



Farmer-Labor Founder William Mahoney and His Battle with Communists

JIM MCCARTNEY, PAGE 1

How do supplies get to market? Trains, trailer trucks, and cargo ships do most of the heavy lifting these days, but how was it done in the mid-1800s? Back then, convoys of wooden, two-wheeled oxcarts creaking, swaying, and kicking up dust across prairieland were a common site as fur traders loaded their supplies and made their way hundreds of miles from northern territories to an initial destination—St. Paul. Today, though, the once famed Red River trails are silent. But a recent recreated trek by Canadians Terry and Patty Doerksen has us thinking about what life was like for those early businessmen. Check out these transportation statistics from long ago.

Number of miles between Upper Fort Garry in Winnipeg, Manitoba, to the Port of St. Paul, Minnesota:

469

Total weight a typical oxcart and ox could carry (goods and people):

800 to 1,000 pounds

Number of carts traveling south to St. Paul in the 1840s:

Low hundreds

Number of carts traveling to St. Paul in the late 1860s:

Thousands

Number of carts tied together in a “brigade” with three drivers and an overseer:

10

Average speed and distance for a typical cart in the 1800s:

2 miles/hour and 20 miles/day

Source: “Red River Trails facts for kids,” Kiddle, accessed September 29, 2022, https://kids.kiddle.co/Red_River_Trails.

To read about the Doerksens’ recent trek, see “*A Man, a Woman, an Ox, and a Cart: Retracing the Red River Trail*” on page 17.

ON THE COVER

William Mahoney was a pressman, trade unionist, labor leader, political activist and candidate, and editor. He even served as St. Paul’s mayor. Most importantly, perhaps, was his work as a “political entrepreneur.” According to author Jim McCartney, the founder of the Farmer-Labor Party “crossed paths—and crossed swords—with some of the most influential leaders in the world.” See “Farmer-Labor Founder William Mahoney and His Battle with Communists” on page 1. Photographs courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society. News headline in The Minneapolis Morning Tribune, June 18, 1924, 1.



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REVIEWED BY RENOIR W. GAITHER

Message from the Editorial Board

It’s a shame that history is often reduced to lists—dry, uninspiring chronologies of dates and events. History is so much more—it’s people, who through their work, make history—or people, who through their love of land and lore, reenact history and make it come alive in the present day.

William Mahoney was a history maker, an early champion of the labor movement, and a politician who never backed down from a good fight. Or a bad one. In Jim McCartney’s cover story, we learn about the “quiet, white-haired little man,” a fierce advocate for farmers and workers who described himself as a dreamer. McCartney brings Mahoney to life as we follow his political and personal trajectory.

Then there’s Canadian couple Terry and Patty Doerksen. They recently followed the mostly forgotten Red River Trail from Upper Fort Garry in Winnipeg to Lowertown St. Paul—just the two of them and a wooden cart pulled by a young ox named Zik. Terry’s love of Manitoba history and his deep respect for the ancient lands of the Anishinaabeg led him to attempt this grueling journey. His adapted dispatches to the *Winnipeg Free Press* and Patty’s photos are a delightful addition to this issue.

At Ramsey County Historical Society, we don’t just make lists. History comes alive on these pages. We hope you enjoy these stories.

Anne Field, Chair

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks former Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon.

Farmer-Labor Founder William Mahoney and His Battle with Communists

JIM MCCARTNEY

William Mahoney was anxious to open the national convention of the Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation at the Municipal Auditorium in St. Paul.

As temporary chairman of the convention and president of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, Mahoney had spent six months organizing the launch of a new national party. With Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette, the charismatic, progressive US senator from Wisconsin potentially leading the ticket, Mahoney was convinced this unique party could forever change the landscape of American politics.

American flags festooned the auditorium on the pleasant, sunny day, June 17, 1924. “The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party Welcomes You” read the sole banner in the convention hall. About one-hundred men and women who had paid fifty cents for admission waited in the galleries.¹

The St. Paul Daily News described the delegates on the main floor as “[f]armers just in from the fields, labor organizers with their coats off, girl workers with knickerbockers, fat old women and moustached foreign-looking men.” When Mahoney entered, they applauded enthusiastically for the “quiet, white-haired little man, who describe[d] himself as a ‘dreamer.’”²

Behind Mahoney’s round, wire-rim glasses were the eyes of a fifty-five-year-old firebrand who had once run for Congress as a Socialist in 1914. An accomplished pressman, he became a top official at a St. Paul trades union who hoped to mould labor into a political powerhouse. He was the driving force behind uniting farmers, union tradesmen, factory workers, and others into the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party—one of the most powerful political organizations of its kind in US history. Now, he was ready to leverage state success into a national political party.³



The Farmer-Labor Party (1918-1944) was a historically successful third party that became part of the mainstream two-political-party system when it merged with the Democrats to become Minnesota’s Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party. This 1924 printer’s slug and an undated political button are a few remaining artifacts from the early party. Image digitally edited by Tim Davenport for Wikipedia Commons; button courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

An hour past the 10 a.m. scheduled opening, Mahoney headed to the podium. Appearing before a curtain portraying a “sylvan scene,” he pounded the meeting to order—with a piece of scrap wood. “Someone stole my gavel, so I had to go in the scrap heap and get this,” Mahoney told the convention.⁴

Despite setbacks, Mahoney was determined to host the event. Three weeks earlier, Senator La Follette had issued a public letter distancing himself from the party and its convention because its organizers had committed the “fatal error” of allowing Communists to participate.⁵

In his keynote address, Mahoney defended his inclusion of Communists in this “great coalition movement among all progressives.” Those who felt threatened by the party had “inveigled” La Follette into making a “cruel and unwarranted” denunciation of the convention,



