

THE WORK OF THE LEAGUE OF CALIFORNIA MUNICIPALITIES¹

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San Francisco

ONE of the great questions confronting all students of municipal administration is: How can we develop a class of trained officials for our cities and towns, who will bring to the administration of our local affairs a practical knowledge of the things necessary to insure the highest degree of efficiency?

In every one of our local communities we have an abundance of raw material out of which may be made officials more or less expert, men (and women) intelligent and honest, earnest, and eager to render public service, yet ignorant of the best methods to pursue to accomplish the highest results. The problem, therefore, is how to shape this raw material into a finished product that will serve the public needs in the way of educated officials, educated in the special business of municipal administration.

We have found comparatively little difficulty here in California in securing the election of a fairly high class of public officials. This is due to the fact that we have absolutely non-partisan elections and have succeeded in eliminating the political boss from our municipal affairs.

We have, therefore, secured the foundation upon which to build a system of municipal administration by trained officials, and even now are engaged in introducing an educational system so that these officials may eventually become trained to the efficient discharge of their public duties.

The first requisite is to secure long terms for our public officials. We cannot train a man in a year or two years. Nearly all of our elected officials now hold for four years and some for six. We are gradually reducing the number of elective officers and making administrative officers appointive to serve during good behavior or under a merit system. Thus we provide sufficient time for an official to train himself if he possesses the necessary ambition. As one of the means employed to furnish the training of officials comes the work of the League of California Municipalities.

This association was found in December, 1898, nearly fourteen years ago.

At that time there were about one hundred incorporated cities and towns in the state and the idea was suggested to the mayor of a small town near San Francisco that it would be a good idea to have an organization of city

¹ Read at the Los Angeles meeting of the National Municipal League. Mr. Mason has been secretary of the League of California Municipalities since its organization and has been the chief factor in its success.—EDITOR.

officials that they might talk over the problems of municipal management, exchange their experiences and compare methods for doing the various classes of municipal work. Circulars were sent out to the mayors of these cities seeking their views as to the desirability of such an organization.

The idea proved to be an attractive one to many mayors, and as a result a meeting was called and the League of California Municipalities was organized with thirteen cities represented by twenty-nine officials in attendance. James D. Phelan, then mayor of San Francisco, was the first president and the writer was elected the secretary, a position he still holds.

The League now has one hundred and fifty cities and towns on its membership list, and its last annual convention was attended by three hundred and fifty officials and others interested in municipal subjects.

We maintain that the annual contention of the League is a valuable school for municipal officials. It is the only direct means by which municipal officials may learn improved methods of performing the different kinds of municipal work, the best practice in administering local affairs, how various problems may be effectively solved, and how to avoid extravagances and failures.

We have ever tried to have the subjects treated in a practical way, avoiding as much as possible the academic form. For example: Instead of discussing municipal ownership as a question of economics we invite discussion of "Experiences of cities with the municipal operation of water works, lighting systems, etc." In this way the successful operation of public utilities is emphasized and such towns as may not be wholly successful in such operations are stimulated to better endeavor.

Perhaps no better illustration of the scope of the discussions at our conventions can be given than to present the list of subjects considered at our last convention: "Asphaltic base oils, use of for roads and streets" (technical); "Commission form of government," presented by mayors of five cities having that form; "Corrugated iron culverts" (technical); "Recent court decisions affecting municipalities," "Municipal lighting systems," by a professor in the state university; "Financial reports of cities," by the state controller; "Fire and building ordinances;" "New idea in fire department buildings;" "Municipal franchises under the new constitutional amendment;" "Garbage disposal," two papers, one for small towns and one for large cities; "Experts in municipal administration;" "Importance of sewage disposal;" "Reform in taxation;" "Sterilization of water supplies;" "Manufacture and use of vitrified sewer pipe;" "Suggestions for amending the purity of election laws;" "Street paving methods." Besides there were informal discussions on a variety of topics.

The California League includes in its organization all municipal officials and at its conventions it resolves itself into separate departments. The

clerks, auditors and assessors have a separate meeting for discussing accounting and kindred topics. City attorneys have their department for the discussion of legal questions. The engineers and street superintendents discuss their special problems among themselves. The League as a whole also has a meeting during a portion of each day.

