

BUT THE ROOTS REMAIN: THE WISCONSIN PROGRESSIVES IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION
AND POST-WAR ERA

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But the Roots Remain

Wisconsin Progressives in the Great Depression and Post-War Era

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ABSTRACT

This work is concerned with the development of the Progressives, a political faction of the Republican Party which was active in Wisconsin during the first half of the 20th century, throughout the Great Depression, and the Post-War era. It was during this period that the Progressives broke with the Republican Party, formed the Progressive Party and gained control of the state from 1934 through 1938, before finally dissolving in 1946, with many members moving into the Democratic Party, where they rejuvenated that moribund state party. This work, furthermore, focuses on the those Progressive leaders who operated in Wisconsin's northern counties, a region which had a long tradition of Progressivism, the influence they had upon the creation of the Progressive Party and the political realignment which followed its dissolution.

PREFACE

No study of the history of Wisconsin can be complete without a mention of the Progressive era in the state. Beginning in 1900, with the election of Robert M. LaFollette Sr. to the governorship, the era saw Wisconsin grow in prominence throughout the nation as a result of the extensive reforms which the Progressives were able to implement -- reforms which included implementation of the primary election, direct election of United States Senators, strict campaign financing laws, and efforts to curb the political influence of the railroad companies throughout the state. During the first quarter of the 20th century, Wisconsin emerged in the eyes of many as a model state government.

One of the difficulties that has arisen as a result of the centrality of the Progressives in the historiography of Wisconsin is that their study eclipses nearly all other eras. Furthermore, even within the study of the Progressives themselves, most of the attention has been given to the birth of the faction and its period of greatest strength during the first two decades of the 20th century. Although the faction's emergence as an independent political party during the 1930s and the governorship of Philip Fox LaFollette have drawn the interest of some, little scholarly attention has been invested in the sunset of the Progressives, beginning with the disastrous election of 1938, which saw the Progressives reduced to a permanent minority within Wisconsin's government, and the party's eventual demise in 1946. When the collapse of the Progressives, first the faction and later the party, is studied in much detail at all, it is usually seen as a precursor to the rise of the state's Democratic Party which, beginning in the 1940s, was rebranding itself as the party of the New Deal, and was battling to draw former Progressives to its ranks.

By studying the collapse of the Progressives Party, and the careers of prominent former Progressives in both the Democratic and Republican parties, I hoped to, if not directly challenge, then at least augment, many of the basic preconceptions which exist in relation to the era.

Although it was true that the Democrats were able to recreate the old Farmer-Labor-Professional alliance which had been the heart of the Progressive Party, the story was not so clear-cut; many former Progressives chose to return to the Republican Party and enjoyed long, fulfilling careers as Republicans.

Furthermore, I chose to focus upon the region of the Northwoods of Northern Wisconsin for similar reasons. Wisconsin's North had been a bastion of the Progressives since the time of Robert M. LaFollette Sr., and I thought that the region might act as an interesting study of the faction's collapse. More so, however, I chose to focus on the Northwoods because the region is often overlooked in many studies of Wisconsin. Under-populated in comparison to the southern regions of the state, the Northwoods possess a unique history and culture, stemming from the central importance of the lumber and mining industries to the region, as well as the ethnic makeup of the population, which differs from the rest of the state.

In truth, it was initially suspected that the results of this survey would match what I, then, viewed as the trajectory of the Progressive faction; namely that following the collapse of the Progressive Party, the Progressives who chose to return to the Republican Party were initially defeated, and that they did not return to prominence in the region until the later 1950s, after the Democrats had been able to build themselves into a fully functioning, state-wide party. This was not the case. Instead, I found that many of the Progressives in the Northwoods, who wished to, were able to make the successful transition into the Republican Party. This, in turn, created real difficulties for the Democrats who were attempting to compete for the same voters, against

established liberal politicians who possessed a strong base of support. The Democrats, in fact, were only able to compete in the region as a result of dissatisfaction over President Dwight D. Eisenhower's agricultural policies, and the timely retirement of many Progressive-Republicans. It was only once they were able to get a foothold in the Northwoods that the Democrats were able to begin to win statewide elections.