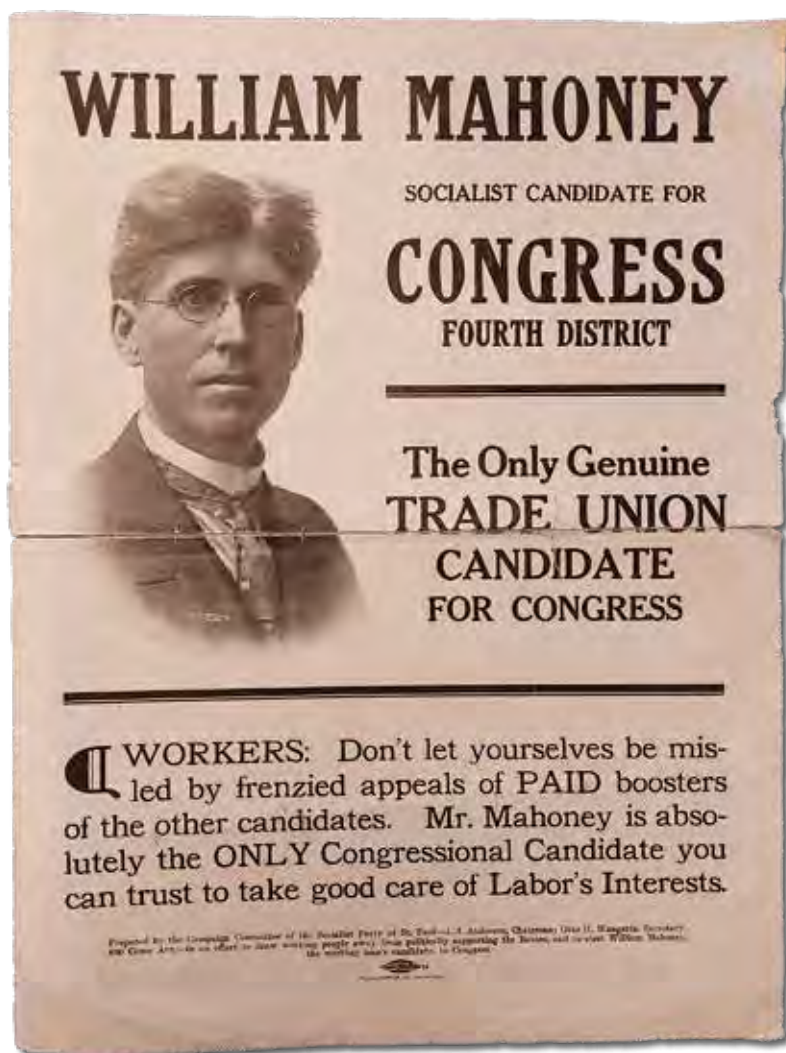
he said. Mahoney believed that a successful Farmer-Labor convention would win back La Follette by proving his fears to be overblown and misguided.⁶

He appealed to the delegates to overthrow the old-line political parties, revolt against oppressive economic conditions, let go of intra-party conflicts, and unite to back La Follette as president:

Minnesota has served as a laboratory in which to work out the principle of political organization which must be employed on a national scale before the great work can be done. The auspicious day has arrived to accomplish the disruption of the old political parties.⁷

The day would become less auspicious by the hour.

When he was forty-five, William Mahoney pursued a bid for US Congress but lost.
Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



Mahoney's Beginnings as a "Poor Provincial"

Most often remembered as the mayor of St. Paul (1932-1934) at the tail end of the gangster era, Mahoney wore many hats—pressman, trade unionist, labor leader, activist, law school graduate, editor, political candidate, and public official. However, it was as a “political entrepreneur” that he would have the most lasting impact.⁸

Born in Chicago on January 13, 1869, Mahoney grew up on a farm near Ottawa, Kansas, one of six children. After training to become a pressman, he worked at shops in Nashville, Galveston, Kansas City, and Chicago, winning glowing reviews from former employers, who praised his “splendid reputation as a master workman, manager and gentleman.” He gave lectures on artistic printing, and he found time to graduate from the Indianapolis School of Law in 1902, writing his thesis on “the fundamental principle . . . of all municipal law.”⁹

In 1905, Mahoney arrived in St. Paul as a labor activist, pressman, and ardent Socialist. In 1914, he ran for Congress, advocating for workers to control the government, which in turn should own railroads, mines, trusts, and factories and control the banking industry. “The rotten rule of the rich” should be abolished, he argued.¹⁰

But while he had support from the Socialist Party, he had trouble winning support from his union brothers, who shouted him down during a campaign speech and demanded he defer to another candidate by withdrawing from the race. In an open letter, Mahoney told his union that “I shall stick in this fight and all others to the end.” He would lose the election badly, winning only 7 percent of the vote. Mahoney, who was not one to back down from a fight, would soon become a potent force not just within his union but Minnesota’s labor movement, as well.¹¹

That year also saw the start of World War I. Many Americans wanted their country to stay out of the “Great War,” especially Socialists like Mahoney, who viewed war as capitalistic activity that made workers its victims. But when the US entered in 1917, it became unpatriotic to oppose the war; oppressive tactics were used to keep citizens in line. This was especially true for workers who threatened to strike—or went on strike; the

Twin Cities' Streetcar Strike of 1917 led to riots and heavy-handed government intervention. This increasingly hostile political environment spurred unions to get more involved in politics. During the War, many new unions were formed, the membership of the old organizations expanded, and "new and progressive ideas" were introduced to St. Paul's conservative labor movement, Mahoney would recall.¹²

A Quick Rise in the Union Ranks

Demonstrating a growing political savvy, Mahoney positioned himself to lead labor's entry into the fray by dropping his Socialist membership, citing its unpatriotic anti-war stance. He privately argued that socialism was more of an "education movement" than a "political organization." In 1918, Mahoney joined the committee of the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly that backed candidates for public office. He would soon become chairman, exhorting his fellow unionists to help labor gain "a controlling influence in the government of the city."¹³

When the assembly's president was elected to the Saint Paul City Council, Mahoney ran to replace him and won. He quickly strong-armed the purchase of the *Minnesota Union Advocate* from Cornelius Guiney, its long-time owner, telling Guiney that if he did not sell, he would face competition from a rival labor newspaper. After borrowing money from members to pay for the deal, Mahoney installed himself as the paper's "editor, manager, bookkeeper, solicitor . . . everything but actual printer."¹⁴

Calling it the "first labor paper" in the country to focus on politics, Mahoney said the *Union Advocate* would educate the members about politics and the economy and help them fight anti-labor employers who aggressively opposed the formation of unions and often refused to negotiate with them. He would also use it to promote the Farmer-Labor movement in Minnesota.¹⁵

Founder of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party

Along with former Minneapolis Mayor Thomas Van Lear, also a former Socialist, Mahoney began the groundwork for a new political party. In 1919, at the Minnesota Federation of Labor convention, Mahoney convinced delegates to

establish the Working People's Nonpartisan Political League (WPNPL)—counterpart to the farmer-based Nonpartisan Political League (NPL), which promoted its own candidates within the two-party system. The NPL had stood behind workers during the streetcar strike, donating funds and speaking out on their behalf, demonstrating that workers and farmers had interests in common. In writing the constitution, declaration of principles, and platform for the new organization, Mahoney borrowed heavily from the NPL platform, which combined progressive reforms with moderate socialism.¹⁶

