

Brownlow's Soldiers Home – The Rockwood Times - July 1903

“One Cannot Realize What It Is Without Seeing It!”

On last Friday, we arrived at Johnson City and were honored by being met at the depot by Congressman W.P. Brownlow and two carriages to take our little party (consisting of Mr. Farr, the genial proprietor of the Imperial Hotel at Knoxville, United States Marshal R. W. Austin, Hon. J.W. Borches, Chairman of the Republican State Executive Committee and the Times Editor), for a drive around the city and to the Soldiers' Home. Johnson City is certainly on a boom; employment is given there to no less than 3,000 laborers, mechanics and contractors.

As to the home, going there is like the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon. "The half has never been told." Already appropriations have been made for \$1,800,000 and will require as Mr. Brownlow thinks from \$300,000 to \$600,000 more to complete the home. The hospital building covers just three acres of ground and is one of the most beautiful and finely arranged hospitals we have ever seen. Already \$10,000 has been spent for furniture, and a great deal of it is placed in the building. The home when completed will accommodate about 3,000 people.

Upon our reaching the home we found Judge Smith, its Governor; Capt. Milburn, Quartermaster; Maj. Paul E. Divine, Treasurer; and Mr. Goode, Chief Clerk, all hard at work, but they laid aside their work for a couple of hours and joined our party and showed us around the buildings and grounds. While all these officials come from Mr. Brownlow's district they are all of them ex-soldiers and most excellent men and will no doubt make first class officers. We certainly feel under obligations to these officers for their kind and courteous treatment while there. **Talk about monuments, this home will be a monument to Walter a century after he has passed away and well it should**, when we think how hard he tried to get this bill for a Soldiers' Home introduced by Congressmen from the Second District, and to be located at Knoxville, and all he got for his pains and for drafting a bill was a laugh and saying that such a thing was impossible, but when Brownlow got in Congress himself (*in 1897*) he showed to the skeptics that this was no idle dream, but instead of its being located in Knoxville, it is now located in Johnson City, and within six miles of Mr. Brownlow's home (in Jonesborough). This shows what ability and industry can accomplish.

Mr. Brownlow was not even a man of first class common education and held no diplomas, but was a towheaded tinner, by trade, but today he stands supremely above any man who has ever represented East Tennessee in the Congress of the United States. He is the plain

unassuming man he was as a boy, and a friend to the common people, and especially to the old soldiers. From what we can see in our short stay in the First District, he can stay in Congress as long as he likes and that virtually without opposition. The people in that district are now beginning to realize his worth.

Brownlow's Gift for Storytelling -

Rep. Richard Austin, 2nd District Tennessee, 1910

Walter Brownlow was a man of great frankness and truthfulness. When necessary to state his views or come to a conclusion he did not beat around the bush. He was ready to express his convictions at all times and to let his determination be known. And his word could always be depended upon. He was not lavish of promises, but what he did promise he always meant to perform, and, indeed, his performance often went beyond his promise.

He had naturally a lively fancy, a happy abundance of wit and humor, and an admirable faculty for telling a story. In the exercise of this latter talent he resembled Abraham Lincoln and many other great raconteurs. His stories were generally used to enforce some truth or as accessories in the accomplishment of some high aim or great duty. His power of repartee, too, was quite remarkable. In conversation or public argument, on the "stump" or elsewhere, he was never taken at a disadvantage, either by legitimate means or by ill-mannered interruption. He generally managed to place his antagonist in a position of embarrassment or discomfiture, but generally without any exhibition of malice or hostility. He always strove, on the contrary, to avoid wounding the feelings of either friend or foe. It was this happy spirit and his talent as a story teller that made him a favorite of such men as Gen. Garfield, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William H. Taft, and many other distinguished personages, who never failed to enjoy his quaint and original humor.

The Real Living Walter Preston Brownlow -

Rep. Thetus W. Sims, 8th Congressional District Tennessee, 1910

I wish to relate some of the smaller occurrences of life which more often enable those who did not have personal knowledge of the deceased to form correct and lifelike conceptions of his distinctly personal characteristics than is otherwise possible.

I never knew Mr. Brownlow personally until the extra session of the Fifty-Fifth Congress which convened in March, 1897. I found him to be a warm-hearted man, approachable and of easy acquaintance. I felt from the start as if I had known him all my life. His conversation was always entertaining, even on the most trivial subjects. He seemed to possess an inexhaustible fund of humor, and was unusually bright and original. In order that those who hear and those who may hereafter read these eulogies, I shall somewhat in detail relate some of the occurrences in the service of Mr. Brownlow coming under my personal observation which illustrate the temperament and humor of our late lamented colleague.

