

“Election Apathy No Problem in 1858”  
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*Preface: Tuesday is election day and 150 years ago Tuesday, August 2, 1858, also was an election day for Kansas, and one of critical importance.*

*The vote back then was on the acceptance or rejection of the Lecompton Constitution, a document which would have allowed Kansas to be admitted to the Union as a slave state. The excitement ran high between free-state and pro-slavery factions and every effort was made to “get out the vote” on both sides.*

*Excitement was not the only thing that ran high on election morning 150 years ago, however. A steady rain for two nights had turned the area’s sleepy creeks into raging rivers, with the high water making travel treacherous if not impossible.*

*The situation called for creative and daring solutions as men all over the territory struggled to get to the polls to decide Kansas’ future.*

*Such was the case of one group of free-staters in Franklin County, who fought Mother Nature with perseverance and good humor to cast their votes against slavery. Their escapade was recorded years later by one of the participants, W.W.H. Lawrence, whose manuscript is preserved today at the Kansas State Historical Society.*

*It is an unusual story of courage and determination, and also of comedy and surprise. As one wag has quipped, “Instead of dying with their boots on, they voted with their clothes off.”*

Early on the election morning of Aug. 2, 1858, 43 free-state men gathered at an appointed rendezvous in Ottawa Township, Franklin County.

Concerned that pro-slavery “Border Ruffians” from Missouri would be out in force to take over the polls, the men had arranged to march en masse to the voting site for protection.

They had a long trek ahead of them, reportedly 15 miles, with 26 of the 40-plus would-be voters being on foot. The distance was greater in part because Missourians had disrupted previous elections.

For this election, a cabin on the very western edge of the district had been chosen as the polling site—as far away from Missouri as possible.

After electing a captain to oversee the expedition, the men set out over the sunny and soggy prairie, horsemen in front and those on foot bringing up the rear.

The first creek they came to confirmed everyone’s fears. The stream, “which in ordinary times a ten-year-old boy could easily jump across,” one of the men, W. W. H. Lawrence, later wrote, was swollen to a width of 100 yards and required some “desperate swimming.”

But swim it they did, with the poorer swimmers doubled up on the horses. Two more flooded creeks were forded in a similar manner with no mishaps, but the party’s progress was considerably delayed.

Then came the big one.

Ottawa Creek was the last and largest of the four streams to be crossed that day and its swollen torrent was even worse than the men had feared.

“The outlook was bad,” Lawrence wrote, “but not one of the party was willing to give up.”

After a short council to devise a plan, the captain in charge gave the orders by which to overcome this final obstacle.

All of the 17 horses were tied up by their bridles, with their tethering ropes fastened into one long rope. Since the men's clothing was seen as a likely encumbrance to their swimming, "we were directed to strip them all off, put our shirts in our haps and fasten (the hats) to the top of our heads as best we could," Lawrence recalled.

"This we did in a hurry, and when done, our captain with the coil of rope...waded out into the water as far as he could wade."

Typing one end to a partly submerged tree, the captain pushed on to another tree, looped the rope around it and then plunged on to another.

Behind him, the other 42 men, adorned only in their hats and "birthday suits," followed in single file.

When the captain struck the main current, it swept him downstream, but by vigorous effort he reached a tree on the other side and tied the rope to it. Once again he worked his way from tree to tree until he could touch bottom and wade out.

The others followed by clinging onto the rope "as closely as was prudent and safe."

Once across, however, the party discovered that one man had disobeyed orders. The last man over, an apparently modest Baptist preacher, had left his shirt and long johns on.

"When the captain saw him...he ordered him to take off his drawers, which he refused to do," Lawrence wrote, "But they came off all the same."

Donning their shirts and replacing their straw hats, these determined voters set out on the final leg of their journey. What a curious and comical sight they must have presented, mostly naked and marching along in single file across the soggy prairie to cast their ballots.

Their stomachs were empty, Lawrence wrote, but "every heart was filled to the brim, with patriotism, with the hope of freedom, with the love of justice... and with the determination to do their whole duty.

Their friends, who had been waiting at the polling place all day, watched the men approach with alarm. "Owing to our peculiar condition of nudity," Lawrence recalled, "(they) were disposed to think us a band of Border Ruffians coming under disguise to destroy the ballot box."

Guns apparently were readied to defend the poll before the "invaders" were recognized. "Then such a free-state shout went up as only earnest men can give," Lawrence wrote.

The warm welcome was followed by hasty balloting as it was mid-afternoon and the difficult 15-mile return trip lay ahead of them. Forty-three votes were dutifully recorded against the pro-slavery constitution.

But one more episode of their adventure awaited them.

Back at Ottawa Creek, with their clothes on the other side, the famished men sought a solution to their hunger. Nearby was the cabin of a kind-hearted German woman whose husband had died in the "fight for freedom," and whose benevolence to free-state men was well known.

Allowed to put on his now-dry drawers, the preacher was sent to the widow to explain "our peculiar condition and request her to send us out a plain lunch," according to Lawrence.

Sheepishly, the underwear-clad minister did so, and upon hearing of the men's adventures, the woman announced she would feed the whole lot of them, "and feed them here at the house."

Protests were ignored as the woman insisted "it is no disgrace for men to be seen in their shirttails on a day like this and in the cause of freedom."

Her invitation was finally heeded and 43 mostly naked and very embarrassed men partook of a simply but substantial dinner. In gratitude, Lawrence wrote, the men gave "three

cheers for our host and three more for the free-state cause” before working their way back to their respective homes.

There, Lawrence concluded, each was able “to indulge in the satisfaction of a duty well done.”

Due to the determination and perseverance of these men and hundreds of others that day, Kansas rejected the pro-slavery constitution and set the stage for admission as a free state.

They had taken their responsibility seriously, and freedom had won.