

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Summer 2015

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Long-Ago Snapshots

*When Sitting Bull
Was Photographed
in St. Paul*

Leo J. Harris

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*When Ramsey County Politics Had an Edge
Maas vs. Williams*

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A 1934 campaign poster calling for voters to reelect Congressman Melvin Maas. Maas, a Republican, won this election, defeating four other candidates who split the votes in Minnesota's Fourth Congressional District, which included Ramsey County. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY
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Volume 50, Number 2

Summer 2015

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Enjoy fun summer reading with this issue. The political landscape in Ramsey County in the 1920s and '30s was not dull. Paul Nelson has written a lively account of the rivalry between Melvin Maas, a colorful Republican congressman, and his left-leaning and equally passionate challenger, Howard Williams. It's a great read. Leo J. Harris explores the world of professional photography in St. Paul in the 1880s. In particular, portraits of Sitting Bull illustrate an up-and-coming technology, used to record the poignancy of a defeated warrior. And Janice Quick reveals the brief but sparkling existence of a midway carnival on the island in Lake Phalen in the early 1900s. Until concerns about water pollution shut it down, it hosted many festive family outings. We have a few interesting book reviews, too, and updates from readers. We are always interested in what you think.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

When Ramsey County Politics Had an Edge

Maas vs. Williams

Paul D. Nelson

No one under 90 years of age can remember a time when the voters of Ramsey County consistently sent a Republican to Congress. But it happened. From 1927 into early 1945 the only politician to represent Minnesota's Fourth Congressional District was the very conservative Melvin J. Maas. He kept the seat through tumult: the stock market crash and the fall of Hoover; Roosevelt's rise and the Republican Party's deep decline; the long and dispiriting Great Depression; and the radical challenge of Minnesota's Farmer-Labor movement.

Until his ultimate defeat in 1944, only one politician seriously challenged Maas's hold on this congressional seat—the left-leaning clergyman, political organizer, and serial candidate Howard Y. Williams. This is the story of their parallel and intersecting careers, and their unfriendly confrontations.

They could not have been more different. Melvin Maas was short and round, a lifelong Marine and successful insurance man, an opponent of Prohibition who smoked twenty cigars a day. He considered American pacifists and internationalists deluded and disloyal. The *Washington Daily News* once called him “a chunky bit of belligerency.”¹

Howard Williams, slim, elegant, and deeply affected by his Union Theological Seminary education, approached politics with a moral idealism—or maybe he was, as the *St. Paul Daily News* once put it, “prone to half-baked ideas.”² He leaned toward pacifism and believed good politics could make the world better. On Prohibition he supported more vigorous enforcement. Unlike Maas, Williams had no idea how to make money.

The two also had plenty in common. Both had volunteered for service in World War I and been changed by the experience. Both had attended the University of Minnesota, started in electoral politics in 1926 and finished in the early to mid-1940s. Both were family men and upright, immune from corruption. Maybe



Melvin Joseph Maas, age 17 or 18, in his St. Paul Central High School senior photo. Photo from the 1916 Central High School Yearbook, Minnesota Historical Society.

their similarities fed the rancor between them as much as their differences.

Melvin J. Maas (1898–1964)

Maas came to St. Paul from Duluth as an infant, graduated from Central High School, and began at the College of St. Thomas. Then World War I intervened. At age nineteen he joined the Marines and learned to fly. Stationed in the Azores, he searched the Atlantic for German vessels. Flying became Maas's passion, and he never really left the military; he kept his Marine Reserve commission. Back

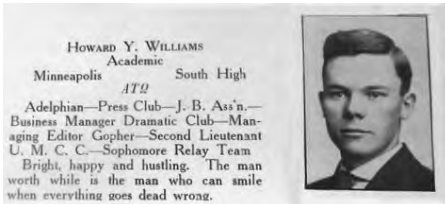
in St. Paul, after experimenting with the public speaking circuit and Texas oil, he did well in the insurance and surety bond business.³

In 1926, at age 27, he challenged incumbent congressman Oscar Keller in the Republican primary. Melvin Maas proved to be a skillful politician. Smart and gregarious, he also enjoyed the perfect ethnic and religious heritage for St. Paul—Catholic, German father, Irish mother. He saw Prohibition as a scourge, turning law-abiding citizens into enablers, even criminals. He called for amending Prohibition to allow selling beer and wine, and presented this as an anti-crime measure. It probably did not hurt that before Prohibition, St. Paul had been a regional brewing center, and the law had cost many jobs.⁴ Maas made Prohibition *the* issue of the campaign.

Keller, meanwhile, had been ideologically and personally erratic: he had been pro-labor, then announced he would become a “regular” Republican, costing him labor support; he had started impeachment proceedings against U.S. Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty, then walked out of the hearings when they did not go his way; he had supported Prohibition, but now wavered and lost the support of the Anti-Saloon League. Keller returned to St. Paul only ten days before the primary, expecting victory. Maas beat him by 10,000 votes. Maas won easily in November and when he took his seat became the youngest member of Congress.⁵

Howard Y. Williams (1889–1973)

Born in San Francisco in 1889, son of a Welsh father and Welsh-American mother, Williams came to Minneapolis as a young boy, graduated from South High School and from the University



Howard Y. Williams in his senior year in the 1910 University of Minnesota Gopher, Minnesota Historical Society.

of Minnesota in 1910. At the U. he ran track, wrote for its newspaper, the *Daily*, and did four years of (compulsory) military training. To pay for college, he took a year to work in a hard-rock mine in Washington.

