

# Early Years of California Progressivism

1900-1910

Los Angeles at the turn of the Century was a brew of reform movements that would eventually coalesce behind the banner of progressivism. Since the 1880s there existed a well-organized network of women's clubs that advocated kindergartens, pure milk laws, temperance, and the separate incarceration of female juvenile offenders. The women's clubs embodied the pious and moralist foundations of progressivism. These clubs encouraged female political participation, and many women who joined merely for social interaction found themselves involved in politics for the first time, an introduction that proved the first step towards women's suffrage.<sup>1</sup>

Women were not the only advocates of reform. Clubs of gentlemen reformers sprang up about the city, where conscientious well-bred men plotted the deliverance of the common man over multi-course meals followed by cigars and brandy. Foremost among these reformers was John Hayes, a leading physician who had made his fortune in real estate speculation. In 1899 John Hayes founded the Christian Socialist Club a movement which advocated the achievement of moderate (or Fabian) socialism in the distant future. However, he was more than ready to support progressive reforms at the present. Hayes' Fabian socialism did not unduly alarm the Los Angeles elite mostly because he was friends with almost all of them. Indeed, he served as the personal physician to both Harrison Gray Otis and Henry Chandler, the airconditioned owner and editor respectively of the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>2</sup>

Hayes was an enthusiastic activist for the Direct Legislation League advocating modifications to the city charter to include the initiative (citizen drafted legislation passed by popular vote), referendum (voters veto legislation) and recall (voters remove an official from office). After vigorous lobbying, the initiative, referendum and recall were incorporated into the Los Angeles City Charter in 1902.

In 1905, the Good Government League was formed in Los Angeles, consisting of Hayes and other prominent Los Angeles progressives, such as **Edwin T. Earl**, the owner of the Los Angeles *Examiner* along with his like minded editor Edward Dickson. The moderate "Goo Goos," as they were derisively called by their opponents on both the right and left, quickly filled the city council with men of their persuasion. In 1909 they elected a mayor, the elderly George Alexander, a former Iowan farm boy and Civil War veteran. The progressive Goo Goos did indeed provide good government for Los Angeles, instituting reforms that included a professional municipal civil service, and a revised city charter which instituted non-partisan elections, thus freeing the city from the stranglehold of machine politics. Meanwhile, the progressives in San Francisco were struggling to extract the city from the pro-Southern Pacific political machine of boss Abraham Ruef of the Union-Labor party. Leading the fight was Fremont Older, of the *San Francisco Bulletin*, and James D. Phelen, the former Democratic mayor. After conferring with District Attorney William Langdon about the possibility of prosecuting Ruef and Mayor Eugene Schmitz (who was a hero at the time for his competent handling of the San Francisco earthquake and subsequent firestorm), Older persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt to release two Federal agents to facilitate the investigation and subsequent prosecution: special prosecutor Francis Heney and William Burns, head of the Secret Service.

With Heney serving as special prosecutor, the graft trials got off to a sensational start. Mayor Schmitz was convicted of 27 counts, primarily for extorting French Restaurants, which in turn-of-the-century San Francisco were two story affairs with a restaurant on the first floor and second floor brothel to make digestion the elegant meal all the more pleasant.<sup>3</sup> Schmitz was forced to resign his post, but the verdict was overturned upon appeal. Most of the supervisors and numerous other minor officials admitted to corruption and receiving bribes under Heney's ruthless pressure. However, Heney had higher ambitions than incarcerating supervisors by the bushel, believing that the source of municipal corruption lay not in the petty office-holders who took bribes, but in the powerful corporate

heads who tendered them with impunity. He thus turned his attention to Patrick Calhoun, President of the United Railroads Corporation (and grandson of John C. Calhoun), who had obtained a street railway contract by dubious means, namely by paying \$200,000 in "attorney's fees" to Abe Ruef. The Calhoun trial floundered, however, and it ended up alienating many of the city's businessmen who had no objection to trials against low-life politicians but did not wish to see attacks against one of their own. Calhoun went free after weathering three hung juries.

