

DESHLER AND THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY

By PAUL HALLERBERG

Charles D. Deshler, druggist, editor, author, and one of the most active political leaders of the Know Nothing Party, left at his death a large body of manuscripts which were the collections of a lifetime of contacts with some of the most prominent Americans of the last half of the nineteenth century. His son, Charles Deshler of the Class of 1885, presented this group of papers to the Library, where after a few years it proved to be a valuable source of information on the life of the elder Deshler. Mr. Hallerberg, whose study of "Charles D. Deshler: Versatile Jerseyman" was based on these papers, is a graduate of Illinois College, 1937, and a master of Rutgers, 1939.

IN THE decade which immediately preceded the Civil War, national politics in the United States were in a state of turmoil and flux. It was the decade marked by the decline and disintegration of the Whig Party, and by the rise of two new political organizations, the Republican Party, and the American Party—more commonly known as the Know Nothing Party. The latter, built on a rather intolerant platform of extreme patriotism, nativism, and anti-Catholicism, and made up largely of old Whigs and dissatisfied Northern Democrats, arose as a national party in 1854. Clothing itself with an atmosphere of deep mystery, it held its meetings in secret and exerted much of its force in its early stages through hidden channels. When its members were asked the nature of their organization, they would answer, "I know nothing."

Charles D. Deshler of New Brunswick, who had been a druggist, author, and pill manufacturer, became one of the important cogs in the machinery of the American Party when it assumed a national aspect, acting as its Corresponding Secretary from 1854 to 1856. Among the many items in the C. D. Deshler Papers in the Rutgers University Library are several important manuscript records, written by Mr. Deshler while he was acting as the secretary of this political organization, which throw new light on its obscure origin and brief history. Probably the most interesting of these is a carbon copy letter-book which covers the period from January 12 to March 10,

1855.¹ One of the letters in this collection, written by Mr. Deshler to a political friend in Vermont, gives an interesting version of the origin of the American Party.

New York Jan'y 20th/55.

R. M. Guilford Esq.
Burlington, Vt.

Dear Sir & Bro:—

Your favor of the 17th came to hand after I had dispatched my reply to yours of the 15th, but I will now proceed to answer your queries as contained in the note before me, to the best of my abilities.

It is impossible to say with whom the Order originated, since like all grand points, it is enveloped with a haze that is almost impenetrable. As well as I can judge, however, its origin was after this wise:—A few men, of rather humble position, so far as social or intellectual standing was concerned, who resided in this city [New York] were indignant at the uniform selection by all parties, of the foreign population for offices of various kinds. They were also indignant at the growing insolence and clamorousness of these "better citizens," and at the system of corruption which the desire to conciliate them, introduced to New York *City* politics. Hence they formed an alliance, declaring hostility to the Catholic and the foreigner, in this City, and I fancy without any intention even the most remote of forming a National Organization. Meantime, owing perhaps to a concerted organization of the foreign and Catholic population—the want of such an association was felt in adjoining States, where attacks were made upon the observance of the Sabbath, and upon the Common School system, together with other favorite American ideas. This suggested the idea of a National Organization; and with the suggestion, was introduced disorder among the old movers. Each wanted to rule, and none were equal to the self-denial of obedience. Therefore they agreed to differ, and they separated [*sic*]. The one party calling themselves "Wigwams" and "lodges" were to operate North and East. The other, calling itself "Councils" was to go South and West.

Thus things went along, with frequent collisions and intrusions upon the jurisdiction of one another—till the *mass* of members in both became acquainted with the fact, and also that our aims were identical. They also soon saw, that the original movers, though good & patriotic men, were of too low a grade intellectually to guide the great movement which the party represented. A Convention was called, to be composed of one delegate from every Wigwam, Lodge, or Council in the two organizations.

¹The manner in which these carbon copies were made was rather unusual. The writer would place the carbon paper (which was coated on both sides) under one of the thin transparent pages of the notebook; beneath the carbon paper was then placed his stationery; and finally under this was placed a hard surfaced piece of cardboard. With a pointed stylus the writer would then write his letter on the thin page of the notebook. The sheet beneath the carbon paper (the one we would ordinarily call the carbon copy) was the one sent as the original letter.