Religion grabbed him at a youth revival meeting in 1909. After graduation he worked four years as general secretary of the University of Iowa YMCA. At Union Theological Seminary (1914–1917) he fell under the influence of the “modernist” Christianity of Harry Emerson Fosdick, which among other things promoted bringing Gospel teachings into social and political issues such as poverty.⁶

Soon after the U.S. entered World War I in April 1917, Williams shipped to France as a lieutenant and chaplain to the Tenth U.S. Army Engineers, a unit that spent the war turning French forests into lumber for the trenches. Williams saw no combat but, promoted to captain as a supervising chaplain, traveled a lot and witnessed plenty of destruction, human and material. His younger brother, Lester, was injured by poison gas. He would not forget what he saw.⁷

Mustered out of the army in 1919, Williams took the pulpit at St. Paul’s independent People’s Church. Upset by the influence of youth gangs in the river flats neighborhoods nearby, Williams turned the People’s Church, Monday through Friday, into what he called the Fifth Ward Neighborhood House, busy with youth sports, classes, clubs, and Boy Scouts.⁸

Sunday sermons sometimes turned political. He preached against the Klu Klux Klan, for Prohibition enforcement (notoriously lax in St. Paul), against a literal interpretation of the Bible, against excessive income inequality. On Sunday, November 13, 1924, he condemned the disparities in wealth in the United States,

and called for the socialization of all mines, railroads, and utilities: “We must confiscate property rather than allow property to confiscate life.” People’s Church grew and prospered.⁹

Williams got noticed. In 1926 St. Paul labor leaders searched for a candidate to run for mayor against city comptroller and former mayor, the Democrat Larry, “Larry Ho,” Hodgson. After two experienced politicians said no, Williams said yes. He lost by plenty, but his political career had begun.¹⁰

Williams and Maas faced each other for the first time in the congressional election of 1928. Maas had no need to take much notice of, or aim at, Williams in this one. St. Paul had always been a Democratic town in a Republican state. Williams represented the brand new Farmer-Labor Party, which never got particularly strong in the city. In a four-way race Williams finished third, with 21% of the vote, 13,000 behind Maas and 8,000 behind Democrat John Dolan. Republican Herbert Hoover, meanwhile, took Minnesota in a landslide in the presidential vote.¹¹ By the time Maas and Williams met again, in 1936, Minnesota politics had been scrambled.

In the Meantime: Maas

In Congress defense issues always animated Melvin Maas. For him, the best way to protect the U.S. from another war was a much bigger and stronger navy. He had no use for pacifists and “internationalists.” “When those people say our modest demands for an increased navy are the beginnings of a great military machine, threatening the peace of the world . . . I tell you, that is lying propaganda for the purpose of destroying the confidence of the American people in their own institutions.” The “depraved” internationalists “are doing everything possible to render America defenseless, so that it can be destroyed.” In 1930 he pressed for a Congressional investigation of any group “protesting or organizing and leading protests against the military and naval defense programs of the United States.” Ramsey County voters rewarded him with 66% of the vote in the 1930 election.¹²

From 1928 and into 1931 Maas pursued a spectacular corruption investi-

gation centered on a U.S. Post Office lease in downtown St. Paul. As far back as 1922 the local postmaster, with approval in Washington, had negotiated a twenty-year lease on a privately owned package shipping facility. Maas learned, and revealed, that the building was substandard and overvalued, the lease rates absurdly high—at over \$120,000 per year, equal to more than one-third the value of the building—and non-cancelable. An inspector had called the place unfit for human occupation. Bonds of \$850,000 had been sold on a building worth less than \$300,000. The clear implication was that only payoffs could explain this arrangement. His inquiry spread far beyond St. Paul.



Oscar Keller was the incumbent Republican Congressman in Minnesota’s Fourth District who lost to newcomer Melvin Maas in the 1926 election. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

This was not a party thing: Republicans had controlled the Post Office since Harding took office in 1921. Maas’s investigation led to the calling of a grand jury, but no indictments resulted. Maas claimed political pressure scuttled the case, but Maas’s work did result in cancellation of the lease. It also irritated party leaders.¹³

In 1932 a quirk interrupted Maas’s career. Due to Minnesota’s failure to redistrict after the 1930 census the Congressional primaries of 1932 were held on a statewide, at-large basis, with the top nine finishers for each of the three parties moving on to the general election (regardless of district). Maas finished eleventh out of thirty-two Republican candidates and came back to his insurance business in St. Paul.¹⁴

That quirk might have saved Maas's political career. In the 1932 elections Franklin Roosevelt crushed Hoover in Ramsey County, with 63% of the vote, and Farmer-Labor candidate for Governor Floyd Olson got 54% in Maas's district in a three-way race. Maas was a good candidate, but probably not strong enough to withstand the liberal tsunami of 1932. Not being in Congress in 1933 and '34 also saved Maas from having to vote on Roosevelt's most radical New Deal measures.¹⁵

Maas responded politically to the Depression and Roosevelt. As early as 1930 he had been part of an independent "progressive" caucus in Congress that criticized Republican leadership. In a chance on-the-street interview in 1933 he told a *St. Paul Dispatch* reporter, "Roosevelt has courage. He's showing the first leadership the country has seen in more than a decade." He attended the Republican National Committee meeting in Chicago in 1934, accused party leadership of being "servants of Wall Street," and threatened to leave the party. (Congressman Magnus Johnson of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party invited him to join that party, but he declined.)¹⁶

When Maas first ran for Congress, in 1926, he warned against any expansion of federal power as a surrender of state and local sovereignty, steps on the road to tyranny. The national economic crisis—and, presumably, Roosevelt's 1932 landslide—changed his approach. When he ran again in 1934 he promised cooperation with President Roosevelt (imagine a Republican doing that today!) and advocated, by federal action:

- Unemployment insurance and old age pensions;
- A comprehensive plan of public works;
- Food, clothing, medical care, and housing for all needy;
- Shorter working hours (a 30-hour week);
- Generous aid to state and local education;
- A constitutional amendment barring tax-exempt securities.



