

Offbeat Oregon: The 'Hold-up Session' of 1896-97

BY FINN J.D. JOHN
FOR THE SENTINEL

At the time of this writing, the Oregon Legislature was stuck, unable to do anything; a group of lawmakers has gone off to Idaho for the express purpose of denying the legislature's leaders a quorum. This is not the first time this tactic has been used in Oregon — nor is it the most dramatic. Things will have to get even more lively before the current situation will be able to hold a candle to the legendary Hold-Up Session of 1896-97.

The Hold-Up Session involved several dozen state House members, a large assortment of alcoholic beverages, and — if the stories of those unfortunate enough to not be invited can be believed — an even larger assortment of dancing girls and prostitutes. It had its roots in political corruption, of course; this was, after all, the 1890s.

In this particular election, Jonathan Bourne Jr., the man who was the closest Portland ever got to a Boss Tweed, had made his big play to carry his political career to the next level. With the help of some of his more morally flexible associates in Portland, he got himself elected to the state House of Representatives.

The plan now was that his friend and political ally John H. Mitchell would help him pull the necessary strings to get elected Speaker of the House, and from that position Bourne would help get Mitchell re-appointed to his seat in the U.S. Senate.

This was, of course, back before Senators were directly elected by the people. In 1896, they were still appointed by state Legislatures. That meant that a wealthy person or company could almost literally

purchase a Senator's seat for him by simply bribing a couple dozen people; and that's exactly what Mitchell's friends and former employers at the Southern Pacific Railroad had done in 1896.

They had given Bourne \$225,000 in cash with which to do the job for them.

Accordingly, he'd trotted around from colleague to colleague, handing over stacks of cash and receiving in return signed pledges to support Mitchell.

Now, the main reason Bourne was injecting himself so deeply into state politics was to help the free-silver movement. This debate — whether to stick with the gold standard for U.S. currency, or add silver to it in order to expand the money supply — was one of the hottest political topics of the day and had split the Oregon Republican Party in half. The conservative party establishment was committed to gold; the insurgent populist wing of the party was just as dogmatic about adding in silver.

Bourne had extensive investments in silver mines in eastern Oregon and Idaho, so he had both economic and political reasons to be a silver man. He was so committed to the cause that he broke party ranks and supported William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic Party's Presidential candidate in 1896.

Bourne's play for power was going right on schedule, until he started hearing whispers that there was a little Benedict Arnold action going on inside his leadership team.

Specifically, the rumor was that Mitchell, as soon as he was safely re-appointed with the help of Bourne and his cronies, planned to renounce the movement and throw his lot in with the "gold crowd."

Bourne was not the kind of fellow to sit on his hands and hope for the best when that kind of thing was in the air. He went straight to Mitchell and asked him about it. This is how he described the ensuing conversation to friend and colleague Walter Pierce:

"I said to him, 'Senator, the report here in Portland is ... that when you are re-elected Senator in this upcoming legislature, you expect to go back to Washington, join Mark Hanna and the gold crowd, going completely back on your silver friends. I don't believe a word of it. You won't go back on me?' He hesitated. I said, 'Out with it. Tell me the fact.'"

One can picture Mitchell thinking this through. Bourne would learn the truth eventually anyway, he must have thought; and the fix was in — Bourne had secured enough signed pledges to guarantee Mitchell's reappointment. There would be nothing Bourne could do but make the best of it. Plus, he was still going to be Speaker of the House; maybe that would mollify him a bit.

So, "the senator said, 'That is what I am going to do, Jonathan.'"

Elder-statesman Mitchell must have been a little taken aback by Bourne's response to this.

"I looked him straight in the face and I said, 'You are not going to be elected by this Legislative body that meets next January,'" Bourne recalled. "The senator replied, 'Jonathan, you can't (stop me). You took the pledges from the men who were candidates when you gave them the money ... and you took those pledges to the Southern Pacific Railroad which put up the \$225,000 that you distributed among candidates for the Legislature. Those

pledges have been signed. They are locked up in the Southern Pacific Railroad safe. ... You can't help it. I will be elected.'"

"I don't know how it is going to be prevented, but you are not going to be elected," I said."

Well, that was easy to say. But it wasn't at all clear how Bourne would be able to follow through on this threat. Odd as it sounds to the modern ear, the politicians whom he'd bribed on Mitchell's behalf considered the pledges they'd signed in exchange for the cash to be their word of honor as gentlemen. They wouldn't go back on them even after learning they'd been double-crossed.

