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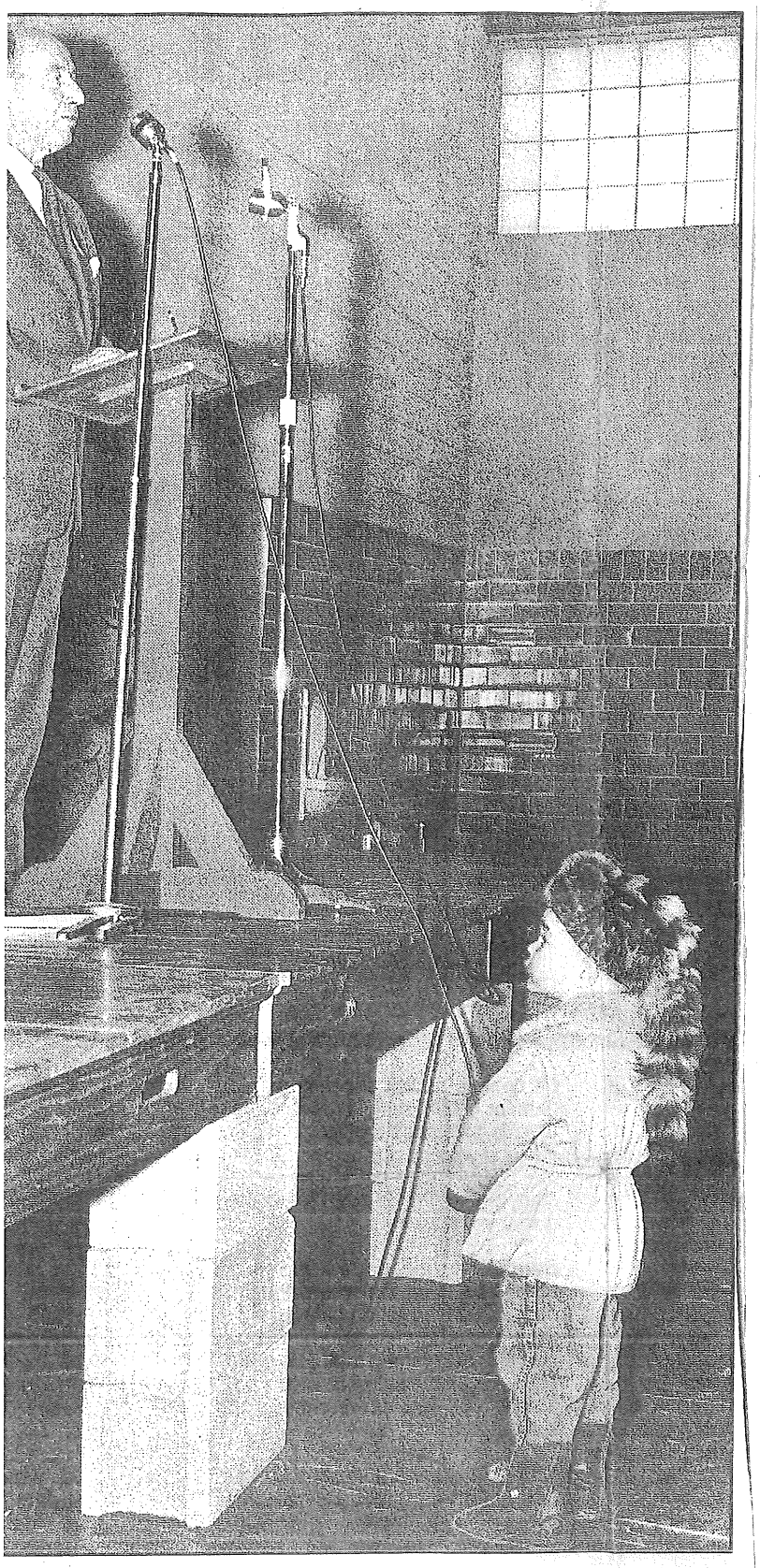

Michael Brown, 2, listened to Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson primary campaign swing through Litchfield, Minn.

Primary history

'56 free-for-all contest had it all: crossover votes, political feuds and Hubert Humphrey

By Jim Parsons
Staff Writer

The spirit of Hubert Humphrey may be squirming a bit, what with all the feuding and fussing that has been going on about whether Minnesota should have a presidential primary this year.

Humphrey whomped a lot of Republicans in his lifetime, but they took him to the cleaners in 1956 and, perhaps, changed the course of history in the process. And it was all because of that year's presidential primary.

Minnesota hasn't had a primary for president since then. DFL legislators saw to that. But the Republicans didn't put up much of a howl. Many of them weren't sorry to see the primary go.

"We got rid of it because of all the mischief-making by the Republicans," said Miles Lord, a DFLer who was state attorney general at the time and later became a federal judge.

The mischief was quite simple. Because President Dwight Eisenhower faced only token opposition in the GOP primary, thousands of Minnesota Republicans "crossed over," voting for Sen. Estes Kefauver in the DFL primary. They thought it would be easier for Ike to beat Kefauver in the general election than Adlai Stevenson.

The 1992 Minnesota primary partly solves the crossover problem. It forces voters to declare whether they are Independent-Republicans or DFLers.