It should be noted that this study was not conceived of as, nor did it ever become, a study of the voting patterns of Wisconsin during the era from the 1920s through the 1930s. Instead, I have followed the careers of several influential leaders from Northern Wisconsin who had been associated with the Progressive faction, and later party, and then made the transition either back to the Republican Party, or to the Democrats. In doing so, it was my intent to study these local elite figures and how they adapted to the new political situations which emerged in Wisconsin during the Great Depression, the Second World War, and, especially, the Post-War era. Although my interest lay less in voting patterns and habits, I strove to paint a picture of local government during the period, the issues which rose to importance, and those local figures who attempted to carry the torch of the Progressive faction following its dissolution in 1946.

In order to accomplish these goals, this work draws much of its information from local newspaper accounts, election statistics, largely provided by the *Wisconsin Blue Book* series, as well as the writings of those political figures detailed within. The very topic of this work necessitates relying largely upon the personal papers of many of men such as Robert Dean and Paul Alfonsi. This opens itself up to problems, as nearly all of these personal papers were donated to the Wisconsin Historical Society, or other regional archives, either by the politician himself, or by family members shortly following his death. Furthermore, events in the life of an eventual donor can have a large influence upon the type of materials eventually donated. Paul

Alfonsi's papers stand as a prime example of this issue; towards the end of his career, Alfonsi was convicted on charges of bribery. Although his conviction was overturned, and he was returned to office, the controversy had an indelible impact upon the papers he donated upon his retirement. Rather than focusing on his early career in the Progressive Party, or detailing his legislative battles as a Republican in the 1950s and 1960s, almost the whole of his documents consist of letters received by his constituents who supported him in his court battles, or papers meant to support his innocence. In other words, these documents were likely chosen in an effort to vindicate Alfonsi to future researchers.

As a result, when and wherever possible, the papers mentioned in this work have been used to analyze the political views, and provide biographical data, for each of the figures focused on. Newspaper articles and editorials, as well as the writings of other politicians, have been used to corroborate the information found within the papers, as well as to provide outside opinions upon each politician's performance and views. Finally, the Wisconsin *Blue Book* series has been consulted to provide electoral information, as well as brief biographical sketches of those mentioned above.

Wisconsin, largely as a result of the pioneering efforts of the University of Wisconsin system, is one of the most heavily researched states in the nation. As a result, a plethora of secondary sources exist. For the purpose of this work, secondary sources were often used in two distinct fashions. The first of these was in providing a general historical context, both in while writing, as well as during the research process. Second, many of these sources were also used by the author to help identify possible figures of interest during the early stages of research; even the most passing of references allowed me to follow up and begin to develop a picture of who the dominant progressive regional figures were during the period.

Finally, I feel that I must state the great enjoyment I felt while researching the several figures detailed in this work. Many of them were politicians of great influence and importance within the state, who led long and fulfilling careers. Although none of them were Governors or United States Senators, they had a definite impact upon the political discourse in Wisconsin during the era. By studying them and their struggles, it was my hope to bring to light their views, accomplishments, and failures, as well as the part they played in the great political realignment which was occurring in Wisconsin, and across the nation, during the great Depression and Post-War era.

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CHAPTER 1. THE WISCONSIN IDEA CONTINUED:
THE EVOLUTION OF WISCONSIN'S PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

The Progressive Party of Wisconsin was officially born in 1934, emerging two years after Franklin Delano Roosevelt's landslide victory over Herbert Hoover in 1932. Over the course of the next four years, the party and its leaders would attempt to institute fundamental economic and political reforms within the state, often in accord, but sometimes in opposition, to the policies of the Roosevelt administration. As the predominant force of liberalism in the state, the Progressives often found themselves walking a tightrope between seeking the favor of the national Roosevelt administration, while still differentiating themselves from the provincial and reactionary state Democratic Party. Following the disastrous election of 1938, which saw a conservative reaction against the national administration as a result of the so-called "Roosevelt Recession," the Progressives were greatly diminished. Although they would not formally dissolve until 1946, the Progressives remained a mere ghost of their former selves throughout the course of the 1940s.

To truly understand the Progressive Party for what it was, it is important to grasp that the party itself, although arising and reaching its greatest height during the course of the Depression Era, was not totally *of* that era. Rather, the Progressive Party traced its heritage back to the Progressive coalition within the Republican Party that had begun to form in the 1890s, and that had held power within Wisconsin, intermittingly, from that time until 1932. The impetus for the party's formation had been, in fact, the election of 1932 which saw its champion, Governor Philip Fox LaFollette, defeated in the Republican primary of that year, his challenger's subsequent defeat to a Democratic candidate, and the bloc's loss of influence within the state's Republican primary.

