BIOGRAPHY

Extracts From the Life of Thomas Hart Benton in the American Statesmen Series. Edited by John T. Morse, Jr.

THOMAS HART BENTON was born on March 14, 1782, near Hillsborough, in Orange County, North Carolina, on same State not fifteen years before, almost to a day, had seen the birth of the great federal chief whose most important supporter he in after life became. Beside some of good colonial stock; and its early surroundings were not characterized by the poverty that marked Jackson's, though the differences in the social conditions of the two families were of small consequence on the frontier, where caste was and is almost unknown.

Benton's father, who was a lawyer in good standing at the North Carolina bar, died when the boy was very young, leaving him to be brought up by his Virginia mother. She was a woman of force and of education. She herself began the training of her son's mind, showing with him literary and biography, while he also of course had access to his father's law library. The son was greatly loved and cherished by the son whose mind she did so much to mould, and she lived to see him become one of the foremost statesmen of his country.

Benton was an insatiable student and reader, and he rapidly acquired a very extensive knowledge, not only of law, but of history, and even of Latin and English literature, and thus became a well-read and cultivated, indeed, a learned, man. Young Benton had begun a course at Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina, when his mother decided to remove to Tennessee, where his father had left a large tract of land to his family.

Benton grew up under the strange influences of the then frontier. He was never a dissipated man, but he bore his share in the duels of the day. The most famous of Benton's affrays was with Jackson himself in 1813, but the two had the quarrel adjusted afterwards, and their friendship renewed.

Benton was admitted to the bar and in 1811 served a single term in the Lower House of the Tennessee Legislature. Even thus early he made his mark. He had a bill passed introducing the system of taxation into the State judiciary, a reform of much importance, especially as the power of judges of litigants; and he also introduced and had enacted into a law, a bill providing that a slave should have the same right to the full benefit of a jury trial as would a white man suffering under the same accusation.

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Benton's long political career can never be thoroughly understood unless it is kept in mind that he was primarily a Westerner and not a Southern statesman, and it owes its especial interest to the fact that during its continuance the West first came to power, acting as a unit, and to the further fact that it was brought to a close by the same causes which soon afterwards broke up the West exactly as the East was already broken. Benton was, perhaps, the most typical representative of the statesmanship of the Middle West at the time when the latter gave the tone to the political thought of the entire Mississippi Valley. The political school which he represented came to its fullest development in the so-called Border States of Kentucky, Tennessee and Missouri, and swayed the destinies of the West so long as the States to the north as well as the States to the south were content to accept the leadership of those that lay between them. It came to an end and disappeared from sight when people north of the Ohio set up their own standard, and when, after some hesitation, the Border States threw in their lot with the other side and concluded to follow the Southern communities, which they had hitherto led.

Shortly after Benton left the Legislature the War of 1812 broke out, and its events impressed on Benton another of what soon became his cardinal principles. The war was brought on by the South and West, the Democrats all favoring it, while the Federalists, forming the anti-democratic party, especially in the Northeast, opposed it; and finally their more extreme members, at the famous Hartford convention, passed resolutions supposed to tend toward the dissolution of the Union, and which brought bitter condemnation upon them. Benton was violently opposed to the idea of secession. Thus early Benton's political character became molded into the shape which it ever afterwards retained. He was a slaveholder, but as advanced as a slaveholder could be. He was a Westerner in his feelings, and more than all else he was emphatically a Union man. He was heartily in favor of the War of 1812.

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It was not in Tennessee, however, that Benton rose to political prominence, for shortly after the close of the war he crossed the Mississippi and made his permanent home in the territory of Missouri. Missouri was then our extreme western outpost, and its citizens possessed the characteristic western traits. The people were pushing, restless and hardy. In spite of the culture and education of some families, society, as a whole, was marked by a florid unconventionality.