In addition to this the State Health Officers Association holds its annual meeting at the same time and place, and one joint meeting is held where some phase of municipal sanitation is the main subject presented.

Two years ago we added another feature to our annual meeting, a municipal exhibition. Here is exhibited the appliances and apparatus used in the performance of municipal work. At this exposition the municipal official may familiarize himself with modern municipal machinery, and this has the same relative value to a municipal official that an exhibition of farm machinery has to a farmer. It is conducive of efficiency. During the first years of the League we held three-day sessions; now we consume a week. We aim to make that week as educational as possible. It may be likened to a university "short course series" in municipal administration. We aim to furnish instruction by experts. Those who prepare papers are selected with a view to obtaining men "who know what they are talking about." It is unfortunate for the speaker if he does not. The quizzing that he would receive would demonstrate his incapacity.

Speaking of short courses in connection with university work, leads me to state that our next convention is to be held at Berkeley, the seat of our state university. We propose at that time to impress our university professors with the importance of providing for municipal officers some sort of a short lecture course in connection with their curriculum.

In addition to the formal discussions at the opening meetings, the bringing together of a body of men engaged in public work promotes discussion of municipal affairs. During the recesses, at meal times, wherever and whenever two or more men meet the discussions are continued and extended. Everybody "talks shop." If you could attend one of these conventions, you would be amazed at the exclusion of private affairs from the conversation about you. It argues well that so many men can lay aside, so completely as these men do, their private interest and center their entire thought on public welfare.

We found at the outset of the League's existence that if we were to maintain continuous interest in work, a publication of some kind would be necessary. Before the end of the first year the monthly publication, *California Municipalities*, afterwards *Pacific Municipalities*, was issued and is still serving the purpose of giving to the city officials of the state an epitome of the news affecting municipalities and timely articles concerning municipal affairs.

This publication is sent free to the principal officers of cities belonging

to the League. This is in itself a means of transmitting knowledge and serves to educate the officials that they may serve the public better.

The League also maintains a bureau of information. City officials can ask for information and it is furnished or may ask questions which are answered in most cases. Here are kept copies of ordinances, specifications relating to public work, legal opinions, pamphlets, general literature connected with municipal affairs. This service is of special value to the smaller towns and is availed of extensively.

I trust that I have said enough to convince you that the League of California Municipalities is a valuable educational institution, spreading the light of knowledge, not particularly in dark places, but seeking to illumine the path of progress sought by every one who is interested in public affairs. Your president, in his opening address, has emphasized the necessity of seeking the aid of experts in the administration of municipal affairs. We must have them, and if every officer can be trained specially to discharge public duties the perfection of municipal government would be quickly secured. But we cannot find trained men in sufficient numbers to fill every office. As long as we elect our officials, men ignorant of their public duties will be chosen to fill offices of public trust. Any means that will impart to these men a greater knowledge of the things they should know, ought to be welcomed and made use of. I have nothing better to suggest in this line than an organization like the League of California Municipalities.

In addition to exercising an educational function, the League has performed some noteworthy work in bettering conditions for the administration of municipal affairs.

It has concerned itself very largely in matters of legislation. The main objects in view in the enactment of laws have been: (1) To secure more and more power to the municipalities. (2) To simplify procedure, and conversely to oppose any threatened legislation that violated these principles.

At every session of the legislature a representative of the League has been in almost constant attendance. We have been fortunate in having active supporters for all measures in each house of the legislature and by the use of diplomacy have succeeded in passing nearly all of our measures.

Among the important ones may be enumerated acts: Simplifying the procedure for issuing municipal bonds; Lengthening the terms of municipal officers; Providing methods by which public libraries may be established in every incorporated town; Providing two complete alternative measures for the improvement of streets by special assessments, known as the Improvement Acts of 1901 and 1911; Decreasing the number of elective officers and making them appointive; Exempting municipal bonds from taxation; Providing an optional form of commission government for the smaller towns; Providing for a system of reports from municipalities. This last named measure was secured only after several years of agitation.

