



John P. St. John

Photo courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society

**"THE LICK THAT ST. JOHN GOT"
PROHIBITION, REPUBLICAN PARTY POLITICS AND THE
PRESS IN ELLIS COUNTY, KANSAS 1878-1882**

by
Gia Lane

In 1880, Kansas became the first state in the Union to establish Constitutional Prohibition. Evangelical religious groups initially addressed temperance—a concept generally defined as moderation in alcoholic consumption, or as complete abstinence from liquor—as a social reform best dealt with through the efforts of the church. By the 1870s, though, the issue had entered the political arena, and according to Kansas historian Robert Richmond, “much of the political controversy in the thirty years before the beginning of the new century centered around prohibition.”¹

Public opinion in Kansas was virtually unanimous regarding the evils of drunkenness. Temperance, in the form of moderation in the use of alcohol, was considered a virtue by the general public; on this there was general agreement. The controversy stemmed from the divergence of opinion regarding the proper role of government in regulating the consumption of liquor. Prohibitionists pressed for a legal solution to the problems of alcohol abuse. Those who opposed prohibition not only believed legal restraints on alcohol use infringed upon personal liberty but also that it was impossible and impractical to attempt to legislate morality. The fact that the state’s prohibition amendment was ratified by the electorate in 1880 indicated that a majority of Kansas voters believed that the use of liquor ought to be regulated by law. Many other Kansans, however, disagreed. One recent analysis of public sentiment on the question of prohibition revealed that prohibition was generally opposed by the western half of the state, the border counties, and by communities with concentrations of German-Americans, Catholics, and Democrats.²

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Prohibition in Kansas, and particularly the amendment of 1880, cannot be discussed without reference to John P. St. John, Republican governor of the state from 1879 to 1883. St. John, an ardent prohibition activist, campaigned for an unprecedented third term in 1882. The passage of the constitutional amendment and his reelection in 1880 appeared to be a mandate for prohibition and a personal victory for St. John. The Republican party, however, divided over support of St. John as its candidate in 1880; this proved even more the case in 1882.

St. John's defeat by George W. Glick in 1882 marked the first Democratic gubernatorial victory in the state's history. In interpreting this event, historians have differed somewhat in their explanations of the election. In the 1950s, William Zornow determined that St. John's third term bid and his support of suffrage for women were the predominant causes of his defeat.³ More recently, Robert Richmond agreed with Zornow, adding that the Republican party was "strongly for prohibition" while the Democratic party favored temperance.⁴ Kenneth Davis has acknowledged that St. John was handicapped by seeking a third term; moreover, by 1882, St. John was "personally unpopular" with Republican politicians. Rumors of St. John's association with railroad interests and the third party vote also factored into St. John's defeat.⁵ Homer Socolofsky has reached a similar conclusion, maintaining that as a result St. John was "virtually forced out of the Republican party."⁶ Robert Bader notes that the people of Kansas supported prohibition—a plank in the Republican platform—by voting for every Republican candidate on the state ticket except the incumbent governor, indicating a personal mandate against St. John. Bader reiterates that "public opposition generated by the third-term issue and personal animosity toward him within the Republican ranks, were largely responsible for his defeat. . . ."⁷

This article examines the gubernatorial campaigns of 1878, 1880, and 1882 as reported in the Ellis County Republican press. Located in the western half of the state, Ellis was a "wet" Republican county with a significant German Catholic population; indeed, the political composition of Ellis County at that time was representative of anti-prohibitionist forces in Kansas.

In contrast to prevailing historical interpretations regarding the results of the gubernatorial race of 1882, the Republican press in Ellis County represented St. John's position on prohibition as detrimental to party unity. In fact, the press perceived the Democratic victory in 1882 as a Republican reaction against St. John's radical position on the single issue of prohibition.⁸

In the weeks before the election of 1878, the *Hays City Sentinel*, a weekly Republican paper, reported very little news regarding gubernatorial candidate, John P. St. John, a former state senator from Johnson County, Kansas and outspoken temperance advocate. Although the temperance movement was gaining

momentum in Kansas, the majority of voters, according to historian Robert Bader, believed prohibition was “a non-partisan social issue and a political question only in a general and vague sense.”⁹ St. John was known as a prohibitionist, but temperance was not among the campaign’s central issues. Upon the 1878 Republican victory, the *Sentinel* proudly reported that Ellis County could now boast of “having the largest Republican majority in proportion to population of any county in the State.”¹⁰ In reference to St. John’s election, the *Sentinel* viewed his sound victory as “surprising . . . when we consider the anti-temperance vote, supposed to be solid against him.”¹¹ This observation, an innocuous enough analysis in 1878, foreshadowed the divisive effect the temperance issue would soon exert on Republican party politics.



