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THE SOUTH'S GREATEST NEWSPAPERS

EVENING - MORNING - SUNDAY

BIRMINGHAM, ALA. May 12, 1931.

Miss Ida M. Tarbell,
120 East Nineteenth St.,
New York, N. Y.

My dear Miss Tarbell:

Your letter of May 8th interests me tremendously. It will be a pleasure to try to give you the information you seek, and I shall, of course, keep entirely confidential the fact that you have made the request. You will have to pardon me for boring you with a lot of extraneous detail, but it is essential, I think, that you get the background if I am to answer your inquiry with complete frankness.

For several years prior to 1927, we had been disturbed over the increasing power of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama. It had become the dominant factor, politically, in the State and was reaching out constantly to add to its dominance. We had discussed often how soon we thought the time would be ripe to launch a campaign with the intention of destroying the power of this sinister organization. Due to the fact that every ripple of opposition was immediately ascribed to pressure from Catholics or Jews and that the deluded rank and file of the Klan believed this implicitly, we had determined, after several minor skirmishes, that to launch a general offensive prematurely would serve only to increase the strength and power of the Klan while we were imperilling our own property. In our discussions during the first half of 1927, we had made a rather vague determination to begin the campaign in about eighteen months, believing by that time there would be sufficient internal dissensions over the division of the spoils and other similar factors to make it possible to damage rather than strengthen the power of the organization by an attack all along the line.

However, our hand was forced. A boy was kidnaped from in front of a country church and flogged one Sunday night a few miles away from Birmingham by masked Klansmen. The date was about July 1st, 1927. Both of my papers launched a vigorous campaign on this incident, feeling that the outrage so boldly executed and so dangerous in its implications demanded drastic treatment. Our vigor in connection with this incident brought to light scores of similar outrages all over the State, no record of which had ever before reached the public. Before we knew it, we were engaged in a life and death struggle with the Klan. The Governor, elected in 1926, was Cyclops of the Montgomery Klan when elected, and the Legislature had a clear Klan majority in both houses. Most of the county officers in Alabama were affiliated with the Klan. In September, in the last few days of the legislative session, we were enabled to defeat solely by a legislative stratagem, engineered by a handful of friends in the State Senate, a libel bill, aimed at our newspapers, that would have made it practically impossible to print a decent, courageous newspaper in the State of Alabama.

Following adjournment of the Legislature, however, and with the fine aid of the Attorney General of the State, himself elected as a Klansman, we succeeded in obtaining convictions and penitentiary sentences in flogging cases, aroused at last a real public sentiment and by mid-November had the Klan, as an organization, definitely

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whipped and on the run. It looked as though the political power of the organization was definitely broken.

However, we foresaw one great danger, namely, the prospective nomination of Al Smith by the 1928 Democratic Convention. We realized fully that the nomination of a wet Catholic would give a rallying cry that might save the Klan. Its power was broken, but the fundamental prejudices among ignorant people that had enabled it to rise to power had not been altered or changed. Every move we had made had been ascribed to our purchase by a slush fund raised by the backers of Al Smith, and thousands literally believed this to be true. Our circulation losses were heavy, a burden we were perfectly willing to bear, provided we could rid Alabama of Klan control and accomplish the thing we had hoped to achieve. We were much worried over the 1928 prospect for ourselves, for the cause we believed in and because, foreseeing the intense bitterness that would be engendered in Alabama by a presidential election with Smith the Democratic nominee, we hated the thought of the nasty battle and the way we knew the State would be torn asunder in such a fight.

If we supported Al Smith for the nomination we knew that much of the effectiveness of the fight we had made and the sacrifices we had gone through would be lost, and if we supported insincerely some dummy candidate, or remained neutral, we felt that the result would be much the same.

So much for the background, and again I ask pardon for boring you with all this local history.

On Monday, Nov. 21, 1927, Jordan Dam was to be dedicated. Mr. Thomas W. Martin, president of the Alabama Power Company, asked Mr. Oscar Wells, president of the First National Bank of Birmingham, later president of the American Bankers Association, and myself to be a sort of escort to Mr. Young for the day. We accompanied him to the Dam, a trip of about three hours, were with him all day and returned with him that night. I was charmed with the man, tremendously impressed with his force and ability, and felt that I admired and respected him more than any person I had ever met. The speech he made, dedicating the Dam, was a gem. Congressman Bowling, representing the Alabama District in which Jordan Dam is located, introduced Mr. Young and more or less facetiously nominated him for the presidency in his speech of introduction. I thought a good deal about his playful utterance. I discussed it with Mr. Young at some length on the return trip and found that he took it for just what it was, a pleasant bit of jocularity, and refused to take it seriously.