Melvin Maas was an outspoken critic of the lease arrangements for the U.S. Post Office in downtown St. Paul, which was known as the Commercial Station, seen here in 1921 at 190 East Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard). Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Maas's campaign flier ended with, "Maas is Soundly and Squarely Liberal."¹⁷

It is impossible to know how much this program represented a change of beliefs and how much an accommodation to a new reality. What is certain is that he wanted to go back to Congress. He accommodated enough, or got lucky, or a combination of the two. In 1930 Maas had gotten over 48,000 votes—his two adversaries together a little over 23,000. Here is the 1934 tally:

Melvin Maas (Republican)	37,933
A.E. Smith (Farmer-Labor)	30,354
John McDonough (Democrat)	24,122
Charles Andre (Independent)	10,180
Thomas Tracy (Communist)	497

Maas won, but his opponents outpolled him by over 27,000 votes.¹⁸ His share of votes fell from 66% to 36%—in most years, a catastrophe, but his multiple opponents split the vote. In the next election, a presidential year, the Fourth Congressional District might be in play.

In the Meantime: Williams

While Melvin Maas managed his political career, Howard Williams flew off in a new direction and eventually into controversy. He left People's Church in 1929 to go to New York as executive director of the League for Independent Political Action (LIPA).

LIPA was the brainchild of the greatest American philosopher of the twentieth century, John Dewey. Capitalism had failed, but both Republicans and Democrats remained its handmaidens. Republicans were dug in to defend it; Democrats wanted to tinker; neither faced the reality of replacing it with something better. "Not the slightest hope remains of accomplishing any fundamental change through either of the old parties. Both are dominated by corrupt political bosses and selfish business interests." Only a new, third party could do this democratically, and now was the time. LIPA did not propose to be the party, only to bring that party into being.¹⁹

The quantity and variety of hotel stationery in Howard Williams's papers testifies to the killing regimen of travel he put himself through over the next eight years.

Capitol Exploits

In her 1967 biography of Melvin Maas, Gladys Zehrpfenning reports two stories of Melvin Maas's physical courage, or daring, in Congress. On December 13, 1932, a young man named Martin Kemmerer appeared in the House gallery waving a gun and demanding to speak. While most members and spectators ran away, Congressman Melvin Maas, on the House floor, approached the elevated gallery and engaged the man in conversation. If he wanted to speak, fine, but the House had a rule, no guns while speaking. The gunman, apparently persuaded, dropped his pistol into the waiting hands of Melvin Maas below. Then, of course, he was arrested. But not hustled off right away—photographers posed a shot of Maas and Kemmerer together with the weapon!

The other story is that one day in 1929 Maas, alarmed by the lack of defense of Washington, D.C., decided to make a point. He was a licensed pilot and reserve officer in the Marines; so he had access to Bolling Field, a military airbase in the city. He often borrowed planes there to practice flying. To dramatize the absence of defenses, Maas chose a day that President Herbert Hoover was to address a joint session of Congress and, precisely at noon, flew his plane so close to the halls of Congress that the House vibrated with the sound. Message received: a determined enemy could wipe out big part of the government with a single strike.

The first of these stories is true. Maas received a medal from the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission for his cool-headed response. And Kemmerer could truly have been dangerous: his gun was loaded and he knew how to use it.

The second story, alas, is a fabrication. It has been recounted, in varying versions, in the *Saturday Evening Post*, in a 2014 Boise State University master's thesis, in the newsletter of the Carnegie Hero Fund, and recently in both *Minnesota Monthly* magazine and *MinnPost*. But it can't be true.

Here's the evidence against it. Maas employed clipping services to document his career, and extensive clippings files remain in his papers. No such story appears there or anywhere in his papers. Though one of his signature campaign issues was defense, the story does not show up in his surviving campaign materials. The spectacular tale of a Congressman buzzing the capitol while Congress was in session would have been newsworthy. No such story appears in either the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*.

Time magazine took note of Maas as early as 1926 and printed stories about him several times, into the mid-1940s, but the magazine said nothing about this incident. In 1933 the *St. Paul Daily News* published an admiring profile of Maas; it included the story of the gunman, but not the other one.

The St. Paul Central Library holds an amazing collection of biographical clippings, including over 300 about Melvin Maas, from 1925 into the 1940s: not one about buzzing the Capitol. But one clipping found there clears up the mystery.



Melvin Maas in 1929 in his pilot's flight suit. Photo courtesy of Paul D. Nelson.

Melvin Maas buzzed D.C. in an airplane, all right, but not for any political purpose. According to the *St. Paul Dispatch*, on June 1, 1929, p. 1 (also reported in the *New York Times*), Maas was reprimanded for flying too low over the city, including the Mall, and disturbing people with the noise. He admitted it and apologized; he had been practicing takeoffs and landings without thinking about the noise factor.

That's all there was to it, but over the years the story grew (at least in his mind) into something spectacular. Thirty years later this is what he told the *Saturday Evening Post*:

That was back in 1931 when some of my colleagues in the House of Representatives scoffed at my notion that an enemy plane could get close enough to bomb the capitol. To show them, I borrowed an old pursuit plane from Bolling Field and made three screaming runs at the skylight of the House while it was in session.

Maas should have consulted his daily diary; he recorded every flight he made, but there is nothing in 1931 (or 1929) about buzzing the Capitol. By 1959 Maas himself may have come to believe the tale, but it never happened.

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Melvin Maas diaries, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.