As president of the WPNPL, Mahoney wanted the two leagues to merge into a Minnesota Farmer-Labor Federation, whose function would be to support and direct the Farmer-Labor Party.¹⁷

Mahoney's constant striving prompted one union colleague to complain that despite his unquestioned integrity, Mahoney was continually "stirring things up" and "not tactful or diplomatic." In addition, many farmers and NPL members worried that the new organization would be controlled by the unions and its Communist elements. Even Van Lear opposed this merger and red-baited Mahoney in the newspaper he helped establish, the *Minnesota Daily Star*.¹⁸

Overcoming this opposition, Mahoney worked with NPL head, Henry Teigan, to combine the two leagues into a tightly centralized Minnesota Farmer-Labor Federation with unity of command, interests, and ideology. At a joint convention in St. Cloud, the merger proposal was introduced by Clarence Hathaway, a St. Paul trade unionist chosen by Mahoney.¹⁹

The merger passed, but Mahoney was not done. In 1923, building on the party's astonishing success in electing two US senators and two congressmen, Mahoney set out to gather a dozen other state Farmer-Labor Party members and progressives under a national banner that would headline La Follette for US president. Mahoney pushed to hold a Farmer-Labor Progressive convention in St. Paul to nominate La Follette and lay the basis for a permanent third party. Mahoney was elected temporary chairman of the convention, while Hathaway was unanimously elected secretary.²⁰

When Home is a Part of History:

Living in Mayor Mahoney's House

A few years after my wife and I bought our house in St. Paul in 1992, I struck up a conversation with a woman in a doctor's waiting room. We discovered we both lived in the Merriam Park neighborhood, and when I mentioned our home is situated on the southwest corner of Dayton and Dewey, she replied, "Oh, the mayor's house!"

She was referring to William Mahoney, St. Paul's mayor from 1932 to 1934, who resided on Dayton Avenue from 1919 to 1947. His tenure at the house closely coincides with the birth and merger of his greatest achievement—the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. A few years ago, "William Mahoney home, 1852 Dayton" was included on the St. Paul Labor History Map.^a

Over the years, Mahoney's name has come to my attention: a remodeling project uncovered a *True Detective* magazine from the 1930s, as well as a workman's reference to Mrs. Mahoney buried in a wall; in a 1994 column in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Don Boxmeyer referred to Mahoney's hostile relationship with the press; and while reading a historical novel called *Saint Mudd: A Novel of Gangsters and Saints* about a St. Paul newspaper reporter's crusade against criminals and corruption, I came across a chapter named for Mayor Mahoney ("Mahoney Baloney"), who was in a heated battle for reelection.^b

I was curious about this larger-than-life man, but it wasn't until a year ago that I began to research his history in earnest. Reading about Mahoney and pouring through two boxes of personal papers at the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS), I began to appreciate what a fascinating, flawed, and important man he was.

Although the Victorian-era house he and I have lived in has undergone changes over the years, it's still essentially the same house. A breakfast nook was added in 1928, and in 1946, Mahoney was in the "midst of the wreckage" of another renovation, which he references in a personal letter. Did he hold union or political meetings here? Where did he type the letters, economic and political reports, and scathing rebukes of critics and enemies? I'll probably never know, but it's fun to look around the house and imagine.^c

I found a number of photographs of Mahoney at MNHS but none of him at his house. I ordered copies of two photos—one with his cabinet in 1932 at the new city hall and another of him with Amelia Earhart a few years before her flight to oblivion. They hang in our front hall over a bookcase topped with a gavel and block set



The former home of William Mahoney, where the Jim and Martha McCartney family has lived for thirty years. Courtesy of Summit Images, LLC—Bob Muschewske and Leaetta Hough.

presented to Mahoney by the St. Paul Vocational School. A friend found them at an antique store. These few items make up my tribute to the writer and editor, pressman and lawyer, and labor leader and political entrepreneur who changed the face of Minnesota labor and politics and came close to having a seismic effect on the American political system.



In the house that once belonged to William Mahoney, author Jim McCartney has set up a small Mahoney shrine in the home's entryway next to the staircase. Courtesy of Summit Images, LLC—Bob Muschewske and Leaetta Hough.

In the spring of 1924, Mahoney met with La Follette in Washington, DC. La Follette was eager to rejuvenate progressivism and, at age sixty-eight, he was running out of time if he wanted to run for president. A new national party could play a key role in the agenda of presidential politics, Mahoney said. If La Follette could win enough states to deny the other candidates an Electoral College win, the election would go to the US House of Representatives, where the political forces were “about evenly balanced,” he said.²¹ La Follette seemed to be on board.

La Follette Balks

Three weeks before the convention, however, La Follette issued a public letter denouncing the convention because of the “very large number of Communist delegates.” The Communists wanted to disrupt the Progressive movement, use it to incite “a proletarian revolution” in the US, and establish a Soviet form of government, he wrote.²²

Why did Mahoney include Communists in the convention? Clearly, there were reasons for Mahoney not to trust them. In 1923, the Communists worked with labor leader John Fitzpatrick to launch a national Farmer-Labor Party, only to “steam roll” Fitzpatrick by packing the Chicago gathering with their own members and taking control of it. Fitzpatrick and many of his union brothers bolted from the convention, leaving the Communists with a Pyrrhic victory. Mahoney disregarded Fitzpatrick’s direct warning to him, perhaps because he assumed the Communists would not repeat this obvious mistake.²³

Mahoney and his fellow Farmer-Labor leaders thought including Communists was a relatively safe bet. They were dynamic workers—too few to pose a real threat from within—but as enemies, they could cause trouble from without. The Communists’ pledge to help build a Farmer-Labor Party and elect La Follette seemed genuine because it squared with the Leninist united front strategy that encouraged Communist cooperation with other workers in their common struggle against capitalism.²⁴

One historian suggests that Mahoney may have admitted Communist organizations to the convention “out of disgust” with labor

leader Samuel Gompers and his heavy-handed, red-baiting opposition. Gompers not only hated Communists, but he avidly opposed the creation of the Farmer-Labor Party; he felt that labor could better advance its interests by working within the two main parties. Gompers would use the Communist involvement to persuade La Follette to publicly renounce Mahoney’s convention.²⁵

