the simple fact. Some of the citizens took it as a reflection upon themselves that the chairman seemed to be intimating there were some screws loose in town, or perchance some nuts that needed adjustment. When the meeting had concluded First Selectman Lalley had made up his mind that the chairman had intended prying the first selectman loose from some of his popularity and influence during the meeting. Needless to say, this object was not accomplished.

As things turned out, the chairman didn't need a screw driver at all. What he did need was a pair of pliers to extract the purpose of the town meeting from a great parliamentary snarl into which it worked. It is no exaggeration to say that never in the history of the world was there such a demand for a clear head as was seen at this town meeting when the matter of a business like road improvement policy was suggested by Representative Elliot Peck. He is a man of few words and much sense, so his proposal was very simply put. It was that the town decide upon an expenditure of \$15,000 for road work for the next five years, the money to be spent under the direction of a competent road builder.

This proposition became tangled in the following parliamentary briar bush. There was a motion. There

was an amendment. There was an amendment to the amendment. There was an amendment offered "in lieu of the amendment to the amendment." Then there was the very dickens to pay. And, when all these amendments to amendments had been amply cussed and discussed there was a series of votes upon them. The result of the voting was that after the vote the road question was just where it started when Mr. Peck rose to his feet and began the argument. So, it may be repeated that if the chairman had a pair of pliers instead of a screw driver things might have been different. The town meeting decided to turn it over to the selectmen who already had it.

What It Is.

For those readers who have recently come to Connecticut and are not familiar with that greatest of democratic institutions, the town meeting, a definition of a town meeting may be helpful. It is hard to define because its possibilities are beyond all limits. And yet, it will help some to know that a town meeting is a public assembly of voters who have little or no opportunity to express their thoughts publicly at any other time.

It is the great Yankee forum; a part of the world already and irretrievably made safe for democracy; a condition of self-determination that needs no league of nations to improve it. It is the voice of the people at the highest possible pitch. There men compete with one another to show that each is more miserably treated by the town officials than any other. There every taxpayer insists that he is held up, beaten and robbed by his chosen officials, and he vows "This sort of thing has got to stop." This civic duty having been done, the voter goes home and awaits the calling of the next town meeting where he repeats.

Nobody ever thinks of sticking to the point in a town meeting. There are no rules that need bother anybody with an idea to express. For instance, if the motion is to lay a tax of two mills for the exclusive purpose of road building, it is perfectly O.K. for any voter to arise and go into the ethics of the second and third selectmen; the relative virtues of native road

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builders and other road builders; the cost of teams and labor; the discrimination shown against certain sections of the town in favor of certain other sections of the town; the efficiency of special committees as compared with that of regularly elected officials; and, anything else that may enter a man's head and skip off his tongue. This is why nobody needs build a vaudeville house in Stratford. It couldn't survive competition with a town meeting.

The Golden Thread.

It adds to the interest of a town meeting to know that in all, through all, behind all and around all runs a thread of politics. Politics may lurk behind the most seemingly innocent and pro bono publico motion. If you are not a politician, you don't see it; if you are you don't see anything else. Take the case of roads. Selectmen are responsible for the condition of the roads under the law. Somebody suggests a "constructive policy" for the future improvements of roads. Some body [sic] else makes a motion that a committee of five be named by the town meeting to present such a policy at a future town meeting. To the uninitiated that seems all right and a fine thing for everybody. The selectmen, however, begin to smell a rat. So do their friends. They are suspicious of this "constructive policy." It looks like somebody trying to construct a personal political policy at the expense of the selectmen. From that moment on, the fight is not over the issue but over the possibility of "slipping something over" the selectmen. Now it so happens, that in Stratford, nobody slips much over on the selectmen because the first selectman always sleeps with one eye open. The first selectman is the elected king of a town and while he doesn't brag about it he knows his power. So does the town. Anybody who wants to pick a fight with him has to do it subrosa under cover, camouflaged behind the "public interest" or some other pretty phrase.

Judge Coughlin was the first man in the meeting to see a drive being made on First Selectman Jim Lalley by the motion for a committee of five to lay out a "constructive policy." And a duel ensued between him and Moderator Morehouse. The young moderator was steering the motion along in fine shape, had it parliamentarily loaded with plenty of amendatory ballast, and was fast making into port

when Judge Coughlin grabbed the wheel and spoiled it all. Jim Lalley grinned, and cut another notch in his gun. Of course the metaphors and similes are all mixed in this story but it's about a town meeting, remember.

Meet Mr. Conine.

At every properly constituted town meeting there is a watchdog of the public funds. Frank Conine did the watching Monday evening. He succeeded in paring a quarter of a mill off the proposed 18¼ mill tax rate. This is never any great rub as, because Mr. Simendinger said, all the taxpayers want every possible improvement but don't want to pay for them. Consequently, a motion to slice a quarter of a mill off a proposed 18¼ rate is as good as passed when made. That this difference, it made about \$2,500, would have to be made up later to take care of appropriations already made was of no concern to Mr. Conine who allowed that "if they have more money than they need they'll spend it anyway." So the remedy was to give them less than they needed.

On the matter of the tax rate the town meeting gets mightily interested. All the "Whys" are paraded in full regalia? Why was my propetry [sic] increased in valuation and Mr. Blank's left as it was? Why do I have to pay so much taxes and get nothing for my money? Why do the selectmen waste taxes dumping sand on roads? Why does my boy only go to school a half day? etc., etc.

As one citizen declared:

"What do we get for our taxes? Nothing. (Faint applause). NOT A DAMN THING! (Uproarious applause). There isn't a man in Stratford knows how to make roads." (Applause).

Each district had an orator present. Mr. Brush represented North avenue and vicinity. It appeared that some time ago a culvert broke near his property. The selectmen, instead of repairing the culvert, dumped some sand over it, and into it, completely choking it up. Thereafter the water drained into Mr. Brush's cellar and yard instead of through the culvert. The sand also gradually washed away and had to be replaced. He declared that he didn't like to go home nights because his children were too small to meet him at the trolley car with a rowboat, and he didn't like to

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carry rubber boots to and from his work. "Talk about a water front. I have one at my front door."

Blatherskites, Too.

Young Mr. Simengdinger created a few tense moments when, during his speech he declared that he knew of a laborer getting as high as \$90 per week during the war period.

"Order, order," cried voices in the rear.

"It's one thing to stand up here and face a town meeting," flashed Mr. Sl, "and it's quite another for a bunch of blackguards to stand in the back of the hall and make a noise." Wow!

The gentleman from Barnum terrace described local conditions by telling of an automobile that was stuck in the road near his home. The car was mired so deeply that he had to loan the driver a shovel to make a hole big enough to allow him to crank his car.

The gentleman from Sound View avenue declared children were late at school because the fishing in the Stratford roads was so tempting.

And so it went. District after district reported its troubles until it seemed as if Stratford had been modeled after John Bunyan's Slough of Despond, and each citizen was Christian making his way, with great difficulty, through it.

Now and then somebody would speak of sewers as a necessary convenience, and it then appeared that sewers are being built in Stratford to take care of sewage, but not surface water. "Then how in the world are you going to keep a good road after you build it if there is no way to drain it?" demanded Judge Coughlin. Well, nobody had thought of that.