Atlanta, Toledo, Little Rock, Dayton, Buffalo, Los Angeles, all forty-eight states. His job was to roam the country enlisting allies and looking for a local party or movement that might go national.²⁰

For a thousand reasons, he never found it (nor has anyone since). Meanwhile, the election of third-party candidate Floyd B. Olson as governor of Minnesota, in 1930, pointed back to Williams's home state. Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party had taken a big share of political power; it might prove to be the national model LIPA had been looking for.

By sometime in 1932 Williams had returned to St. Paul and his LIPA organizing work now also bore the name of the Farmer-Labor Political Federation. He reconnected with the Farmer-Labor Party (which had no formal connection to the Farmer-Labor Political Federation), ran in the oddball primary of 1932, and took a beating similar to Melvin Maas's—he finished fifteenth of thirty-two Farmer-Labor candidates, out of contention.²¹

In early 1934 Williams published, under his name as author, a detailed program of LIPA and the Farmer-Labor Political Federation. This document probably represents his personal political beliefs. "We are standing," he wrote, "on the threshold of a new economic era." Capitalism could collapse at any moment. "If we do have another banking crisis within the next two years we will wake up some morning to find that America has gone Fascist." Our country's economic potentates would "crush out all rank and file organizations of the masses that might serve to check the dictatorship."

The mild-looking clergyman, who not long before had presided over a middle-class St. Paul non-denominational church, raised a clenched fist:

We will either go forward to the next stage of capitalism, state capitalism, collective capitalism, Fascism, the way Europe has gone; or we will go forward to the cooperative democracy proposed by the Farmer Labor party in which we push these exploiters off our backs, extend the American principle of public and cooperative ownership to natural resources, public utilities, banks, packing plants and monopolized industries



Congressman Maas, right, poses with a symbolic forget-me-not flower from a disabled veteran in 1930. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

and rebate this wealth back into the hands of the producers and consumers. . . .

The people, though, are not yet ready for this. For the next several years, while their minds and hearts are being prepared for "cooperative democracy," interim measures must be taken:

- Confiscatory income and inheritance taxes, "to skim off these huge sums of unearned wealth at the top;"
- A job for every worker;
- Adequate old age pensions;
- Maternity leave for women workers and state-provided "adequate medical care to insure the safety of mother and child;"
- A 30-hour work week and \$30 weekly minimum wage;
- Elimination of sales taxes;
- A moratorium on "unjust foreclosures;"
- Elimination of tax-exempt securities; and

- A minimum income for farmers based on cost of production.

These palliatives will precede nationalization of banks and munitions industries, public ownership of natural resources and utilities, and public or cooperative ownership of packing plants, steel, and other monopolized industries.²²

For all its reputation of radicalism, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party platform then in effect (adopted 1932) looks mild: unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, a state income tax, and, the most radical, public ownership of water and electric power.²³ This reticence was about to be exploded, and Howard Williams built the bomb.

The bomb went off at the Farmer-Labor party's 1934 convention in St. Paul. There the party's unchallenged leader, popular two-term governor and likely future U.S. Senator, Floyd B. Olson, made a memorable speech. "I am a radical," he proclaimed, to cheers.

Our ultimate goal is a cooperative commonwealth, wherein government will stifle as much as possible the greed and avarice of the private profit system, and will bring about a more equitable distribution of wealth produced by the hands and minds of the people.

[T]he eyes of the liberals throughout the nation, yes, throughout the world are focused upon us. We are the answer to those who contend that government cannot be truly representative of the common man and woman. If we fail them we fail humanity, but we cannot fail—not so long as we are worthy of the ideals we profess.²⁴

Stifle the avarice of capitalism and bring about a more equitable distribution of wealth—the cooperative commonwealth. For Olson this was careless rhetoric, as Williams should have (and may have) known. But recalling the speech more than thirty years later, he said, "We were so moved, we spoke in tongues."²⁵

He may have felt, in his thrall, that the words were aimed at him. He was chairman of the convention's platform committee, which went to work soon after Olson concluded the speech (and left town without giving the committee any guidance).²⁶

Presiding over the committee, Williams told the members that they had a choice, go along with trying to repair the current system or “step out and declare for a new social order.” Three platform proposals were offered: one from the Ramsey County Farmer-Labor group, one from Hennepin County, and Williams’s own.

The platform that came back at about 2 A.M., and enthusiastically endorsed by the delegates, has been called the most extreme ever endorsed by an American political party holding a share of power.

“We . . . declare that capitalism has failed and immediate steps must be taken by the people to abolish capitalism in a peaceful and lawful manner. . . .” Whew! It called for nationalization of all banks, mines, public utilities, transportation, and factories. “[O]nly a complete reorganization of the social structure into a cooperative commonwealth will bring economic security and prevent a prolonged period of further suffering.” The convention had adopted the Williams platform.²⁷

Olson biographer George Mayer called this platform an “extraordinary attempt at political suicide,” and Howard Williams has taken a lot of blame for it. Historian Millard Gieske portrayed his performance as reckless.²⁸ That is one way of looking at it. Another is that Williams listened to Floyd Olson’s speech, with its magic words, “cooperative commonwealth,” and took it seriously, or at least seriously as an opportunity. “If we fail them [the common man and woman] we fail humanity,” Olson had said. Was this not an invitation, a challenge, to seize the moment? As Brutus said in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, “there is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads to fortune. . . .”