Hays, KS - Newspaper Office for the *Sentinel*
Photo courtesy Kansas State Historical Society

During his first term, St. John moved quickly to shepherd the prohibition amendment successfully through the legislature and onto the 1880 ballot. This amendment met vigorous opposition in the legislature by representatives from anti-prohibitionist districts. As Bader points out, “border counties with their concentration of Catholic, German and Democratic voters, constituted the bulwark of opposition.”¹² Ellis County’s single vote in the legislature was cast against the amendment.

The submission of the prohibition amendment to the voters in 1880 transformed the temperance issue into a contest waged in the broad political arena. By 1880, something approaching an anti-temperance tradition had already sprung up in opposition, especially among the large German population in Kansas.¹³ Neither the Democratic nor Republican platforms addressed prohibition in 1880. This "nonpartisan" treatment of the amendment was meant to distinguish prohibition from its champion, St. John, once again the Republican candidate for governor. In Ellis County, two competing Republican papers reported news of the campaign, each taking a slightly different position on St. John and prohibition.

Both the *Sentinel* and the *Ellis County Star* ran relatively few reports about the amendment in the six months prior to the November vote and the papers published the proposed amendment regularly beginning in August. However, each reprinted the "Platform of the National Prohibition Convention" in July. By late August, the papers took slightly divergent paths regarding prohibition; the *Star* projected a moderate approach to temperance, while the *Sentinel* flatly opposed it.¹⁴

The *Star* printed a lengthy column billed as "The Prohibition Amendment; A Compromise Suggested by a Good Templar," that argued for a revised amendment prohibiting only distilled alcohol. Without such a compromise, beer-drinking German voters would undoubtedly oppose the amendment, threatening its defeat. The message was obviously aimed at Ellis County's German population:

Having, as a State . . . sent agents to Germany, to coax and beg Germans to come and make their homes with us, is it hospitality . . . to sweep down on them with a law, forbidding the drinking of beer and destroying the million of dollars they have in good faith, under our laws invested in breweries, beer houses, gardens etc. No race on the globe possess so many virtues and so few vices as the German. No people avoid excess on the one hand and fanaticism on the other like they . . . Let us ask the Prohibition party to amend the amendment, by striking out "beer, wine, and cider" thus harmonizing it with reason, common sense, right and justice. . . .¹⁵

The *Star* evidently supported this argument, but no direct endorsement or rejection of the amendment appeared in its paper during the weeks preceding the vote.

The *Sentinel*, on the other hand, took a decisive stand against the Prohibition amendment. A front page column in the August 27 edition featured the opinion of Dr. Charles Robinson, "a staunch temperance man" who opposed the amendment "on the ground that it will be impossible to enforce." Moreover, he reasoned that

"the adoption of the amendment will work an instant repeal of all temperance laws upon the statute-books; leaving the sale absolutely free till a legislature can be elected two-thirds in favor of prohibition."¹⁶ In the same issue, the *Sentinel* echoed this argument by predicting the terms of the amendment would "open wide the door to evasion, and displace our present good laws with an unknown legislation."¹⁷

Nothing further regarding the amendment appeared in either paper until after the election and the amendment's passage. In the voting, Ellis County emerged as one of the twenty-seven counties out of a total of eighty coming out against the amendment.¹⁸ The *Star* simply acknowledged the result in its reportage of election returns. But the *Sentinel* responded with a column lamenting the troublesome legal ramifications of the newly adopted amendment and concluded with a final indictment that "the Legislature cannot provide by law for the sale of wine for sacramental purposes."¹⁹ Clearly, in the opinion of the *Sentinel*, prohibitionists had gone too far. Both of these Ellis County Republican newspapers found themselves in the minority in their positions on the amendment; of two hundred Kansas newspapers, only fifty opposed the measure and sixty remained neutral.²⁰

Regarding the 1880 gubernatorial race, the *Star* carried fewer pieces on St. John than did the *Sentinel* although its editorial comments were favorable to the incumbent. In June, the *Star* indicated its support of St. John and his position on temperance: "rumor has it, that some of Gov. St. John's warmest political friends are urging him to get down off the prohibition platform. We say nix." Again, in an endorsement of St. John's prohibition record, the *Star* declared that "there are few qualifications more requisite or more appreciated by the mass of the people in a candidate, than sobriety." The article concluded, however, with a more pointed endorsement of sobriety than of St. John:

The history and success of St. John's Gubernatorial [*sic*] candidacy prior to nomination, leaves but little doubt that the average Kansan regards sobriety as an essential qualification in a candidate and one, that hereafter, will neither be ignored in Convention or at the polls.²¹