Heney meanwhile was shot in the head by a prospective juror for the trial of Abe Ruef. Ruef was indeed a prosecutorial trophy, as the most powerful man in San Francisco, who routinely accepted generous bribes disguised as attorney's fees from corporate heads and in turn bribed city officials to complete the business. While Heney was recuperating the trials were carried on by his able assistant, Hiram Johnson. Ruef would become the only person sent to prison during the trials. He was convicted of bribery in 1909 and spent five years in San Quentin. Having recovered from his near fatal wound, Heney ran for district attorney only to be defeated. The new District Attorney, former Stanford football player Charles M. Fickert brought the trials to a close.<sup>4</sup>

Now progressives increasingly turned their attention and ambitions to the state level. California was experiencing one of its worst periods of corrupt and dubious politics. In 1906, the Republican convention met in Santa Cruz to select a new gubernatorial candidate. The incumbent, Republican George Pardee, who the Southern Pacific had supported in 1902 against the anti-machine Democrat Thomas Flint, had offended the railroad with some modest attempts at reform. Therefore, the head of the Southern Pacific's Political Bureau, William Herrin paid Abe Ruef \$14,000 to ensure the nomination of James Gillet, a blatantly pro-railroad candidate. Ruef pulled the necessary strings to obtain the nomination, and that same night Gillet, Ruef, Herrin and their followers posed for a celebratory photograph, with Gillet standing behind the seated Ruef, center, the candidate's appreciative hand on the Boss's shoulder. Progressives later seized upon this image of opulence and corruption, distributing it *en masse* under the title "The Shame of California."

The 1907 legislature, filled with men, according to the House chaplain, who "draw pay, draw corks and draw poker," only demonstrated how shameful the situation really was.<sup>5</sup>

Southern Pacific lobbyists dominated both houses, wheeling and dealing on the floor of the legislature while in session. The legislature displayed slavish obedience to the Southern Pacific, along with unusual levels of corruption from other interests. "Scarcely a vote was cast in either house that did not show some aspect of Southern Pacific Ownership, petty vengeance or legislative blackmail," one Senator wrote dejectedly<sup>6</sup>. Five railroad regulation bills were handily defeated. The legislatures meanwhile indulged shamelessly in spoils, rewarding loyal followers with state salaries, hiring 36 sergeant at arms and ten doorkeepers to watch over four doors.<sup>7</sup> Governor Gillet, who owed his position to the railroad, proclaimed however that the legislature of 1907 was "one of the best that ever met in the state capital," while the progressive papers howled and blustered and progressive men swore action.<sup>8</sup>

At the opening of this dismal legislative session, Edward Dickson of the *Los Angeles Examiner* sat next to Chester Rowell, editor-in-chief of the *Fresno Republican*. Rowell, son of an Illinois congressman, had been educated in Germany and had initially aspired to be a philosopher, only to discover that a professorship did not offer sufficient compensation to cover the costs of a growing family. His uncle in Fresno, owner of the *Fresno Republican*, offered to make him editor of the paper, and thus Rowell came to California. He railed against the corruption and vice of Fresno, a town where agricultural workers flocked on weekends to spend their pay on women and alcohol. But his vision expanded beyond the local horizons of Fresno and Rowell would go on to become the intellectual leader of the California Progressive movement.

After conferring together in Sacramento, Rowell and Dickson arranged a dinner meeting in Oakland of 17 other like minded men, including Francis Heney. Following the sumptuous meal, they agreed to form a statewide organization to promote their cause, calling themselves the League of Lincoln-Roosevelt Republican Clubs. In summoning the spirit of Lincoln they blazoned their traditional Republican credentials, traditionally the party of white

collared businessmen, lawyers and publishers, a class which the founding members of the League invariably belonged <sup>9</sup>. However, in the *cognomen* Roosevelt they paid tribute to the reformist energies of the President, who represented a new type of Republican: one dedicated to giving the American people a "quare deal." Roosevelt had already initiated many progressive policies on the national level, including the creation of new regulatory agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration, anti-trust actions, and national conservationism. Roosevelt had appointed Lincoln-Roosevelter Frank Lane to the Interstate Commerce Commission, who immediately used his power to frustrate the Southern Pacific wherever possible. The Lincoln-Roosevelters hoped to follow in the rough-rider's bootstraps at the state level.

In response to the bad behavior of the legislature during the 1907 session, California voters elected numerous progressive-leaning legislators in 1909. Their most important contribution would be the passage of Direct Primary, which meant that gubernatorial and legislative nominees would be selected not by party bosses in smoke-filled rooms, but rather by a vote of all the people registered with the party.

