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The White Chief: James K. Vardaman
in Mississippi Politics, 1890-1908

by

William F. Holmes

A THESIS SUBMITTED
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Thesis Director's signature:

Samuel F. Lathrop

Houston, Texas

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TO
MY MOTHER AND FATHER

Preface

This study, the beginning of a full length biography of James Kimble Vardaman, focuses upon his career as newspaper editor, state legislator, and governor. Actually his greater fame was to come after 1911 when he served in the United States Senate during the administrations of President Woodrow Wilson. The present work has attempted to trace the development of Vardaman's thought before he gained national reputation and to plot his political career during the 1890's and early 1900's. Vardaman entered public life as a Bourbon Democrat who supported the conservative interests; after twice experiencing defeat under the convention system, he turned away from the conservative connection and began to advocate causes popular with the small farmers. As an agrarian spokesman he achieved success in Mississippi politics.

During the past year I have frequently been asked, why study Vardaman? After all, some argue, he was a racist, a demagogue, and a fascist. The first two accusations are true, the last false. Because there are unpleasant, not to say odious, aspects of Vardaman's career is no reason to ignore him, nor is the stereotype view of him as a demagogue and racist a complete or a fair representation. While it is true that he won political victories by appealing to white supremacy and to emotionalism, he was more than a spellbinder. As a popular leader of Mississippi's rural folk, he advocated and achieved reforms for which the small farmers had been striving throughout the late nineteenth century. In his roles as a racist and as a reformer Vardaman represented an essential dualism of politics in the deep South during the twentieth century, especially the politics of his own state--Mississippi.

I would like to acknowledge the aid given my by the following persons: Mrs. J. H. Freeman, Mrs. Laura D. S. Harrell, Mrs. Marvin Brand, Mr. Douglas Robinson, Jr., Mrs. W. T. Ratliff, and Dr. Stanford W. Higginbotham. Dr. Floyd S. Lear, Dr. William H. Masterson, and Dr. Francis L. Loewenheim have aided me indirectly during the past three years through their stimulating courses. The staffs of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the Rice University Fondren Library, the University of Mississippi Library, and the Mississippi State University Library were always cooperative in fulfilling my many requests. I am thankful to Dr. Frank E. Vandiver, my thesis director, who has given me aid and encouragement throughout my graduate studies at Rice University and who permitted me to choose a subject foreign to his fields of special interest. During the past year, while Dr. Vandiver served as Harmsworth Professor of American History at Oxford University, Dr. Andrew Forest Muir has given generously of his time and ability in assisting me. I am especially indebted to Dr. Barnes F. Lathrop, who has supervised the writing of this thesis. He read the entire manuscript and made many suggestions and corrections, all of which have been to my advantage.

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CHAPTER I

FROM THE HILLS TO THE DELTA

James Kimble Vardaman began practicing law in the town of Winona, Mississippi at the age of twenty-one. Winona lay in the loess hill region of north-central Mississippi, where fertile soil in combination with steep hills and narrow valleys made farms productive but small.¹ A county seat town located on the Illinois Central Railroad, it served as a trading center for the surrounding countryside.² Many lawyers might have selected a more attractive place than this in which to begin their careers, but Winona seemed a wise choice for young Vardaman. For one thing, he had spent much of his life in the adjacent and similar country of Yallobusha and Carroll counties. What was even more important, his cousin, Hernando DeSoto Money, lived in Winona. The Moneys were an important family, and Hernando himself represented the Third District of Mississippi in the United States Congress.³

Vardaman's own family did not have the wealth nor the social position enjoyed by the Moneys. His father, William Sylvester, was of Swedish descent. His forebears had immigrated to America early in the eighteenth century, settling first in Virginia, then moving westward to Kentucky and finally to Mississippi.⁴ William Sylvester's father, Jeremiah Vardaman, had served with a Mississippi militia company in the War of 1812, afterward settling in Copiah County, the home of Senator Albert Gallatin Brown and Benjamin King, both ante-bellum leaders

of democratic causes.⁵

In 1852 William Sylvester married Mary Ann Fox of Carroll County, the daughter of a family of considerable wealth that had come from Virginia to Mississippi by way of northern Alabama.⁶ The couple moved to Holmes County where William Sylvester began raising cotton on a tract of land near the Carroll County line.⁷ Then in 1858 Vardaman took his family and slaves on a long over-land trip from Mississippi to Texas. There he purchased land on credit in Jackson County. It was in this southeastern Texas county that Mary Ann Vardaman on July 25, 1861, gave birth to a son, James Kimble Vardaman. He was one of six children, two daughters and four sons.⁸ In 1868 William Sylvester moved his family back to Mississippi and settled at the village of Preston in Yallobusha County.

In re-establishing himself in Mississippi, James's father was able to acquire land. Whether or not he was required to work it with his own hands is uncertain; probably he did not.⁹ Any possibility that James himself would engage in physical labor was greatly reduced by an attack of infantile paralysis in early childhood that crippled his right arm.¹⁰ He obtained the rudiments of an education in the common schools of Yallobusha County. His disability contributed, it is said, to his reading more than most children his age.

James early decided not to follow his father's career as a farmer; he wanted to practice law and later to become a politician.

At the age of eighteen he went to Carrollton to live in the home of his uncle, Pierson Money.¹¹ There he read law and improved his scant education by many hours spent with works of history, political theory, and literature in the family's private library. In 1882 he passed the bar examination.¹²

James's years in Carrollton formed the basis of his later political career. The principal reason for this was his aforementioned cousin, Hernando DeSoto Money. Twenty-one years older than Vardaman, and now a resident of Winona, Money had grown up in Carrollton and later attended the University of Mississippi. After service as an officer in the Civil War, he had become a leader in the campaign to overthrow the Reconstruction government in Mississippi. With the return of home rule in 1875 Money attained a seat in the lower house of the United States Congress, and thereafter for three decades he was a force to reckon with in Mississippi politics.¹³

Money was himself a junior associate of the most powerful figure in the public affairs of post-Reconstruction Mississippi: Senator James Z. George. A resident of Carrollton, George had risen to prominence during Reconstruction. As a leader in the election of 1875, and later as the most influential man at the constitutional convention of 1890, George became "the symbol of white supremacy triumphant."¹⁴ Himself a rich man, he nonetheless supported on most issues the interests of the small farmers of his state.¹⁵ Throughout their careers George and Money remained close political allies. Like George, Money

generally sided with the farmers and firmly supported the doctrine of white supremacy.

The Carrollton leaders greatly influenced Vardaman's future. "He was not to be a lonely individualist crusading against an established order; instead he was a prospective leader of the causes identified with Carrollton." Like his political mentors, Vardaman would direct many of his legislative programs toward the farmer's welfare. And when he espoused the cause of white supremacy, he would simply be following the earlier lead of George and Money. These post-Reconstruction Bourbons left, as part of their legacy to the state, Governor James K. Vardaman.¹⁶

Soon after young James gained admission to the bar he moved to his cousin Hernando's town, Winona, which contained a bank, a railroad depot, a hotel, a few general stores, and seven saloons. The wooden frame homes of twelve hundred people lined the dirt streets.¹⁷ A single newspaper, the Winona Advance, furnished news of the town and of Montgomery County.¹⁸ James's arrival in Winona might well cause comment, for his trim, erect figure, over six feet in height, was crowned by his long, black hair combed straight back and allowed to grow to shoulder length. A large nose, a full mouth, restless searching eyes, and a clear complexion added to his striking appearance. Throughout life he would be a vain man.

Five months after his arrival in Winona James and his cousin,

William Vardaman Money, became editors of the Winona Advance. This event was brought about by Congressman Money who purchased the Advance from B. H. Wear and gave his young relatives the job of running it.¹⁹ Evidently James's law practice amounted to little as yet, and editing a country newspaper was one of the most desirable professions in the New South. Requiring no formal training and slight capital, it promised much prestige and might enable the editor to exert strong influence in his community.²⁰ Vardaman's experience with the Advance taught him the importance of the press as an instrument for guiding public opinion and gave him his baptism in Mississippi politics.

The Advance was a small four-page weekly, its front and back pages filled with ready-print articles featuring current events, short stories, sermons, agricultural topics, women's fashions, and tales of murders, robberies, and mysterious visions. The editors prepared the two inside pages, one devoted to editorial comment on local, state, and national news, the other to social events in Winona and Montgomery County. In their first issue the young men cautiously described their editorial policy. Admittedly awed by their new job, they aimed to be just, to avoid fights, and to do the best they could. "We are not working for fun, nor glory, nor for our health; therefore we want the money."²¹ In an early article they modestly urged the establishment of a chair of journalism at the University of Mississippi to impart training that would make newspapermen more efficient and give the press "a better tone intellectually and morally."²²

At first Vardaman and Money abided by their declared editorial policy: They published no controversial material. They frequently complimented friends, and they printed letters or speeches by state and local dignitaries on such timely topics as schools, religion, and social life. Special attention went to schemes for more efficient and productive farming. All Mississippians, they proclaimed, should support a bill by Congressman Money to establish experimental stations to provide agricultural information for farmers throughout the nation.²³ The Advance also took the agrarian side in condemning railroad rate discrimination against farmers, and maintained that the states had the right to regulate railroads in the public interest.²⁴

The race problem received little notice in the Advance except as it related to Democratic solidarity. The editor's faithfully supported white supremacy and scorned anyone who did not. Thus they felt no sympathy for whites in Nashville who were outraged when a Negro constable shot a restaurant owner there; any town that tolerated a Negro official had no right to complain.²⁵ To maintain white supremacy was to maintain the Democratic party.

Year after year, election after election, as long as we live and abide in Miss~~issippi~~ we must set ourselves firmly to the duty and toil of holding up Democracy and defeating Republicanism. . . . With us it is no strife for a political creed, but a battle for our very existence, socially, materially, and politically. . . . It has no end. . . . Be sure that you fight for Democracy; because you are then sure that you are opposing your enemy. Let not any one surprising [sic] you with the false face of 'Independence,' or any other mask. . . . You are free to choose from all men who are Democrats but note well that he is not an enemy.²⁶

The editors had sound reasons for urging party solidarity in the early 1880's. The Mississippi Democracy had recently experienced its first serious dissensions since the overthrow of the Reconstruction government. In the senatorial election of 1880 and the gubernatorial election of 1881 Ethelbert Barksdale and a group of dissatisfied Democrats had seriously challenged the dominant wing of the party led by George, Money, and L. Q. C. Lamar. The Bourbon Democrats had put down this initial challenge, but a new threat had arisen by 1882 in a movement led by James R. Chalmers, who attempted to forge an alliance between Republicans, Greenbackers, and independent Democrats. The threat was particularly serious in Money's congressional district, but he managed to achieve re-election in 1882, and the Democrats presently quelled the danger in the state at large.²⁷

It is against this background that the anxiety of the Advance for party regularity even at the local level is to be understood. When elections were to be held in October, 1883, the Advance appealed for everyone to abide by the ruling of the county Democratic executive committee on the question whether nominations should be made by means of a convention, a mass meeting, or a primary. As it turned out, the executive committee called for a popular primary, a decision the Advance supported even though the last popular primary held in Winona had, according to the editors, been a farce in which many Negroes voted, even minors participated, and the vote cast exceeded the total number of registered voters.²⁸ The editors did urge that this time the candidates

not employ the Negro vote and that the officials maintain a free and fair election.²⁹

After only three months as an editor Vardaman abandoned his original policy of avoiding controversial issues. At that time a Democratic nominating convention at Lexington, Mississippi, struggled for four days and cast over seven hundred ballots before choosing Edmond F. Noel, an able young lawyer, to be the party's candidate for district attorney from the fifth judicial district. At first Vardaman and Money were pleased with the outcome, reporting that Noel had celebrated his victory by giving a champagne reception for members of the convention.³⁰ But soon they exploded in wrath and set off a bitter controversy. The delegates of Holmes, Carroll, and Leflore counties had made a deal, the Advance reported, by which they had agreed to pool their votes and to select the nominee by a raffle. The people, however, should never elect such delegates to represent them again.³¹ Criticized as youngsters meddling in the affairs of older and more experienced men, Vardaman and Money replied that not one member of the convention had denied their version of what had taken place.³² They would retract when and if proven wrong by the delegates' published statements.³³

Increasing discontent with the "corrupt bargain" presently induced opposition leaders to begin to circulate petitions through the district urging support for Colonel A. H. Brantley in place of Noel. The Advance continued for a time to maintain, as it had all along, that

Noel was the official party nominee no matter how illegal the manner of his choice, but then it began to shift toward a defense of the privilege of petition as a basic American right. If a majority of voters signed the petitions for Brantley, the editors argued, their action would clearly demonstrate that they had not gotten their choice at the Lexington convention.³⁴ At this the Yazoo Valley Flag, hot with indignation, charged the Advance with causing disunity within the Democratic party.³⁵ Vardaman replied that if the convention had conducted itself properly, no petitions would have been necessary. Now the petitions would serve as a "preventative" against future trickery and corruption.³⁶ Publishing a copy of a petition supporting him late in September, Vardaman went completely to the Brantley side, and in the ensuing election Brantley won.

Vardaman had ceased to be an editor by the time of the election, but the Advance had played a leading role in disrupting the convention's work and in defeating Noel.³⁷ Vardaman's reaction to Noel's nomination typified much in his later journalistic and political career. In denouncing this "corrupt bargain" he appeared to be a defender of the people. As they had been betrayed, he was protecting their interest by bringing the sordid affair into the open. Those who defended the convention he attacked with bursts of indignation and with touches of humor. Always he appealed to his readers; always he presented himself as standing for honesty and openness.

In the midst of the Noel controversy William V. Money left the

Advance. The reason was that the paper did not pay. He urged his former readers to "give Mr. Vardaman all your patronage, and if you can't give him any money or cloths [sic] or produce, then go every day and read his exchanges, and give him good advice."³⁸ Vardaman went on alone for another month and a half until the middle of October. Then he, too, gave up, and Congressman Money sold the paper to Percy L. Moore. In his valedictory issue Vardaman explained that he had sought not a career in journalism but rather to make himself known to the people of Montgomery and adjoining counties upon whose patronage his practice as a lawyer would depend. Finding that he could no longer manage as both editor and lawyer, he had decided to devote all of his time to the law.³⁹ No doubt this explanation was mostly an attempt to save face. The financial plight of the Advance--accentuated perhaps by loss of patronage resulting from the Noel affair--drove Vardaman temporarily out of the newspaper business.⁴⁰

During Vardaman's editorship of the Advance a struggle to establish prohibition had begun to divide the townspeople of Winona into two major factions. The movement to stamp out "demon rum" had long existed in Mississippi but it intensified in the 1880's as was true in much of the nation. The legislature passed strigent laws regulating the manufacture and sale of liquor; men formed numerous prohibition clubs; Frances E. Willard came to Mississippi in 1882 to organize the state's first chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union; and town after town passed laws prohibiting the sale of liquor.⁴¹ During the 1870's and 1880's several developments gave new impetus to the

temperance forces. Some prohibitionists had learned a lesson from the Civil War, when states had passed laws to stop the manufacture of liquor. Then since the freedman could buy liquor as readily as the white man, many people who had formerly opposed prohibition now supported legislation that would "keep liquor away from the Negro."⁴² The movement had definitely taken a firm hold in Winona when Vardaman arrived. Letters advocating prohibition frequently appeared in the local papers, and in February, 1883, some temperance leaders formed the Prohibition Union of Montgomery County with the avowed purpose of stopping the sale, manufacture, and importation of liquor throughout the entire state.⁴³

Vardaman and Money tried to keep the Advance out of the prohibition controversy. While they respected temperance and those who were trying to stamp out a known evil, they feared that bringing the prohibition question into politics might endanger white solidarity. They ridiculed the disposition of some reformers to believe that prohibition would solve all problems, "including that of running the government." The editors feared the rise of demagogues who would, to satisfy their own political ambitions, appeal to the emotional issue of prohibition in order to break up white solidarity in the Democratic party.

The very life and soul of politico-prohibition is the ambition of its leaders to rise on the ruins of the party that has rendered your life in Mississippi even tolerable. The fires [sic] of ambition burns so fiercely in some men, that if they could, they would wreck the throne of Heaven and climb over its ruins to the seat of power.⁴⁴

Vardaman continued to oppose political prohibition until he left the Advance.⁴⁵

The prohibition campaign in Montgomery county began in earnest in January, 1884, after Vardaman resumed practicing law. Because the Advance under his successor supported the antiprohibitionists, temperance leaders established the Winona Times to champion their cause.⁴⁶ They also organized their supporters thoroughly and campaigned intensively, outdoing the wets in both respects. Prominent state temperance leaders visited Winona and addressed large gatherings; local prohibition clubs were organized; and the drys circulated much literature supporting their cause.⁴⁷ The wets on their side argued through letters, editorials, and speeches that prohibition violated personal liberty, that it could never be enforced, and that it hurt the economy of Montgomery County.⁴⁸ The struggle soon gave rise to serious tensions in Montgomery County, animosities developed, and long established friendships dissolved.⁴⁹

Despite his earlier uneasiness over prohibition as a threat to white solidarity, Vardaman entered the fight on the side of the drys. Perhaps he reasoned that an election would settle the controversy once and for all; more probably he was responding to popular sentiment, partly as one who was swept along by it, partly as an astute opportunist seeking to take advantage of it. He first indicated his new position in March, 1884, by withdrawing his card as an attorney from the Advance and inserting it in the Times.⁵⁰ By May he was speaking

publicly in behalf of the cause, and he soon became a leader in organizing prohibition clubs in Winona.⁵¹

The struggle grew more serious in June, 1884, after it was announced that a prohibition election would be held on July 8. The Times intensified its appeal, arguing that so many evils sprang from intemperance that the deadly cancer must be wiped out.⁵² The antiprohibitionists retaliated with equal vigor, lambasting the whole movement as a "fanaticism born in New England, the hot-bed of isms, intolerance, and hatred toward the South."⁵³ Although the wets waged a hard fight, the prohibitionists on election day marched to the polls in groups to cast their votes. The emotional appeal of their cause and their superior organization carried the day. The editors of the Advance accepted defeat, admitted the election had been a fair one, and promised to abide by the results. They continued to believe in their cause, however, and predicted that liquor would still be sold even though the saloon had closed.⁵⁴

For reasons unconnected with the prohibition fight, Vardaman left Winona shortly thereafter. He lived in the town less than two years, but his stay had been important as a formative period that to some extent foreshadowed his later career. He wanted to practice law, but he discovered how difficult it was for an inexperienced lawyer to develop a practice. He withdrew from journalism, but would find much of his subsequent life spent editing newspapers. The case of Edmond F. Noel held particular significance for the future: Noel became the

sponsor of the state's first Democratic primary law in 1902 and then Vardaman proceeded to defeat him for governor in the first application of that law. The fight for prohibition, which centered around an emotional issue and caused bitterness on both sides, resembled the later statewide campaigns of Vardaman after he entered politics.

* * *

A major event in the shaping of Vardaman's career was his marriage in early June, 1884, to Anna Burleson Robinson, a young widow five years his senior. To the marriage Anna brought a young son and a large Delta plantation inherited from her first husband.⁵⁵ Immediately after their marriage the Vardamans began making trips to Sidon, the site of the plantation; and in September they gave up residence in Winona and moved to Sidon.⁵⁶

Sidon, located on the Yazoo River, was in one of the first parts of the Delta settled by white men. In 1882 Douglas Robinson had died and bequeathed his property, which totaled about three thousand acres, to his wife and unborn child, Douglas, Jr.⁵⁷ On what had been Robinson's plantation Vardaman and his bride went to live in 1884. The Vardamans did not long remain in Sidon, for in January of 1886 they moved to Greenwood, a town about ten miles to the north of Sidon in Leflore County, which was rapidly becoming a chief river port on the Yazoo.⁵⁸ Yet the Vardamans maintained close relations with Sidon. Indeed between 1887 and 1890 it appeared that Sidon might develop into a flourishing community. In 1886 the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, a branch of the Illinois Central, had been built through

Sidon; with comparatively good roads to the hill country and a steamboat landing on the Yazoo River, the little village became more active as a trading center. A number of enterprising merchants came to Sidon hoping to profit by the area's expanding trade, so that by 1890 there were eleven stores and two saloons.⁵⁹ In 1887 the Vardamans had begun to sell parts of their land, both in the town of Sidon and in the adjoining countryside, and these sales contributed to Sidon's growth.⁶⁰ Vardaman not only sold land, but on one occasion at least built a store for a merchant who wanted to come to Sidon.⁶¹ But Sidon did not develop as he hoped. Greenwood grew more rapidly and overshadowed its neighbor to the south. Then in 1894 a disastrous fire swept through Sidon, destroying much of the town.⁶² Though this outcome must have been distressing to the Vardamans, their property at Sidon helped sustain the family in its early years and would be used as collateral during the 1890's.⁶³

After moving to Greenwood the Vardamans developed an active social life. Vardaman enjoyed playing the host, and his consideration for others, gracious manners, personal magnetism, and sense of fun, attracted visitors to the household. Friends and relatives often came from Carrollton or Winona or Sidon, places to which the Vardamans paid visits in return. James and Anna especially enjoyed the company of young people and gave frequent dances for them.⁶⁴ Birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries were the occasions for more general parties featuring large dinners, games, and dancing into the early hours of the morning.⁶⁵

For seventeen years James and Anna made their home in the Delta town of Greenwood. The first of their children, Bessie, born in Sidon in 1885, died the following year of influenza. Then came Altha in 1887, James Money in 1891, James Kimble, Jr., in 1893, and Minnie in 1896.⁶⁶ They, together with their half-brother Douglas Robinson, Jr., brought the family up to seven. The family was a close knit unit. Anna was totally absorbed in the role of wife and mother, and James, despite the rising distractions of politics, devoted much time to his family, especially to the problems and interests of the children. He gave as much love to his stepson, Douglas, as to his own children, and Douglas in time made recompense by helping his stepfather in a number of political campaigns.⁶⁷

Vardaman's most distinctive habit during his years in Greenwood, and a presumptive source of his abilities as a writer and speaker, was his avid reading. When not entertaining he habitually spent long evenings in the solitude of his library.⁶⁸ As soon as he got to the state legislature in 1890 his fellow members nicknamed him the "bookworm."⁶⁹ When the Vardaman home burned the next year, the loss of books, of which the usual price was then not above one to three dollars apiece, was estimated at \$2,000 to \$2,500.⁷⁰ Precisely what Vardaman read is not known, but from his editorials it appears that he concentrated on the classics, history, and poetry.

As a private citizen Vardaman took an active role in the affairs of Greenwood and the Delta. He often served on committees for the

advancement and welfare of the community. He co-operated with fellow citizens in appealing to the federal government for protection against caving banks caused by the current of the Yazoo River.⁷¹ He set an example for his fellow citizens by being one of the first to lay a sidewalk in front of his home.⁷² In the summer of 1889 the Mississippi Hedge Company attempted to stimulate the development of Osage orange hedges in the Delta, and Vardaman was among those invited to Union City, Tennessee, to inspect the feasibility of the project.⁷³ In 1896 he served as one of the state commissioners for the Southern States Exposition to be held in Chicago the next year; under his leadership Leflore County arranged a display there.⁷⁴ He led the fight to reinforce the levees against the rising waters of the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers that often endangered the Delta during the spring months.⁷⁵ When a yellow fever epidemic threatened the county in 1897, he assumed a leading role in organizing quarantine practices..⁷⁶

While he lived in Greenwood Vardaman journeyed constantly to the neighboring towns of Carrollton, Winona, Grenada, and Greenville, and sometimes as far afield as Memphis and New Orleans. In all his travels he displayed a facility for making friendships and lasting impressions. This faculty was to play a major role in his later political success.

As a lawyer Vardaman practiced alone except for two brief periods. In 1887 he formed a partnership with J. E. Prewitt and Bonner Richardson that lasted only six months;⁷⁷ in 1892 he and R. G. Humphreys

worked together for about a year.⁷⁸ Vardaman became an active member of the Leflore County bar association and helped to draw up basic regulations for the local profession concerning fees and expenditures.⁷⁹ In 1893 he served as city attorney of Greenwood, and in 1896 the board of supervisors appointed him county attorney.⁸⁰ Each of these positions he held for only a short time, and it does not appear that his private practice ever amounted to much. A survey of the criminal dockets and minute books of Leflore County for the 1880's and early 1890's reveals that the firm of W. T. Rush and A. T. Gardiner handled the greater part of the legal business arising in Greenwood, and that Vardaman participated in only a few cases. Perhaps his meager success at the law caused Vardaman to turn back to journalism, a calling in which he would become one of the leaders of the state.

NOTES

¹E. N. Lowe, A Preliminary Study of Soils of Mississippi (Nashville, 1911), 65-66.

²U. S. Bureau of the Census, Compendium of the Eleventh Census (3 pts., Washington, 1897), I, 242.

³Dunbar Rowland, The Official and Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi, 1908 (Nashville, 1908), 975.

⁴Vardaman family genealogy, in possession of Mrs. J. H. Freeman, Greenwood, Mississippi.

⁵National Archives and Records Service, Bounty Land Warrant, no. 47587-80-55.

⁶Fox family genealogy, in possession of Mrs. J. H. Freeman, Greenwood, Mississippi; Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine, XXI (April, 1940), 217-290; Charles Granville Hamilton, Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era, 1904-1920 (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1958), 60.

⁷Albert S. Coody, Biographical Sketches of James K. Vardaman (Jackson, Miss., 1922), 13-14; Charles S. Sydnor, "James Kimble Vardaman," Dictionary of American Biography, ed. by Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, 20 vols. (New York, 1928-1937), XIX, 221-222.

⁸Vardaman family genealogy.

⁹Hamilton, Mississippi in the Progressive Era, 60-61.

¹⁰Interview with Mrs. J. H. Freeman, Greenwood, Mississippi, July 3, 1963. Coody's assertion, Biographical Sketches, 8, that Vardaman injured his arm while operating a corn sheller is false.

¹¹Pierson Money had married Vardaman's aunt, Triphenie Vardaman. Vardaman family genealogy.

¹²Heber A. Ladner, James K. Vardaman in Mississippi Politics (unpublished M. A. thesis, Duke University, 1938), 8; Coody, Biographical Sketches, 14-16.

¹³Charles S. Sydnor, "Hernando DeSoto Money," Dictionary of American Biography, XIII, 85-86; Rowland, Official and Statistical Register, 974-976.

¹⁴Hamilton, Mississippi in the Progressive Era, 62.

¹⁵ May Spencer Ringold, "Senator James Zachariah George of Mississippi: Bourbon or Liberal," Journal of Mississippi History, XVI (July, 1954), 164-182; May Spencer Ringold, Some Liberal Aspects in the Senatorial Policies of James Zachariah George during the Period, 1881-1890 (unpublished M. A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1950), passim.

¹⁶ Hamilton, Mississippi in the Progressive Era, 62-64.

¹⁷ Winona Centennial: Commemorating the Incorporation of the City of Winona in 1861 and More Than 100 Years of Progress as a Community (n.p., 1961); Compendium of the Eleventh Census, I, 242.

¹⁸ Mississippi Historical Records Survey, Service Division, Mississippi Newspapers, 1805-1940: A Preliminary Union List of Mississippi Newspaper Files Available in County Archives, Offices of Publishers, Libraries, and Private Collections in Mississippi (Jackson, Miss., 1942), 87.

¹⁹ Winona Advance, May 4, 1883.

²⁰ Thomas D. Clark, "The Country Newspaper: A Factor in Southern Opinion, 1865-1930," Journal of Southern History, XIV (February, 1948), 5; Thomas D. Clark, The Southern Country Editor (New York, 1948), 35.

²¹ Winona Advance, May 4, 1883.

²² Ibid., May 11, 1883.

²³ Ibid., May 4, 1883.

²⁴ Ibid., May 13, 1883.

²⁵ Ibid., June 15, 1883.

²⁶ Ibid., August 31, 1883.

²⁷ Willie D. Halsell, "Democratic Dissension in Mississippi, 1878-1882," Journal of Mississippi History, II (July, 1940), 123-135; Willie D. Halsell, "Republican Factionalism in Mississippi, 1882-1884," Journal of Southern History, VII (February, 1941), 84-101; Willie D. Halsell, "James R. Chalmers and 'Mahoneism,' in Mississippi," Journal of Southern History, X (February, 1944), 37-58.

²⁸ Winona Advance, July 27, 1883.

²⁹ Ibid., August 31, September 14, 21, 1883.

³⁰ Ibid., August 3, 1883.

³¹ Ibid., August 10, 1883.

³²Greenwood Yazoo Valley Flag, quoted in Winona Advance, September 7, 1883.

³³Ibid., August 24, 31, 1883.

³⁴Ibid., August 31, September 14, 1883.

³⁵Greenwood Yazoo Valley Flag, quoted in Winona Advance, September 21, 1883.

³⁶Ibid., September 28, 1883.

³⁷Twenty years later, when Vardaman and Noel were opponents in the first state Democratic primary for governor, Noel maintained that he had not been aware of the actions of the Lexington convention and had not approved its methods. Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, June 14, 1902.

³⁸Winona Advance, September 7, 1883.

³⁹Ibid., October 19, 1883.

⁴⁰Ibid., January 11, 1884. In this issue Vardaman published a card asking his former patrons to pay all debts they owed the Advance incurred during his editorship.

⁴¹Thomas Jefferson Bailey, Prohibition in Mississippi; or, Anti-Liquor Legislation from Territorial Days with its Results in the Counties (Jackson, 1917), 51-63.

⁴²Daniel Jay Whitener, Prohibition in North Carolina, 1715-1945 (Chapel Hill, 1945), 50, 57-58; James Benson Sellers, The Prohibition Movement in Alabama, 1702 to 1943 (Chapel Hill, 1943), 50-51.

⁴³Winona Advance, February 9, 1883.

⁴⁴Ibid., June 15, 1883.

⁴⁵Ibid., June 8, 29, July 13, 1883.

⁴⁶Ibid., January 25, 1884.

⁴⁷Mississippi Newspapers, 1805-1940, 260-262.

⁴⁸Ibid., January 11, 1884; Winona Times, March 14, 28, April 18, 1884.

⁴⁹Winona Advance, February 1, June 20, 1884.

⁵⁰Winona Times, March 14, 1884.

⁵¹Ibid., May 23, 30, 1885.

⁵²Ibid., June 6, 1884. To insure a fair election, the prohibitionists appointed election commissioners for each beat to supervise the voting and the ballot count. Winona Times, June 20, 1884.

⁵³Winona Advance, February 8, 1884.

⁵⁴Ibid., July 11, 1884.

⁵⁵Vardaman family genealogy; Winona Times, June 6, 1884; Frank E. Smith, The Yazoo River (New York, 1954), 268-269.

⁵⁶Winona Times, June 6, 13, 27, September 5, 26, 1884.

⁵⁷Smith, The Yazoo, 267; Mary K. Ward and Frank Smith, A Short History of Sidon, Mississippi (unpublished paper, Greenwood Public Library, Greenwood, Mississippi, 1937).

⁵⁸Greenwood, Yazoo Valley Flag, January 16, 1886. Greenwood's population increased from 308 in 1880 to 1,055 by 1890. Compendium of the Eleventh Census, 1890, I, 241.

⁵⁹Ward and Smith, History of Sidon; Compendium of the Eleventh Census, 1890, I, 241. Sidon's population in 1890 was 119.

⁶⁰Deed Book of Leflore County (Office of the Chancery Clerk, Greenwood, Mississippi), vols. XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XX, XXXIV, XXXVII, passim.

⁶¹Greenwood, Yazoo Valley Flag, March 10, 1888.

⁶²Ward and Smith, History of Sidon.

⁶³The Vardamans had previously divided the land into two sections: James and Anna retained the ownership of one part; an equally large section, consisting of numerous lots in the town of Sidon, they registered in the name of Douglas Robinson, Jr. Until he came of age his property remained in a trust under the supervision of the chancery court of Leflore County. Deed Books of Leflore County, XII, 123-124.

⁶⁴Greenwood Enterprise, July 5, 1895; Greenwood Commonwealth, June 17, 1897, August 17, 1900.

⁶⁵Greenwood, Yazoo Valley Flag, May 22, July 31, 1886, June 4, August 6, 1887, November 17, 1888, January 5, February 23, 1889; Greenwood Enterprise, June 2, 1893.

⁶⁶Vardaman family genealogy.

⁶⁷ Interview with Mr. Douglas Robinson, Jackson, Mississippi, August 23, 1963; interview with Mrs. W. T. Ratliff, Birmingham, Alabama, September 3, 1963.

⁶⁸ Interview with Mrs. J. H. Freeman.

⁶⁹ Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, February 13, 1890.

⁷⁰ Greenwood Enterprise, August 20, 1891.

⁷¹ Greenwood Yazoo Valley Flag, September 17, December 3, 1887.

⁷² Ibid., January 5, 1889.

⁷³ Ibid., July 27, August 17, 1889.

⁷⁴ Greenwood Enterprise, April 3, 1896.

⁷⁵ Greenwood Delta Flag, March 26, 1897.

⁷⁶ Greenwood Commonwealth, September 23, 1897.

⁷⁷ Greenwood Yazoo Valley Flag, January 8, July 30, 1887.

⁷⁸ Greenwood Enterprise, May 20, 1892, March 31, 1893.

⁷⁹ Greenwood Yazoo Valley Flag, January 22, February 5, May 28, 1887.

⁸⁰ Greenwood Enterprise, September 15, 1893, April 10, 1896.

CHAPTER II

THE COUNTRY EDITOR

In 1890 Greenwood had two weekly newspapers, the Yazoo Valley Flag and the Greenwood Enterprise. The Enterprise, edited by Will Cowan since 1889, was a four page paper, similar in lay-out to Vardaman's Winona Advance of 1883.¹ The front and back pages contained advertisements, national and international news, and feature stories. The second and third pages dealt briefly with state and local news. In the autumn of 1889 Cowan announced a desire to sell the Enterprise, and Vardaman expressed interest in it, but nothing came of this idea until the office of the Enterprise was badly damaged in a fire that destroyed much of the Greenwood business district in May, 1890. Shortly thereafter Vardaman bought the paper from Cowan, probably for less than the previous price.²

As was customary, Vardaman's fellow editors welcomed him to the profession. The Winona Times foresaw that he would make of the Enterprise "one of the ablest and best papers in the State." The Lexington Bulletin alluded to his having newspaper experience, called him "an able writer of broad liberal views," and joined in predicting success.³ That Vardaman intended to succeed, there can be no doubt.

