

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Democratic Party Project

Political Experience

O. H. 59

LYNN B. GRIFFITH

Interviewed

by

Mark Dittmer

on

April 23, 1977

LYNN B. GRIFFITH

Judge Lynn B. Griffith, Sr. proves to be a truly valuable source for the history of the Democratic party of Trumbull County. Lynn Griffith was born on October 30, 1886 in West Farmington, Ohio, the son of a farmer, Herbert F. and Lovira M. Griffith. One of nine children, Lynn's motives to the Democratic party and politics came from his grandfather, Cyrus B. Snyder, who was an active Democrat from North Bloomfield, Ohio during the middle to the late nineteenth century.

Griffith attended Oberlin College and actively participated in college politics, during which time he was an ardent supporter of William Jennings Bryan. Lynn Griffith's career interest was that of the law profession and he proceeded to the Western Reserve Law School in 1910. Admission to the bar in 1914 marked the beginning of his political career. Griffith became the chairman of the Democratic party in Trumbull County in 1914 and served till 1925.

His law career is untouchable by any other attorney in Trumbull County. While serving as Prosecuting Attorney, he had a trial against a defendant of Clarence Darrow. Griffith proceeded from Prosecuting Attorney to Common Pleas Judge, Court of Appeals Judge, to the

Supreme Court of Ohio. He was the presiding Judge over the Little Steel Strike of 1937 in Trumbull County. Griffith's most exciting time in active politics was when he was picked as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1932. His vote went to Newton D. Baker, later swayed to Franklin D. Roosevelt. His ties to the Democratic party originate when the party was a severe minority in the county. His time and effort contributed to the immense growth of the party.

He married Stata M. Griffith on September 16, 1916 and they are the parents of Judge David M. Griffith, Patricia Ann Kaighan, and Lynn B., Jr.

Mark Dittmer
Edited by Terri Belloto

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INTERVIEWEE: LYNN B. GRIFFITH
INTERVIEWER: Mark Dittmer
SUBJECT: Political Experience
DATE: April 23, 1977

D: This is an interview with Judge Lynn B. Griffith, Sr. for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program Democratic Party Project by Mark Dittmer in Warren, Ohio, on April 23, 1977, at 9:30 a.m.

The first thing I'd like to ask you, Judge, is I'd like you to give a description of your political background and relate what or who has motivated you to proceed in the field of politics.

G: My first political background was perhaps when I was a freshman at Oberlin College. In my college days, I was quite active in the politics of my school and of my class. Those were the days when William Jennings Bryan was the leader of our party nationally. And Judson Harmon was the leader of our party state-wise. I was an ardent, sincere supporter of Bryan from the first of my political days and didn't hesitate to advance his interests as much as I could in my college and in my community. My grandfather was a strong Democrat and I followed in his steps, my dad taking little interest in politics. My father was a farmer with a family of nine children and he didn't have time to waste on politics. But my grandfather was an active Democrat residing in North Bloomfield, Ohio.

D: Who is this?

G: Cyrus B. Snyder. And he was in the minority party

in his community and in his county. But not withstanding that, he always asserted his loyalty to the party and was a loyal Democrat right up to the end of his days on earth.

D: Now, I'd like you to proceed from your beginning of your political career in Trumbull County and then up to today.

G: My political career in Trumbull County perhaps commenced at the time of my admission to the bar in 1914. I was elected chairman of the Democratic party that year in Trumbull County and we had a vigorous and active organization created with my help and with the help of other loyal believers in my party. I was chairman of the Trumbull County Democratic Committee for a number of years. We had banquets and we had picnics and gatherings in an active manner down through those years. We had such leaders at that time as our late and beloved Phoebe T. Sutliff; Edward Houser and his sister Miss Elizabeth Houser, who by the way, was the secretary to Tom L. Johnson in Cleveland and who wrote the book on the life of Tom L. Johnson; and other active leaders.

