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Review of Political Bossism in Mid-America: Tom Dennison's Omaha 1900-1933

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Political Bossism in Mid-America: Tom Dennison's Omaha 1900-1933. By Orville D. Menard. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1989. Preface, photographs, appendix, bibliography, index. xiii + 346 pp. \$32.50.

Orville D. Menard's *Political Bossism in Mid-America* is an in-depth account of the political machine that controlled Omaha, Nebraska, during the first third of the twentieth century. Thomas Dennison, the man who stood at the helm of that machine, is the book's central character, and the author scrutinizes Dennison's long and colorful career from almost every imaginable angle. Furthermore, Menard keeps Dennison and his city in their national context. Tom Dennison was one of many pragmatic urban bosses who came to power in cities filled with immigrants needing powerful friends who could help them in times of need. In return for or in anticipation of that assistance, foreign-born voters willingly supported their benefactors' candidates for public office. Dennison also

acted as a liaison between city hall and the legitimate and illegitimate business communities.

The son of Irish immigrants, Thomas Dennison was born in 1858 in rural Iowa and grew up on a northeastern Nebraska farm. He eventually became a professional gambler and in 1892 settled in Omaha, where he plied his trade. In order to become the city's "King Gambler" he had to secure the sanction and protection of local authorities, and by 1897 Dennison was a political power to be reckoned with in Omaha. Over the next three years the boss tightened his hold on the city, and as the new century opened he was its most influential citizen.

The largest segment of this study consists of three chapters on the actual operations of the Dennison machine, and those chapters are packed with local color. In the first of them Menard discusses the ingenious legal and blatantly illegal ways that the machine went about the full-time task of electioneering. The following chapter traces how Dennison used his tremendous influence and manipulated city contracts, building codes, taxes, licenses, and the like to secure alliances with businessmen. Similarly, since the boss dominated the police department, he controlled illegitimate business activities and frequently made his town a haven for nationally known gangsters. His domination of the city's police as well as the local courts enabled the "Old Man" to tip the scales of justice his way and to fix any jury in Douglas County. That is the topic of Menard's third chapter on the machine's operations.

The beginning of the end of Dennison's domination of Omaha came with a series of three brutal murders in 1930 that may or may not have been carried out at the Old Man's behest. After much labor, reformers managed to secure a federal indictment against the Old Man and fifty-eight of his comrades for conspiracy to violate the National Prohibition Act. A two-month trial ended in a mistrial, but the court proceedings discredited the machine and alienated it from the electorate. Reform candidates swept the 1933 city elections, and

Thomas Dennison died of a cerebral hemorrhage in February 1934.

Political Bossism in Mid-America is a meticulously researched book. Despite an unfortunate number of proofreading errors and some rather cumbersome writing, it probably will become a standard reference work on Omaha's political history. Urban historians and political scientists should find much of value in both the factual materials Menard presents and in his interpretations of them. Certainly residents of Omaha and those with ties there will find the study fascinating.

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