That is how Williams saw it. Four weeks after the convention he told *St. Paul Daily News* reporter Leif Gilstad that “the response in the convention to such speeches as the governor’s indicated to me that the rank and file were ready to go along with a real program.” He agreed that it was too radical for many, but that was good: “It will drive out the hangers-on and make a real party out of it.”²⁹

It took a few days for the reaction to crystallize. Party moderates, includ-

ing Olson, feared that selling economic revolution to Minnesota farmers (who had mostly been voting Republican for decades) was not going to work. Four weeks later party leaders appointed a committee (not including Williams) to revise the program. The party settled on a rather elegant solution: Candidates would run on the “interim” recommendations of the platform—the enhanced New Deal part—and remind voters that implementing the visionary features would require national legislation, national consensus, and in some cases constitutional amendment.³⁰



A campaign flyer for Howard Williams. Photo from the Melvin Maas Papers, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

According to both George Mayer and Millard Gieske, the radical platform did enormous damage. It split the party on urban/rural lines and cost it many votes, and Gieske says it cost St. Paul’s socialist mayor, William Mahoney, re-election. Olson himself won reelection fairly easily, but by a much smaller margin than before. Conservatives, already in firm control of the state Senate, took the House also. By adopting the radical platform, the party lost all chance of turning its provisions into law.³¹

The 1936 Election

Both Melvin Maas and Howard Williams aimed for Congress in the elections of 1936. Both had strengths and both (unlike their meeting in 1928) now had public records to defend. The *Pioneer Press* newspaper had been a strong early supporter of Maas’s, going back to 1926. But in September of 1935, it featured him in a Sunday article about anti-New Deal voting. It reported that he had voted for the Social Security Act, been absent from several other important votes, and voted against Roosevelt-endorsed measures

(and with his party) thirteen times.³² Roosevelt remained tremendously popular in Minnesota, 1936 would be a presidential election year, and the Depression had gone on, with the Republican Party offering no persuasive way out. And Maas had gotten only 36% of the vote in 1934; he was vulnerable.

Howard Williams, on the other hand, had no official record to defend, as he had never won an election, but his role in the 1934 Farmer-Labor platform was well known—in normal times, too radical to be elected. And so they squared off, two able and eager heavyweights. Williams attacked and never stopped. He made two fundamental charges: (1) Maas was dangerously right wing: “Melvin Maas is the full time servant of the big banks, public utilities, and munitions interests” and on civil liberties, he “shows a dangerous tendency toward fascism;”³³ and (2) Maas opposed the New Deal.

These charges had just enough to them to fall within capacious boundaries of campaign truth. It was true, as Williams repeated (and repeated and repeated), that most of Maas’s legislative achievements had been in promoting defense; this was his area of specialty. But there was nothing to suggest any motivation other than sincere belief. “Militarist” was just name-calling, without real content. In Congress Maas belonged to a tiny minority of 103 out of 435; only by developing expertise in an area of possible bipartisanship—in his case, defense—could he hope to get anything done.

And Maas had never opposed the New Deal. He had voted against certain measures, yes; but not the program on the whole. Given the tiny Republican minority, his votes mattered not at all. He had taken a “loyal opposition” stance, just as his campaign literature had obliquely suggested, giving his independent judgment on Roosevelt Administration proposals. He had voted for big measures like the Social Security Act and the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. Still, he had voted against such pro-labor measures as the National Labor Relations Act (protecting collective bargaining), the Walsh-Healey Public Contracts Act, guaranteeing overtime pay, and the Robinson-Patman Act,

protecting independent merchants from chain stores. Maas defended himself ably, but Williams put him on the defensive.³⁴

Williams drove him crazy. Maas's speeches from that campaign shake with exasperation:

- "Again, the Rev. Mr. Williams resorts to cheap trickery in his campaign of misrepresentation."
- "He resorts to half-truths, which are more despicable than out and out lies. One hardly expects a clergyman to stoop to such tactics."
- "You asked me [addressing Williams, rhetorically] why I advocated relief then voted against it. You know that is a damnable lie."
- "Williams, stick to the issues and facts!"³⁵

Candidate Williams wrapped himself in the cozy blanket of Roosevelt and the New Deal. There was no talk of overthrowing capitalism, or the cooperative commonwealth. He called for a more muscular New Deal and promised to oppose any American involvement in foreign wars.

It is impossible to know whether Williams's more moderate program reflected a change in his beliefs or a tactical retreat. His 1934 Farmer Labor Association manifesto acknowledged that the people were not ready for the cooperative commonwealth just yet—they would need some years of an enhanced New Deal to get ready. His 1936 program looked like just that.

Maas attacked Williams as a hypocrite (all-Roosevelt, yet he had spent most of a decade promoting a third party to compete with Roosevelt's Democrats; true), a dirty campaigner (true), and, well, a Communist:

- "Williams was the proud author of the 1934 Communist Farm-Labor platform. . . . This platform announced that Capitalism had failed and proposed . . . a soviet system in Minnesota."
- "Explain why you oppose every from of national defense in this country. Isn't it because you want

the American people to be unable to defend themselves against a communist uprising or an invasion by Russia?"

- "Mr. Williams denies that he is a Communist . . . yet I hold in my hand a Communist pamphlet . . . which endorses Earl Browder for President and H.Y. Williams for Congress. . . ."³⁶



A caricature of Maas that appeared in the St. Paul Daily News. Clipping from the Melvin Maas Papers, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Today the accusation "Communist" looks a little comical, but in 1936 it still carried plenty of heft. With capitalism stricken and failing in the eyes of many voters, Communism looked like a real threat, and American Communists were plenty active, including in Minnesota.

Williams was no Communist (he was probably a socialist, in something like the European social democratic line)³⁷ but certainly far, far out of the Minnesota mainstream. In today's attack ads he would have been clubbed to death with his own words. You can hear the tag line: "Howard Williams—far left . . . and not right for Minnesota." But this was a different time and it would have been hard for anyone to see the handsome and personable clergyman—a World War I army chaplain no less—as an agent of Stalin's.

