

JAMES CANSLER OF TIRZAH

When James Cansler of Tirzah announced in the winter of 1916 that he was running for a six-year term on the South Carolina Railroad Commission no one was surprised. Cansler had been running for that office "since the time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary," as one newspaper expressed it. Cansler had a habit of running every two years for the state post but had gotten so few votes in the past that few people foresaw Cansler's victory.

In truth, there was nothing in Cansler's past that would have predicted he had any chance of getting such a choice plum. Railroad commissioners had one of the plushest political posts in the state. Their control of railroads was complete down to the smallest detail. Railroads were quick to offer commissioners private cars with unlimited travel. There was no state ethics commission, either.

Cansler was a poor man and had never held a political office. A native of North Carolina, he had arrived at Tirzah, a rural community between Rock Hill and York, in 1877 to teach school. His father, though poor, had been determined that his children receive an education and had boarded school teachers for \$3 a month in order to guarantee their instruction. Cansler finished Catawba College. Cansler did manage, on the meager salary of a teacher, to save enough money in 12 years to acquire a small farm. The work must have been hard for him because he long suffered physical pain which had left him crippled for life.

Ben Tillman was governor and his dispensary system was in full swing when Cansler first got into politics. The dispensary system was an attempt to control the sale of alcohol by having the state control the manufacture, distribution and sale of alcoholic beverages. Cansler was an ardent prohibitionist. In 1894 York County citizens went to the polls to decide if their local communities would have state operated liquor stores. The idea was rejected everywhere except in Tirzah which ended up selling the only legal whiskey in York County.

James Cansler's house sat on the road to the dispensary shop. He was incensed at the sight of "the thirsty" trudging the highway. He fumed for seven years. Finally, in 1901 Cansler circulated a petition to remove the dispensary. His petition first circulated in Tirzah, which had only 11 registered voters, and then all over the county. He got over one thousand signatures.

Henry Massey of Rock Hill took Cansler to Columbia to present his petition to the dispensary board. Cansler told the board that if they didn't act the people of Tirzah would. The board ordered the dispensary closed within 60 days.

During his 1916 race for railroad commissioner, one of Cansler's former pupils wrote about him: "There is nothing negative about him...He has a very high sense of honor and his character is unimpeachable...not a lazy bone....He has no friend to reward, and he is too manly to punish an enemy if he has one. The letter-writer, who admittedly was not fond of Cansler, added that Cansler was peculiar and eccentric and undaunted in adversity.

The governor's race in 1916 was between Richard I. Manning and a former governor, Cole L. Blease. Blease was favored but in the second primary to everyone's surprise, Manning won 71,463 votes to Blease's 66,785.

Cansler won, too, and by a far greater margin than Manning did over Blease. Cansler defeated incumbent Albert S. Fant by a vote of 83,054 to 54,271. It was hard to believe. The Greenville News commented: "Cansler probably does not know anymore about railroads than we do about farming, but men are not often elected to office in this State on the basis of what they know....may he revel in the plush luxury of his private car and the good things of this life...."

On September 12, 1917, the South Carolina Railroad Commission issued Order #169 to the Southern Railway Company. In the order were these words: "...to construct, without further delay, a freight depot at Tirzah, S. C., said depot to be in every way adequate for the demands of the patrons of Southern Railway Company at that point...to be done in 60 days."

James Cansler may not have gotten rich but he did get power.

By Louise Pettus, printed in the York Observer, a Charlotte Observer supplement, August 25, 1985.