It was in reference to this matter of admitting Missouri that the slavery question for the first time made its appearance in national politics, where it threw everything into confusion and for the moment overshadowed all else; though it vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared, and did not again come to the front for several years. The Northerners desiring to "restrict" the growth of slavery, and the slave-power, demanded that Missouri, before being admitted as a State, should abolish slavery within her boundaries. The South was equally determined that she should be admitted as a slave State; and for the first time the politicians of the country divided on geographical rather than on party lines, though the division proved but temporary, and was of but little interest except as foreshadowing what was to come a score of years later. * * * Benton was a slaveholder, and as the question was in no way one between the East and the West, or between the Union as a whole and any part of it, he naturally gave full swing to his Southern feelings, and entered with tremendous vigor into the anti-restriction side. * * * His efforts were successful. In Congress the matter was finally settled by the passage of the famous Missouri compromise bill, a measure Southern in its origin, but approved at the time by many if not most Northerners, and disapproved by not a few Southerners. By its terms Missouri was admitted as a slave State, while slavery was abolished in all the rest of the old Province of Louisiana lying north and west of it and north of the parallel of thirty-six degrees thirty minutes.

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Before entering the Senate Benton did something which well illustrates his peculiar uprightness, and the care which he took to keep his public acts free from the least suspicion of improper influence. When he was at the bar in St. Louis, real estate litigation was much the most important branch of legal business. The condition of Missouri land titles was mixed, since many of them were based upon the thousands of "concessions" of land made by the old French and Spanish governments. Benton, being able, honest and energetic, was the favorite counsel of the claimants. Success to Benton in these many cases meant wealth, but he resigned the work after his election, giving as his reason that the success of the cases largely depended upon the action of Congress, of which he was now himself a member, so that he was bound to consult, not any private interest, but the good of the community as a whole.

One of the first subjects that attracted Benton's attention in the Senate was the Oregon question, and on this he showed himself at once in his true character as a Western man, proud alike of every part of his country, and as desirous of seeing the West extended in a northerly as in a southerly direction. He was one of the earliest and most vehement advocates of the extension of our free territory northward along the Pacific Coast.

Success attended a bill he introduced to establish a trading-road from Missouri through the Indian country to New Mexico, which, after much debate, passed both houses and was signed by President Monroe. The road thus marked out and established became, and remained for many years, a great thoroughfare, and among the chief channels through which our foreign commerce flowed. Until Benton secured the enactment of this law, so important to the interests and development of the West, the overland trade with Mexico had been carried on by individual effort and at the cost of incredible hazard, hardship and risk of life. (The Santa Fe trail.)

With the close of Monroe's second term the "era of good feeling" came to an end, and the great Democratic-Republican party split up into several fragments, which gradually crystallized round two centers. Benton became a Jacksonian Democrat, and during the rest of his political career he treated as the most prominent representative of the Jacksonian Democracy in the Senate.

The vote on the protective tariff law of 1828 furnished another illustration of the solidarity of the West. * * * This tariff bill was the sign of the immediate irritating causes which induced South Carolina to go into the nullification movement. Benton's attitude on the measure was that of a good many other men, who, in their public capacities, are obliged to appear as protectionists, but who lack his frankness in stating their reasons. He utterly disbelieved in and was opposed to the principle of the bill, but as it had laid for and secured the interest of Missouri by a heavy duty on lead, he felt himself forced to support it, and so he announced his position.

During Adams's term Benton began his fight for disposing of the public lands to actual settlers at a small cost. It was a move of enormous importance to the whole West, and Benton's long and sturdy contest for it, and for the right of pre-emption, entitles him to the greatest credit. He never gave up the struggle, although repulsed again and again, and at the last was only partially successful, for he had to encounter much opposition, especially from the short-sighted selfishness of many of the Northeasterners, who wished to consider the public lands purely as sources of revenue. He utterly opposed the then existing system of selling land to the highest bidder—a most barbarous practice—and advocated the establishment of an arbitrary minimum price, which practically kept all land below a certain value out of the market altogether. He succeeded in establishing the pre-emption system, and had the system of renting public mines, etc., abolished, and he struggled for the principle of giving land warrants to settlers in certain cases.