Beneath all the name-calling and the

record-distorting rhetoric lay fundamental ideological differences. Melvin Maas was willing to put up with the New Deal as a temporary response to the crisis—upon the end of the crisis, however, he desired a return to a lightly regulated market capitalism. As early as 1934 he lamented that people were becoming dependent on government to meet all their needs. Williams, by contrast, believed in the use of state power to make permanent change in economic and social relations. In this debate, not much has changed in the last eighty years. It was a three-way election race; the strength of the Democratic candidate, a railroad clerk named A.B.C. Doherty, would be important. How would the pro-FDR vote be split?

St. Paul those days was divided into twelve wards, some tiny, some huge. Williams whipped Maas in nine of them, by substantial pluralities. The East Side, North End, West Side, and Frogtown all went solidly for Williams. So far, so good.

Maas's strength lay in just three wards: Ward Seven, south of Marshall from Cathedral Hill on the east and Lexington on the west; Ward Ten, St. Anthony Park and the city's northwest corner; and Ward Eleven, Highland Park. These were also the city's largest by population. He crushed Williams in all three, by five thousand in Ward Eleven alone. Maas also enjoyed extraordinary ticket-splitting: nearly 20,000 St. Paul voters chose Roosevelt for president (he easily carried all twelve wards) and Maas for Congress. Maybe Maas's Red-bashing worked, just enough, after all.

The final tally of votes:

Maas	48,399	(38.27%)
Williams	48,039	(37.99%)
Doherty (D)	28,957	(22.89%)
Otis Luce (I)	952	

Melvin Maas did well in an anti-Republican landslide, but the voters did reject him by a margin of nearly 30,000 (7,000 more than in 1934); and so he was returned to Congress.³⁸ Doherty, an unknown, did surprisingly well and therein lay Maas's electoral success and long career—divided opposition. In the eight

times he won election to Congress, Maas got majorities only twice. Williams made noises about a recount, but noises only. He would never come close to public office again.

Coda

Governor Elmer Benson, the Farmer-Labor successor to Floyd Olson, who died in 1936, gave Howard Williams a job at the state capitol as Director of the Minnesota Division of Soldier Welfare. Melvin Maas went back to Washington. The Depression continued; war threatened more ominously in Europe and Asia.

Williams and Maas matched up again in 1938, and fought the contest on the same grounds, with the same accusations back and forth, even more bitterness this time. Maas should have been just as vulnerable as ever. Instead, he won easily. State politics had been transformed by divisions within the Farmer-Labor Party and by the arrival of a new star, Republican Harold Stassen.

In 1936 Governor Benson had beaten Republican candidate Martin Nelson in Ramsey County by 85,134 to 42,947—a two to one margin. In 1938 Benson's votes fell by 37,000—over 43%—and Stassen won there 64,293 to 48,174. Williams fell by only 16% in his rematch with Maas; in defeat, he far outpolled his party.³⁹ In 1940 Maas won re-election with a 58% majority, while Williams lost again, this time as Farmer-Labor candidate for lieutenant governor. From there he moved temporarily to north central Louisiana, where he had gotten a federal job. And there he learned that Melvin Maas could hold a grudge.

Williams's job was an unglamorous one, morale officer for new army recruits. In the summer of 1941 the U.S. Civil Service Commission suspended him upon the receipt of a complaint that he was too radical to be allowed to influence young soldiers. According to Williams, the complaint listed seven points, the crucial one this: That while serving as Director of Soldier Welfare Williams kept on his office wall a photo of himself shaking hands with the chairman of the Communist Party USA, Earl

Browder. The author, said Williams, was Congressman Melvin J. Maas.

Williams's papers contain a surprisingly cheery seventeen-page reply to the charges, addressed to the Civil Service Commission. It admitted the photo on the wall, with one correction; the man with him was not Earl Browder but another public figure who must have been well known to Maas—the “father of the Air Force,” General Billy Mitchell. The complaint was dismissed but Williams did not get his job back.⁴⁰

The surviving Civil Service Commission file neither confirms nor disproves Williams's suspicion about Maas; no seven-point complaint or long answer by Williams appears in it. The record has an odd American Legion (a veterans' organization) focus that points plausibly at Maas. He was a prominent Minnesota Legionnaire, and he was interviewed in the investigation. The two written complaints in the record came from Minnesota American Legion officials, St. Paul lawyer William Fallon, and Minneapolis Republican Congressman Oscar Youngdahl. They claimed that Williams—another Legionnaire, but not active—was a Marxist. Their complaints were addressed to Paul McNutt, head of the Civil Service Commission and past national president of the American Legion. Melvin Maas met with McNutt privately within one week of the announcement of Williams's appointment.⁴¹

Williams got good performance reviews in Louisiana, and the Commission dismissed the complaints, but no matter—he never got his job back. If Maas was behind all this, as seems likely, it was not his finest hour.

Howard Williams came back to Minnesota and made one more election foray. In 1942 he got the Farmer-Labor endorsement for lieutenant governor (though he had run for governor), but lost the nomination in the primary.⁴² Now, at last, he was done. But not done with politics.