Mahoney’s Hoped-for-Ace: Robust Convention Turnout

If it came to a struggle with the Communists, Mahoney thought he had an ace in the hole. If, as anticipated, 4,000 to 5,000 people from thirty-two states attended the convention, such a turnout could easily fend off any Communist takeover attempt. The day before the convention, Mahoney told a reporter that “our farmer delegates are coming in fast and they will have a big majority.”²⁶

Privately, he was less confident. Even before La Follette’s letter, the *Farmer-Labor Advocate* asked on the front page, “Should we go or stay away?” After La Follette’s letter, cancellations came pouring in. In the days leading up to the convention, Mahoney anxiously scoured registrations at the Labor Temple in St. Paul, where delegates turned in their credentials.²⁷

He was right to be anxious. While La Follette supporters stayed away, Communists arrived in force. The Communists had sent out 50,000 invitations for the convention and moved “heaven and hell” to get delegates to Minnesota. Moscow paid for everything, including railroad tickets, hotel costs, per diem, and other expenses. They even hired a special train to bring Communists from Chicago to St. Paul. In the end, only about 500 delegates came; many of them were Communists.²⁸

Humiliation or Hope?

One of the convention’s first orders of business was to elect a permanent convention chairman.²⁹ When Mahoney, the temporary chairman, was nominated, he told the delegates:

A few weeks ago when La Follette made his statement about this convention, I was made a target of ridicule. I can stand argument. I can stand abuse. I can stand

ridicule. But forces will desert one who is ridiculed. . . .

I have been accused of running the convention. It is ridiculous to state that some poor provincial such as I could bring the representatives of the farmers and the workers together and get them to do something for themselves.

This is not my convention. I want to be controlled by the delegates. I don't want there to be any basis for the charge that it is being run for the aggrandisement of Mahoney. Therefore, I decline.³⁰

Other nominees were proposed but were ineligible or also declined. Again, the cry rose for Mahoney, who responded, "It has been charged, and I wonder if it is true, that the dead hand of

[Vladimir] Lenin is dominating the convention. I don't think it does. We must decide whether this will be a real political party or a farce."³¹

He agreed to run. So did a Communist candidate. Mahoney lost.³²

Despite this humiliating defeat, Mahoney had reason to hope that the Communists would stick to their pledge. American Communist William Z. Foster acknowledged to delegates that a successful Farmer-Labor Federation could not be Communist, have a Communist platform, or nominate Communist candidates.³³

Mahoney proposed endorsing a provisional presidential ticket that would step down in case La Follette wanted to run with their backing. His plan was adopted. A unionist and a farm editor were endorsed for the top two spots.³⁴

But then things went south again. Newspaper warnings that the convention's platform will be "built of red-stained planks" came true. The platform called for the nationalization of monopoly industries, banks, mines, public power, transportation, communication—and immediate recognition of the Soviet Union.³⁵

Led by Foster, the Communists agreed to accept La Follette as a candidate if he accepted "the party's platform and its control over his electoral campaign and campaign funds." While there was little chance La Follette would agree to this, the maneuver kept the non-Communist delegates from bolting the convention.³⁶

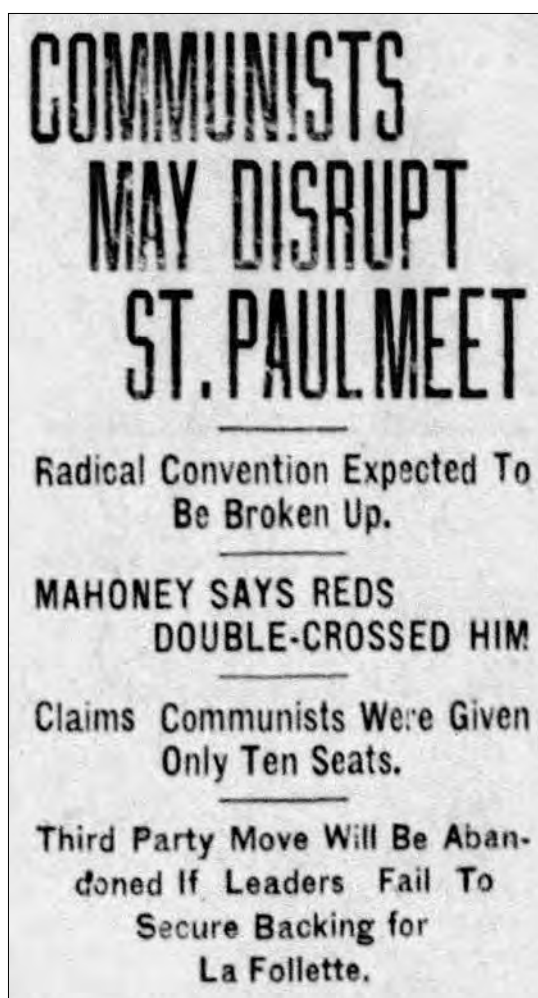
In the end, even the candidates changed. Shortly after the convention, the Communists, in full control of the new party, replaced the endorsed ticket with Communist leaders Foster, for president, and Benjamin Gitlow, for vice president. Everything that Foster had promised delegates would not happen, happened.³⁷

Et Tu, Hathaway?

The most surprising betrayal was that of Hathaway, who worked closely with Mahoney to organize the convention.

An "outgoing, friendly man, a former semi-pro baseball player not adverse to having several drinks," Hathaway had a personality that was "gay, warm, and slightly unstable." Born in St. Paul (Oakdale Township), Hathaway was a tool-and-die maker who, like Mahoney, was or would be a trade unionist, Socialist, labor leader,

Ominous headlines prior to and during the 1924 Farmer-Labor Progressive convention in St. Paul warned of a Communist takeover in Minnesota newspapers and many other papers across the nation. This headline greeted readers in Marion, Ohio. *In Marion Star*, June 18, 1924, 1.



Key Players

William Mahoney crossed paths—and crossed swords—with some of the most influential leaders in the world. These included Progressive lion Robert La Follette, Minnesota Governor Elmer Benson, Bolshevik hero Leon Trotsky, American Communist leader William Z. Foster, and labor leader Samuel Gompers. Lesser known but important figures included Clarence Hathaway, a Communist who betrayed Mahoney at the national Farmer-Labor Progressive convention in 1924, and Thomas Van Lear, a former Socialist and Minneapolis mayor, who fell out with Mahoney over his plan to consolidate the farmer and labor organizations underlying the Farmer-Labor Party and take the party national. Below are brief sketches of these men, including their fates.

