

THE FORGOTTEN CANDIDATE:

Omar B. Ketchum and the Senate Race of 1936

by Shane N. Galentine

THE NATIONAL AND STATEWIDE ELECTIONS of 1936 provided Kansans with an intrinsically interesting and entertaining spectacle. For the first time in the history of the Sunflower State, Kansas residents were presented with the phenomenon of two Kansans vying for the American presidency, as well as the opportunity to pass judgment upon some newcomers and a number of veteran officeholders who were seeking reelection. In addition to the numerous political rivalries that intensified during this election year, Kansans were confronted with the devastating effects of severe drought and of a nationwide economic depression of unprecedented severity. Although political and economic turmoil was nothing new to the residents of Kansas, the circumstances and events of the year 1936 represented a challenge to the Kansas electorate which, in terms of long-range repercussions, were unparalleled in the history of the state.

The individual who captured the most attention then was Alfred M. Landon, governor of Kansas and the 1936 presidential nominee of the Republican party. The only Republican governor to be reelected in the United States in the Democratic landslide of 1934, Landon had gained a national reputation as the chief executive who had managed to balance his state's budget. His supporters portrayed him as an unassuming, forthright individual who could restore fiscal integrity and an element of "old-fashioned common sense" to the

policies and practices of the federal government. Although some seasoned political observers predicted the eventual failure of Landon's presidential bid, there were many Kansans who believed that their governor had a realistic chance of being elected to the office of President. The Landon candidacy provided, at any rate, a rallying point for the state's other Republican candidates and evoked from fellow Kansans feelings of pride and interest during the closing months of 1936.¹

Less well known or remembered is the other Kansan who made a bid for the presidency in 1936. He was the unorthodox Earl Browder. A native of Wichita, Browder held the dubious distinction of being the presidential nominee of the American Communist party in the 1936 election. He was unable to inspire the Kansas masses (Browder failed to garner a single vote in his home state), and he represented nothing more than an electoral oddity of which few Kansans were proud.²

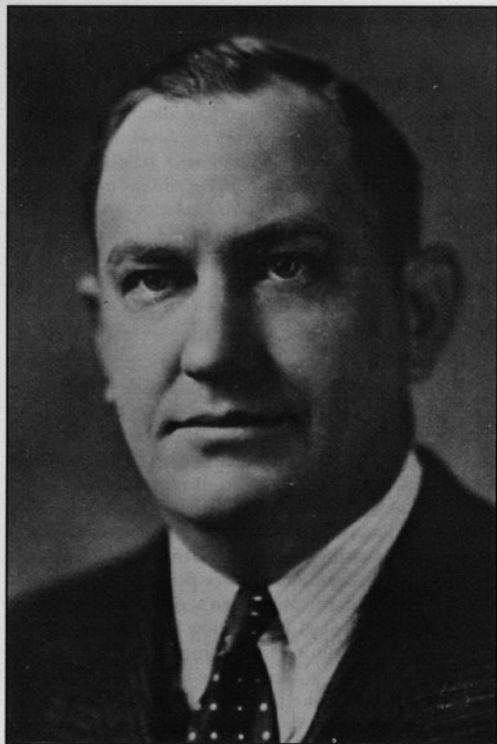
Although the Landon candidacy was an unusually noteworthy event in the annals of Kansas history and a political phenomenon inherently worthy of the scholarly attention that it has been paid, one must not overlook the number of significant election battles that took place within the boundaries of the state during 1936. The outcome of many of those statewide races had a much more direct and prolonged effect upon Kansas citizens than did the failure of Governor Landon's presidential bid.

The state's senior senator, Arthur Capper, was up for reelection, and by 1936, Capper had established a reputation among his fellow Kansans as a steadfast,

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1. Francis W. Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil, 1930-1936* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 188-214.

2. *Ibid.*, 201.



Omar B. Ketchum

durable politician who was dedicated to maintaining the well-being of his constituents. The senator's popularity among the voters seemed secure at the beginning of the election year, but Capper never was one to take a political campaign lightly. He approached the 1936 race with the cautious optimism that characterized his fundamental outlook on partisan political activity.³

Capper's Democratic opponent was Omar B. Ketchum, a man who played a significant role in Kansas politics during the early and mid-1930s. Although the highest office Ketchum ever held was that of mayor of Topeka, he managed to emerge as a major force within the ranks of the Democratic party during the time. A brief account of Ketchum's business and political career illustrates the determined and intense nature of this man and of his campaign for the U. S. Senate in 1936.