They met in May/54, agreed upon a plan of consolidation, and called a Grand Council of the United States, for the 14th June 1854.

This Council met accordingly, and by a remarkable coincidence, consisted of delegates from thirteen States. Its action resulted in the Constitution, Ritual & organization we now have.

It may be well to say that when the Councils and Lodges split, taking certain jurisdiction for their sphere of action, the former were principally under the guidance of C. B. Allen, — Elliot, and Dr. J. Wilkinson Sleight; all of whom have since committed actions for which they have been expelled, or are in bad standing. They were feeble, vain men, who could not brook the inferior position to which they sunk by sheer force of *gravity*. The Lodges were under the head of Stephen B. Munn of New York, who is still an active and trusted member.

I cannot say how many were present at the original meeting which formed the order for the City purposes, but think 12 or 15. The subsequent Meetings, however, were largely attended and by able men—the attendance being between one and two hundred.

Should I learn anything more definite on these points, I will advise you.

Very faithfully

Ch. D. Deshler.

Although he does not say so, it is probable that Mr. Deshler attended the first consolidation meeting of the Wigwams, Lodges, and Councils held in May of 1854, for he later recorded that he had “slightly assisted in giving shape to its [the American Party’s] principles and direction to its energies in its earlier and experimental stage.”² Certainly he was a delegate to the National Council of the American Party which met the following month, for it was at this meeting that he was made Corresponding Secretary. While he preserved no records of what actually occurred at this meeting, he did keep a manuscript list of the membership of this Council of June 17, 1854.³ In the letter previously quoted, he noted that thirteen states had sent delegates to this convention, but his roster contains the names of fourteen states together with the District of Columbia.⁴ The states that were listed were: Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, South Caro-

² C. D. Deshler to Gen. W. S. Pilcher, et al, November 20, 1855, quoted in the *Fredonian* (New Brunswick), December 19, 1855.

³ The manuscript is entitled: “Delegates to the National [Council of the American Party], June 17, 1854.” None of the accounts of the beginning of the Know Nothing movement which the writer has examined makes any mention of this Council meeting of June, 1854.

⁴ Several of the states, Kentucky, Maine and South Carolina, are listed with only one delegate, and it may be that one of these was not a delegate in the true sense of the word.

lina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan.

The letters of Mr. Deshler reveal the amazing growth of the American Party. He wrote on January 26, 1855, that "Our Order is in a most flourishing condition—excepting of course a few unimportant particulars growing out of our newness. There are now over 10,000 councils within the U. S., and a membership of over one million. We are in every State, and completely organized under State Councils in nearly every State and Council."⁶ In another letter he noted that the state of Ohio had reported 830 Councils within its borders.⁶ Late in 1855 he reported that in "respect of the condition of the party, it may interest you to learn that my tidings from all parts of the country are most gratifying. Everywhere it is gaining accessions, not only in number but of strength, and it now counts among its supporters and friends names that are historical, while thousands of the wisest and purest are looking on in profound and earnest expectation, hoping to find with us a refuge from the senility, the corruption, and the chaos of all other parties."⁷ As Mr. Deshler's position in the party gave him a very good opportunity to know what was going on in the various state organizations, his estimate of the growth and size of the party is particularly important.

The question of slavery was growing to a fighting heat during the years in which the Know Nothing Party arose, and it also exerted its dividing influence on this political organization. Mr. Deshler wanted the American Party to leave this controversial question alone, and so stated in a letter to Gen. John M. McCalla of Washington:

Cannot you persuade the editor of the "Organ" to preserve utter silence on the Slavery question? It is so pre-eminently and morbidly sensitive on the subject, and it is a question so intrinsically difficult that wisdom and true conservatism dictates perfect silence upon it. . . . Our Order is sound on that question, and will purge itself of the agitators. Trust us—and do not so constantly protrude before our gaze, what we wish to lose sight of.⁸

⁵ C. D. Deshler to Rev. James A. Henry, January 26, 1855.

⁶ C. D. Deshler to H. Crane, January 15, 1855.

⁷ C. D. Deshler to Gen. W. S. Pilcher, et al, November 20, 1855, quoted in the *Fredonian*, December 19, 1855.