Prior to the 1930s Wisconsin, along with many states in the Upper Midwest, was effectively a one-party state, dominated by the Republican Party. During the 1910s and 1920s, the Republicans further solidified their control over the state, as many ethnic Germans turned away from their traditional home in the Democratic Party, blaming it for the United States' entry into the First World War. As a result, the usual partisan battles which would otherwise have occurred between the two parties instead were played out within the Republican Party, which was split between a Conservative wing, known as the Stalwarts, and a liberal wing, known as the Progressives.

In 1930 Philip Fox LaFollette, the son of legendary Progressive leader Robert M. LaFollette, Sr., defeated Walter J. Kohler, then governor and representative of the Stalwart faction, in the Republican primary and then sailed to an easy victory in the November general election. However, he was unseated himself during the primary of 1932 by a resurrected Kohler, who went down to defeat to the conservative Democratic candidate, Albert Schmedeman, during the Roosevelt landslide of that year.

Believing that his defeat was caused by defections from the Republican Party to the Democrats, generated by interest in the candidacy of Franklin Roosevelt, Philip LaFollette sought to break the Progressive bloc away from its traditional allegiance to the Republican Party and to create a third party. In an attempt to bolster their party's chances, LaFollette and other notable Progressive leaders, including his older brother, Senator Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., formed alliances with Farm-Labor and other liberal groups, including the Socialists of Milwaukee. The result was a temporary success; LaFollette was returned to the governorship in 1934, and remained there until his party's defeat in 1938.

After 1938 the Progressive Party was never able to regain control of the state. Although it was able to elect Orlando Loomis as Governor in 1942, Loomis's death of a heart attack mere months later effectively sealed the party's fate. It continued to struggle until it was officially dissolved at a convention in Portage, Wisconsin, after Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., declared that he was returning to the Republican Party to stand for reelection in 1946. Months later, he was defeated in the Republican primary by Joseph McCarthy, and most of the returned Progressives fell with him. It would take another ten years before a younger generation of Progressives was able to come to power in the state, not as Republicans, but under the auspices of a revitalized Democratic Party.

A great deal has already been written about the Progressives of Wisconsin over the past several decades, perhaps beginning with the elder LaFollette's autobiography, published as he was preparing to make a run for president in 1912. The period from the 1890s through the 1920s is perhaps one of the most thoroughly researched periods of Wisconsin history. Scholars, however, have shown much less enthusiasm for the Progressivism of the 1930s, and still less for the movement's decline and fall during the 1940s. Perhaps the best have been *Governor Philip F. LaFollette: Wisconsin Progressives and the New Deal*, by John E. Miller; the recent *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. LaFollette*, by Jon Kasperek; and "*Young Bob*" *LaFollette: A Biography of Robert M. LaFollette, Jr.*, by Patrick J. Maney. Paul W. Gladd also produced a masterful synthesis of this era in his contribution to the *History of Wisconsin* series, namely, volume V, *A War, a New Era and a Depression, 1914-1940*. It is possible that this limited scholarship stems from the fact that, despite the best efforts of Philip LaFollette, Wisconsin lost its preeminence as the bastion of reform, in the minds of the nation, to the federal government.

In other words, the battles within Wisconsin of the Progressive Party have come to be overshadowed by the monumental changes occurring on the national stage.¹

This is all the more so when focusing upon the struggles of Progressives during the 1940s and 1950s. The two strongest works covering this era are William F. Thompson's volume VI of the *History of Wisconsin, Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, as well as Richard C. Haney's doctoral dissertation "A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin since World War Two." Haney's text has become the definitive work detailing the reemergence of the Democratic Party following its takeover by younger Progressive leaders. In addition, there is a smattering of other works, usually focused upon individual political leaders, which shed light upon this area.