Ketchum was born in Hardy, Arkansas, on January 22, 1899. Most of his childhood years were spent in Galena, Kansas, and Sarcoux, Missouri. It is likely that he became well acquainted with numerous workers and gained an understanding of the problems of labor while growing up in these towns, since they are located in the heart of the mining region of southeastern Kansas and southwestern Missouri, respectively. Omar's father, Joel Bartlett Ketchum, was himself a miner. Although he attended the high schools of both Galena and Topeka, Kansas, Omar Ketchum never graduated. While in high school he began to polish his oratorical style by participating in school debate activities. He learned much about public speaking from a set of books he purchased through the mail. In April 1917, Ketchum enlisted in Company A, 110th Engineers, of the U.S. Army, and during the First World War he served in Europe with the 35th Division until he was discharged in 1919. Ketchum received battle wounds while in both the Argonne Forest and the Alsace-Lorraine regions of France. His regiment was honored for bravery.⁴

From 1919 to 1931, Ketchum became identified with various aspects of the printing business in Topeka, working as a compositor, linotype operator, and proofreader, and as foreman, manager, and mechanical superintendent for several different employers. During these years Ketchum was also an active participant in the affairs of local labor unions. He served several consecutive terms as president of the local Typographical Union and as a delegate and executive board member of the Central Trades and Labor Council. For two years Ketchum contributed to a labor column which was printed in the *Topeka Daily Capital*. As a result of his weekly speeches, broadcast by station WIBW as part of a labor program, Ketchum, during the 1920s, came to be known as the "Voice of Labor" in Topeka and the surrounding area.⁵

Ketchum's rise to a position of political prominence was rapid and calculated. He was first elected mayor of Topeka in 1931. This electoral success came immediately after he completed his final term as president of the local Typographical Union. He achieved reelection in 1933, and, by the end of his mayoral tenure in 1935, could boast of a highly successful record as a civic administrator. Among his numerous accomplishments as mayor, Ketchum had brought about a substantial reduction in Topeka's municipal debt, developed a public works program that

4. *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 26, 1963; Thomas Ketchum, phone interview with author, October 15, 1989.

5. Biographical sketch, Omar B. Ketchum Papers, Collection 37, box 2, Manuscripts Department, Kansas State Historical Society [hereafter referred to as Ketchum Papers, KSHS]; Thomas Ketchum interview.

3. Homer E. Socolofsky, *Arthur Capper: Publisher, Politician, and Philanthropist* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1962), 176.



Omar Ketchum (front row, third from left) worked in Topeka's printing trade from 1919 to 1931, eventually serving as president of Topeka Typographical Union No. 121. He is shown in this 1930 photograph with others who served as president of that local.

helped keep unemployment in the city to a minimum, and modernized Topeka's police department. Although these achievements were not mentioned at the time of the 1936 campaign, they undoubtedly had helped Ketchum build a reputation in the 1930s as a skilled and experienced public administrator. Ketchum's landslide victory in 1933 further enhanced his status within the Democratic party as an attractive and marketable candidate. In 1934 he won the Democratic nomination for governor, but lost the general election to Republican incumbent Alf M. Landon by 62,153 votes out of 781,907 cast. Of course, Ketchum was unable to bring to his 1936 senatorial campaign the political experience that Senator Capper possessed. Ketchum, however, was twenty-nine years younger than Capper, and his robust countenance and youthful vigor proved to be important strengths that the senator did not have.⁶

6. Biographical sketch, Ketchum Papers, KSHS; John W. Partin, "Senator Arthur Capper, 1936-1941," (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1973), v; Walt Markley, *Builders of Topeka* (Topeka: Capper Printing Co., 1934), 137; *75th Anniversary Souvenir Topeka Typographical Union No. 121, 1882-1957* (No impr.); Secretary of State, *Twenty-Ninth Biennial Report, 1933-1934* (Topeka: State Printer, 1934), 100-1.

