

Tennessee's War of the Roses

In 1886, brothers Alf and Bob Taylor, natives of the Elizabethton - Johnson City area, ran against each other for governor. Since it involved family members, like the famous military campaign in medieval England, the race was called **"The War of the Roses."** The Taylor household had been divided since the boys were young. Their father, a Methodist minister, served in Congress as a Whig. But their mother was the sister of a Democratic Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives who became a Confederate senator from Tennessee (Landon Carter Haynes). During the Civil War, their father was a strong supporter of the Union. Their mother's sympathies were with the South. Some would say the brothers were born into, brought up in, and destined for conflict.

In June 1886, the Republicans met in Nashville and on the first ballot nominated Alf Taylor for governor. Two months later, the Democrats also met in Nashville. After fifteen ballots, they chose Alf's brother, Bob, as their nominee.

The brothers also decided to campaign together. **The two often shared a room and even slept in the same bed.** The first of forty-one debates was held in September in Madisonville. Bob declared, "I have a very high regard for the Republican candidate – he is a perfect gentleman because he is my brother."

In Chattanooga, a joint committee of Republicans and Democrats prepared a fine welcome. Then the brothers were allowed some time before each was to speak from their hotel balcony. Both brothers wanted to make the best speeches possible, and Alf had even prepared a totally new manuscript for the special occasion. Then he left the hotel briefly to visit friends. While Alf was visiting, Bob began his speech. Alf soon heard a familiar phrase. He listened a moment, then exclaimed, "Great Scott! Listen! He is quoting the text of my speech, word for word..."

In fact, Alf's brother was delivering a familiar and beautiful speech, including such carefully crafted lines as these:

The illustrious dreamers and creators in the realm of music, the Mozarts, the Beethovens, the Handels, and the Mendelssohns, have scaled the purple steps of the heaven of sweet sounds, unbarred its opal gates and opened its holy of holies to the rapt ear of the world. In their wonderful creations of melody they have given a new interpretation and a sweeter tongue to nature and an audible voice to the music of the stars. Surely

humanity can never forget God or our civilization sink to a lower plane while their works endure.

Alf rushed to their room but it was too late. The manuscript was gone. **Bob had it, and he did not return it until he had read Alf's entire speech to the crowd.**

Generally the Taylor brother candidates sought to entertain crowds with music and witty remarks, rather than confuse people with issues. **Both played the fiddle. While Alf was a better fiddler, Bob usually had the sharper wit.**

On one occasion, Bob said that while they both were born of the same mother and nursed at the same breast, Alf's milk soured on him and made him a Republican.

In his last campaign speech at Blountville before the election, Alf told the crowd, "I say to you now that after all these eventful struggles I still love my brother as of old, with an undying affection – **but politically, my friends, I despise him.**" Bob was not to be outdone by Alf. He said: I thank God that it has been reserved for Tennessee to declare to the world that politics cannot sever the tender relations of brotherhood. I love the man who has borne the Republican standard as dearly as in the old days long ago when we slept side by side in the same trundle-bed and shared our youthful joys and griefs. I have never seen the hour that I would not willingly lay down my life to save him, **nor the dawn of the day that I would not lay down my life to destroy his party!"**

Bob won by 13,000 votes.

Alf, however, did not quit. The next election he won a seat in Congress where he served three terms. In 1921, he finally won a race for governor – when he was seventy-two!



Local Remembrances of the Campaign: 1925

The fierce gubernatorial campaign which has gone down in history as Tennessee's "War of the Roses" is of course the dramatic high point of the Taylor boys' lives. Just picture two brothers – one a Republican – one a Democrat – stumping a great state against one another, traveling from town to town together to fight for the sovereigns' votes, cussing out each other's politics by day and sleeping in the same bed at night. Picture two candidates for Governor fiddling their lively mountain tunes while a crowd of grinning citizens beats time with their feet and chaws time with their mouths. Picture an entire state torn over the question of which should be the Chief Executive, **Taylor or Taylor?**

Since that memorable autumn Bob and Alf have become as much institutions of Tennessee as Andrew Jackson's Hermitage or the battlefield at Shiloh. Bob is now dead – died in Washington as a United States Senator in 1912 – but he is still vividly remembered as the "apostle of sunshine" and the best loved of Tennessee's great sons. Folks speak affectionately about him and his brother Alf, recall chucklesome anecdotes of their old campaigns, repeat a story that Bob narrated 'as he was standing right over in front of that barber shop.' With the fiddler's contests and the old rail fences and the tobacco of the hill country, the Taylor brothers are now part of Tennessee's traditions.

Just saunter into the lobby of a quiet mountain hotel in eastern Tennessee - one of those lobbies where a two-by-four cigar case and three maps of the United States comprise the decorations, one of those hotels where the owner-clerk-bellhop plays cards with salesmen after supper. Casually mention the name of Taylor to one of the natives loafing there. Then sit back comfortable-like in your chair, for you are about to hear a long series of reminiscences and historical data – **most of which will be true.** For example consider the following narrative:

"Well sir, I remember back in '85 when the War of the Roses came to Jonesborough." A pause here while the narrator shoots a stream of tobacco juice towards the corner and squints his eyes in thought. "No, I'm a little off there; '85's no voting year. It was in '86 when they came to Jonesborough. Alf was giving his speech, and Bob was sitting over at one end of the platform. Some of the boys were drunk and three or four of them decided to sit down over by Bob. Well the upshot was - that Bob's end of the platform suddenly came tumbling down. Alf took one look and then raised his hand up high. "Hold on, fellow citizens, he says; "Don't get alarmed. **That's just the Democratic platform collapsing, as usual!**" Well Bob just looked up with that grin of his and then when it came his turn he" And so on until the owner-clerk-

bellhop turns down the lamp and prepares to close up his hotel for the night.

Primary Source:

Paul Augsburg. *Bob and Alf Taylor*. Morristown, TN: Morristown Book Co., 1925.

An almost unbelievable circumstance in this political race occurred when the Prohibition Party attempted to nominate Bob and Alf's father, former Congressman, Nathaniel Greene Taylor, (who declined the nomination) to enter the race against his sons for Governor. After being queried on the campaign trail that Nathaniel (Bob's dad) was for Alf and that his father had said that Bob was stubborn and the "mule" of the family, Bob replied "**Well you know what the father of a mule typically is?**" All laughed hilariously. Bob turned serious and said "I love my dad. He's the finest man in the world but he is for Alf because he is a Republican."

Nathaniel Greene Taylor, the former Congressman, graduate of Princeton, farmer and Minister of the Gospel, died on April 1, 1887 at his home in Carter County shortly after his son Robert Love Taylor was inaugurated as Governor of Tennessee following the "War of the Roses".