
The Political Impact of the Central Nevada Mining Boom: An Address to the 10th Annual Convention of the Mining History Association, Tonopah, Nevada

by Sally Zanjani

Because mining was the big gorilla in Nevada's economy at the turn of the twentieth century, the effects of the central Nevada mining boom appear with unusual clarity in state politics. We should first look at Nevada's situation on the eve of the discovery at Tonopah in May, 1900, which was to have such far reaching consequences. Since gaining statehood in 1864 during the Civil War, Nevada had usually voted Republican and the Comstock elite had dominated politics. No countervailing centers of economic power developed in this desert country so poor in natural resources, and as the Comstock went, so went the state. After 1880 the Comstock went into borrasca and the entire state sank with it. The population dwindled from 62,000 in 1880 to 42,000 in 1900. In the backwater that Nevada became, central Nevada was the backwater behind the backwater. The few stubborn souls who clung on in Belmont could not afford to get sick, for the only available treatment was the annual visit of the Chinese herbalist from Carson City, nor could they marry in haste because there was no preacher. Much of the surrounding region remained an unmapped pocket of the old frontier.

As might be expected, a plummeting economy and heavy population losses had drastic political consequences. In 1892 voters bolted from both traditional parties to a new entity, the Silver Party, and gave a heavy majority to James B. Weaver, the Populist candidate for president. The ideological focus of the Silver party was, of course, unlimited coinage of silver to restore past prosperity.

Interestingly, the bigger a party was in a given county, the greater the defection from that party to the Populist Weaver, suggesting that the larger the party coalition, the more unstable and easily de-

tached were its constituent elements. Both arithmetically and in percentage terms, Democratic and Republican losses were very close in the state as a whole. Outside the northwest region clustered around the Comstock, the five counties that suffered the greatest population losses were those that defected most heavily from the Republicans in an apparent political protest against hardship.

The response of the ruling political elite to this revolt by the voters was, quite simply, "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em." Charles C. Wallace—known as "Black" Wallace, the Central Pacific Railroad agent who had run Nevada politics for years—and all the leading politicians joined the Silver party and quickly captured it. If this single issue pressure group ever had a chance of becoming an innovative and lasting political party, that chance was effectively killed when Black Wallace took over the show. Although I have never seen a photo of Black Wallace, I picture him a bit like Darth Vader.

This period of political upheaval in the 1890s confused historians for some years, and it was supposed that the new Democratic majority that emerged in Nevada after 1900 was an outgrowth of the Silver party. In fact, it can be demonstrated by mathematical methods that Nevada was in the process of reverting to its old Republican pattern. But when Nevada's population nearly doubled in the period 1900–1910, thanks to the central Nevada boom, this trend toward business as usual abruptly halted, and the influx of new voters created a Democratic majority. The five counties with the greatest Democratic gains from 1888 to 1896 diverge from the five counties with smallest Democratic losses in the open scissors pattern characteristic of realignment, but the scissors did not remain open.

By 1904 the two lines were again very close together.

Why did Nevada, perversely, turn Democratic when the nation as a whole had gone predominantly Republican ever since the great realigning election of 1896? Apparently because after 1900 Nevada state Democratic platforms with strong labor planks were framed in an obvious effort to appeal to the large working class vote concentrated in the new mining towns, while the national party had a similar emphasis. The change was symbolically recognized in 1908 when presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan awarded Major Minnamascot—the big, black Democratic mule—to Goldfield, in recognition of the sevenfold increase in the Esmeralda County Democratic vote over the previous presidential election.

This, then, was the first seismic political effect of the central Nevada boom—a new Democratic partisan majority. The second, was the rise of a new political elite owing their prominence to the central Nevada mining boom. Comstock-era politicians such as William Stewart faded from the scene. Black Wallace was no longer heard from, and a somewhat transitional figure, George Nixon, moved to the fore. Nixon was at the same time a Winnemucca banker and Southern Pacific Railroad political agent, and an investor made rich by Tonopah and Goldfield—rich enough to acquire a United States Senate seat in 1904. And Nixon was pretty pleased with himself. As one observer remarked, he used to walk the streets of Goldfield “with the pride and gravity of a Spanish grandee.” Nixon, however, died suddenly in 1912.