Prior to facing Capper, Ketchum had the task of defeating three opponents in the Democratic primary. One opponent was Bob George, a twenty-nine-year-old farmer and stockman from Lebo, who engaged in very little active campaigning. Then there was John H. Arnett, a resident of the northeastern Kansas community of Williamstown, who endorsed the Frazier-Lemke farm mortgage refinance bill, the concept of complete control by the government of the Federal Reserve System, and old-age pensions for those over sixty years of age. Arnett was the only one of the three who had previously conducted a political campaign; in 1934 he had been the Democratic nominee for Congress from the First District. Lastly, there was Dempster Potts, a lawyer from Wichita, who advocated implementation of the Townsend Old-Age Pension Plan, a popular social welfare scheme of the 1930s that proposed paying two hundred dollars per month to each senior citizen.⁷

Beginning with the primary campaign, Ketchum's continuing theme was support for New Deal policies

7. *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 31, June 3, June 19, July 26, 1936.

and derision for those who condemned Roosevelt but offered no substitute to his programs. As part of an address delivered to Shawnee County Young Democrats on May 6, Ketchum severely criticized those in Congress who had supported New Deal legislation in the past and then condemned the spending policies of the Roosevelt Administration during the early months of the 1936 campaign.⁸ This charge was an obvious criticism of the recent behavior of Senator Capper and it eventually became the basis around which Ketchum centered his attack against his Republican opponent. By accusing Capper of hypocrisy after the senator's recent chastisement of massive deficit spending by the Roosevelt Administration, Ketchum was able to expose an inherent contradiction in Capper's campaign.

Early on, Ketchum introduced a second tactic that came to be utilized repeatedly throughout the course of his campaign. Well aware of Franklin Roosevelt's personal popularity among Kansans, Ketchum frequently attempted to align himself with the policies and philosophies of the incumbent presidential administration as a means of bolstering his own attractiveness with the voters.⁹

During the primary, Ketchum felt the need to respond to the popular platform advocated by his opponent Dempster Potts. In a speech delivered on July 30 in Potts' hometown of Wichita, Ketchum criticized the currently popular old-age pension plans, particularly the Townsend plan, that were based upon untested theories. He argued that a more reasonable form of pension plan should be sought, one that could be implemented quickly and effectively. Ketchum stated that any attempt to implement current theoretical plans concerning the social welfare of the aged would result in endless bickering between politicians and their constituents over specific goals and methods. He offered no specific solution of his own to the problem of senior citizen benefits, but he pledged that if he were elected to the U. S. Senate, he would "fight for an old age pension that would close poorhouses and give old people a respectable living, and at the same time be within the means of those who must pay the bill." Completing his attack upon the Townsend plan that was strongly favored by Potts, Ketchum declared once again that he unhesitatingly supported the record of President Roosevelt as well as the planks of the national Democratic party platform.¹⁰

Ketchum scored a decisive victory over all opponents in the Democratic primary election. By capturing 103,083 votes he easily outdistanced his strongest

competitor, Dempster Potts, who polled only 31,717 votes. Bob George received 10,170 votes and John Arnett, 6,451. Of the four candidates, Arnett spent the largest amount of money on his campaign, \$457. Ketchum spent \$381.¹¹

In the August 7 edition of the *Topeka Daily Capital*, Ketchum issued a statement of thanks to the voters. The Democratic nominee cited what he interpreted to be the unusually large number of Democratic ballots cast as proof that Kansans approved of the New Deal and wanted to retain the current Democratic administration in office. Ketchum predicted that thousands of Kansas Republicans would support President Roosevelt's candidacy at the polls in November and, thus, help place the state's nine electoral votes in the Democratic column at the general election.¹²

Omar Ketchum wasted little time after the primary election to start his drive to win the fall campaign. On August 19 he passed through the state capital, riding along with the "Roosevelt Caravan," which consisted of a large campaign trailer sent by the Democratic National Committee to various states as part of the effort to reelect Roosevelt. Local Democratic politicians were allowed to travel in the trailer and promote their own candidacies as the vehicle progressed from town to town. For approximately one week, starting on August 19, Ketchum began the task of taking his candidacy to the people by accompanying the Caravan as it followed U.S. Highway 40 west from Topeka to the Colorado border. The Democratic senatorial nominee made full use of this opportunity for exposure by speaking at each town along the Caravan's route.¹³