Vardaman began his editorship with a promise to revise and improve the Enterprise so as to warrant a greater circulation, and he soon proved as good as his word. By October, 1890, he had purchased

a new press, expanded the Enterprise, and given it a new format. The paper became an eight-page publication and covered a wide range of topics. The front page was usually devoted to state and national politics, letters and speeches by Mississippi congressmen, and articles from other newspapers of the state. The inside pages were aimed at one and all: Articles on agriculture to attract farmers; sentimental short stories to arouse female interest; Billi Arp's humor column and reports of sensational crimes to capture everyone's attention. Vardaman expanded local news to cover the whole of Leflore county, with correspondents in each community reporting all arrivals, departures, births, deaths, marriages, and social events. He also began publishing under the heading "Sunday Service," a sermon delivered by one of the local ministers the previous Sunday.⁴

The improvements were rewarded by an increase in advertising and circulation. The new press, which produced larger and more attractive advertisements than had formerly appeared, brought patronage not only from Greenwood business men but also from merchants in adjoining towns. By October, 1890, Vardaman boasted of a weekly circulation exceeding one thousand copies and covering Leflore, Carroll, Sunflower, and Holmes counties.⁵ The regular subscription rate was \$2 a year. In a further effort to expand circulation he offered to send the paper free for two months to any new subscriber.⁶ At the same time, facing a problem universal to country editors, he constantly pled for his readers to pay the debts they owed him.⁷

Except for the mechanical work and for temporary help from his cousin George P. Money, Vardaman in the beginning edited and published the Enterprise single-handed.⁸ The job of a country editor was not easy. After Vardaman entered the state legislature its sessions sometimes kept him away from Greenwood for months at a time. Lack of money also pressed him on occasion. By the beginning of 1892 his weekly paper had reverted to a four-page size. Because he needed to get editorial and financial help, Vardaman in January, 1892, sold a half interest in the paper to J. L. Gillespie, formerly a member of the legislature and editor of papers in Tupelo and Oxford. Gillespie became business manager and served as editor when Vardaman was out of town; Vardaman retained control over editorial policy.⁹

Soon after Gillespie joined, the Enterprise rose again to an eight-page format. Early the next year, however, fire destroyed the office and equipment. The paper was not interrupted, but the printing was done in a neighboring town for almost six months and the size fell back to four pages.¹⁰ In September, 1893, Vardaman and Gillespie purchased the right to use the Taylor Chromatic Printing Process, which enabled them to produce a handsome paper with color printing and advertising.¹¹ By 1894 the editors had recovered sufficiently from their losses to return the paper to an eight-page format. In addition to the older features, the Enterprise now contained "Sam Jones's Weekly Letter," "T. DeWitt Talmage's Sermons," "Fashion Letters," and "Agricultural Notes."¹²

During the five years that Vardaman edited the Enterprise it became a leading paper in the Delta country. Its local rival, the Delta Flag, remained a four-page publication during much of this time, although it eventually assumed an eight-page lay-out similar to that of the Enterprise.¹³ There is no way of knowing which paper was more widely read. In 1895, however, the Enterprise boasted a weekly subscription of 1,200.¹⁴

As editor of the Enterprise Vardaman carefully formed and maintained his policies. No longer did he try to avoid offending readers and to remain friends with all, as he had when he had become editor of the Advance. Now he believed that an editor should, after mature deliberation, form opinions, announce them, and stand by them.¹⁵ Vardaman strove to prevent his editorial page from becoming littered with petty compliments to friends and local personages.¹⁶

An early incident showed forcefully the hazards of editorial responsibility. In late July, 1890, a group of pranksters cut from an illustrated newspaper a picture of the Chicago city council, which had recently been accused of graft; wrote over the head of each councilman the name of a Greenwood city official; and then posted the illustration on the Delta Bank. Evidently Vardaman thought that the incident involved more than a harmless joke, for he condemned it in a stinging editorial: "The man who would assassinate your character . . . would when occasion permitted stab you in the back or shoot you in the dark."¹⁷ His editorial enraged Walter Stoddard and T. H. Upshur, two

of the pranksters. They soon confronted Vardaman and his cousin, James Money, in downtown Greenwood. Had Vardaman written the editorial? Stoddard asked. He had. What did he mean by it? He meant, Vardaman replied, exactly what he said. Stoddard slapped Vardaman's face, and both sides instantly drew pistols and began to fire. When the shooting stopped Stoddard lay dead, his body riddled by five bullets; a shot had broken Money's leg; Upshur had fled the scene; and Vardaman had not been harmed.¹⁸ No one pressed charges against Vardaman and Money, since they had fought in self-defense.¹⁹ The shooting did help to establish Vardaman's reputation as an editor who would stand by his work. Although many of his later editorials aroused anger, no one ever repeated Stoddard's mistake.

As editor of the Enterprise he avoided sensationalism and vituperative journalism. He deemed accurate reporting more important. When a fellow editor, for example, reported that officials at the Yallobusha County convict farm treated prisoners cruelly, Vardaman sent an agent to the farm to investigate the situation, concluded that the charges were groundless, and condemned his irresponsible colleague.²⁰ Vardaman wrote ordinarily in a moderate tone, not resorting to invective nor distortion. Those public officials whom he criticized could reply through the columns of the Enterprise free of charge. Indeed, Vardaman promised that the "most violent and uncompromising personal enemy will be accorded the same fairness of reply that would be given the warmest and most devoted personal friend."²¹ Sometimes men who opposed Vardaman's views took advantage of this offer.²²

Newspaper editors, Vardaman believed, had a special obligation to society. Usually they constituted the only medium for informing the public about current happenings. In a speech to the Mississippi Press Association in May, 1893, he called the attention of his colleagues to their responsibilities, asserting that there had never been "a more imperative demand for honest, intelligent and courageous journalistic work, than confronts us today." Too many accepted existing conditions without realizing major changes might soon occur. The present was an age of transition: "We are in the very vortex of mutations-- The old order of things is being displaced by the new--the multitudinous interests are demanding a change in our system." Change might represent progress and advancement, but many existing forces endangered the nation.

The concentration of wealth in the hands of a favored few--the unholy greed for gold--the prostitution of the ballot--the subversion and subordination of every moral truth to sordid selfishness--the widespread want and discontent--the emasculating effect of inherited indigence--all brought about by unjust and immoral legislation--legislation enacted for the purpose of robbing the indigent many for the enrichment of the few, are the deadly germs of governmental destruction--the fatal symptoms of national death.

Drawing an analogy from James Anthony Froude's Caesar: A Sketch, he warned that weaknesses similar to those that caused the downfall of Rome endangered America in the 1890's.²³ Editors must inform their readers and arouse them to action.²⁴

As every editor was expected to do, Vardaman worked for the advancement of his town. Since the Civil War the population of the

Delta had grown rapidly, and Greenwood had shared in this growth. Yet it remained a rural town, and in the early 1890's did not have even the electric lights, water works, and telephones that other municipalities throughout the country were adopting.²⁵ Vardaman worked for these and other improvements, but not by attacking city officials nor criticizing their lack of initiative. He directed his appeals to his readers. If he could arouse enthusiasm for improvements, their attainment would be only a matter of time, and to arouse animosities might make it more difficult to achieve them.²⁶

The Enterprise constantly strove to improve the city's business opportunities. Vardaman issued special trade editions which described the growth of Greenwood, the advantages of doing business with her merchants, and the possibilities of future expansion. Frequently sixteen pages long, these trade editions were distributed throughout Leflore and adjoining counties.²⁷ Vardaman also encouraged the establishment of manufactories. Greenwood had a variety of small enterprises, such as stave companies, cooperages, foundries, and machine shops, but no large establishments.²⁸ In an attempt to encourage industrial growth the Enterprise advocated the formation of a business men's league, whose members should correspond with men throughout the country interested in establishing factories in the South. When the citizens of Greenwood formed such a league in 1893, Vardaman became a leading member.²⁹

What Greenwood needed above all else, Vardaman thought, was a

public high school. If the city erected an adequate building, teachers and school would follow. He recommended a structure costing \$15,000 to be financed by twenty-year bonds. An adequate educational system would attract new people to the area; the money that wealthier parents now paid to boarding schools could be directed into Greenwood's economy; and children could remain at home throughout the year. Furthermore, society should assist those who could not afford a private education: "This class of children--the poor of society [---] are entitled to some consideration." In the long run, Vardaman warned, it would be wise for the wealthier people to provide this necessity for the poor.³⁰

When the new state constitution of 1890 provided for a minimum of four months public schooling to be paid from the state's general fund, and authorized individual counties to extend the term by levying a special tax, the Enterprise became more vehement in demanding a school.³¹ After a time numerous citizens petitioned the city council to erect a frame schoolhouse costing not more than \$2,000. This Vardaman opposed, arguing that within a few years the cheap building would have to be abandoned. When the city council proceeded to order the construction of a \$3,000 building, Vardaman expressed his confirmed disapproval. Such a building would not insure a competent and efficient school system nor attract men with capital to invest "to come and cast their lot among us." Nevertheless, Vardaman accepted the proposal as better than none, and as a final effort appealed for a ten month school term.³²

That Greenwood needed better fire protection was well demonstrated by the fact that within a five year period the Enterprise office burned twice. The town eventually provided for a volunteer fire company and urgings by the Enterprise and various civic groups presently induced the county board of supervisors to order the erection of a fire proof vault in which to preserve public records.³³

Even more serious was the lack of public utilities. Dependent upon wells for her water supply, Greenwood had neither running water nor a sewage system. The Enterprise suggested that the experience of Yazoo City showed that river water could be filtered and pumped into an elevated tank to furnish an inexhaustible supply the year around.³⁴ Despite Vardaman's pleadings, more than a decade passed before Greenwood got around to establishing a water works.

The five years that Vardaman edited the Enterprise, 1890-1895, saw Greenwood gain not only a school of sorts, a fire company, and a fire proof vault, but also a street car system, an electric light plant, telephones, and an opera house. Vardaman had helped to obtain these improvements by educating the public to the need. While civic spirit motivated him, enlightened self-interest also entered in. A town with an active spirit, an educated citizenry, and an expanding economy could better support its newspapers.³⁵

Having quickly become an influential figure among his fellow editors, Vardaman was instrumental in inducing the Mississippi Press Association to meet at Greenwood in May, 1893.³⁶ The Enterprise

urged its readers to prepare for the occasion, and committees made plans to entertain the visitors. Since there was a strong prohibition movement in Leflore County at the time, the editor of the Oxford Globe asked if Greenwood was a dry town. "Yes!" Vardaman replied, "But it is not exactly working at the business yet. . . . There will be enough on hand for the 'boys' on the 16th."³⁷ As Vardaman hoped, many of the editors returned to their homes after the meeting prepared to sing the praises of the progressive Delta town of Greenwood.³⁸

As it might seem paradoxical in light of some of his other beliefs, Vardaman was a decided advocate of certain humanitarian reforms and liberal positions. The most surprising of these, perhaps, was his conviction that capital punishment should be abolished. In an era when southern life on its darker side was characterized by much violence, large crowds customarily assembled to witness public hangings.³⁹ Despite the strength of this frontier mentality, Vardaman considered the adage of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" to indicate ignorance, barbarity, and revenge.⁴⁰ The Greenwood editor opposed capital punishment because he believed it did not deter crime: "You may hang, burn or flay, but crime will be committed."⁴¹ Capital punishment, he argued, could only be defended on the grounds of revenge. Convinced that the state should strive to deter crime and rehabilitate criminals, he considered capital punishment to be no more justified than lynch law. Nor had the state any greater right to hang a man than had a mob; if the state did not consider life sacred, neither would the mob.⁴²

Far more important than capital punishment as a practical issue in the South was prison reform, which Vardaman also advocated. The barbaric convict lease system still existing in Mississippi during the 1890's caused untold injustices.⁴³ One instance illustrates Vardaman's opposition to the system. On a morning in April, 1894, at the request of the sheriff he examined a Negro prisoner, Julius Adams, who had just escaped from the farm of J. H. Foltz. Convicted of petty larceny and unable to pay a fine of \$14, Adams had been leased to Foltz.⁴⁴ Adams's story was that while he worked outdoors during the winter his fingers froze; the skin burst and peeled off exposing the raw bones. Foltz forced him to continue working, and most of his fingers began to rot. No physician attended him. When his hands began to stink, an assistant of Foltz took him to a block and cut off each of his fingers at the first joint. Finally he could not work, and Foltz locked him in a log cabin and chained him down each night. In March Adams again went to work in the yard and fled at the first opportunity. Although pursued by dogs, he managed to reach the sheriff's office in Greenwood.

Vardaman's editorial on the inhumanity to Julius Adams opened with these lines:

Nothings But a Convict!
 Man's inhumanity to man.
 Makes countless thousands mourn.

In biting language Vardaman attacked the entire convict lease system and the society that tolerated it. For a minute crime the state had assigned this poor creature to a living hell:

In this day of bibles, boasted benevolence, charity and forgiveness . . . we find in our midst, committed by intelligent white people deeds of barbarity that would outrage the bloody instincts of the most conscienceless savage that ever roamed the wilds of the West!

True, many considered him nothing but a "damned negro convict" lacking even the rights of beasts of burden. Admittedly the Negro had no political rights in Mississippi, but Vardaman maintained that the white race must be humane to all. Even if one-half of Adams's story was true, "then there is enough [in it] to dam, to make crimson the souls of the whole community." It would be better to take a gun and blow out a prisoner's brains than subject him to the ordeal through which Adams had passed.⁴⁵

Foltz published a statement in which he denied the charges leveled against him. He held that when Adams came to his farm he had syphilis, which rendered him liable to serious injury from slight exposure.⁴⁶ The outcome of the Adams's case is unknown. Its barbarity was, however, inescapable. As Vardaman pointed out, one thing did not lie: "the mutilated disfigured hands."⁴⁷

One reason the southern people lagged far behind the rest of the nation in the management of their penal institutions, Vardaman believed, was that many did not understand the cause of crime. He did not believe that man had complete free will and was responsible for all of his actions. Rather he maintained that "it is quite probable that the actions of all men are determined by countless causes over which they have no control." Certainly in many cases mental illness

and environmental factors gave rise to crime. Convinced that many criminals were not responsible for their actions, Vardaman urged that prisons should be "moral hospitals," and "when the patient shows symptoms of returning or entirely recovers he should be released."⁴⁸

Throughout Vardaman's early writings ran a persistent note of optimism: He believed in progress. Someday after time and education had done their work man would end capital punishment and institute prison reforms. To insure his own advancement man must have complete freedom of thought. Intolerance, bigotry, and fanaticism had always "rested like a foul fog upon progress and prosperity." It did not matter what men might believe temporarily, if they came to their conclusions honestly and could express them freely; mistakes would be made, but if men remained free all error would eventually be driven out.⁴⁹ To those who feared unrestricted intellectual freedom, Vardaman pointed to scientific discoveries which the church had considered to be "an emanation from infinite wickedness." Bruno and Servetus had suffered at the hands of the "ruling ignorance of their respective times." Modern men must follow the course of intellectual freedom.⁵⁰

Because he believed in free inquiry, Vardaman sharply criticized religious groups desirous of imposing their views on others. Sunday blue laws particularly aroused his ire. In Tennessee a judge had fined a Seventh Day Adventist for working on Sunday. In reviewing the case Vardaman noted that the witnesses had not claimed that the accused had disturbed a religious meeting, nor that he had violated their individual

rights; he only had shocked their moral sense, and the court had ruled that shock to be a nuisance. Vardaman doubted that the witnesses had a moral sense, for it "is a very common human frailty to mistake bigotry and intolerance for moral sense."⁵¹ State laws should not attempt to control conscience but should allow the utmost freedom in individual matters.⁵² In his war against Sunday blue laws, Vardaman even leveled his guns at the Mississippi State Baptist Convention, which had opposed having the World's Fair open on Sundays. Arguing that many people could attend the fair only on Sunday, Vardaman hoped the authorities would pay no attention to such demands.⁵³

Vardaman had little respect for ministers who abused their positions by attacking individuals or groups. Resort to such vulgar and slanderous attacks degraded their office. Vardaman considered that the attacks of Sam Small upon bootleggers, gamblers, and prostitutes--attacks widely reported in the southern newspapers--were "as much out of place in the pulpit as prostitution is out of place in the home of purity or around the fireside of virtue."⁵⁴ When Small was beaten by a bartender, Vardaman believed he had gotten what he deserved.⁵⁵

In Vardaman's mind Thomas Paine became symbolic as a champion of intellectual freedom and a victim of ignorance and religious intolerance. More than any man, Paine had helped the cause of American independence, and at the end of the Revolution only Washington's popularity had exceeded his. Then Paine wrote the Age of Reason "and the Christian world has waged cruel and relentless warfare against him

from that time to this good day." For one indiscretion he lost all. Although Vardaman thought Paine had erred in writing the Age of Reason, Paine believed what he wrote, and the treatment accorded him was a crime for which "the recipients of his benefaction must suffer in the judgement of coming generations."⁵⁶

Though Vardaman's outlook on humanitarian reform and intellectual freedom, as well as his zeal for civic improvements, would be considered liberal by his own and later generations, and help to explain why he became a progressive governor and senator, his views on other matters, and especially in relation to the Negro, were far from enlightened. He was in truth a hard-shelled racist. In great measure his attitude simply reflected his time, place, and circumstances. Many people both North and South regarded the Negro as an inferior being, and concern over his welfare had been muted following 1875.⁵⁷ In the South the legacy of Reconstruction had given particular emphasis to the problem of "keeping the Negro in his place," and fear of Negro domination had been a chief concern of southern politics during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Finally, Vardaman had spent much of his life watching a white minority rule a society in which the blacks were a majority, often a vast majority.

As proof that racial conflict was a living reality, and that the whites must look to their supremacy, Vardaman would surely have pointed to an incident in Leflore County, where Negroes outnumbered whites 14,267 to 2,597.⁵⁹ On the night of August 31, 1889 racial vio-

lence erupted. In the northern part of the county about five hundred armed Negroes defied local authorities and threatened to march on Greenwood. Similar disturbances had occurred a few days earlier in the community of Shell Mound. The sheriff wired Governor Robert Lowery for help. National guardsmen soon arrived, but not before the Negroes had destroyed some property. With the arrival of troops the Negroes dispersed into small bands and fled to the "cane-brakers," but local whites hunted them down and shot a number.⁶⁰

At Winona Vardaman had supported white supremacy as a political necessity, and at Greenwood he developed his views more fully and expressed them in his newspaper in concrete language. The Negro had to be barred from voting and holding office because he was incapable of self-government. For proof Vardaman pointed to the histories of Haiti and San Domingo, which he described as characterized by revolution, chaos, and despotism. Yet it was the race that ruled San Domingo which the "Republicans of the North have been trying for the last thirty years to place at the head of the governmental affairs of the South," most recently the Force Bill of 1890.⁶¹ The South would never submit to such domination. No matter how many laws Congress passed to insure the Negro social and political equality, he would not be allowed to enjoy them. Southern whites would treat him properly "just so long as he keeps the place which nature designed for him." All white Americans should co-operate in meeting this problem, Vardaman urged, by supporting the passage of laws that prohibited Negroes from participating in governmental activities.⁶²

Vardaman advocated lynch law occasionally as a means for suppressing insurrection, often as a punishment for the rape of a white female by a Negro male. Writing with vengeance and passion, he asserted that a "black brute" should be lynched for raping a white woman. Lynch law brought demoralizing and harmful effects to the whites, but when Negroes violated white women "there is nothing left to do with these human brutes but to kill them and at least get rid of them. That is all there is in it."⁶³ When a group of Negroes in Marianna, Arkansas, threatened an insurrection, he advised that the "judicious use of the noose and rifle might teach them a very salutary lesson."⁶⁴ Allowing Henry Jones, "a 30 year-old-negro brute," to stand trial for having raped a seven year old white child enraged Vardaman. The colored people themselves should have dealt with him in short order.⁶⁵ Vardaman did make one compassionate concession, namely that mobs should lynch their victims as quickly and simply as possible. He condemned the "brutal spirit" manifested by the people of Paris, Texas and the people of Memphis, Tennessee in burning Negroes who had ravished children.⁶⁶

Vardaman's concept of womanhood strongly influenced his justifying lynch law. As with many white men of his day, the fear of interracial marriage touched the emotional depth of his soul. Here his views on race stood out most clearly. The proudest boast of a southern man, he declared, was "the exalted virtue, the vestal purity and superlative qualities of Southern woman." He did not believe women to be inferior to men. If they wanted to enjoy equal political and

economic opportunity, they had the right. In one area, however, women surpassed men: In religion and morals. Believing women to be of a finer moral fiber than men, Vardaman was certain that females more frequently did the correct thing in matters of right and wrong. In turn, this female virtue exerted a decisive and much needed influence upon men. "The truth is that quality in woman is the check and balance wheel to man's character." Men, on the other hand, had constantly to strive to defend women's virtue, for their fall was "his saddest loss." Fathers and brothers had to protect their wives and sisters not only from Negro rapists, but from the evil intentions of dishonorable whites. Even the simple kiss could be a danger, "when given as an expression of lascivious emotions." Fathers and brothers who failed to regard it in this light might live to deplore their judgment. Since "promiscuous kissing" could become the "doorway of prostitution," the man who thus took advantage of a woman deserved death. "No, Brother, it is better that death be the penalty, that the debasement of the character of our siblime [sic] womanhood."⁶⁷

Many Northerners often failed to realize, Vardaman thought, that the blacks received more advantages from the whites than they returned. The whites fed, clothed, and schooled them receiving in return inefficient labor for six months of the year. The Negro was the greatest obstacle to material progress in the South; "he is a blight, a catapillar [sic] that destroys everything in sight and leaves nothing behind." All society suffered by his presence.⁶⁸

Burdensome though he believed Negroes to be, Vardaman conceded that the South could not do without them. In his own Delta country gangs of Negro field hands furnished the only available working force for the large plantations; Negroes also made the best share croppers; and any attempt to replace them would fail. "There is no man on earth," Vardaman warned, "who will take the negro's place in the South" under the existing system.⁶⁹ Vardaman suggested, however, that the existing system ought to be changed. If western farmers could be enticed to the Delta and the large plantations broken up and sold to them as small farms, the Delta would become one of the wealthiest agricultural sections in the world. The Negro had failed as an agriculturist, and the South would never become a prosperous section until white farmers replaced him.⁷⁰ But as long as the old system continued "Sambo is the only man that will suit the Delta farmer."⁷¹

Even though Vardaman advocated lynching and had closely assumed his basic position on the race question, he was less extreme in the early 1890's than he later became. He did not, for example, completely oppose Negro education. When Isiah T. Montgomery, a colored writer and lecturer, wanted to establish a grade school for Negro children at Cleveland, a Delta town not far from Greenwood, Vardaman published Montgomery's appeal for funds and quoted the Greenville Times in support of him: "The Stand which this man has taken for the improvement and elevation of the negro . . . entitle him to the hearty encouragement and material support of the white citizens and property owners of the Delta."⁷²

Vardaman's attitude toward Negroes was not reflected in what he had to say about any other racial or ethnic group, except perhaps Italians. When a New Orleans mob lynched eleven Italians in 1891, Vardaman supported the act. He believed the victims had been members of the Mafia and justified the murders by the "law of self protection." Italians throughout the country, and especially those in New Orleans, should understand that if they attempted to retaliate "the whole crowd will be wiped from the face of the earth." If necessary, the United States should go to war with Italy to settle the matter.⁷³ Whether this violent attitude reflected primarily fear of the Mafia, hostility toward Italians, or nationalistic bluster, it would be difficult to say.

Throughout his journalistic career Vardaman fought anti-Semitism. He could not understand prejudice against Jews as a race. True, there were some "thieving rascals" among them, but no more than among gentile groups. He believed the Jews to be the most law-abiding people in the world: "Obedient to authority, patriotic, charitable, sympathetic--loyal to friend and fair to foe, they make the ideal citizen."⁷⁴ Much of Greenwood's prosperity he attributed to its Jewish citizens, and on a number of occasions he defended Jews against unjust criticisms. When a Memphis judge described a Jewish witness as having the "down-trodden look of his race," Vardaman protested that American Jews were not "down trodden either in looks or in conduct."⁷⁵ The idea that the Jews might establish a nation in the Turkish Empire seemed ridiculous to Vardaman. The American Jew loved his country as much as any citizen

and would not give it up for any place on earth.⁷⁶ As editor of the Commonwealth in 1899, he advocated that the nations of the world express their disapproval of the Dreyfus case by withdrawing support from a worlds fair to be held in France.⁷⁷

A prohibition campaign in 1893 generated the most heated controversy of Vardaman's years as editor of the Enterprise. It resembled his earlier experiences in Winona, but this time he played a more decided role. Himself a practicing advocate of total abstention, Vardaman did not believe it wise or possible to enforce his views on others. He opposed prohibition but wanted rigid laws strictly enforced - to regulate the sale of liquor. By such a course many of the "little crossroad" saloons could be eliminated. He urged saloon owners to help enforce the laws, promising that if they did the "prejudice against the saloon in this country will die out entirely."⁷⁸ He opposed all attempts to enact statewide prohibition; if temperance legislation must be adopted, let it be on a county-option basis.⁷⁹

In Leflore County the movement began to gain momentum in June, 1893, when prohibition leaders began to circulate petitions requesting the board of supervisors to call a local option election. At first Vardaman did not endorse the prohibition cause, but he got into the fight in August, 1893, when the board of supervisors refused to call a local option election on the grounds that many signers of the petitions were not registered voters.⁸⁰ Believing the board had violated the law, Vardaman now sided with the prohibitionists and partly as a

result of his writings, public opinion soon forced the supervisors to yield and order an election for October 14.⁸¹

The antiprohibitionists now directed much of their wrath at the editor of the Enterprise. Judge S. R. Coleman, the attorney for the board of supervisors, accused him of treating the board unfairly and of relying on second-hand reports and rumors. On the personal side, he accused Vardaman of hypocrisy and asserted that the action of the board of supervisors had only given him an excuse to ally himself with the prohibitionists.⁸² For a short while Coleman became editor pro tempore of the Delta Flag and continued to attack Vardaman viciously.⁸³ As Vardaman replied to Coleman's attacks in kind, the feud between the two became so bitter that a group of mutual friends and civic leaders arranged a truce. The two editors agreed to retract everything of a personal nature written about the other and the bitterness between the two papers subsided.⁸⁴

The struggle for prohibition, however, continued at an even fiercer pace. Vardaman knew the saloon men were fighting for their lives, but he warned that they should not use Negroes in the coming election. Only white men must decide if Leflore County would be wet or dry.⁸⁵ Vardaman knew of what he wrote, because some antiprohibitionists did go through the county registering Negroes to vote. So serious did the situation become that the county Democratic executive committee issued a resolution urging all to work against the wholesale registration of Negroes.⁸⁵ This enraged the antiprohibitionists, who

interpreted it as an attempt by the Democratic leaders to side with the opposition.⁸⁶ The committee denied this charge and held it only wanted to maintain white Democracy in Leflore County. The state Supreme Court settled the controversy by ruling that no one could vote who had not registered four months before the election. The anti-prohibitionists accepted the court's decision as a death knell to their cause.⁸⁷ Although they continued to struggle, on October 14 the prohibitionists won the election.⁸⁸

In this contest Vardaman's experiences closely resembled his earlier ones at Winona. At first he refused to join the prohibitionists in their crusade. He believed in temperance, but he did not think it could be achieved through legislation. Only when the board of supervisors refused to order an election did Vardaman enter the contest. Believing the board to have openly violated the law, he condemned its action and urged his readers to support the temperance forces. The board's action added a new element to this highly emotional contest. Again as at Winona he demonstrated innate political talent, an asset of great value to a young editor who had begun his apprenticeship in Mississippi politics.

NOTES

¹Mississippi Historical Records Survey, Service Division, Mississippi Newspapers, 1805-1940: A Preliminary Union List of Mississippi Newspaper Files Available in County Archives, Offices of Publishers, Libraries, and Private Collections in Mississippi (Jackson, Miss., 1942), 87.

²Greenwood Enterprise, October 10, 1889, May 8, 1890.

³Winona Times and Lexington Bulletin quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, May 29, 1890.

⁴Ibid., June 19, October 24, November 14, 1890, February 20, May 9, 1891.

⁵Ibid., August 14, October 24, 1890.

⁶Ibid., March 21, 1891.

⁷Ibid., October 14, 1892.

⁸Mississippi Newspapers, 1805-1940, 87.

⁹Greenwood Enterprise, January 29, February 5, 1892.

¹⁰Ibid., February 3, 1893.

¹¹Ibid., September 22, 1893.

¹²Ibid., August 3, 1894.

¹³Greenwood Delta Flag, 1891, 1893, passim.

¹⁴Greenwood Enterprise, February 1, 1895.

¹⁵Ibid., September 10, 1891.

¹⁶Vardaman expressed himself forcefully on this problem. "There is nothing more contemptable [sic], and at the same time, more discouraging to the country editor . . . than the disposition on the part of some little one by three-quarters money changer, penut [sic] merchant, jack-let lawyer, or patent medicine doctor, to speak disparagingly and lightly of the county newspaper. They seem to think that the newspaper is established and run solely for the purpose of paying cheap compliments and publishing senseless communications without charge." Greenwood Enterprise, May 4, 1894.

¹⁷Ibid., quoted in the Yazoo Sentinel, August 7, 1900. The issues for the Enterprise for early August 1900 are not on file in the Office of the Chancery Clerk in Greenwood, nor in any other depository known to the author.

¹⁸Yazoo Sentinel, August 7, 1900; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, August 1, 1890. The shooting occurred on August 1, 1890.

¹⁹Yazoo Sentinel, August 14, 1890; Greenwood Enterprise, August 14, 21, 1890.

²⁰Ibid., May 9, 1891.

²¹Ibid., May 9, 1891, June 29, December 7, 1894.

²²Ibid., August 8, 1891, June 30, 1893.

²³In his speech Vardaman did not refer to a specific work. James Anthony Froude's only major work on Roman history, however, was Caesar: A Sketch (London, 1879). British Museum, General Catalogue of Printed Books: New Edition (London, 1961), LXXX, 201.

²⁴Vardaman's speech was published in the Greenwood Enterprise, May 12, 1893.

²⁵U. S. Bureau of the Census, Compendium of the Eleventh Census: 1890 (3 pts., Washington, 1897, I, 241. Between 1880 and 1890 Greenwood's population had grown from 308 to 1,055. In its adoption of civic improvements at this time Greenwood resembled hundreds of other cities and towns throughout the United States. Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Rise of the City 1878-1898 (New York, 1933), 92-106; Edward C. Kirkland, Industry Comes of Age: Business, Labor, and Public Policy, 1860-1897 (New York, 1961), 241-244; Roger Burlingame, Engines of Democracy: Inventions and Society in Mature America (New York, 1940), 243-247; John W. Oliver, History of American Technology (New York, 1956), 349-351, 433-440.

²⁶Greenwood Enterprise, June 19, 1890.

²⁷Ibid., August 14, 1890, September 10, 1891, September 22, 1893, September 28, 1894.

²⁸Ibid., January 1, 1892.

²⁹Ibid., November 3, 10, 1893.

³⁰Ibid., May 29, June 19, 1890.

³¹Ibid., October 24, 1890.

- ³²Ibid., February 20, March 21, April 4, 1891.
- ³³Ibid., October 24, 1890, February 3, July 25, 1893, October 5, 1894.
- ³⁴Ibid., October 31, 1890.
- ³⁵Thomas D. Clark, The Southern Country Editor (New York, 1948), 30.
- ³⁶Tunica Independent quoted in the Greenwood Enterprise, June 2, 1893.
- ³⁷Ibid., May 11, 1894.
- ³⁸R. H. Henry, Editors I Have Known Since the Civil War (New Orleans, 1922), 386-391.
- ³⁹Clark, Southern Country Editor, 210-225; Vernon Lane Wharton, The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890 (Chapel Hill, 1947), 216-218.
- ⁴⁰Greenwood Enterprise, June 29, 1894.
- ⁴¹Ibid., July 21, 1893.
- ⁴²Ibid., June 19, 1890, October 31, 1890.
- ⁴³In 1890 Mississippi became the first southern state officially to outlaw the convict lease system, but it lingered in the state on a smaller scale until 1906. J. H. Jones, "Penitentiary Reform in Mississippi," Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, VI (1902), 111-120; C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913 (Baton Rouge, 1951), 424. Also see Fletcher Melvin Green, "Some Aspects of the Convict Lease System in the Southern States," in Essays in Southern History Presented to Joseph Gregoire de Roulhac Hamilton, Ph. D., LL. D. By His Former Students at the University of North Carolina, Fletcher Melvin Green, ed. (Chapel Hill, 1949), 112-123; George W. Cable, "The Convict Lease System in the Southern States," in The Silent South (New York, 1885), 113-180; Blake McKelvey, American Prisons: A Study in American Social History Prior to 1915 (Chicago, 1936), 180-185.
- ⁴⁴"The so-called 'pig law' of Mississippi defined the theft of any property over ten dollars in value, or any cattle or swine of whatever value, as grand larceny, with sentence up to five years." Woodward, Origins of New South, 213; Wharton, Negro in Mississippi, 236-238.
- ⁴⁵Greenwood Enterprise, April 13, 1894.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., April 27, 1894.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., April 20, 1894.

⁴⁸Greenwood Commonwealth, April 15, May 6, 20, August 12, 1897, September 29, 1899, January 19, 1900, February 22, 1901.

⁴⁹Ibid., March 25, 1898.

⁵⁰Greenwood Enterprise, June 30, July 21, 1893.

⁵¹Ibid., August 14, 1890.

⁵²Ibid., October 1, 24, 1890.

⁵³Ibid., August 1, 1891. Vardaman's position can be more fully understood when one realizes that in the late nineteenth century evangelical religious faiths formed a powerful force in rural southern life, and most editors paid at least lip service to them. Clark, Southern Country Editor, 134-135.

⁵⁴Greenwood Enterprise, November 17, 1891.

⁵⁵Ibid., November 24, 1891.

⁵⁶Ibid., November 19, 1893; Greenwood Commonwealth, October 15, 1897.

⁵⁷Rayford W. Logan, The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901 (New York, 1954), passim; John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925 (New Brunswick, N. J., 1955), 131-157.

⁵⁸Guion Griffis Johnson, "The Ideology of White Supremacy, 1876-1910," in Essays in Southern History, 125-156; Wharton, Negro in Mississippi, 216-233; Paul Lewinson, Race Class & Party: A History of Negro Suffrage and White Politics in the South (New York, 1932), passim.

⁵⁹Compendium of the Eleventh Census, I, 241.

⁶⁰Journal of House of Representatives, of the State of Mississippi, at a Regular Session Thereof, Convened in the City of Jackson, January, 7, 1890 (Jackson, Miss., 1890), 594-598.

⁶¹Greenwood Enterprise, July 25, 1891.

⁶²Ibid., May 26, 1893.

⁶³Ibid., May 25, 1892. On lynching in the South and the nation, see James Elbert Cutler, Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States (New York, 1905), passim; Southern Commission of the Study of Lynching, Lynchings and What They Mean (Atlanta, 1931/), passim.

- ⁶⁴Greenwood Enterprise, October 1, 1891.
- ⁶⁵Ibid., September 7, 1894.
- ⁶⁶Ibid., February 10, July 28, 1893.
- ⁶⁷Ibid., August 11, 1893; Greenwood Commonwealth, March 9, 1900. Vardaman's views on womanhood were those of editors throughout the South. Clark, Southern Country Editor, 96-101.
- ⁶⁸Greenwood Enterprise, May 26, 1893.
- ⁶⁹Ibid., May 18, 1894.
- ⁷⁰Ibid., January 4, 1895.
- ⁷¹Ibid., May 18, 1894.
- ⁷²Greenville Times quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, November 10, 1891.
- ⁷³Ibid., March 21, April 4, 1891. The New Orleans riot resulted from the murder of the superintendent of police under conditions which pointed to the local Italian population. The lynchings were widely supported by local newspapers and business leaders. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 90-91.
- ⁷⁴Greenwood Commonwealth, September 14, 1900.
- ⁷⁵Greenwood Enterprise, February 24, 1893, June 15, 1894.
- ⁷⁶Greenwood Commonwealth, September 9, 1897.
- ⁷⁷Ibid., September 15, 1899. The first anti-Semitic demonstrations in American history occurred in parts of the lower South. In 1893 night riders burned many homes belonging to Jewish landlords in southern Mississippi, and many Jewish businessmen were terrorized in Louisiana. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 92.
- ⁷⁸Greenwood Enterprise, September 10, 1891.
- ⁷⁹Ibid., November 24, 1891; February 4, 19, 1892.
- ⁸⁰Ibid., June 23, 30, August 4, 1893.
- ⁸¹Ibid., August 25, September 8, 1893; Greenwood Delta Flag, September 15, 1893.
- ⁸²Ibid., August 25, September 1, 1893.