Far more politically important in the long run was Nixon’s partner, a former gambler and frontier tough made rich by Nixon’s investment in Goldfield’s fabulous Mohawk Mine—George Wingfield. Unlike Nixon, Wingfield preferred operating behind the scenes to holding formal political office, perhaps because he was aware that political campaigns would entail scrutiny of his unsavory past. Those around Wingfield, whom he liked to call “the old Goldfield crowd,” went on to become governors, senators, and so forth after Wingfield created the bipartisan political machine that virtually ran Nevada in the 1920s. In this period, when the boom had faded and Wing-

field and the rest had moved north to Reno, it is no exaggeration to say that the major politicians and the major bootleggers of those days were spawned in central Nevada.

This, then, was the second major effect of the boom, the rise of a new political elite from the central Nevada mining camps and a reaffirmation of the old tradition of corporate control, no longer under the aegis of the Southern (formerly Central) Pacific Railroad and the Comstock notables but under the overlord of the Goldfield Consolidated Mines Company, George Wingfield.

The old system of corporate control did not roll merrily along without challenge, however. Those Goldfield streets so crowded that you could only move at a slow shuffle, those saloons with men packed in like bees in a hive, seethed with dreams of fortune and tales of adventure—and also with new political ideas in the minds of this extraordinary gathering of talented and ambitious young men. It is no accident that the two major political reform movements of twentieth century Nevada—Socialism and Progressivism—burst out of central Nevada. Socialism, the first to emerge, was very close to its beginnings then. After Eugene Debs organized the party in 1901, no one could yet know what we know now—that communism was an unworkable economic system—and to many it seemed to offer a vision of a more equitable society.

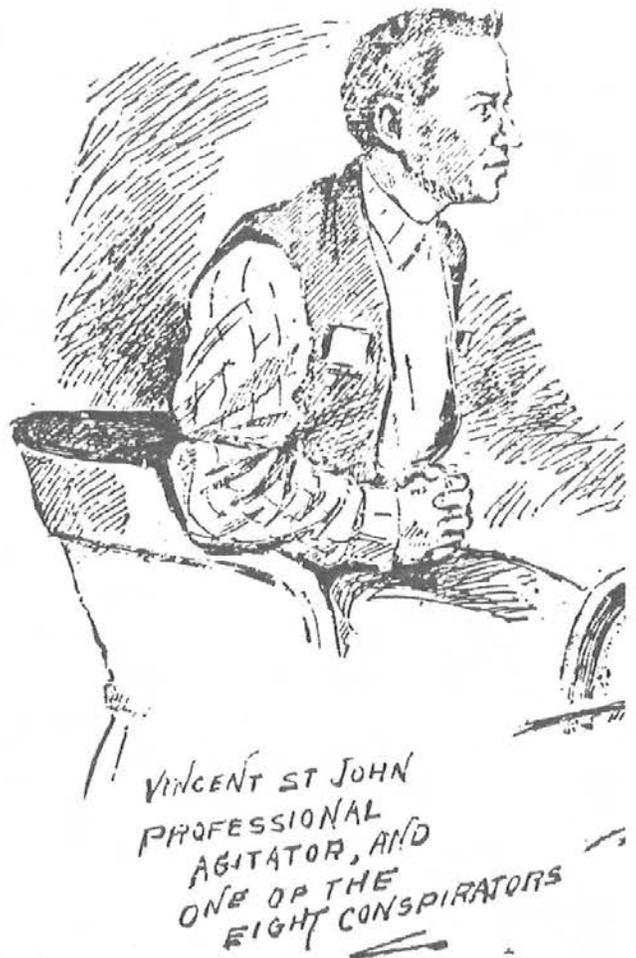
The early electoral showing by the Socialists was paltry, but their potential greatly alarmed mainstream politicians. In Nevada they had good cause for alarm because in a state with such a small electorate a few votes could easily alter the results. What was more, the Socialist vote was rising in every election, pushed by organizers in the avowedly socialist Western Federation of Miners, and its even more radical bedfellow, the Industrial Workers of the World. Debs declared, “A mighty social revolution is impending—it is shaking the earth from center to circumference, and only the dead may be deaf to its rumblings.” Nevada’s mainstream politicians were not deaf.