He was committed to the support of Smith, he told me, was not interested in personal political ambitions and would under no conditions think of allowing himself to become a candidate for the nomination. Pressed further, he dismissed the subject by saying that the presidency of the United States was too big a job for any man to refuse; he thought that it was too big for any man to refuse even a nomination by either of the great parties, but that, as for himself, he was not interested and would regret it if by any chance he were to be nominated. He felt that if the nomination were tendered him, he would want to refuse it, but probably could not bring himself to do so. However, he was absolutely sure that there was no possible chance of the nomination coming to him, assured me that Al Smith's nomination was written in the stars, declared he would not lift his hand to obtain it under any conditions, and insisted that there be no further thought or discussion of the matter. (Naturally, Mr. Young's expressions after the lapse of nearly four years are not accurately given here and, in addition, were of course purely personal in their nature and should not be used. Mr. Young has since said similar things, I think, in a more or less public way anyhow.)

After I went to bed that night, I lay awake a long while, thinking the thing

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through. I do not trust my emotions, but I could not get over the fact that Mr. Young had made the strongest impression upon me that any person had ever made. I felt that I had been in close contact with the biggest, most vital personality it had ever been my privilege to be associated with. The more I thought of the man, the bigger he loomed in my mind. I felt carried away by his charm, his magnetism, his sheer force of character. It seemed to me that this man had more of the qualities of high leadership than any man I had ever met, that he had the power to woo men to his will, to inspire them and to be the greatest of political leaders under a republican form of government where the autocratic type is at such a loss in handling men and obtaining results.

When I reached the office the next morning, I summoned my assistant and without disclosing what was in my mind, asked him how he had been impressed with the dedication ceremonies. He could talk of nothing but Young's speech and the tremendous impression Young in that brief address had made on him. He remarked, "What a great president that man would be". I then told him that I had called him to my office to discuss with him the advisability of committing our papers to the support of Young for the Democratic nomination for President. I found him as enthusiastic over the idea as I had come to be in my own mind. We talked it over for half an hour or more, and both agreed that here was our way out of the Al Smith impasse; here was a man we could support sincerely, enthusiastically and, with the greatness of the man in mind, might be able to help bring about his nomination in 1928 and if not then, perhaps in 1932.

We had a two column editorial in our afternoon paper of Wednesday, Nov. 23rd, captioned "For President: Owen D. Young, of New York." Our morning paper, The Age-Herald, followed it up the next morning, and immediately thereafter, The Montgomery Advertiser. (I then owned The Advertiser but sold it a few weeks later.) Our editorial writers hammered it hard the next few weeks. As they worked on the idea, it caught their imaginations. In the course of a few days, we had lost sight of political strategy, of our own situation in Alabama, of everything but the desirability of having Owen D. Young as president of the United States.

We have kept it up consistently since. Even during the campaign between June and November 1928, when we were supporting Smith with all the vigor we could command, we never lost an opportunity to refer to Young as our ideal choice. We have kept it up ever since. I am sure that not a month has passed since November 1928 that we have not had editorials in both papers in which we reiterated our admiration for the man and the executive, and our belief that he would be the ideal nominee in 1932.

For instance, this morning when I read my morning paper before I had seen your letter, I found an editorial on the recent speeches made before the International Chamber of Commerce by Melvin Traylor and Gerald Swope, captioned "Mr. Young's Friends", and pointing out that the liberal views presented by these industrial leaders were fairly representative of the things that Young, the so-called head of the "power trust", stood for and believed in.

Incidentally, if you have not already done so, my guess is that Melvin Traylor might offer you some interesting leads for your series on Young. Traylor and I have had an intermittent correspondence since November 1927 over the possibilities of obtaining the nomination for Young. He is as enthusiastic as I am.

I believe this will give you a fair and frank picture of why I have been so fervent an advocate of Mr. Young. It is possible that, had it not been for our local situation and our desire for a way out, I might never have become so definitely committed in my own mind to Owen Young for president, though I am by no means sure of this. However, the combination of the peculiar situation and the man was such that

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not only was our way clear before us, but we entered upon it with the greatest enthusiasm we have ever felt for any candidate we have supported for any office.

That very day I began mailing out clippings of The News' editorial to newspaper friends over the country who owned or edited Democratic papers, and urged them to join in the movement. I used every means at my command to spread the gospel, and I have not yet ceased to do so.

I regret very much that I cannot lay my hands upon a copy of the issue of The News for Nov. 23rd, 1927, but I enclose editorial page of The Age-Herald of the following morning, which will give you an idea of the way we launched the Young-for-president movement.

If I can serve you further, please feel free to call on me. I shall await with the keenest interest your series of articles or book on Mr. Young. It is fine that his career is to be treated by so outstanding a biographer and so clear a thinker as your work over the years has demontrated you to be.

With all good wishes,

Sincerely yours,

Victor H. Hanson

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