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In the presidential election of 1828 Jackson and Adams were pitted against each other as the only candidates before the people, and Jackson's war, an overwhelming victory. The followers of the two were fast developing respectively into Democrats and Whigs, and the parties were hardening and taking shape while the dividing lines were being drawn more clearly and distinctly.

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Several of Benton's speeches at this time show hostility against the Northeast, and also incidentally brought out the solidarity of interest felt throughout the West. In a long and able speech favoring the repeal of the iniquitous "salt tax," or high duty on imported salt, he brought out the latter point very strongly, besides complaining of the disproportionate lightness of the burden imposed upon the Northeast by the high tariff, of which he announced himself to be but a moderate adherent.

Benton was the leading opponent of a proposal, introduced by Senator Foot of Connecticut, to inquire into the expediency of limiting the sales of public lands to such lands as were then in the market. The limitation would have been most injurious to the entire West, which was then menaced by the action of a New Englander, while Benton appeared as the champion of the whole section, North and South alike, in the speech wherein he strenuously and successfully opposed the adoption of the resolution, and at the same time bitterly attacked the quarter of the country from which it came, as having from the earliest years opposed everything that might advance the interests of the people beyond the Alleghanies. Webster came to the assistance of the mover of the measure in a speech wherein, among other things, he claimed for the North the merit of the passage of the ordinance of 1787, in relation to the Northwest Territory, and especially of the anti-slavery clause therein contained. But Benton here caught him tripping, and in a fine speech showed that he was completely mistaken in his facts. The debate was, however, completely left the point at issue, taking a bitterly sectional turn, and giving rise to the famous encounter between Hayne, of South Carolina, who, for the first time on the floor of the Senate, announced the doctrine of nullification, and Webster, who, in response, made that speech since known as "The Reply to Hayne."

Jackson's administration derives no humble notoriety as being the one under which the "spoils system" became, for the first time, grafted on the civil service of the nation. Benton, to his honor, always strongly opposed this system. It is unfair to assert that Jackson was the originator of this method of appointment. * * * Despite all the Eastern sneers at the "savages" of the West, it was from Eastern men that this most effective method of debauching political life came.

It was about this time that, in the course of a debate in the Senate, Marcy of New York gave utterance of the now notorious maxim, "To the victor belongs the spoils."

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It was on account of the high tariff laws, operating against the interests of the South Atlantic States, that nullification was agitated. The South Carolina statesmen now proclaimed the doctrine of nullification—that is, proclaimed that if any State deemed a Federal law improper, it could proceed to declare that law null and void so far as its own territory was concerned—and, as a corollary, that it had the right forcibly to prevent execution of this void law within its borders. * * *

In the presidential election of 1832, Jackson defeated Clay by an enormous majority; Van Buren was elected Vice President.

Benton threw himself in heart and soul, with the Union party, acting as Jackson's right-hand man throughout the contest with South Carolina, and showing an even more resolute and unflinching front than Old Hickory himself. No better or truer ally than the Missouri statesman, in a hard fight for a principle, could be desired. He was intensely national in all his habits of thought; he took a deep, personal pride in his country—North, South, East and West. He had been very loath to believe that any movement hostile to the Union was really on foot; but once thoroughly convinced of it, he chose his own line of action without an instant's hesitation.

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When the rupture between Calhoun and the Jacksonian Democrats came, three parties developed in the United States Senate. One was composed of the Jacksonian Democrats, with Benton at their head; one was made up of the band of Nullifiers, led by Calhoun; and the third included the rather loose array of Whigs, under Clay and Webster.

The nullification battle did not result in a decisive victory for either side.

Without doubt, the honors of the nullification dispute were borne off by Benton and Webster. There never was any question of Webster's courage. On the occasions when he changed front he was actuated by self-interest and ambition, not by timidity.