Congressman David Obey's memoirs, *Raising Hell for Justice: The Washington Battles of a Heartland Progressive*, and Bill Christofferson's *The Man from Clear Lake: Earth Day Founder Senator Gaylord Nelson* both offer telling glimpses into the struggles to rebuild the state's Democratic Party; Obey's in particular offers insight into many less prominent players in the state government. Despite this, both are focused on the story of only a single figure and use the struggles of the era as a backdrop upon which to illustrate the contributions of either Obey or Nelson. Obey's work also struggles with the obvious problem of being a political autobiography and, as a result, is hardly an objective examination of the era.²

Of these scholarly works which do exist, many suffer from a fixation upon the cities of Madison and Milwaukee. This is largely forgivable; Madison is the state's capital, and has been

¹Jonathon Kasperek, *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. La Follette* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2006), passim; Patrick J. Maney, *Young Bob: A Biography Robert M. LaFollette, Jr.* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2002), passim; Paul W. Glad, *War, a New Era and a Depression, 1914-1940*, Vol. 5, of *The History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), passim.

²Richard Carlton Haney, "A History of Democratic Party of Wisconsin Since World War II." (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1970), passim.; William F. Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965* Vol. VI of *History of Wisconsin* (Madison: Historical Society of Madison, 1988), passim; David. R. Obey, *Raising Hell for Justice: the Washington Battles of a Heartland Progressive* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), passim; Bill Christofferson, *The Man from Clear Lake: Earth Day Founder Senator Gaylord Nelson* (University of Wisconsin press, 2004), passim.

a bastion of Progressivism since the 1890s, while Milwaukee is the state's largest metropolitan area, and traditionally was the stronghold of Wisconsin's Socialist Party. In other words, not only are these cities the two most prominent in the state, they also produced two of the major wings of the original Progressive movement: labor from Milwaukee, and educated professionals from Madison. However, the Progressives traditionally had also relied on a third wing, northern Wisconsin farmers and small town residents, in order to create their electoral bloc from the founding of the movement until the 1930s. It is important to note that the modern Democrats, long seen as the heirs of the Progressive movement, were not able to make significant gains within the state until they began to attract large numbers of farmers to their cause in the 1950s.

Another hole which emerges in the literature is the neglect of those Progressives who were able to maintain a place within the Republican Party from the 1940s onward. Although the election of 1946 was a disaster for Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., and many of the Progressives who were attempting to make a move back to the Republican Party, this was not the case for all of them. Several, in fact, were able to make the transition, and would go on to have successful legislative careers as Republicans; perhaps the most successful of these was Clifford "Tiny" Krueger from Merrill, Wisconsin. Elected in 1946, he would remain in the State Senate until his retirement in the early 1980s, reaching the position of minority leader. These Republican Progressives largely came from safe districts, mostly rural and northern, meaning that they rarely were opposed by challengers to their right, and were able to build strong coalitions of voters who continued to return them to Madison. Although many of them would go on to leadership positions within their party, they became more of a minority as time went on and the Wisconsin Republican Party drifted further to the right during the 1960s and 1970s.

It will not be the goal of this thesis to make the argument that the Progressives of the

1930s, or the Democrats of the 1950s, were a purely northern movement. Instead, it will seek to illustrate the struggles of Progressives, either Democratic or Republican, of the region from the Depression until the 1960s. In doing so, it will also shed light upon the great political realignment which occurred during these decades. By looking at the voting patterns of the population of the North, as well as the lives and beliefs of those political figures elected there, it will prove that the northern counties of Wisconsin were fundamental in fashioning an electoral bloc that allowed the Progressives to take power in the 1930s, and had profound impacts upon the political goals of the Progressive Party in that decade. Following 1938, many of the voters in this region lost faith in the Progressive Party and returned to the Republicans. This in turn allowed the Republicans to dominate the state throughout the 1940s and well into the 1950s. However, sympathy for Progressive values remained, and many of the Republicans elected at the time had strong roots in the Progressive Party and movement; in fact, despite the disapproval of the Republican leadership, these Republican Progressives were able to carve out significant power bases for themselves within their districts, making their removal unlikely. However, in the state-at-large, more Progressives were beginning to seek shelter in the fundamentally fractured and conservative state Democratic Party, which they were able to co-opt and use as a vehicle to rebuild the Progressive Party under a new name. Despite winning several internal battles, the new Democrats were unable to take power in the state until they were able to bring northern rural voters into their party, by appealing to an electorate largely disenchanted with the agricultural policies of the Republican Party, effectively rebuilding the old Progressive coalition of farmers, laborers, and professionals.

