



## A.F. Crail and W.A Clark: A Tale of Two Politicians in Montana's New State

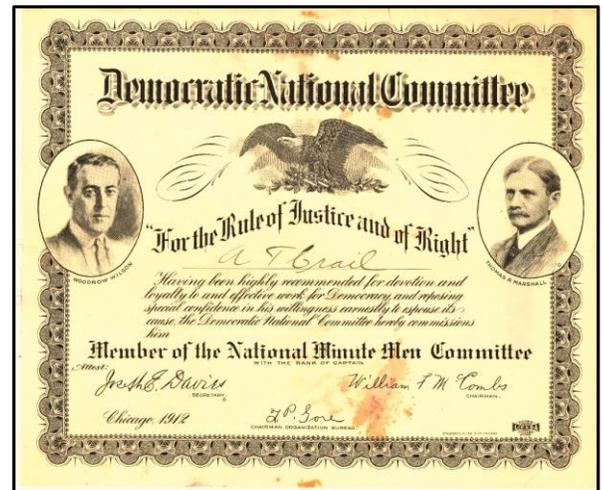
By Anne Marie Mistretta

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In 1912, Augustus Franklin Crail received an important letter at the Eldridge, Montana Post Office (at the Cooper Tie Camp in Taylor Fork). The letter, from Western Headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in Chicago, announced his appointment to the National Minutemen Committee after nomination by the local precinct for his efforts in Democratic politics. The Dems encouraged Crail to promote the election of Wilson and Marshall.

The honor, coming just a decade before Crail's death, signals his substantive involvement in politics on behalf of the Democratic Party.

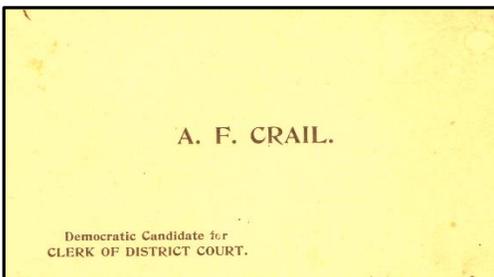
Most notable is Crail's election as a Democrat to Clerk of the 9<sup>th</sup> District Court in 1896. In a June 11, 1897 letter to his father back in Indiana, Crail announces, "I was elected to the office of Clerk of the District Court last November and came into the office on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January. . . I was elected on the Democratic Ticket against a Republican endorsed by the Populist." Later in that same letter, Crail tips his hand as a "Silverite." "It is pretty hard times here now but we have heard yet that Free Silver will win . . . if it does we will



have a good country."

Silverite Democrats

supported both William Jennings Bryan and the bi-metal standard. Whereas, the Northeast promoted gold as the "coin of the realm," agricultural regions in the South and West tended to back silver as a standard as well, in hopes of inflating their crop prices against the depressed economy.



These letters and other evidence of

Crail's political efforts are on display at the Historic Crail Ranch Homestead Museum. His wife Sallie stitched into her crazy quilt a number of Frank's ribbon-badges for Democratic conventions in the 1880s.

One ribbon has the date of 1886, three years before Montana earned statehood. Others have the name W. A. Clark (William Andrew Clark). Although those badges have no dates, history tells us that these might pertain to the state constitutional conventions or to Montana's senatorial elections - either in 1893 or 1898 when Clark failed to win the legislature vote or later years that sent "Copper King" Clark to the U.S. Senate in 1899 and then again 1901.

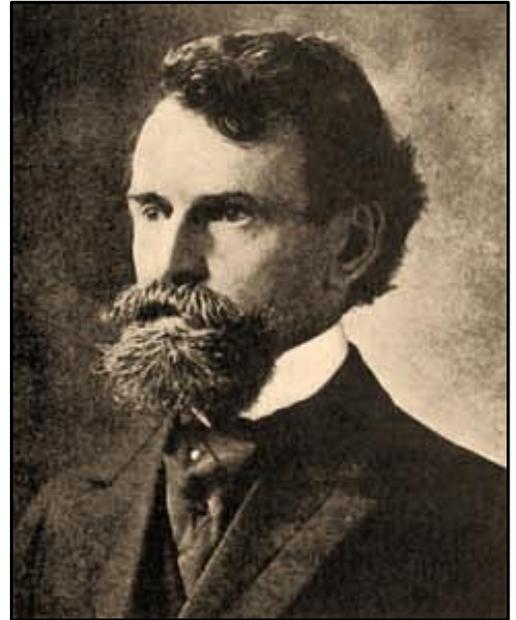
Some might recognize the Clark name from 2011 publicity regarding the death and subsequent inheritance disputes of Huguette Clark, his reclusive daughter by his second marriage. Others might associate Clark with the Nevada county, where he established modern-day Las Vegas in the early 1900s. Residents of Butte are continually reminded of Clark's mining days.



In his 20s, Frank Crail abandoned a guaranteed inheritance of a farm in Indiana and landed in Montana in 1865. Clark arrived in Montana just two years before Crail. Clark had made his way across the continent with his family from his humble log cabin birthplace in Pennsylvania by way of school teaching, law study, and mining in Iowa and Colorado. After stints of mining, freighting, mule skinning, and Indian fighting in Montana, Clark settled into banking. Likewise, Crail tried his hand at mining and freighting. But Clark became a Copper King, whose mining practices that made him one of the wealthiest men in the country but that plague the environment to this day.

As Montana sought statehood, Clark dominated the constitutional conventions of 1883 and 1889 strong-arming mining support. At the turn of the century, Clark so brazenly bought his senatorial election that his seat was challenged and short-lived. Through nefarious strategies, Clark was seated after his second "election," but the blatant political corruption of the newly admitted State of Montana ultimately resulted in the adoption of Montana's Corrupt Practices Act in 1912 and contributed to passage of the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, progressive legislation that guaranteed election of senators by popular vote rather than by state legislatures.

Ironically, both Crail and Clark served only one term. After leaving Office of Clerk of the District Court in 1901, Crail purchased his second Montana ranch and lived a rustic life in what would become the Meadow, while maintaining his home on West Main in Bozeman. Once Clark was seated, he served only one term in the U.S. Senate and then left Montana for Gilded Age excess in New York City. Whereas Clark's rapacious business practices destroyed the environment, Crail and his family maintained a working stock ranch that preserved Big Sky's Meadow area from development until the 1970s. Clark was vilified by many, including Mark Twain. Crail was lauded by neighbors (and the Western Democratic Committee!) for his hard work. Clark died in March 1925, just six months after Augustus Franklin Crail's death on his ranch. Shortly after Clark's demise, his Beaux-Arts mansion and his empire were destroyed, but Frank Crail's homestead remains preserved here in Big Sky - a century later.



William Andrews Clark -- [www.reviewjournal.com](http://www.reviewjournal.com)

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Historic Crail Ranch is a project of the Big Sky Community Corporation, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization which exists to promote, acquire, preserve, and maintain land, parks, trails, and easements for the use of the people of the Big Sky Community and general public.