

## **Bloomington once fertile ground for gubernatorial candidates**



*This undated image taken from Bloomington's Franklin Park shows the 900 block of North McLean Street. Three of the four residences pictured were home to gubernatorial candidates.*

This Tuesday's election features two Bloomington residents running for governor—Bill Brady heads the Republican ticket, while Lex Green does likewise for the Libertarians.

Yet Bloomington's association with the state's top elected office goes back more than a century. In fact, before the rise and dominance of Chicago and its suburbs in Prairie State politics, Bloomington wielded influence above and beyond its (relatively speaking) small size.

The city has been home to three Illinois governors, the most recognizable (and most recent) being Adlai E. Stevenson II, who in 1948 clobbered the scandal-plagued Republican Dwight H. Green. Although a Chicago lawyer by the time he embarked on his political career, Stevenson always considered Bloomington his home. The cerebral reformer then parlayed his four years in Springfield into two presidential campaigns, losing both times (1952 and 1956) to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Then there was Republican John Hamilton, who as lieutenant governor completed the final two years (1883 to January 1885) of Shelby M. Cullom's second term, a move necessitated when Cullom left Springfield for the U.S. Senate.

Yet nowhere is Bloomington's powerhouse political past better preserved than the east side of Franklin Park. Of the four stately residences on the 900 block of North McLean Street, three were home to late 19th and early 20th century gubernatorial candidates.

The Georgian Revival beauty at the southeast corner of McLean and Walnut streets (909 N. McLean—on the far left of the accompanying photograph) was home to Joseph W. Fifer, a one-term Republican governor elected in 1888. The Queen Anne residence to the immediate south (907 N. McLean) was Frank H. Funk's, who ran as the Progressive "Bull Moose" Party candidate in 1912. Two down from Funk, at the northeast corner of McLean and Chestnut streets (901 N. McLean—on the far right) was the Italianate-style home of Democrat Adlai E. Stevenson I, a former congressman and U.S. vice president who in 1908 lost a close race for governor. The unusual name Adlai skipped a generation, so this Stevenson is the grandfather of the Stevenson who won the same office four decades later.

Fifer, Funk and Stevenson: One city block and three compelling candidates for governor. Call it Bloomington's "Politician's Row."

"Private Joe" Fifer received his nickname when he bested six former Union Army officers—three generals, a colonel, a major and a captain—for the Republican gubernatorial nomination. Fifer's term was one of moderate reform and no major scandals, a not-inconsiderable accomplishment given the endemic corruption of the Gilded Age. Fifer passed away in 1938 at the age of 97, but not before spending his latter years as a sage-like storyteller and elder statesman of Illinois politics.

Unlike Fifer, Democrat Adlai Stevenson ran for governor in the twilight of his political career, having already served in the U.S. House of Representatives and as vice president during Grover Cleveland's return to the White House (1893-1897). The well-liked Stevenson, known for the suppleness of his political principles, remained an attractive national candidate, and in 1900 he was once again his national party's choice for vice president, though Democratic standard bearer William Jennings Bryan handily lost his rematch to William McKinley.

In the 1908 governor's race, Stevenson faced Charles S. Deneen, a reform-minded Chicago Republican seeking his second term. Deneen won the closely contested election, with 2 percentage points separating the candidates. Democrats cried foul, accusing Chicago Mayor Fred A. Busse and his Republican cronies of stealing the election (this was when the GOP ruled the roost in the Windy City!)

Four years after Stevenson's defeat, the governor's race included another Bloomingtonian. This time it was Stevenson's and Fifer's neighbor Frank Funk, who ran under the Progressive Party banner. The 1912 election cycle was one of the more dramatic in U.S. history, with Republicans split into two camps, as the more conservative, pro-business, old guard stayed with William Taft, and the activist, trust-busting progressives sided with Teddy Roosevelt and his newly formed Bull Moose Party.

This intra-party breakup enabled Democrat Woodrow Wilson to capture the White House. It was the same story in Illinois, as Charles Deneen (running for a third term) and

Funk divided the GOP vote, opening the door for Democrat Edward Dunne. Although Funk finished third, he did so with a solid 26 percent of the vote, a record showing for any third party gubernatorial candidate in Illinois history.

Though one needs no excuse to take a late autumn stroll through lovely Franklin Park, it seems especially fitting to do so on Election Day.