And during those years when I was active in the party and in the heading up of the party in Trumbull County, we had many banquets and had in attendance such speakers as: Champ Clark of Missouri, who was then in Congress, who gave us a fine talk at the Central Christian Church in Warren; we had Judson Harmon as a speaker, who was then governor of Ohio. We had Atlee Pomerene, who was the United States Senator from Ohio for years; and other notables that--oh, I should say we had the mayor of Pittsburgh Mayor Lawrence, and others of that caliber who came and addressed us at our banquets. The attendance at those banquets and those gatherings kept increasing as the years came along, so that by the 1920s, we had a strong, cohesive organization of Democrats in Trumbull County; a membership of perhaps a hundred active Democrats which heretofore had been nonexistent. They had neglected organizing. There were organizations lead by such leaders in those days as Lawyer William B. Kilpatrick of Warren, who was State Representative for years, who was a representative of the Constitutional Convention of 1912, of the State Constitutional Convention.

And we had, following the election of Mr. Kilpatrick

as mayor, which occurred at four different terms and times, quite a series of successes in the Democratic organization. Following Mr. Kilpatrick's mayoral successful and very efficient Administration, we had as mayor, Wally Lynn. And we had our county surveyor, Harry Dittmer, as county surveyor. And we had county commissioners elected on our ticket. And from that time on we had a cohesive organization that was successful in many instances.

- D: Could you possibly give a summary of your years as an attorney in service?
- G: As an attorney in my service, dating back to 1914 down to the present time, I have been an active member of the Democratic party--county, state, and national. I have attended many conventions including the national convention in 1932 when we were successful in nominating Franklin D. Roosevelt for President. I attended and was elected to the national committee, and was a pledged delegate to the national convention in 1932 and attended and voted at all the proceedings of that convention in Chicago wherein, I was pledged to the support and election of Newton D. Baker for our President. But the steamroller of Jim Farley deflated me and others of my following, and Roosevelt was elected by a big vote. And of course, Franklin D. Roosevelt dominated the Democratic party from that time--1932--right down till the time of his death in 1945. I guess that covers that.
- D: Over your years of service from 1914 till now, do you think that the judicial system in Trumbull County has been a fairly well-run organization and a good system of justice for the people of this community?
- G: Since my coming to the bar in 1914, a member of the Trumbull County Bar Association, down to the very present morning, I have been a member of that organization. I've been president of it. I've been active in its support. And I feel that at the time I commenced practicing law in Warren, Trumbull County [in] 1914, that the caliber of the lawyers that were members of the bar has been upheld. The noticeable fact is that when I came, the bar was much older than I was--a youngster in 1914 and so many of the members of the bar were older and of course, much superior in capabilities than I was as a member of the bar. But, I must say that the older

members of the bar had outstanding leadership. Among that leadership was an outstanding giant in the legal profession, not only of Trumbull County, but of the adjoining counties, in the person of our late and beloved judge, T. I. Gilmour. Judge Gilmour was elected and reelected and beloved by all. He was a kindly, wonderful, outstanding jurist of the purest quality and noble leadership. He was a Republican and the Democrats never saw fit to oppose Judge T. I. Gilmour for election because of his lovely, his outstanding leadership and capabilities. And he served for a long period of time.

I think the quality of the lawyers at that time was just as high as the quality of the lawyers at this present time. We have at the present time many young lawyers, all of them much younger than the rank and file of the members of the bar in [the] 1915s and 1920s. But I think the quality of the bar has been well upheld by the present membership.

- D: Could you give an analysis of your main political philosophies and creeds?
- G: Well, my political philosophy has always been the philosophy of leaders of William Jennings Bryan branch of the Democratic party. We must remember that Judson Harmon was not a Bryan supporter. He was not a Bryan type. He was a Conservative and you might say an Orthodox Democrat, whereas Bryan was of the younger and more aggressive belief that the people should rule and not the organized party organization. And Harmon was an abled governor of Ohio and would have been a good President had he ever been nominated but he was Orthodox. He believed in party organization more than a type of Bryan. And I was inclined to lean toward Bryan's philosophy. He believed in, of course, the sixteen-to-one theory of money at the time. He was representing the silver interests which had been neglected and the gold interests that had been in the saddle for years and years. And I just thought that the silver rights were to my liking.
- D: When do you think the Trumbull County Democratic party was at its peak of existence and can you recall some of the individuals and events that made this high point possible?
- G: I think the peak of the party in Trumbull County was perhaps reached at or about the time that William B.

Kilpatrick was reelected for his fourth term as mayor of the city of Warren.

D: What year was this?