The *Sentinel* did not endorse St. John's candidacy for governor in 1880, but once St. John secured the Republican nomination, the paper upheld the party's decision. Early in the campaign, the *Sentinel* reprinted a comment from the *Atchison Globe*: "If Grant ever gets to be Emperor of America, who will get the position of court fool? We nominate . . . Gov. St. John." The editor of the *Sentinel* added, "such flippancy is unbecoming in a newspaper." Perhaps the editor meant

to impress his readers with an unflattering reference to St. John, disclaimer or not.²²

Prior to the Republican convention, the *Sentinel* campaigned against St. John's renomination. "We have stated that Gov. St. John is unpopular in his own party and always has been." This sentiment opened a lengthy column devoted to a critical analysis of St. John's gubernatorial career. The column asserted that St. John had "never been ranked among the strong men of the state," arguing he had not been a "leader of aggressive Republicanism" but had instead "come to the surface as a specialist,—the advocate of some question open to the widest and most logical difference of opinion." This was, of course, a reference to the highly controversial prohibition amendment with which St. John was universally associated. The column concluded with a directive that: "the party must either reject St. John or become the especial champion of the amendment. . . . What we want is a Republican candidate not a constitutional amendment candidate."²³

In its August 6, 1880 issue, the *Sentinel* endorsed St. John's rival for the nomination, T.C. Henry, stating that Henry "would grace the position and make an officer of whom the State would never have occasion to be ashamed." This may have been meant as an indirect criticism of St. John. Henry was described as "a temperance man," but obviously not one given to fanaticism on the subject. In the end, the nomination went to St. John and the *Sentinel*, in the spirit of reconciliation, promised to "give him an honest support." The paper defended its earlier position with this explanation: "the *Sentinel* feels somewhat influenced to admit that a difference of opinion existed between it and the biggest part of the party. . . . There was not that unanimity of feeling toward our position as we had been led to believe. . . ."²⁴ This was evidently the case in Ellis County where the *Sentinel's* election returns showed a solid victory for St. John over the Democratic candidate, Edmund G. Ross, with 567 votes to 396; the Greenback candidate received an insignificant 28 votes.²⁵

With the Republican victory secured, the *Star* noted that "the din of the political battle" had subsided and that the "average American citizen" had resumed "the usual routine of business." Taking advantage of the general good will of the moment, it added, the *Star* . . . will continue to boom along as usual. Now is the time to subscribe and hand in your advertising."²⁶ Although Ellis County voters rejected the Prohibition amendment, it carried in the state wide referendum. Both *Star* and *Sentinel* withheld comment on the temperance victory.

The prohibition question was not settled, however, by the passage of the amendment in 1880. Prohibition remained controversial even after the amendment's adoption as evidenced by the nature of the gubernatorial campaign of 1882. By the spring of that year, the "new" Ellis County Republican paper, the

Star-Sentinel, (product of a January 1882 merger) began criticizing those who supported a third term for Governor St. John. In June, the paper listed the contenders for the Republican gubernatorial seat, indicated its support for temperance, but not for St. John: “[any] of the gentlemen named will carry the solid vote of the party and are just as true to the cause of temperance as our present Governor—possibly, not quite as a fanatical.”²⁷

The following week, the paper virtually ridiculed St. John in two front page offerings:

Governor St. John is reported as saying in a speech in Wyandotte: “No greater truth, perhaps, was ever uttered than that by Abraham Lincoln when he said this government cannot permanently endure half slave and half free. Is it not equally true to say that this government cannot permanently endure half drunk and half sober? It must eventually become all one or the other.” As the country has been about half drunk for the last fifty thousand years, and is not dead yet, the above proposition admits of some doubt.

That analysis was coupled with a one-liner: “The Lord is against St. John—the present immense crop of old rye shows that.”²⁸ Evidently, the *Star-Sentinel* was not, as yet, taking rumors of a third term for St. John seriously.

In the weeks that followed, it became apparent that St. John would probably be renominated. The *Star-Sentinel* predicted that “a large number of Republicans” would not vote for St. John “if he secures the nomination.” The paper depicted the governor as self-serving: “No true Republican will hold his political advancement paramount to the best interests of the party, and that is just what St. John is doing by continuing to press his claims for a third term.” An assortment of criticisms were directed at St. John. He was presented as soft on bootleggers, as someone who lacked leadership qualities, a man no more able than any other candidate to uphold prohibition laws:

St. John and him sanctified!—any Republican who does not believe our constitution and laws would become null and void and the principle of prohibition totally perish if St. John should not be continued as Governor, is either a blear eyed whiskeyite or will inevitably become one.²⁹