An even greater need of praise attached to Benton for the unswerving fidelity which he showed to the Union in this crisis. Webster was a high-tariff man, and was backed up by all the sectional antipathies of the Northeast in his opposition to the nullifiers. Benton, on the contrary, was a believer in a low tariff, or in a tariff for revenue only, and his sectional antipathies were the other way. Yet, even when deserted by his chief, and when he was opposed to every Senator from south of the Potomac and the Ohio, he did not flinch for a moment from his attitude of aggressive loyalty to the national Union. He had a singularly strong and upright character. This country has never had a statesman more fearlessly true to his convictions when great questions were at stake, no matter what might be the cost to himself, or the pressure from outside—even when, as happened later, his own State was against him. Morally, he towers much higher than the great Massachusetts Senator.

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Benton aided Jackson in his opposition to the then existing national bank. He was an advocate of "hard" money, and was called "Old Bullion" by many of his followers.

The great financial measure of Van Buren's administration, in which Benton was most interested—the independent treasury bill—he succeeded in getting through the Senate twice. The first time it was lost in the House of Representatives, but on the second occasion, toward the close of Van Buren's term, firmness and perseverance met their reward. The bill passed the Senate by an increased majority, scraped through the House after a bitter contest and became a law. It developed the system known as that of the subtreasury, which has proved satisfactory to the present day.

Benton thoroughly appreciated the importance of our geographical extensions. He was the great champion of the West and of Western development, and a furious partisan of every movement in the direction of the enlargement of our western boundaries. In his early years he thought the Rockies should bound our western territory, but very soon he changed his mind and held that we should have, wherever possible, no boundaries but the two oceans.

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In his biographical sketch of her father, Mrs. Jessie Benton Fremont writes in the "Fremont Memoirs": "In Lafayette Park at St. Louis stands a bronze statue of my father, and upon its pedestal, below the hand which points west, are his prophetic words:

"There is the East;
There lies the road to India!"

Words which, when spoken by him, had made men smile sceptically to one another; too much dwelling on this idea had—they thought—warped his mind. They who listened said: 'This man is mad; now they asked, 'Hath he a God?'"

Especially was Benton excited over the Northwest, Oregon, and the region to the south of California, was disputed ground. The English claimed a part of it. The aspect of affairs was totally changed when in 1843 a huge caravan of over a thousand Americans made the journey overland from the frontiers of Missouri, taking with them their wives and children, their flocks and herds, carrying their long rifles on their shoulders, and their axes and spades in the great canvas-topped Wagons. The next year 200 more settlers of the same sort in their turn crossed the vast plains, wound their way among the Rocky Mountains through the pass explored by Fremont, Benton's son-in-law, and, after suffering every kind of hardship and danger, joined their fellows by the banks of the Columbia. When American settlers were once in actual possession of the disputed territory, it became evident that the period of Great Britain's unopposed sway was over.

When Texas was admitted to the Union the foundation for our war with Mexico was laid. * * * Although heartily opposed to the war in its origin, Benton very properly believed in prosecuting it with the utmost vigor which once fairly in, and it was mainly owing to him that the proposed policy of a "masterly inactivity" was abandoned, and the scheme of pushing straight for the City of Mexico adopted in its stead.

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From this time (after 1846) the slavery question diverted all others, and it was the one with which Benton, as well as other statesmen, had mainly to deal. He had been very loath to acknowledge that it was never to become of such overshadowing importance. Until late in life he had not realized that, interwoven with the disunionist movement, it had grown so as to become in reality the one and only question before the people, but, this once thoroughly understood, he henceforth devoted his tremendous energies to the struggle with it.

He had now entered on what may fairly be called the heroic part of his career, for it would be difficult to choose any other word to express our admiration for the unflinching and defiant courage with which, supported only by conscience and by his loving loyalty to the Union, he battled for the losing side, although by so doing he jeopardized and eventually ruined his political prospects, being finally, as punishment for his boldness in opposing the dominant faction of the Missouri Democracy, turned out of the Senate, wherein he had passed nearly half his life. Indeed, he was one of the natures that show better in defeat than in victory. * * *

Benton always regarded much of the slavery agitation in the South as being political in character, and the result of the schemes of ambitious and unscrupulous leaders.

