

RESULTS OF COMMISSION GOVERNMENT IN KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

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Kansas City, the metropolis of Kansas, was, at the time it adopted the commission government, the largest city in the United States to adopt the plan. The population of Kansas City as shown by the Federal census of 1910 was 86,000. The city is one of the largest in the world, if not the largest, in which the sale of intoxicating liquors is prohibited. There is not a saloon or "joint" in the city or county, and there is not one penny of revenue received by the city from the sale of intoxicating liquors, either as a license fee or "fine" in police court. There are, of course, migratory violators of the law, commonly called "bootleggers," but they are eventually arrested, and it is the rare exception that one of them is enabled to pay his fine. In addition to the absence of saloons, we have an entire absence of gambling houses and houses of vice common to large cities.

Kansas City, Kansas, contains the large packing houses for which the city is famous. The stockyards are located partly in Kansas City, Missouri, but mostly in Kansas City, Kansas. The terminals, including shops, round houses, switching yards, etc., of all the western railroads are in Kansas City, Kansas. The great factory district of the two Kansas Cities is located on the Kansas side, where we find the large flour mills, foundries, cooper shops, soap factories, etc., employing thousands of men. The workers in these factories and the employees of the railroads constitute the bulk of the population of Kansas City, Kansas. They are industrious, thrifty and a home building body of men. Kansas City, Kansas, is a city of home owners. The percentage of persons who own and occupy their own homes is probably greater in Kansas City, Kansas, than in any other city in the United States. This condition explains in no small measure the fact that this city, although containing thousands and thousands of workers, most of whom are affiliated with the labor unions, if they exist in their trade or calling, has been

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immune for years from any serious strikes, boycotts or other labor difficulties.

The legislature of Kansas in 1907 passed the first act authorizing the commission form of government in cities of the first class. The act was amended and supplemented in 1909. As it now stands it provides for the election of five commissioners biennially. Any person filing a petition signed by twenty-five persons may be a candidate for mayor or commissioner and his name is placed upon the official primary ballot as such candidate, without any party designation whatever. The primary election is held eight days before the regular election. The two candidates for mayor receiving the greatest number of votes and the eight candidates for commissioner receiving the highest number of votes are the nominees. Then at the regular election the same plan is again followed; the names of the candidates nominated are again placed on a ballot without party designation, the names in all cases appearing in alphabetical order, the candidates then receiving the highest votes, are declared elected. The first year our mayor was a democrat, and the commissioners were two democrats and two republicans. This year we have the same mayor and three republican commissioners and one democrat. The form of the ballot makes it difficult for an illiterate person to vote, and there being no "tickets," of course, no person can vote a "straight ticket."

Our mayor since the adoption of the commission plan is James E. Porter, who has been connected with city and county affairs for twenty-five years. The commissioners the first year were Otto Anderson, a merchant; Henry E. Dean, a lawyer; James A. Cable, at the time of his election supreme secretary-treasurer of the Coopers' International Union and editor of the *Coopers' Journal*; and Charles W. Green, president of a local bank. Mr. Green declined to be a candidate for re-election and was succeeded by James E. Caton, an expert accountant in municipal work. The other commissioners were re-elected with the mayor. The mayor-commissioner is *ex-officio* in charge of the police and fire departments, the other four commissioners are, after election, assigned by themselves to the following departments: 1. Finance and revenue; 2. Water works and street lighting; 3. Parks and public buildings; 4. Streets and public improvements. The commissioners appoint all officers and employees of the city, after a civil service examination. The

civil service does not apply to the heads of the various city departments.

The question of the adoption of commission government was first submitted to the voters of Kansas City in 1908 and defeated; in 1909 it was again submitted and carried. The first board of commissioners were elected in April, 1909, and assumed the duties of their office in the same month. The commissioners were somewhat handicapped the first year by a shortage of funds, the failure in the old law to distribute the funds to the various departments causing an inevitable deficit each year.

During the first year of commission government the city operated within its actual revenue. During the thirteen years prior to 1908, there was a deficit each year, totaling in the thirteen years \$1,300,000, or an average of \$100,000 per year, for which sum bonds were from time to time issued. The first year of commission government resulted in the payment of \$63,000 in general bonds, the full payment of all the expenses of the city from the revenue of the city, and, in addition thereto, there was an unexpended surplus of \$19,000 in the treasury. So if we might, for the purpose of comparison, take an average of the preceding thirteen years, showing a deficit of \$100,000 each year, and the first year of commission government, showing the equivalent of a balance of \$82,000, we find that from a financial standpoint it resulted in a saving of \$182,000 in the first year. A comparison of the collections from a few of the sources of revenue for the years 1909 and 1910 will show why it was possible for the city to make the showing it did.