None of the campaigning by motor vehicle could have been easy or pleasurable for Ketchum or any of the other candidates who were out "stumping" the state. The summer of 1936 was agonizingly severe. August temperatures skyrocketed to incredible heights of 115, 117, and even 120 degrees Fahrenheit in numerous towns throughout the state.¹⁴ Nor did temperatures drop substantially as September arrived. In a day when air conditioning was virtually unheard of, constant travel from one campaign site to the next must have been an enervating experience. The condition of Kansas roads at this time also intensified the burden assumed by indefatigable campaigners such as Omar Ketchum. In 1936 most highways in Kansas were still gravel surfaced.¹⁵

11. Kansas Secretary of State, *Thirtieth Biennial Report, 1935-1936* (Topeka: State Printer, 1936), 30-31; *Wichita Eagle*, September 4, 1936.

12. *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 7, 1936.

13. *Ibid.*, August 20, 1936.

14. *Ibid.*, August 10, 11, 12, September 6, 7, 1936; *The WPA Guide to 1930s Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), *passim*; *Wichita Eagle*, September 8, 1936.

8. *Ibid.*, May 7, 1936.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, July 31, 1936.

Unfortunately for Ketchum, the chief means available to him for presenting his case to the voters was that of driving about the state, making as many public appearances as time would permit. Referring to this situation, Ketchum remarked early in the campaign that he "must ride under the blazing prairie sun of Kansas, for hundreds of miles" to carry his message to the people.¹⁵

Ketchum officially began his fall campaign by making a brief speech at a Labor Day picnic in Louisburg. The Democratic nominee characterized Capper's extensive use of his privately owned publications and radio station for campaign purposes as exploitation of the senator's candidacy. He also spoke out against Capper's recent criticisms of excessive relief spending on the part of the Roosevelt Administration. The senator, according to Ketchum, was guilty of hypocrisy on this score because he had supported most New Deal legislative enactments that provided for the allocation of relief funds. In an attempt to discredit

Republican candidates in general and his Republican opponent in particular, Ketchum reminded his audience of the desperate economic plight in which the nation found itself during the Hoover Administration. Praising Roosevelt for putting people back to work and for bringing about a substantial increase in national income, Ketchum concluded by asking his listeners to disregard party allegiance and vote Democratic if they felt that they were better off than they had been three and one-half years earlier.¹⁶

This address was, in a number of ways, characteristic of Ketchum's campaign speeches. In most of his speeches the Democratic nominee severely criticized Capper for what Ketchum believed was a hypocritical criticism of New Deal policies supported previously by Capper in the U.S. Senate. He also stated that Capper maintained a double standard when he attempted to obtain more federal funds for the state after having condemned the spending excesses of the New Deal

15. *Louisburg Herald*, September 10, 1936.

16. *Ibid.*

THIS IS
STATION O-M-A-R
operating on a New Deal frequency, up-to-date kilocycles,
station soon to be located "Under the Dome" of the state
capitol. Join in dedication of this station by singing.

Parade—THE WALKS OF NEW YORK—By I. E. H.
K.E.T.: U.S. the man.
We'll cast our vote for Omar, he's for the Roosevelt plan.
New Deal means a Square Deal, with work for everyone.
Let's clean out the state house, GOP is on the run.

K.A.N.S. Kansas Sunflower State.
Vote for Omar Ketchum, with a platform up to date.
Give the State cheap school books, but the school book trust.
Ketchum means a square deal, he is honest, he is just.

Parade—TUNE, WE'RE FROM KANSAS—I. E. H.
We're for Ketchum, O. Omar Ketchum,
Fair and square, a heart of gold.
A man who knows our troubles and will C him smile,
That's the reason why we're for him all the while.
Ketchum for Governor, Ketchum for Governor,
We'll be true to you.
Ketchum, GOVERNOR, We'll vote for YOU.

Parade—TUNE, LET ME CALL YOU SWEETHEART—I. E. H.
Let's vote for OMAR KETCHUM, he is clean true blue,
A man who knows our troubles and will C us through.
When you vote for Ketchum you have laid a plan,
I'll be your head's a workin',
He's a Real Man's Man.

OMAR for Sunny Kansas, dear old Sunflower State,
He's for the common people, doesn't use A SLATE.
He's a World War Buddy, fights for what is fair,
Let's VOTE FOR OMAR KETCHUM, cause he's on the Square.

