The American Sabbath Union

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The American Sabbath Union was an interdenominational religious body promoting the enactment and enforcement of strict Sunday legislation. Its leading spokesperson frequently attacked Seventh-day Adventists, and the legislation they promoted drew Adventists into the arena of political agitation.

The organization consisted largely of Christian ministers. Its founder, chief spokesperson, and most prolific writer during its early years was Wilbur F. Crafts (1850-1922), who had been a minister for the Methodists and Congregationalists before switching to Presbyterianism in 1883. He believed that a national Sunday law would be tantamount to "national recognition of divine sovereignty" while the act of liberalizing Sunday laws was "legislative rebellion against the Supreme Court of the Universe." Besides organizing the petition campaign that led to the introduction in Congress of the Blair Sunday Bill, he supported other bills proposing congressional Sunday legislation, and campaigned for passing new state Sunday laws and retaining without modification previously enacted legislation. Other American Sabbath Union spokespeople argued that the government had an obligation to encourage church attendance by eliminating competition from saloons, theaters, baseball games, cigar stands, ice cream stores, soda fountains, excursions, and newspapers.

Adventist Opposition

Seventh-day Adventist lobbyists in Washington, D.C., worked to defeat the Blair bill and the other congressional Sunday legislation that the American Sabbath Union proposed. Adventist representatives also appeared before legislative committees in several states to oppose Sunday bills. Confronting the Blair bill, they obtained 658,000 signatures on a petition against any legislation regarding Sunday observance or "any other religious institution or rite." They also petitioned against other proposals for either state or congressional Sunday legislation.

A major vehicle for publicizing Adventist opposition to national Sunday legislation was the American Sentinel, a forerunner of Liberty: A Magazine of Religious Freedom. As early as June 1888, the Sentinel began quoting statements made by Crafts and other American Sabbath Union leaders in order to demonstrate what its editors considered the fallacy of their facts and logic. Foremost among the writers attacking the organization’s views was Sentinel co-editor Alonzo T. Jones.

Crafts versus Jones

The conflict between Crafts and Jones turned ugly after Crafts canceled a scheduled debate with Jones. Crafts had initially challenged him to a debate, and Jones had not only accepted, but had publicized the upcoming meeting in the Sentinel and even anticipated publishing a verbatim transcript afterward. When Jones complained that Crafts had arbitrarily canceled the debate, stating that the challenge had been made unconditionally, Crafts swore out an affidavit calling for civil and religious penalties against Jones for allegedly lying, claiming that the challenge to debate...
had been conditional upon its acceptance by the Illinois Sabbath Union. Jones thereupon published photographic copies of the letters he had received from Crafts, demonstrating that there had been no such stipulations. The Pacific Press Publishing Association followed with an 80 page pamphlet to substantiate the charge that Crafts was guilty of "willful and malicious slander." The Pacific Press Publishing Association followed with an 80 page pamphlet to substantiate the charge that Crafts was guilty of "willful and malicious slander." The Pacific Press Publishing Association followed with an 80 page pamphlet to substantiate the charge that Crafts was guilty of "willful and malicious slander." The Pacific Press Publishing Association followed with an 80 page pamphlet to substantiate the charge that Crafts was guilty of "willful and malicious slander." The Pacific Press Publishing Association followed with an 80 page pamphlet to substantiate the charge that Crafts was guilty of "willful and malicious slander." The Pacific Press Publishing Association followed with an 80 page pamphlet to substantiate the charge that Crafts was guilty of "willful and malicious slander." The Pacific Press Publishing Association followed with an 80 page pamphlet to substantiate the charge that Crafts was guilty of "willful and malicious slander." The Pacific Press Publishing Association followed with an 80 page pamphlet to substantiate the charge that Crafts was guilty of "willful and malicious slander."

After Crafts cancelled the debate, Adventists adopted a strategy of following him around the country, sometimes before his speeches and sometimes after them, delivering their own lectures opposing Sunday legislation and passing out copies of the American Sentinel and other religious liberty publications. At times they even packed Crafts' meetings so much that they were able to defeat the pro-Sunday resolutions that he proposed in them. In order to throw its opponents off-track, the American Sabbath Union began trying to confuse them by listing up to seven locations for each date that Crafts was scheduled to speak.

Crafts began spending a major portion of his lectures attacking Seventh-day Adventists. He said "seventh day people" had made a fetish of Saturday and that only "a little insignificant set of harebrained woolly headed fanatics of about a hundred men" actually opposed Sunday legislation. Charging that they were guilty of "slanders" and "malicious statements and misquotations," he complained that in order to silence Saturday keepers they would have to be "knocked on the head with a club and then transported while unconscious to some uninhabited island where they would be compelled to remain, cut off from all intercourse with others for the remainder of their natural lives."

A Kinder, Gentler Era

As the twentieth century dawned, the cast of characters changed, and kinder and gentler leadership emerged in both organizations. Having alienated the other leaders of the organization by his bellicose approach, Crafts had turned his attention away from the American Sabbath Union and organized a rival body, the International Reform Association. Jones, in turn, became estranged from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The American Sabbath Union changed its name to the Lord's Day Alliance, and the time would come when James P. Wesberry, the executive director of the organization, would write a glowing foreword for Divine Rest or Human Restlessness by Adventist theologian Samuel Bacchiocchi and even invited him to address an annual meeting of the Lord's Day Alliance on February 18, 1979. Wesberry himself spoke at the Andrews University Theological Seminary. He said of Adventists, "In spite of differences of opinion in reference to the Sabbath question we had clasped hands across these differences and denominational lines and felt the warm, sincere grip and gracious friendship among brothers and sisters in Christ." What a far cry from Wilbur Crafts!

Sources

American Sabbath Union. First Annual Report; Third Annual Report; Document no.6, May 1889.

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Washington Post, December 13, 1888; May 16, 1892.

Notes


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*American Sentinel*, June 5, 1889, 152; A. T. J., "Mr. Crafts and His Oath," *American Sentinel*, September 5, 1889, 249-253. Crafts even wrote to the Battle Creek Seventh-day Adventist Church, requesting that they disfellowship Jones on the basis of his alleged falsehoods.

A. T. J., "Mr. Crafts and His Oath."


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