	1909.	1910.
Occupation license	\$38,825.14	\$51,450.15
Police court fines	6,228.75	11,373.76
Dog tax	3,084.25	6,796.50
Bank interest	3,688.01	10,971.07
Franchises	9,000.02	16,000.00

The cost of public work was reduced, brick paving formerly costing \$1.70 per yard is now done for \$1.50. Asphalt paving was reduced from \$2.10 to \$1.85. The park and boulevard system, in its infancy when the commissioners assumed charge of the affairs of the city, has been extended and enlarged so as now to include several miles of beautiful boulevards and parks that are a delight and pleasure to the citizens. Playgrounds have been installed in

many of the parks where at all times of the day and evening hundreds of boys and girls can be seen in healthful and orderly exercise. A public shower bath was installed in one of the parks this summer; in one week over 1,500 persons availed themselves of the public shower bath. The street railway system is operated by the same company in this city and in Kansas City, Mo. The franchise requires the company to build two miles of extension each year. From 1902 to April, 1910, there was actually built but three miles of street railway; from April, 1910, to January, 1911, the street railway company either built or contracted to build four and a half miles of street railway.

The Missouri and Kansas Telephone Company, commonly known as the Bell Telephone Company, has a franchise in this city granted in 1901 and running for a period of twenty years. The compensation clause is as follows: "The Missouri and Kansas Telephone Company, its successors and assigns, agree that until such time as the city shall require payment of a license, privilege or occupation tax, fees, rentals or similar charges by the company on account of its business or property, the company, its successors or assigns will furnish to said city, free of cost, five metallic circuit telephones with exchange service for city business and such additional metallic circuit telephones not exceeding ten with exchange service as the city may need for city business at the rate of fifty dollars each per year." A very fine proposition for the city, telephones at fifty dollars per year. Think of the thousands of telephone poles strung all over the city, streets disfigured by wires and poles, and in return for this use, the city received five free telephones. No effort was ever made to make any other charge until the commissioners took office. They called the manager of the telephone company to the city hall, informed him that they desired to make a rental charge for the use of the streets and he quickly offered to pay, and has since paid the city two per cent of the gross revenue of the city, and the city now receives the free use of sixteen telephones in addition to the gross receipts. This item alone means about \$6,000 per year.

The city acquired its water plant less than one year before the commissioners assumed charge of the affairs of the city. It was rebuilt at a cost of nine hundred thousand dollars, its original cost being eleven hundred thousand dollars, so its cost to date is two million dollars. The revenue from the water plant is sufficient to

pay the salaries of all the officers and employees of the department, to make all necessary improvements and extensions, to pay all miscellaneous expenditures, to pay all interest charges, to cover depreciation and, in addition thereto, to create a sinking fund of more than two per cent annually to pay the outstanding bonds at maturity, and all this at water rates less than those charged by the private company. The water works sinking fund is invested in our own internal improvement bonds which bear five per cent interest, while the water bonds bear only four and one-half per cent interest. The success attained by the city in the operation of the water plant was such that last fall the citizens voted bonds to install a municipal electric lighting plant which is now being built.

The foregoing are a few of the statistical facts that can be pointed to as showing to some extent, at least, the financial conditions under commission government and the old ward plan. There are, however, results far more beneficial than those upon which statistics can be quoted or given, chief among which is a quickened and enlightened understanding of public affairs by the citizens. The public knows the public business. Responsible heads of departments with power and authority to act, with no superior body such as a Board of Aldermen or council to hinder their efforts, on duty each and every day attending to the business of the city, giving information to taxpayers or other inquirers, telling through the newspapers from time to time of the public business, such a scheme is bound to bring about an awakened public interest and a quick public conscience. While many of our citizens do not agree with the ideas of the Board of Commissioners, either politically or in municipal matters, yet I think any proposition to return to the old form would be overwhelmingly defeated at the polls, for the reason that the public understands that commission form of government in Kansas City, Kansas, has succeeded.