Despite the opposition of wet Republicans like those in Ellis County, St. John secured renomination. Moreover, the Republican convention adopted prohibition and a commitment to “such . . . legislation as shall secure the rigid enforcement of

the constitutional provisions upon this subject in all parts of the state" as a major plank in the platform. Once again, Ellis County's Republican press resigned itself to the party's candidate and supported St. John.³⁰

As the election neared, the *Star-Sentinel* advised Republicans to "Vote the ticket." In a half-hearted endorsement, the paper urged its readers to stand by the Grand Old Party for its principles, if not its candidate. "Let us take our medicine like the Democrats take theirs—*straight*." But Republicans in Ellis County did not vote the "straight" ticket on election day. St. John was defeated by George W. Glick, the Democratic candidate, by a margin of two to one. Significantly, every other Republican candidate for a state office was elected.³¹

Kansas' first Democratic governor won by default. Clearly, voters came out against St. John rather than for Glick. The outcome apparently came as no surprise to the *Star-Sentinel*. In fact, the only explanation for the number of votes that went to St. John according to its post-election analysis, lay in the fact that a good many men lied about how they intended to vote. "To have entered judgement from 'talk' heard upon the streets, this city was going almost 'solid' against St. John." With St. John's defeat, the paper no longer felt obliged to defend him for the sake of party solidarity. "The lick that St. John got Tuesday last, ought to have been given him at the State convention—then we would have had a Republican Governor for the next two years."³²

In the final analysis, the *Star-Sentinel* attributed the election results to the Republican party's misplaced allegiance to one man representing a single issue. Radical elements, holding the reigns of leadership, drove the party to the edge of a political precipice. Now was the time for Republicans to find their way back to the well-worn and more productive path of political consensus and party unity. Reflecting on recent events, the *Star-Sentinel* opined:

The adoption by any political party of the peculiar ideas, tenets and belief of a sect or society, has ever in the history of this republic impaired their influence and curtailed their powers. This fact has been recognized to a great extent by Republicans of the State in the late election, and the reduction of the usual large majority of the Republican party may justly and safely be laid at the door of the Temperance agitators, in this State.³³

As the first state in the Union to enact constitutional prohibition, Kansas pioneered uncharted political territory. In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, temperance in Kansas evolved from a social issue to a political question: What was the proper role of government regarding matters of private and public morality? When considering temperance, Kansans differed on the best answer to

that question. Various combinations of locale, ethnic background, religion, political ideology and local institutions influenced individual communities in their responses to the prohibition question. The people of Ellis County, though predominantly Republican, shared a similar identity with the statewide anti-prohibitionist groups. Ellis' location in the western half of the state and its significant German-American and Catholic population meant that its voters would reject the prohibition amendment and its champion, John Pierce St. John. St. John's identification as a Republican worked to his benefit; his linkage to prohibition, however, overrode the usual partisan considerations.

Historians have correctly identified several reasons for the outcome of the Kansas 1882 gubernatorial election. A close read of the local press reveals that, in Ellis County, a single factor paved the way for the stunning Democratic victory. St. John's defeat was a mandate against the radical faction of the prohibition movement.

NOTES

1. Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas A Land of Contrasts*, 3rd ed. (Arlington Heights, IL: Forum Press, Inc., 1989), 183.
2. Robert Smith Bader, *Prohibition in Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 21, 26.
3. William Frank Zornow, *Kansas, a History of the Jayhawk State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 193.
4. Richmond, 186-187.
5. Kenneth S. Davis, *Kansas, A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 146.
6. Homer E. Socolofsky, *Kansas Governors* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 107.
7. Bader, 107.
8. Three newspapers were consulted: *The Hays City Sentinel*, issues of May 1878 through November 1878 and May 1880 through November 1880; *The Ellis County Star* issues of May 1880 through November 1880; *The Star-Sentinel* issues of April 1882 through November 1882.
9. Bader, 39.
10. *Hays City Sentinel* (hereafter cited as *Sentinel*), November 9, 1878.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Bader, 44.
13. *Ibid.*, 52.
14. "The Platform of the National Prohibition Convention," *Ellis County Star* (hereafter: *Star*), July 1, 1880; *Sentinel*, July 2, 1880.
15. "The Prohibition Amendment, A Compromise Suggested by a Good Templar," *Star*, August 26, 1880. The Good Templars, a national temperance group, had organized in Kansas in 1861, Richmond, 184.
16. "Constitutional Amendment," *Sentinel*, August 27, 1880. Although Dr. Charles Robinson is not identified in the column as the former Governor of Kansas (1861-1863) it is possible that the author of the article was the former governor (a graduate of Berkshire Medical School in 1843).