Howard Williams continued to scramble for work as a political organizer. He worked as Midwest organizer for Union for Democratic Action—predecessor of Americans for Democratic

Action—in the mid-1940s, then the League for a Free (meaning free from British control) Palestine, then Independent Voters of Illinois, and then the Minnesota DFL in the early 1950s. In 1955, after twenty-six years out of the pulpit, he became pastor of a Congregational church in Butte, Montana. That job turned political too; he led a successful effort to defeat anti-union legislation in the Montana legislature. In 1965 Williams returned to St. Paul as local organizer of United World Federalists until his retirement, at age 80, in 1969. He died in St. Paul in 1973.⁴³

Melvin Maas won reelection in 1940 and 1942. While in office in 1942 he used his Marine aviator's commission to join—on his own—combat operations in the South Pacific, and won a Silver Star for volunteering on a perilous air reconnaissance and combat mission out of Port Moresby, New Guinea.

Running for a ninth term in 1944, Maas had to deal with something common for most politicians but new to him: a single opponent. The Democratic and Farmer-Labor parties, now merged, sent the veteran Farmer-Labor man (and Williams's first campaign manager in 1926), Frank Starkey, against him. Maas was a war hero but probably did not help himself by accusing—just before election day—President Roosevelt of allowing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in order to draw the country into war. Starkey beat Maas in the general election by 4,040 votes.⁴⁴ Though only forty-six years old, Maas never ran for office again.

After leaving Congress in 1945, Maas went back on active combat duty. He won a Legion of Merit for his service as an airbase commander during combat on Okinawa and was promoted to major general. On Okinawa he suffered facial wounds from Japanese bombs.

He remained on duty after the war. Over the course of a few weeks in August 1951, possibly deriving from his Okinawa injuries, Melvin Maas went completely blind. But rather than retiring, he learned to navigate the world anew, usually without a cane or an attendant. In April 1954 President



Maas as a Marine major general, now blind, in 1952 flanked by his daughter, Patricia, left, who is also wearing the uniform of a woman Marine, and his wife, Katherine. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Eisenhower appointed him chairman of the Commission on Employment of the Physically Handicapped, where his work won him countless awards and certificates of appreciation. He died on the job in 1964.

Frank Starkey represented the Fourth Congressional District for just one term. Republican Edward Devitt (later and for many years a federal judge) defeated and followed him for one term. Eugene McCarthy crushed Devitt in 1948 (by 25,000 votes and Democrats—McCarthy,

Joseph Karth, Bruce Vento, and Betty McCollum—have represented the district without interruption for nearly seventy years.⁴⁵

One-party politics pleases those in control, dispirits the minority, and bores almost everyone. The Melvin Maas era in Ramsey County bored no one: the paradox of a pugnacious conservative representing a liberal district gave every election an edge—this cannot be!—and made for far more compelling politics than what has ensued.

Paul D. Nelson is a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Editorial Board, the author of Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912 (2002), and a frequent contributor to this magazine. He owes many thanks to Tom O'Connell and the Farmer Labor Education Committee for directing his attention to Howard Williams; to those at the St. Paul Public Library responsible for its amazing collection of newspaper clippings; and to Steve Trimble.