⁸³"The great chief, and bottle-washer of the Enterprise," as Coleman described Vardaman, had debased the code of journalism by putting pressure on the board to call a local option election. He further accused Vardaman and other prohibitionists of having had Negroes sign the local option petitions. Greenwood Delta Flag, September 15, 1893.

⁸⁴Greenwood Enterprise, September 8, 15, 22, 1893.

⁸⁵Ibid., September 22, 1893.

⁸⁶Greenwood Delta Flag, September 15, 1893.

⁸⁷Ibid., October 13, 1893; Greenwood Enterprise, October 13, 1893.

⁸⁸Ibid., October 20, 27, 1893.

CHAPTER III

A POLITICIAN'S APPRENTICESHIP

During the 1890's James Kimble Vardaman learned the ways of Mississippi politics. He became a legislator, a presidential elector, and speaker of the state House of Representatives. He did not crusade for reforms, but supported those leaders that a later generation would call Bourbons. Roughly defined, the Bourbons were conservative Democrats, usually allied with railroads, planting, and business, who after 1875 kept themselves in power by their prestige, their appeals to southern white solidarity, and their control, sometimes unscrupulous, of party processes.¹ Vardaman usually followed the lead of Senator James Z. George and Representative Hernando D. Money, and he supported the Democracy against the Farmers' Alliance and the Populist Party. Above all else a practical politician who wanted to advance himself within the existing system, he yet failed as an adherent of the Bourbon Democracy to obtain his ultimate objective--the governorship.

* * *

Ambitious from an early age to enter public life, Vardaman began to participate in Leflore County politics as a delegate to local Democratic nominating conventions.² In October, 1890, he became chairman of the Leflore County Democratic executive committee, a position he held during most of the nineties.³ In 1885

he had tried and failed to win a seat in the state legislature, but he succeeded in the election of 1889, and the next year, at the age of twenty-nine, assumed his official duties in the House.⁴ That conservative body was made up largely of old Confederates with Hugh N. Street, a Meridian banker, presiding as speaker. Vardaman found the atmosphere perfectly congenial.⁵

The most important accomplishment of the legislature of 1890 was the calling of a state constitutional convention. The Reconstruction constitution of 1868 had based apportionment on total population, giving the Delta control of the state legislature. Since the large Negro population had almost no voice in politics, the small number of whites in the Delta exercised far greater political power than did the large number of whites in the northeast and south. Many farmers therefore wanted a constitution that would disfranchise the Negro, eliminate him as an influence in Mississippi politics, and base apportionment on white population.⁶ The small farmers also opposed the existing per capita system of distributing the school fund. Since few Negroes attended school, the white children of the Delta enjoyed better schools and longer terms than did the children of the hill section. Other reforms that the farmers demanded were an elective judiciary, limitation on the repeated re-election of state officials, abolition of convict leasing, and the elimination of tax exemptions for railroads.⁷

During the 1880's agrarian pressure for a constitutional convention had steadily mounted, and in 1890 Senator George surprised many of his fellow Bourbons by announcing his support for a new constitution. While George has been described as the father of the 1890 constitution, Professor James S. Ferguson has correctly observed that he actually began to support the convention "after the issue was decided." When the agrarians could no longer be stopped, George worked to control the convention and "even to tame it." His objective was disfranchisement of the Negro, not the progressive reforms demanded by the agrarians. He explained that his decision resulted from fear of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge's Force Bill of 1890, which provided for federal control of elections.⁸ The explanation fell upon receptive ears, for the Republican victory in 1888, Lodge's Force Bill, and the fact that a convention of Mississippi Negroes in 1889 nominated candidates for all state offices had aroused many whites--both Bourbons and farmers--and prepared them for the total elimination of the Negro from public affairs.⁹

In response to George's leadership Vardaman became one of only three Delta legislators who voted for the constitutional convention.¹⁰ Vardaman not only voted for a constitutional convention, but when it met in August, 1890, he also supported its work. Although he wanted the Negro disfranchised, he opposed any type of suffrage qualification based on property ownership. Against the suggestion that a multiple vote be granted to property owners on a

basis of one vote for each forty acres of land owned he argued that the "fruits of cupidity, avarice, stinginess, and usury are not to be counted above brains and patriotism when we come to exercising the elective franchise."¹¹ Vardaman's own plan, offered the previous May, involved a residence requirement of three years in the state and one year in the county, a poll tax to be paid annually six months before general elections, and an examination to determine mental fitness. Plainly this plan could be expected to reduce greatly the number of whites voting as well as the number of Negroes, but Vardaman professed himself willing to accept even a reduction in Mississippi's congressional delegation if it were the necessary price of restricting the franchise.¹²

In the constitutional convention a split developed between the conservatives who wanted to restrict the suffrage by property or educational qualifications and the leaders of the small farmer class who wanted no restrictions at all. Senator George then offered a compromise plan, almost identical to Vardaman's, which by employing an increased poll tax and an educational requirement would disfranchise many whites, as well as most Negroes. To compensate the agrarians, George arranged to increase their strength in the state legislature by assigning thirteen new members of the House of Representatives to the white counties.¹³ After the convention accepted the essential parts of George's plan, Vardaman fully supported the new constitution. His primary objective of having the Negro disfranchised

was achieved. Furthermore, his section did not lose its political strength as many Delta politicians had feared it would, for it continued to control the legislature and the state Democratic conventions.¹⁴ By devoting its major attention to the disfranchisement of the Negro, the constitutional convention had ignored many of the constructive reforms advocated by the agrarians.¹⁵ The outcome pleased Vardaman.¹⁶

Besides serving his party as a legislator, Vardaman campaigned for the Bourbon Democracy when it was threatened by agrarian movements. The Southern Farmers' Alliance, an organization of great strength in Mississippi, advocated the sub-treasury plan as a means of expanding credit to farmers.¹⁷ Most of the state's Democratic leaders, including Senator George, denounced the plan as unwise and unconstitutional. When Ethelbert Barksdale opposed George's bid for re-election in 1891, he endorsed the sub-treasury plan in an attempt to win the Alliance's support. The resulting campaign held national significance, for it tested the sub-treasury plan's strength as a political issue in an agricultural state.¹⁸

Vardaman strove to avoid all dangers of a party split and to unite the Leflore Democracy behind George. In accordance with Vardaman's urging a primary election was not held, but a county convention chose delegates for the state nominating convention. Vardaman was pleased, for under his direction the county convention would support George.¹⁹ Through the columns of the Enterprise he championed the Senator's

cause, and he harshly rebutted attacks upon the Mississippi leader. He branded Barksdale's attempt to take the Alliance into politics as demagogic and as endangering the entire farmers' movement. The editor heaped his strongest abuse upon those who threatened to bolt the Democratic party. All loyal Democrats must accept the dictates of the party; any man who could not should get out. But woe to him who did! "Judas Iscariot was just about as good a friend to Jesus Christ as the man who will go over the country and denounce the action of the Democratic state convention." Barksdale's followers did not attempt to bolt the party even though George carried the Democratic state convention which met in August. Since the state legislature--not the convention--chose United States Senators, the Alliance men continued to work during the fall to elect legislators who would support Barksdale. This second attempt to secure the election for Barksdale also failed.²⁰

Throughout his terms in the state legislature Vardaman continued to side with the conservative interests. Agrarian leaders had long advocated popular election of judges, but in 1892 and 1894 he voted against elective judiciary bills.²¹ G. A. Wilson introduced a bill to repeal tax exemptions granted to railroads, but Vardaman defended the corporations' interests.²² Many small farmers opposed the convention system for choosing party nominees, but in 1892 Speaker Hugh N. Street and Vardaman put down a movement to establish popular primaries.²³ When the legislature elected United States Senators, Vardaman voted for

the incumbents--James Z. George and Edward C. Walthall, the state's two leading Bourbons.²⁴ In 1894 he voted for Anse J. McLaurin, a rising power in state politics, to fill Walthall's unexpired term after the Senator resigned because of ill health.²⁵

As the Greenwood representative favorably impressed his fellow legislators, they accepted him. During his first term he seldom missed a vote, and his speeches were marked by moderation and "gentleness."²⁶ His sense of humor and ability to take a joke added to his popularity.²⁷ By the opening of the 1892 session he had become known as a leader of Mississippi's "young democracy," and a movement was underway to elect him speaker. Older legislators could strengthen party solidarity, some argued, by supporting a young man for the place.²⁸ The race revolved about three candidates: Hugh N. Street, seeking re-election, Vardaman and one other. Since no one of them had majority support, some feared a long, drawn-out fight. Shortly before the balloting began, however, Vardaman surprised the assembly by withdrawing from the race "in the interest of party harmony." His move enabled Street to win by the narrow margin of sixty-one votes to fifty-nine.²⁹

It was not unselfishness that caused Vardaman to leave the race. He had in effect formed an alliance with Street. The speaker rewarded his young colleague by appointing him chairman of the appropriations committee; the two men often co-operated on legislative business; and Vardaman frequently served as speaker pro tempore during

Street's absences.³⁰ Vardaman's withdrawal also helped to make his position within his party stronger. Because he was young, he might gain the speakership at a later election. J. M. McGuire, a fellow legislator, predicted "there are high honors in store for Mr. Vardaman, who is one of the recognized leaders of the legislature."³¹

As chairman of the appropriations committee Vardaman continued to serve the legislature's conservative majority. A group of agrarian reformers, representing the interests of the impoverished farmer and led by Frank Burkitt, had since the late 1880's sought to lower taxes and reduce all state expenditures that benefited the wealthier classes. Some advocates of retrenchment soon became Populists, as did Burkitt himself in the summer of 1892.³² Vardaman as chairman of the appropriations committee worked to offset Burkitt's attempts to cut expenditures. The clash of interests did not become sharp, but it showed Vardaman clearly sided with the conservative majority rather than the minority of reformers.³³ In view of his later career one observes with interest that he favored appropriating funds to the state's Negro colleges.³⁴

After the close of the 1892 legislative session Vardaman worked against another agrarian threat to Democratic supremacy. By 1892 the Populist Party, which had gained considerable strength in Mississippi, entered a full slate of candidates for state offices, and the local Populists supported the party's presidential nominee,

James B. Weaver. The Democrats, who marshalled their full forces to crush their opponents, realized the necessity of choosing able and influential men to represent their party as delegates to the national convention and as presidential electors. Who could better fulfill these requirements than the young Vardaman?³⁵ There was only one objection: Through his newspaper he had been supporting Senator David B. Hill of New York for the presidential nomination and had been opposing former President Grover Cleveland's candidacy. While Vardaman admired Cleveland's courage and integrity, he opposed the New Yorker's sound money policies. The Greenwood editor frequently denounced Cleveland's candidacy, and he was not a delegate to the national convention.³⁶ When the former President won the nomination, Vardaman reversed his position and supported him. No longer did he mention free silver, and no longer did he criticize Cleveland's anti-inflationishts policies. "Cleveland and Stevenson--A good pair to 'draw' Democratic voters to!" became the battle cry of the Enterprise.³⁷

Assured of Vardaman's party loyalty, a state Democratic convention chose him as a presidential elector for the state at large.³⁸ Vardaman responded to his party's call: In order to serve as a presidential elector, he resigned from the legislature; he worked with party leaders in formulating campaign strategy; and for the first time he went before the entire Mississippi electorate as a campaign speaker.³⁹ In addressing audiences throughout the state Vardaman agreed with Populist leaders who decried the plight of the farmer and the laborer,

but he denied that the Democratic party was to blame. The true culprits were the Republicans. They had controlled the federal government for the past thirty years; they had passed the high protective tariff; they wanted to restore Negro rule in the South through the Force Bill. As for the Populists, their policies of government ownership of railroads and telegraph and telephone lines, he branded as socialism. While he described Populist leaders as opponents of white supremacy, he urged their followers to return to the party of their fathers.⁴⁰

Cleveland's victory and the Populists' failure to make serious inroads in Mississippi further strengthened Vardaman among his fellow Democrats. The editor of the Delta Advocate held that "no young man in Mississippi has contributed more to, nor has any man, to a greater extent, sacrificed his personal interests for the success of the Democratic party than the Hon. J. K. Vardaman."⁴¹ Vardaman's increasing prestige within the Bourbon Democracy was evidenced at the legislative session of 1894, when Hugh N. Street resigned as speaker, and the lawmakers elected Vardaman to the position.⁴²

The move appears to have been an extension of the alliance formed between Vardaman and Street during the previous session. As soon as he became Speaker he appointed Street chairman of the powerful ways and means committee. One student of the progressive movement in Mississippi believes the explanation of the Vardaman-

Street alliance may be found in family ties and political factions within the state: Street was an ally of Congressman Money and Senator George; perhaps Money exerted influence in behalf of his young cousin. In the past the speakership had been a valuable stepping stone on the path toward the governor's mansion.⁴³ However achieved, Vardaman's election constituted a major triumph for a man of thirty-three.

Vardaman as speaker demonstrated his party loyalty and his belief in party government. The Populist movement in Mississippi reached its peak in this legislature, claiming eighteen members in the House over which Vardaman presided.⁴⁴ Although this number posed no serious threat to the Democrats, Vardaman did not want to give them a chance to hurt his party. He therefore reorganized the House committees to put the Populists "where they can do the least harm-- the place our enemies should always occupy when we have the location of them." The Speaker realized that reorganization along party lines would tend to unify the opposition to the Democrats, but Vardaman did not mind that, believing it would prove profitable in the long run.

Feeling for my own political creed, as they [the Populists] probably regard theirs, I want to preserve it in its purity and integrity, and for that reason I want no man who entertains views at variance with mine to act and think for me. I think there is a great deal of true patriotism in party discipline. No great question of political, economic or governmental measure was ever enacted into law, but that had behind it as an indispensable prerequisite a well-organized and disciplined political fact on.⁴⁵

The legislative session of 1894 Vardaman described as the most harmonious he had ever witnessed. The Populists had caused no serious trouble, even Frank Burkitt having maintained a gentlemanly bearing at all times.⁴⁶ Actually the placid surface was deceptive, for it was only their small number that prevented the Populists from making their presence felt. On many issues, such as appropriating money for state institutions, they formed a solid block of opposition.⁴⁷ In removing them from all positions of power, Vardaman had acted wisely in his party's interests. Certainly his actions as speaker gave no indication that he would later lead the progressive movement in Mississippi.

By the close of the 1894 legislative session Vardaman appeared to be a rising power in Mississippi politics. Indeed, he had achieved much during his first five years in public office: As a state legislator, as a presidential elector, and as the speaker of the House, he had served his party well. He now wanted to become governor. Some state newspapers had mentioned him as a likely gubernatorial candidate in 1893, shortly after he had canvassed the state as a presidential elector.⁴⁸ By the time he achieved the speakership, one national publication erroneously reported that twenty-seven Mississippi newspapers had endorsed him for the governorship.⁴⁹ During 1894 it was widely rumored that Vardaman would be the Delta's candidate, and in December, he officially announced his candidacy.⁵⁰ By the end of that month his two leading opponents had also announced. United

States Senator Anse J. McLaurin would run as a free silver Democrat, H. C. McCabe of Vicksburg, as an upholder of the gold standard.⁵¹

When Vardaman entered the gubernatorial race he, too, advocated free silver, but he had not always championed it. Having supported Cleveland for the presidency, he continued during 1893 to back Cleveland's policies, even while an economic depression spread over the country and the demand for free silver as a measure to restore prosperity began to gain strength. Vardaman did not agree, for he realized there was no simple solution for the nation's economic ills.⁵²

Through the Enterprise he urged his readers to remain faithful to the Democratic party, while he condemned those who criticized Cleveland for his lack of action. At the same time he believed that both the Democratic platform and the desire of many southerners and westerners made it imperative to enact some legislation favorable to the silver interests.⁵³ After repealing the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, the party should start anew with a more effective silver policy.

What that should be, Vardaman left extremely vague. Indeed, his writings indicate no true faith in silver legislation in any form.⁵⁴

Yet as economic conditions worsened and inflationary sentiment increased, Vardaman went over to silver. By the fall of 1894, after Cleveland had vetoed the seigniorage bill and refused to sign the Wilson tariff, Vardaman believed that he no longer represented his party and repudiated him completely.⁵⁵

Free silver became and remained a leading issue in the guber-

natorial contest of 1895, Vardaman centered his early speeches around it, and so did his leading opponent, Senator McLaurin. But Vardaman soon realized that he must broaden the appeal of his campaign. McLaurin, who also championed silver, was a United States Senator and by virtue of his position was stronger in the Democratic party than Vardaman. Without new issues he would easily carry the nominating convention in August. Vardaman began therefore to emphasize state problems, especially the distribution of the common school fund. He surprised a Delta audience at Batesville in early April by asserting that the present system of allocating the common school fund was unfair to the white people. Each year the whites paid the larger part of the school tax but the Delta counties, heavily populated with Negroes, received a greater share of the proceeds than did the hill counties of eastern Mississippi where whites predominated. As things were, many Delta counties ran their schools five to seven months each year, whereas some white counties could barely manage four. The system should be changed. Negroes should not be educated at the expense of white people. Vardaman even asserted that he sometimes feared education only made the Negro dissatisfied with his lowly position in society--a position he would always occupy as long as white men dominated the country.⁵⁶

Vardaman knew his Mississippi. Sentiment had long been growing among many whites for a change in the distribution of the school tax. The Sardis Reporter, itself a Delta paper, speculated that nine tenths of the white voters in the state would agree with

Vardaman: "We have noticed a trend of public sentiment in that direction all over the State. Mr. Vardaman made a certre [sic] shot--a ten strike--right there."⁵⁷ Again he had demonstrated his ability to perceive a popular trend and to capitalize on it.

As the campaign progressed Vardaman took up other state issues. Proper immigration laws and a new land-holding system would improve Mississippi's economic situation. If the large plantations were divided into smaller units, industrious farmers from the North and West could be induced to come South to try them. To encourage northern farmers, and manufacturers too, the state must greatly improve educational facilities for whites. Finally, to remove "a shame and disgrace upon the fair name of Mississippi," the penitentiary lease system should be abolished once and for all.⁵⁸

The problem of how to choose the Democratic nominee aroused much attention. While the party still employed the convention system, many voters wanted a popular primary.⁵⁹ The state Democratic executive committee settled the controversy by ruling in favor of a convention.⁶⁰ Both Vardaman and McLaurin constituents had mixed feelings regarding the committee's decision. G. L. Gillespie, Vardaman's former partner, supported the committee, for he feared the party did not have adequate machinery for holding a primary.⁶¹ Since Gillespie supported Vardaman, he must have believed his candidate would fare well in the convention. Papers supporting McLaurin did not clarify the problem: The Yazoo Sentinel and the Yazoo City Herald, for

example, took opposite sides on the question.⁶² Vardaman himself refused to say what he thought of the committee's action, but as a state legislator he had supported the convention system.⁶³

During the campaign Vardaman canvassed the entire state, speaking three and four times a day. His forceful and colorful language held his listeners' attention for hours at a time. His physical appearance helped: Over six feet tall, he was a large man whose long black hair fell to shoulder length. With his head erect, his jaw jutting forward, and his left arm flashing in gestures, he made a striking appearance. Personal magnetism and ability to meet people added to his appeal.⁶⁴

Opposition to Vardaman's candidacy was based less upon issues than upon his age. No one argued that he lacked experience or qualifications for the governorship. He was just young enough to wait. As the Grenada Sentinel pointed out, "Vardaman is opposed because someone, consulting the life insurance statistics, has discovered that he has an 'expectancy' of about thirty years."⁶⁵ The impact of Vardaman's emphasis on state issues is difficult to determine. He appealed to causes which agrarian leaders had advocated since the 1870's, and this despite the fact that he had opposed their interests during his brief public career. Since a state convention chose the Democratic nominee, however, there was no true expression of popular sentiment. Some state newspapers held that by concentrating on state issues Vardaman discussed the problems he would encounter as governor; others criticized McLaurin for avoiding local issues.⁶⁶ Yet the

Senator continued to base his campaign on free silver. Although Vardaman's appeal to state issues added new life to the campaign, it did not change the attitude of the delegates to the Democratic state convention.

In the end Vardaman left his campaign unfinished, announcing on July 12 his withdrawal from the race. In addressing an audience in Greenwood he explained that his candidacy had suffered because he had not fought in the Civil War and because he had not served in the United States Senate like his leading opponent, who by distributing patronage had developed a solid core of supporters. Convinced now that he could not carry the convention, Vardaman felt that it would be foolish to continue campaigning.⁶⁷ Unheroic though this behavior may have been, it demonstrated that Vardaman was a practical politician and a realist. Convinced that he could not defeat McLaurin, he decided to wait and run again in 1899. His decision, of course, pleased McLaurin's supporters, one of whom predicted that he "is young enough yet to be Mississippi's chief executive."⁶⁸

* * *

For a year and more after the gubernatorial contest of 1895 Vardaman occupied himself practicing law and managing the family's property at Sidon. Then in December, 1896, he began publishing the Greenwood Commonwealth, an eight page paper much like the earlier Enterprise in both format and editorial policy.⁶⁹ While he usually took a definite position on controversial questions, he did not want the Commonwealth to become a "reform" sheet nor a guardian of the

community's morals: "Could not accomplish it if we would, and would not if we could."⁷⁰ As was to be expected, Vardaman did disagree frequently with his rival editors, and this spice perhaps helped the Commonwealth to become Greenwood's leading paper.⁷¹

Vardaman continued to express faith in progress and advocated civic improvements, municipal ownership of public utilities, and prison reform.⁷² While he applied progressive views to his fellow whites, he had nothing but increasing hostility for Negroes. After founding the Commonwealth he assumed a more vindictive and radical stand on the race problem. The word "nigger" began to prevail in his public writings. In part Negroes had worsened race relations, he argued, by attending public schools; as they gained the rudiments of education, they wanted to vote, to hold political office, and to assume more active roles in all areas of society. In Mississippi the problem could be solved by dividing the school fund between the blacks and whites in proportion to the amount of taxes paid by each race. Such a solution would insure that the Negro remained a menial laborer. If the race problem was not solved, he warned, whites would continue to lynch and terrorize Negroes. Though aware that his statements would "grate upon the sensitive nerves of some folks," Vardaman believed that no southern white man could honestly deny the truth of them.⁷³

While editing the Commonwealth Vardaman did not hold elective office, but he did remain active in state politics. After his withdrawal from the gubernatorial campaign in 1895 he resumed his position

as chairman of the Leflore County Democratic executive committee.⁷⁴ He supported McLaurin as the Democratic nominee, and on several occasions that fall he campaigned in his behalf, even substituting for him in a debate with Frank Burkitt, the Populist candidate.⁷⁵ During the presidential election of 1896 he again worked for his party by serving as a presidential elector.⁷⁶

After campaigning for McLaurin, Vardaman did not long remain on friendly terms with him. McLaurin's distribution of patronage and his actions on certain issues stimulated a bitter opposition to him and eventually gave rise to a new factionalism in the Mississippi Democracy.⁷⁷ Vardaman became a leading critic of the administration. His reasons for attacking McLaurin are not completely clear. In part, he based his position on fundamental disagreements with the state's chief executive; in part, he sought to advance his own political fortunes. He objected to a number of McLaurin's political appointments, and denounced the Governor for not adopting the legislature's plan for constructing a new capitol.⁷⁸ At a special legislative session in 1897 the lawmakers passed a bill for erecting a new capitol, but McLaurin vetoed it, the question at issue being whether he or a legislative committee should supervise the construction. Vardaman condemned the veto, and when the legislature adjourned without providing for a new capitol placed blame entirely upon McLaurin: "In the annals of Mississippi statesmanship he stands alone the most unique, absurd, and ridiculous character that ever varied the monotony, created a ripple in public affairs or disappointed and humiliated a constituency."⁷⁹

In his attacks upon the Governor Vardaman sometimes resorted to personal accusations and innuendoe. For example, he did not in so many words accuse McLaurin of nepotism; instead he carefully maintained that McLaurin had given offices not to all seven of his brothers but only to five or six.⁸⁰ He devoted much attention to the accusation that widespread drunkenness prevailed in the McLaurin administration. When the anti-McLaurin faction in the legislature attempted unsuccessfully to investigate the charges that Judge W. K. McLaurin, the Governor's brother, had been drunk while engaged in his official duties, Vardaman held that the investigation should have been carried out so that the McLaurins might be in turn justified or censured.⁸¹

The congressional campaign of 1898 in the Delta illustrated the factional strife in the Mississippi Democracy which the McLaurin and anti-McLaurin forces were generating. Because the McLaurin faction supported Pat Henry of Vicksburg, Vardaman favored the incumbent, Thomas C. Catchings, whom he had opposed two years earlier.⁸² In May, 1898, Vardaman infused new spirit into the campaign by announcing in the Commonwealth that a McLaurin lieutenant had attempted to make a deal with Catchings' friends. It was generally known that Senator Edward C. Walthall would resign from the Senate in 1899, and many Delta leaders wanted a man from their section to obtain the office. Vardaman reported that McLaurin men had asked Catchings supporters to persuade the Congressman to withdraw from the race; if they did and if Catchings men supported McLaurin's gubernatorial candidate in 1899, then the Governor would appoint W. G. Yerger of

the Delta to the senatorship vacated by Walthall. Vardaman did not believe Yerger implicated in the sordid affair: "He is too clean to take the office under the terms proposed. . . ." If the Governor had approved this offer, Vardaman maintained, than "he deserved the condemnation of every decent white man, woman, and child, and nigger, dago, 'yaller'dog and Chinaman in the state."⁸³

When Vardaman first reported the proposed deal, he did not name those who were supposed to have attempted it. The Vicksburg Dispatch immediately accused him of lying and challenged him to name the individuals or "stand branded as a slanderer, himself." Vardaman quickly replied that Walter Sillers of Bolivar County, "a close political friend, appointee and partisan" of McLaurin had made the offer to LeRoy Percy, one of the Delta's most influential men. Vardaman implied that McLaurin had authorized Sillers to make the offer.⁸⁴ Both Sillers and Percy wrote letters to the Commonwealth attempting to justify their own positions. Sillers claimed the Governor had no knowledge of the discussion and that he had told Percy only that it might be possible to work out an arrangement. Percy, on the other hand, reported he had laughed at Sillers' proposition; he could not ask Catchings to withdraw from the race after having induced him to make it. Although the opposing factions continued to debate the issue, Vardaman believed Percy.⁸⁵

In the district primary on July 11, 1898 the electorate decided the contest, as Catchings won by the slim margin of three hundred and fifteen votes.⁸⁶ Anti-McLaurin men claimed Henry's defeat

reflected the Governor's unpopularity. Friends of the administration, however, held that McLaurinism had not affected the outcome: Catchings had won, they declared, because as a congressman he had worked for flood control. In both Washington and Bolivar counties this issue had been stressed and these counties had given Catchings his largest majorities. In Warren and Leflore counties, however, the McLaurin issue had been emphasized and there the McLaurin forces had won. Especially had this been the case in Leflore County, where G. L. Gillespie supporting the Governor defeated Vardaman, who opposed the Governor, for a position on the district Democratic executive committee.⁸⁷ Actually the reasons for Vardaman's defeat were uncertain. For one thing, he was out of the state at the time of the election and no one supervised his interests. Of greater importance, Vardaman led in a majority of the counties, but his name was, either through "carelessness" or deliberate antagonism, left off the ballot in Sunflower County with the result that he got not a single vote in that county.⁸⁸ This "carelessness" in Sunflower appears to have been a deliberate stratagem to undermine Vardaman's political strength and to bolster the McLaurin faction in the Delta.

During the campaign of 1898 Vardaman's attention was diverted from politics by the worsening relations between Spain and the United States. He sympathized with the Cuban insurgents, believing their grievances against Spain to be justified and believing the United States should use its influence to secure Cuban independence. At first Vardaman did not want the United States to go to war with

Spain, but he eventually concluded that only American military intervention could free Cuba.⁸⁹ During the early months of 1898, as his writings became more vehement in favor of war, he appealed to a host of emotions to win support for intervention. The Commonwealth contained numerous articles describing Spanish atrocities and bemoaning the Cubans' plight. President McKinley was a tool of American corporations too indifferent to defend the national honor. When the President finally gave in to the war hysteria that swept the country, Vardaman rejoiced.⁹⁰

In Mississippi, as in most states, officials made numerous mistakes in organizing troops and preparing for war. Vardaman chose to blame Governor McLaurin for all of this, and when McLaurin offered to lead the Mississippi forces in Cuba, Vardaman became enraged. Because the Governor lacked military training, the Greenwood editor considered his offer to be demagoguery. "He knows nothing about commanding an army--less probably than he does about properly performing the functions of his present office. . . ."91

Vardaman, who had less military training than McLaurin, also wanted to participate in the war.⁹² No doubt he realized full well that an honorable war record would help his later political career. It might even compensate for his having missed the Civil War--a circumstance which he believed had weakened his candidacy in 1895. The Water Valley Rifles gave Vardaman his first opportunity to serve by electing him their captain. Vardaman accepted the position, but his

right arm, disabled since childhood, prevented his passing the usual physical examination. Such being the case, only the Governor could authorize a commission, and McLaurin refused to do so unless Vardaman apologized for his many criticisms of the administration. Vardaman would not apologize, and McLaurin refused to commission him.⁹³

Vardaman and his sympathizers took full political advantage of the situation. They pictured Vardaman as a martyr who wanted to serve his country, McLaurin as allowing petty jealousy to degrade his office.⁹⁴ Even as he continued to excoriate the Governor, Vardaman received a commission as captain in the Fifth Regiment of the United States Volunteer Infantry. On June 23, 1898, he accordingly bade farewell to the readers of the Commonwealth and left to join his regiment.

I have been an advocate of this war from its inception. . . . I believe that Cuba should be free, and I am willing to prove my convictions, to sustain my doctrine with my service, and if need be, my life. . . . The sacrifice so far as personal comfort goes, is a great one. To leave a comfortable home, a dear wife, and five sweet and loving children is a great sacrifice indeed. But as stated above, believing it to be my duty, I should be unworthy of them, disloyal to their better interest, were I to refuse to respond to the calls of my country at this time. To a loving God and a host of dear friends I leave them to their kind and generous keeping until I shall return.⁹⁵

Vardaman's stay in Cuba was neither enjoyable nor exciting. He never participated in a battle, but served the entire time in the forces occupying Santiago. An assignment that brought heat, rain, mosquitoes, and the threat of yellow fever but little glory. How much better it would be, he thought, to die in battle than "to

remain here and become permeated with the poisons of this infernal pest hole, and die and rot like a dog."⁹⁶ The closest he ever came to actual fighting, however, was a visit to the San Juan battlefield.

Long before Vardaman went to Cuba it had been generally known that he would run again for Governor in 1899.⁹⁷ Formal proclamation of his candidacy came in a letter from Santiago on November 6, 1898, describing the sacrifices he was making for his country and promising that on his return home he would present his platform to the electorate.⁹⁸ In addition to Vardaman, five other candidates contested for the governorship. The leading contender, A. H. Longino, from the Delta town of Greenville based his campaign upon the promise of a fiscally sound administration. Sometimes described as a McLaurin sympathizer because the Governor had appointed him to a judgeship, he disclaimed any connection with the administration. F. A. Critz, from the hill section of northeast Mississippi, supported the national Democratic platform of 1896, advocated granting tax exemptions to encourage industrial growth in the state, and favored an elective judiciary. James F. McCool also spoke for tax privileges for industry and an elective judiciary; in addition, he wanted a distribution of the school fund more favorable to the white counties of eastern Mississippi and the establishment of a state uniform text book law. Other candidates were Judge Robert Powell of Lincoln County and W. A. Montgomery of Hinds.⁹⁹

While Vardaman was in Cuba the Commonwealth, which he had left under the supervision of T. H. Crosby, became his chief spokes-

man. Vardaman's followers tried to bolster his cause by appealing to the fact that he had gone to war. True, he had not been privileged to engage in any battles, but he had done his duty in the forces occupying Santiago. It also stressed the fact that McLaurin had fled from Jackson during a yellow fever epidemic, whereas Vardaman had gone to an area infested with the disease.¹⁰⁰ In addition to appealing to Vardaman's participation in the war, his supporters based his early campaign on a denunciation of the McLaurins. They equated McLaurinism in state affairs with Republicanism in national affairs; like the McKinley administration, McLaurin's had been marked by wasted money, the appointment of incompetent men to office, and disgraceful conduct by public officials. So strong was the McLaurin machine, they warned, that it covered the entire state; its power had to be broken in the coming election or free institutions in Mississippi would be forever endangered. There was only one sure way to end the McLaurin influence: Vardaman's election.¹⁰¹

Vardaman returned to Mississippi on June 2, 1899, and within a few days took the stump in a grueling canvass.¹⁰² Contrary to perhaps gleeful expectations in certain quarters, he did not engage in personal attacks on his opponents or brand any of them as tools of McLaurin. On national issues he supported the Democratic platform of 1896 and favored the renomination of William Jennings Bryan for the Presidency. He opposed the expansionist policies of the McKinley administration and the existence of a standing army. Regarding state issues, he attempted, as he had in 1895, to broaden

his appeal by advocating basic reforms that farmer movements had advocated since the 1870's. He favored the popular election of judges, primaries for choosing all state officials, and more liberal appropriations for the public schools; he opposed the granting of tax exemptions to railroads and industries.¹⁰³

Above all Vardaman stressed the need to change the system of distributing the state school fund under which the Delta counties, with their heavy Negro population, received larger appropriations than the white counties of eastern Mississippi. In the campaign of 1895 he had introduced this issue. Since then, as he had devoted more attention to it, his thoughts upon it had become more rabid. A highly emotionalized issue, it touched two sensitive nerves of the Mississippi electorate: The all-prevailing race issue and the increasing class consciousness of the rural whites. Under a system of popular elections, such an issue could carry a man far in the politics of the rural South. Vardaman presented it on the stump with brutal frankness:

There is no getting around the fact that the whole scheme of negro education in the South is a pitable [sic] failure. It is met by a barrier of race prejudice that is simply unsurmountable. I mean exactly what I say. We are charged with entertaining race prejudice. Well, I admit it. The charge is true. The prejudice exists, can't be eliminated, and may as well be considered as a factor of the problem. I am tired of this lying and shuffling in politics and platforms. It is time to face facts honestly and squarely, and say what we mean and mean what we say. In educating the negro we implant in him all manner of aspirations and ambitions which we then refuse to allow him to gratify. It would be impossible for a negro in Mississippi to be elected as much as a justice of the peace, no matter how able, honest

and otherwise unobjectionable he may be. Yet people talk about elevating the race by education! It is not only folly, but it comes pretty nearly being criminal folly. The negro isn't permitted to advance and their education only spoils a good field hand and makes a shyster lawyer or a fourth-rate teacher. It is money thrown away.¹⁰⁴

The state press neither supported Vardaman as it had four years earlier nor paid as much attention to him. Only a few newspapers endorsed Vardaman's candidacy and even after his return from Cuba opposition to him remained vague and general. His adversaries ignored his extreme racial views and did not accuse him of demagoguery for using this highly emotional issue. The editor of the Tunica Democrat, a leading Delta paper, regretted Vardaman's entry into the race; he liked Vardaman personally, but believed that his platform lacked substance and that his political strength was too narrowly confined to win the governorship.¹⁰⁵

The old state convention made its last stand in the election of 1899. Although the demand for a popular Democratic primary had grown stronger during the past four years, the state Democratic executive committee called for a nominating convention to meet in Jackson on August 23.¹⁰⁶ Vardaman had wanted a popular primary to decide the contest, but he accepted the committee's decision.¹⁰⁷ As the campaign progressed Longino became the leading candidate. There were to be two hundred and sixty-six votes at the nominating convention, thereby making it necessary for the nominee to receive one hundred and thirty-four. By late July fifty-one of the state's seventy-five counties had chosen delegates for the convention. Some

counties had not instructed their delegates in respect to a gubernatorial candidate, because they wanted to leave their delegates free to bargain in behalf of favorite candidates for other state offices. Those counties that did instruct gave Longino 61 votes, Critz, 26, Vardaman, 9, McCool and Montgomery, 8 each, and Powell, 4.¹⁰⁸ Obviously Vardaman would be far behind Longino going into the convention, but his supporters hoped that if Longino failed to get the necessary majority, the convention might swing to Vardaman.¹⁰⁹ It would be absolutely necessary, however, for all the candidates to remain in the race and hold their own against Longino.