KETCHUM for GOVERNOR

**KETCHUM
for GOVERNOR**

KETCHUM for GOVERNOR

EFFICIENCY

programs. As Ketchum told a Young Democrats group in Wichita on September 21, "Senator Capper is the only man in the world who can ride a donkey and an elephant at the same time, with each going in an opposite direction."¹⁷

Ketchum also attacked Senator Capper on a much more personal level. He constantly reminded his listeners of Capper's advanced age and contended that since the senator had held positions of high elective office for more than twenty years he had received more than his share of financial compensation from the government. Ketchum argued that since Capper believed that every working person should retire when he or she reached the age of sixty, the senator should follow his own advice and withdraw his candidacy for reelection. He believed that it was time to replace Arthur Capper with an officeholder who, although inexperienced, could function from a different perspective and inject new ideas into the legislative process.¹⁸

Ketchum used the national campaign for the presidency as a secondary theme in his fall speeches. He stated that the presidential race was not a contest between the Republican and Democratic nominees for the office, or even a struggle between Democrats and Republicans in general. In Ketchum's opinion, the presidential campaign of 1936 provided the voters with the opportunity of choosing between two distinct theories of government. He described the New Deal, espoused by the followers of Franklin Roosevelt, as a theory based upon the concept that human rights were of greater consequence than property rights. According to proponents of this philosophy, the federal government had the right to make use of financial credit as a means of alleviating human suffering and misery. Ketchum thus attempted to justify the massive spending undertaken by the Democratic administration by emphasizing to his audiences the humanitarian aspect of the New Deal programs.¹⁹

To Ketchum, the other theory of government was that advocated by members of the Republican party. Speaking in disparaging terms of this opposing theory, he said that the basic tenets of this philosophy provided for a society in which each individual would be responsible for his or her own welfare. Ketchum referred to this theory as the "root hog or die theory" and described it as "that theory of the DuPonts and the Morgans and Hoover that believes that those of special privilege may loot and plunder the weak."²⁰

Ketchum's speeches were written in a style that differed significantly from the approach utilized in Capper's campaign speeches. The addresses delivered by the Democratic nominee lacked the polish of the Capper speeches. Ketchum's style was remarkably blunt, even belligerent at times. In one particular instance, Ketchum attacked the motives behind the fiscal policies of the Hoover Administration and he derogatorily referred to former President Hoover as "Herbie." Unlike Capper, Ketchum severely criticized his political opponent throughout the texts of his campaign speeches. In an address delivered in Winfield on September 18, the Democratic nominee nastily remarked that Capper was no friend to Kansas farmers because he had "been feeding them China eggs." Within the text of this same speech, Ketchum characterized certain phases of Capper's senatorial actions as "silly and ridiculous."²¹ Although the basic ideas articulated by Ketchum in these speeches may have been well received by many in his audiences, it is doubtful that the specific words he used to express them were regarded by all listeners as flattering to his candidacy. Additionally, when Ketchum leveled the charge that Capper was not a friend of the farmer, failing to successfully sponsor a single piece of farm legislation,²² he displayed either a tendency to ignore the truth or an unbelievable ignorance of Capper's career.

Most of Ketchum's campaign speeches were relatively brief. Because of the intense pace at which he moved about the state, it was impossible for him to remain at any one campaign site long. Ketchum visited a large number of Kansas towns during his fall campaign. As early as mid-September he was speaking in six towns per day during the course of several consecutive days. Indeed, the energy level exhibited by Ketchum during the final six weeks of his campaign was extraordinary.²³

Ironically, Ketchum, the so-called "Voice of Labor" in eastern Kansas, failed to receive the endorsement of any labor unions within the state. As a result of the longtime support Capper had given the labor movement in Congress, his candidacy received the endorsement of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, the

21. *Wichita Eagle*, October 11, 1936; *Winfield Daily Courier*, September 19, 1936. Traditionally, a china egg was a device used to prevent the entanglement of threads while darning a garment. The term also refers to artificial eggs placed under a hen to encourage the laying of eggs. Ketchum appears to have meant, in a figurative sense, that Capper had been giving Kansas farmers only a feeling of being helped, but not the real thing.

22. *Winfield Daily Courier*, September 19, 1936; *Meade Globe-News*, October 8, 1936.