In order to make this case, this work will be divided into three separate chapters, the first of which will detail the Progressive Party of the 1930s with an eye to its activities in Wisconsin's

north. It will be argued that the Progressives of the 1930s were a coalition composed of a radical, agrarian left, best exemplified by the Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation, and the professional politicians who had made up the progressive coalition of previous years. The first substantive chapter, numbered chapter two in this work, will examine the careers and thoughts of three Progressive politicians: Gerald Boileau, a former Republican congressman from Marathon County who moved into the Progressive Party when it was founded; Roland Kannenberg, the young son of a farmer who was elected to the state senate and represents the more radical strand of Progressivism; and, finally, Walter Graunke, a local Progressive boss in Wausau who continued to agitate for the party's movement to the left.

This chapter will be set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, which had an enormous impact upon the state of Wisconsin, much as it did across the rest of the nation. Although the stock market crash of 1929 is often seen as the first symptom of the Depression, the economic effects were not immediately seen in the state. For instance, the number of construction and building contracts declined by 13.4 percent between 1929 and 1930 -- a noticeable drop, but not the catastrophe which was being witnessed in other parts of the nation. However, in 1931, the total number of those same contracts had decreased 46 percent from 1929.³

Although Wisconsin possessed a reputation throughout the nation for prosperity, even during hard times, it could not escape the hardships of the economic collapse. The state capitol remained relatively well off because of the large number of employees on the government payroll, but by 1931 the unemployment rate had still reached 16 percent in Madison. The situation in other urban centers was equally dire. In the city of Kohler, former governor Walter J. Kohler, Sr., struggled to keep his employees paid, continuing production despite a collapse in

³ Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 356-7.

the market, and ordering the destruction of backlogged product he had been unable to sell. His efforts were in vain; by 1932 he had been forced to cut wages, and hours, and was eventually forced to lay off parts of his workforce. The city of Milwaukee, the most populous city in Wisconsin, and one of the state's industrial hubs, fared even worse. Already, by March 1930, it was estimated by John J. Handley, secretary-treasure of the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor, that the number of unemployed in the city had reached 20,000.⁴

Equally hurt was the farming community, which, at the time, comprised roughly a fourth of Wisconsin's population. By 1928 the farm price index in Wisconsin had risen to 56 percent above the pre-war levels; however, by 1932 prices were 30 percent lower than that had been before the First World War. Adding to the dismay of farmers, the crash and the early years of the Depression coincided with an unusual dry period in Wisconsin which led to a reduction in the amount of feed available for dairy herds and, as a result, less milk production.⁵

These difficulties were even more pronounced in the Northwoods. From 1910 through 1920, the price of farm land had greatly increased in Wisconsin, but most of the growth was in the counties of the state's southern tier, as well as the counties on the shore of Lake Michigan. Except for some notable exceptions, such as Barron, Polk, and St. Croix counties, which bordered the Mississippi River, the northern region of Wisconsin saw a minimal increase of 100 dollars an acre or less. During the 1920s, the price of farms began to drop, especially in the later years of the decade, although the decrease largely affected those counties which had seen the substantial gains during the pre-war years. The 1930s, and the Great Depression, however, saw the Northwoods being struck harder than most other regions in the state, except for the southern

⁴ Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 363-6.; Thomas C. Reeves, *Distinguished Service: The Life of Wisconsin Governor Walter J. Kohler Jr.* (Milwaukee; Marquette University Press, 2006), 108-10.

⁵ Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 357-61.

lakeshore, with the average price of farm acreage dropping from between 30 to over 35 dollars an acre.⁶

Naturally, these difficult conditions resulted in confrontations between the beleaguered people, and those institutions which, they felt, were exploiting them, or not doing enough to ease their suffering. In February of 1930, a group of 400 unemployed men marched upon the City Hall of Milwaukee where they presented a petition to Mayor Daniel Hoan, requesting that the city transfer money from its funds to help pay for aid for the unemployed. A similar situation occurred in Madison a mere three weeks later, when another group marched on the capital's City Hall, and remanded relief from Mayor, and future Governor, Albert Schmedeman. After receiving a similar response to that given by Hoan, another demonstration was scheduled for March 6, a mere week later. During that gathering, the protestors, lead by Lottie Blumenthal, a member of the Young Communist League, were beset by angry students from the University of Wisconsin. In the ensuing struggle Blumenthal was thrown to the ground, members of the protest were assaulted, and banners and literature were destroyed. The students responsible for the attack later claimed that they were angered at the reputation the University of Wisconsin had gained as a hotbed for radicalism, and had decided to voice their disapproval by assaulting the protestors.⁷

Protests also occurred throughout the Northwoods as the Depression worsened. In Price County, for example, farmers and members of the local community took part in all three of the milk strikes organized by the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool and the Farmers Holiday Association, organized to protest the quickly deleting prices of dairy products. Whereas these protests often lead to violence in other parts of the state, however, in Price County they remained

⁶ Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 359-61.