On Sunday, August 24, friends of the various candidates began to converge on Jackson. By Monday night all the gubernatorial candidates were circulating among the delegates, shaking hands and asking for support. By Tuesday morning hotels and boarding houses were alive with activity, as the politicians worked to secure the necessary support for their cause. They especially besieged the uninstructed delegates. After two days of bargaining and trading, the outcome of the gubernatorial contest had been determined. By that time, it was reported that Powell and Montgomery had withdrawn from the race; on Wednesday morning these former candidates substantiated the report. On learning of this news, Vardaman and Critz, who had more than eighty votes between them, realized they could not defeat Longino. They accordingly withdrew and left the nomination to him. When the convention assembled that day "a great many candidates were seen with

lost expression/s/ on their face/s/."110 Surely Vardaman was one of them.

* * *

James K. Vardaman had begun his political career as a Bourbon Democrat conforming to the political system as he found it and working within it for advancement. Yet from the beginning he demonstrated his awareness of the small farmer class--an awareness derived, one may suppose, from his political mentors, James Z. George and Hernando D. Money. Like George, he supported the 1890 constitution but did not favor the constructive reforms advocated by agrarian leaders. Instead Vardaman believed that the chief objective of the constitution should be to disfranchise the Negro. Throughout his terms in the state legislature he consistently supported the conservative Democracy. In the 1895 campaign he tried as a Bourbon Democrat to win the governorship and discovered that he did not have sufficient strength. He therefore began to appeal to the small farmer class on such issues as racism, the school fund question, convict leasing, and stricter regulation of corporate wealth. Yet in the years from 1896 to 1899 he remained essentially a conservative, devoting far more attention to lambasting the McLaurin administration than he did to discussing agrarian interests. After his second defeat in 1899, however, he would break with his Bourbon allies and become a popular leader of the small farmers.

NOTES

¹James Sharbrough Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 1871-1890: A Study in Nonconformity (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1953), 266-269; Willie D. Halsell, "The Bourbon Period in Mississippi Politics, 1875-1890," Journal Of Southern History, XI (1945), 522.

²Greenwood Yazoo Valley Flag, April 11, 18, May 9, 1885, July 10, 1886, June 25, 1887.

³Greenwood Enterprise, October 24, 1890.

⁴Greenwood Yazoo Valley Flag, March 9, 16, July 27, November 9, 1889.

⁵Charles Granville Hamilton, Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era, 1904-1920 (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1958), 67-68.

⁶Albert D. Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, Mississippi Politics: 1875-1925 (Lexington, 1951), 58-60; C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913 (A History of the South, vol. IX., Baton Rouge, 1951), 326-329; J. S. McNeilly, "History of the Measures Submitted to the Committee on Elective Franchise, Apportionment, and Elections in the Constitutional Convention of 1890," Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, VI (1902), 129-140.

⁷Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 442-448.

⁸Ibid., 448-452; Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 60-64, 70.

⁹Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 453-456.

¹⁰Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi at a Regular Session Thereof, Convened in the City of Jackson, January 7, 1890 (Jackson, Mississippi, 1890), 211-217, 238-239. Hereafter cited as House Journal, 1890. The Journals for 1892 and 1894 will be similarly denoted. See also James P. Coleman, "The Origins of the Constitution of 1890," Journal of Mississippi History, XIX (April, 1957), 88.

¹¹Greenwood Enterprise, October 20, 1890.

¹²Ibid., May 29, 1890.

¹³Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 467-473.

¹⁴Albert D. Kirwan, "Apportionment in the Mississippi Constitution of 1890," Journal of Southern History, XIV (May, 1948), 234-246.

¹⁵Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 477-478.

¹⁶Greenwood Enterprise, November 14, 1890.

¹⁷For a description of the sub-treasury plan see John D. Hicks, "The Sub-Treasury; A Forgotten Plan for the Relief of Agriculture," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XV (December, 1928), 355-373; James C. Malin, "The Farmers' Alliance Sub-treasury Plan and European Precedents," ibid., XXXI (September, 1944), 255-260; John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party (Minneapolis, 1931), 186-192.

¹⁸Theodore Saloutos, Farmer Movements in the South: 1865-1933 (Los Angeles, 1960), 122.

¹⁹Greenwood Enterprise, April 5, 1891; Greenwood Delta Flag, April 10, 1891.

²⁰Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 86-92.

²¹House Journal, 1892, 523-524, 534, 560-562; House Journal, 1894, 328-329.

²²Greenwood Commonwealth, February 16, 1900.

²³House Journal, 1892, 686-688, 920-921; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, March 31, April 1, 1892; Greenwood Enterprise, April 22, 1892.

²⁴House Journal, 1892, 178-180.

²⁵Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, February 8, 1894; House Journal, 1894, 273, 283, 294-297, 304-307, 317-320, 334-337, 358-361, 374-376. Because of poor health, Walthall wanted someone to finish his term; then after a year's rest he would resume his place in the Senate to begin a new term to which he had already been elected. Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 96-97.

²⁶Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, February 13, 1890.

²⁷Greenwood Enterprise, February 26, 1892.

²⁸The Enterprise reported articles from other papers favorably mentioning Vardaman's candidacy for the speakership. Articles appeared in the Walthall Warden, Carrollton Conservative, Greenville

Times, Oxford Globe, Tupelo Ledger, Brookhaven Leader, Raymond Gazette, Lawrence County Press, Meridian Standard, Greenwood Delta Flag, Vicksburg Commercial Herald. Greenwood Enterprise, September, October, 1891.

²⁹Ibid., January 8, 1892. This election was settled in a Democratic caucus. When the House convened, Street was officially elected speaker, receiving 114 of 116 votes. House Journal, 1892, 5-6.

³⁰Hamilton, Mississippi in the Progressive Era, 68-70; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 13, April 1, 1892; House Journal, 1892, 143-145, 189.

³¹Yazoo City Herald quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, January 22, 1892.

³²Ferguson, Agrarian in Mississippi, 192-208; Hurshel Henry Broadway, Frank Burkitt: The Man in the Wool Hat (unpublished M. A. Thesis, Mississippi State University, 1938), 24-26. One of the basic grievances of the members of the Farmers' Alliance and the Populist Party was the heavy burden of taxation which they had to bear. John D. Hicks, Populist Revolt, 85-87.

³³House Journal, 1892, 189, 219-220, 252, 284-285, 358, 386, 448-449, 612-613, 698, 757-758, 813, 854, 915.

³⁴Ibid., 698, 757-758.

³⁵Vicksburg Post quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, April 22, 1892.

³⁶Ibid., February 20, April 4, September 17, November 24, 1891, February 5, March 25, 1892.

³⁷Ibid., July 1, 1892.

³⁸Ibid., June 10, 1892.

³⁹Ibid., September 9, 16, 30, October 14, 21, 1892; James K. Vardaman to John M. Stone, September 19, 1892 (Letters of the Governors: John M. Stone, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi), Box 17, Folder 172.

⁴⁰Yazoo City Herald, Yazoo Sentinel, Winona Times, quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, October 7, 1892.

⁴¹Delta Advocate quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, December 2, 1892.

⁴²Street's only explanation for resigning was that he preferred "the freedom of the floor to the laborious and responsible duties of that office [the speakership]." House Journal, 1894, 7-8.

⁴³Hamilton, Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era, 68-70.

⁴⁴House Journal, 1894, 488-492; William David McCain, The Populist Party in Mississippi (unpublished M. A. Thesis, University of Mississippi, 1931), 23.

⁴⁵New Orleans Picayune quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, January 12, 1894. On most major committees the Populists numbered only two, and their membership never exceeded four. In the session of 1892 Frank Burkitt had served as chairman of the committee on registration and elections; since he returned in 1894 as a Populist, the Democrats stripped him of his chairmanship. Only the Populist R. R. Buntin continued to hold the minor position of chairman of the joint committee on enrolled bills. House Journal (1894), 382, 398.

⁴⁶Greenwood Enterprise, February 16, 1894.

⁴⁷House Journal, 1894, 92-94, 110-111, 229-231, 405-407.

⁴⁸Winona Times and Ripley Sentinel quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, March 17, 31, 1893.

⁴⁹National View quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, February 16, 1894.

⁵⁰Ibid., April 27, August 3, 24, 31, October 19, December 14, 1894.

⁵¹Ibid., December 21, 1894, Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, December 4, 1894.

⁵²Vardaman believed the depression had been brought on by the Republicans' high tariff policy, the demonetization of silver in 1873, crop failures in 1886 and 1887 in the West, labor troubles in the East, and the crash of securities in South American countries and Australia. Greenwood Enterprise, June 16, 1893.

⁵³Actually the Democratic platform of 1892 had straddled the silver issue as it had the tariff question. George Harmon Knoles, The Presidential Campaign and Election of 1892 (Stanford University, 1942), 81-83.

⁵⁴Greenwood Enterprise, June 30, July 28, August 25, October 13, 27, November 3, 1893.

⁵⁵Ibid., April 6, September 7, November 30, 1894. Seigniorage is the gain to the government involved in minting coins that are worth more than the bullion from which they are made. Allan Nevins, Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage (New York, 1932), 600.

- ⁵⁶Greenwood Enterprise, April 2, 1895.
- ⁵⁷Sardis Reporter quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, April 19, 1895.
- ⁵⁸Ibid., June 28, July 5, 1895.
- ⁵⁹Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, March 2, 11, 1895.
- ⁶⁰Ibid., April 24, 25, 1895.
- ⁶¹Greenwood Enterprise, March 1, 8, 29, April 26, 1895.
- ⁶²Yazoo Sentinel, May 2, 1895; Yazoo City Herald, April 5, 26, May 3, 1895.
- ⁶³Greenwood Enterprise, April 26, 1895.
- ⁶⁴Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, December 3, 4, 1894; Greenwood Enterprise, February 8, 15, 22, March 1, 29, April 26, 1895.
- ⁶⁵Grenada Sentinel quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, February 8, 1895; Yazoo Sentinel, June 6, 1895.
- ⁶⁶Canton Times and Tupelo Journal quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, May 31, June 7, 1895.
- ⁶⁷Ibid., July 12, 1895.
- ⁶⁸Yazoo Sentinel, July 11, 1895.
- ⁶⁹Mississippi Historical Records Survey, Service Division, Mississippi Newspapers, 1805-1940: A Preliminary Union List of Mississippi Newspaper Files Available in County Archives, Offices of Publishers, Libraries, and Private Collections in Mississippi (Jackson, Miss., 1942), 85; Greenwood Commonwealth, April 15, 1897.
- ⁷⁰Ibid., July 29, 1897.
- ⁷¹Greenwood Delta Flag, March 5, 19, 1897; Greenwood Commonwealth, October 15, 1897; Greenwood Enterprise, August 21, 1896.
- ⁷²Greenwood Commonwealth, May 13, June 10, 1897, January 21, 1898, September 29, 1899, March 29, May 10, June 14, September 6, 1901.
- ⁷³Ibid., July 1, August 12, 26, September 2, December 17, 1897; January 14, February 28, 1898.

- ⁷⁴Greenwood Enterprise, August 2, 1895.
- ⁷⁵Ibid., September 27, 1895; Ackerman Plaindealer, October 4, 1895.
- ⁷⁶Greenwood Enterprise, May 8, October 23, 1896.
- ⁷⁷Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 103-121.
- ⁷⁸Greenwood Commonwealth, January 14, 1898.
- ⁷⁹Ibid., May 27, 1897.
- ⁸⁰Ibid., May 13, 1897.
- ⁸¹Ibid., October 29, 1897, January 14, 21, 1898.
- ⁸²Ibid., May 13, April 21, 1898.
- ⁸³Ibid., May 13, 1898.
- ⁸⁴Ibid., May 26, 1898.
- ⁸⁵Walter Sillers to James K. Vardaman, May 30, 1898; LeRoy Percy to James K. Vardaman, n.d., Greenwood Commonwealth, June 9, 1898.
- ⁸⁶Ibid., July 22, 1898.
- ⁸⁷Centerville Jeffersonian quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, July 29, 1898.
- ⁸⁸Meridian Daily News quoted in Greenwood Commonwealth, August 4, 1898.
- ⁸⁹Ibid., March 11, April 8, 1898.
- ⁹⁰Ibid., April 1, April 21, 1898.
- ⁹¹Ibid., May 26, 1898.
- ⁹²McLaurin had served for one year as a private in the Third Mississippi Cavalry during the Civil War. Dunbar Rowland, The Official and Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi, 1908 (Nashville, 1908), 976.
- ⁹³Greenwood Commonwealth, June 2, 9, 1898.
- ⁹⁴Ibid., June 9, 1898. Newspapers throughout the state published articles denouncing McLaurin's refusal to commission Vardaman. See Greenwood Commonwealth, June 16, 23, 1898.

⁹⁵Ibid., June 23, 1898.

⁹⁶James K. Vardaman to Editor, January 31, 1899, in Greenwood Commonwealth, February 17, 1898. See also "The Spanish American War as Revealed Through the Letters of Major James K. Vardaman," ed. by George C. Osborn, Journal of Mississippi History, IX (April, 1947), 108-120.

⁹⁷Greenwood Commonwealth, July 1, 1897.

⁹⁸James K. Vardaman to the Editor, November 6, 1898, Greenwood Commonwealth, December 2, 1898; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, November 26, 1898.

⁹⁹Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 118; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, March 16, 1899.

¹⁰⁰Greenwood Commonwealth, August 11, 1898.

¹⁰¹Ibid., September 15, 1898, January 27, March 3, 10, April 14, July 14, 1899.

¹⁰²Ibid., June 2, 9, 1899; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, June 5, 1899.

¹⁰³Greenwood Commonwealth, June 23, 30, 1899.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., June 30, 1899.

¹⁰⁵Tunica Democrat quoted in Greenwood Enterprise, December 9, 1898.

¹⁰⁶Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, April 7, 1899.

¹⁰⁷Greenwood Commonwealth, April 14, 1899.

¹⁰⁸Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 24, 1899.

¹⁰⁹Greenwood Commonwealth, August 18, 1899.

¹¹⁰New Orleans Times-Democrat quoted in Greenwood Commonwealth, August 25, 1899.

CHAPTER IV

THE EMERGENCE OF A POPULAR LEADER

As a newspaper editor, as a state legislator, and as a presidential elector he had worked for the Democratic party. Always he had opposed attempts by independents and third party movements to gain political power in Mississippi. During the Spanish American War he had proved his devotion to his country by serving for almost a year in Cuba. Despite these efforts he had suffered defeat twice at the hands of the state Democratic nominating convention. A majority of the established political leaders of the state--the men who controlled the Democratic conventions--had supported McLaurin and Longino. But the days of the convention system were numbered. Throughout the 1890's a movement for adopting statewide Democratic primaries had been gaining momentum; soon Mississippi would use Democratic primaries to choose all state officers. Candidates for office would thus be saved from exclusive dependence upon the will of the Democratic leaders and could--indeed must--appeal directly to the white voters of Mississippi, most of whom were farmers.

* * *

In September, 1899, when Vardaman resumed his position as editor of the Greenwood Commonwealth, he began to devote much attention to foreign affairs and to the involvement of the United States in the Philippines and in Cuba. His views on American foreign policy are important, because they reflect his thinking on certain domestic issues.

Before the United States went to war with Spain, Vardaman had opposed all schemes for acquiring new territories. He had not, however, become an inflexible opponent of American expansion, for he had published articles by Senator Hernando D. Money favoring annexation of the Hawaiian Islands by the United States.¹ Although he had believed America would eventually control these islands, he had not liked the idea; breaking our isolationist tradition would give rise to standing armies, and war would become a constant danger.² Above all, Vardaman had feared the acquisition of new territories would further intensify the race problem; "with the Negroes in the South, the mixed breeds in Cuba and the great variety of the genus homo in Hawaii this country will have a most homogeneous citizenship."³

Vardaman's unfavorable attitude toward American expansion had been visible by 1897, and his experiences in Cuba hardened him into a determined opponent of all imperialistic schemes. His first impressions of Cuba pleased him. Mountains--covered with green growth--surrounded the harbor of Santiago, the most picturesque place he had ever seen.⁴ Soon, however, he came to be revolted by the filth, disease, and poverty in which most of Santiago's inhabitants lived. Never had he imagined there existed so many poorly fed children and half-clothed people. Because the town had no sewers or sanitary arrangements, "disgusting odors" filled the night air. A people who would tolerate such conditions, Vardaman believed, were the lowest form of humanity he had ever encountered.

The Almighty when He made Cuba, did a pretty good job, but He turned it over to a class of people that would cause hell itself to deteriorate. I think of all the weak, weary and altogether worthless people that I have ever had the misfortune to come into contact with the Cuban is, and about Santiago is, the most trifling [sic]. The American nigger is a gentleman and scholar compared with him. Indeed, I am disposed to apologize to the nigger for making the Comparison.⁵

Despite his cruel evaluation of the Cubans, Vardaman felt sorry for them.⁶ At first he could not understand how they had become degraded to their lowly state. The island had abundant natural resources, and the inhabitants enjoyed contact with the most civilized countries of the world.⁷ After serving as president of the court of claims in Santiago, Vardaman became convinced that all Cubans totally lacked honesty: Their chief ambition was to steal from the United States.⁸ But the roots of their dishonesty went deeper. The Catholic church, he believed, was largely responsible for conditions in Cuba. Although he respected Catholicism in the United States, he believed the Church in Cuba cared little for the spiritual or material welfare of its members; "there is about as much sweet spirit in it [the Church] as there is in an old fangless snake." Above all, the Church had encouraged social equality between Negroes and whites and committed the hideous crime of permitting inter-racial marriages between Negroes and whites. "It is common (in fact, the usual) thing to see a big buck nigger sitting by the side of a well-dressed white woman listening to the glad tidings of salvation from a Spanish padre." Since the Cubans had become largely a homogeneous race, Vardaman concluded that the island

would always be a backward and dismal place. Shortly before leaving Cuba, he warned that white people should never live there:

When the great God created the universe he drew the line north of Cuba as the place for Anglo-Saxons to live. This country will do for land crabs, spikers, niggers, bilious half-breeds and "critters" of that character, but it was not built for our sort of folks, and therefore does not suit them.⁹

After returning from Cuba Vardaman became an embittered foe of imperialism throughout the world. United States involvement in the Philippines especially enraged him. He considered this venture, which cost millions of dollars and thousands of lives, to be the selfish scheme of a few wealthy men who wanted to exploit the resources and trade of the archipelago.¹⁰ The acquisition of these islands would not benefit the majority of American people, he argued, and would be possibly harmful to southern farmers, who would have to compete with Filipino cotton planters.¹¹ He did not believe those who argued that the Filipinos could not govern themselves; any form of government would be superior to what they had known during Spanish domination. The fact that the Filipinos had rebelled against Spanish rule and now were fighting against American control, he believed, proved that they were entitled to govern themselves. Perhaps they would not enjoy a government like that of the United States, but it would be one "good enough for them."¹²

Vardaman became convinced that America's Philippine policy completely violated the constitution and that eventually it would weaken

the nation's moral fiber. No country could murder, plunder, and oppress others, he warned, and hope to escape the consequences.¹³ Certainly the Filipinos hated Americans:

God hates a liar, hypocrit [sic] and tyrant, and why should not man. The treatment to which the Filipinos have been subjected by Americans is enough to embitter and make resentful the soul of infinite forgiveness and love. They have been robbed of their country, plundered, humiliated and otherwise harshly used.¹⁴

With equal disgust he attacked those who argued that American missionaries would take Christianity to the islands. Religion would not mellow the natives; only American "rotgut" liquor and "16-inch guns" would achieve that end.¹⁵

Vardaman extended his anti-imperialistic views to other nations. The English committed just as great a crime in their war against the Boers in South Africa as the Americans committed in their war against the Filipinos. The Boers, like the Filipinos, were fighting for their homes and rights. Vardaman wondered how American newspapers could condemn England's actions in South Africa, while they supported the American position in the Philippines.¹⁶

Although he opposed imperialism, his sense of nationalism remained strong. When in the summer of 1900 Chinese nationalists murdered foreign missionaries in Peking, Vardaman called for retaliatory action. The United States should send armed forces to China and teach that nation a lesson.¹⁷ This incident, he believed, was a matter of

national honor and did not involve an attempt at expansion. Imperialism, on the other hand, was foolish and selfish: Foolish, because it would infuse more "inferior races" into American society; selfish, because it was a deliberate scheme of the McKinley administration to benefit a few wealthy men.¹⁸ Indeed, Vardaman considered every American killed in the Philippines a victim of the Republican party.¹⁹

The development of Vardaman's attitude toward imperialism closely paralleled his thought and writing on other subjects. On resuming his editorial duties in September, 1899, he began to be harsher, bolder, and more vindictive than he had formerly been. He now expressed many old ideas in new language, lashing out at trusts, financial magnates, Republicans, and Negroes. In his intensified attacks upon state and national political leaders, he resorted with greater frequency to rumors and innuendo. His initial editorial of September 15, 1899, announced that he would tell the truth regardless of whom it hurt. If the people of Mississippi liked "that platform," they could subscribe to the Commonwealth for one dollar a year.²⁰

That Vardaman's new tone of expression appealed to many seemed evident from the fact that people throughout Mississippi began to subscribe to his paper.²¹ The reader could easily identify his editorials, for he wrote in the first person singular. Some of his fellow editors criticized this egotistical approach, but Vardaman argued that it was a matter of "taste." Moreover, since he determined editorial policy for the Commonwealth, he would continue to use "I."²² On occasion his

writing offended readers because of its bluntness and harshness. To such persons he could only suggest that they stop reading the Commonwealth, for he would not change his style.

I have no apology to offer for the language used in The Commonwealth. I try to be just, candid and clear. I do not want anybody to remain in doubt as to my position on the question at issue. . . . An editor is often called upon to discuss questions which are not altogether agreeable. It becomes his duty to make exposures which are not pleasant for the refined to look upon. But it must be done. The sanitary officer is as necessary as the florist. And it is the offensive fertilizer which makes the sweetest flower. No man admires purity of thought, grace and elegance of diction more than I do. I also despise a counterfit [sic] and sham.²³

Vardaman's new style may have been influenced by South Carolina's Senator Ben Tillman. Throughout the 1890's southern newspapers had frequently reported Tillman's rabid speeches and exploits. Vardaman's own comments showed a realization that Tillman was a man of strength, though he did not express admiration for the South Carolinian until after the Spanish American war.²⁴ Then he began to demonstrate a fondness for Tillman, as well he might, for their views on such issues as race, trusts, and imperialism were almost identical.²⁵ He explicitly approved Tillman's forthright and fearless mode of expression: "Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina is at times not very elegant in his language, but there is a virtility [sic] and wide-open honesty about the old fellow's speech which all honest men admire."²⁶

Besides writing in a more dramatic style, Vardaman began to

emphasize certain new subjects. Beliefs and prejudices that were held by many southern farmers but that had played a minor part in Vardaman's earlier writings now became major themes. He warned, for example, that one of America's greatest dangers was the growing influence of the "money power." This sinister force, centered chiefly in the large eastern cities, was led by such men as John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie.²⁷ These men would go to any lengths to enrich themselves further at the expense of the American people. So great was their power that they strongly influenced the national government and some state governments. In proof of this, Vardaman now condemned former President Grover Cleveland for having made a "dishonest deal" in 1894 and 1895 by selling government bonds to J. P. Morgan and Company. Ironically enough, Vardaman's criticism of Cleveland and Morgan were harsher in 1901 than it had been when the bond sale occurred.²⁸

The growing power of concentrated wealth endangered many aspects of American life. It posed a special threat to academic freedom, for wealthy men frequently came to control American schools. Industrialists and financiers endowed universities, Vardaman asserted, in order to throttle freedom of investigation and to render the school subservient to their own wills. This represented an attempt by the "money power" to instill its ideas of the value of "predatory wealth and commercialism" into the minds of the nation's youth.²⁹ Far more serious was the danger that concentrated wealth posed to American capitalism;

it could destroy the entire American economic system. On the one hand, as fewer and fewer men came to dominate the nation's financial and industrial wealth and resources, the government might be forced to intervene and impose a system of socialism.³⁰ On the other hand, the unlimited accumulation of capital by a few could drive many poor men to attempt social revolutions. Both of these alternatives, the Delta editor believed, should be avoided and could be; to preserve American capitalism the "money power" had to be checked.³¹

As the United States was rapidly becoming an industrial nation, Vardaman feared that commercialism and materialism were beginning to dominate the American people. The older agrarian values were dying; the true spirit of Christianity was being forgotten; and far too many had the one goal of trying to amass money for themselves. While men spent thousands of dollars for churches and "high-priced ministers," a perfect "Niagara" of souls went to hell every day because they lacked the basic necessities of life and because they had no one to help them.³² The problem was worse in the cities, but even in the rural districts the spirit of commercialism was spreading.³³

In writing about the social ills of his age, Vardaman devoted some attention to conditions at home. In connection with schooling he observed that hundreds of parents simply could not afford to buy school books for their children.

In truth, there are thousands of families in this State wherein five or ten dollars will determine the question of whether or not the little children shall have shoes for the

winter. That may sound incredible to some folks, but it is nevertheless true. . . . ³⁴

Mississippi therefore needed a uniform text book law to insure sound educational material for all the state's white children.

With the founding of the Commonwealth in 1896 Vardaman had become one of Mississippi's most ardent supporters of white supremacy. As he now continued to rant on the danger of Negro equality, he wrote more audaciously and crudely than before. As he learned more fully the intense appeal that racism and white supremacy had among Mississippi's small white farmers, he constantly went to greater extremes. Many Mississippians, cursed by poverty and ignorance, feared and resented any attempts to improve the American Negro's social or economic position. They believed that the white man, and not the Negro, should be the recipient of society's benefits. Especially did they resent the white man's having to pay for Negro education.³⁵ As editor of the Commonwealth Vardaman exhorted their views to the utmost of his ability in preparation, conscious or unconscious, for his attainment of success in Mississippi politics.

He continued to bemoan the folly of Negro education. Although he emphasized the value of education for whites, he did not believe it could settle the race problem. In fact, as he had long said, education only made the Negro dissatisfied with being a laborer or servant; no matter how much education a Negro gained, the whites would always force him to be a menial. It was "because he was a nigger." Moreover,

Vardaman argued that during the past thirty years only a minority of Negroes had profited from education; public schools had not improved the majority intellectually or morally.³⁶ When some white Mississippi teachers held a summer school for Negro teachers, Vardaman bitterly denounced the entire plan in a typical outburst:

Now it is almost an unpardonable offense for a white man or woman to teach in the ordinary nigger school. To do it means social ostracism. Will some one be kind enough to tell the difference? I had as soon teach a young as an old nigger. They both have the same fragrant accompaniment [sic]. . . . It should be prohibited by law. Let niggers teach niggers. I am opposed to mixing the races even in institutes.³⁷

Some editors asked why Vardaman, a Delta man, should advocate the curtailment of Negro education. Under the existing system the Delta counties, because of their large Negro populations, received the greatest appropriations, and there white children enjoyed better school facilities than did many white children in south and east Mississippi. Vardaman replied that this issue should not cause sectionalism in the state, for all white children should receive the best possible education. "I depreciate most earnestly that spirit which would split the state into factions and array the hills against the delta," Vardaman asserted. "The interest of the sections are one, and he [who] would favor one to the neglect or detriment of the other is a public enemy."³⁸

Vardaman was especially hostile toward northerners who criticized the state of race relations in the South. In his future political campaigns he would often gain support by condemning outside critics.

Believing that whites too frequently tried to appease northern opinion on the race problem, he declared that only southerners understood the Negro and could deal with him properly. When racial troubles flared in the North, Vardaman was delighted. Such incidents demonstrating that race prejudice existed throughout the country, might enable northerners to understand better the problem faced by the South.³⁹ Vardaman's reply to an article in the New York Independent typified his reaction to northerners who condemned his views on race.

It matters very little with me what this blue belted, coon facinated, south hatting [sic], vain glorious miscegenationist who presides over the editorial department of The Independent may think of me. I am not trying to please his kind of cattle. It is just such literary pole cats as he who have intimidated and bull-dozed the southern people and caused our public men to make egregious asses of themselves when dealing with the race problem.⁴⁰

The many people who subscribed to the Commonwealth after 1899 must have enjoyed Vardaman's sharp, biting language, and many must have sympathized with his attacks on the "money power," imperialism, and the Negro. In still another area the Delta editor must have pleased many readers: His coverage of state politics. Here Vardaman continued to attack Anse J. McLaurin and many men whom he believed to be allied with the former governor. McLaurin's last senatorial appointment particularly disgusted Vardaman. In the spring of 1898 Senator Walthall had died and some observers had believed McLaurin would appoint himself to fulfill the vacancy. The Governor had, however, adopted a more cautious course and selected W. V. Sullivan, a wealthy lawyer from Lafayette county who wanted the distinction of having served

for a short term in the Senate. Many believed that Sullivan and McLaurin made an agreement, whereby the Governor appointed him to fulfill Walthall's term which expired in 1901; then Sullivan would resign and McLaurin would run for a full term. Although the Governor's critics could never prove that such a bargain had been made, in 1900 the state legislature elected Sullivan to fulfill the unexpired term and elected McLaurin to a full term in the Senate.⁴¹

Vardaman took special delight in ridiculing Senator Sullivan: "Ten years ago such a man would no more have been considered in connection with the United States Senatorship from Mississippi than for the presidency of the United States." Convinced that Sullivan was completely unqualified for his position, Vardaman accused the Senator of sympathizing with McKinley's Philippine policies.⁴² He also supported as being true rumors circulated by Sullivan's opponents, reporting, for example, that the Senator had tried to violate the honor of a young Mississippi woman, whom he had promised to help find a job in Washington.⁴³ Such an incident, Vardaman boasted, proved that Sullivan's political enemies were "those who stand for decency in politics, decency in the home: for the purity of our women and the honesty of our men."⁴⁴

When Governor Longino assumed office Vardaman might have been expected to lambast his administration as he had McLaurin's. For almost two years, however, he refrained from such attacks. Although some argued that McLaurin supported Longino, Vardaman did not accept

this assertion. He described the new governor as an honest man who represented, so Vardaman hoped, a clean break with the government of the past four years. Such acts as Longino's refusal to reappoint Judge W. K. McLaurin, Anse's brother, especially pleased Vardaman.⁴⁵ At first he clashed with Longino on only one major issue. The governor wanted to encourage industry to come to Mississippi through a program of tax exemptions.⁴⁶ Vardaman strongly objected. He too wanted more factories in the state, but he opposed any plan which discriminated in favor of corporate wealth.⁴⁷ Contrary to what Vardaman had feared, the legislature of 1900 did not grant tax exemptions; in fact, the state brought suit against the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, charging that the company owed a large amount of back taxes. After the Mississippi Supreme Court ruled against the railroad company, the case was appealed to the United States Supreme Court. Vardaman devoted numerous editorials to this case, for he was apprehensive lest the Longino administration compromise with the railroad company.⁴⁸ The administration attempted no compromise, however, and the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the state.⁴⁹ Vardaman was pleased. Longino was proving to be a much better governor than he had expected.

Vardaman's attitude toward corporate wealth indicated how greatly he had changed his beliefs since the early 1890's. As a state legislator siding with the conservative faction of the Mississippi Democracy, he had defended a bill to grant tax exemptions to railroads.⁵⁰ Beginning in 1897 and becoming more pronounced by 1900, Vardaman turned

away from his conservative allies--who had failed to support his gubernatorial aspirations--and began to champion the causes of Mississippi's small farmers. His attitudes toward corporate wealth, the trusts, poverty, and the Negro all reflected the general sentiment of the state's agricultural masses.⁵¹ If Mississippi abolished the old convention system and adopted popular primaries to choose state officials, the Greenwood editor, with the support of the agrarian interests, might become a new power in state politics.

Indeed, opposition to the convention system had, as intimated earlier, been mounting throughout the 1880's and 1890's.⁵² The practice had been that counties frequently held primaries, but Democratic leaders always used conventions to nominate state and district officers. Since the end of Reconstruction the Bourbon wing of the Mississippi Democracy had maintained tight control over party machinery. Opposition to Bourbon domination through the convention system had at first stemmed largely from agrarian movements such as the Farmers' Alliance and the Populists.⁵³ But unsuccessful politicians constituted another source of opposition, for the convention system offered them an increasingly strong issue upon which to attack their successful rivals. James K. Vardaman certainly had reason to want the convention system abolished and popular primaries adopted. After his second defeat in 1889 at the hands of a convention, he had begun to champion the passage of a primary.⁵⁴

A new wave of opposition to the convention system arose in

April, 1900, when the state Democratic executive committee ordered primaries in all counties to choose delegates to the Democratic national convention and presidential electors but failed to provide for the meeting of a state convention. Traditionally a state convention had assembled every four years to elect new members to the state executive committee, to ratify the results of the county primaries, and to draw up a state Democratic platform. The committee's failure to provide for a state convention appeared to be an arbitrary attempt by its members to retain control of the state Democratic party. Unless there was a state convention, the existing executive committee would retain power for the next four years and would canvass the vote of the county primaries. That it would conduct such a canvass fairly was highly doubted. The state press fiercely condemned the committee and its chairman, C. C. Miller. Many county committees refused to hold primaries unless a state convention would be held to ratify the results.⁵⁵

As fear grew that party machinery might break down, Vardaman assumed leadership of the opposition. In an editorial of May 11 addressed to the state executive committee he accused the committee of trying to mislead the people and asked the members whom they were trying to shield. Although he never named the persons responsible for the committee's action, he strongly implied that Senator Sullivan and Senator-elect McLaurin were behind it.⁵⁶ Anti-McLaurin men pointed out that Miller had served as chairman of the state convention which had nominated McLaurin for governor and that the two men

were close friends; from these facts they inferred that McLaurin acting through Miller had manipulated the executive committee.⁵⁷

On May 25 Vardaman directed an appeal "To the Democracy of Mississippi" in which he urged county executive committees to send delegates to a convention in Jackson on June 5, 1900. The convention would name its own ticket of presidential electors and delegates to the national convention. It would also choose new members of the state executive committee and draw up a party platform to instruct the delegates to the national convention. Then in a state primary on June 21 the electorate would choose between the delegates and electors nominated by the executive committee.⁵⁸

Twenty-nine counties responded to Vardaman's appeal and sent over three hundred delegates to the June 5 convention. The assemblage chose Vardaman as its chairman and adopted the plan he had proposed.⁵⁹ The party platform closely resembled the national Democratic platform of 1896: It condemned the adoption of the gold standard, the trusts, imperialism, and the tariff, and it supported the renomination of William Jennings Bryan for the presidency. Disavowing any attempt to bolt the Democratic party, the convention nominated a ticket for the June 21 primary that included all factions of the state party. Thus the delegates nominated to represent the state at large included Senator Money, Senator-elect McLaurin, and Governor Longino.⁶⁰

Despite the pretense of maintaining party unity, the convention's action led to an open split in the Mississippi Democracy.