23. *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 20, September 12, 16, 1936; Partin, "Senator Arthur Capper," 12.

17. *Wichita Eagle*, September 22, 1936.

18. *Ibid.*; *Winfield Daily Courier*, September 19, 1936; *Hutchinson Record*, September 18, 1936.

19. *Hutchinson Record*, September 18, 1936.

20. *Ibid.*



A World War I veteran, Ketchum was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and after his 1936 defeat became a national officer for that organization.



Omar Ketchum, a viable candidate for senator, provided in the 1930s one of the Kansas voices supporting New Deal policies.

Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, the Brotherhood of Boiler Makers, the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, the Brotherhood of Railroad Signal Men, the Brotherhood of Blacksmiths, the Kansas State Federation of Labor, and the Combined Building Trades Council. Although Ketchum failed to win the official support of these organizations, he in all likelihood benefited from isolated pockets of union support across the state.²⁴

The failure of the local chapter of the Typographical Union to endorse the Ketchum candidacy requires explanation. Although Ketchum had been president of this organization from 1927 through 1931 and its delegate to the International Typographical Union Convention of 1930, the allegiance of the chapter lay with Capper who had been associated with the printing business in Topeka since 1884. Capper frequently had advised the Topeka Typographical Union No. 121 membership during times of difficult negotiations with employers. The high regard in which many chapter

members held Capper was summed up in a statement printed in a pamphlet upon the occasion of the chapter's seventy-fifth anniversary: "... to the members of Topeka Typographical Union No. 121 he [Capper] is fondly thought of as a brother printer, employer and friend."²⁵ It must be kept in mind that Ketchum may have received support at the polls from rank and file members of Local No. 121, even though its leaders failed to endorse the Democratic nominee officially.²⁶

During the final weeks of October, Ketchum continued the aggressive drive begun the preceding month. He repeatedly charged Capper with hypocrisy, and Ketchum's chances for victory were boosted by Roosevelt's efforts to carry the home state of his Republican rival. As a means of achieving this objective, the Democratic campaign organization undertook a

25. 75th Anniversary Souvenir Topeka Typographical Union No. 121, 34-35.

26. Interestingly, Ketchum carried Shawnee County by 1,587 votes out of 39,709 cast. Although the margin of victory was narrow, it is unlikely that he could have accomplished this without carrying much of Topeka's sizeable labor vote. For voting results see Secretary of State, *Thirtieth Biennial Report*, 133, 189.

24. *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 9, 1936; Partin, "Senator Arthur Capper," 14; Socolofsky, *Arthur Capper*, 178.

massive publicity drive throughout the state urging citizens to vote the straight Democratic ticket.²⁷

The Democrats created one particularly striking newspaper advertisement to encourage this voting option. Entitled "Forward With Courage and Confidence," this advertisement featured a large picture of Roosevelt in the center of the page, with smaller pictures of Omar Ketchum and Democratic gubernatorial nominee, Walter Huxman, positioned on either side. Underneath Ketchum's photograph were the words, "When you Vote for Roosevelt Vote for Ketchum for U.S. Senator." A list of Ketchum's strengths as a candidate was printed below this main slogan. One of the items contained in the list was the promise that the Democratic nominee would, if elected, "Support the National Administration all years, including election years." This statement was an obvious reference to Capper's about-face concerning the merits and weaknesses of New Deal policies and legislation. Because of its large size, this advertisement hardly could have gone unnoticed by anyone who glanced at the newspapers in which it appeared.²⁸

The extent to which Ketchum relied upon the popularity of the Democratic President as a means of drawing attention to his own candidacy for the Senate cannot be overemphasized. As the fall campaign intensified, Ketchum continued to travel about the state in the trailer, the "Roosevelt Caravan." Ornamented with campaign propaganda designed to promote only the reelection bid of President Roosevelt, Ketchum's own candidacy failed to receive recognition on the very vehicle in which he was campaigning.²⁹

At one point in the campaign, however, the Democratic nominee made a major mistake in riding upon the Roosevelt "grave train." In mid-October, President Roosevelt made a triumphant whistle-stop train tour through the state. He delivered speeches at nearly a half-dozen Kansas towns and was very well received at each stop along his route. This festive event was marred for Kansas Democrats by the rift that developed between Ketchum and his Democratic colleague George S. McGill, the state's junior senator. Inexplicably, they disputed one another's right to occupy on the train the seat of honor beside the President, and the situation was exacerbated when news of it reached members of the press.³⁰