When the Texas slave act of 1836 was passed, through the help of some Northern votes, Benton refused to support it, and that was the last act of importance that he performed as United States Senator. * * * It is this part of growing that especially marks his career. No other American statesman, except John Quincy Adams, certainly neither of his great contemporaries, Webster and Clay—kept doing continually better work throughout his term of public service, or showed himself able to rise to a higher level at the very end than at the beginning. Yet such was the case with Benton. He always rose to meet a really great emergency and his services to the nation grew steadily in importance to the very close of his life. Whereas, Webster and Clay passed their zenith and fell he kept rising all the time.

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Benton had now finished his sixth and last term in the United States Senate. In the next campaign he was defeated. The Stout old Nationalist was not in the least cast down or even shaken by his defeat. He kept up the fight as bitterly as ever, though now an old man, and in 1852 went to Congress as a representative Union Democrat. For thirty years he had been the autocrat of Missouri politics, and had at one time wielded throughout his own State a power as great as Calhoun possessed in South Carolina; greater than Webster held in Massachusetts or Clay in Kentucky. But the tide which had so long flowed in his favor now turned, and for the few remaining years of his life set as steadily against him; yet at no time of his long public career did he stand forth as honorably and prominently as during his last day, when he was showing so stern a front to his victorious foes. * * * The idea of depositing or giving up, for any cause whatsoever, simply never entered his head. When his house, containing all the manuscript and papers of the nearly completed second volume of his "Thirty Years' View," was burned, he did not delay a minute in recommencing his work, and the very next day spoke in Congress as usual.

He produced the second volume of the "Thirty Years' View" in 1856, the year when he made his last attempt to regain his hold in politics. Although his own son-in-law, Fremont, the daring Western explorer, was running as the first presidential candidate ever nominated by the Republicans, the old man voted for the Democrat, Buchanan. For Governor there was a triangular fight, the native Americans having nominated one candidate, the secessionist Democrats a second, while Benton himself ran as the choice of the Union Democracy. He was now 74 years old, but his mind was as vigorous as ever, and his iron will kept up a frame that had hardly even yet began to give way. During the course of the campaign he traveled throughout the State, going in all 1,200 miles and making forty speeches, each one of two or three hours' length. This was a remarkable feat for so old a man, indeed, it has very rarely been paralleled except by Gladstone's performances.

One of Benton's great works was the "Abridgement of the Debates of Congress from 1789 to 1856," in sixteen volumes, besides writing a valuable pamphlet on the Dred Scott decision, which he severely criticised. The amount of labor all this required was immense, and his health completely gave way, yet he continued working to the very end, dictating the closing portion of the "Abridgment" in a whisper as he lay on his death-bed. When he once began to fail his advanced years made him succumb rapidly; and on April 10, 1858, he died, in the city of Washington. As soon as the news reached Missouri, a great revulsion of feeling took place, and all classes of the people united to do honor to the memory of the dead statesman, realizing that they had lost a man who towered head and shoulders above both friends and foes. The body was taken to St. Louis, and after lying in state was buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery, more than forty thousand people witnessing the funeral. All the public buildings were draped in mourning; all places of business closed and the flags everywhere were at half-mast.

Benton's "Thirty Years' View, a History of the Workings of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850," will always be indispensable to every student of American history.

He was a most loving father. At his death he left four surviving daughters—Mrs. William Carey Jones, Mrs. Sarah Benton Jacobs, Mme. Susan Benton Boilleau and Mrs. Jessie Ann Benton Fremont, the wife of the great explorer, whose wonderful feats and adventures, ending with the conquest of California, where he became a sort of viceroy in point of power, made him an especial favorite with his father-in-law, who loved daring and hardihood. Benton took the keenest delight in Fremont's remarkable successes, and was never tired of talking of them. He records with very natural pride the fact that it was solely the courage and judgment displayed in a trying crisis by his own gifted daughter, Fremont's wife, which enabled the adventurous young explorer to prosecute one of the most important of his expeditions, when threatened with fatal interference from jealous governmental superiors.