Elmer Benson (1895-1985) was a Farmer-Labor candidate who won the 1936 governor's race in Minnesota but lost reelection to Republican Harold Stassen in 1938. Late in life, while Benson acknowledged that Communists were included in his party's political process while governor, he said it is "sheer exaggeration" that the Communist Party ever "took over" the Farmer-Labor Party during his time in office.^a

William Z. Foster (1881-1961) was an American labor organizer and Communist politician who made his fame leading the steel strike of 1919. He was the American Communist Party candidate for president in 1924, 1928, and 1932. He received a state funeral in the Soviet Union when he died in 1961.^b

Samuel Gompers (1850-1924) was the first and longest-serving president (1886-1924) of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). By the time of Gompers' death, the AFL had grown to 3 million members. Gompers opposed Communists and the formation of a political party representing workers, arguing labor does best working within a two-party system.^c

Clarence Hathaway (1894-1963) was a Minnesota trade union activist who rose in the ranks of the American Communist Party after his



Governor Elmer Austin Benson. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



William Z. Foster. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*



Samuel Gompers. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

role in the 1924 Farmer-Labor convention. The longtime editor of *The Daily Worker*, he would go to prison briefly in 1940 after losing a libel case. He was kicked out of the Communist Party for "alcoholism" that same year but was readmitted after World War II. In FBI files published in 2011, it was disclosed that he had been an informant for the FBI since 1920.^d

Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette (1855-1925) was a Republican governor, US representative, and US senator from Wisconsin who championed progressive politics. In ill health when he unsuccessfully ran for the presidency in 1924, he died on June 18, 1925.^e

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) was second only to Vladimir Lenin as a hero of the Russian Revolution and was Joseph Stalin's rival and critic. Once in power, Stalin had Trotsky expelled from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1927 and exiled to Turkey in 1929. He was killed by a Soviet-backed assassin in Mexico City in 1940.^f

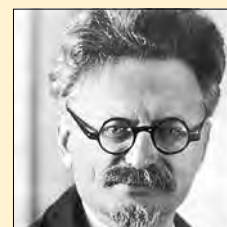
Thomas Van Lear (1869-1931) was a machinist, Socialist, and mayor of Minneapolis (1917-1919). He and William Mahoney founded labor's Working People's Non-partisan Political League. Van Lear adamantly but unsuccessfully opposed Mahoney's attempt to create the Farmer-Labor Federation. Discouraged after losing the fight with Mahoney, he retired to Miami.^g



Clarence Hathaway. *In Minneapolis Newspaper Photograph Collection, courtesy of Hennepin County Library.*



Robert La Follette. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*



Leon Trotsky. *Uploaded from Wikipedia Commons.*



Thomas Van Lear. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

political candidate, writer, speaker, and newspaper editor.³⁸ Given all they had in common, Mahoney likely looked upon the much younger Hathaway as his protégé.

Unlike Mahoney, Hathaway was a Communist. In fact, he was head of the Minnesota Communist Party. As the secretary of the convention, Hathaway was “assigned to this work by the Communist Party,” Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky wrote later that year.³⁹

In a memoir, Gitlow claims that Hathaway played “a most clever Jekyll and Hyde role,” hiding his Communist connections from Mahoney and fellow Farmer-Laborites. Clearly, however, Mahoney must have suspected Hathaway was a Communist—especially when La Follette, in his renunciation of the convention, publicly outed Hathaway as a “delegate to the Communist Worker’s Party convention in 1923.”⁴⁰

But Hathaway likely had no idea that Moscow would force him and his comrades to renege on their pledge to Mahoney and the La Follette plan—a plan which, although not without opposition, was supported by most American Communists.

Trotsky regarded the plan as a dangerous illusion relying on capitalist farmers and on La Follette, an old man who “hadn’t found time

to leave the ranks of the Republican Party.” In the turmoil following Lenin’s death in January 1924, the issue became ensnared in an ensuing power struggle between Trotsky and a troika of Soviets, including Joseph Stalin. Trotsky attacked the troika as being too conciliatory and opportunistic, citing the La Follette scheme as a prime example. To undercut Trotsky, a month before the convention, the troika-led Communist International issued an order to cease all cooperation with liberal or Social-Democratic parties. This led to pulling support for the La Follette plan but keeping this decision a “dead secret” until shortly before the convention.⁴¹

Hathaway figured prominently in the Communists’ new plans. He was ordered to assign Communist delegates to influence or spy on other delegates and non-delegate Communists to work on “convention arrangements and technical matters” or to run messages.⁴²

Mid-convention, it all became too much for Hathaway. Gitlow wrote, “the orders of the communist steering committee were so brazen that even the crooked Hathaway was afraid to carry them out.” Hathaway fled the convention and was later found in a “speakeasy where he had drowned his troubles and eased his conscience with bootleg liquor.”⁴³



The Aftermath

For Mahoney, more humiliation came the next month, when he was criticized for his “depraved” associations and barred from sitting as a delegate at a progressives’ gathering in Cleveland, where La Follette was nominated as an independent candidate, but no third party was formed.⁴⁴

La Follette would get 4.8 million votes in the presidential election, far short of Republican Calvin Coolidge with 15.7 million and Democrat John Davis with 8.4 million—but well ahead of Foster, the Communist candidate, with 36,386.⁴⁵

After initially arguing that criticism of the 1924 convention was overblown and that it served a useful purpose, Mahoney would end up repudiating it. He initially blamed his convention’s troubles on opponents, such as Gompers, for sabotaging the gathering by convincing La Follette to withdraw. He also blamed La Follette for dooming the convention by following through.⁴⁶

But soon Mahoney would come to understand that the Communists had planned to betray him before—not because—La Follette withdrew due to Communist involvement. Mahoney became an implacable enemy of the Communists, accusing them of betraying their promises and sabotage. He successfully

advocated that Communists be expelled from the Farmer-Labor Party and from the local labor movement. His *Union Advocate* ran excerpts from an article Hathaway wrote for the *Daily Worker* in which Hathaway admitted that by taking over the convention, the Communists ended up with “a house of cards that crashed on our heads.” In an accompanying article, Mahoney wrote that Hathaway’s “frank confession” showed that the Communists “failed in their purpose” and demonstrated the strength of the Farmer-Labor movement’s ability to withstand “the insidious efforts of these disruptionists.” The Communists, for their part, said Mahoney betrayed “the interests of the working class and the principles of the labor party” by continuing to support La Follette.⁴⁷

