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Con Con starts, but end in doubt with several factions vying for say

On Dec. 8, 1969, the sixth Illinois Constitutional Convention opened in Springfield. Almost a century had passed since Dec. 13, 1869, when the fourth Illinois Constitutional Convention opened. That convention had drafted the constitution that the new delegates were hoping to revise.

One issue dominated both conventions: How to write a basic charter for a state that often seemed split into two competing parts. The commercial Northeast often seemed unrelated to the vast and verdant prairies of downstate Illinois.

When Gov. Richard B. Ogilvie gaveled the convention to order, it was already obvious that the 1969 delegates were splitting into geographical and political factions.

The “Chicago Regular Democrats” were members of the formidable organization run by Chicago’s legendary mayor, whose oldest son was a delegate. Everyone knew that Mayor Richard J. Daley had played a key role in bringing about the convention and would play a key role in adopting a proposed constitution. Approximately 25% of the 116 delegates belonged to this bloc.

Second, there were the “independents.” These were nine liberal Democrats from Chicago who were definitely not part of the Chicago Democratic bloc. They had met

informally after the Nov. 18 election and would caucus regularly during the next few months.

Third, there were the delegates from the suburbs around Chicago, including the five “collar counties” bordering Cook County. Most of these suburbanites had never run for office on the Republican ticket, but they had the tacit support of the Republican organizations in their areas.

Many of the women delegates came from the suburbs. Almost all had cut their political teeth working with the League of Women Voters and were known as the “League of Women Voters housewives.” Never a formal caucus, they nonetheless agreed on many issues.

Finally, the Downstater were as varied as the 96 counties they came from. Some had experience in public office and a few were affiliated with either the Democratic or Republican Party. For the most part they were civic-minded traditionalists with deep roots in their counties. They often seemed to have one thing in common, a deep, perhaps visceral, distrust of the Chicago area.

The downstate delegates from the southern third of Illinois were a subset of this group. Illinois began in their part of the state in 1818, but by 1970 it was thinly populated except for the Metro St. Louis area.



LAW AND PUBLIC ISSUES

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The city of East St. Louis elected the only African American delegate outside Chicago. He and others from southern Illinois soon formed a study group called “SOS” for South of Springfield.

The divisions became apparent when the convention turned to electing officers. The obvious choice for president was Samuel W. Witwer of north suburban Cook County. A corporate

lawyer in Chicago with Republican credentials, he had been a leader in Illinois constitutional reform since 1947. When Mayor Daley, also a longtime laborer in that vineyard, signaled support for Witwer, his election was assured.

Some non-Chicagoans saw this as a portent of a “Chicago convention,” one in which Cook County (which they saw as the monolith it was not) would run roughshod over the rest of the state.

To alleviate these fears, the convention decided to elect not just one, but two vice presidents. Thomas G. Lyons, the head of the Daley delegation, was the most prominent of the Chicago Democrats and a former state senator. Elbert S. Smith of Decatur in central Illinois was a Republican, a former state auditor and a former state senator.

At that point, John Alexander of southern Illinois began campaigning to have a third vice president, one who could represent both Southern Illinois and young people, namely himself. The delegates elected him vice president, but he was never the political player that Lyons and Smith were.

That left one office to fill, that of secretary of the convention. To balance out four white males, the convention elected Odas Nicholson, an African American female lawyer from Chicago’s Hyde Park.

The next step tested the convention's ability to be united and yet representative of all of Illinois. That was the appointment of the members of committees, especially the chairmanships and vice chairmanships of the committees. Because the convention regulations provided for a strong president, Witwer made the appointments. Delegates expressed their preferences, but Witwer was committed to committees with geographical and political balance.

Of course, the heads of the political factions had input. After 50 years, it is difficult to say that anyone could have made better appointments than Witwer did.

He worked with what he had. Everyone had to have a seat on a substantive committee. There were also special committees, the most important of which was Style and Drafting, the committee that supervised the wording of the constitution. When I worked with the committees, they

seemed to me remarkably representative of the different views at the convention.

By January 1970, the delegates were ready to begin work. First, however, they decided to discover what their fellow Illinoisans thought and wanted. They also realized the importance of getting to know all of the parts of Illinois because they were drafting a constitution for the whole state, not just their home areas.

Chicagoans would visit Little Egypt in Southern Illinois

and Downstater would visit the West Side of Chicago. They would have to hear testimony from people all over Illinois.

In short, they would have to see Illinois as other Illinoisans saw it. It would be an eye-opener when they began what the newspapers called The Road Show in February. What did they learn from traveling around Illinois that winter? That is the subject of my next column, to appear in February 2020.