Governor Longino and Senator Money supported the convention, while Senator Sullivan and Senator-elect McLaurin defended the state executive committee. In the primary on June 21 a majority of Mississippi voters supported the convention ticket. This outcome pleased Vardaman, naturally, but he urged moderation in order to avoid a permanent party rupture.⁶¹

The inter-party fight of 1900 held important implications for the future. In helping to solidify opposition between the McLaurin and anti-McLaurin factions, it led to the formation of some new temporary alliances. John Sharp Williams, Mississippi's most distinguished young congressman, LeRoy Percy, a man of wealth and power in the Delta, and R. H. Henry, influential editor of the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, all joined with Vardaman in fighting the McLaurin faction.⁶²

The factional struggle of 1900 also gave impetus to the movement for abolishing the convention system. Numerous scandals grew out of the June 21 primary. In an effort to retain political power, some Delta politicians had resorted to ballot box stuffing; in almost every Delta county there were charges of fraud.⁶³ Opponents of the existing system argued that Mississippi needed a uniform primary law that would be enforced fairly throughout the state. Political power, they believed, should be removed from the control of political bosses and placed directly in the hands of the white voters. During the next two years more and more state newspapers demanded that each voter should have the opportunity to express his individual choice; political power

should be placed directly in the hands of the people. In 1902, in response to popular sentiment, Governor Longino urged the legislature to enact a state Democratic primary law. Opposition to popular primaries had always centered in the Delta--the section that had enjoyed the largest representation at state conventions. By the turn of the century, however, pockets of discontent with the convention system were numerous enough even in the Delta to undermine opposition to a primary law.⁶⁴ Edmond F. Noel, whose nomination for district attorney Vardaman had denounced so bitterly in 1883, had now become a state senator from Holmes county, and it was he who sponsored the state's first primary law, which the legislature passed on March 4, 1902.⁶⁵ Henceforth party nominations in Mississippi would be made by primary elections. If no candidate received a majority in the first primary, a run-off election would be held three weeks later.⁶⁶

Because the state Democratic executive committee ruled that only whites could vote in a Democratic primary and the Democratic nomination was equivalent to election in Mississippi, the primary law in effect placed another barrier between the Negro and the franchise. In this sense it was a move away from Democracy. Otherwise it was "the most democratic measure which the voters of the state had yet obtained."⁶⁷ Since 1875 a small group of political leaders had controlled the nominations of state officers, but after 1902 great numbers of white men would actually have a voice in the matter. A certain geographical shift in political power and perhaps also a change in political emphasis

might be expected, for the counties of eastern Mississippi had always cast the largest number of white votes, and in the future political candidates would have to appeal strongly to the interests of that section.

Following the passage of the primary law Vardaman abandoned his friendly attitude toward Governor Longino and became increasingly hostile toward his administration. When state newspapers began to report that corruption existed in the penitentiary system, Vardaman demanded an investigation. Something was "rotten and corrupt as hell," he warned, in the management of the penitentiary, and the responsibility for correcting the situation lay with the Governor.⁶⁸ Vardaman's harshest attacks were reserved for Longino's courageous opposition to lynchings. When on several occasions the Governor personally stopped angry mobs from seizing Negro prisoners, Vardaman defended lynch law as a necessary evil.⁶⁹ He especially criticized Longino for trying to break up lawless mobs in South Mississippi. During the 1890's secret organizations, known as White Caps, had been terrorizing Negroes in many south Mississippi counties. Composed primarily of dirt farmers, the whitecap societies represented a most extreme form of animosity against the Negro.⁷⁰ When Longino attempted to suppress some of them, Vardaman accused him of making a "spectacular play." Local authorities could handle the situation, he asserted, and the Governor damaged the state's reputation by calling attention to a minute problem that existed in few counties.⁷¹

As Vardaman's attacks upon the Governor became more intense, he frequently distorted facts. Because Longino opposed lynching, for example, Vardaman described him as a supporter of President Theodore Roosevelt.⁷² Indeed, by 1902 Roosevelt had become one of Vardaman's leading subjects, a symbol for many things that the Greenwood editor feared and hated.

Although Vardaman had disliked Roosevelt as governor of New York, he believed that he might make an adequate president. Immediately after McKinley's assassination Vardaman predicted that Roosevelt would purge the administration of all its corrupt elements.⁷³ His hopes for the new chief executive were of short duration. Roosevelt, soon after becoming President, invited the distinguished Negro educator, Booker T. Washington, to dine with him at the White House. This act, which aroused condemnation throughout the South, moved Vardaman to the height of editorial fury.⁷⁴ In denouncing the President he gave vent to every prejudice and emotion at his command. Booker T. Washington, "the saddle-colored philosopher of Tuskegee," had been disgraced, he declared. Vardaman had hoped Washington had more self-respect than to accept the President's invitation and associate on terms of social equality "with a white man who had no more decency than to take a d---d nigger into his home."⁷⁵ By this act the President had insulted every white man in American.

President Roosevelt takes this nigger bastard into his home, introduces him to his family and entertains him on terms of absolute social equality. He does more. He carries his

daughter to another social function, where she and Washington are to be among the special guest of honor.

Roosevelt's actions, Vardaman concluded, directly encouraged social equality and interracial marriage.⁷⁶

Any man who showed the slightest sympathy for the President could be assured of Vardaman's disapproval. Governor Longino's brother-in-law, Edgar S. Wilson, was a United States marshal and a leading Mississippi Republican. In lambasting Longino and Wilson, Vardaman repeatedly accused them of sharing the same political creed; both men only wanted favors from the national administration.⁷⁷ Vardaman claimed that he respected Roosevelt more than he did the southern white man who could be bribed by presidential flattery and patronage. When Roosevelt in November, 1902, visited Mississippi to hunt bear in the Delta, Vardaman urged his readers to respect the President's office, but nothing more.⁷⁸ After Roosevelt left the South, Vardaman included the following disparaging verse in his editorial column.

Teddy has come and Teddy has gone.
And the lick spittle spittled and the fawning did fawn.
The Coons smelt as loud as a musk rat's nest.
And Teddy licked his chops and said it smelt the best.⁷⁹

Vardaman's rantings against Roosevelt might not have caused more than a passing sensation had the President not become involved in a Mississippi racial incident. In 1896 President William McKinley had appointed Mrs. Minnie Cox, a Negro, postmistress of Indianola, Missis-

issippi. Local whites accepted her and she was reappointed in 1898 and again in 1900 with the Mississippi senators voting to confirm her. Then in January, 1903, a mob drove a Negro doctor out of town and forced Mrs. Cox to resign. Roosevelt retaliated by closing the post-office.⁸⁰ Considering this a direct insult to Mississippi and to the white race, Vardaman condemned the President's action in one of the most scathing editorials of his career.

In the annals of the political history of the world since the days of Nero there is not to be found a parallel to the pusillanimous lawdown, dirty and contemptible conduct of President Roosevelt regarding the Indianola post office. There have been deeds committed by heads of governments followed by more widespread and atrocious consequences but none that evidence a more craven and malignant spirit. It is the work of a human coyote who would destroy the civilization of the better and more respecting section of the country of which he by the accident of an assassin's shot is president; he would break down the barriers which keep back and hold in restraint the black waves of ignorance, superstition and immorality with which the South is perpetually threatened.

After reviewing the circumstances surrounding the Indianola incident, Vardaman concluded that Roosevelt had acted just to advance his political career.

He had the power--not the right under the law--but the power, and like the spectacular lion masquerading ass that he is, dared to prostitute that power. But probably I am a little harsh. It is remotely possible that I may not know any better. I would not be uncharitable. It is said that men follow the bent of their genius, and that prenatal influences are often patent in shaping thoughts and ideas of after life. Probably old lady Roosevelt during the period of gestation was frightened by a dog and that fact may account for the qualities of the male pup which are so prominent in Teddy. I would not do her an injustice but I am disposed to apologize to the dog for mentioning it.⁸¹

When Vardaman ran for governor in 1903, he used anti-Rooseveltism as one of his chief appeals. Because of his action regarding Booker T. Washington and the Indianola post office, many southern whites feared and hated the President. Vardaman seized upon this sentiment, magnified it, and used it for his political advancement. Unknowingly, President Roosevelt contributed to Vardaman's election as governor.

The gubernatorial contest of 1903 initiated a new era in Mississippi politics. After the passage of the primary law candidates had to canvass the state more thoroughly than in the past, speaking to as many people as possible. This would not be an easy task. Railroads served the major towns, but much of the countryside was many miles from any rail lines. For a great deal of their canvass candidates must travel in wagons or on horseback over dusty country roads.⁸²

Four months after the passage of the primary law and more than a year before the first primary was to be held, the gubernatorial canvass got under way. The candidates stumped every county in Mississippi. Among the first to enter the race was James K. Vardaman. Having twice been defeated under the convention system, he now directed his campaign to the rural whites. He favored a state uniform text book law, an elective judiciary, construction of better roads, larger appropriations for white schools, and local option liquor laws. While he wanted industry to grow in Mississippi, he opposed the granting of tax exemptions to corporations. Above all, he advocated the plan he had

emphasized since 1895: Distribution of the school fund among the races in proportion to the taxes paid by the whites and by the blacks.⁸³ From the outset many hailed Vardaman as the leading candidate.⁸⁴

Judge Frank A. Critz, from the hill section of northwestern Mississippi, became Vardaman's closest rival. He too favored a uniform text book law and larger appropriations for white schools, and opposed tax exemptions for corporations. Critz clashed most strongly with Vardaman on the racial issue. Believing that Vardaman appealed to racism solely as a political issue, he argued that Vardaman's election could endanger race relations throughout the state. The constitution of 1890 had settled the race problem in Mississippi, he claimed. Why engender unnecessary tensions and hatreds? Above all, he ridiculed Vardaman's scheme to distribute the school fund in proportion to the taxes paid by each race. Even Vardaman admitted, he pointed out, that such a plan could not be enforced unless the constitution was amended.⁸⁵

Edmond F. Noel, author of the primary law, became Vardaman's leading Delta rival. Having studied Vardaman's legislative record he held that his opponent had reversed himself on many issues: As a state legislator Vardaman had voted against an elective judiciary bill and a primary election law; and he had supported appropriations for the state's Negro colleges and had voted for a program to grant tax exemptions to corporations. Like Critz, Noel ridiculed Vardaman's scheme for distributing the school fund as an impossibility, because it violated the United States constitution. He argued, moreover, that

the Delta counties in fact contributed more money to the general school fund than they received in return.⁸⁶

Noel was correct in asserting that since the early 1890's Vardaman had changed his position on many issues. As a member of the conservative faction of the Mississippi Democracy he had opposed such agrarian programs as retrenchment and an elective judiciary; he had fought against the sub-treasury plan and the Populist party.⁸⁷ But during the 1880's and 1890's, as the farmers struggled to improve their lot, the rural whites of Mississippi had begun to gain a sense of social and political unity.⁸⁸ It was to this emerging class that Vardaman now appealed. Under his leadership the agrarians would break the Bourbon control of Mississippi politics.

Above all else, Vardaman's emphasis on the race issue appealed to Mississippi farmers. Their own poverty and ignorance and the lowly condition of many southern Negroes had combined to form a bitter racial prejudice among the rural whites. Many had come to damn the system of educating Negroes at the expense of whites, and Vardaman's plan for making Negroes pay for educating their own race appealed strongly to them.⁸⁹ They accepted Vardaman's comforting argument that the existing system was unfair to the Negro as well as to the white because education only enkindled desires and ambitions in Negroes that whites would never allow them to attain. Vardaman admitted that Negroes could not be deprived of educational funds unless the constitution were amended; but he promised that his election would mark a beginning

toward the abolition of Negro education.⁹⁰

Because of the furor over President Roosevelt's actions in relation to Booker T. Washington and the Indianola post office, Vardaman's appeal to racism came at an opportune time.⁹¹ In capitalizing on the opposition to Roosevelt, Vardaman and his followers resorted to many base and distorted appeals. They frequently pictured the contest as one between Roosevelt and Vardaman.

A vote for Vardaman is a vote for White Supremacy, a vote for the quelling of the arrogant spirit that has been aroused in the blacks by Roosevelt and his henchmen, a vote for the better education of white children, a vote for the safety of the Home and the protection of our women and children. . . .⁹²

In speech after speech Vardaman attacked Roosevelt. Thus in an address at Vicksburg he described the President as "that wild, untamed, self asserted, broncho busting, negro dinning [sic] man who sits in the chair of Washington, Jefferson, and Wm. McKinley . . ."⁹³ On occasion, while lashing out at Roosevelt or decrying the dangers of social equality, Vardaman even advocated lynch law as a solution to the race problem.

I want to tell you just how far I am in favor of mob law. If I were the sheriff and a negro fiend fell into my hands I would run him out of the county. If I were governor and were asked for troops to protect him I would send them. but [sic] if I were a private citizen I would head the mob to string the brute up, and I haven't much respect for a white man who wouldn't. (Applause)⁹⁴

Racism was only one emotional issue to which Vardaman appealed. The political machinery of the convention system supplied another issue.

Agrarian leaders, Republicans, and unsuccessful Democratic candidates had long bemoaned the existence of a "Jackson ring" which supposedly controlled state politics.⁹⁵ Although no one clearly defined the "Jackson ring," many believed in its existence. In general, the term denoted a group of professional politicians supposed to have controlled the affairs of the state government for the past thirty years. Members of the "ring" seldom held elective offices; their sole object was to enrich themselves at the state's expense. Vardaman pictured himself as working to overthrow the "Jackson Ring" and to restore honest and clean government in Mississippi.⁹⁶ The Vardaman press never accused his rivals of being tools of the "Jackson ring," but some papers reported that Noel and Critz had resorted to sordid tricks in the hope of offsetting Vardaman's majority.⁹⁷

Vardaman appealed to the white farmers to help him. Of the three gubernatorial candidates, he asserted, only he had risen from a humble background of poverty and hardship; only he represented the people in their fight against the politicians; only he stood against entrenched wealth. His election would prove that it was possible to elect a poor man governor.⁹⁸ He constantly stressed the importance of the sturdy farmer's reasserting his control in Mississippi politics.

Take the history of our own republic from its birth, around whose cradle stood that coterie of undying patriots--Jefferson, Washington, Patrick Henry and others to this good day when the reigns of government have gone into the hands of that band of political bandits, vampires and vulgarians of the Roosevelt-Hanna brand, and you will find that most all of our really great men, in all of the walks of life, have

been country raised boys. . . . I believe the "ark of the covenant of American ideals" rests in the agricultural sections of the South.⁹⁹

During the campaign the Commonwealth, managed by Walter N. Hunt while the editor stumped the state, served as the leading Vardaman propaganda organ. It devoted special attention to answering attacks upon Vardaman. Thus when the editor of the Baptist condemned Vardaman's use of the race issue, saying that any man who attacked an "inferior race" as Vardaman did should be "sent back to nature's mint and recoined as a counterfeit [sic] on humanity," the Commonwealth published letters from ministers testifying that Vardaman was a good and practicing Christian.¹⁰⁰ On one occasion Vardaman himself answered the attacks of the editor of the Baptist.

Now I want to say that I yield to no one in my love, devotion and reverence for the church of the living God. For the faithful minister of the Gospel I have not words with which to express my admiration and respect. . . . But for one of these little nubbin-stud, self-sanctified, theological runts I have not the language to express my commiseration and contempt. He is a discredit to the Baptist church and ought to be pulling the bell-cord over a mule instead of misdirecting the official organ of that splendid sect of devoted Christian men and women.¹⁰¹

Opposition to Vardaman varied from enlightened criticism to personal attacks. Some denounced his plan to abolish Negro education as unwise because southern whites should never forfeit control of Negro education, and unjust because the Negro contributed to Mississippi's economy and therefore deserved his fair share of educational benefits.¹⁰² Some newspapers reported that if Vardaman won many Negroes would leave

the state, thus creating a labor problem.¹⁰³ Others reprobated Vardaman's crude language, his attacks on President Roosevelt, and his opposition to corporate wealth.¹⁰⁴ Typical of the campaign rumors spread against Vardaman were those describing him as being the candidate of the whisky interests and of being an infidel.¹⁰⁵ In none of the criticisms leveled at him, however, did anyone venture to disagree with his belief in the inferiority of the Negro, nor did any white doubt the necessity of segregation.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1903 the excitement of the canvass mounted. The candidates toured the state, speaking three and four times a day. Of the three gubernatorial candidates, Vardaman was the master orator.¹⁰⁶ His tall figure, long flowing hair, and well-dressed person made a striking impression at public gatherings. By employing concrete, graphic words to achieve drama and color and by delivering his speeches with intensity and emotion, Vardaman inspired his audiences.¹⁰⁷ Because he was an entertaining speaker, many looked forward to his political rallies. As an accompaniment to his speaking his followers often organized parades, picnics, and barbecues.¹⁰⁸ In Chickasaw County Frank Burkitt, the former Populist leader, led hundreds of men on horseback, two abreast and with flying banners, to a Vardaman demonstration.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the emotionalism engendered by Mississippi's first Democratic primary gave rise to violence. In Yazoo City two men were killed when a gun battle erupted between Vardaman and anti-Vardaman factions.¹¹⁰

The first phase of the primary ended on August 6, 1903, when Vardaman received 39,679 votes, Critz 34,813, and Noel 24,233.¹¹¹ Since no one had a majority, a runoff between Vardaman and Critz was set for August 29. Both sides immediately began to work for the Noel vote. Noel himself pronounced in favor of Critz, believing him to have a more enlightened view of race relations than Vardaman.¹¹² Another influential state leader, Senator A. J. McLaurin, announced that he too would support Critz.¹¹³

In an effort to offset Critz's new sources of strength, the Vardaman forces enrolled many anti-McLaurin men in their camp. Senator Money, Representative John Sharp Williams, and the Delta leader, Leroy Percy, all announced their support of Vardaman.¹¹⁴ The campaign continued along its earlier course, with Vardaman playing upon the issues of white supremacy, Theodore Roosevelt, and corporate wealth.

In the runoff of August 27 Vardaman defeated Critz by 51,829 to 44,931 votes.¹¹⁵ The Noel vote had split almost evenly between the two. For several days following the contest excitement ran high. Vardaman men in Jackson chartered a special train on which they journeyed to Yazoo City, where they picked up more Vardaman followers, and then pushed out into the Delta country. Over four hundred were jammed into the train when it arrived at Greenwood. In a double column they marched from the depot to the hotel, while fire works and shouts pierced the night air. Between deafening outbursts of applause, Vardaman addressed the crowd and repeated his campaign pledges. The crowd remained in

Greenwood until almost midnight, meaning it was probably the "largest night" the little town had ever experienced.¹¹⁶

Numerous reasons caused men to vote for Vardaman. Some opponents of the McLaurin faction were convinced by McLaurin's support for Critz that they must work for Vardaman.¹¹⁷ President Roosevelt's friendliness toward Booker T. Washington and his closing of the Indiana post office decisively influenced others.¹¹⁸ More than anything else Vardaman's appeal to the rural whites must be considered as the major cause of his victory. His use of such issues as racism, corporate wealth, and the "Jackson ring" made him the spokesman of the rural masses. Among his greatest sources of strength were the counties that had returned Populist majorities in the early 1890's. For the first time since the Civil War Mississippi's white farmers had had the opportunity to express their true choice. They did this by supporting Vardaman, the candidate who best expressed goals for which they had long been striving.

NOTES

- ¹Greenwood Commonwealth, November 5, 1897, February 28, 1898.
- ²Ibid., June 24, October 7, 1897.
- ³Ibid., June 24, 1897.
- ⁴James K. Vardaman to Anna Vardaman, August 21, 1898, "The Spanish American War as Revealed Through the Letters of Major James K. Vardaman," ed. George C. Osborn, Journal of Mississippi History, IX (April, 1947), 113.
- ⁵Vardaman to Greenwood Commonwealth, August 21, 1898, ibid., 112.
- ⁶Vardaman to Greenwood Commonwealth, September 17, 1898, ibid., 114-115. In describing his reaction to the Cubans Vardaman wrote: "It may be a weakness but I am so put together that where I see any sort of an animal, human or otherwise, suffering I cannot for the life of me help pitying them and making a little effort to 'help them out.'"
- ⁷Vardaman to H. T. Crosby, April 2, 1899, Greenwood Commonwealth, April 21, 1899.
- ⁸Vardaman to Crosby, March 10, 1899, ibid., March 31, 1899.
- ⁹Vardaman to Crosby, April 2, 1899, ibid., April 14, 1899.
- ¹⁰Greenwood Commonwealth, December 15, 1899.
- ¹¹Ibid., March 16, 1900.
- ¹²Ibid., March 30, 1900, September 1, 1901.
- ¹³Ibid., March 21, 1900.
- ¹⁴Ibid., July 12, 1901.
- ¹⁵Ibid., August 17, 1900.
- ¹⁶Ibid., January 12, February 16, April 13, 1900, November 16, 1901.
- ¹⁷Ibid., July 6, August 10, 1900.
- ¹⁸Ibid., March 16, 1900.
- ¹⁹Ibid., October 13, 1899.

- ²⁰Ibid., September 15, 1899.
- ²¹Ibid., November 21, 1903.
- ²²Ibid., October 20, 1899.
- ²³Ibid., January 4, 1901.
- ²⁴Greenwood Enterprise, October 31, 1890, December 14, 1894; Greenwood Commonwealth, May 6, 27, 1897.
- ²⁵Francis B. Simkins, Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian (Baton Rouge, 1944), passim.
- ²⁶Ibid., August 9, 1901.
- ²⁷Ibid., April 29, July 1, 1897, May 31, 1901.
- ²⁸Ibid., April 29, 1897, January 18, 1901; Allan Nevins, Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage (New York, 1932), 649-676.
- ²⁹Greenwood Commonwealth, November 2, 1900, February 1, 1901.
- ³⁰Ibid., April 12, 1901.
- ³¹Ibid., June 14, September 27, 1901, October 17, 1902.
- ³²Ibid., November 28, 1902.
- ³³Ibid., January 18, 1901.
- ³⁴Ibid., August 3, 1900.
- ³⁵James Sharbrough Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 1871-1900: A Study in Nonconformity (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1939), 169-174, 588-591; Albert D. Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks: Mississippi Politics, 1876-1925 (Lexington, 1951), 136-141.
- ³⁶Greenwood Commonwealth, September 29, October 6, 20, 1899, January 19, 1900, March 29, 1901, June 20, 1902.
- ³⁷Ibid., May 25, 1900.
- ³⁸Ibid., November 30, 1900.
- ³⁹Ibid., August 17, 1900.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., November 10, 1899.

⁴¹Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 105-106. Later Sullivan claimed that McLaurin had promised to support him for both the long and the short terms, but had broken his promise.

⁴²Greenwood Commonwealth, October 15, 1899.

⁴³Coffeeville Courier quoted in Greenwood Commonwealth, November 3, 1899.

⁴⁴Ibid., February 15, 1901.

⁴⁵Ibid., March 2, 1900, July 12, August 30, 1901.

⁴⁶Journal of the Senate of the State of Mississippi at a Regular Session, January, February, and March, 1900 (Jacksonville, 1900), 88.

⁴⁷Greenwood Commonwealth, January 26, 1900.

⁴⁸Ibid., February 2, 16, March 9, 1900, January 11, 1901.

⁴⁹Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad Company v. Adams, 181 U. S., 530-533 (1901).

⁵⁰Greenwood Commonwealth, February 16, 1900.

⁵¹Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 412-418, 607-613.

⁵²Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 122-123.

⁵³Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 359-395.

⁵⁴Greenwood Commonwealth, July 12, 1901.

⁵⁵Ibid., May 1, 4, 1900; Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 124.

⁵⁶Greenwood Commonwealth, May 11, 1900.

⁵⁷Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 125.

⁵⁸Greenwood Commonwealth, May 25, 1900.

⁵⁹Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 125.

⁶⁰Greenwood Commonwealth, June 8, 1900.

⁶¹Ibid., June 15, 29, July 6, 13, 1900; Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 125.

⁶²Shortly after the June 21 primary Vardaman described John Sharp Williams as the ablest southerner in the House of Representatives. Greenwood Commonwealth, July 6, 1900. Concerning LeRoy Percy he had said six months earlier: "If I were called upon to name one of the most promising and gifted young men in the Third Congressional District, I should unhesitatingly name LeRoy Percy of Greenville. . . . He was born to rule. . . ." Greenwood Commonwealth, February 9, 1900.

⁶³Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 125-126. Opposition to state conventions, which were frequently characterized by fraud and corruption, was widespread throughout the United States by the early twentieth century. The direct primary, either as a cause or a result, frequently appeared with the progressive movement. Many progressive leaders stressed the importance of the people controlling the government. In at least five southern states the direct primary was an antecedent of the victory of a reform administration. "It is probable that in those cases the primary paved the way for reform." C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913 (A History of the South, vol. IX, Baton Rouge, 1951), 372-373; Russel B. Nye, Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870-1950 (East Lansing, Michigan, 1951), 200; Belle and Fola LaFollette, Robert M. LaFollette (New York, 1953), I, 130-143; Arthur S. Link, Wilson, the Road to the White House (Princeton, 1947), 259-260; Henry F. Pringle, The Life and Times of William Howard Taft (New York, 1939), II, 59, 67.

⁶⁴Charles Granville Hamilton, Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era, 1904-1920 (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1959), 52-58.

⁶⁵E. F. Noel, "Mississippi's Primary Election Law," Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, VIII (1904), 239-245.

⁶⁶"This was the first mandatory statewide primay in the country. . . . The legislature was required to ratify the selection of candidates for United States Senator who received a majority of the votes in the primary, thus bypassing constitutional election by the legislature and inaugurating a popular election of senator in fact. By providing for a run-off, in case no candidate had a majority in the first primary election, Mississippi established what has been considered by some as the first complete primary election system. . . . The primary system made the governor a more accurate reflector of statewide white opinion than the legislature." Hamilton, Mississippi Politics, 58-59. For a more thorough discussion of the primary law see Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 122-135.

⁶⁷Ibid., 131.

⁶⁸Greenwood Commonwealth, October 17, November 7, 14, 1902. Vardaman held that Longino's administration had been "characterized by more 'filthy disclosures,' 'questionable transactions' and profound weakness than any democratic / sic / administration since the days of Winthrope / sic / Sargent." Greenwood Commonwealth, October 10, 1902.

⁶⁹Ibid., February 9, December 28, 1900, March 22, August 9, 1901; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, June 11, 1902.

⁷⁰Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 578-606.

⁷¹Greenwood Commonwealth, January 2, March 28, 1903.

⁷²Ibid., October 25, 1901, October 17, 24, November 14, 28, 1902.

⁷³Ibid., April 27, 1900, June 28, September 27, October 11, 1901.

⁷⁴Henry F. Pringle, Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography (New York, 1931), 248-249; Thomas D. Clark, The Southern Country Editor (New York, 1948), 304-321.

⁷⁵Greenwood Commonwealth, October 18, 1901.

⁷⁶Ibid., October 25, 1901.

⁷⁷Ibid., November 7, 1902.

⁷⁸Ibid., November 14, 1902.

⁷⁹Ibid., November 28, 1902.

⁸⁰When the post office reopened a year later, Roosevelt appointed a white postmaster. Hamilton, Mississippi in the Progressive Era, 91.

⁸¹Greenwood Commonwealth, January 10, 1903.

⁸²Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, 132.

⁸³Yazoo City Herald, May 8, 1903; Greenwood Commonwealth, April 25, 1903.

⁸⁴Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, April 20, 1903.

⁸⁵Ibid., December 5, 1902, April 7, May 25, 1903, Yazoo City Saturday Evening News, March 7, 1903.

⁸⁶Ibid., September 10, 1902, April 4, July 24, 1903.

⁸⁷See above, Chapter III.

- ⁸⁸Ferguson, *Agrarianism in Mississippi*, 244-245.
- ⁸⁹Ibid., 169-174.
- ⁹⁰Cleveland Enterprise, October 6, 1902.
- ⁹¹Yazoo City Herald, March 20, 1903, Columbus Commercial, February 3, 1903, Aberdeen Weekly, September 4, 1903.
- ⁹²Greenwood Commonwealth, August 22, 1903.
- ⁹³Ibid., March 21, 1903.
- ⁹⁴Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 24, 1903.
- ⁹⁵Ferguson, *Agrarianism in Mississippi*, 338, 418.
- ⁹⁶Greenwood Commonwealth, December 19, 1902, April 11, June 27, 1903; Aberdeen Weekly, May 29, 1903, Yazoo Sentinel, July 23, 1903.
- ⁹⁷It was sometimes reported that in counties where Vardaman seemed to have the greatest support, Noel and Critz agreed to pool their votes in order to offset his lead. Greenwood Commonwealth, August 1, 1903; Yazoo Sentinel, July 30, 1903.
- ⁹⁸Greenwood Commonwealth, March 21, May 21, June 27, July 8, 18, August 6, 22, 1903.
- ⁹⁹Ibid., June 20, 1902.
- ¹⁰⁰Ibid., October 10, 1902, February 7, April 25, May 9, 1903.
- ¹⁰¹Ibid., April 25, 1903.
- ¹⁰²Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, December 16, 1902, Yazoo City Herald, March 6, 1903.
- ¹⁰³Yazoo City Saturday Evening News, May 2, 1903.
- ¹⁰⁴Ibid., February 28, 1903; Columbus Commercial, July 28, 1903; Biloxi Daily Herald, April 24, 1903.
- ¹⁰⁵Yazoo City Herald, May 22, 1903; Greenwood Commonwealth, May 30, 1903.
- ¹⁰⁶Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 24, 1903.
- ¹⁰⁷Ibid., September 25, 1903.

- ¹⁰⁸Yazoo City Herald, July 31, 1903.
- ¹⁰⁹Greenwood Commonwealth, July 18, 1903.
- ¹¹⁰Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, May 11, 1903.
- ¹¹¹Yazoo Sentinel, September 17, 1903.
- ¹¹²Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, August 12, 1903.
- ¹¹³Ibid., August 15, 1903.
- ¹¹⁴Ibid., August 22, 1903.
- ¹¹⁵Ibid., August 31, 1903.
- ¹¹⁶Ibid., August 28, 31, 1903. On September 4 a special train carrying Vardaman men from the hill towns of Columbus, Eupora, Winona, and Carrollton made a similar trip to Greenwood. Columbus Weekly Dispatch, September 10, 1903.
- ¹¹⁷Ibid., June 11, 1903; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, August 24, 1903; Greenwood Commonwealth, June 6, August 22, 1903.
- ¹¹⁸Ibid., September 12, 26, 1903; Yazoo City Herald, September 18, 1903.

CHAPTER V

THE ADMINISTRATION

The administration of James K. Vardaman introduced a new era in Mississippi politics. For the first time since the Civil War a majority of the state's white voters had elected a governor by popular vote. On the eve of Vardaman's inauguration many wondered what would happen during the next four years. In relation to the Negro, would the governor try to abolish Negro education? Would his administration encourage a revival of the white terrorist outrages against Negroes that had flared up periodically since the Civil War? Would race relations become so embittered that many Negroes would leave the state? In politics, would there be a widespread purge of state officials, as the Governor used his patronage power to mold a new political organization? The small farmer wondered if here at last was a Governor who would be responsive to his needs and champion his causes. Events of the next few years would answer these questions.

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On the morning of January 19, 1904, the sun rose bright and clear. Dark clouds soon covered the sky and cast an aspect of gloom, but showers did not begin until the morning had passed. At noon the newly elected Governor, accompanied by a few friends and state legislative leaders, emerged from the mansion. Dressed in a well-tailored broadcloth suit with a white carnation pinned to his lapel, he made an impressive appearance. His long hair, brushed to a brilliant

luster and marked by a few threads of grey, was neatly combed over his shoulders.¹ As always on public occasions, Vardaman was careful of what he wore and of how he looked.²

The official party sat in open carriages for the short trip to the new capitol building. For the first time in eight years no band nor military parade escorted the Governor on inauguration day; Vardaman wanted a minimum of ceremony and pomp.³ Crowds lining the streets applauded as the new executive passed.⁴ At the capitol Vardaman took the oath of office before the supreme court judges and then began to make his way to the House of Representatives. Visitors and well-wishers, many of whom had come on specially chartered trains, filled the corridors of the capitol, and they stopped the Governor to shake hands and congratulate him.⁵

It was almost one o'clock before Vardaman arrived at the House of Representatives to address the legislators. When he entered the chamber and began to walk to the speaker's desk, the lawmakers cheered and applauded. Former Governor Longino did not, as was customary, introduce his successor; Vardaman's attacks upon him during the past two years had engendered too much bitterness to permit such courtesies. Instead, E. N. Thomas, the newly elected speaker of the House, introduced the Governor with the assertion that this was an occasion of special importance to the people of Mississippi: For the first time in the state's history a governor was being inaugurated

who had been elected directly by the people without the aid of "convention, combination, or clique."⁶

Vardaman opened his address by asking that the bitterness engendered by the late primary be allowed to subside. Admitting that freedom of speech had been abused in that contest, Vardaman nevertheless thought that the experience of directly choosing public officials had given the electorate of Mississippi increased confidence in and capacity for self-government. Throughout his address Vardaman emphasized the importance of the "common laborer" and the "working man." They were the ones who elect government officials; and to their interests governments should cater.⁷

In outlining the policies for which his administration would strive, the Governor asserted that he would not work for the benefits of a favored few or for the interests of corporate wealth. He would try to ease the lot of the farmer, the working man, and small businessman. To keep the cost of the state's new capitol building from falling entirely upon the present generation, the legislature should, instead of increasing taxation to pay for it, issue state bonds to be repaid over several decades. He wanted industry to come to the state, but would not grant special tax exemptions to corporate wealth. The railroads, lumber companies, and other corporate interests should be made to bear their share of the tax burden. In addition, the legislature should impose more stringent controls upon certain financial interests: For example, the state should regulate insurance

companies better in order to obtain lower rates.⁸

In the field of education he urged larger appropriations to the common schools. Increases for the state's colleges were unnecessary, for their costs could be borne by those who wanted to attain higher education. Many white children, especially those in the rural districts, were not receiving even the rudiments of education.⁹ One specific reform needed was a uniform text book law, that would insure all children a set of basic text books.¹⁰

The judiciary system and the penitentiary also needed attention. Too frequently in the past, governors had appointed judges solely for political purposes. Vardaman believed it would be safer for the people to elect all judges. To encourage more competent men to become judges, he urged the legislature to increase the salaries of the judiciary. Turning to the penal system, he advocated a change in the management of the penitentiary. Since 1895 the governor, the attorney general, and the railroad commissioners had managed penitentiary affairs. It would be far better, Vardaman claimed, to have a full-time board of trustees and a superintendent to direct the penal system. Under stricter supervision the graft and inefficiency often characteristic in the past might be eliminated.¹¹

Vardaman warned, as he had in his campaign speeches, that the most dangerous problem facing the American people was the race issue. He recommended three solutions to help meet it. Most immediately the

legislature could pass rigid laws to insure a separation of the races in all public places. Railroad companies and street car lines, for example, should be required to furnish separate cars for blacks and for whites.¹² To offset the Republican crime of having invested the Negro with all the rights of citizenship, Mississippi should lead the nation in a movement to alter the Fourteenth Amendment and to abolish the Fifteenth Amendment. These two amendments, Vardaman believed, posed the most serious threats to white supremacy: The Fourteenth because it entitled the Negro to the benefits of public education, the Fifteenth because it gave him the right to vote. Pending change in the Fourteenth Amendment, Mississippi could curtail Negro education by investing the legislature with unrestricted control over public education.¹³ Vardaman never specifically said how the legislature was to reduce Negro education. Apparently he contemplated that it would be by manipulating the school fund.

