Davenport and the Anti-Cartoon Bill
By Gus Frederick – Homer Davenport International Cartoon Contest

In the New York State Senate on February 23, 1897, Senator Timothy Ellsworth of Niagara introduced SB-623, described as an act “...to restrain the unauthorized printing and publishing of portraits or alleged portraits of individuals.” This proposed legislation, commonly referred to as the Anti-Cartoon Bill was inspired by the work of Oregon political cartoonist Homer Davenport (1867-1912), late of Silverton. Davenport, then in the employ of William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal, had just hit his stride as a gifted cartoonist with a biting edge.

His caustic caricatures during the 1896 presidential campaign, and the consolidation of New York City, inspired this action, which in turn, inspired even more Davenport cartoons—including his classic work “No Honest Man Need Fear Cartoons”—until the proposed law was unceremoniously killed.

The two grotesque faces on the poster depict actual persons; Tammany Democrat William M. Tweed (left) and Republican U.S. Senator Thomas C. Platt. Both were referred to by the quaint term “Boss,” but separated by political party and several decades. Tweed’s fall from grace was attributed to the vigorous work of cartoonist Thomas Nast. Through the pages of Harper’s Weekly, a relentless campaign exposed Tweed’s corruption, punctuated with Nast’s cartoons. Tweed reportedly informed his minions that he didn’t mind the written editorials, because his supporters were largely illiterate, but to “…stop those damn pictures!” Tweed was convicted, but escaped from prison, only to be apprehended later in Spain after authorities recognized him from a Nast cartoon.

A generation later, another young upstart threatened the established order with cartoons. Homer Calvin Davenport arrived on the scene during a perfect storm of public opinion and technology. By the mid-1890s, advances in printing facilitated the reproduction of illustrations. Pretty much all newspapers employed staff cartoonists, and in the case of the larger outfits like Hearst and Pulitzer, entire staffs of artists were deployed to cover any number of issues, topics or persons of the day.

Davenport became somewhat of a household name during the 1896 Presidential campaign between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan. Instead of focusing on the actual candidate, Davenport went after Republican National Committee (RNC) Chair Marcus Hanna. His cartoon incarnation was as “Dollar-Mark Hanna” a bulbous visage of an obvious capitalist, made so by individual dollar-marks drawn in each and every square of the plaid suit.

His work from this period included the classic “Mr. Hanna’s Stand on the Labor Question,” featuring a detailed human skull with “LABOR” etched in the forehead, with a foot perched on top. The right cuff of the plutocratic-plaid pants is labeled “HANNA.” After the election, Davenport met Hanna, who claimed he didn’t mind the cartoons, except the one with the skull. “That one hurt…” he reportedly said.

Following this, another election—for the Mayor of a newly consolidated New York City—was underway. Davenport’s attention shifted there, and as a result captured the attention of certain others. Specifically U.S. Senator Thomas Platt, the acknowledged “Boss” of the New York State Republican Party. As such, he seemed more involved in state affairs as opposed to national issues. The growing progressive movement, which included future president Theodore Roosevelt, was making itself heard. The New York Republican party split into traditionalist and
progressive factions, with Platt firmly in control of the former. The result was a Democratic Mayor.

In light of the fact that the Hearst papers supported the progressive faction’s candidate, Platt was rumored to have directed Ellsworth and the loyal Republican members of the New York State Assembly to pass the infamous SB-623. Needless to say, the Act’s initial effect was to inspire the publication of even more “…portraits or alleged portraits of individuals.” After the bill was defeated, Davenport’s final comment on the subject was a trash can with a dead cat on top, and “Anti-Cartoon Bill” tagged to its tail, with a weeping Boss Platt standing beneath a poster of a weeping Boss Tweed.

Davenport left Heart’s employ in 1904, and shifted his support to the freshly elected President Roosevelt. The irony is that Roosevelt’s ascension was directly related to Senator Platt’s desire to get Roosevelt out of the state political scene. He lobbied the 1900 Republican National Convention for the inclusion of Roosevelt on the ticket as Vice President.

Upon hearing of this backroom deal, RNC Chair Marcus Hanna was alleged to have said: “You fools! Don’t you see that there is now but a single heartbeat separating this mad man from the Whitehouse?” The rest as they say is history.

During his relatively short, but productive career, Davenport never forgot his Oregon roots. And in recognition to his memory, his hometown of Silverton holds its main summer festival in honor of this practitioner of that traditional American art form, the political cartoon. As such, this year we have “re-booted” our popular Cartoon Contest. After all, a festival that honors a famous Political Cartoonist seems almost naked without some kind of competition focused on that endeavor. Rules, Official entry forms and more details can be found on the Web at HomerDavenport.com.
STATE OF NEW YORK
No. 623 / Int. 548

In Senate,
February 23, 1897

Introduced by Mr. ELLSWORTH - read twice and ordered printed, and when printed to be committed to the committee on codes.

AN ACT

To restrain the unauthorized printing and publishing of portraits or alleged portraits of individuals.

The People of the State of New York, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:

Section 1. No person, firm, partnership, corporation or voluntary association shall print or publish in any newspaper, paper, periodical, magazine, pamphlet or book any portrait or alleged portrait of any person or individual living in this state without first obtaining his or her written consent to such printing or publication.

Section 2. The printing or publishing of the portrait or alleged portrait of such person or individual without such consent in writing shall be a misdemeanor and shall be punishable by a fine not less than one thousand dollars and by imprisonment for not less than one year.

Section 3. This act shall take effect immediately.

Courtesy New York State Historical Society