Moderate and right-wing Farmer-Labor members would use the convention debacle against Mahoney to reassert control over the party. Republicans charged that the Farmer-Labor Party members were Communist tools, even holding a mass rally of 10,000 at the St. Paul Municipal Auditorium to say as much.⁴⁸

The disastrous convention soured the election for the Farmer-Labor Party that year. But that was not the only factor: as the economy gained strength during the Roaring ‘20s, the

Members of the Farmer-Labor Party at their two-day convention in St. Paul in March 1930. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



Farmer-Labor movement and its progressive platform saw its voter support erode.⁴⁹

Leveraging his position as editor of the *Union Advocate*, Mahoney slowly reestablished himself within the Farmer-Labor movement. The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Federation was renamed the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Association—the only significant difference being that Communists were no longer welcome as members. Mahoney lost his role as president but remained on the leadership committee. His plan to restructure the organization stayed largely intact, and, for years, he would remain among its top leaders.⁵⁰

As the economy deteriorated and the Depression took hold, the Farmer-Labor movement began a remarkable comeback, starting with Floyd Olson's election as Minnesota governor in 1930. Although the Socialist slogans were gone, the party advocated for increased government intervention and regulation, which struck a chord with voters devastated by high unemployment and decimated savings accounts.⁵¹

Mahoney Runs for Mayor

In 1932, Mahoney ran as a Farmer-Labor candidate for mayor of St. Paul. He had campaigned for the job in 1920 and lost largely due to his former ties to the Socialist Party and the “Red

Scare” raging at the time. Although his beliefs had not greatly changed, his campaign was less negative and strident. He would take a more incremental and collaborative approach to change. He was even a strong supporter of the Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt and his progressive agenda. He focused on promoting public welfare and opposing “underworld and special privilege influences,” which have “assumed a dominant place in our City government.” Under St. Paul Police Chief John O'Connor and his brother, Democratic politician Richard O'Connor, St. Paul had become a haven for gangsters and bootleggers, who thrived during Prohibition.⁵²

Backed by a progressive labor coalition of the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly, Democrats, and Farmer-Laborites, Mahoney's victory was an early prototype of the “fusion” between these elements.⁵³

As mayor, Mahoney's inclusiveness and handling of a public crisis won widespread admiration. Business leaders were pleasantly surprised when he issued an open solicitation for suggestions as to who should serve on a civic advisory committee. Later, Mahoney, facing a city payroll shortfall due to endemic delinquent property taxes related to the Depression, was able, on his reputation as a staunch unionist, to convince city employees to accept 85 percent of their wages. As a result, he was able to rescue the city's finances and protect jobs. Mahoney also built credibility with city hall workers through his efforts to reduce utility rates and curb unfair corporate practices. Even Homer Clark, the head of West Publishing, wrote in 1933 that “strange to say, after seeing [Mahoney] in action for nearly a year . . . [I am] glad he beat the conservative candidate.”⁵⁴

Mahoney Loses Reelection

Business interests, however, did not favor his attempt to municipalize the Northern States Power (NSP) Company, Xcel Energy's predecessor. Mahoney had long believed in public ownership of electric utilities. He helped launch a commission to report on St. Paul's “utility problem,” which argued that residents were paying high gas and electric rates and that the city was losing industry because of these high rates.⁵⁵

Newly elected Mayor William Mahoney receives congratulations from his opponent, Gerhard Bundlie, c. 1932. Photograph by Bowen Studios, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



In addition, Mahoney's attempt to protect St. Paul's business interests and reputation by downplaying crime at the same time he ramped up efforts to fight it would backfire. The end of Prohibition and his crackdown on corruption had made criminals desperate and angry at the town that was once their haven. That anger opened the door to bank robberies, shootouts, and high-profile kidnappings. As one historian put it, "the immediate result of Mahoney's anticrime crusade was an unparalleled crime wave. . . ."⁵⁶

Mahoney's downplaying of crime and attempts to municipalize NSP were used against him by Mark Gehan, who ran for mayor in 1934 and initially posed little challenge to Mahoney's bid for reelection. As challenger, Gehan said Mahoney was responsible for the city's crime wave. To be fair, by downplaying the problem, Mahoney may have looked either clueless or complicit to many voters. Meanwhile, NSP furiously attacked his takeover attempt and his reelection bid.⁵⁷

Mahoney's reelection chances also may have been hurt by the Farmer-Labor Party's 1934 radical platform that advocated public ownership of key industries and a gradual end to capitalism. Gehan barraged Mahoney with anti-socialist assaults, declaring that only he (Gehan) could save the city from the clutches of socialism and communism. Mahoney lost to Gehan by 500 votes (out of 94,100).⁵⁸

Taking Mahoney's defeat as a lesson, Governor Olson—who famously declared, "I am a radical" at the 1934 convention—distanced himself from the platform enough to win reelection, but Farmer-Laborites failed to win either house of the state legislature.⁵⁹

Although he was sixty-five, Mahoney was not ready to retire. In 1936, after he ran against Gehan again and lost, Governor Olson appointed Mahoney as State Liquor Commissioner. His challenge was to regulate the liquor industry, which had been dominated by bootleggers and gangs during Prohibition. In 1939, he was replaced when Farmer-Labor Governor Elmer Benson lost reelection to Republican Harold Stassen.⁶⁰

Mahoney would become increasingly disillusioned with the leadership of the Farmer-Labor Party, especially Benson. One key reason: the surging influence of the Communists.

