



circa late 1850s.



Grand Master 1828

Sir Knight Thomas Corwin From 'Wagon Boy' to Grand Master and Buckeye Statesman ©

by **Sir Knight Ivan M. Tribe, K C T**

In the Jacksonian era, one of America's leading statesmen was Sir Knight Thomas Corwin. Of Kentucky birth, Tom came to Ohio with his parents at an early age and eventually became an acclaimed attorney and orator. Entering national politics as a Whig, he served in numerous elected and appointive offices eventually becoming Secretary of the Treasury. Along the way the one-time "Wagon Boy" served as Worshipful Master of his home lodge, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, and was knighted in the oldest Commandery in the Buckeye State.

Thomas Corwin was born in Bourbon County, Kentucky on July 29, 1794. His parents, Matthias and Patience Corwin, had a total of nine children and moved to Warren County, Ohio in 1798. Tom worked on the family farm as a youngster. Matthias Corwin, more than just a man of the soil, served in the General Assembly twelve times, two of them as Speaker of the House. Son Tom eventually served three times. An older brother, Moses B. Corwin,

eventually spent a couple of terms in the United States Congress. In 1812 when Tom was seventeen, the United States declared war on Great Britain. The youth worked as a wagon boy, moving military supplies for the army on the Ohio and Michigan frontier. This experience provided Corwin with the sobriquet "Wagon Boy" that he would carry throughout life. After the war, the young man studied law in Lebanon, Ohio, being apprenticed to Joshua Collett. His admittance to the bar came in 1817.

As a young barrister, Tom Corwin quickly gained a reputation for public speaking. In 1818, he became Prosecuting Attorney for Warren County, spending the next decade in this position representing the state in both petty and major criminal cases. Simultaneously, the "Wagon Boy" gained a reputation for "stump speeches" second to none in the Buckeye State, becoming especially noted for his satire and biting wit. While still holding the office of prosecutor, he also represented Warren County in the legislature for three one-year terms.

While building his name as a lawyer and orator, Thomas Corwin became a Mason in Lebanon Lodge No. 26, probably in 1819. According to the Grand Lodge of Ohio's website, he is reported to have served as Worshipful Master in 1820, 1821, 1824, and 1843. He was later exalted in Lebanon Chapter No. 5, Royal Arch Masons and knighted in Mount Vernon Commandery No. 1, Knights Templar in Columbus on January 13, 1826 at a time when Ohio had only two Commanderies. After serving as Master of Lebanon Lodge, Brother Corwin held the offices of Grand Orator in 1821 and 1826, Deputy Grand Master in 1823 and 1827, and ultimately M. W. Grand Master in 1828. According to Edwin Selby and Harvey Walker's History of Royal Arch Masonry in Ohio, 1816-1966, Companion Corwin also held offices in the Grand Chapter of Ohio, but they provide no details.

Meanwhile, during the decade he served as prosecutor and was active in Grand Lodge business, Brother Corwin courted and married Sarah Ross in 1822. The couple became the parents of five children. In later years an oft-told story relates that Corwin, an active Baptist, sent a son to Denison College in Granville, Ohio to attain higher education with instructions to diligently apply himself to his study. The son complained that the heavy academic work was taking a toll on his health to which the unsympathetic father replied: "I am informed that you are seriously injuring your health by study. Very few young men now-a-days are likely to be injured in this way, and if you should kill yourself by over study, it will give me great pleasure to attend your funeral." Apparently "tough love" has been around since the 1840s! Tom Corwin's biting wit was hardly confined solely to courtroom oratory and the speaking stump, but also in his household.

In 1830, having completed three terms in the General Assembly and a decade as prosecutor, Sir Knight Thomas Corwin began a national political career by seeking and winning a seat in the United States Congress from his southwest Ohio district. By that time the country's political divisions had evolved into what had become known as the second party system consisting of the Jacksonian Democrats and the National Republicans who changed their name to "Whigs" in 1833. Corwin identified with the latter party and usually closely allied himself with the ideas of Brother Henry Clay and his "American System," supporting a protective tariff to encourage industrialization, federally funded internal improvements, and a national bank to insure economic stability. According to tradition Clay, Corwin, and other prominent Whigs often held meetings to discuss political strategy at the famed Golden Lamb Tavern in the heart of downtown Lebanon, Ohio. During the decade of the 1830s, Tom Corwin won election to the Congress five times, earning a reputation as one of the most capable Whig orators. He was successful on two major issues to Buckeye voters. He secured continued funding for the National Road (later U. S. Route 40) and was also successful in

securing Ohio boundary claims in the "Toledo War," a dispute over the line between Ohio and Michigan Territory in 1836-1837.