Well, OK then; what if the subject never came up? When the legislature convened, could it be prevented from bringing Mitchell's appointment to a vote?

As Bourne knew, if the state legislature never actually voted one way or the other on Mitchell's appointment, the nomination would fall to the governor. And the governor, William P. Lord, was one of Bourne's friends....

A few days later, a somewhat curious article appeared in the Oregonian — which, like everyone else in the state, thought the Bourne-Mitchell alliance was still rock-solid.

"MR. BOURNE'S FIGHT," the top headline shouted; followed by two sub-headlines: "Senator Mitchell Will Help Him to Be Speaker" and "Being Assured of Desired Support, He Renews His Campaign with Great Energy."

"SALEM — The engagement by Mr. Jonathan Bourne of 19 rooms in the Eldridge Block, Salem, as well as the lease of the handsome Keller House, on State

Street, has created uncommon interest in political circles in this city," the article begins. "It would appear that he is entering upon the fight with a degree of ostentation unusual in speakership contests, and it is not easy to see on the surface should have been engaged. The real reason probably is that the Eldridge Block will be used during the season as supplementary Mitchell headquarters."

One imagines Mitchell reading this article with mounting anxiety. What, he must have wondered, could that rascally Jonathan Bourne be scheming at?

Meanwhile, Bourne was putting a few other pieces in place. The president of the Senate, Joseph Simon, was a solid silver man and could be depended on. But he needed a good ally in the House. So, Bourne reached across the aisle and connected with an earnest Populist Party reformer named William U'Ren — who must have been very surprised to hear from him; although both favored silver, the two of them had not been allies prior to this.

U'Ren was happy to help defeat "Benedict Arnold" Mitchell, and the two of them made some plans for U'Ren to implement some parliamentary delaying tactics while Bourne deployed the main thrust of his audacious plan — a plan to literally get the 1897 Legislative session canceled.

Remember those mysterious 19 rooms in the Eldridge Block? They were about to become the scene of probably the most magnificent and longest-lasting house party in the history of the state of Oregon.

"I hired the best chef in the state of Oregon," Bourne recalled; "sent him to Salem to fix up apartments in the Eldridge Block; things to

eat and drink and entertainment. I said to the chef: 'I pay all expenses. I want to take care of all my friends in the lower House who signed pledges with me, the friends of Silver.'"

The whole undertaking cost Bourne \$80,000. It lasted for 40 days, in an ironic and presumably unintentional echo of the account of Jesus's time of temptation in the wilderness. And by the time it was over, the Eldridge Block had some colorful new nicknames: "Bourne's Harem" was one and "The Den of Prostitution and Evil" was another — apparently when Bourne mentioned "entertainment" he wasn't just talking about checkers and Scrabble.

When, a day or so later, the state House of Representatives tried to convene for the opening day of the session, all Bourne's "Friends of Silver" were several blocks away, gulping down Scotch and enjoying the company of dancing girls and other friendly ladies. As Bourne had planned, there were not enough legislators left to form a quorum.

Mitchell's supporters formed a "rump session" and tried to elect him; U'Ren got on the record pointing out that their vote had no legal weight. The Oregonian's editorial writers roared with baffled fury.

Inauguration Day approached, and still nothing was coming out of the state house — on Mitchell's appointment or on any other topic. Finally, the state senate announced it was giving up and canceling the session; and Governor Lord announced he was appointing Henry Corbett to Mitchell's Senate seat.

Bourne had won. Corbett was delighted; he'd been a Senator before — it was he who Mitchell had defeated way back in 1873 when he first got appointed as Senator — and had long cherished hopes of getting back. But when he arrived in D.C., Southern Pacific pulled some strings and the Senate refused to seat him. For the next two years, Oregon had just one U.S. Senator.

As for Mitchell, he had to sit the whole dance out. He was returned to the Senate, again with the Southern Pacific's help, in 1900. He was still in office when he died of a dental abscess in 1905.

As a side note, Bourne and U'Ren must have liked working together, because a few years later the two of them became the founding fathers of the Oregon Initiative and Referendum system. Bourne himself, in 1906, was the first Oregon Senator elected by popular vote.

(Sources: Oregon Cattleman/Governor/Congressman, a book by Walter Pierce, published in 1989 by OHS Press; Wicked Portland, a book by Finn J.D. John, published in 2012 by The History Press; Portland Oregonian archives, Jan.-Feb. 1897)

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