

*To Chairman's  
confidential file*

(From Lanterns on the Levee, by William Alexander Percy, pp. 143-144)

"The most prominent politician in Mississippi at that time was James K. Vardaman, a kindly, vain demagogue unable to think, and given to emotions he considered noble. He was a handsome, flamboyant figure of a man, immaculately overdressed, wearing his black hair long to the shoulders, and crowned with a wide cowboy's hat. He looked like a top-notch medicine man. He had made a good governor of Mississippi and he craved public office because the spot-light was his passion and because, eternally in need of money, he abhorred work. At the slightest opportunity he would quote Bobby Burns fervently and with appreciation, but his oratory was bastard emotionalism and raven-tressed rant. For political platform he advertised his love of the common people and advocated the repeal of the Fifteenth and the modification of the Fourteenth Amendments to the Federal Constitution. He did love the common man after a fashion, as well he might, but although he hated the 'nigger,' as he called the Negro, he had never studied the effects of the abolition of the Fifteenth Amendment and he had never considered by what verbiage the Fourteenth Amendment could be modified. He stood for the poor white against the 'nigger' -- those were his qualifications as a statesman. He was very popular in Mississippi; they called him the Great White Chief.

"Father rather liked Vardaman -- he was such a splendid ham actor, his inability to reason was so contagious, it was so impossible to determine where his idealism ended and his demagoguery began. Besides he had charm and a gift for the vivid reckless phrase. A likable man, as a poolroom wit is likable, but surely not one to set in the councils of the nation. Father considered his Negro-baiting mischievous and his proposed changes in the Constitution impractical and undesirable. He was not a moral idiot of genius like Huey Long; he was merely an exhibitionist playing with fire. So Vardaman announced his candidacy for the United States Senate while Father was hunting quail in Arkansas.

"Father wanted to be a force for good government, but he did not want to hold office. He did not want to be senator from Mississippi, but he wanted to keep Vardaman from being. Vardaman stood for all he considered vulgar and dangerous. Most people we knew felt the same way about him. . . . ."