Since Roosevelt failed to endorse Ketchum at any of the Kansas towns where he spoke, it seems reasonable to

assume that Ketchum's provocative behavior had irritated him. Ketchum's candidacy may have been harmed even more by an apologetic statement that he released to the public afterward. In the text of this statement, Ketchum said that he had thoroughly enjoyed accompanying the President on his journey across the state and that he was "not aggrieved nor angry" because he had not been allowed to introduce the President at any stop. Therefore, not only did Ketchum endure the humiliation of making a public apology when news of his abrasive behavior became widespread, but he had been denied a presidential endorsement.³¹

Ketchum brought his senatorial bid to a close on the night of November 2 at a massive Democratic rally held in Topeka's city auditorium. The rally included a torchlight procession and was a festive event, similar in most respects to a large meeting conducted by the Republicans in the same facility two days earlier. In his address the Democratic nominee again condemned Senator Capper's criticisms of New Deal policies, and he described presidential hopeful, Governor Landon, as a mindless candidate who only represented the concerns of large eastern business. Surprisingly, he expressed approval of certain aspects of the Townsend plan for senior citizen pensions. This was an endorsement that Ketchum had not undertaken during the course of his campaign.³²

When the official tally was completed, it was announced that Ketchum had lost to Senator Capper. The margin was 396,685 votes to 417,873; this was the closest margin of victory that Capper experienced in any of his campaigns for election to the Senate. Capper, however, had fared significantly better than Kansas' Republican presidential candidate. Roosevelt carried Kansas by a comfortable margin, defeating Landon 464,520 votes to 397,727; Landon lost his home county, Montgomery, by seven votes.³³

After the election, Ketchum wrote to Capper and stated that he was confident that the senator's past support of New Deal legislation had helped to bring about his success at the polls. He expressed his sincere wish that Capper would continue to assist Roosevelt's recovery program in the Senate during the coming years. It seems ironic that Ketchum would write such remarks that were sure to be made public, especially since his entire campaign had focused upon the issue of Capper's voting record and his later rejection of many New Deal policies.³⁴

27. *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 30, 1936; Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil*, 202.

28. *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 30, 1936; *Wichita Eagle* (morning), October 30, 1936.

29. *Hutchinson Record*, September 18, 1936; *Meade County Press*, October 1, 1936; Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil*, 210.

30. *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 21, 1936.

31. *Ibid.*, October 21, 1936.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Kansas Secretary of State, *Thirtieth Biennial Report, 1935-1936*, 130-33; Socolofsky, *Arthur Capper*, 178.

34. *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 7, 1936.

Some of the circumstances of Ketchum's candidacy remain unclear to this day. He failed to receive any significant assistance in his campaign from members of the Democratic hierarchy within the state. One can only speculate about the motives that prompted Democratic leaders to ignore their party's senatorial nominee. In 1936, Ketchum may have been regarded as a political "loser" by Democratic officials because he had lost the gubernatorial race in the 1934 Democratic landslide. This in itself may have convinced high level Democrats that the former Topeka mayor was incapable of running a successful campaign for the Senate, particularly when the opposing candidate was the venerable Arthur Capper. In all likelihood, they believed that it was a waste of time and effort to work on behalf of Ketchum's candidacy.

The rivalry that traditionally existed between the Topeka and Wichita factions of the state Democratic party also may have played a role in the decision not to wholeheartedly support Ketchum. During the 1930s, Sen. George S. McGill, Harry Woodring, and Guy T. Helvering were three of the most powerful and influential Democrats in Kansas. All three were associated with Wichita and may well have resented Ketchum and his Topeka power base. Or, Guy T. Helvering may have been more concerned with electing Democratic nominee Walter Huxman to the office of governor, as a means of securing control of state patronage for his party. Thus, Ketchum's bid for the Senate may have been a matter of secondary importance to Helvering. It is also likely, as Francis Schruben has suggested, that Democratic party leaders were displeased with Ketchum's union membership as a linotype operator and that his allegiance as a veteran of World War I lay with the Veterans of Foreign Wars instead of the more popular American Legion.³⁵ While these suggestions remain to be proven, they are viable reasons for Ketchum's lack of party support and his ultimate loss.

