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They Also Ran (Stories of Past Elections)

By Jim Jones

Although the Democratic party has controlled West Chester politics since 2000, for more than a century before that, candidates endorsed by the Republican party dominated local elections. They won all but a handful of seats, but that didn't stop people from challenging them, both within and from outside of their party. Here are some of the highlights:

In 1949, a group calling itself the "Committee for the Preservation of the Christian Sabbath" urged voters to vote against changing the law to permit the showing of movies on Sunday in the Borough. They failed, but demonstrated that the Republican party was not the monolith that it claimed to be, at least in the Borough. Two years later, two-term Council member J. Herbert Bender (1942-1949) demonstrated it again by coming within 47 votes of Rudolph B. Weiler, the endorsed candidate for Borough Assessor, who won 1312 to 1265. Had the Democrats not run their own candidate, John T. Donnelly, his 607 votes could have easily altered the outcome.

In 1955, Republicans took all three Council races as W. Earl Thomas, Thomas Hoopes and George Baldwin Jr. defeated Louis Distefano, George Oakes and Francis M. Oakes. That was also the year that Anthony Stancato, father of the local developer, first won office as constable for the Borough. Four years later, Stancato won election as justice of the peace along with Earl Heald, defeating Democrats Joe Dunleavy and Frank Falcone.

Meanwhile, Democrat J. Herbert Chambers ran six times as a Democrat for mayor (called "burgess" until 1960) between 1949 and 1969. An electrician who ran unsuccessfully for state senator in 1944, Chambers lost five mayoral races to Republicans Gibbons Cornwell in 1949, Henry DeHaven in 1953, Charles Lucas Jr. in 1957, Lucas again in 1961, and Charles Andress in 1965. According to his widow, Alice Chambers, he ran in 1944 "to keep the two-party system alive," but his marriage made him part of the closest thing the Borough has ever seen to a Democratic dynasty. Alice was the daughter of builder Patrick Corcoran, who helped to revive the Democratic Party in Chester County around World War I. She served a term as secretary of the WCSC board of trustees, while her brother Henry lost a bid for County Commissioner in 1951, her husband eventually became mayor in 1969, her son won a seat on Council that year and succeeded his father as mayor in 1978, and her niece Pat Baldwin served a term as a Chester County Commissioner.

Meanwhile Republicans were building their own dynasties. Anthony Stancato (mentioned above) was appointed to the West Chester State College board of trustees and ran for mayor in 1969, while his son Anthony Jr. served as the chair of the local Republican committee at the end of the 1990s. Among the Republicans who defeated Herbert Chambers and his Democratic colleagues in 1957 was incumbent J. Dewees Mosteller and newcomer Dominic T. Marrone. Mosteller won his first term on Council in 1946 and remained there until his death in 1968, spending the last eight years as Council president. Marrone served less than a year before resigning to become the Borough solicitor, but then went on to become the solicitor for the County Republican party, an

assistant district attorney, a Common Pleas Court judge and eventually a County commissioner.

The most visible Republican dynasty got its start in 1965. Once again, Democrats ran unsuccessfully for Borough Council as Norman Bond, Sig Overgaard and Joseph Burkenstock lost to four incumbent Republicans: Bob Spaziani Sr., Ed Cotter, C. Harry Barber and George Baldwin Jr. But the Democrats also sent three candidates into the campaign for School Board -- Harriet Hulnick, Nancy Houston and Richard Welsh. Among the Republican winners was a West Chester State College professor named Elinor Z. Taylor.

Taylor was the daughter of the Borough's Recreation Director and, like another successful Republican named Dick Yoder, a graduate of the local high school and an athletic coach at the state college. She went on to serve a term on Borough Council (1974-77) before entering the state legislature for thirty years. During that period she ran unopposed through most of the 1990s, but began facing challengers from both her own party and the Democrats on a regular basis in 2000. Although the Republican challengers generally dropped out at the last minute, a succession of Democrats -- including Robin Garrett, Wayne Burton, Bob Hodies and Barbara McIlvaine Smith -- kept up the pressure until she retired, and McIlvaine Smith won the seat in 2006. Ironically, she defeated Shannon Royer, whom she replaced on West Chester's Borough Council, and went on to defeat Royer a second time in 2008.

