

“Bathhouse John” Coughlin Rules a Rich Domain.

BY

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THE richest ward in the world is the First of Chicago, and it is ruled by the world's most eccentric alderman, “Bathhouse John” Coughlin, called by his particular friends “De Bat’house.”

Coughlin's fame is nation-wide. He has been a member of the Chicago City Council for ten years, and in that time he has achieved more notoriety than any dozen other aldermen in the world. He has introduced absurd and impossible ordinances, worn weird and fantastic clothes, posed as the author of sentimental ballads, and generally said and done enough bizarre and grotesque things to fill several volumes. Politicians of every section of the country know “Bathhouse John.” He was a most noticeable figure at the last three democratic national conventions, and the various tours of the Cook County Marching Club have served to introduce him to street throngs in many American cities. The sensation he created in social circles by appearing among the fashionable set at Saratoga three summers ago attired in a pea-green dress suit still resounds. But to the country-at-large he is known only as a freakish Chicago alderman. Few even of his fellow citizens realize the importance of the ward represented by this aldermanic buffoon.

Among the districts known as wards in the cities of the world there is none approaching in wealth the First of Chicago. There are few cities so rich. The nations which exceed the ward in property value are not many. Several South American republics could be purchased for less wealth than is contained within its boundaries. The national wealth of neither Greece nor Portugal is so great. There are half a dozen European principalities which, if combined, would not represent an equal amount of money in the markets of the world. The city of Rome in the days of its greatest

glory; opulent, luxurious Babylon of old, with its hanging gardens and marble palaces, would compare but poorly in riches with this single section of Chicago.

The First ward is the heart of Chicago. It contains less than two square miles of territory, but its arteries merge all the life blood of this second city of the New World. During the early growth of the city the geographic location of the ward was such that all of the main business community grew up within its confines, which, ever since, for one reason or another, usually political exigency, have been allowed to remain practically the same. Lake Michigan is the eastern, the Chicago river the northern boundary. The river turns south after running nearly a mile west, and forms the dividing line to the point where the artificial line, at Twenty-second street, marks the southern end of the ward.

Within these boundaries are all the famous “skyscrapers,” towering hundreds of feet into the ethereal blue and representing the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars; the national banks and the federal sub-treasury; safety deposit vaults and jewelry establishments holding valuables enough to ransom a family of royalties; all of the immense department stores, each teeming with tens of thousands of customers daily; the main public buildings and the principal theaters and hotels; the famous grain mart with its transactions of many score millions yearly; the head offices of numerous hundred million-dollar trusts, and of corporations, quasi-public and private, which dominate the business interests of Illinois and several western states. In addition there are over 1,000 saloons, most of them in the “Levee” district, a section only surpassed in its way by New York's famed “Tenderloin.”

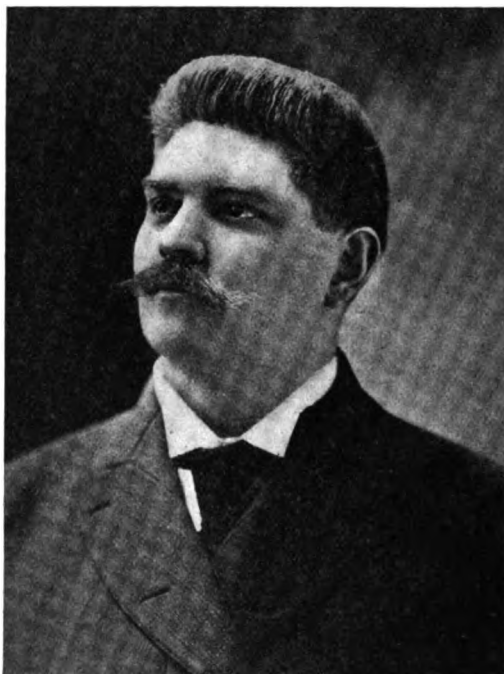
While it is impossible to compute with

exactitude the monetary values, real estate men and financiers say the district easily contains property of one form or another worth two billion dollars, and there is represented in the ward several times that sum. Besides its other wealth, the ward includes the homes of some of the nation's most opulent men. Marshall Field, the merchant prince, who is thought by some, because of the extent of his holdings in various enterprises, to be the third richest man in the United States, lives in one corner of the ward, and the residences of the late P. D. Armour and many other millionaires are within its limits.