Notes

1. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 30, 1928; *Washington (D.C.) Daily News*, June 4, 1934, unpaginated clippings in Melvin Maas Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul, Minn.
2. *St. Paul Daily News*, May 2, 1926 p. 1.
3. There is one published biography of Maas: Gladys Zehnpfennig, *Melvin J. Maas: Gallant Man of Action* (Minneapolis: T. S. Dennison 1967). It must be used with caution, as it is uncritical, lacks any identification of sources, written for a high-school audience, and contains one enormous fabrication (see sidebar). Still it is accurate on the whole and has been the source of much writing about Maas since 1967.
4. In 1932, citing a study by the International Union of Brewery, Flour, Cereal, and Soft Drink Workers, Maas estimated that Prohibition had cost St. Paul over 1,500 jobs (*St. Paul Dispatch*, January 14, 1932, p. 1).
5. *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 15, 1922, p. 1 (Daugherty hearings); November 21, 1927, p. 1 (obituary); Minnesota Secretary of State, *1927 Legislative Manual of the State of Minnesota*, compiled for the Legislature of 1927 (Minneapolis: Harris & Smith Co., 1927), 350 (hereinafter *Legislative Manual*). Soon after Keller left office in 1927, his wife, Alice, died of pneumonia at age 48; Keller died, also of pneumonia, seven months later. They left three young children.
6. Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 464–89.
7. No biography of Howard Williams has ever been published. The most complete treatment available is a sketch that accompanies the guide to his papers in notebook M441 of the manuscript collection at MHS. It is useful, though it contains one spectacular error—the assertion that Williams received a Congressional Medal of Honor; he did not. The best source for his early life is “Autobiography of Howard Y. Williams,” a typescript in his papers, at MHS. This is, alas, incomplete; it breaks off in the late 1920s. His “Reflections on 74 Years,” a sermon he prepared for United Congregational Church, Butte, Montana, January 27, 1963, covers more ground but is short. Also useful is a short resume, all in the Howard Y. Williams papers at MHS. Some facts printed here were gathered from his papers in general.
8. “Uses Boy ‘Gangs’ in Church Work,” *St. Paul Daily News*, undated clipping marked 1921, Williams Papers.
9. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 20, 1925, p. 1 (death penalty); September 29, 1924, p. 1 (the Klan); May 18, 1925, p. 16 (against literal interpretation of Genesis); November 14, 1924, p. 4 (quotation); undated clipping in Williams Papers, People’s Church budget tripled during his first five years as pastor.
10. *St. Paul Daily News*, May 5, 1926 p. 1 (election results.)
11. *1929 Legislative Manual*, 86. Hoover beat Al Smith in Minnesota by 560,977 to 396,451.
12. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 30, 1928, clipping with no page identified in Melvin Maas Papers; “The Age of Propagandists,” 1928 pamphlet in the Maas Papers, p. 6; *St. Paul Dispatch*, March 22, 1928, p. 13; and *1931 Legislative Manual* p. 366.
13. *St. Paul Dispatch*, March 8, 1928, p. 1 (grand jury report); Melvin J. Maas, “Facts About the St. Paul Post Office Lease,” *Congressional Record*, 71st Congress, Second Session, in the House of Representatives, February 24, 1930; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 25, 1930, p. 1 and February 26, 1930, pp. 1 and 8 (editorial); *Time*, April 22, 1930.
14. *St. Paul Dispatch*, November 7, 1933, sec. 2, p. 1; *1933 Legislative Manual*, 201.
15. Minnesota Secretary of State, Abstract of Votes, Election November 8, 1932, Ramsey County. Tally: Roosevelt 66,128, Hoover 38,589. For governor: Floyd B. Olson 59,206, Republican Earle Brown 35,960, and Democrat John Regan 14,137.
16. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 4, 1931, p. 9; *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 26, 1933 pp.1, and 7 November 1933, p. 1; *Christian Science Monitor* June 8, 1934; *Washington Daily News* June 4, 1934, clippings with no page identified, Maas Papers.
17. “Maas and Progress, a Constructive Program,” 1934 campaign pamphlet, Maas Papers.
18. *1935 Legislative Manual*, 378.
19. League for Independent Political Action, “Wanted, A New Political Alignment,” and “League for Independent Political Action Endorses B.C. Vladeck,” (quotation); undated fliers in Williams Papers.
20. Howard Y. Williams Papers.
21. Williams’s movements, in residence and employment, during this period are hard to pin down. In a resume done later, found in his papers, he wrote that he worked for LIPA until 1935, then the Farmer-Labor Political Federation 1935–1937. But he was in St. Paul long enough to run for Congress in 1932 and to participate in the Farmer-Labor Convention of 1934, and some 1934 FLFP documents, bearing his name give its address as the Hotel Frederic, St. Paul. Some also show him employed simultaneously by both organizations. His Civil Service file shows him employed by LIPA from September 1929 to November 1937. Howard Y. Williams Civil Service file, National Archives and Records Administration, St. Louis, copy in author’s possession, *1933 Legislative Manual*, 342 (primary election results.)
22. Farmer-Labor Political Federation and League for Independent Political Action, “America’s Future, The Farmer-Labor Party Program,” a four-page broadside, Williams Papers. Though undated, this appears to come from early 1934.
23. George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1987), 95–96.
24. *St. Paul Daily News*, March 28, 1934, pp. 1–2
25. James Shields, *Mr. Progressive: A Biography of Elmer Austin Benson* (Minneapolis: T.S. Dennison Co., 1971), 46. This is from an interview Williams gave Shields in 1967.
26. Mayer, 171.
27. *St. Paul Daily News*, March 28, 1934, pp. 1–2; *Duluth Labor Leader*, April 7, 1934, p. 6 (complete platform text).
28. Millard Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1979), 192–93.
29. *St. Paul Daily News*, April 22, 1934, p. 1.
30. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 22, 1934, p. 1.
31. Mayer, 223–72. These two chapters, “The 1934 Election,” and “Deadlock,” describe the events in detail, with Mayer’s analysis; Gieske, 192–93.
32. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 8, 1935, section 3, p. 3.
33. Williams for Congress Press Release, September 28, 1936; undated Williams 1936 press release or radio address, Maas Papers.
34. Williams’s last newspaper ad, published the day before the election, leads with the headline, “Stand By Roosevelt.” The text: “Elect Howard Y. Williams to Congress. He is the ONLY candidate for Congress in this District who is campaigning for Roosevelt and his policies,” *St. Paul Daily News*, November 2, 1936 p. 2; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 2, 1936, p. 3.
35. Quotations from two 1936 radio campaign speeches, Maas Papers.
36. *Ibid.*
37. There were plenty of socialists in the League for Independent Political Action, and Williams’s 1934 Farmer-Labor Political Federation platform closely resembles the American Socialist Party platform of 1932.
38. Minnesota Secretary of State, Abstract of Votes, Election November 3, 1936, Ramsey County.
39. *1939 Legislative Manual*, 390. Here are the vote totals: Maas: 60,252 (53%); Williams: 40,588; A.B.C. Doherty: 12,619. Maas did remarkably well. Though turnout fell by 13,000, he increased his votes by over 11,000. Stassen carried five of St. Paul’s twelve wards, one of them by over 10,000. Minnesota Secretary of State, Abstract of Votes, Election November 8, 1938, Ramsey County
40. Draft letter from Howard Y. Williams to U.S. Civil Service Commission, dated July 5, 1941, Williams Papers.
41. Undated Maas newspaper obituary, biography clippings collection, St. Paul Central Library; Howard Y. Williams Civil Service file; Melvin Maas diary, March 18, 1941, MHS.
42. Gieske, 309–11; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 11, 1942, p. 1. Williams lost by about 3,000 votes out of 98,000 cast.
43. Howard Williams, “Reflections on 74 Years,” January 27, 1963, Howard Y. Williams Papers; Biographical Sketch, Manuscript Notebook 441, MHS.
44. Zehrfennig; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 29, 1946, p. 9; *Legislative Manual*, Maas Papers; Albert Eisele, “Melvin Maas: A Hero in Congress from Minnesota,” *MinnPost*, December 20, 2011.
45. *1945 Legislative Manual*, 358; *1947 Legislative Manual*, 359; *1949 Legislative Manual*, 355.

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This photograph of Chief Sitting Bull was made at the photography studio of Alfred Palmquist and Peder T. Jurgens in St. Paul in 1884. The signature at the bottom of the cabinet card adds to the value and importance of the photo. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress. For more on Sitting Bull and Palmquist and Jurgens, see page 13.