He was an exceptionally devoted husband. His wife was Miss Elizabeth McDowell of Virginia, whom he married after he had entered the Senate. Their life was most happy until 1841, when she was struck by paralysis. From that time till her death in 1854 he never went out to a public place of amusement, spending all his time not occupied with public duties in writing by her bedside. It is scarcely praise to say that while mere acquaintance on his part would have enabled him to become rich through governmental influence, he nevertheless died a poor man. In public, as in private life, he was a man of sensitive purity of character; he would never permit any person connected with him by blood or marriage to accept office under the Government, nor would he ever favor an applicant for a Government contract on political grounds.

At all times and in all places he held every good gift he had completely at the service of the American Federal Union.

LITTLE CLASSICS.

"Through the mists and clouds, in shade
And yet the light is bright, I see
Through the woods and meadows, in sunshine and shade
Sometimes swift, sometimes slow
Wave succeeding wave, they go
A various journey to the deep
Like human life to endless sleep!"
—John Ware.

Fools admire, but men of sense approve.—Pope.

Dethroneth the Majesty of God yonder,
Plant the and you have nothing else to fear.
—Bacon.

Johnson told Garrick that he and his profession were mutually indebted to each other. "Your profession," said the doctor, "has made you rich, and you have made your profession respectable."—Colton.

Oh, Lucifer, when the sun was low,
All thoughtless of the mischief he should know,
And darkness winter was the flow
Of fear, rolling rapidly.
—Campbell, "Hohenlinden."

Childhood has no foreboding; but then it is spoiled by no memories of outlived sorrow.—George Eliot.

Should the whole frame of nature round him break,
In ruin and confusion hurled,
He, unconcerned, would hear the mighty crash,
And stand serene amidst a falling world.
—Addison, "Cherubs."

Where children are, there is the golden age.—Novalis.

Fair spring! whose smallest promise more delights
Than all their largest wealth, and pleasures the heart!
Each joy and month in hope
With softest influence breathest
—Anne Bradstreet.

God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose.—Emerson.

Now Nature hangs her mantle green
On every blooming tree,
And spreads her sheets of daisies white
Out over the grassy lea.
—Burns.

I have been young and am now old, and have not yet known an instructive man to come to a good end.—Alcibiades.

Gentle Spring! in sunshine clad,
We feel thee thy power display;
For Winter maketh the bleak heart sad,
And about thee makest the sad heart gay.
—Charles Swain.

Anger is a short madness.—Horace.

Once more the Heavens are
Mantled with thick rain,
And drowns the redbreast
With wintry strain.
The blackbirds have their
The thrushes too.
—Tennyson.

What most increases about us the feeling that one is in the wrong.—Richter.

I cannot tell how the truth may be;
I say the tale as 'twas said to me.
—Longfellow.

If you wish the company of the angels in your walking hours, you will be sure to come to you in your solitude.—Henry D. Thoreau.

And what is life, unless to a thoughtful mind
Delicious?
—Bloomfield.

Heaven is not gained by a single act, but by a life-long course of well-doing and well-being, that ripens the soul for immortality; we are not made saints by a single act, but we may be made saints by a life-long course of holy living, growing ever more and more like God.—Theodore Parker.

"Heaven is not reached at a single bound; but we build the ladder by which we rise, step by step, round by round, from the lowly earth to the vault of heaven, and we must climb to the skies through the darkness and storm, and we must climb through the sunshine and the storm, and we must climb through the darkness and the light, if we climb at all, and if we climb at all, we climb step by step, round by round, and we climb through the darkness and the light, and we climb through the sunshine and the storm, and we climb through the storm and the darkness