The inflammatory rhetoric of socialist union leaders like Vincent St. John hardly served to calm their fears. The union held a “Bloody Sunday” pa-

rade on January 20, 1907 to commemorate the St. Petersburg massacre of Russian revolutionaries and to support Big Bill Haywood and other union leaders then awaiting trial in Idaho. Union firebrands spoke to an overflow crowd in union hall under a red banner inscribed: "If they pack the jury to hang our men, we will pack hell full with them." The meeting concluded with rousing resolutions dedicated to the Russian revolutionaries. "We have no enemy but the capitalist class! Our country is the world! Our flag is the banner that is dyed red with the martyrs' blood of our class! Down with capitalism! Long live the International working class republic!" Harry Jardine, Socialist candidate for Congress in 1906, was probably the most radical person ever to take the field in Nevada. "Get an axe," he urged the voters, "and use your axe at the system that makes slaves of you."

Clearly it was time to crush these mad revolutionaries. Some steps had already been taken. For instance, the Republicans endorsed the Democratic candidate for Goldfield sheriff, William Ingalls, to avoid splitting the vote for the traditional parties and electing a Socialist to that lucrative office. More decisive action came when George Wingfield took matters in hand. Mine owners, led by Wingfield, turned a run-of-the-mill frontier shooting in self-defense during a picketing dispute into a horror crime, indeed a union assassination plot—the infamous Preston-Smith case.

Public hysteria over this shooting on March 10, 1907 led directly to the formation of the Goldfield Businessmen's and Mine Owners' Association, which became the de facto government of the city. Wingfield moved forward toward his supreme objective, the destruction of the socialist unions. A lock-out, before which the unions eventually capitulated, followed. The conviction of Preston and Smith in a trial featuring false witnesses paid by Wingfield was the next item on the agenda. While the case against a list of union leaders for their part in the so-called "assassination plot" crumbled, their indictment proved a useful tool for driving out of town leading radicals who might have resisted the destruction of the union. Wingfield's victory was completed in December, 1907, when the mine owners eradicated the unions under cover of federal troops and paraded the

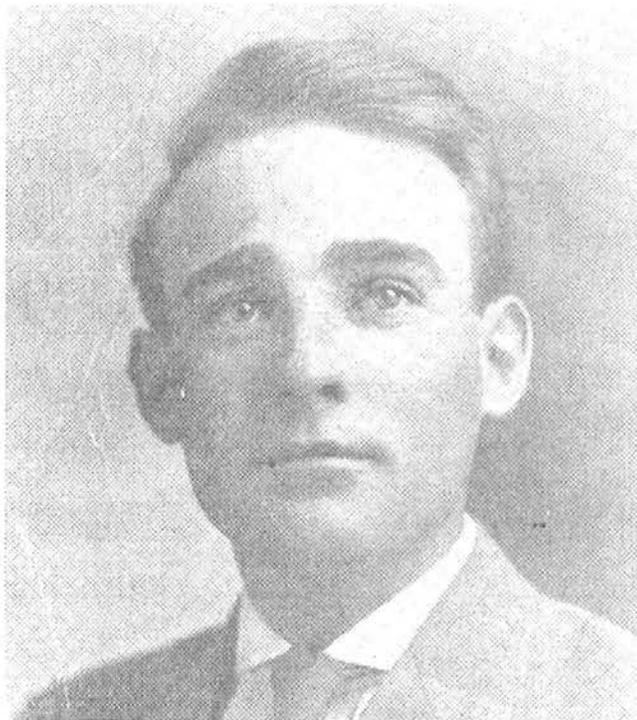


Vincent St. John as sketched by Arthur Buel for the *Tonopah Daily Sun*, 1907 (Nevada Historical Society)

Preston-Smith case before dubious federal investigators as one of the principal justifications for action against union violence.

Although they never attained majority status, the Socialists had an impact on Nevada politics. They elected several legislators, as well as a number of local officials. Their senatorial candidate, Grant Miller—who was far more moderate than the fire-breathing revolutionary Harry Jardine—won nearly 30% of the vote in 1916. Perhaps more importantly, many of the reform issues championed by the Socialists in such areas as labor conditions and woman suffrage would be co-opted by the major parties and enacted into law.

It remains one of the oddities of historical schol-



George Springmeyer in a 1914 campaign card (author's collection)

arship that there has been a heavy concentration upon the contributions of the suffragettes and scant recognition of the important part played by the Socialists in woman suffrage. When Nevada's referendum on woman suffrage was held in 1914, the issue did best in the mining camps and worst in the more conservative middle class counties of the northwest region around Reno, where more women lived. Let us remember that the success of woman suffrage in Nevada owed much to counties that would lose influence when women got the vote. These mining camps gave their hearty support to woman suffrage on the basis of an ideological belief in equal rights and in defiance of practical politics.