⁷ Glad, *War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940*, 367-69.

relatively peaceful. Less peaceful were the efforts by community members throughout the Northwoods to help save neighbors from foreclosure on their farms; in the town of Brantwood, located in Price County, in 1933 a group of six men were arrested for taking part in a group of local farmers attempting to prevent the foreclosure on a neighbor's farm; the crowd, of which the six men were a part of, had to be dispersed by the local fire department and a group of local volunteers. It was these struggles, inspired by the ever worsening conditions during the first years of the Great Depression, which formed the backdrop upon which the formation and rise of the Progressive Party played-out.⁸

The second chapter of this work will detail the Progressive coalition which came together to find solutions to these grave issues facing Wisconsin during the Great Depression. It will also examine the political leaders who emerged during this time, be they practical politicians attempting to steer a safe course during times of such uncertainty, or radical true-believers who saw the troubles of the Depression as proof positive of the failures of capitalism and the emergence of a new system.

The third chapter of this work will detail the careers of three Progressives who successfully made their way into the Republican Party, following the collapse of the Progressive Party in 1946: Charles Madsen, a state senator from Polk County in northwest Wisconsin, who made the move into the Republican Party, albeit with little enthusiasm, and was initially able to maintain his seat until he attempted to unseat a popular Republican incumbent Congressman; Paul Alfonsi, the former speaker of the assembly for Philip LaFollette in the 1930s, who returned to the State Assembly as a Republican in the 1950s, quickly retook his old position, and built a reputation as a partisan fighter; and, finally, Clifford Krueger of Merrill, who was elected to the

⁸ Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 126-28.

state senate in 1946 and would eventually retire as the Republican senate minority leader. By analyzing the careers of these three men, it will be shown how each was able to build off of his reputation as a Progressive in order to build a strong powerbase within their districts, as well as how the drift of the Republican Party to the right marginalized them.

Finally, the fourth chapter will look at the Democratic Party of Wisconsin in the 1940s and 1950s, and chart its transformation from a fractured, hard-line conservative party into the heir of the old Progressive Party. In doing so, the argument will be made that, although the professional wing of the Progressives, largely centered around Madison, and the labor wing, centered in Milwaukee, were able to take control of the Democrats by the late 1940s, it was not until the party was able to capture the farmer vote of the north, that it truly reconstituted the old Progressive coalition, and was able to win statewide office. The chapter will also detail the careers of Robert Dean, who would become the assembly majority leader and who was a close ally of the Madison wing of the party, and Ben Reihle, an unrepentant old progressive who would be elected to the state senate from Marathon County.

Both chapters three and four are set against the backdrop of Wisconsin during the end of the Second World War, and the immediate post-war period. In Wisconsin, the 1940s, and much of the 1950s, was a time of Republican dominance in the state. With the weakening of the Progressive Party in 1938, and its dissolution in 1946, the Republicans were able to consolidate their hold on the state. From 1938 through 1958, the Republicans were able to elect five governors: Julius Heil, Walter Goodland, Oscar Rennebohm, Walter J. Kohler Jr., and Vernon Thomson.

However, the Republicans, despite, or possibly as a result of, their political dominance, were not a unified force. Although Thomas Coleman, and other conservative Republicans, had

come to dominate the party machinery after the Progressive defection in the 1930s, they were unable to completely control the party. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, a split developed between Coleman, and other party leaders, on one side, and moderate Republicans on the other. Coleman's efforts to see that only ideological allies received the party's nomination, such as his efforts to run a conservative candidate against the beloved Walter Goodland in 1946, or to encourage opposition to the reelection of moderate Senator Alexander Wiley, often backfired and exposed the weaknesses of the party.⁹