Characteristic of the tone of Vardaman's inaugural address was an appeal to abolish the governor's mansion. Describing it as a relic of aristocracy, he argued that the mansion imposed undue social obligations upon the chief executive and forced him to devote less time to his official duties. As the first popularly elected governor, he asked that he be permitted to rent or own a home in Jackson as did other state officials.¹⁴

The state press generally approved the new Governor's message. Some objected to his appeal to racism, but most considered the inaugural

a sound and sensible document. Certainly it did not resemble his vicious, biting campaign speeches. The Biloxi Herald, which had strongly opposed Vardaman's election, asserted that his address indicated that his administration might not be as "radical" as many had feared.¹⁵

The legislature had been in session for over two weeks before Vardaman took office. Although he had visited Jackson several times in the weeks before his inauguration, he had taken pains, so he said, not to interfere with the work of the legislature.¹⁶ During his administration Vardaman did strive to cultivate the friendship of legislators, and through his personal magnetism and political astuteness he sometimes strongly influenced them. Among those newly elected were many who had openly supported Vardaman during the primary. It soon became evident that Vardaman's greatest source of legislative strength would be in the House of Representatives. E. N. Thomas, an ardent Vardaman supporter who favored the Governor's plan for penitentiary reform, had been elected speaker.¹⁷ Like Vardaman, he was from the Delta. So also were L. P. Smith, the clerk of the House, from Thomas' home county of Washington, and E. H. More, president pro tempore of the Senate, was from the Delta county of Bolivar.¹⁸

The brief legislative session of 1904 bore the stamp of Vardaman's influence. With almost unanimous support the assemblage enacted the state's first Jim Crow law by requiring street car companies to

furnish separate facilities for Negroes and for whites. If a concern could not afford separate cars, its coaches must be partitioned into sections.¹⁹ The legislature also passed a vagrancy law that provided stiff penalties for able-bodied persons who did not work and had no means of support. Although the law applied to gamblers, prostitutes, and bootleggers, it was directed chiefly against Negroes.²⁰

Vardaman delivered his most serious blow to Negro education by vetoing a bill to appropriate funds for the Holly Springs State Normal School, an institute in northeastern Mississippi. Although it was small and poor, the school had provided instruction for some Negro teachers. The House passed the appropriation bill by a vote of 70 to 19 and the Senate by a vote of 25 to 13, but the Governor rejected it, maintaining that literary education did not benefit the Negro.²¹ As if he were an authority on education, he asserted that Negroes learned to read and write by imitation but never learned the meaning of what they studied. Negro schools, the Governor maintained, should train only the pupils heart and hands.²² After the House sustained the Governor's veto, Speaker Thomas put down all further attempts to reconsider the measure.²³ In vetoing this bill Vardaman hurt Negro education in Mississippi, the most specific injury being that for many years thereafter Negroes seeking to become teachers of literary subjects must go outside the state for instruction. The other Negro colleges of Mississippi offered instruction that was primarily designed for agricultural and industrial training.²⁴

The Governor compensated the community of Holly Springs by having one of the state's two new agricultural experiment stations located there.²⁵ In 1906 the legislature donated all the property and buildings of the defunct Holly Springs Normal College to the newly founded experiment station.²⁶

While encouraging legislation detrimental to Negro education, Vardaman gave leadership to improving educational facilities for whites. After a lengthy struggle between the two houses the lawmakers passed the sorely needed uniform text book law. The Senate passed a bill providing that a committee, consisting of the governor, attorney general, state superintendent of education, and eight teachers choose the text books.²⁷ The House objected to including the governor and attorney general on the committee.²⁸ Although some feared that the bill might be lost, the Senate agreed to accept the House's version.²⁹ The legislature also followed Vardaman's recommendation and increased the appropriations for common schools. The sum provided was \$1,125,000 a year, an increase of \$600,000 over the past year.³⁰

Several other achievements are of note. Fire having destroyed the Deaf and Dumb Institute two years earlier, the legislature now empowered the Governor to appoint a commission that would select a new site and plans for the school; it allotted \$75,000 to cover the costs of construction.³¹ To provide care and housing for Confederate veterans, the legislature authorized the purchase of Jefferson Davis' former residence, Beauvoir, to serve as home for veterans and their wives.³²

The legislature completed its business by late March and adjourned. It had supported the wishes of the new chief executive in relation to a uniform text book law, larger appropriations for common schools, and termination of the Holly Springs Normal College. It had failed to reform the penitentiary system, to create the office of commissioner of agriculture, to enact a child labor law, or to make the judiciary elective. Vardaman had favored all these measures.³³ In truth, it was too early for him to exert his full influence with the legislature. Two years later, having established his reputation as a strong governor, he would be able to call a special session to take up unfinished business and see more of his legislative program enacted into law.

An embarrassing inadequacy of funds in the state treasury caused much trouble during Vardaman's first year in office. Under the Longino administration the state had built a new capitol costing over a million dollars. As the collection of unpaid railroad taxes was supposed to cover much of the construction costs, Longino had argued that the state would not have to impose new taxes or issue bonds.³⁴ Vardaman necessarily disagreed, for it had become evident by 1904 that new sources of revenue must be secured to meet the basic needs of the state government. For the reasons set forth in his inaugural, Vardaman urged the legislature to authorize the issuance of state bonds instead of increasing taxes.³⁵ After much delay the legislature accordingly empowered the Governor to sell $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent state bonds to the amount of \$500,000 and to borrow \$300,000 to cover the expenses of the state during 1905.³⁶

By late spring of 1904 the state's financial resources were at low ebb and the need for additional revenue imperative.³⁷ After several months of negotiation Vardaman arranged to sell bonds to N. W. Harris and Company of Chicago, but the company wanted time to investigate thoroughly and to make sure that the state would not repudiate this bond issue.³⁸ As the company did not deliver the money until September, the resources in the treasury once sank to seventy cents, and many predicted the legislature would have to be called into special session.³⁹ The controversy resulting from the bond sale brought the first open break between Vardaman and the press, especially in Jackson. The Governor believed some newspapers had unjustly blamed him for the financial troubles.⁴⁰ Throughout the remainder of his administration he accused the capitol papers of open hostility toward him, and frequently he was right.

From the beginning of his term Vardaman was under unusual pressure to prove himself as an administrator. Political enemies who might admit that he was an effective speaker and writer had argued that he totally lacked business sense.⁴¹ The treasury stringency during 1904 certainly provided ammunition for his critics, but Vardaman's actions in meeting other problems won overwhelming praise. Immediately after the legislature passed the uniform textbook law, teachers throughout the state began to bombard Vardaman with applications to be appointed to the textbook commission. The new law did not go into effect until the fall of 1905, giving plenty of time for Vardaman to deliberate.⁴² The eight teachers he eventually named were considered excellent choices.⁴³

In July of 1905 a yellow fever epidemic broke out in New Orleans and soon spread to Mississippi. Vardaman assumed a leading role in maintaining order and in establishing quarantine regulations. He appealed for calm, emphasized the importance of immediately reporting all new cases, and promised to keep the public fully informed on the course of the disease.⁴⁴ The last legislature had provided an emergency fund of \$5,000, and Vardaman immediately wrote to each legislator asking for permission to borrow whatever additional money was necessary. With one exception, the lawmakers pledged their support.⁴⁵ So thorough was the fight against the disease, that the epidemic did not cause widespread destruction as it had frequently done in the past.⁴⁶ The Governor received special citations for his leadership in the fight.⁴⁷

Few people could criticize Vardaman's actions in obtaining school text books or in fighting yellow fever, but his position on the race problem continued to cause much concern. Among those who publicly expressed their fears that race relations would deteriorate under Vardaman and that Negroes would be subjected to abuses greater than in the past, was Charles B. Galloway, the Methodist Bishop of Mississippi. Appalled by lynchings and other outrages inflicted on Negroes, Galloway advocated the improvement of the Negro race in the South by providing better educational opportunities and by impartial enforcement of the law. Although he did not advocate granting Negroes social and political equality, he objected strongly to Vardaman's crude approach to the race problem.⁴⁸ The Governor's long-time friend and advisor, Dr. B. F. Ward, answered the Bishop in a news-

paper article, arguing as Vardaman did that the Negro race had not improved during the past forty years, that Negro education had failed to help the race, and that lynch law would remain a necessity as long as Negroes violated white women.⁴⁹ The contrast between these views and Galloway's indicated a sharp division among Mississippi whites on how best to maintain race relations.

To gain popular support Vardaman continued to appeal to racism and to denounce those whom he considered enemies of white supremacy. During Vardaman's first year in office the Postmaster General of the United States, bearing in mind the virulence of Vardaman's criticism of President Roosevelt for closing the Indianola post office, refused to name a post office in honor of the new Governor. This seemingly triviality enhanced Vardaman's popularity in Mississippi. Even the Jackson Evening News, one of his leading critics, asserted that because of the Postmaster's action, "it is time for all of us to be Vardaman men."⁵⁰

The Governor rarely missed an opportunity to call attention to the race problem, especially to Negro crimes of violence. Asserting that Negroes committed more crimes during the summer months, he offered a demagogic explanation:

The heat of the summer sun seems to intensify the brutish negro's lust, as it causes the blood to flow in the body, and melts the virus in the fangs of the coiled serpent, on the side of the rock in early spring. It seems to loosen within his soul the very fires of hell itself.⁵¹

As an immediate solution to this problem he urged that law officers enforce the vagrancy law strictly, because most crimes were

committed by "trifling, loafing, negroes."⁵² As a permanent solution he advocated his old plan of modifying the Fourteenth Amendment and abolishing the Fifteenth. It must be done quickly to meet an impending racial crisis. "The matter of white supremacy or black domination in the South is at fever heat and the sooner the North and West realize this, the better it will be for the nation."⁵³

However radical the utterances by which Vardaman appealed to racism for political purposes, he realized the danger of permitting lawlessness to go unchecked and worked to maintain order. Shortly after his inauguration a mob at Doddsville captured a Negro man and woman accused of murdering a young white planter. They mutilated the man by cutting off his ears and fingers and then burned both Negroes to death.⁵⁴ Determined to prevent similar occurrences, Vardaman personally intervened two weeks later to stop a lynching in Batysville. In protecting from mob action a Negro accused of killing a white man, Vardaman took a train to Greenwood, there enlisted the local national guard unit, and then proceeded to Batysville. Arriving after an all night trip, he had the prisoner taken into custody and returned with him to Jackson.⁵⁵

Perhaps the most inflammable situation with which Vardaman dealt occurred in Jackson in 1905 when a Negro raped a young white woman. The local populace quickly organized search parties and as the crowd became embittered, some feared that innocent Negroes would suffer.

Vardaman then made a public appeal, urging calmness and moderation. He sympathized with the desire to punish the offender, but he warned that "never in your history was it more necessary for your acts and utterances to be characterized by prudence and conservatism than in this emergency."⁵⁶ The Jackson citizenry responded to the Governor's appeal and did not try to lynch Stewart Johnson, a Negro arrested for the crime. In fact, when Johnson was tried, the jury ruled there was not sufficient evidence to convict him. The Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger reported it was one of the first times in Mississippi that a Negro had been acquitted for such a crime.⁵⁷

Altogether Vardaman intervened on at least nine occasions to prevent lynchings--peculiar behavior for an ultra white supremacist who had criticized his predecessor for doing the same thing.⁵⁸

On assuming office Vardaman discovered that a serious race problem existed in parts of south Mississippi. During the 1890's white terrorist societies had flourished in several counties there. Usually known as White Caps, these secret clubs had first appeared during the severe agricultural depression involved in the Panic of 1893. At that time many small farmers were indebted to local merchants, some of them Alsatian Jews who had moved into the South after the Civil War. In anger and frustration many farmers joined the White Cap societies, which were hostile to Jews and to merchants. White Caps sometimes burned gins owned by merchants and terrorized their Negro employees. Indeed, Negroes were frequently the principal victims of

the White Caps.⁵⁹

Many of the White Cap secret organizations had ceased to exist by the late 1890's, but violence continued in certain counties. When Governor Longino had considered taking action against the lawless bands, Vardaman had boasted that the local authorities could deal with the problem.⁶⁰ When Vardaman had become Governor himself, he found the White Cappers posing a serious threat in Lincoln and Franklin Counties. From Lincoln as many as eighteen wagons, loaded with the possessions of Negro families, left in a single day.⁶¹ Usually Negroes employed by merchants and lumber companies or those living on government homesteads were the ones that experienced the White Capper wrath. Typical warnings received by White Capper victims read thus:

Elder Burton, you must leave this place at once and go to some good white farmer's place and go to work and you will be protected if not you will be delt with roughly.

John Bank, you must vacate this place at once or you will be delt with and . . . damn roughly.⁶²

For the seeming revival of White Cap violence now that Vardaman was Governor, some blamed his appeal to racism during the Democratic primary; they also feared that conditions would become worse during his four years in office.⁶³ Others claimed that labor agents trying to persuade Negroes to leave the lower counties for the Delta were behind the trouble.⁶⁴

In 1904 Vardaman began to work secretly against the White Cappers. After the legislature provided a special fund for maintaining law and order, he employed a Pinkerton detective, J. H. Hoyt, to make an investigation in Lincoln and surrounding counties. Hoyt interviewed witnesses, obtained some confessions, and compiled evidence against the White Cappers. Detailed reports of his activities were sent to Vardaman each day.⁶⁵

Hoyt discovered that White Cap societies similar to those that had existed in 1893 had been organized since 1902 in Lincoln and Franklin Counties. W. P. Adams, himself a White Capper, disclosed that the societies usually met at night in the woods. New members swore to help discipline any 'obnoxious negroes' within the jurisdiction of the club. They also vowed that as members of a jury they would never vote for the conviction of a fellow White Capper. Secret rituals, pass words, and signs helped the members identify one another, with death the penalty for divulging the organization's secrets.⁶⁶ Most members were poor white farmers--men who on coming to town wore broad-brimmed wool hats, who rarely shaved, and who allowed their hair to fall about their shoulders, coiled and knotted. Some wealthier citizens also had become White Cappers.⁶⁷ Labor agents had not incited the movement.

The evidence amassed by Hoyt's investigation in Lincoln County presented a picture of terrorism and violence. Not only whites, but also some Negroes had participated in White Capper raids, as was seen in the case of Sam Jones. Himself a Negro, Jones joined his father and

seven white men in making a raid on the home of Gwyn Rogers, also a Negro. The terrorists riddled the doors, windows, and porch of the Rogers' home with buckshot and bullets, but fortunately no one was hurt.⁶⁸ Other White Capper raids were more serious, as when a small group of terrorists killed an elderly Negro, Henry List.⁶⁹

After Hoyt had discovered the society's objectives, some of its activities, and the names of many members, Vardaman instructed him to meet with local merchants and professional men to inform them of his work.⁷⁰ When Hoyt accordingly made himself known to some of the leading citizens in Lincoln County, many of them were encouraged to learn of the Governor's position. They too opposed the White Cappers but had not been able to offset them, especially since 1903 when many candidates for local office in Lincoln and Franklin counties had won in the Democratic primary with the active support of the White Cappers, against whom they were now unwilling to proceed.⁷¹

To help unify opposition to the White Cappers Vardaman invited a number of leading merchants and lawyers to Jackson to discuss the problem with him. In view of the local political situation, as they described it, he suggested that they form a law-and-order league and promised to give this extra legal organization his full support in prosecuting the White Cappers. As some among the businessmen of Lincoln County were suspected of being White Cappers themselves, the league formed a special executive committee composed of the most trusted business leaders to meet periodically with the Governor. Immediately after the formation of the law-and-order league, sentiment in

Lincoln County began to mount against the White Cappers; many farmers, as well as merchants, supported the Governor's action.⁷²

During the spring and summer of 1904 Hoyt and the executive committee of the law-and-order league and a local attorney whom Vardaman appointed to head the prosecution gathered evidence against the White Cappers. One White Capper who was persuaded to testify against the society went through the Lincoln County tax rolls and named over four hundred members of the organization.⁷³ When the assassins of Henry List were brought to trial, some of their fellow White Cappers threatened violence, and Vardaman ordered a national guard unit to maintain order.⁷⁴ So overwhelming was the evidence against the List murderers that they pled guilty and received long sentences in the state penitentiary.⁷⁵ Most of the White Cappers of Lincoln County had committed no overt crime, and could not be prosecuted, but the conviction of the List murderers led to the breakup of the local society.⁷⁶

While investigating the trouble in Lincoln County, detective Hoyt discovered that there had been White Cap outrages in the adjoining county of Franklin. Vardaman therefore soon launched another investigation. The sheriff of Franklin County, A. M. Newman, denounced this intrusion, arguing that local authorities had the situation under control. Newman admitted that he himself had helped to organize a Farmer's League in December, 1902, the same month that White Cap violence had erupted in Franklin; but he denied that the League was a White Cap society.⁷⁷

Despite the sheriff's protests, Vardaman pushed the investigation. In part, the situation in Franklin resembled that in Lincoln, because in both places many people had joined who had no idea of actively participating in terrorist raids.⁷⁸ The Franklin White Cappers had murdered no one, but great numbers had been involved in driving Negroes off government homesteads. They had thus violated United States law, and a federal grand jury accordingly indicted over three hundred of them in May, 1905. The large number of the indictments and the bulk of the evidence to be introduced caused the cases to be postponed until the following year.⁷⁹

In the interval between the indictments and the trials W. P. Adams, who had disclosed the secrets of both the Lincoln and Franklin County organizations, was murdered.⁸⁰ White Cappers in Franklin County attempted to threaten and frighten witnesses who had agreed to testify against them.⁸¹ Despite the continuing outbursts of violence, the White Capper cases came before the United States Circuit Court in May, 1906. Over three hundred men were charged with conspiracy for attempting to intimidate government homesteaders. Among those indicted was Sheriff A. M. Newman whose case served as a test for the others. His attorneys tried to have his case dismissed, charging that detective Hoyt, although employed by the prosecution, had been allowed to talk to members of the grand jury while they were deliberating on Newman's indictment, and that John P. Butler, a member of the grand jury, had assisted Hoyt in securing evidence against Newman. After United States Attorney R. C. Lee had answered these charges, Judge Henry Niles ruled

that the indictment of Newman was valid.⁷² Newman and all other defendants then pled guilty and were sentenced to pay fines of \$25 and to serve three months in jail. The jail sentences were suspended and never enforced.⁸³

The Franklin County White Cappers had received the lightest penalties permitted by law. Certainly they deserved more severe treatment. Under the circumstances, however, there had been little chance of their receiving it. Many who deplored White Cap lawlessness did not consider crimes committed against Negroes to be as serious as similar crimes committed against whites. Furthermore, to sentence over three hundred men to long terms in prison would impose severe hardship on their families.

The principal accomplishment of the investigations and prosecutions was the virtual destruction of the White Cap societies. Although some whites continued to terrorize Negroes, such activities were by no means so widespread as they had been when Vardaman entered office.⁸⁴ It may be that his office-seeking speeches in 1903 had encouraged atrocities, but by leading the fight against the White Cappers in Lincoln and Franklin Counties he had proved that he would maintain law and order.

Inevitably, given the tone of the campaign that had put him in office, there had been fear that Vardaman would abuse his patronage power by appointing incompetent men to office. In general, however, Vardaman distributed patronage wisely. After he had been in office

for less than a month the Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, an anti-administration paper, declared it no more than

the plain and simple truth to say that in this brief and trying time, when so many of his friends are clamoring for place and positions, that he has sustained himself ably and well, to the admiration of friends and to the satisfaction of opponents.⁸⁵

A notable example of moderation came in connection with a number of judicial appointments made during Longino's last six months in office. In spite of much fear to the contrary, Vardaman decided after a thorough investigation not to disturb these "vacation appointments"; he would have the opportunity to appoint new judges during the course of his administration.⁸⁶

Indeed, during his entire administration few of Vardaman's appointments caused controversy. LeRoy Percy, who had supported him in 1903, strongly objected to his not reappointing J. T. Atterbury to the Mississippi board of levee commissioners. The Governor chose to appoint instead John T. Hebron of the state senate.⁸⁷ The decision fully justified itself, for Hebron later played a major role in the most important achievement of Vardaman's administration--the reform of the state penitentiary system.⁸⁸

In one instance Vardaman perhaps used his appointive powers for vindictive purposes. Longino had appointed J. L. Gillespie as a trustee of Alcorn A. & M. College, a Negro institution. Gillespie was Vardaman's former partner in the Greenwood Enterprise, but since

1896 he had opposed Vardaman's political ambitions and Vardaman as governor did not reappoint him to the Alcorn board. What was more, the new board of trustees, of which Vardaman was president, secretly accused Gillespie of having used his official position to obtain the contract for printing the college catalogue and stationery at excessively high prices. The sum of money involved was not large, and Gillespie vindicated himself. One cannot but feel that if Vardaman and Gillespie had still been friends, the Governor might have withheld the matter from the public until it had been investigated and Gillespie had made his defense. As it was, the state press reported the charges before Gillespie had been informed of them.⁸⁹

Vardaman's most important innovation in making appointments had to do with the county electoral commissioners. The commissions had usually consisted of two Democrats and one Republican. In the Delta counties, the Republican was often a Negro. Vardaman announced that no Negroes would receive such appointments in the future. In counties where the Populists had been strong he appointed two Democrats and a Populist; in other counties he appointed a Republican if a white one could be found. Republicans opposed this innovation, but acquiesced in it.⁹⁰

The preliminaries of the presidential election of 1904 brought on the first open political friction of Vardaman's governorship. He had originally favored not instructing the Mississippi delegates to the national convention, but because he suspected his old enemy,

Senator McLaurin, of supporting William Randolph Hearst, he insisted that the delegation be pledged to Judge Alton B. Parker of New York. The state convention, led by Vardaman, Money, and John Sharp Williams, instructed the Mississippi delegation as Vardaman desired.⁹¹ When the Democratic national convention met at St. Louis in July, 1904, the struggle between the McLaurin and anti-McLaurin forces reached a new intensity. In view of their long-standing hostility, dating back to the Spanish-American War, Vardaman and McLaurin refused to associate with one another. Taking advantage of the situation, Vardaman had the Mississippi delegation hold all of its meetings in his hotel room--a place he knew Senator McLaurin would not go. This action enraged the McLaurin men in the Mississippi delegation, who appealed to Senator Money to intervene. Apparently Representative Williams tried to mediate, but his efforts were to no avail.⁹² The new rift between Vardaman and McLaurin would influence strongly certain policies of the Governor's administration.

Political factionalism also appeared early within the state administration in the form of ill feeling between Vardaman and Attorney General William Williams. A young man of thirty-three, Williams was considered a rising power in Mississippi politics. In the summer of 1904 he and Vardaman became embroiled in a controversy over the construction of the new deaf and dumb institute. After Williams disapproved an architectural plan favored by Vardaman, the Governor issued an intemperate statement to the press advising the Attorney General to "always 'give the state an honest job.'" Although Vardaman apologized for

this rash outburst, relations between him and Williams remained strained.⁹³ As in his conflict with McLaurin, Vardaman's breach with William Williams would strongly influence the remainder of his administration.

In January, 1906, Vardaman called the legislature into special session. The ostensible reason was to consider a new state code drawn up by a three-man commission authorized by the legislature and appointed by Vardaman in March, 1904.⁹⁴ In truth, however, the code was not all the Governor had in mind: He announced that the lawmakers could take up any business they desired, and that he would if necessary extend the session into the spring.⁹⁵ Evidently Vardaman now felt himself strong enough to warrant a further attempt to secure enactment of various parts of his basic program.

His address to the special session renewed many recommendations he had made two years earlier. The state's common schools and benevolent institutions should have larger appropriations, the post of commissioner of agriculture should be created, the judiciary should be made elective, and a child labor law should be enacted. Repeating many of his old views on the race problem, Vardaman now urged the legislature to provide the death penalty for the crime of rape; as long as ten years' imprisonment remained the maximum penalty for rape, lynch mobs would continue to burn and hang rapists.⁹⁶

From the time the legislature convened in January, 1906, Vardaman urged stricter regulation of railroads and other corporate

enterprises. His actions were in accord with a strong antimonopoly and antirailroad movement that reached a high point in the South, as it did in other parts of the nation, in 1906 and 1907.⁹⁷ Especially in the South did the progressive movement in its early stages take the form of antimonopoly drives against such enterprises as insurance, oil, tobacco, and railroads.⁹⁸ In 1904 the legislature had passed an act to permit the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and the Southern Railroad to merge their operations in Mississippi.⁹⁹ Vardaman had not signed this bill, and at the opening of the 1906 legislative session he vetoed it. Maintaining that this act would encourage railroad consolidation, he asserted that only competition would protect the people's interest by insuring lower rates and better service. "Give the railroads in America the power," he warned, "and they will rule the Legislatures, dominate the courts, and ultimately enslave the people."¹⁰⁰ His veto stood.

Soon after Vardaman's veto of the railroad merger bill, the legislature began to investigate the possible existence of a lumber trust in the state. At the time many lumber companies were operating in southern Mississippi, and some people had become alarmed over their increasing size and apparent influence and power.¹⁰¹ Until 1876 federal lands in Mississippi had been limited to homestead grants of eighty acres. In that year, in response to the growing needs for new lumber, federal lands were opened to unrestricted cash entry, and during the next twelve years thirty-two northern groups acquired 889,359 acres and eleven southern groups bought 134,270 acres. In

1888, "under the spur of agrarian alarm," southern representatives tried to restore some of the 1866 restrictions, but by that time the rising lumber companies controlled the best stands of long leaf pine.¹⁰² Mississippi had attempted to prevent corporations from acquiring unlimited property in land when in 1892 the legislature passed an act that attempted to limit real estate holdings of manufacturing and banking corporations to \$1,000,000 in value, and of other corporations to \$250,000. Despite this legislation, consolidation of large tracts of land continued in the years between 1890 and 1906. Indeed, some lumber interests advocated that all restrictive legislation on property holding be removed.¹⁰³ After investigating the timber industry, a legislative committee reported that no lumber trust existed, although the business had expanded greatly during the past twenty years. The committee did recommend more stringent laws to regulate lumbering.¹⁰⁴ Senator Horace Bloomfield, a member of the committee, issued a minority report supporting the industry and urging that lumber companies be allowed to own as much as \$20,000,000 worth of property.¹⁰⁵

Although the lawmakers did not follow Bloomfield's recommendation, they did provide that corporations could own a maximum of \$10,000,000 worth of property. Vardaman immediately vetoed this bill and strongly censured the legislators for passing it. Believing this law would place even more of the forests of southern Mississippi "within the hands of a few people to be exploited," he urged the lawmakers to reconsider their action and reduce the limit of property holdings of

corporations to \$2,000,000.

The policy of our laws, for many years, be it said to the credit of her law-makers, has been against the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, for the elimination of trusts and against the fostering of monopoly. This section, if it becomes a law, places the pine forests of South Mississippi within the hands of a few people to be exploited, used and employed for the benefit of the few against the interests of the many. If the Legislature had undertaken in definite terms to create a lumber trust and place the long leaf pine industry in the hands of a limited number of men to be used as their cupidity and self-interest might dictate, I cannot conceive of a method or a means by which it could have been more effectually done than is proposed to be done by the enactment of this law. . . . The effect of such legislation will be to close the door of opportunity and hope in the face of the struggling youth of the State and make of them the toilers of the favored rich.¹⁰⁶

To the disgust of many conservative interests, the legislature followed the Governor's advise and reduced the limit of corporate holdings from \$10,000,000 to \$2,000,000.¹⁰⁷

In pursuance of Vardaman's radical scheme to abolish Negro education Senator A. J. Glover introduced a resolution to amend the state constitution by providing that no child be admitted to public school whose father had not paid the poll tax for the current year. Since almost no Negroes paid this tax, the amendment would, according to some estimates, bar over nine-tenths of the Negro children from school, as well as many white children.¹⁰⁸ Fortunately the Senate did not support Glover's amendment.¹⁰⁹

Vardaman's other recommendations fared variously in the legislature. Nothing was done about child labor or an elective judiciary.¹¹⁰ In the matter of annual appropriations for the common

schools an attempted reduction of \$125,000 was beaten off and the figure continued at \$1,250,000.¹¹¹ Another issue of state bonds, recommended by Vardaman as necessary because the state was still burdened with the debt from the new capitol, was authorized.¹¹² Finally, in accordance with Vardaman's repeated request in behalf of the agrarian interests, the legislature created the office of commissioner of agriculture. This officer came to assist farmers by collecting and making readily available information on agricultural conditions through the state. As an indirect means of aiding agriculture the commissioner also sought to encourage industries to come to Mississippi.¹¹³

* * *

Vardaman's administration did not introduce the sweeping changes that many had expected. State politics were not radically altered, for his old conflict with the McLaurins had constituted the chief source of political quarreling. By his efforts to maintain law and order and by his prosecution of the White Caps, the Governor had proved himself to be a more responsible public official than many had expected. His most damaging blows to race relations had been the Jim Crow law, the vagrancy law, and the abolition of the Holly Springs Normal School. Yet the new administration enacted progressive legislation that distinguished it from its Bourbon predecessors and resembled measures being adopted in other states. The uniform text book law, increased appropriations for common schools and benevolent institutions, the creation of a commissioner of agriculture, and more

stringent regulation of corporate wealth, all constituted achievements which the Bourbons had opposed and the small farmers had long advocated.

NOTES

¹Jackson Evening News, January 19, 1904.

²Chicago Record Herald quoted in Jackson Evening News, April 7, 1905. Before moving to Jackson Vardaman sold the Commonwealth to F. R. Birdsall, editor of the Yazoo Sentinel. Greenwood Commonwealth, October 3, 10, 1903.

³Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 8, 13, 1904.

⁴Ibid., January 19, 1904.

⁵Jackson Evening News, January 18, 19, 1904.

⁶Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 19, 1904.

⁷Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi at a Regular Session thereof in the City of Jackson, January, February, and March, 1904 (Nashville, Tenn., 1904), 142-147. Hereafter cited as House Journal, 1904.

⁸Ibid., 148-150. Vardaman's belief in stricter regulation of corporate wealth was similar to that of Progressive governors throughout the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century. George E. Mowry, The Era of Theodore Roosevelt, 1900-1912 (New York, 1958), 8-9; Russel B. Nye, 71-78; Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870-1950 (East Lansing, Mich., 1951), 9, 206-232; C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913 (History of the South, vol. IX, Baton Rouge, 1951), 374-377, 380-381, 384.

⁹House Journal, 1904, 150-151.

¹⁰Ibid., 153.

¹¹Ibid., 147-149.

¹²Ibid., 153.

¹³Ibid., 145-146, 151-153.

¹⁴Ibid., 153-154.

¹⁵Biloxi Herald, quoted in Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 23, 1904.

¹⁶Greenwood Commonwealth, January 2, 1904.

¹⁷Jackson Evening News, January 6, 1904. The News commented: "The election of Mr. Thomas cannot but be regarded as a victory for the new administration which is to take charge on the 19th of this month. In the late campaign he was an ardent supporter of both Vardaman and Money, and that these forces contributed to his election yesterday there is little doubt."

¹⁸Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 6, 1904.

¹⁹Laws of the State of Mississippi Passed at a Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature Held in the City of Jackson Commencing January 5, 1904, Ending March 22, 1904 (Nashville, Tenn., 1904), 140-141. Hereafter cited as Mississippi Laws.

²⁰Ibid., 199-203.

²¹House Journal, 1904, 472-473; Journal of the Senate of the State of Mississippi at a Regular Session thereof in the City of Jackson, January, February, and March, 1904 (Nashville, Tenn., 1904), 489. Hereafter cited as Senate Journal, 1904.

²²House Journal, 1904, 840-843.

²³Ibid., 851, 867.

²⁴The total number of graduates from the Holly Springs Normal School down to 1904 was about two hundred. After its closing the only normal training provided for Negroes was in private institutions and in state normals. Indeed, during the decade 1900-1910 Negro education in Mississippi underwent a "decided retrogression" of which the closing of the Holly Springs Normal college was a major cause. Stuart Grayson Noble, Forty Years of Public Schools in Mississippi: with Special Reference to the Education of the Negro (New York, 1918), 87-89. Vardaman's veto of the Holly Springs Normal bill evoked sharp criticism from part of the newspapers of the state. Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, March 15, 1904; Jackson Evening News, March 15, 17, 1904.

²⁵Ibid., July 28, 1904.

²⁶Ibid., January 6, 1906; Mississippi Laws, 1906, 153.

²⁷Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, February 11, 1904.

²⁸Ibid., February 24, 1904.

²⁹Ibid., March 15, 1904; Mississippi Laws, 1904, 116-124.

³⁰Ibid., 5. During the first decade of the twentieth century there were movements to improve educational facilities throughout the South: School terms were lengthened, teachers salaries were improved, and new schools were erected. Still the "peculiar southern combination of poverty, excessive numbers of children over adults, and the duplication for two races proved in the end more of a problem than southern resources, philanthropy, and good intentions could solve." Woodward, Origins of the New South, 405-406.

³¹Mississippi Laws, 1904, 155-161.

³²Jackson Evening News, February 20, 1904.

³³Ibid., January 8, 1904; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 11, 13, March 15, 16, 1904.

³⁴House Journal, 1904, 32-37.

³⁵Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 21, 1904.

³⁶Mississippi Laws, 1904, 42-43, 87-88.

³⁷Jackson Evening News, May 4, 1904.

³⁸Ibid., July 12, 1904. Mississippi had a reputation for repudiation dating from the 1840's. R. C. McGrane, Foreign Bondholders and American State Debts (New York, 1935), 193-222; B. U. Ratchford, American State Debts (Durham, 1941), 105-109.

³⁹Jackson Evening News, September 7, 8, 1904; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, September 22, 1904.

⁴⁰Ibid., October 1, 1904.

⁴¹Jackson Evening News, February 2, 1904.

⁴²Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, April 25, June 2, 7, 1904.

⁴³Ibid., April 17, 1905.

⁴⁴Ibid., July 26, 1905; Jackson Evening News, July 26, 1905.

⁴⁵Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, August 3, 4, 1905.

⁴⁶Dunbar Rowland, History of Mississippi: The Heart of the South (Chicago, 1925), II, 205-207.

⁴⁷Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, November 17, 1905.