If 2006 was a turning point -- Democrat Andrew Dinniman also won a perpetually Republican state senate seat -- three other elections produced payoffs for persistent Democrats. The first was in 1969 when Herbert Chambers won his sixth race for mayor, thanks in large part to the turmoil that resulted when Borough Council decided to demolish the historic Chester Street [Friends] meeting house for a parking garage in 1966. That spawned an opposition movement headed by Dr. Edgar R. Lawrence, who ran (and lost) as an unendorsed Republican in 1969. Meanwhile the Republican party withheld its support from its own incumbent mayor, Charles Address, and instead endorsed Anthony Stancato Sr. The Republicans also endorsed incumbent Council members J. Paul Mosteller, William Underwood and Edward Cotter, and newcomer Fred Beckett, the first African-American candidate for Council since the 19th century. The incumbents all won but Beckett lost, so Chambers was joined by his son Tom who became only the second Democrat to win a Council seat since 1913 (William E. Gilbert crossfiled as a Republican and Democrat in 1953). Ironically, the parking garage was eventually built two blocks to the east and named after J. Dewees Mosteller, a Republican.

Democrats scored two more victories in 1971 when Robert Cosgriff and Dallett Hemphill won Council seats. They nearly got a third, but Norman Bond lost by 15 votes to incumbent Republican, Robert Baldwin. With Tom Chambers, that gave the Democrats control over three of seven Council seats, but they never gained a majority. Instead they gradually lost ground during the 1970s and 1980s, until a second revolution took place in 1986. That year Wayne Burton, Richard Fazio, William Bowes and Ann Aerie joined incumbent Democrat Barry Wright on Council, while Tom Chambers reentered local politics for a second term as mayor. That left only two Republicans on Council, and the next election simply replaced them -- Kenneth Hagerty and Steven Handzel -- with two more -- Betty Loper and Patricia McIlvaine (Barbara McIlvaine-Smith's aunt). By 1990, Democrats controlled five of seven Council seats and the mayor (still Tom Chambers), but their hold on Borough government remained precarious in a town where

Republicans held the edge in registrations and fundraising, as well as control of County government and the WCU board of directors, two of the Borough's largest employers.

The 1992 election gave Betty Loper two new Republican allies on Council, Janet Colliton and Mary Zimmerman. The 1994 election saw the Republicans open what *Philadelphia Inquirer* writers Jeff Eckhoff and Lem Lloyd (December 12, 1993) called "the fattest wallets in this year's election campaign" to win the mayoral race when First National Bank director Clifford DeBaptiste outspent former Council member Wayne Burton by a six- to-one margin, and three more Council seats (former College Republican chair Shannon Royer, oil company owner Boyd Davis, and pharmaceutical executive Robert Whetstone). Royer's victory was particularly close -- he won by only ten votes -- and a harbinger of his narrow loss to Barbara McIlvaine Smith for state representative in 2006 by 28 votes. As a result, Republicans controlled Council throughout most of the 1990s, although Democrats managed to hold two seats at all times.

That all changed in 2000. Following a contentious campaign to increase rental property inspections that forced the Republican party into an alliance with out-of-town landlords, the election ended with three Democrats and three Republicans, plus a tie in Ward 2. The tie breaker sent Democrat Diane Lebold to Council (and Republican Constance Allen back to the Library Board), and launched a Democratic majority that has yet to dissipate. Since then, the only Republican to win a seat on Borough Council has been Norman Bond's son Steve, who lost the 2003 primary as a Democrat and then beat his opponent (Joe Norley) in the fall after switching parties.

Meanwhile the list of unsuccessful Republicans grew during the decade to include Patricia Kotsay, Bob Rodgers, Steve Bond (reelection), Thomas Schindler, Timothy Daniels, Peter Kulp, Judy Harris, Joyce Sanyour, Bill Mason, Nancy Seltzer, Michael Bacchini, Andrew Lehr, Rick Miller and Andrew Close. Only Dick Yoder's victories over Paul Fitzpatrick for mayor in 2001 and Jim Jones for mayor in 2005 gave the Republican party anything to celebrate, and even that came with a caveat. Fitzpatrick, who was already on Council, continued to serve six more years including four as Council president. Jones won Fitzpatrick's seat after term limits made him ineligible at the end of 2006, and continued to serve after Yoder had to leave office at the end of 2009.