Ketchum may have been at least partly responsible for the Democratic hierarchy's disaffection. It is possible that Ketchum previously had alienated officials at the national level. During his 1934 gubernatorial campaign, he had traveled to Washington in hopes of consulting with Roosevelt. For some unknown reason, the President snubbed Ketchum then. Roosevelt's later refusal during his 1936 tour of Kansas to endorse the senatorial nominee adds credence to the suspicion that Ketchum had been ostracized by leading members of his own party.³⁶

There seems to be a consensus of opinion among observers and students of this election that Roosevelt

made a grievous error when he failed to endorse Ketchum. According to Dutch Schultz of the *Topeka State Journal*, "Just a wee smile and a pat and a good word from President Roosevelt during his Kansas visit would have sent Omar Ketchum to the United States Senate." Landon stated that Ketchum could have possibly beaten Capper if "President Roosevelt had ever looked his way once when he crossed the state." The closeness of the vote tends to confirm these observations.³⁷

Yet, it seems reasonable that the Roosevelt Administration may have wanted Senator Capper to triumph over Ketchum. Throughout Roosevelt's initial term, Capper had been a steadfast supporter of many legislative proposals brought before the Senate by the Democratic administration. In August of 1936, Roosevelt had issued a special invitation to Senator Capper to attend his conference with governors of several midwestern states for the purpose of discussing the current drought crisis. The President obviously valued Capper's previous endorsements of New Deal legislation and may well have preferred that Capper retain his seat in the U. S. Senate. Although Ketchum was a fellow Democrat, his loyalty to Roosevelt and his policies remained untested at that time.³⁸

Evidence from another source indicates, however, that the unpleasant treatment Ketchum received from his Democratic colleagues may not have originated with President Roosevelt. During a recent interview, Ketchum's youngest son confirmed the existence of an anti-Ketchum faction within the national ranks of the Democratic party at the time of the 1936 campaign. According to Thomas Ketchum, Roosevelt's campaign manager James Farley resented Omar Ketchum personally and refused to assist him in his bid for the U.S. Senate. Farley was one of Roosevelt's most trusted advisors and it is likely that his negative feelings toward Ketchum strongly influenced the attitude and behavior of the President toward the Democratic Senate nominee. The extent to which this animosity dominated the attitude of Democratic officials at the national level is revealed in the fact that Ketchum was asked to leave the presidential train in Kansas after he quarrelled with Senator McGill over seating arrangements.³⁹

It is important to note that this anti-Ketchum sentiment did not filter down to leaders of the state Democratic party. Thomas Ketchum related that his

37. Ibid., 213; Partin, "Senator Arthur Capper," 16, citing *Topeka State Journal*, November 19, 1936.

38. Socolofsky, *Arthur Capper*, 171-72, 174; *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 3, 1936.

39. Thomas Ketchum interview. For Farley see James A. Farley, *Jim Farley's Story: The Roosevelt Years* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1948), 58-67; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), 574, 579, 583, 586-87, 589, 592.

35. Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil*, 219; cited in Partin, "Senator Arthur Capper," 16, from *Topeka State Journal*, November 26, 1936.

36. Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil*, 143-44.

father and state party boss Guy T. Helvering always enjoyed an excellent working relationship. It appears that any amiable feelings within the state party toward Ketchum were overruled by national level Democrats during the 1936 campaign.⁴⁰

Ketchum never again ran for elective office. Although his opinions concerning political matters were still sought by Democratic colleagues within the state, he refused to play an active role in politics during the years he remained in Kansas. In 1941, Ketchum moved to Washington, D.C., and continued

his work with the Veterans of Foreign Wars, eventually becoming a national official. Ketchum never returned to Kansas to live. He died in 1963 at age sixty-four after a year-long battle with cancer.⁴¹ Although Ketchum never achieved high-office, he played a prominent role in the electoral process, contributing to the political dialogue within the state at a critical time in the history of Kansas and raising difficult issues with which his Republican opponent was forced to deal.

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40. Thomas Ketchum interview.

41. *Topeka Capital*, July 26, 1963; Donald R. McCoy, "Senator George S. McGill and the Election of 1938," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 4 (Spring 1981): 13, 17-18.