With the country in economic depression following the panic of 1837, Whig hopes for state and national victory in the 1840 election rose to an all time high. The state convention nominated the "Wagon Boy" for governor. He campaigned tirelessly for himself and presidential candidate William Henry Harrison earning not only a dual victory but also receiving acclaim as the "most successful stump speaker of his time." Unfortunately, the "great Whig hope" was short lived. Harrison died after a month in office, and the new President John Tyler fell out with party leaders in cabinet and Congress. In Ohio Democrats ignored Corwin's proposed banking reforms "in a crisis of inaction" leaving the Governor in his own words with little to do but "appoint notaries public and pardon convicts in the penitentiary." This did, however, give Brother Corwin time to continue his lucrative law practice which provided a supplement to his \$1,500 annual salary. In 1842, when Corwin sought a second term, defections from Whig ranks by the anti-slavery Liberty Party cost him some 5,000 votes, and he suffered his only political defeat by a margin of 1,872.

In 1844, Whig fortunes in Ohio turned in their favor with Henry Clay winning the state and legislature sending Tom Corwin to the U. S. Senate once more giving the "Wagon Boy" a national base. During his five years in the Senate, Sir Knight Corwin achieved both his greatest fame (and also infamy in some circles) by his strong opposition to the Mexican War. Large numbers of Americans-especially in the northern states-viewed the conflict as a thinly veiled effort on the part of the Polk Administration to add slave territory to the Union. In what Ohio historian Thomas H. Smith called "probably the greatest antiwar speech given in the Senate" (at least prior to 1975), Corwin denounced the war on February 11, 1847 in inflammatory terms that won him both strong friends and equally potent enemies. Many northern Whigs hoped the Ohioan would be their presidential standard bearer in 1848, but it was not to be.

Tom Corwin knew that even with the war over, southern Whigs could never bring themselves to support his candidacy for president. Therefore, in the final analysis, the Ohio Senator threw his support to General Zachary Taylor, one of the two major military heroes in a war he had just opposed. Realizing that he would be portrayed as a hypocrite and that the Free Soil Party had no chance to win, Corwin stuck with the Whigs writing that "Consistently with my notions of duty . . . [and] believing the Mexican War as I do to be a great national sin, I shall vote for the man who fought it. Holding slavery to be a great evil, I shall vote for him who owns . . . 200 Negroes."

Corwin's instincts proved correct as Taylor showed himself to be no friend of slavery. Unfortunately the new President died in July 1850 and Millard Fillmore, although weaker in many respects, did sign the Compromise of 1850 and also placed Corwin in the cabinet. The "Wagon Boy" had initially been offered the position of Postmaster General and refused, but he did accept Secretary of the Treasury. His service in the Fillmore cabinet has been described by historians as competent and honorable but in the words of Homer C. Hockett "without distinction." After the death of Henry Clay he supported the unsuccessful campaign of General and Brother Winfield Scott in 1852. However, on a personal level Corwin placed some of his own money in corporate shares and lost it "by an unfortunate investment in railroad stock."

After his tenure at the Treasury Department terminated in March 1853, Sir Knight Corwin returned to Lebanon and devoted more time to his law practice which proved wise considering the debt burden. More or less out of politics, he lamented the decline of the Whig

Party which he believed to be the only reasonable alternative to the increasingly divisive sectional tensions. Although no supporter of slavery, Corwin was not an abolitionist either. In 1856, the aging "Wagon Boy" reluctantly endorsed John C. Fremont for president, rejecting the third party candidacy of his old boss Millard Fillmore. In 1858, local Republicans persuaded him to run for the United States Congress, and he won both that year and in 1860. As the secession crisis deepened, Corwin, along with other old Whigs in Congress such as Brother and Senator John Crittenden of Kentucky, endeavored to effect meaningful compromise to no avail. Following the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln, the new President appointed Tom Corwin to his last significant government post, Ambassador to Mexico.

Corwin's past opposition to the Mexican War made him a popular figure south of the border. His goal to prevent Mexican recognition of the Confederate States of America proved successful. His encouragement of support for the government of Brother Benito Juarez and resisting French imperialism also helped. At the age of seventy, the old Whig leader resigned his post effective September 1, 1864. He returned to Washington and practiced law for a year, dying on December 18, 1865.

Thomas Corwin's remains were returned to Lebanon, Ohio where friends and family laid him to rest in the local cemetery with Masonic honors. The man himself once humorously suggested that his epitaph read "Dearly beloved by his family; universally despised by Democrats, useful in life only to knaves and pretended friends." In reality, however, this was not the case. His name and reputation endured for generations in southern Ohio where male children often received the first name "Corwin." One of the best known examples of these being Corwin M. Nixon, 33o who spent thirty years in the Ohio legislature representing Warren County. While the presidency eluded him, Brother Corwin served his state and nation with honor. As Professor J. Jeffrey Auer of the University of Virginia concluded in his study, "In one of the critical periods of American history, Ohio's Tom Corwin played a leading role."

Further Reading

No adequate modern biography of Thomas Corwin exists, but useful sketches may be found by H.C. Hockett in the Dictionary of American Biography (1930), J. Jeffrey Auer in The Governors of Ohio (1969), and Frederick Blue in American National Biography Online (www.anb.org). His Masonic records can be found in Allen Roberts', Frontier Cornerstone (1976), W. R. Denslow's, 10,000 Famous Freemasons (1957), W. A. Cunningham's, History of Freemasonry in Ohio (1909), and the Grand Lodge of Ohio's website(www.freemason.com).

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