The Communists Come Back

In 1935, Communists crept back into the Farmer-Labor movement as part of a new initiative called the Popular Front, which supported political coalitions. Well-known Minnesota Communists were replaced by younger ones, with one exception—the return, after a decade away, of Clarence Hathaway. Hathaway would supervise the Communist Party's reentry into the Minnesota Farmer-Labor movement and quietly create an alliance with Benson.⁶¹

Meanwhile, Mahoney had his eyes on another job—this one as editor of the *Minnesota Leader*. He had started the paper in 1924 as the *Farmer-Labor Advocate* and managed and edited it until 1930, when the Farmer-Labor Association renamed it.⁶²

In a detailed proposal in 1939, Mahoney said the newspaper was "a failure financially and educationally." In 1940, Mahoney was hired to edit the *Minnesota Leader* for \$50 an issue. His attempts to revive the paper were mixed. In 1941, he lost his position after the publication's reports about Communist attempts to seize control of the Farmer-Labor Party's convention and editorials warning off Communists who would run as Farmer-Labor candidates.⁶³

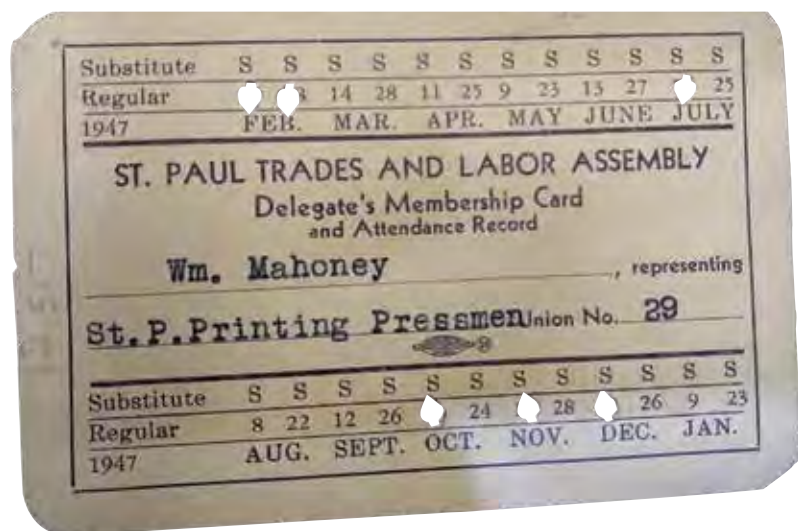
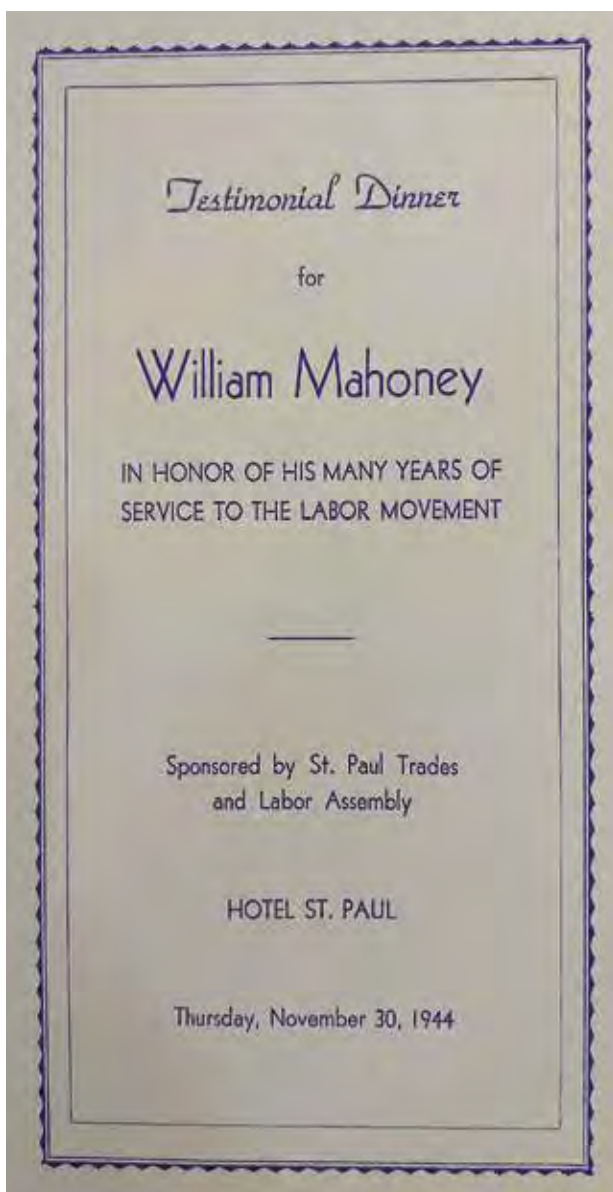
Mahoney Disengages from the Farmer-Labor Association

In 1941, after his attempts failed to rid the party of the influence of the Popular Front, Mahoney resigned from the Farmer-Labor state committee, blaming the committee and "fellow travelers," such as Governor Benson, for perverting "the association into extremist channels." In his resignation letter, Mahoney said that Benson brought the movement "to the brink of moral and financial bankruptcy."⁶⁴

After an aborted attempt to run for Congress in 1942, Mahoney resigned from the Farmer-Labor Association. History was repeating itself, he said, and he refused to be "party to such betrayal." In 1944, when the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Association merged with the Democratic Party, Mahoney blamed Benson, Communists, and fellow travelers for "finally destroying the Farmer-Labor Party."⁶⁵

The party Mahoney had founded, the most powerful third party in US history, would take

Two artifacts included in William Mahoney's papers after his passing: a dinner invitation honoring the elder politician and Mahoney's 1947 union membership card. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



a diminished role with the merged Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party due to its leaders' continued alliance with the Popular Front and its Communist elements. As anti-communism grew during the Cold War era, anti-communist liberals such as Hubert H. Humphrey consolidated their control of the party.⁶⁶

Not so Retiring in Retirement

Given his penchant for hot rhetoric, Mahoney was surprised that a group of "co-workers, friends and suspected foes" threw a testimonial dinner for him in 1944. Mahoney wrote that he was "shocked to be told to my face that I was not always a confirmed disturber, and I had done in my time many constructive things that redounded to the permanent advantage of the people."⁶⁷

Throughout his life, Mahoney remained true to the beliefs that spurred him to organize the Farmer-Labor Party. When he reached his eighties, Mahoney suggested to one friend that he was slowing down while telling another that he was researching how money and the banking system are "potent weapons of exploitation by which the few dominate the system and rob and rule the many." Less than three weeks before his death, he wrote his brother Terrence that he and Stella, his wife of sixty-six years, are in "good health" and that, despite "doing some research work," he has "learned to enjoy an idle life" and to "disregard the eternal struggle that fills our days of the life that has faded out."⁶⁸

On August 16, 1952, Mahoney died of a severe coronary occlusion. His death certificate lists his occupation, not as mayor, editor or labor leader, but as "retired pressman." Found among his belongings was a 1947 union membership and attendance card for the St. Paul Printing Pressmen.⁶⁹

Jim McCartney is a St. Paul writer. After a long career as a newspaper journalist, including twenty-five years as a business reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, he joined Weber Shandwick public relations' healthcare and science teams in 2006, where he worked before going on his own in 2020.