The second dissident political movement to arise out of the bubbling ferment of the central Nevada mining boom was Progressivism. This is a subject on which I have personal knowledge, because my father, the late George Springmeyer, was one of the leaders of the Progressives. The other was "Lighthouse Harry" Morehouse, a Goldfield attorney and an aged Confederate veteran, short on organizational skills but renowned for his oratory. My father,

then not yet thirty, was the son of German immigrant ranchers in the Carson Valley some distance south of Reno and also a lawyer. My grandfather had wanted him to go to Heidelberg for further educational polishing, and usually no one argued with my grandfather. But Heidelberg was no match for the excitement at Goldfield, where my father arrived at the height of the boom in 1906. He had been to law school at Stanford and Harvard, but the place where he really learned the law was the Goldfield district attorney's office. He was assistant district attorney and business was so brisk that he often worked till long after midnight and resumed at crack of dawn.

Nevada Progressivism began with my father's bid for Nevada attorney general in the direct primary of 1910. He was campaigning against the organization of his own party, the Republicans, and its favored candidate, Hugh Brown. The main thrust of his campaign was "to overthrow this evil power in the Republican party," by which he meant Southern Pacific control. He proposed to do that by exercising the powers of the office to the full, and by beefing up the state railroad commission into an elective public service commission with broad powers. Campaign posters proclaimed him "The Unspiked Rail in the Path of Railroad Domination," and Democratic cartoonists pictured him as a human cyclone sweeping across the landscape while the organization men ran for cover.

In fact, the cyclone was a pretty good description of my father. His was a shoe string campaign of walking through the streets in the mining towns to talk with the men and riding the range with the cowboys. In late August, at an enthusiastic overflow meeting in Goldfield, Morehouse and my father founded the Lincoln-Roosevelt league, which they hoped would back the Republican insurgency in the same way that the league of the same name was sweeping Hiram Johnson and the insurgents into office in California. However, the crucial difference was that the California league had a strong organization with a unit in every hamlet and the Nevada league had no organization at all.

Although he had no money and no effective campaign organization, he won the primary with a paper thin margin and wrote the strongest reform

platform the Nevada Republicans had produced in a generation. As the general election drew nearer, reports of foul play began to appear. A legion of Southern Pacific employees was given two weeks of furlough for political work. Key Pittman, Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, charged that “sneaking political tools” and “gumshoes” were at work all over the state. Pittman, a Tonopah attorney, was another member of the new central Nevada political elite. Although he lost in 1910, in 1912 he gained the U.S. Senate seat that he was to hold until his death in 1940.