⁸ C. D. Deshler to J. M. McCalla, January 20, 1855. The "Organ" he refers to was the *Daily American Organ*, published in Washington, D. C. as the official paper of the American Party.



CHARLEY DESHLER

—AS—

President of the Know-Nothing Council

"Let none but *American-born*
Citizens Vote! Put none but *Amer-*
icans on guard! Let no *Foreigner*
HOLD OFFICE!"

President of Democratic Meeting

"Oh! how happy you and I are
here! I'ze so happy ez I'ze got a
Fiddle in my belly. We all have
Fiddles in our bellies!"

1862

But the slavery question was not so easily dismissed, for when the National Council again met in Philadelphia on June 5th, 1855, it could not be put aside. The committee on Resolutions, of which Mr. Deshler was a member, examined the question and, unable to agree, finally submitted two reports. The majority opinion, representing the southern element, deemed it a matter of common justice to abide conclusively and finally by the existing laws on the subject of slavery in the states or territories. The minority report stated that the Missouri Compromise should be restored, and if Congress failed in this, it should refuse to admit any State tolerating slavery which should be formed out of the territory from which slavery was excluded by the Compromise. Mr. Deshler subscribed to neither of these reports, but made a separate statement that "I agree to the above [minority report] so far as it relates to the Missouri Compromise if the proposed action may be done legally and constitutionally." When the reports came up for a vote, Mr. Deshler voted against both, explaining that, "Believing the question of slavery to be an issue extraneous to the principles of the order, and without expressing any opinion upon the merits of that subject, I vote No."⁹ When Kenneth Rayner, a prominent leader from North Carolina, offered a compromise resolution to the effect that the slavery question did not come within the purview of the American party and should be left to local law, the *New York Herald* noted that Mr. Deshler gave his assent to this resolution because of its "milk and water tendencies." Unfortunately the question of slavery was not satisfactorily settled and it ended with twelve of the Northern states withdrawing from the convention.¹⁰ From then on the party was on the downgrade, and it failed to make a very impressive showing in the national election of 1856.

Because of his own oratorical outbursts Mr. Deshler was subjected to the attacks of his political opponents. A cartoon of the time (see facing page) pictures him as a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. On the one hand it labels him as the President of the Know Nothing Council in New Brunswick who is demand-

⁹ See the *New York Weekly Tribune*, June 16, 1855; the *New York Express*, July 13, 1855; and the *New York Herald*, June 14 and 15, 1855, for accounts of this convention.

¹⁰ *New York Herald*, June 14, 1855.

ing that none but the American-born be allowed to vote, while on the other hand he is labeled as the President of the Democratic meeting who seems to be catering to the foreigner with a slightly foreign accent. Just exactly what the "fiddle" represents is not known, but one word-of-mouth account has it that on one occasion, Mr. Deshler actually did become so excited in his oratory that, as he walked up and down the platform, his shirt came unbuttoned and he began to rub his stomach crying, "I'm so happy I feel like I've got a Fiddle in my belly." Perhaps Mr. Deshler's power and influence in New Jersey political life are shown by just such attacks as that pictured in this cartoon. When a person becomes so obnoxious to his political adversaries that he merits their abusive attack, he must be exerting some influence, whether good or evil. And he did receive his share of vituperative attack. On the other hand, he also received somewhat more favorable notice of his activities. The New York *Herald* remarked rather humorously, that "Mr. Deshler is extensively engaged in the pill business in New York, and since he has become a Know Nothing he bids fair to eclipse Moffat, and even Brandreth [famous for their pills]; for the demand for his pills has very much increased among the sick men of the old parties who come to him for relief."¹¹

After the American party had suffered defeat in the national election of 1856, Mr. Deshler came to the conclusion that the American Party in New Jersey was powerless alone, and he proposed in 1858, that the American and Republican parties should join in their opposition to the Democrats.¹² His opposition to the Democratic machine did not last, however, for in his later years he became one of its loyal henchmen, and was duly rewarded by President Cleveland with the postmastership of New Brunswick.

¹¹ New York *Herald*, May 2, 1855.

¹² This proposition is found in a letter written to John Funk, September 1, 1858.