But these moneyed men comprise a very small per cent of the total number of the actual residents. With a population during business hours of half a million or more, the First ward contains of registered voters little over 14,000, and in this fact lies the reason for the political domination of the ward by Coughlin and his colleague, "Hinky Dink" Kenna. The men who do the most voting in the realm of "de Bath-house" are not bondholders, owners of skyscrapers, business men or working men. They are of that leisurely class known variously as "floaters," "cadgers," "free-lunch grabbers" and "bums"—patrons of those among the one thousand saloons generally called barrel houses, with which one end of the "Levee" is liberally sprinkled. In this unique dominion this type of voter far outnumbers the better element. Within a radius of several blocks there are scores of cheap lodging houses, wherein live thousands of sovereign voters, each of whom casts a ballot which counts for as much as that of the wealthiest or most intellectual citizen of the ward. These are the "frens," as he terms them, of Coughlin. They are the creatures who have made him the political power he is. Without them he could not be in public life. No feudal baron of old ever had more faithful followers.

The alderman grows especially attached to these men as election time approaches. He and his chief henchmen watch over them with tender care. If any of them are arrested and sentenced to jail or the bridewell, their fines are paid that they may be released to vote. The lodgers are housed free of charge for several weeks before voting day, and are given beer and meals. The alderman is even so kind as to loan them money, in amounts of five to fifty cents, without question and without hope of being

repaid. Existence is made so pleasant for these men during ante-election periods that their number is always augmented by many hundreds. It is generally understood among them that they will be better liked if they take up their habitation in the ward at least thirty days before election, so that they may acquire a legal residence therein for the purpose of voting. The lodging-house keepers and saloon proprietors, desiring to obtain influence with the powerful Coughlin-Kenna regime, or, fearing its displeasure, are quite willing to do their part of the colonizing work, especially as it means increased revenues for them.



JOHN COUGHLIN.
The famous alderman of Chicago's first ward.

From this source, then, from the protected dens of vice and from corporation interests favored by him in the Council, does "Bath-house John" receive the political support that makes him invincible in his bailiwick.

Only in such a ward as this would a career like his be possible. Coughlin sold newspapers and did "odd jobs" about town until he was old enough to become a "rubber" in a Turkish bath establishment. Thus he acquired his sobriquet.

"Little did I t'ink," he says, recalling those days, "I wuz one day to be a aldermen, an' 'specially of dis great ward, de

home of me yout'ful dreams of ambition. But dey say Grant worked in a tannery and Garfield drove mules. Ev'ry young American is entitled to his ambition and I ain't swelled."

For several plodding, patient years the future alderman labored over the bodies of customers of the bathhouse. He did his work so well that he received frequent tips. Being of a careful, saving nature, he laid by his surplus earnings and one day bought a controlling interest in the establishment. He was now able to hire others to perform



THE ARRIVAL OF SOME OF "BATHHOUSE JOHN'S" CONSTITUENTS.

From a cartoon by J. T. McCutcheon, published in the "Chicago Record-Herald" during the recent campaign.

the onerous task of rubbing, and he devoted his leisure time to promenading the streets clad in wonderful sartorial outfits. His manner of dressing attracted attention, caused comment, and brought him that notoriety which later became the breath of his political life. So much time did he give to other matters, however, that his business suffered. One day a receiver was named. Coughlin's partners, who were among the First Ward Democratic bosses, were suspected of juggling the funds. He hired a lawyer to look after his interests. The part-

ners became alarmed. "We'll give you the nomination for alderman, John, and a thousand dollars, if you'll call the lawyer off," they told him. The ward was Democratic and the nomination meant an election. "Dat was de tide in me affairs an' I took it at its flood, an' it floated me to de Council," Coughlin afterward explained. He made this remark the day after attending a performance of "Julius Cæsar."

That was in 1892, and in the Council Coughlin has since remained. This year he was elected for the sixth consecutive time, in spite of the greatest efforts by the allied forces of good government in a city of two million population to defeat him. In preparation for the contest the ward's southern boundary had been extended three-fourths of a mile, by vote of the reform majority in the Council when the city was redistricted. This gave 5,000 additional voters, most of them considered as of the "better element." The opposition to "de Bat'house" in previous years had been of a more or less perfunctory character. So firmly intrenched were he and Kenna, who are elected in alternate years, that it was regarded as almost impossible to dislodge them. But this year the Municipal Voters' League, organized to expose and drive from office incompetent or corrupt aldermen, and various other reform elements concentrated their efforts in a fight against Coughlin.