Almost from its inception, the League resolved upon improved systems of accounting. We endeavored first to secure a uniform system by the voluntary action of the city officials, and made but very little progress. We finally reached the conclusion that if we could secure a uniform system of annual reports, a uniform accounting system would naturally be adopted, because in getting uniform results uniformity of methods would naturally suggest themselves.

It was necessary therefore to vest in some central authority the power to require annual reports of the financial transactions of every municipality. We were fortunate in having a state controller (Hon. A. B. Nye) who was in full sympathy with this reform. He took hold of the matter in earnest and without legislation and without increase of his office force undertook to secure the financial reports. He prepared at first very simple forms and sent them to each city and town. As the subject had been discussed at our annual conventions many of the auditors knew what was coming and as a result nearly two-thirds of the cities furnished the information desired and the controller in his biennial report in 1908 presented a fairly good exhibit of municipal expenditures.

In 1909 a bill was presented to the legislature requiring all cities to make reports to the controller in such form as he might desire and making an appropriation to enable that officer to carry out the purpose of the act. The finance committee objected to the appropriation and the bill failed of passage.

It was made, however, a sort of a political issue and in 1910 the political parties fell into the hands of progressives and declarations were made in favor of uniform systems of accounting for the state, counties and municipalities. In response to these declarations the legislature passed the necessary act, even broader than had been proposed two years before, for it included the counties within the scope of its operations as well as the cities and towns. Last year the controller employed assistance in preparing forms and tabulating the statistics and issued in pamphlet form the first annual report of financial statistics of the municipalities of the state. It is the most complete report of its kind ever issued in this country and we believe that it will lead to a uniform system of accounting by the cities, towns and counties of California.

The most distressing part of our legislative duties has been to prevent vicious acts from being passed. As long as the legislature was under the control of "special interests" there were continual attempts to gain some private advantage from the municipal corporations that were subject to legislative control. When any measures appeared we could only expose them and trust to publicity to effect their defeat. Many proposed acts were thus disposed of, but once in a while a bad act was passed despite our best efforts. In 1901 the legislature proposed an amendment to the con-

stitution which practically deprived all municipalities of the right to operate public utilities. The League appealed to the voters to defeat it: in the campaign against it we distributed over 300,000 circulars throughout the state. The amendment was defeated by a vote of about six to one, and incidentally the member of the legislature who proposed it was retired to private life. I wish to say, that with the inauguration of a progressive legislature in 1911, there was no attempted "hold up" of the municipalities, in fact it was the first legislature in the history of the state when we felt the assurance that the interests of our cities were safe from attack.

We have also done considerable work in preparing model ordinances on a number of subjects, such as building laws and fire protection ordinances for small towns, ordinances for the collection of taxes, license ordinances.

On two occasions we united to defend several small towns in law suits where the principal involved concerned every city in the state. A New Jersey concern sought to collect a royalty on an alleged patent on the application of crude oil to the streets for the purpose of laying dust. The League raised a defense fund of \$5000, engaged able patent lawyers and after a year's contest won a victory. We are now defending our cities from the demands of owners of a patent septic tank.

The special work which the League now has on hand is to secure home rule for the cities and counties of the state in the matter of taxation. Since we have home rule in the expending revenue, we believe that home rule in raising revenue is equally important. A petition is now being circulated to submit a constitutional amendment giving to the voters of the cities and counties the right to change the present system, but changes can only take place by the process of the referendum.

Professor Plehn, yesterday stated that the proposed amendment would enable cities "to tax whom they choose or exempt from taxation whom they choose." I was surprised that a university professor, usually so careful in stating facts, should make such a gross inaccuracy. The proposed amendment provides that property may be classified for purposes of taxation, or exemption from taxation, but taxes shall be uniform for each class.

While California is widely known for its progressiveness, it must not be assumed that we are all progressive. We are not unanimous. So naturally when a reform scheme is put forth, we find individuals here and there who are ready to give it the ax. The attack is usually accompanied by doleful prophecies of things that are going to happen, or *might* happen. But the things prophesied, the dire results, the sad catastrophies, somehow fail to connect. The quotation from the Harvard professor in his argument against home rule, quoted yesterday, provoked a smile from us Californians, who had heard the same thing thirty years ago, and have learned to place a value on such prophecies—a value about equal to those of the professional clairvoyant and palmist.