This gave the Lincoln Roosevelt League the ability to take control of the Republican convention if they could just get enough people nominated by Republican voters (delegates now consisted of those nominated by voters for state office.) The Lincoln-Roosevelt League now went about selecting its first gubernatorial candidate, to vie for the Republican nomination. Ironically, the organization selected its man much the same fashion as party machines. No more than 28 people had any say about the selection, and they quickly settled on Hiram Johnson, the prosperous San Francisco lawyer who had taken over the San Francisco graft trials. <sup>10</sup> Johnson, however was reluctant to run. He did not want to jeopardize his successful law firm. Going to the Governor's Mansion would mean having to confront publicly his estranged father, Grove C. Johnson, a State Senator and one of the Southern Pacific's staunchest allies. Finally, Johnson's wife melodramatically insisted she preferred death to having to live in Sacramento<sup>11</sup>. However, Johnson was coaxed into running, and his wife was mollified by hints that the governorship was a sure path to a term in the Senate; if she could endure the social backwater of Sacramento she might be rewarded by the prestige, glamor, and excitement of Washington D.C. <sup>12</sup>

Having made up his mind, Johnson began to vigorously campaign for the primary. He was an eloquent and forceful orator, his rhetoric honed by his many years arguing before juries.<sup>13</sup> He kept his campaign narrowed to one issue: his virulent hater of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Republican voters responded, nominating Johnson as the Republican candidate for governor, and packing the Republican convention with progressive delegates. The progressive sentiments displayed by voters were fanned by newspapers across the state, as progressives immediatly grasped the importance of media in promoting their message of reform. In San Francisco, Fremont Older was the dedicated editor of the *San Francisco Bulletin*. The *Los Angeles Examiner* was the city's major progressive voice, that offset the conservative rant of Otis' *Los Angeles Times*. C.K. McClatchy and the *Sacramento Bee* brought a progressive voice to the state's capital, while Chester Rowell's *Fresno Republican* circulated about the San Joaquin Valley. Ambitious progressives who had no interest in the inky world of newspapers nonetheless became amateur journalists in order to build a political reputation through their muck-racking. <sup>14</sup>

The Republican convention of 1910 announced a sweeping platform of progressive reforms. Johnson was most certainly not the brain behind this platform, for he poorly understood the progressive ideology of the Lincoln-Roosevelters who had brought him to power, and somewhat resented their educated polish and intellectualism (Johnson had been forced to drop out of the University of California in order to marry his pregnant girlfriend). One day, on the campaign trail, after Edward Dickson suggested that passage of a direct legislation amendment would forever free California from special interests, Johnson was forced to admit that he didn't know what direct legislation was, and begged the young reporter explain. <sup>15</sup> Through the entire campaign and into his subsequent governorships Johnson relied on a brain trust whose chief members were Rowell, Dickson and Los Angeles lawyers Myer Lissner and Marshall Stimson.

The Democratic Party nominated Theodore Bell, who had been poised to win the governorship in 1906 on an anti-railroad platform had not William Randolph Hearst challenged him as an independent candidate, fearing that Bell's success would lessen his iron grip on the state Democratic Party. <sup>16</sup> The Republican and Democratic candidates thus ran on virtually identical platforms, with both of them limiting their stump speeches to vitriolic attacks on the Southern Pacific and those who supported it. However, Johnson proved a far more vigorous campaigner than Bell. He toured the state in the automobile, one of the first candidates to do so, thus taking his messages to small towns that lacked rail lines, attracting an audience by clanging a cow bell.

The Southern Pacific, lacking a candidate, now decided to throw its support in with Bell, whom it preferred in Sacramento rather than Johnson and his rabid, well-organized progressive cohorts. However, at this point disillusionment against the Southern Pacific was so great that an endorsement was akin to political homicide. <sup>17</sup> Johnson now vigorously attacked Bell as a mere henchman for the Railroad's interests. Bell tried, unsuccessfully, to do the same, arguing that Johnson was merely a chip off the block of his pro-railroad father. Johnson's antipathy for his father (which was reciprocated) was well known, however, and the elder Johnson resigned from the legislature after the election. Bell was also hampered by the surprising success of the Socialist candidate, who garnered some 47,000 votes, mostly from working class and immigrant voters who otherwise would have been inclined to cast a Democratic vote. On election day Johnson won by a handy margin of 22,000 votes. A progressive-dominated legislature was likewise elected, paving the way for a period unprecedented reform.