G: I think that would be about 1920, approximately. And it was more united and more representative of the entire democracy of the county. Rural sections were highly in the saddle, and since the 1920s, it has gradually lost control of the rural Democrats and gotten into the control of the municipal and city type of Democrats. I think that the party is perhaps, while it has now reached the highest peak, the time that was outstanding in the history of our party would be in the early 1920s.

D: Having accounted for the high points of the Democratic party, could you speculate upon its lowest depth?

G: Yes. I think the party's lowest depths have been in the past eight or nine years. And it's been brought to its lower depths by the weak Administration. Some of the leaders or so-called leaders of the party that were in the county commissioner's office and, to my mind, failed to do their sworn duty and reached a low estimate in the feelings and in the judgement of the voters of the county.

D: During the 1930s and 1940s, the main political issues that were concerned were the Democratic party's use of political bosses in a politically boss-run organization. Would you consider this true or how would you elaborate on that?

G: Well, in the teens and 1920s and 1930s we didn't have bosses. We had outstanding leaders, like Ed Houser and W. B. Kilpatrick, and Mr. Harry Dittmer, our county surveyor and others; many others. Miss Phoebe Sutliff was a tremendous influence in the betterment of our party. She was active in using her influence. And now we have leaders that are more inclined to be bosses than they were in the teens and 1920s and 1930s.

D: Speaking on the internal structure of the party itself, what is the significance of the precinct committeemen and the executive committee in Trumbull County?

G: Well, they are voices of the party in their home precincts and representing their precincts in the

body politic of the county. The whole county has I don't know how many committeemen, but I would say in the neighborhood of eighty; seventy-five or eighty. And the committeemen--it's their duty to sense the feeling of the community in which they resided on matters of interest to the whole party, for instance, bond issues and other vital county-wide interests that each committeeman voices his or her district in the party. The committeeman, of course, is an important official in the machinery of the party. And it's one of his duties to see that the information is circulated for he pushes and advertises the advantages of the success of the party candidates.

- D: Who decides if a person must run for an office?
Who decides?
- G: The person himself.
- D: The person himself in Trumbull County?
- G: (agrees)
- D: If you were again ordained the head of the Democratic party of Trumbull County what type of platform would you run and what changes would you like to see come about?
- G: Well, that's an interesting question. The changes that I would like to see brought about might pertain to the . . . could you restate that question?
- D: If you were ordained head of the Democratic party of Trumbull County, what type of platform would you run and what changes would you like to see come about?
- G: I would be inclined to loyally endorse and work for a platform that our present President is now championing. He is free from the influence, the Washington influence, of the Washington gang. By that I mean both Republicans and Democrats. And he has brought fresh influence and freshness of thought, freshness of philosophy to the national Democratic party and we needed it. There were too many Democrats that were willing to go along and not challenge the crookedness and the dishonesty of the Nixon Administration. And we have in our Washington White House today one who dares to stand for good morals and good, honest conduct, and says so openly and defiantly.

- D: What future do you see for the Trumbull County Democratic party and the national Democratic party as a whole?
- G: I perceive for the Democratic party as a whole, a glowing success. I think by the last national election in November 1976, the last election expressed the feeling of America in that they want to get rid of a lot of political hacks in Washington that have been there for years and they've thrown them out. We had a Democrat thrown out of the office during the past year who deserved just what he got because he had been crooked from the time he was elected [to] Congress right down to the time he was thrown out.
- D: Who's this?
- G: That's Wayne Hays, congressman from Belmont County. So I see the party ridding itself of that type of false and despicable conduct.
- D: I've completed all my questions up to this point. Speaking about Carter, why does Carter have good press?
- G: He has good press because he is forthright in his statements. He doesn't hedge, he doesn't deceive. He's forthright, I think, and I'm glad to see him break up the Washington gang.
- D: During the early 1970s, the Administration in the White House was really not, it has to be decreed not up to par. What do you see of the Watergate years? Do you think it's going to pass over or do you think it's going to go down in history as a mark?
- G: I think it can't be passed over. It's a blemish on the history of America and a disgrace, an outrageous disgrace that will last during your time and your children and your grandchildren's time. We've had colossal disgraces before, but nothing equal to the Watergate, where the President of the United States advanced and condoned and upheld the criminal conduct of the burglary.

END OF INTERVIEW