Soon after the commencement of the Spanish American War, Mr. Brownlow and I had joined in recommending to the President (McKinley) for appointment as brigadier general of volunteers from Tennessee a certain distinguished and well-known citizen of our state. A few days later I heard that at least one of our senators had refused to join us in our recommendation, stating that our man had no military training or experience and that it would be dangerous to have such a man in command of raw volunteers in battle. Mr. Brownlow replied that:

“the man you and I have recommended for brigadier general is like me. He knows the Tennessee boys are brave and impetuous and will fight anywhere, but he loves them too well to ever lead them into any place of danger; therefore I stand by our man.”

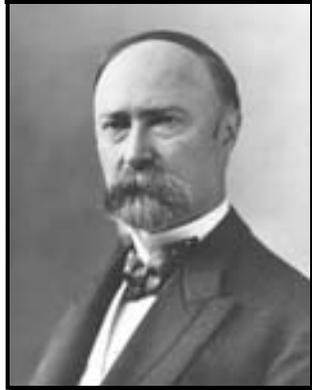
I never knew Brownlow to vote or oppose any appropriation of money coming to the South. On one occasion when some bill was coming up for consideration he came over to the Democratic side and asked me to support the bill and to do all I could to get our side to do the same. I asked him, What about the merits? He replied:

“Oh, it is a steal and that ought to make it popular on your side; but in addition it is coming South. If we vote for all the steals coming our way for the next hundred years we will not then get even with the North.”

After several years' service Mr. Brownlow was appointed on the Committee of Appropriations, and by Members ahead of him going out of Congress and on other committees it was not long until he was near head of the committee (in seniority). It was but natural that I wanted to see him become chairman of the committee. So on a proper occasion I mentioned the matter to him and suggested that if he did not manifest a greater disposition toward economy in public expenditures that I feared he would never be made chairman of that great committee, although he might be entitled to it by rank and seniority. He replied:

“Now Sims, don’t you worry about that; if the Yankees get all they want for the North and I get all I want for the South, there will not be anything left in the Treasury to appropriate long before I can get to the head of the committee.”

It will be recalled that Vice President Fairbanks, during the campaign in which he was a candidate, was cartooned as a cold, icy, man. He was represented as having icicles hanging from his hat brim and beard.



*Vice President Charles Fairbanks
(served with Theodore Roosevelt)*

I always thought the cartoon did Mr. Fairbanks a great injustice. I have never known a man in public life more approachable or more kindly and sympathetic in his treatment of all people with whom he came in contact than was Mr. Fairbanks. It was not an unusual thing for the Vice President to share with him his carriage on going to the Capitol in the morning. On one occasion as I was walking east on F Street I saw the Vice President’s carriage in front of me with Mr. Fairbanks and Mr. Brownlow in conversation. In a moment the carriage stopped in front of a store and the Vice President alighted and passed into the building, while Mr. Brownlow remained seated in the carriage. When I came up even with him I halted and spoke to him and asked him where he was going. He replied:

“Oh nowhere in particular; I am just taking a ride in the ice wagon.”

His reply was so bright and so characteristic of the man that I could not keep it from the newspapers. Not long afterwards, Mr. Brownlow got sharply after me for telling the occurrence to the newspaper boys, and said that if he got into any trouble with any of his bills in the Senate on account of it he would have my seat contested and have me thrown out of Congress. I replied:

“Just go ahead with your contest; the remark was worth a seat in Congress.”

Only a few months after I began my first service in the extra session of 1897, Mr. Brownlow passed me in the corridor between this Chamber and Statuary Hall, where the telegraph operators are located, and noticed that I was sending a telegram and paying the charges on it. He said:

“Sims, have you not got a book of telegraph franks yet?”

I replied that I had not; that I did not know that such franks were to be had. He replied:

“Well make application for one immediately.”

I replied:

“How do you know that I want to use them?”

He replied:

“I don’t care if you use them or not, but I don’t want the Western Union Telegraph Co. to know that Tennessee ever sent a man to Congress who did not have sense enough to know what was coming to him and how to get it.”

Mr. Speaker, (Speaker of the House of Representatives), the membership of this House is made up of all kinds of personal characteristics. It is difficult to so treat, in a merely descriptive way, the lives of men so as to fully bring out these distinguished characteristics.

I think few men were more original than Mr. Brownlow, and in order that those that follow him may know some of the peculiarly personal traits of this many-sided man I have attempted, without embellishment or exaggeration, to relate some of these occurrences in actual life without which it is impossible to fully portray the real living Walter Preston Brownlow.

He has been and will be greatly missed in this House by those who had the good fortune to serve with and to know him intimately for so many years. He was a true and steadfast friend, a devoted father and husband, and a loyal party man, but without partisan rancor and bitterness.

Mr. Speaker, we regret and grieve that we can never again meet him in these halls, that his voice is silenced forever, that his work has ended; but he will never be forgotten by any living man who ever knew him.