So do not be worried. Under home rule in taxation, we are not going to array city against city, we are not going to commercially cut throats, nor are we going to commit any crime against the fourteenth amendment. We will be rational and sane, and when we get home rule in taxation (which may not be this year or next, but will be soon), you will be able to point with pride to another of California's municipal achievements.

We feel that the League of California Municipalities has done, is doing and will continue to do valuable work in promoting the interests of the municipalities of the state and of the people who reside in them.

Whatever good we have accomplished has been the result of recognizing certain business principles in its organization and conduct. At the threshold of its organization we clearly saw that a great work could be done, but that it could not be done for nothing. That it was as impossible for the public to receive something for nothing as it was for an individual. Whatever is worth having is worth paying for was a maxim to be recognized. Moreover, there was a field for an active worker, a job for a man and he should receive pay for what he did.

So the League fixed a schedule of annual dues that would provide a fund from which would be paid a salary to the secretary, but he could not get the salary unless he demonstrated that the service he was to render was sufficiently valuable to induce the cities and towns to become and remain members of the League. These annual dues range from \$10 to \$60 a year, according to population and the annual revenue is now about \$3000. The fact that the membership is increasing every year and that a town rarely loses its membership ought to be proof of the fact that the League of California Municipalities has justified its existence.

We have been conservative in many respects. We have heard all sides of the questions of public ownership, direct legislation, the recall, commission government, but we have never gone on record as favoring or disfavoring any of these ideas. However, we have never opposed them and probably most of our officials favor them. We recognized that there are powerful forces operating in behalf of the public good; we do not seek to obstruct any movement that promises to promote the public welfare.

There have also been policies to be avoided. The meetings of the League have not been noted for their entertainment features. We have discouraged sight-seeing trips, elaborate banquets and those things that might be called pleasures. As the expenses of those in attendance are generally paid by the cities sending their officials, we do not wish it to be said that such officials are enjoying a junketing trip at the expense of the taxpayers. On one occasion the convention declined an invitation to a banquet. Not until all the business of a meeting is concluded do we indulge in any sight-seeing. We never permit discussions of political questions nor representatives of special interests to address the convention.

I think now that I have said all that is necessary concerning the organization to which I have given the greater part of the past fourteen years, years which I regard as the best and most pleasurable of my life. The work has been most interesting and you will pardon the feeling of satisfaction with which I regard the results of my labors.

As I stated at the outset an organization of this kind is largely educational. It is valuable because its benefits reach directly to those whom we must look to to transform our municipal conditions. They are the performers, the men "on the job" who must apply the new schemes of municipal administration suggested by such an organization as this. You must look to them to give vitality to the ideas that you produce.

I believe that there should be a more intimate association of the National Municipal League with the various state organizations of municipal officials. Whenever, as a fruit of your discussions, a plan of action is produced that will improve our system of municipal administration it should be laid before a body of officers charged by law with the administration of affairs. More than likely they will welcome any suggestion you may make and give actual trial to the scheme.

Right here I wish to announce that one of the themes you have discussed at this conference will be taken up at our next annual meeting next September. I refer to the matter of excess condemnation. It is one which will appeal to the good sense of every public official and find support with every thinking private citizen.

I think that I can promise that our League will make use of your discussion of this subject, that it will appoint a committee to prepare the necessary amendment to our constitution, present it to the legislature and if submitted to the people assist in a campaign for its adoption. Similar action by the leagues of other states would produce far-reaching results.

It might possibly be wise for you as a national organization to keep a watchful eye on the workings of the various state leagues of city officials. Where they are weak strengthen them, commending if you can, such features of the California league as will produce practical results. I would also commend the Iowa league as being a most worthy body. It is organized on lines similar to that in this state.

I believe that in this work you have an engaging field. The whole country should be thoroughly organized. Your body can, if it wills to be, the parent organization in this country to whom we will look for guidance and for inspiration. Remember that our chief function is educational, that without education there is no progress, that the first great duty is to educate our municipal officials, that they may in turn transmit the knowledge and wisdom that should be theirs to that multitude of citizens who chose them for their leaders and teachers.