- ⁴⁸Ibid., April 26, 1904.
- ⁴⁹Jackson Evening News, May 3, 1904.
- ⁵⁰Ibid., July 28, 1904.
- ⁵¹Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 18, 1905.
- ⁵²Ibid., March 9, 1905; Vicksburg Herald, September 26, 1906.
- ⁵³Ibid., September 25, October 19, 1906.
- ⁵⁴Greenwood Commonwealth, February 13, 1904.
- ⁵⁵Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, February 29, 1904.
- ⁵⁶Ibid., February 24, 25, 1905.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., April 22, 1905.
- ⁵⁸Ibid., February 24, April 13, 19, 1905; February 1, 17, 1906; Vicksburg Herald, December 25, 1906; Jackson Evening News, April 5, June 29, 1904, January 23, August 17, 1905.
- ⁵⁹James Sharbrough Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 1871-1900: A Study in Nonconformity (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1953), 578-583; Nollie Hickman, Mississippi Harvest: Lumbering in the Longleaf Pine Belt, 1840-1915 (University, Mississippi, 1962), 239-240.
- ⁶⁰Greenwood Commonwealth, January 2, 1903.
- ⁶¹A. J. H/oyt/ to H. W. Minster, April 19, 1904, in Mississippi Governors Records, Letters Received by James K. Vardaman, Box I, Folder 3 (Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi). Hereafter cited as Governor's Letters Received.
- ⁶²H/oyt/ to Minster, April 7, 1904, ibid.
- ⁶³H/oyt/ to Minster, April 12, 13, 1904, ibid.
- ⁶⁴H/oyt/to Minster, April 11, 1904, ibid.,
- ⁶⁵Hoyt mailed his daily reports to H. W. Minster, Resident Superintendent of Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, in St. Louis. Minster then forwarded the reports to Vardaman. See ibid., Box I, Folder 2.
- ⁶⁶H/oyt/ to Minster, July 13, 14, 1904, ibid., Box I, Folder 7; Jackson Evening News, July 21, 1904.

⁶⁷Ibid., May 12, 1905.

⁶⁸Statement of Sam Jones, given voluntarily. See Governor's Letters Received, Box I, Folder 4.

⁶⁹Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, September 7, 1904.

⁷⁰H/oyt/ to Minster, April 21, 1904, Governor's Letters Received, Box I, Folder 4.

⁷¹H/oyt/ to Minster, April 29, July 3, 11, 1904, ibid., Box I, Folders 4, 6.

⁷²H/oyt/ to Minster, April 25, 1905, ibid., Box I, Folder 4.

⁷³H/oyt/ to Minster, July 2, 3, 1904, ibid., Box I, Folder 6.

⁷⁴Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, September 13, 1904.

⁷⁵Jackson Evening News, May 12, 1905.

⁷⁶Ibid., December 9, 1904; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 22, 1905.

⁷⁷Ibid., January 18, 23, 1905; Jackson Evening News, March 22, 1905.

⁷⁸Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, March 16, 1905.

⁷⁹Jackson Evening News, May 1, 4, 8, 10, 11, 1905.

⁸⁰Ibid., November 14, 1905.

⁸¹Ibid., June 10, August 21, 1905.

⁸²United States vs. A. M. Newman, et al., No. 6811, MSS, Federal Records Center, East Point, Georgia; Jackson Evening News, May 8, 9, 1906.

⁸³United States vs Willie Evans, et al., No. 6786; United States vs Jeff T. Cotten, et al., No. 6808; United States vs W. E. Evans, et al., No. 6810; United States vs A. M. Newman, et al., No. 6811; United States vs E. C. Adams, et al., No. 6812; United States vs Jim Coffee, et al., No. 3813; United States vs J. T. Cain, et al., No. 6814; United States vs Will Harvard, et al., No. 6815; United States vs Emmitt McMannus, et al., No. 6816; United States vs A. M. Newman, et al., No. 6916; United States vs E. C. Adams, et al., No. 6917, MSS, Federal Records Center, East Point, Georgia.

⁸⁴A. U. Montgomery to James K. Vardaman, July 28, 1906, W. E. Still to Vardaman, January 18, 1907, Governor's Letters Received, Box II, Folders 26, 37.

⁸⁵Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, February 12, 1904.

⁸⁶Jackson Evening News, January 6, 8, 22, March 22, 1904. Attorney General William Williams ruled that Longino's appointments were legal and binding, but Judge J. A. P. Campbell held that they were unconstitutional and could be overturned. Jackson Evening News, March 3, 11, 1904.

⁸⁷Ibid., December 6, 1905; Jackson Evening News, December 4, 1905.

⁸⁸See below, Chapter VI.

⁸⁹Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 28, August 1, 1904.

⁹⁰Jackson Evening News, August 1, 31, October 10, 1904.

⁹¹Ibid., May 18, 25, 27, June 15, 16, 1904.

⁹²Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 16, 1904.

⁹³Ibid., July 1, 2, 1904.

⁹⁴Ibid., March 24, 1904.

⁹⁵Ibid., January 2, 1906; Jackson Evening News, September 4, November 26, 1905.

⁹⁶House Journal, 1906, 13-39.

⁹⁷William H. Glasson, "The Crusade Against the Railroads," South Atlantic Quarterly, VI (April, 1907), 165-176.

⁹⁸Woodward, Origins of the New South, 380-388.

⁹⁹Jackson Evening News, December 30, 1905.

¹⁰⁰House Journal, 1906, 45-50.

¹⁰¹Hickman, Mississippi Harvest, 254-255.

¹⁰²Paul W. Gates, "Federal Land Policy in the South, 1866-1888," Journal of Southern History, VI (August, 1940), 303-330; Woodward, Origins of the New South, 115-120.

¹⁰³Hickman, Mississippi Harvest, 254-255.

¹⁰⁴House Journal, 1906, 520-523; Jackson Evening News, February 24, 1906.

¹⁰⁵House Journal, 1906, 523-524.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 1306-1308.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 1315-1316; Jackson Evening News, May 8, 1906.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., January 19, 1906; Senate Journal, 1906, 137.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 1041.

¹¹⁰Jackson Evening News, February 21, April 3, 1906.

¹¹¹Vicksburg Herald, February 9, 1906.

¹¹²Mississippi Laws, 1906, 54-55.

¹¹³Ibid., 83-87; Vardaman appointed H. E. Blakeslee as the first Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce. Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, April 29, 1906.

CHAPTER VI

PRISON REFORM

Prison reform constituted the major achievement in Mississippi public affairs in 1906, and it represented a personal victory for Vardaman. At the time states throughout the South were improving their penal systems by abolishing convict leasing, establishing prison farms, instituting reformatories for juveniles, and adopting more humane methods of prison discipline.¹ For over two decades the Mississippi penal system had been a subject of controversy. Until 1890 the state leased most convicts to cotton planters who worked them as they wanted. The lease system was so unjust and so inhumane that during the 1880's objections had mounted continually against it.² Small farmers were especially opposed, for they believed it enriched a few Delta planters at the expense of the state.³ The agrarians won a partial victory in the constitution of 1890 by a provision that after 1894 the lease system should be abolished and the convicts should be worked upon farms to be purchased by the state. Supervision of the penitentiary system was entrusted to a Board of Control consisting of the governor, the attorney general, and the three state railroad commissioners.

In compliance with the constitution the worst aspects of convict leasing ended after 1894. The state purchased three farms--the Hunter and Stevens in Rankin County, Oakley in Hinds County, and

Belmont in Holmes County--and the Board of Control placed most prisoners upon them. Despite the creation of the state penal farms, the new constitution permitted the Board to employ prisoners on privately owned farms, because at first the state would not have enough land under cultivation to absorb all the convicts.⁴ From the outset the state-owned plantations were successful, at least financially, bringing in the first year a net profit of \$60,000. Governor McLaurin was so pleased that in 1897 he urged the state to buy enough additional lands to absorb the entire prison population. He also emphasized the undesirability of employing convicts on privately owned plantations. Three years later the state purchased a Delta plantation of 13,789 acres in Sunflower County. But the new tract required clearing before it could be cultivated, and the Board of Control continued to lease some prisoners to plantation owners.⁵

Not only did vestiges of convict leasing remain, but instances of mismanagement and corruption also plagued the penitentiary system. A legislative investigating committee reported in 1902 that the Board of Control had allowed its records to be kept so poorly that many aspects of how the penitentiary system was managed could not be determined from them. The committee did discover that the warden had used about one hundred and fifty convicts to clear land belonging to himself or to a neighbor. About two hundred convicts had been employed in work on the Yazoo Delta Railroad that was so hard that free workmen would not do it. The committee could not discover by whom the contract had

been made or whether the railroad paid the state for the convicts' labor. The committee believed that most prisoners were sufficiently cared for, but found many working when they were so sick that they should have been in a hospital. Finally, the committee reported that despite the good intentions of the Board of Control, its members were prevented by their other official duties from devoting adequate time to penitentiary affairs.⁶

When Vardaman entered office in 1904, prison reform was not new to him. From the beginning of his editorial career in Greenwood he had advocated more humane treatment of prisoners, and his writings indicate wide reading on penology and close observation of penitentiary conditions in Mississippi. After the findings of the investigating committee were made public in 1902 the warden had resigned, but penitentiary management remained unchanged. Vardaman in his inaugural address advocated abolishing the Board of Control; the governor, the attorney general, and the railroad commissioners could not, he believed, manage the penitentiary properly. In place of the Board he wanted a separate department of government under the direction of a single superintendent who would be responsible for penitentiary affairs. It would then be easier to discover who was to blame if conditions went wrong again as they had in 1902.⁷ Despite the Governor's appeal, the legislature took no action on penitentiary affairs during the 1904 session.

As governor Vardaman was automatically a member of the Board of Control, and during the next two years he devoted much time to the

penitentiary. His fellow Board members were the attorney general, William Williams, and the three railroad commissioners. Williams and two of the commissioners had served on the Board during Governor Longino's administration; one commissioner, Richard L. Bradley was new.⁸ As if to signify a break with past management, Vardaman had all Board meetings opened to newspaper reporters.⁹ Then he began to advocate that all prisoners be concentrated on state lands immediately and that leases of land from plantation owners not be renewed. Since 1895 the Board of Control had arranged contracts with plantation owners for leases of land; in effect the old system of convict leasing remained in vogue. Despite the increased profits derived from state owned farms, the Governor pointed out, the Board of Control continued to lease land from five planters. Why should these men be allowed to profit at the state's expense?

A principal change that Vardaman desired was concentration of the management of penitentiary affairs at the Sunflower plantation so that those in charge of the system could be familiar with actual conditions and able to render proper service to the state. The monthly meetings of the Board and the office of its secretary should be moved to Sunflower, and the warden should make his home there.¹⁰ Defenders of the existing system of penitentiary management replied that the Governor's recommendations were impractical: As the railroad commissioners had to spend much time in Jackson, it would be hard for them to attend meetings at the Sunflower farm; the secretary of the

Board was obliged to consult frequently with the state treasurer and the records of the Board could be kept more safely at the capitol.¹¹ Although the defenders of the Board of Control did not intend it, their arguments demonstrated the cardinal weakness of the existing system, namely that the Board was in no position to devote to the penitentiary the full attention that strict and careful supervision would require.

Vardaman's attempts to reform the prison system produced a bitter dissension within the Board of Control. The new railroad commissioner, Bradley, usually lined up with Vardaman, while the attorney general, Williams, and the two old commissioners usually opposed him. Behind Vardaman's opponents stood most persons who had been connected with penitentiary affairs and especially the five Delta planters upon whose lands the state still worked convicts. Most formidable among the planters was H. J. McLaurin, a potent political figure not only as a state senator in his own right but also as the brother of the Governor's old enemy, United States Senator A. J. McLaurin. McLaurin had leased his plantation, Sandy Bayou, to the state for the past seven years.¹²

Vardaman's first move came at a meeting of the Board of Control in August, 1904. He proposed to have all convicts concentrated on state farms the following year. The Board delayed a decision in order to give the planters an opportunity to protest the Governor's recommendation at a subsequent meeting. When the Board next met Commissioner

Bradley moved that there be no leases in 1905. Vardaman supported Bradley, arguing the change would unquestionably benefit the state and citing a recent report by the warden in support of his position. Unfortunately for Vardaman the attorney general was able to show that he had misinterpreted the warden's report, which recommended that the leases be reduced in number but not totally abolished. A majority of Board members supported the attorney general, voting to drop four of the five leases for 1905 but to retain Senator McLaurin's plantation. If one lease had to be renewed, Vardaman asked, why should it be with a state senator? Commissioner Bradley suggested that another plantation be leased instead of McLaurin's, but the Board again voted to retain Sandy Bayou. As a last resort Vardaman proposed that the Board advertise for a plantation in at least three state newspapers and then choose the best bid offered. Again the Board voted against him.¹³ The fact remained, however, that most remnants of the lease system had been abolished.

Despite Vardaman's anger at the renewal of McLaurin's lease-- he insisted that his feeling in the matter had not arisen from hatred of his political enemies--and his disappointment when the Board re-elected the incumbent prison physicians over his nominees, he went on to give valuable leadership in improving the penitentiary.¹⁴ Vardaman wanted to increase the efficiency of each prison farm and make the entire system self-sustaining. This would insure the end of convict leasing once and for all. The first unit he sought to improve was

Oakley farm, which served as a prison hospital. Rented in the past to local farmers to work, Oakley had rarely brought profit to the state, and Governors Stone, McLaurin, and Longino had recommended that it be sold.¹⁵ Vardaman had the director of the state's agricultural experiment stations inspect the place. He advised that Oakley be converted into a stock farm, and the Board of Control followed his advise. In the future Oakley would supply draft animals and meats for the entire penitentiary system.¹⁶ Similar changes were made at other prison farms both to improve them and in the hope that they would become models. Thus the Board reduced cotton acreage on state farms and encouraged the cultivation of cereal crops. If other farmers would do the same, the Board argued, the price of cotton would rise and the general conditions of state agriculture would improve.¹⁷ The farmers of the state showed little or no interest in the good example set them, but the penitentiary system itself did benefit.¹⁸

Even though the Board of Control had worked to improve the state farms, and more and more land had been cleared on the Sunflower plantation, Vardaman remained dissatisfied with the existing arrangements. He continued to believe that the Board of Control could not direct prison affairs adequately, and the state's use of McLaurin's Sandy Bayou plantation still annoyed him. During his first two years in office several incidents occurred that strengthened his position by stimulating public support for his plan for prison reform.

Several days before the Board of Control met in November, 1904,

the Governor learned that Sergeant E. E. Jackson of Oakley had been working convicts for his own use. Vardaman immediately arranged for the Board to investigate the charge and after a brief inquiry the officials learned that Jackson had used convicts in working the lands of two farmers in the Oakley area. One farmer had repaid Jackson by dividing the profits of his crop evenly with him. In another instance Jackson had allowed a farmer to use his name in selling cotton, because the farmer's crop had been heavily mortgaged. When confronted with the evidence against him, Jackson claimed that the warden had permitted him to use prisoners in performing small tasks for farmers in the Oakley neighborhood. The warden admitted he had allowed Jackson to employ prisoners for small jobs, but denied he had any knowledge of Jackson's recent activities.

After various witnesses had testified, Vardaman and commissioner Bradley urged that the Board dismiss Jackson. Attorney General Williams advised moderation, arguing that Jackson had not received a full hearing and cautioning the Board not to damage Jackson's reputation purposely. A former Board member and state senator H. J. McLaurin, both present at the investigation, made appeals in behalf of Jackson. Vardaman replied that since the state's interest was involved Jackson should be fired. The majority of the Board, however, decided to postpone action until the following day at which time all prison officials, including Vardaman, agreed to allow Jackson to resign.¹⁹ The Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger reported that while most Board members believed

Jackson guilty of indiscretion, they did not think he had done anything criminal.²⁰ Vardaman maintained that Jackson was the victim of the existing system of penitentiary administration: The loose methods that had characterized prison management and the past incidents of corruption in penitentiary affairs probably had encouraged Jackson to work convicts for his own profit. If the state adopted a stricter system of supervision, the Governor advised, such incidents might not arise in the future.²¹

Two months after Jackson resigned, a sergeant cruelly beat a convict at the Rankin farm. There a white prisoner escaped and rode away on Sergeant David Puckett's horse. When authorities captured the convict, Puckett and an aid, Joe Strong, whipped him unmercifully, lacerating his back and seriously damaging one of his kidneys. By the time prison officials discovered this atrocity Puckett's term of employment had expired, and he resigned. Vardaman, however, was determined to make an example of Puckett in the hopes of ending cruelty in the penitentiary. After the Board of Control empowered him to secure counsel and prosecute the case, the Governor employed W. Calvin Wells, Jr., a lawyer and member of the state legislature.²² When authorities began to investigate conditions at the Rankin farm, they discovered that for many years Puckett had whipped prisoners cruelly. Although Wells was unable to secure Puckett's conviction, this case provided another example of the need for more efficient and enlightened prison supervision. It was the duty of the Board of Control, some argued,

to know that Puckett had been terrorizing prisoners.²³

In 1905 Vardaman directed Wirt Adams, state revenue agent, to examine the financial affairs of all educational, eleemosynary, and penal institutions. After months of investigation Adams reported that the records of the Oakley farm had been so badly kept--the Board of Control had never employed an auditor to examine them--that the financial condition of the farm could not be determined.²⁴ Adams discovered that between 1895 and 1899 the state had lost money in the sale of cotton seed. Much of the loss he attributed to state senator McLaurin's Sandy Bayou plantation.²⁵ Adams' report gave further impetus to the movement for prison reform.

After these revelations of mismanagement and cruelty, the Board of Control met in December, 1905, to consider leasing Sandy Bayou plantation for another year. State senator McLaurin announced that he would fight for the renewal of his lease, and for several days he and the Governor exchanged insults through the columns of the Jackson newspapers.²⁶ McLaurin claimed that the Governor had shown poor business sense in selling state cotton for a ridiculously low price. Vardaman defended his cotton sales and asserted that he would "see to it that the special favors enjoyed by State Senator H. J. McLaurin will not be perpetuated if in my power to prevent."²⁷ A majority of the Board of Control nevertheless voted to renew the Sandy Bayou lease, the reason alleged being the Sunflower plantation still could not employ all state convicts.²⁸ As in the past, McLaurin agreed to supply

land, animals, wagons, implements, and seed, while the Board of Control agreed to furnish seventy convicts to work the crop. The state would be paid \$25,000, and McLaurin would enjoy all profits over that amount.²⁹ In a three-to-two decision of the Board Vardaman and one railroad commissioner voted against the lease, but only Vardaman refused to sign it.³⁰

Immediately after the renewal of the lease Vardaman filed suit for a writ of injunction against the Board of Control and Senator McLaurin. The attorneys he employed to argue the case before Chancellor Robert B. Mayes in the Jackson Chancery Court contended that the contract was unconstitutional, because it was not a lease of land, but a lease of convicts. McLaurin's attorneys defended the contract on the grounds that it was a lease of land and that the Governor had no authority to institute proceedings in the case.³¹ On December 18, 1905, the Chancery Court upheld Vardaman's position and issued an injunction against the Board's lease with McLaurin.³²

In rendering his decision Chancellor Mayes ruled that the Board of Control had violated the state constitution because the contract was, despite its wording, in reality a lease of convicts. McLaurin was not paying the state \$25,000 for the use of land, seed, or equipment, but for the use of convict labor. Even if the contract was a lease of land, Mayes pointed out, it still violated the "spirit and letter" of the constitution in that it gave McLaurin, a private individual, an interest in the convicts' labor. The history of convict

leasing in Mississippi showed, according to the Chancellor, that the constitution had abolished the system in order to protect the rights of the convicts; but the Sandy Bayou contract by providing that McLaurin pay the state a fixed sum regardless of the amount of cotton he produced practically invited him to overwork the prisoners. The Governor had a right to bring suit in the case in order to uphold the law and defend the state's interest. Manifestly the Attorney General, who had as a member of the Board of Control voted for the lease, could not be expected to sue for an injunction. It was therefore the duty of the chief executive to prevent the Board from violating the law.³³

Only a month after Chancellor Mayes undertook to enjoin the Board of Control, the State Supreme Court in a two-to-one decision reversed the lower court's decision.³⁴ In delivering the majority opinion Chief Justice Solomon S. Calhoun held that only the attorney general had authority to institute a suit in behalf of the state. If the attorney general refused to bring suit, it simply meant there was a "hiatus" in the law; but it was better to have the "hiatus" than to violate the constitution.³⁵ Justice Jeff Truly's concurring opinion relied primarily upon the argument that the Chancery Court had no authority to regulate the action of an executive board. Truly also held that the contract was a lease of land and that the Board had the right to make it.³⁶ Justice Albert H. Whitfield's dissenting opinion upheld the Chancery Court's power to issue the injunction, supported the entire decision of Chancellor Mayes, and disagreed emphatically

with Justice Calhoun's opinion that the Governor had no right to bring a suit.³⁷

Following the Supreme Court's decision Warden Henry had seventy prisoners transferred to McLaurin's Sandy Bayou plantation.³⁸ But Vardaman did not give up. He now instituted proceedings to secure a writ of mandamus compelling the return of the convicts to Sunflower plantation.³⁹ Again by a vote of two to one the State Supreme Court ruled against the Governor and refused to allow him to remove the prisoners from the McLaurin plantation.⁴⁰

After Chancellor Mayes issued the injunction against the Board of Control, and before the Supreme Court annulled it, the 1906 legislative session convened. The code committee, which Vardaman had appointed two years earlier, now recommended that the Board of Control be abolished and replaced by a superintendent of prisons to be elected every four years. As the committee's plan was in accord with the Governor's recommendations, he urged it upon the legislature, devoting to prison reform the major part of his legislative address of 1906. Repeating ideas that he had advanced as a newspaper editor, he emphasized that the penitentiary should be operated for the benefit of the prisoners. The chief object should be reform.

Man is the creature of heredity and environment, and the influence of the latter is more potential [sic] in the formation of character than the former. Therefore, the environment of the convict in the penitentiary should be so ordered and colored that the unfortunate individual would be better for having suffered imprisonment there. Punish-

ment under our system is not inflicted in the spirit of revenge, but rather for correction--in love, rather than hate.

All too frequently, he recalled, the penitentiary had served instead to benefit a few wealthy men, who had exploited the convicts' labor, and had been a source of graft and corruption.⁴¹

Vardaman's message intensified the friction between him and the McLaurins because in it he asserted that not a single warden during the past ten years had worked for the well-being of the convicts and for the public interest, a statement which the McLaurins considered an attack upon them in the person of their dead brother, Walter, who had been a warden within the decade. United States Senator A. J. McLaurin publicly denounced Vardaman and defended his brother's memory.⁴² Vardaman replied by pointing out that it was during McLaurin's administration as governor that his brother Walter had been appointed warden and that the Board of Control had first leased the Sandy Bayou plantation.⁴³ This exchange between the Senator and the Governor created much excitement and helped to solidify factional lines in the state legislature: Vardaman men were prepared to work for prison reform; McLaurin supporters were ready to fight the change. Vardaman's strength centered in the House, that of the McLaurins, in the Senate.⁴⁴

The House of Representatives began the work for prison reform by authorizing its penitentiary committee to investigate thoroughly all the state's prison farms. Witnesses might be subpoenaed, any pertinent records examined, and arrests made if necessary.⁴⁵ The committee,

under the chairmanship of A. Miller, consisted largely of legislators in favor of Vardaman's plan to abolish the Board of Control.⁴⁶ To insure the secrecy of the proceedings a policeman constantly guarded the committee room and the participants refused to make public statements.⁴⁷ Actual investigation was confined to the Oakley farm, partly because the affairs of Sergeant E. E. Jackson demonstrated the need for prison reform, partly because Oakley took so much time that the committee could not pay much attention to matters elsewhere.⁴⁸ W. Calvin Wells, Jr., whom Vardaman had appointed to prosecute David Puckett, became the driving force behind the inquiry. His intensive questioning produced spirited exchanges as well as objections from some witnesses, but the committee always supported him.⁴⁹

The committee dug more deeply into conditions at Oakley and into E. E. Jackson's use of convicts than had the Board of Control. They found that, partly because of Sergeant Jackson, the farm had lost money every year since 1900, the cumulative loss coming to \$24,000.⁵⁰ By interviewing farmers, merchants, cotton gin operators, and cotton factors who lived near Oakley or had had dealings with Jackson, the committee concluded "beyond any doubt whatever" that Jackson had in 1903 and 1904 used convict labor for his own benefit.⁵¹ He had once boasted that he might be called "Jack" then but if he could remain at Oakley for another year he would be "Mr. Jackson."⁵² Jackson had not, the committee found, worked prisoners when they were sick nor treated them cruelly.⁵³

The committeemen did not confine themselves to Jackson's activities, for they found others were implicated. If Jackson had been working convicts, they asked, why had this not been reported by the prison physician, J. P. Berry. The doctor denied knowledge of the sergeant's activities, but the committee found strong circumstantial evidence that convicts who were not sick had been assigned to Oakley and that Berry had permitted well prisoners to remain in the hospital and work for Jackson. As Jackson had loaned money to Berry on occasions, the committee intimated that the doctor had repaid his debt by keeping his mouth shut about the sergeant's activities.⁵⁴ Telling more seriously against Berry was the finding that he had bought drugs for the Oakley hospital at prices higher than those to which the state was entitled.⁵⁵ The committee also emphasized that he had bought excessive quantities of whiskey, and suggested without any semblance of proof that Berry and Jackson had engaged in large-scale bootlegging operations.⁵⁶ The fact that Berry was the son-in-law of United States A. J. McLaurin added not a little to the political overtones of the investigation.⁵⁷

Throughout the proceedings Representative Wells's questioning had emphasized the inability of the Board of Control to manage penitentiary affairs adequately. The committee reported itself appalled at the immense ignorance of the Board and the warden "with reference to theft, incompetency, extravagancies and other irregularities" at Oakley farm and hospital.⁵⁸ The incumbent warden was either "utterly

incompetent, or grossly and practically criminally negligent in the discharge of his duties."⁵⁹ The state should sell Oakley farm, concentrate all prisoners on the Sunflower plantation, and build a new prison hospital on the Rankin farm. Above all, the Board of Control must be abolished and a superintendent placed in charge of the penitentiary system.⁶⁰

One member of the House penitentiary committee, E. D. Cavett, issued a minority report in which he defended Dr. Berry, the warden, and the Board of Control. Cavett denied that the entire penitentiary system could be condemned because of conditions existing at one farm. The Board of Control had probed the Jackson case, he pointed out, and had appointed Vardaman to investigate the sergeant's activities further and to have him prosecuted. Thus Vardaman, not the Board, was responsible for the failure to prosecute Jackson, Cavett concluded.⁶¹

The penitentiary committee issued its report the day after the State Supreme Court had turned down Vardaman's appeal for a writ of mandamus.⁶² Inevitably the controversy produced in the press of the state a barrage of charges and countercharges between supporters of the Governor and defenders of the Board. Pro-Vardaman newspapers especially censored Cavett's minority report.⁶³ So also did the Governor himself, asserting that Cavett was "trying to defend or excuse somebody connected with the board of control." He admitted that the Board had empowered him to investigate E. E. Jackson further and to prosecute him. But the District Attorney of Hinds County had ruled

that Jackson was not amenable to prosecution, and the Governor had neither money nor authority for an investigation as thorough as a legislative committee could make. He had therefore postponed action until the legislature convened.⁶⁴

A public statement by Dr. Berry denied the charges against him and condemned the methods used by the penitentiary committee. Both a key witness and a member of the committee, Berry asserted, were leading enemies of State Senator H. J. McLaurin and had special reasons for attacking his friends. The doctor strongly implied that Vardaman had instituted the investigation to advance his political career.⁶⁵ After Berry's statement appeared the Jackson Evening News remarked:

Politics is sizzling and popping around the state house like a pan of frying frog legs, and the issue of Vardaman vs. McLaurin is now more squarely before the legislative body than at any time since the beginning of the session.

The air is so heavily charged with political electricity around the big building that its presence can be instinctively felt, even by a stranger, the moment his foot hits the marble floors of the main entrance.⁶⁶

An incident that should have been and presumably was exceedingly embarrassing to Vardaman, and certainly supplied ammunition to those who opposed his plans of prison reform, had occurred at the Governor's mansion just about the time the investigation into penitentiary matters was beginning. Hezekiah Plenny, a Negro convict working at the mansion, got drunk, became embroiled in a ruckus, and was arrested.

Vardaman paid his fine, Plenney returned to the mansion, and Vardaman reprimanded him for his conduct. In the process the Negro said something that so enraged Vardaman that he kicked him and thrashed him with a broom. When word of the incident leaked out, the anti-Vardaman newspapers denounced the Governor for display of temper and loss of self-control. He was a hypocrit to condemn men such as David Pluckett, some argued, when he committed similar autrocities himself.⁶⁷ H. Calvin Wells, Jr., defended the Governor by asserting that Plenny had insulted him and then gotten off with only a light whipping.⁶⁸ The incident continued to be discussed, however, and added to the excitement surrounding the penitentiary controversy.

Vardaman's fight with the Board of Control and H. J. McLaurin over renewal of the Sandy Bayou contract enkindled support for the final abolition of convict leasing in Mississippi. As a result, the legislature soon after assembling had passed a bill providing that prisoners could be employed only on public roads, levees, and state-owned lands.⁶⁹ In other words, they could not be employed upon privately owned plantations or other enterprises. Although this constituted a victory for Vardaman over the McLaurins, he still wanted the Board of Control abolished.

About a week after the House penitentiary committee issued its report the fight for prison reform entered its final phase with the introduction into the House of a bill to reorganize the prison system. Newspapers dubbed it the "administration bill," but it differed from

Vardaman's original proposal in that it divided authority between a prison superintendent and a board of trustees, whereas the Governor had wanted all power vested in the superintendent.⁷⁰ Still Vardaman supported this bill, although he denied being its author. The "administration bill" easily passed the House, but met sturdy opposition in the Senate, whose committee on penitentiary affairs opposed the Governor's wish to abolish the Board of Control. Some believed that the bill could not pass during the 1906 session.⁷¹

While the bill was pending before the Senate committee, the House penitentiary committee issued a second report--this one on conditions at the Rankin farm. As in the case of Oakley, the committee had concentrated upon an area of known mismanagement and corruption. The report, though short and resting upon quick investigation, disclosed that the abuses at Rankin had been more shocking than those at Oakley. Some officials had indulged in petty graft, but the most serious abuse had been the punishments inflicted on prisoners by Sergeant David Puckett and his assistant, Joe Strong. Not only had these men whipped prisoners unmercifully, but Strong had ordered that one convict be murdered. The committee emphasized, as it had in the Oakley report, the inability of the Board of Control to supervise the prison system properly. It recommended abolition of the Board.⁷²

The report on the Rankin farm did not, however, change the minds of the Senate penitentiary committee, which voted soon afterward against the abolition of the Board of Control. The Jackson

Daily Clarion-Ledger called the vote a victory for the "conservative and safer body of the legislature."⁷³ The Vardaman forces now put log-rolling to the service of reform. W. W. Magruder, an anti-Vardaman senator from Starkville, was trying to obtain for the Mississippi Agricultural and Mechanical College a large appropriation which he wanted deposited in a Starkville bank. Other anti-Vardaman senators wanted the college appropriation fund kept in the state treasury. Leading the fight in the Senate for the "administration bill" was John L. Hebron, the same man whom Vardaman had appointed to the Mississippi Levee Board over the protests of LeRoy Percy. Hebron now took advantage of the rift in the anti-Vardaman men to arrange a deal whereby the pro-Vardaman senators voted against the attempt to move the college appropriation to Starkville and the opponents of Magruder's bill voted for the penitentiary reform.⁷⁴ After the Governor signed the bill, the Vicksburg Herald reported, he gave the pen to "Chairman Miller of the [House] penitentiary committee which was a fitting recognition of the chief victor; next to Vardaman himself."⁷⁵

Indeed the enactment of prison reform constituted the major progressive achievement of Vardaman's administration. By two acts the legislature had abolished convict leasing once and for all and had created a more efficient system of penitentiary management. Vardaman had led the fight for reform, and by sheer political power plus a touch of shrewd compromise had attained victory. In part personal animosities and politics had motivated him: The McLaurins were his

old enemies, and he might well consider the leasing of Sandy Bayou a personal affront. But there were more important reasons why he worked for prison reform. Throughout the late nineteenth century the state's small farmers had regarded the convict lease system as serving the interests of a few wealthy planters; in abolishing the last vestiges of it Vardaman was championing the interests of those who had brought him into office. Above all, during the 1890's Vardaman had advocated more humane and more enlightened treatment of convicts. As governor he had managed to translate a part of his proposals into concrete reform.

NOTES

¹ Jane Zimmerman, "The Penal Reform Movement in the South During the Progressive Era, 1890-1917," Journal of Southern History, XVII (November, 1951), 462-492; C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913 (History of the South, vol. IX, Baton Rouge, 1951), 212-215, 424-425.

² Lyda Gordon Shivers, A History of the Mississippi Penitentiary (unpublished M. A. Thesis, University of Mississippi, 1930), 26-45.

³ James Sharbrough Ferguson, Agrarianism in Mississippi, 1871-1900: A Study in Nonconformity (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1953), 304-322.

⁴ Shivers, Mississippi Penitentiary, 70-71.

⁵ Ibid., 75-79; Paul B. Foreman and Julien R. Tatum, "A Short History of Mississippi's State Penal System," Mississippi Law Journal, X (1938), 262-267.

⁶ Ibid., 267-268; Shivers, Mississippi Penitentiary, 80-82; Journal of the Senate of the State of Mississippi at a Special Session, January, February, and March, 1902 (Nashville, Tenn., 1902), 47-55.

⁷ Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi at a Regular Session Thereof in the City of Jackson, January, February, and March, 1904 (Nashville, Tenn., 1904), 149.

⁸ The other railroad commissioners were S. D. McNair and J. C. Kinnannon. Biennial Report of the Board of Control, the Warden and Other Officers of the Mississippi Penitentiary from October 1, 1903 to October 1, 1905 (Nashville, Tenn., 1905), iii. Hereafter cited as Board of Control Report, 1905.

⁹ Jackson Evening News, May 3, 1904.

¹⁰ Ibid., July 26, 1904; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 25, August 5, 1904.

¹¹ Ibid., July 27, 1904; Jackson Evening News, August 6, 1904.

¹² Board of Control Report, 1905, 90; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, August 2, 1904.

¹³ Ibid., September 6, 1904; Jackson Evening News, September 6, 1904.

¹⁴ Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, November 2, 1904.

- ¹⁵Ibid., January 12, 1905; Jackson Evening News, October 6, 1904.
- ¹⁶Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, February 17, March 22, June 12, 1905; Board of Control Report, 1905, v-viii.
- ¹⁷Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, March 28, 1905, February 9, 22, 1906.
- ¹⁸Board of Control Report, 1905, 3-4.
- ¹⁹Jackson Evening News, November 2, 1904; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, November 2, 1904.
- ²⁰Ibid., November 3, 1904.
- ²¹Jackson Evening News, November 3, 1904.
- ²²Ibid., January 3, 4, 5, 1905; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 5, 1905.
- ²³Jackson Evening News, June 5, November 10, 29, December 1, 1905, May 12, 31, 1906.
- ²⁴Report of the Penitentiary Investigating Committee on Oakley Farm and Hospital: As Submitted to the Legislature, Special Session, 1906 (Nashville, Tenn., 1906), 108-109. Hereafter cited as Penitentiary Investigation Report.
- ²⁵Jackson Evening News, July 29, 1905; Vicksburg Herald, July 1, 1906.
- ²⁶Jackson Evening News, December 2, 1905.
- ²⁷Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, November 26, 1905.
- ²⁸Ibid., December 6, 1905.
- ²⁹Sandy Bayou Injunction Case; John J. Henry, Warden of the Penitentiary, et al., v. State of Mississippi, 87 Miss., I (1906), 83-84.
- ³⁰Jackson Evening News, December 8, 1905.
- ³¹Ibid., December 7, 1905; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, December 7, 9, 1905.
- ³²Ibid., December 19, 1905.
- ³³Sandy Bayou Injunction Case, 2-10.

