

BACK IN TIME: 1888

Iron wills stalled Lansdale Council

By **DICK SHEARER**

Most folks are disgusted with all the political gridlock that's taking place in Washington while the nation's economy is being held hostage. Back in 1888, Lansdale's government ground to a halt for another reason: no one wanted to serve as borough council president.

The town was not yet 16 years old when it came time to reorganize after local elections. In those days, the change took place on the first Monday in March – or at least it was supposed to.

As is the case today, *The Reporter* dutifully covered borough council meetings but it did so without reserving the editor's personal opinions for somewhere other than the news story. That makes it easy for us to read between the lines and figure out what was really going on.

The trouble began at the last meeting of the old council when only four members showed up. We assume it was a six-member council back then and the burgess - in this case merchant Jacob Geller - voted to break ties. Anyway, two councilmen who were not re-elected skipped the final session, leaving plenty of unfinished to be dealt with by the new board the following week.

Dr. John Jacobs, considered by many early residents as Lansdale's "Daddy", had been president of the outgoing council. If Jacobs was anything, he was opinionated and outspoken. People admired, detested or feared him – but all would agree that he wielded considerable power and influence.

Jacobs closest equal was A.C. Godshall, who operated a highly-profitable feed and grain mill next to the railroad tracks. Godshall, another member of council, was much more reserved than Jacobs, but he was no less opinionated. Both men were passionately positive about Lansdale's future, but they didn't always get along.

Jacobs and Godshall were holdovers when the new council convened to reorganize on that cold March Monday. Godshall assumed Jacobs would agree to another year as president so he nominated the good doctor. Jacobs flatly declined and returned the favor by nominating Godshall, who also said no.

Earlier in the meeting when the new members were

sworn in, everyone in the room exchanged pleasantries, but now the mood was darkening. When asked why he wouldn't take the top job again, Jacobs ran with the bait. He said (1) he held the job for too long and wanted to be relieved of the duties, (2) he had not received the past support of council that he felt he deserved, (3) he was blamed too often for anything that went wrong and sometimes his honor was questioned, and (4) he was tired of "fighting the people for the people singlehandedly" when others on council should do their fair share.

Godshall said he didn't consider himself qualified to serve as council president but then he got to the point: he felt Jacobs left a lot of unfinished business on the table and that he should clean it up before relinquishing the job.

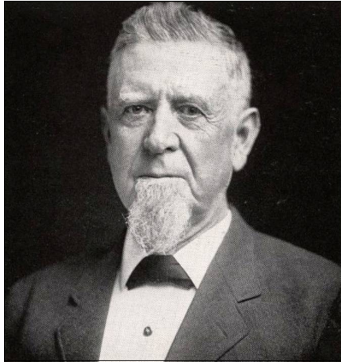
None of the other councilmen wanted to get caught in this buzz saw, therefore they didn't offer to be nominated. So there they sat – all six of them, all members of the Republican Party – waiting for Jacobs or Godshall to flinch. More than 2½ hours went by; they tapped their fingers and made small talk but there was no giving in. At 10 p.m., they adjourned.

A week later they tried again to convince Jacobs to stay on but he was more determined than ever to decline. So, in desperation, the remaining members turned to Godshall, who reluctantly accepted since it was obvious no one else would serve. He was unanimously elected.

A.C. found out in a matter of minutes how thankless the job would be. The first motion on the agenda involved naming the streets committee, which back then was more important than the finance committee. Jacobs nominated a committee that included Godshall; Godshall said he wouldn't serve unless the

size of the board was increased to include Jacobs. Jacobs balked and withdrew his motion. Another impasse ensued and it took a few more weeks before council got past Item One.

Meanwhile, the infamous Blizzard of 1888 raged up and down the East Coast. Roads were drifted shut, the railroad was paralyzed and everyday life ground to halt. What a perfect backdrop for the Bickersons of Lansdale Borough Council to sit on their hands and do nothing.



JOHN JACOBS, above, and A.C. Godshall were key players in Lansdale's early years