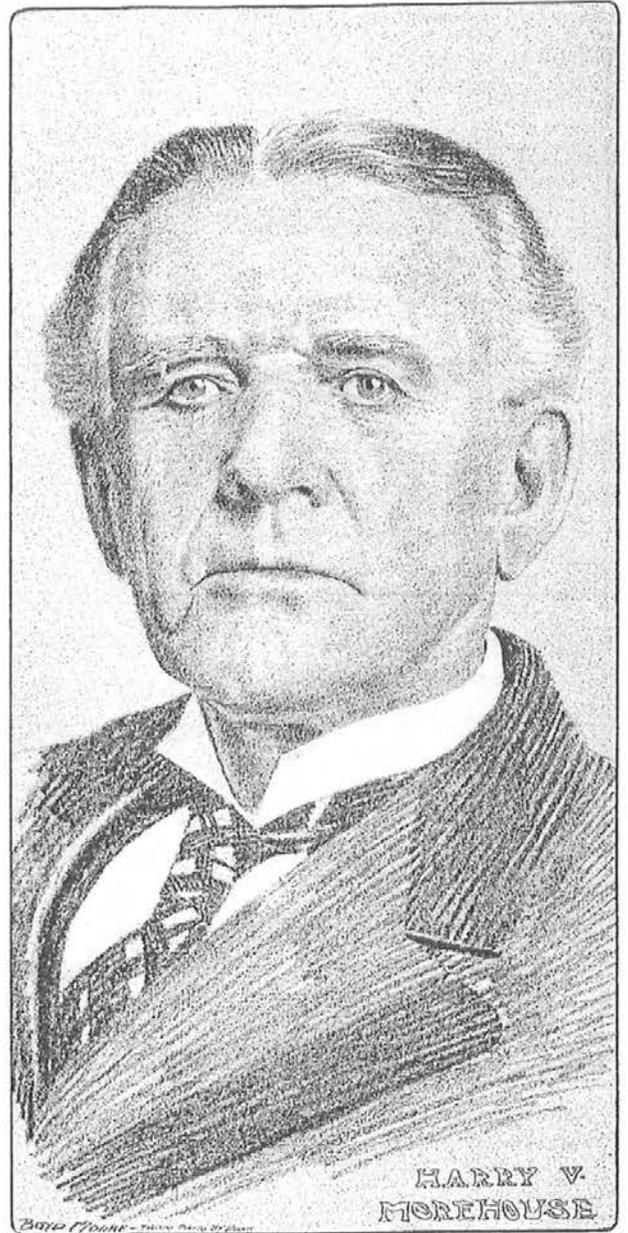
My father finished his campaign in Reno, and on election eve, Nixon invited him to dinner at his mansion on the bluff overlooking the Truckee River. Over that dinner a conversation ensued. “You’ll never get anywhere in Nevada politics,” Nixon told my father, “because you’re too independent and you won’t work with the party leaders and the machine. If you would, you would go far—to Congress and eventually to the Senate. George, you’re going to be defeated.”

“You said that before,” my father answered, “but I beat the railroad, the machine, and everything else singlehanded.”

“This time you’re going to be defeated,” said Nixon. “We’ve turned loose a river of gold against you.”

My father lost the election by a heartbreakingly thin margin of 65 votes out of nearly 20,000 cast. “Nixon personally expended over a quarter of a million dollars and the Southern Pacific expended about as much,” Pittman wrote about his 1910 election defeat to a friend (multiply that by about 20 for contemporary dollars). “I would have beaten him in spite of all this had it not been for the extensive bribery indulged in on election day.” A cartoonist depicted Wingfield and Nixon distributing money from the “corruption sack.” My father had won in a majority of counties but had been badly hurt by losses in populous Reno, where elections had been bought by the Southern Pacific for years.

Nineteen ten proved to be the high water mark for Nevada Progressivism. My father would continue to lead the Progressives until they re-entered the Republican fold in 1914 and as U.S. attorney in the



Harry V. Morehouse as drawn by Boy Moore (author's collection)

1920s would have the dangerous task of enforcing the law against Wingfield's bootlegger associates. The Progressives had less impact on public policy than the Socialists, but railroad influence was nonetheless on the way out, primarily because Hiram Johnson had defanged the Southern Pacific lion in California. Initiative, referendum, and recall, the classic Progressive reforms, went into the state constitution with overwhelmingly favorable popular



Springmeyer the political cyclone, drawn by Al Dutton for the *Goldfield Daily News* during the 1910 primary campaign (Nevada Historical Society)

votes.