The independent Democratic organization nominated as his opponent David L. Frank, an able young lawyer and business man of good repute. The Republicans indorsed Frank's candidacy. A headquarters was opened in the lodging-house district and within a few doors of Coughlin's campaign office. A committee composed of leading business men backed Frank's campaign, contributing thousands of dollars. The funds were devoted to renting halls, hiring brass bands, displaying the reform candidate's picture in many thousand places, issuing circulars by the hundredweight, giving free vaudeville entertainments to voters, and investigating the right of most of Coughlin's followers to vote. Wagon loads of the "machine's" supporters were arrested for false registration. A rigid revision of the registry lists, hundreds failing to respond to "suspect" notices sent out by election judges, reduced the total of 19,139 registered voters in the enlarged ward to 14,483, or less than one thousand more than were within the old limits.

Various speakers of high reputation took the field against "de Bat'house." But Candidate Frank, although aided by these men and by all the reform organizations, was shrewd enough to realize that with this support alone he could not win. He knew the majority of the ward's voters did not care so much about reform as they did about other things. He appreciated the fact that that flexible term, "personal liberty," was quite popular among by far the greater number. He was particularly fearful of the effect of a rumor assiduously circulated by Coughlin and his friends that he did not drink, and that he had no sympathy with saloon keepers or their patrons. So Frank set about deliberately to dispel any such impression.

Frank would declare himself in entire sympathy with the aims and ideals of the majority of the voters. "Don't think I'm a reformer," he would say, "for I ain't. Besides drinkin' some I play poker and I do other things I'm not goin' to tell you about. But if I'm elected alderman I won't charge anyone fifty dollars a week or more to let him run a poker game or a game of any sort in his cigar store or saloon. I won't try to make any graft or rake-off, but I'll be for givin' everybody a square deal."

Following such meetings the candidate would be besieged by hundreds of his audience for money. The amounts asked would vary from fifty cents or a quarter for a night's lodging to five cents for "a cup o' coffee an' a bite to eat." Some "old soaks," basing their hopes on Frank's declaration of his bibulous propensities, would openly avow their burning thirst for strong drink and throw themselves upon his mercy. The Frank campaign committee dispensed about four thousand dollars in this way.

At meetings in the residence section of the ward Frank made speeches of a vastly different sort. He denounced vice and crime and told about the reforms he intended bringing about.

The First ward Democratic organization was roused to unwonted efforts. "De Bat'house" was awakened from his lethargic air of confidence. The reduction in the list of registered voters in his stronghold alarmed him. His opponent's bold bid for the slum vote increased his apprehension. By his order unnumbered beer kegs were tapped, pie was added at free lunch distributions, cigars by the cartload were given away, and the vagrant's dream of a happy

life made a reality to 5,000 men for a period of two weeks.

Coughlin made no effort to obtain the votes of the "better element." He sought only to retain the following which had theretofore always been his. He bent his energies to rallying the lodging house, saloon and dive vote. His managers bought options on all the halls not hired by Frank's committee, and "de Bat'house" started in for a whirlwind campaign. He visited several score saloons each day and at night after his meetings. On the platform he devoted most of his time to denouncing Frank. From his viewpoint it was a crime for any one but himself and "Hinkey Dink" to run for alderman in the First.

And so the battle was waged, participated in by the highest and lowest, and viewed with the keenest interest by politician and sociologist. When the ballots were counted they showed a majority of 2,600 for Coughlin. Frank's supporters cried fraud, but could not prove that a sufficient number of illegal votes had been cast to affect the result. When Coughlin began his sixth term his desk was buried under several hundred dollars' worth of flowers. There were no names attached. "From me frens," said the alderman, but his colleagues whispered among themselves, "John's handing himself a bouquet."

To all the caricaturing and lampooning to which he has been subjected Coughlin remains impervious. He was never known to smile at any of these things, nor while discussing himself. By some it is thought his eccentricities are studied art, that, realizing that in the eyes of the main body of his constituents notoriety passes for fame, he aims to achieve it by such methods. Others believe him a mere nonentity, placed in office by accident and held there by exceptional political conditions in the most peculiar ward in the world.

But whether or not he is politically sagacious, Coughlin seems not lacking in financial shrewdness. He possesses a fortune estimated at a quarter of a million dollars, resides on Michigan boulevard among the fashionable set, has banker and broker's offices in La Salle street, the Wall street of Chicago, and spends his summers at Saratoga and other watering places, where society ignores but cannot suppress him.

Coughlin has made money even out of the song, "Dear Midnight of Love," which brought him so much of the loved notoriety.