But crossovers still are a concern. For instance, President Bush could brush aside his opposition in the early primaries, prompting some Minnesota Republicans to vote in the free-for-all shaping up among the Democrats.

Crossovers weren't the only sticky wicket back in '56. There was another debate — actually, it was more like a brawl — that created yet another chapter in the DFL's colorful history of internecine warfare.

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Primary: Should voters or leaders pick candidates?

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The struggle revolved around one of the issues that was discussed somewhat more sedately at the Capitol last week: Should the voters pick the parties' candidates or should it be up to the party leaders and activists?

The party caucuses, although open to everyone, usually are dominated by the party faithful. Primaries enable anyone who goes to the polls to have a direct say in who the candidates will be. At least that's the theory.

In '56, the DFL leaders threw their weight behind Stevenson before he was officially even a candidate. That led to cries of "bossism." And Humphrey was a boss, or so the young party Turks thought.

Humphrey had made an indelible mark on American politics in 1948 when he told the Southern Democrats and everyone else that it was time "to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights."

He was mayor of Minneapolis when he made his eloquent attack on racial segregation. Before the year was out, he had knocked off an incumbent Republican and was on his way to the U.S. Senate.

Humphrey quickly became a leader in the Senate and by the time 1956 rolled around, he was working on a scheme that would make him Stevenson's running mate.

Even if a Stevenson-Humphrey ticket lost, which was likely considering Eisenhower's popularity, Humphrey would be thrust further into the national spotlight.

That was supposed to set him up for a run for president in 1960. And it might have happened that way if it hadn't been for those mischievous Minnesota crossovers.

Carl Solberg's biography of Humphrey probably has the most detailed account of the affair. Solberg says that Humphrey and his political protégé, Gov. Orville Freeman, organized a big rally in Duluth to honor Stevenson. Then the party's central committee, meeting in an extraordinary session, voted an unprecedented early endorsement of Stevenson.

Two weeks later, Stevenson announced that he would again run against Eisenhower and that he would launch his campaign in the Minnesota primary, which was in March that year.

Sen. Estes Kefauver also had presidential ambitions. The tall Tennesseean had made a name for himself by using Senate hearings to put a spotlight on organized crime and illicit drugs. Although he and Humphrey were friends and fellow liberals, Kefauver courted the disgruntled DFLers in Minnesota.

Many of those backers were out of the old Farmer-Labor branch of the party, including the late Robert Short, a Minneapolis attorney and businessman who would later own the Leamington Hotel and play key roles in other party fights. D.D. Wozniak, a young St. Paul legislator and now the chief judge of the state Court of Appeals, coordinated Kefauver's campaign.

Kefauver, with a down-home, folksy style of campaigning, gave Humphrey fits. For the sake of party harmony, he had to greet Kefauver and smile for the cameras while groaning on the inside. Large crowds turned out for Kefauver's rallies. He worked the small-town main streets and whistle-stopped from the back of a train. And he usually did it wearing a Tennessee coonskin cap, which had become his campaign trademark.

Stevenson, a more formal, erudite man, tried to keep up. At a rally in Litchfield, Minn., he donned a Lincolnesque beard because all the men in town were growing beards for a local celebration. Stevenson looked silly, but it got his picture in the newspapers.

The national media flooded in to see the show and to report on one of the few primaries held that year. Kefauver won. He got 57 percent of the vote, leading a pundit from the New York Times to speculate the next day that Stevenson was a goner.

The national pundits didn't initially realize that much of Kefauver's support had come from Republicans. Edina, with its impeccable Republican credentials, went for Kefauver 3-1. The four most Republican counties in the state swung over to the Democrats and Kefauver. (They swung back to the Republicans in the general election, as did Edina.)

"Those Republicans really slipped one over on us," Humphrey said afterward.

The primary fight also left Humphrey with a split party to mend. He told a friend, "Old Humphrey had to go around the state for a whole year kissing asses."

More importantly, Stevenson considered the episode a "disaster," although he rebounded in later primaries. Humphrey's carefully crafted plan to be the vice-presidential nominee was derailed even though he and Gov. Freeman scrambled to keep it alive at the national convention.

Instead of Humphrey, the battle for vice president came down to Kefauver and a young senator from Massachusetts named John F. Kennedy. A tearful Kefauver begged a tearful Humphrey for his support. Humphrey reluctantly agreed, in part to mollify Kefauver's backers in the DFL.

"That was the worst, that was the bitterest defeat," Humphrey's wife, Muriel, said many years later. "He felt he had been made a fool of. He never would talk about it."

It also wounded Humphrey as a potential presidential candidate at the same time that it gave Kennedy the national exposure he needed. Four years later, the two men went head-to-head in the Democratic primaries. Humphrey was swamped by the well-financed Kennedy machine.

Kennedy went on to become president, defeating Richard Nixon.

Humphrey got a shot at Nixon, too, in the 1968 campaign. Humphrey lost, but the circumstances were vastly different from 1960. As vice president, he had the Johnson administration's albatross of the unpopular war in Vietnam around his neck.

Three years after Humphrey's 1956 debacle, Freeman led the charge to get rid of the presidential primary. He succeeded, but not before again doing battle with the Young Turks. "It was the hottest thing I've seen in all my days down here," said one veteran legislator.

Others, who have a sense of party history, might describe it as business as usual.