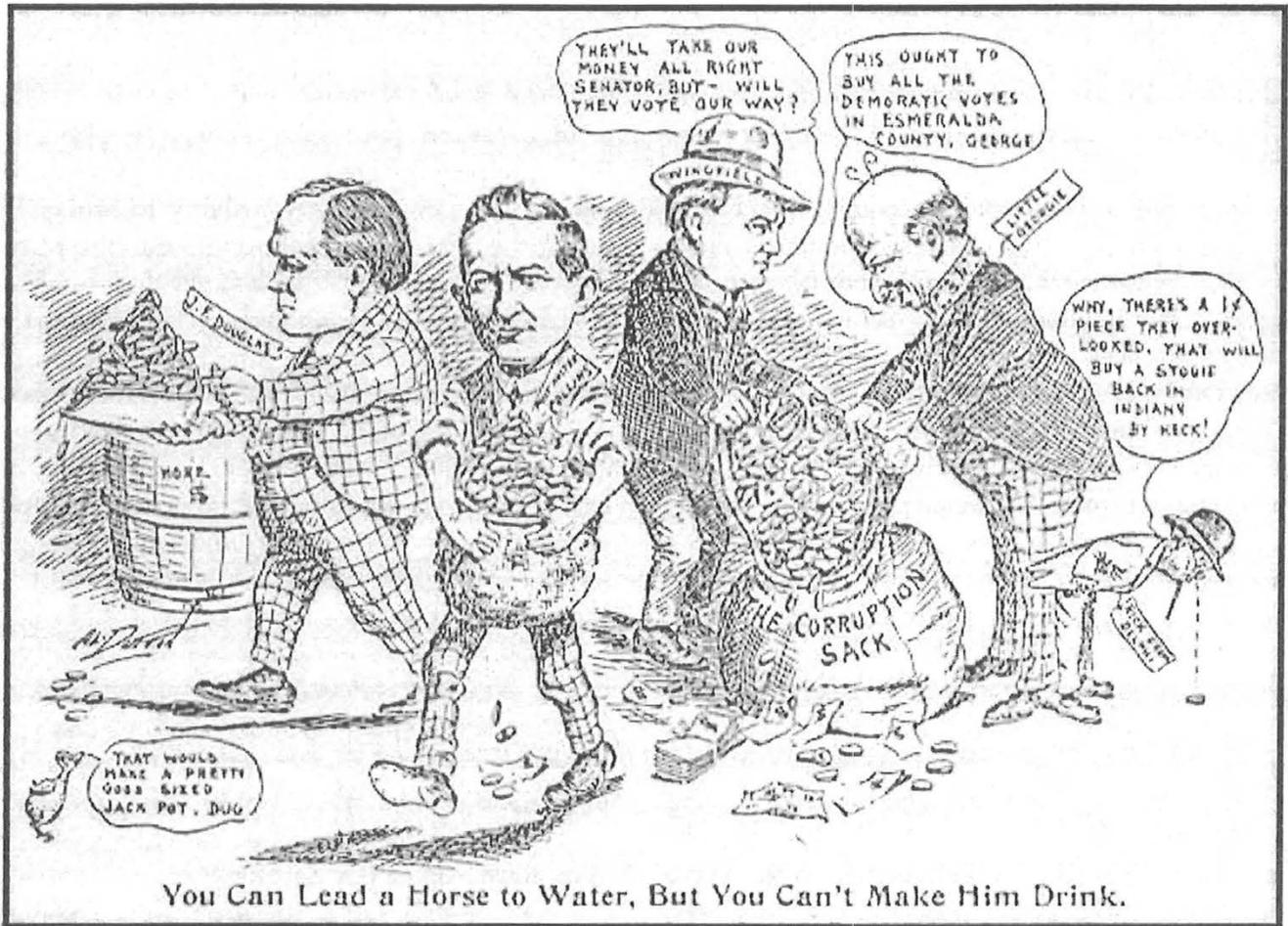
Both of the twentieth century reform movements nurtured in central Nevada shared common features. They shared corporate enemies—the mining companies and the Southern Pacific. Both elevated leaders with similar strengths—passionate and uncompromising idealists lacking practical political savvy. Both movements were defeated at the polls yet witnessed the eventual triumph of some of their ideas. Both shared a central Nevada political base. Though in theory the old northwest region around the Comstock, more middle-class and Protestant, should have been the stronghold of Progressivism, Goldfield

was the catalyst. Perhaps Goldfield's newness, her disorganized leadership, and her weak and rudimentary political institutions allowed new movements to rise swiftly, as they could not have done in counties rigorously controlled by the old guard.

This, then, was the third major political impact of the central Nevada mining boom—the challenge to corporate control by two reform movements. Their impact on the state proved to be less deep and lasting than that of the new Democratic partisan majority and the new political elite, but they certainly enlivened Nevada politics to a degree that has not been seen since.

The question arises: What lasting political difference has the mining boom that began with Jim Butler's Tonopah discovery made in the century that has passed since then? A more competitive partisan alignment, tilting in the Democratic direction, lasted almost to the present day. Now a new population influx, retirees and others moving into Amer-

ica's fastest growing city—Las Vegas—is producing a Republican tilt. But the old and unsavory tradition of corporation control, seen in action crushing the Socialist and Progressive movements, has survived in an updated form. Today the controlling corporations are not railroads or mining companies but casinos—and, yes, the river of gold still flows.



George Wingfield and Senator George Nixon Busy themselves at the corruption sack during the 1910 general election campaign, from the *Goldfield Daily News* (Nevada Historical Society)