

## **Daniel T. Foster (1841-1920)**

Captain Foster, as he was commonly called, was a major figure in Bloomington politics in the 1890s. Elected first as alderman, and then four times as mayor, he was hugely popular with members of both parties, but his legacy is clouded by scandals and controversy.

Daniel T. Foster was born July 22, 1841 in Vermont. As a young man, he worked as a farm hand and then as an engineer on the Vermont Central Railroad. With the start of the Civil War, he enlisted in the Union Army. He entered the Tenth Vermont Infantry as a Private, but was mustered out of service with the rank of Captain. He participated in a number of major battles; among them The Wilderness Campaign and the Shenandoah Valley Campaign. He was wounded at the battle of Fisher's Hill and present at Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.

In 1867, Foster moved to Bloomington where two years later he married Levina Walton who was from his hometown in Vermont. They lived at 606 E. Mulberry Street all their married lives. They had one daughter, Myra, who died at the age of nine.

Foster worked at a variety of jobs before turning to politics. He was a Locomotive Engineer, a Baggage Master and ran a restaurant near the Chicago and Alton Railroad. In 1883, with a business partner, he leased the Ashley House, a hotel, and owned and operated an omnibus and carriage company. Because of all his years of business experience, he was considered one of the best known men in Bloomington, being called "polite," "agreeable," and a "general favorite."

In 1889, Captain Foster ran and won on the Republican ticket for alderman of the First Ward in Bloomington. The First Ward was located from Chestnut St. to Front St., and from Main St. east beyond Towanda Ave. When he ran for mayor two years later, there was virtually no opposition as he was heavily favored by all. *The Pantagraph* reported that "he is an honest man...a patriot and his patriotism has been tried by fire." The opposition said that he was popular even among the Democrats, particularly the Irish Democrats of the Fifth Ward.

But scandals and controversy were to trouble his terms in office. *The Pantagraph* complained that gambling and prostitution increased during his first three terms as mayor. Accusations were printed that said Mayor Foster and city officials were ignoring the vice which was "stalking the streets of Bloomington" and that they did "little to nothing to stop such activities." Although the paper said that "one word from the mayor would put a halt to all these illegal and immoral activities," Foster and other officials remained silent. Articles continued to be published suggesting that Foster was responsible for the spread of these crimes. Some leading citizens even said that Foster and F.J. Maxwell, the chairman of the police committee, were taking part in the gambling or even being bribed to look the other way. Finally, Foster responded to pressure and in January, 1892, and ordered police to raid several gambling houses and shut them down. He was quoted in *The Pantagraph* as saying he had no idea that gambling was so open in Bloomington since he had never been to one of the gambling houses, and he was grateful to the paper for having exposed the problem.

Nothing changed however, and it seemed to many people the problems of gambling and prostitution only increased. Foster continued to be accused of being involved in the vice problems, and failed to win reelection in 1894. But two years later, when he ran again, Foster was elected to a fourth and final term. At the same time, F.J. Maxwell, the former head of the police committee, was elected captain of the Bloomington Police.

Although the vice problems continued, it was another issue which dominated Foster's last term in office. On an October evening in 1896, a large Republican rally was held in

Bloomington to support candidates for the upcoming presidential election. During the rally, several people had their pockets picked. On the word of eyewitness, a member of a Chicago gang of pickpockets named Paddy Ryan was arrested and taken to jail. He was placed in a jail cell, but later that night, the cell was found to be empty. When Paddy Ryan was tracked down in Chicago, he said that a police sergeant had let him go on the orders of Mayor Foster. He said he had paid a value of \$210 to be released and that police Sergeant R.T. Dunn had left the door to his cell open. When Dunn was indicted and questioned, he told investigators that he was acting under the orders of Mayor Foster. Foster denied the story, and the case eventually went to trial. Mayor Foster was acquitted, but it was the end of his political career.

Although his political career was very controversial, Foster can be credited with some accomplishment for the city. He commissioned the building of Miller Park Lake and an electric light plant for the city.

Captain Foster died quietly at his home on East Mulberry Street on October 24, 1920. He was remembered as a man of strong convictions with a kindly disposition. It was said that he was very fond of children and always willing to lend a hand to those in need. He is buried in Evergreen Cemetery.

**Discussion Question:** Much of what we know about Daniel Foster comes from records of *The Pantagraph*. Trace where the paper interacted with Foster's life. How did Foster and *The Pantagraph* affect each other?

## Bullets for Daniel T. Foster

- \*Born in Waitsfield, VT, 1841, died Bloomington, IL 1920
- \*Fought in the Civil War, rose from private to Captain, took part in major battles
- \*Married Levina Walton, also of Waitsfield, Vt. They had one daughter who died when nine years old
- \*Successful and popular businessman
- \*Was mayor of Bloomington four terms. Charges of corruption marred his political career.