Progressives Find Relevance in the Mahoney Story

Former St. Paul Mayor William Mahoney was honored in the *Union Advocate's* one-hundredth anniversary edition in 1997 and had a street co-named for him in 2002.^a

But what truly makes his story relevant today are his roles as a labor leader and political entrepreneur and the many social, political, and economic parallels between 2022 and a century ago. Changing workforce conditions, a surge in organized labor, the stark disparity in wealth and power between the rich and the rest, and polarized politics are a few trends Mahoney's time shares with ours.

"That era and this era were periods of great flux—flux in the economy, flux in the labor movement, and flux in the political arena," says Peter Rachleff, a retired professor of labor history at Macalester College. "I think we can use Mahoney's story to explore what we are going through now and how we can drive political and economic change."^b

Just as we see low wages drive organizing attempts at companies ranging from Starbucks to Amazon to Chipotle, we saw a surge in union organizing after World War I for similar reasons. Likewise, there was great disparity in wealth between the rich and the rest of us. Then, it was Henry Ford, John Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie. Today, it is Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk. And there was an increasing divide between left and right, which would culminate a decade later in the rise of progressive Franklin Roosevelt as well as fascist Adolf Hitler, who had many admirers in America.^c

In fact, Mahoney and the Farmer-Labor story are surprisingly hot topics today among progressives who debate how to build political power: work within the Democratic Party, form their own party, or consider a combination of the two?

Mahoney faced a similar dilemma: he and his colleagues worked within the two-party system before

starting the Farmer-Labor Party. Others in the labor ranks, including powerful American Federation of Labor (AFL) President Samuel Gompers, opposed the creation of a third party and insisted workers were better off within the two-party system.^d

For some progressives, Mahoney's approach in establishing a successful third party—it dominated Minnesota politics for more than two decades and is still an important part of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party makeup today—shows how to build a movement as a political force. In a 2017 article for the American socialist magazine *Jacobin*, Eric Blanc argues that Mahoney and Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party are "rich in lessons for challenging the two-party system." He focuses on how the forerunners of the Farmer-Labor Party ran their own candidates and built up their base within the system before adopting the "Mahoney plan," through which they made a "dirty break" from the two-party system to form their own party.^e

Echoing Mahoney's words, Blanc argues that building "a working-class party in the United States" is far more realistic than "the illusion" of capturing a party "controlled by corporate America and its political adjuncts." The key question, Blanc asks, is whether today's socialists can match the "active intervention of William Mahoney and his comrades" necessary to implode the two-party system.^f

Blanc's article has drawn opposing responses from those who argue that the left should try to realign the Democratic Party to be more progressive and from those who believe progressives should make a "clean break" from the Democrats and start their own party.^g

A man who loved spirited debate, Mahoney no doubt would be happy to know that he's in the middle of one among progressives and socialists even today.

NOTES

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13. William Mahoney papers, letter to H. E. Soule, box 1, correspondence and misc., 1890-1929, MNHS; Wingerd, 219-220.

14. Wingerd, 220.

15. William Mahoney, letter to members of the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly, August 2, 1920 and letter to Arnold Severeid, who was writing his dissertation on "The Party Press in Minnesota," box 1, correspondence and misc., 1937-1939, MNHS. Note: The student was American author and CBS News journalist Eric Severeid, who dropped the use of his first name, Arnold; Wingerd, 220.

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Ramsey County History is published quarterly
by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323
Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, Saint Paul, MN
55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright
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Number 0485-9758.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

The Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) strives to innovate, lead, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, deliver inspiring history programming, and incorporate local history in education.

The Society was established in 1949 to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, the original programs told the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Heyáta Othúnwe (Cloud Man's Village).

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, the organization moved to St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 and rededicated in 2016 as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers public programming for youth and adults. Visit www.rchs.com for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps, courthouse and depot tours, and more. The Society serves more than 15,000 students annually on field trips or through school outreach. Programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, & Inclusion

RCHS is committed to ensuring it preserves and presents our county's history. As we continue our work to incorporate more culturally diverse histories, we have made a commitment to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion that is based on this core idea: RCHS exists to serve ALL who call Ramsey County home. To learn more, please see www.rchs.com/about.

Acknowledging This Sacred Dakota Land

Mnisóta Makhóche, the land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds, extends beyond the modern borders of Minnesota and is the ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Dakhóta (Dakota) people. It is also home to the Anishinaabe and other Indigenous peoples, all who make up a vibrant community in Mnisóta Makhóche. RCHS acknowledges that its sites are located on and benefit from these sacred Dakota lands.

RCHS is committed to preserving our past, informing our present, and inspiring our future. Part of doing so is acknowledging the painful history and current challenges facing the Dakota people just as we celebrate the contributions of Dakota and other Indigenous peoples.

Find our full Land Acknowledgment Statement on our website, www.rchs.com. This includes actionable ways in which RCHS pledges to honor the Dakota and other Indigenous peoples of Mnisóta Makhóche.



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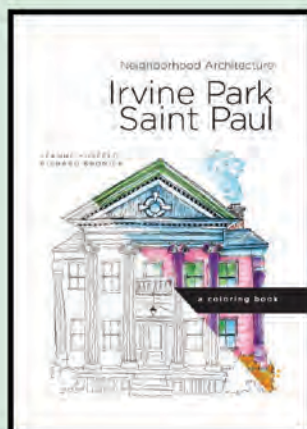
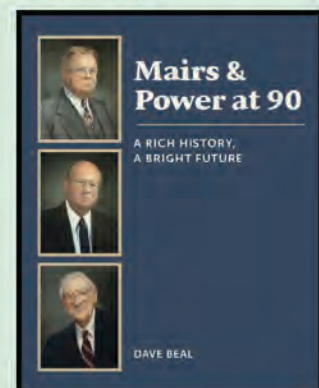
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A Man, a Woman, an Ox, and a Cart **Retracing the Red River Trail**

TERRY DOERKSEN, PAGE 17



After two months traveling several hundred miles from Winnipeg to St. Paul along the Red River Trail, Terry Doerksen and his trusty ox, Zik, take their final steps along the banks of the Mississippi River to reach Lambert's Landing in Lowertown. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*