

# THE NEW YORK TIMES

## *The Sound of Politics in Iowa Town*

By R. W. Apple Jr., Special to the New York Times

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It was three degrees below zero at 10 o'clock Monday morning, the wind was knifing in from the north at 30 miles an hour, snow was piled around the old gold-domed bandstand, and the plate glass windows of Gale Stapp's Purity Drug Store were coated with ice.

But inside, this being Iowa in late January in a year divisible by four, they were drinking coffee from paper cups fitted into plastic holders and talking Presidential politics, talking it with earthy zest.

The celebrants were lawyers, like Hugh Faulkner and Bob Spayde; or small-business people, like Marvin Dieleman, a life insurance agent, and David Langkamp, an undertaker; or farmers, like Virgil Else. Mr. Spayde wore a Bush-for-President button, but most of his friends were for Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, not for the Vice President. 'He Isn't a Leader'

"The trouble with Bush," Mr. Dieleman said, "is that he won't come clean on this Iran-contra business."

Mr. Spayde replied, "Has nothing to do with it."

"Yes it does," Mr. Dieleman countered. "It shows he isn't a leader. If he was, he'd have come clean."

"Iran-contra's peanuts," said Mr. Faulkner. "It's the deficit that matters, and the trade problem. Bush has sat by while we've worked ourselves into a hole, and he'll pay for that."

Most of the men agreed that Mr. Dole appealed to them because he came from nearby Kansas. But regional feeling did not count for as much among the Democrats in the group; they were evenly divided between Representative Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri, whose border is only 50 miles from here, and Gov. Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusetts, a man from another planet, culturally speaking. No one spoke up for another small-town Midwesterner, Senator Paul Simon of Makanda, Ill. Adultery and Gorbachev

Mr. Langkamp said he had backed Gary Hart until he pulled out of the race last spring after he was accused of a dalliance with a Miami model. He had abandoned the former Colorado Senator, Mr. Langkamp said, not because of his alleged adultery but because he withdrew so quickly in the face of criticism.

"I asked myself whether a man who quit that way would stand up to Gorbachev," the undertaker said. "Not likely, so I don't support him now."

"To tell you the truth," said Fred Koogler, a former Democratic State Senator, "I don't hear a whole lot about anyone. Carter drew big crowds here in '76, but this has been a quiet year."

All the candidates have come to Oskaloosa in the last year, hoping to score a victory or at least a surprise in Iowa's precinct caucuses on Feb. 8. They and their television commercials have had some impact, and so have the words of national and local political commentators. No Chance of Winning

Mr. Gephardt's assertion that he would look after the farmers and Mr. Dukakis's claims of credit for the economic "miracle" in his home state find their echoes here in frigid southeastern Iowa.

Former Gov. Pete du Pont of Delaware and former Gov. Bruce Babbitt of Arizona, unknown here a year ago, have impressed people, too, but many who might otherwise vote for them say they won't because the analysts say they have no chance of winning.

Oskaloosa, named for an Indian maiden, is a courthouse town of about 10,000 people tucked into the dark, rich plains between the Des Moines and Skunk rivers. It is a shopping magnet for a five-county region and a small center of manufacturing, with a valve factory, a corn syrup works and a big plant making aluminum windows. Wyatt Earp was born 15 miles north of here, and John L. Lewis, the labor leader, about 60 miles to the southwest. The Republicans usually carry Mahaska County - it is named for an Indian chief whose bronze statue stands in the town square -but they do not carry it by very much.

The population is almost all white, mostly German and Dutch in ethnic origin. The only noticeable minorities are the Laos and Vietnamese who came here in the 1970's, one of whom was the place-kicker on the high school football team last year. Most people live in white frame houses and bungalows, simply but comfortably. The Robertson Factor

Oskaloosa is typical of Iowa, with an aging population fascinated by the world but very wrapped up in what happens here. John Eberline, editor of The Oskaloosa Herald, said the most popular radio program in town is a daily obituary broadcast at lunchtime.

Like the state as whole, Oskaloosa is a place where religion is taken seriously. It has 30-odd churches - Quaker, Methodist, Baptist, Mormon, Nazarene, Disciples of Christ and many others. One of the shopping malls is called Atpic, an acronym for "All things possible in Christ."

Outsiders are struck by the warm nature of the local people. Jack Armstrong, a Gephardt organizer from Texas, said the other day, "Politics here are very clean, very open, no deals, no acrimony - not at all like they are at home."

But an unaccustomed element has been introduced this time: the candidacy of Pat Robertson. None of the old political hands hereabouts is quite sure what to expect a week from Monday from the Virginia Republican, especially in light of the large pool of evangelical Christians from which he could draw support. Both Races Tight

Joleen Iburg and her husband, Kenneth, who own a motel here, are the town's most visible Robertson workers. Mrs. Iburg praises Mr. Robertson's opposition to abortion, his support for school prayer and his hostility to all negotiation with the Soviet Union. She is a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, but she says Oskaloosa churches have played no role in the Robertson campaign. Indeed, she says the news media are "trying to wreck" her candidate by calling him, wrongly, in her view, a television evangelist.

Dr. Ronald Wilson, a professor at Vennard College, a tiny, conservative Bible school east of town, says the Robertson forces are doing all they can to play down the religious angle because of resistance among Iowans to the mingling of church and state. But Dr. Wilson, an evangelical who supports Mr. Dole, insisted that "nearly everyone involved with Robertson in Oskaloosa is a very church-oriented person." He expects the Virginian to run a close third behind Mr. Dole and Mr. Bush.

Both the Republican and Democratic races may, in fact, be very tight, not least because none of the candidates seems to have established a consistent profile in voters' minds.

Take Mr. Simon, for example. Mrs. Margaret Collison, a cultivated, silver-haired physician's wife who has somehow managed to remain one of Oskaloosa's most active Democrats while raising 11 children, sees in the Illinois senator "a certain real, old-time integrity." Down at the Elks Club, Earl Johnson, a retired school teacher, said he was for Mr. Simon because the Senator had promised 100 percent employment. But two friends, Phil James and Ivan Hankins, ridiculed Mr. Simon by comparing him to Mortimer Snerd, Edgar Bergen's hayseed puppet, and Pee Wee Herman, the bow-tied comedian.

If any candidate could convince folks here that he could produce a genuine agricultural revival, he would probably sweep Mahaska County, because the whole area depends, ultimately, on the farms whose lofty silos punctuate the horizon like prairie cathedrals. The big landowners are doing well, but not the family farmers; Sheriff Joe Beal, a Democrat, says grimly that he is called upon every month "to throw people off the land that I've known since I was a boy."

But neither he nor anyone else has spotted a farm savior thus far.