³⁴Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 2, 3, 9, 23, 1906.

³⁵Sandy Bayou Injunction Case, 25-33.

³⁶Ibid., 42-78.

³⁷Ibid., 79-125.

³⁸Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 25, 1906.

³⁹Ibid., January 23, February 20, March 6, 1906; Jackson Evening News, February 6, 1906.

⁴⁰Sandy Bayou Mandamus Case: State of Mississippi, et rel. J. B. Greaves, District Attorney, v. John J. Henry, Warden of the Penitentiary, 87 Miss., 1st (1906), 125-169.

⁴¹Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi at a Special Session Thereof in the City of Jackson Commencing January 2, 1906, Ending April 21, 1906 (Nashville, Tenn., 1906), 17-23. Hereafter cited as House Journal, 1906.

⁴²Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, January 5, 1906.

⁴³Ibid., January 7, 1906.

⁴⁴Jackson Evening News, January 12, 1906.

⁴⁵House Journal, 1906, 50, 62, 74, 85.

⁴⁶Ibid., 65-66.

⁴⁷Jackson Evening News, February 21, 1906.

⁴⁸Penitentiary Investigation Report, 5.

⁴⁹Ibid., 298-299, 313, 319-351.

⁵⁰Ibid., 5-6.

⁵¹House Journal, 1906, 617.

⁵²Penitentiary Investigation Report, 63.

⁵³House Journal, 1906, 619.

⁵⁴Penitentiary Investigation Report, 10-12.

⁵⁵Ibid., 14-16.

- ⁵⁶Ibid., 16-17.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., 383.
- ⁵⁸House Journal, 1906, 626.
- ⁵⁹Ibid., 620.
- ⁶⁰Ibid., 626-627.
- ⁶¹Ibid., 638-644.
- ⁶²Jackson Evening News, March 6, 1906.
- ⁶³Vicksburg Herald, March 8, 9, 10, 1906.
- ⁶⁴Ibid., March 9, 1906.
- ⁶⁵Jackson Evening News, March 11, 1906.
- ⁶⁶Ibid., March 12, 1906.
- ⁶⁷Ibid., January 18, 19, 1906.
- ⁶⁸Vicksburg Herald, January 20, 1906.
- ⁶⁹Laws of the State of Mississippi Passed at a Special Session of the Mississippi Legislature Held in the City of Jackson Commencing January 2, 1906, Ending April 21, 1906 (Nashville, Tenn., 1906), 142-143.
- ⁷⁰Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, March 16, 1906.
- ⁷¹Ibid., March 30, April 1, 1906; Jackson Evening News, March 30, 1906.
- ⁷²House Journal, 1906, 916-918.
- ⁷³Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, April 6, 1906.
- ⁷⁴Shivers, Mississippi Penitentiary, 86. The Senate passed the penitentiary bill by a vote of 23 to 12. Jackson Evening News, April 11, 1906.
- ⁷⁵Vicksburg Herald, April 17, 1906.

CHAPTER VII

REVISION AND DEFEAT

James K. Vardaman, the first Governor to be both nominated and elected by the voters of Mississippi, represented the political power that the new Democratic primary gave to Mississippi's white farmers. This political change toward agrarianism affected various state institutions. To the public schools, the benevolent institutions, and the penitentiary system it brought progressive and long needed improvements. To the University of Mississippi, however, it brought mainly misfortune, for Vardaman's administration initiated a degree of control of the University's internal affairs by state politicians that would plague higher education in Mississippi for years to come.

A board consisting of sixteen trustees, the Governor, and the state superintendent of education directed the affairs of the University. The Governor, besides serving as president of the board, appointed the trustees, one from each of the eight congressional districts, the others from the state at large. Trustees served six year terms, which meant that more than two years must pass before the appointees of a new governor could constitute a majority of the board. The trustees relegated much of their work to an executive committee that met more frequently than the board could and handled most of the University's financial affairs. Because of his appointive power and his membership on the executive committee and the board, the governor

was in a position to control, if he were so minded, all aspects of the University "from the janitor to the Chancellor and faculty, and from the selection of textbooks to the kind of buildings constructed."¹

From the beginning of Vardaman's administration it was evident that his new political faction was not satisfied with University affairs despite the fact that since 1890 under the chancellorship of Robert B. Fulton the student body, teaching staff, and annual revenues had all doubled; schools of education, engineering, and medicine had been added; numerous educational improvements had been introduced; and the University had not only entered as a charter member into both the National Association of State Universities and the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools but had also enjoyed the distinction of seeing its Chancellor become president of each of those organizations.²

As luck would have it, the University's progress toward a national reputation under Fulton was paralleled after 1900 by the rise of certain disciplinary problems on the campus that stimulated opposition to the Chancellor and reached a peak under Vardaman's administration.³ The greater part of the trouble arose in connection with fraternities which were of long standing at the University. Division between fraternity and non-fraternity men ran along social lines, for the clubs in most cases asked only the sons of wealthy parents or the descendants of respected families to join. The two-fifths of the students who did not belong believed that fraternity members enjoyed

undeserved privileges. The non-fraternity men for their part frequently felt the sting of social ostracism. Many young women of Oxford, for example, would associate only with fraternity men. Opponents of the secret societies argued that their members usually started campus disorders: "fraternity men spend too much of their time in frequent carousals, making the night hideous with unearthly yells, with midnight wassail, and bacchanalian revelry."⁴ So serious had the friction between fraternity and non-fraternity men become by 1902 that the Board of Trustees enacted a series of regulations to govern the fraternities.⁵ Difficulties over the fraternities continued, however, after Vardaman became Governor. In 1904 a minority report of the joint committee on colleges and universities recommended that all fraternities be abolished. The legislature took no action.⁶

Governor Vardaman and the trustees appointed by him were not slow to adopt a hostile attitude toward Chancellor Fulton and a new approach in governing University affairs. Undoubtedly this attitude rose in part from the growing discontent with fraternities and the fact that the small farmers who were Vardaman's particular constituents had no sympathy with the "aristocratic" social clubs. As soon as Vardaman joined the board, and well before his appointees amounted to a majority, the board began to break with the practice in effect since 1895 that the University enjoy relative freedom from interference in the administration of its internal affairs. At the regular meeting of June 4, 1904, the first after Vardaman's inauguration, the

trustees ordered that faculty members prepare reports of their departments. Then, before the greater number managed to submit their reports, the board ruled that all faculty positions were open and subject to being filled by the board. The next month the board filled them by re-electing all faculty members to their former positions; but the re-elections were by no means unanimous.⁷

In more and more matters during the next two years the board ignored the Chancellor. Part of the duties formerly exercised by him and by the Proctor were assigned to a business manager; then the executive committee by control of the University's finances increasingly assumed direction of school affairs. One of the most startling decisions was the rejection in June, 1905, of an offer Fulton had attained from the Carnegie Foundation to grant \$25,000 for a library building provided the board would meet conditions for its maintenance. The board also turned down the Chancellor's request that the University participate in a retirement plan sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation.⁸

Before the board met in June, 1906, new troubles had arisen at the University. They had their beginning in the expulsion of seven seniors for violating fraternity regulations. The seven students, all members of influential families, appealed directly to Governor Vardaman for help, and he promised to investigate immediately.⁹ Because of pressure exerted by the Governor, the trustees, or political leaders, the faculty reversed its ruling and permitted the students to

graduate in June, 1905. This incident increased further the hostility between fraternity and non-fraternity men.¹⁰

Especially angered by the pardoning of the seven was a law student at the University, D. H. Chamberlain, Jr., whose experiences had converted him into a bitter foe of fraternities. Just as the legislature was assembling in January, 1906, Chamberlain published at his own expense a pamphlet in which he described the dominance of the fraternities.¹¹ Not only did many students belong to them, but influential men throughout the state were alumni members, and their combined influence gave the fraternities power to control the University with an iron grip. To support his argument that non-fraternity men suffered gross discrimination, Chamberlain recalled an incident of 1903 in which, as he alleged, a student who had struggled to pay his way to the University was unfairly suspended by Fulton in consequence of a fight with a fraternity man, the son of a wealthy family, that the fraternity man had started.¹²

At Fulton's request the legislative committee on colleges and universities investigated Chamberlain's charges, which had caused concern throughout the state.¹³ A majority of the committee held that the Chancellor had not abused his powers and completely exonerated him.¹⁴ A minority of three, however, issued a report strongly censoring Fulton for ordering the suspension and urging the University Board of Trustees to give the matter full consideration.¹⁵

The majority report favorable to Fulton was quite generally

accepted, but there can be no doubt that much hostility and dissatisfaction had been engendered against him by the longstanding fraternity troubles and Chamberlain's recent "disclosures." One of Governor Vardaman's correspondents alleged that Chamberlain's accusations had been correct and that Fulton's friends had controlled the legislative investigation.¹⁶ Chamberlain himself published a second pamphlet accusing the faculty members who had testified in behalf of Fulton of resort "to sophistry, confusion, misdirection, and trimming of quotations" in trying to save the Chancellor.¹⁷

After the legislature adjourned in April, 1906, the issue shifted to the Board of Trustees, a majority of whom were Vardaman's appointees. During the closing days of the legislative session Vardaman had selected a number of new trustees, all believed to favor a change in the University administration. They were to officially assume their positions at the June meeting.¹⁸ By late May, 1906, some observers believed the board would dismiss Fulton the following month.¹⁹ Fulton had vowed that he would not quit, but he must have decided that resignation was preferable to removal, for he did resign when the board met in June, 1906.²⁰ Still the Chancellor's friends waged a determined fight in his behalf. The trustees debated far into the night, then accepted his resignation by a vote of 10 to 8.²¹

Fulton's dismissal gave rise to charges and counter-charges that filled the newspapers for several weeks following.²² Opponents of the administration were sure that Vardaman had forced the Chan-

cellor to resign for political reasons, among them that Fulton was known to have opposed Vardaman's election and that he was related to Representative John Sharp Williams, who had already announced that he would run against Vardaman for the Senate in 1907. Vardaman publicly denied that politics had influenced his decision to vote against Fulton. He was determined to end the "friction and bickering" that had plagued the University for the past six years, and believed that a new chancellor could help to achieve that goal.²³

Although the board after accepting Fulton's resignation as chancellor elected him professor of astronomy, he left the University and moved to Virginia, where he became superintendent of the Miller school in Albermarle County.²⁴ What the trustees had done to the University was demonstrated by the difficulty they had in finding a successor to Fulton. After two men refused the place, the Board increased the salary, provided an official residence on campus, increased the chancellor's powers to nominate and to remove faculty members, and gave him more authority to arrange courses of study. Andrew Armstrong Kincannon, former state superintendent of education, and president of the state's woman college, finally accepted the position in June, 1907.²⁵

Despite Vardaman's explanation of his reasons for opposing Fulton, it appears that politics did motivate him. By its very nature a public university in a state without a high tradition of education may reflect political changes in the state. Beginning in 1890 Chan-

cellor Fulton's talents and the absence of legislative interference had given the University of Mississippi one of its most enlightened administrations.²⁶ But the fraternity and disciplinary problems aroused the opposition of the new political faction that came to power in 1904. Under Vardaman's administration the Board of Trustees interfered more and more in University affairs and finally drove away one of the ablest executives the institution ever had. Former Boards of Trustees had been known to make serious mistakes in directing the school, but the dismissal of the chancellor by a board chosen politically for that purpose inaugurated a new and unhappy era in the history of the University.²⁷ During the next two decades political control of the University became so marked that one observer believed it produced perhaps "the most iniquitous chapter in the history of higher education in America."²⁸

* * *

Shortly after Vardaman became Governor, Senator Hernando DeSoto Money announced that he would not seek re-election to the United States Senate in 1907. Money's natural successor, so to speak, was John Sharp Williams, Democratic minority leader of the United States House of Representatives, but Vardaman was not slow to let it be known unofficially that he also would be a contender for the seat.²⁹ In many ways the Congressman and the Governor represented the opposite poles of Mississippi politics. Coming from a background of wealth and culture, Williams was the champion of a conservative Democracy that eschewed progressive legislation and maintained the tradition of such Bourbon

leaders as L. Q. C. Lamar. Although not physically imposing, Williams was a forceful speaker and a quick witted debater. The base of his political strength was the Delta, but he enjoyed wide popularity in east-central and southern Mississippi. His national reputation, his ability, and his popular appeal combined to make him the most powerful man in Mississippi public life, and many observers believed that he would easily defeat Vardaman.³⁰

The contest promised to arouse interest beyond the limits of the state. Williams was a staunch segregationist, but he had never appealed to racism as openly and boldly as had Vardaman. The anti-Vardaman press therefore maintained that Vardaman's election would lower the nation's respect for Mississippi whereas Williams's would enhance it.³¹ Also at issue between the two were certain economic policies, especially William Jennings Bryan's proposal for government ownership of railroads. Vardaman favored Bryan's plan, Williams denounced it. Some commentators therefore believed that what happened in a Williams-Vardaman contest might influence the selection of the Democratic presidential nominee in 1908.³²

To thousands of Mississippi voters the choice between Vardaman and Williams would be difficult, for they approved both men. Both had opposed the McLaurin faction, and Williams had campaigned for Vardaman in the 1903 Democratic primary. To avoid collision between them it was even suggested that one replace Senator Money while the other agreed to wait for Senator McLaurin's seat. The trouble was

that McLaurin's term did not expire until 1911, and neither Williams nor Vardaman was willing to wait that long.³³ Thus by the spring of 1907 both were determined to fight it out in the August primary.

Williams launched his official campaign with a canvass of more than a month in north Mississippi. Time and again he challenged Vardaman to meet him in joint debates. When he received no reply, he accused the Governor of being afraid to discuss the issues of the campaign.³⁴ Williams denounced government ownership of railroads as dangerous and foolish. Socialism could not solve this problem, he argued, but strict government regulation of common carriers would.³⁵ More ridiculous still, Williams asserted, was Vardaman's plan to solve the race problem by changing the Fourteenth Amendment and abolishing the Fifteenth. Even if the nation were ready for this change, Vardaman could not achieve it through his radical rantings. On the contrary, the Governor's extreme denunciation of the amendments reduced the chances of getting rid of them. Williams claimed that he, too, favored repeal and would begin to work for it at the proper time.³⁶

Williams's alternative to Vardaman's approach to the race question was encouragement of white immigration in the South. By buying land and becoming prosperous farmers the immigrants could end the South's dependence upon the Negro as an economic necessity. To offset the danger of Negro violence, about which Vardaman talked in so inflammatory a fashion, Williams suggested the organization of companies of mounted rural policemen similar to those maintained in some

African colonies. The creation of such a constabulary, together with strict enforcement of the vagrancy laws, would greatly reduce the Negro crime rate.³⁷

Vardaman began his campaign along the Gulf Coast while Williams toured north Mississippi.³⁸ Because much of Vardaman's persuasiveness rested upon his ability to excite emotions and admiration among his listeners, he was less likely to do well in direct give and take with Williams than in one-man oratory. He therefore wisely ignored Williams's challenge to debate. Vardaman's speeches avoided the issue of government ownership of railroads. Without denying that he supported Bryan's proposal, he asserted that it had no place in the present campaign, for even Bryan had declared that it would not be included in the Democratic platform of 1908. Williams was trying to create a false issue.³⁹ As he had in the past, Vardaman made his chief appeal to racism, reiterating the necessity of abolishing the Fifteenth Amendment.

One maneuver implementing his racial views Vardaman was able to bring off just as the campaign got actively underway. As president of the Board of Trustees of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, the state's leading Negro school, Vardaman had the board slash the salaries of all the "literary" teachers and make corresponding increase in the salaries of all vocational teachers. This change would, the Governor argued, have the salutary effect of discouraging higher education among Negroes and of insuring that the blacks remained agricul-

tural laborers.⁴⁰

As the senatorial campaign approached full intensity in June, 1907, an evangelist, George C. Gates, was conducting a revival in Jackson. Large crowds flocked to his services each night and many "sinners" came to the mourners bench. One hot summer evening a crowd of two thousand was startled to see among thirty converts who marched to the front the figure of Governor Vardaman. Excitement swept through the tent as Vardaman acknowledged his sins and announced that he "surrendered everything to the service of Christ." Certainly the Governor's conversion must have marked a high point in the Reverend Gates's career! And Vardaman's "getting religion" won him much favorable comment in the state press.⁴¹

Williams continued to challenge Vardaman to meet him in debate, and Vardaman continued to refuse, saying that he felt bound to address as many people as possible and had not the time to listen to his opponent.⁴² Finally, by resort to an unauthorized announcement that kindled popular interest too strong for Vardaman to ignore, the Meridian Board of Trade managed to schedule for the Fourth of July a joint debate between the candidates.⁴³ On the day before the debate trains, filled to overflowing, arrived in Meridian. Vardaman men and Williams men worked with suitable feverishness for their candidates. On the morning of July 4 the sun rose bright and clear, and by nine o'clock it was hot. Men and women streamed into the park grounds where the speaking would be held. While Williams's followers mingled throughout

the crowd, a large body of Vardaman supporters, accompanied by a band, marched into the park, wearing badges and shouting to prepare the way for their candidate.⁴⁴

When John Sharp Williams rose to speak at ten o'clock he began with an attempt to embarrass Vardaman by offering to cancel all his speaking engagements if Vardaman would but consent to debate him every day during the remainder of the campaign. Williams then asked the audience to consider whether he or Vardaman was better qualified to be United States Senator. Would it not be sensible, he asked, to elect the man who had served for fourteen years in the Congress?

The subject to which Williams devoted most attention was Vardaman's plan for altering the Fourteenth Amendment and repealing the Fifteenth. Holding out a pencil and a copy of the constitution, Williams challenged Vardaman to come forward and strike out those sections of the Fourteenth Amendment which he believed should be removed. The country was not, Williams argued, ready for such a change, and it could never be accomplished through Vardaman's radical utterances. The Negro had been eliminated from participation in Mississippi politics by the constitution of 1890, and there was no danger that the situation would change. The most ominous aspect of the race problem, Williams warned, was the way such men as Vardaman appealed to it to enhance their political careers. Vardaman ought instead to discuss the major problems confronting the nation, such as government ownership of railroads, which Williams deplored. But if Vardaman became

a senator he would accomplish nothing, for he would spend all his time futilely urging the repeal of the Fifteenth Amendment.⁴⁵

When Vardaman's turn came shouts and cheers broke forth from the crowd. Drenched with sweat from having sat in the blistering sun for two hours, his voice strained by the speaking of previous days, he appealed for quiet and a hush fell over the crowd. His address emphasized three emotionally safe topics, his faith in the Mississippi electorate, the importance of popular elections, and the value of that rural simplicity and honesty that still reigned in Mississippi.

I thank God that we have not great cities. I thank God that we have very few multi-millionaires; I thank God we have no paupers. . . . in my state next to the virtue of our women the most sacred thing is the ballot.

To show that he did not, as Williams claimed, avoid national issues, Vardaman launched into a discussion of the tariff. It must be reduced. He then attacked the imperialist policies of the Roosevelt administration. One great danger of imperialism was the further infusion of inferior races into American society. President Roosevelt directly had encouraged this foolish policy, the most recent instance being his attempt to force white Californians to accept Japanese children in their schools. For Mississippians the lesson was obvious.

The little wild man in the White House sent a man to California to say that the action the state had taken in the matter was in violation of the constitution of the United States. Now, the little Jap boys and girls have a right to sit next to our children in San Francisco and the president thinks they have. That same executive can say that your

children shall sit next to the little black, unwashed Mississippi "nigger" boys and girls.

As to government ownership of railroads, it was misleading for Williams to accuse him of supporting that, for even Bryan had said it was not a live issue. Williams men immediately began a demonstration and demanded to know where Bryan had made any such statement. Vardaman's reply was virtually unimpeachable: Bryan had told him privately during a recent visit to Jackson.⁴⁶

Turning away from national issues, Vardaman delighted his audience by attacking advocates of Negro equality. Through graphic descriptions he aroused his listeners to the ever-present danger of the Negro "fiend."

My friends, the mounted constable gets on his horse and starts out for his ride. He meets a young buck Negro. He accosts him. Where are you going, Buck. Going to town. Where have you been? Been out here working at a saw mill. Buck, passes on down the street. He spies a little cottage; he enters that cottage; he finds a mother and daughter there, the husband and brother out in the field at work. The beast goes in and commits that crime which forever blasts the peace, the purity, and the happiness of that home. The constable comes along. He may possibly arrest him and visit upon him punishment, but he has not brought back the love and light and purity of that home.

Vardaman closed by describing the ordeal of a white woman who had been ravished by a Negro.

This little girl languished for some time upon a sick bed; she got able to go into court; we had arrested a man to whom the hand of guilt pointed. I never shall forget that morning when the little girl came into the courtroom;

the leading negroes about Jackson had hired counsel, or had gotten counsel somewhere. . . . This little girl came into court that morning, and here is the picture burned upon my heart: A little woman, with her eyes red with weeping. She speaks her voice is broken. From eyes like her and tones like hers, a man may learn much. She tells the story of the assault, tells it amid the insults from a shyster lawyer privileged through his employment to ask what he shall please; tells it from start to finish, and is not spared a word, until at last a pitiful, living corpse, she falls back into fearful senselessness. And facing her is a monster, composed, whispering at times into the attorney's ears, suggesting as to questions to be asked, and though the fear of death may be there, unable quite to hide a grin of delight.⁴⁷

By the time Vardaman finished speaking he had become so hoarse that many could barely hear him. Williams made a short rejoinder again lambasting Vardaman for advocating abolition of the Fifteenth Amendment and for supporting government ownership of railroads. Vardaman defended himself by arguing that his position on the Fifteenth Amendment would awaken the entire nation to the dangers confronting the South. After several interruptions by Williams's followers, he ended by defending his administration as governor.⁴⁸ When the debate was over after four and one-half hours, the crowd of more than five thousand broke into deafening applause. Vardaman's partisans lifted him bodily from the platform and carried him in his chair for a considerable distance to a waiting carriage.⁴⁹ Although both sides claimed victory in the debate, Vardaman's supporters appear to have been the more numerous and the more vocal.⁵⁰

The Meridian encounter awakened Williams to Vardaman's strength and spurred him and his supporters to more strenuous efforts during

the remainder of the campaign.⁵¹ Vardaman clubs and Williams clubs were organized through the state. They staged frequent demonstrations in behalf of their candidates and distributed so much campaign literature that postal clerks in Jackson frequently had to work overtime.⁵² Rumors were circulated against Williams alleging that he represented the commercial and financial interests of the state, that he had been drunk on numerous occasions, and that Negroes were supporting his candidacy.⁵³ The Williams forces retaliated with counter rumors charging that Vardaman had the backing not only of Tom Watson but also of the Negroes, who knew that his radical ravings would never lead to the abolition of the Fifteenth Amendment.⁵⁴ Despite these rumors and the intensity of the contest, the campaign was not allowed to degenerate into one of personal vengeance and viciousness. A week before the end both sides agreed not to distribute new campaign literature, leaders in the Vardaman camp denounced the rumor that Williams had been drunk during the canvass, and Williams men quashed certain accusations against the Governor.⁵⁵

On the day before the primary both candidates arrived in Jackson aboard a train from southern Mississippi. The local Vardaman club, accompanied by a band from Brookhaven, paraded down one side of Capitol Street, while at the same time Williams men started down the other side of the street. That night both men addressed large gatherings.⁵⁶

As the early returns of the next day's voting began to be

reported, Williams took a commanding lead over Vardaman. Pro-Williams newspapers, though they had receded from earlier boasts of victory by 30,000 votes, were still able to predict that Williams would win by a margin of 10,000 to 20,000. The day following the primary the Jackson Evening News was full of glee:

South Carolina has her Tillman, Arkansas her Jeff Davis, Tennessee her Bob Taylor, but Mississippi has thrown her Vardaman in the political discard.

Fellow Mississippians, the News greets you and congratulates you on rising to an opportunity and electing to the highest office within the gift of the people of Mississippi a man who has made the name of Mississippi famous; a man who stands for the best traditions of the south, the democratic party and the white man.⁵⁷

As returns from the state's rural districts mounted, however, Williams's supporters became alarmed. Hour after hour Vardaman cut his opponent's lead. The election was so close that Vardaman refused to admit defeat until the state Democratic executive committee, having officially canvassed the returns, announced that Williams had a majority of 648 in a total of 118,344 votes cast.⁵⁸

The vote in this spectacularly close election was along sectional lines. Vardaman's strength was in the hill section of the northeast, where he carried almost every county, and in parts of southern Mississippi. The typical Vardaman counties were those where small white farmers predominated, and the Negro population was relatively small, and the Populists had been strong in the 1890's.⁵⁹ Vardaman first had won state office by appealing to the rural whites, and his

four years as governor had not weakened that appeal. If Williams had not carried the entire Delta and won decisively in a few important counties of the northeast, Vardaman would have beaten him.

Vardaman's post-election statement accepted defeat gracefully, thanked his many followers, and promised to support Williams as the official party nominee.⁶⁰ Considering that Williams's national reputation, his long experience in public life, and his personal popularity made him the strongest man in the Mississippi Democratic party, Vardaman's showing against him was extremely impressive and clearly portended an early and successful return of the retiring governor to the pursuit of major public office.

NOTES

¹Grover Cleveland Hooker, The Origin and Development of the University of Mississippi with Special Reference to Its Legislative Control (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 1932-1933), 2-4, 151-153.

²Fulton graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1869 and from 1871 to 1890 he served on the faculty, teaching astronomy and physics. James Allen Cabaniss, A History of the University of Mississippi (University, Mississippi, 1949), 120-130; Franklin L. Riley and Dumas Malone, "Robert Burwell Fulton," Dictionary of American Biography (20 vols., New York, 1928-1937), VII, 27; Alfred Hume, "Robert Burwell Fulton: Chancellor of the University of Mississippi," Southern Association Quarterly, III (November, 1939), 537; Annie Berry, "University Land Grants," University of Mississippi Magazine, XXVII (February, 1904), 27-31.

³Cabaniss, University of Mississippi, 130-131.

⁴Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi at a Regular Session thereof in the City of Jackson January, February, and March, 1904 (Nashville, Tenn., 1904), 346-347, 407-409. Hereafter cited as House Journal, 1904.

⁵Cabaniss, University of Mississippi, 131-132; Hooker, Origin and Development of the University, 155-156.

⁶House Journal, 1904, 407-409.

⁷Hooker, Origin and Development of the University, 159-161.

⁸Ibid., 161-163; Cabaniss, University of Mississippi, 133.

⁹Jackson Evening News, May 18, 1905. Those expelled were Lucius Mayes, son of a Judge Edward Mayes who had formerly been Chancellor of the University, and grandson of L. Q. C. Lamar; Murry Powell, son of Judge Robert Powell; James and Will Elmer, two well-known leaders in college sports; Jim Stone, "son of one of the most prominent families in North Mississippi"; and W. F. Cook and Stokes Robertson, honor students.

¹⁰D. H. Chamberlain, Jr., The Facts About the Troubles of the University of Mississippi: The Jim Crow Law Against Whites at the University (n.p., n.d.), 2-7.

¹¹Ibid., 14-15. Duncan Holt Chamberlain entered the University law school in 1902 and graduated with distinction in 1905. In addition to

winning several distinctions for oratory, he was awarded the Edward Thompson Law Prize in 1905. Historical Catalogue of the University of Mississippi, 1849-1909 (Nashville, Tenn., 1910), 283-287, 293-296.

¹²Chamberlain, Facts About the University, 1-10; Record of the Testimony Taken by the Joint Committee on Universities and Colleges in the Investigation of the Charges Made Against Chancellor Robert B. Fulton by D. H. Chamberlain (n.p., n.d.), 36-37-46.

¹³Jackson Evening News, February 8, 1906.

¹⁴Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi at a Special Session Thereof in the City of Jackson Commencing January 2, 1906, Ending April 2, 1906 (Nashville, Tenn., 1906), 372. Hereafter cited as House Journal, 1906.

¹⁵Ibid., 630-631.

¹⁶N. A. Moore to Dr. N. C. Knox, University, Mississippi, February 12, 1906, in Mississippi Governors Records, Letters Received by James K. Vardaman, Box II, Folder 24 (Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi).

¹⁷D. H. Chamberlain, Jr., The Mud Beneath the Whitewash (n.p., n.d.), passim.

¹⁸Jackson Evening News, May 25, 1906.

¹⁹Ibid., May 23, 1906.

²⁰Ibid., May 26, 1906.

²¹Ibid., June 9, 1906; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, June 10, 1906.

²²Ibid., June 26, 1906; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 1, 4, 1906.

²³Vicksburg Herald, June 17, 1906.

²⁴Riley and Malone, "Robert Burwell Fulton," 72.

²⁵Cabaniss, University of Mississippi, 133-138.

²⁶Hooker, Origins and Development of the University, 178-179.

²⁷Ibid., 334-336.

²⁸Ibid., 322.

²⁹ Jackson Evening News, February 20, 1905; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, April 18, 26, 1905.

³⁰ George C. Osborn, "John Sharp Williams Becomes a United States Senator," Journal of Southern History (May, 1940), VI, 222-223.

³¹ Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, August 14, 1907; Biloxi Daily Herald, June 20, 1907.

³² Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, March 21, 1907; George C. Osborn, "Mississippi's Closest Senatorial Contest: John Sharp Williams and James K. Vardaman, 1907," Journal of Mississippi History (October, 1950), XII, 196-199.

³³ Yazoo City Herald, quoted in Jackson Evening News, February 20, 1905.

³⁴ Ibid., April 9, 20, 1907.

³⁵ Ibid., June 7, 1907.

³⁶ Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, November 10, 18, 1906.

³⁷ Ibid., November 14, 1906.

³⁸ Vicksburg Herald, April 20, 1907.

³⁹ Jackson Evening News, May 14, 1907.

⁴⁰ Ibid., April 9, 1907.

⁴¹ Ibid., June 25, 1907; Vicksburg Herald, June 26, 1907.

⁴² Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, May 29, 1907; Jackson Evening News, June 13, 1907; Vicksburg Herald, June 27, 1907.

⁴³ Jackson Evening News, July 2, 1907; On the day of the debate Vardaman asked to have the privilege of speaking first, and he did not want to make a rejoinder. "Apparently he wanted to depart upon the conclusion of his speech." Osborn, "John Sharp Williams Becomes a Senator," 231.

⁴⁴ Jackson Evening News, July 4, 1907; Vicksburg Herald, July 14, 1907.

⁴⁵ Ibid., July 6, 1907; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 14, 1907.

⁴⁶ Vicksburg Herald, July 6, 1907.

- ⁴⁷Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 21, 1907.
- ⁴⁸Ibid., July 6, 1907.
- ⁴⁹Vicksburg Herald, July 6, 1907.
- ⁵⁰Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 6, 11, 1907.
- ⁵¹Osborn, "Mississippi's Closest Senatorial Contest," 215-216.
- ⁵²Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 13, 17, 18, 24, 1907.
- ⁵³Ibid., July 21, 1907; Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, July 21, 30, 1907.
- ⁵⁴Ibid., July 26, 1907; Jackson Evening News, July 6, 15, 26, 1907. Osborn, "John Sharp Williams Becomes a Senator," 228-230.
- ⁵⁵Vicksburg Herald, July 27, 1907.
- ⁵⁶Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, August 1, 1907.
- ⁵⁷Jackson Evening News, August 3, 1907.
- ⁵⁸Vicksburg Herald, August 9, 1907.
- ⁵⁹William David McCain, The Populist Party in Mississippi (unpublished M. A. Thesis, University of Mississippi, 1931), 144-146.
- ⁶⁰Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger, August 9, 1907.

EP ILOGUE

James Kimble Vardaman grew up during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Prior to the conflict his father had been a farmer in Texas, but in 1868 he returned impoverished to Mississippi. Like most southern whites of his day James Kimble received only a common school education; as a young man he had, however, the opportunity to associate with his cousin, Hernando DeSoto Money a member of the United States Congress. Young Vardaman wanted to follow his cousin's example and enter public life. What better way could he begin than as a newspaper editor? By furnishing his community with much of its written matter and by working with a wide range of people, an editor could become a man of influence. From 1890 to 1898, while Vardaman edited first the Enterprise and then the Commonwealth, he presented news moderately and fairly.

His writings demonstrated a dual strain of reform and reaction. On the one hand, Vardaman believed in progress: Man could abolish poverty, reduce crime, and improve his life, if he were free to work out his own problems. Society could be improved. Yet Vardaman thought progress was possible for whites only. So strongly did he believe in the Negro's inferiority, that he thought the races must be rigidly segregated. Although he was a staunch racist, at first he was not more so than were most southern whites. This dual approach of advocating progressive reforms for whites while warning of the danger of Negro equality characterized Vardaman's entire career.

Vardaman became a public man as well as an editor by virtue of election to the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1890. During his early career he did not champion agrarian reform, but sided rather with the conservative politicians who controlled the state legislature. He voted against a primary election law and elective judiciary bill, and he supported tax exemptions for railroads and appropriations for Negro colleges. He campaigned against the Farmers' Alliance's sub-treasury plan, and during the early 1890's continually denounced the Populists. Above all, Vardaman was a practical politician who wanted to advance within his party. He accordingly served the Mississippi Democracy as a legislator, as a presidential elector, and as speaker of the House.

Notwithstanding his loyal party service, Vardaman suffered defeat in 1895 and again in 1899 in attempts to win the governorship. His two successful opponents, A. J. McLaurin and A. H. Longino, had greater strength among state party leaders. In an effort to offset his opponents' advantage, Vardaman tried to win popular support by advocating a redistribution of the school fund in favor of the white counties of eastern Mississippi. By championing additional reforms, such as abolition of convict leasing and larger appropriations for white schools, Vardaman began to appeal to the agrarian interests. He could, however, not muster enough strength by this means to carry a state convention.

Mississippi politics were revolutionized in 1902 when the state

abolished the convention system and adopted a Democratic primary law. In the future politicians would have to appeal directly to the white voters, most of them small farmers. After his second defeat by a convention Vardaman hammered still harder on his appeals to the agrarian interests. Employing a bolder, harsher, more intense style, he expressed old ideas in a new language, lashing out at the "money power," imperialism, Teddy Roosevelt, and the Negro. In Mississippi's first Democratic primary in 1903 Vardaman ran for governor and won on a platform that advocated agrarian reforms and the abolition of Negro education.

Vardaman was a better governor than his campaign speeches had led many to expect. Corruption did not mar his administration, and he did not abuse his patronage powers. Although he encouraged racism and seriously damaged Negro education in Mississippi, he worked to maintain law and order by preventing lynchings and by prosecuting the White Caps. Above all, he responded to the agrarian interests and achieved certain long awaited reforms. A uniform text book law, increased appropriations for common schools, improvements in the state's eleemosynary institutions, laws more stringently regulating railroads and lumber companies, the creation of a commissioner of agriculture, the establishment of two new agricultural experimental stations, and the reorganization of the penitentiary system, all constituted the major achievements of Vardaman's administration. Indeed he was a progressive governor.

Despite Vardaman's achievements, he lost to John Sharp Williams in a tight race for the United States Senate in 1907. Only a man of Williams's strength could have done it. Even in defeat, however, Vardaman had made a most impressive showing for Williams, whose ability and national reputation gave him a distinct preeminence among Mississippi public men, beat him by fewer than a thousand votes. The election clearly demonstrated that Vardaman's political strength rested almost exclusively with the rural whites of northeastern and southern Mississippi. In Vardaman they had found a champion who appealed to their needs and their prejudices. Although they lost in 1907, victory would come to them again under Vardaman's leadership.

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