The divides in the party were only exacerbated by the most prominent politician to emerge from Wisconsin in the years immediately following the conclusion of the Second World War: Senator Joseph McCarthy. Exploiting the second Red Scare which was gripping the nation during the 1940s and 1950s, McCarthy mercilessly attempted to make a name for himself as the nation's premier fighter of internal communism. Although he was largely careful to level attacks at national targets, and not any in Wisconsin, his presence divided many within the state. Although moderate Republican leaders, such as Walter J. Kohler Jr., were often faint in their praise of McCarthy, usually refusing to condemn him out of a lack of desire to cause party disunity, there were many others in the state who remained dedicated to McCarthy and his cause. In the case of the Republicans, the split caused between McCarthy supporters and moderates would prove fatal to the Republican hegemony of the state, directly leading to the victory of William Proxmire over Kohler in the special election of 1957. For the Democrats, McCarthy acted as a lightning-rod, giving them an opportune target, which helped strengthen their profile in the state.¹⁰

Following the collapse of GOP dominance in the state, beginning with the election of

⁹ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 533-36.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 531-33, 586.; Reeves, *Distinguished Service: The Life of Wisconsin Governor Walter J. Kohler, Jr.*, 379-98.

William Proxmire as Senator in 1957, and completed the next year with the election of Gaylord Nelson as governor, the conservatives continued to dominate much of the party's machine. Wisconsin's Republican leadership was strong backers of Senator Barry Goldwater's efforts to become elected president in 1964. Despite this, when the party found victory at the gubernatorial level, it was always with a moderate at the head of the ticket, such as Kohler's protégé, Warren Knowles, from 1965 through 1971, and Lee S. Dreyfus from 1979 through 1983. It was not until the later 1970s that the conservatives were able to gain full control of the party, largely helped by the decimation of the Republicans following the Watergate scandal on the national level.¹¹

The definitions of several key terms are important to discuss throughout this work. Terms such as "progressive" and "conservative" can be frustratingly fluid throughout the course of history, for example, and regional designations such as 'the Northwoods' or 'the North' do not have any broadly accepted fixed definitions.

Perhaps the best definition of Progressivism was given by Philip LaFollette himself, when he stated, "we investigate problems very thoroughly, whether it be a depression amongst farmers, or unemployment. Out of this, shall we say scientific investigation of problems, we seek after remedies." That is, namely, a practical form of liberalism which investigates problems and then seeks to use legislation to correct the identified cause of the malady. Even this definition, however, is largely opaque. As Jonathan Kasperek, LaFollette's most recent biographer notes, LaFollette saw progressivism more as a methodology than a political ideology.¹²

LaFollette struggled, as did many other Progressives, to differentiate themselves from the

¹¹ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940 - 1965*, 129-35.

¹² Quotation from Jonathan Kasperek, *Fighting Son: a Biography of Philip F. LaFollette*, (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 2006), xvi.

New Deal of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As a result, it would be tempting to view Progressivism as a separate strand of liberal thought, related to but separate from the dominant liberalism of the 1930s through the 1950s. Authors such as Richard C. Haney have, in fact, noticed peculiar differences within the ideology of the state's Democratic Party, when compared to the national party, as late as the 1960s and 1970s. However, such an analysis of ideological minutia is far beyond the scope of this work, which is more focused on examining the careers of self-identified Progressives of the north who moved into the Republican and Democratic parties following the collapse of the Progressive Party. As such, it would seem prudent, then, to establish less nuanced definitions of Progressivism and Progressive to further that goal. As a result, a Progressive is a liberal or moderate politician who openly identifies himself as one, and Progressivism should be read as liberalism.

Defining Wisconsin's north is another problem which must be addressed. Although several cities, including Wausau and Stevens Point, attempt to advertise themselves as the gateway to the Northwoods, a consensus has yet to be reached, either by scholars, or the general public. As the purpose of this work is to focus upon those Progressives who lived in, and represented, districts out of the sway of Wisconsin's major urban centers, it seems best to define "the north" as any part of Wisconsin north of the southernmost border of Marathon County. This establishes a definite geographical area which has the benefit of excluding Brown County, and those areas directly linked with the Green Bay metropolitan area, but including much of the northern Mississippi River valley, which had long been seen as a stronghold of Progressivism within the state.

The Northwoods remains a distinct region within the state of Wisconsin. Initially settled during the lumber boom of the 19th century, by the 1930s, the region had begun to suffer

economically. The lumber industry had gone into sharp decline by the dawn of the 20th century, and many efforts to revive the region's economy were unsuccessful. Despite an attempt to draw farmers into the region, the soil was ill-suited to the task, and many farmers, usually poor immigrants who arrived in the state at the turn of the century and found most of the state's good agricultural lands already claimed, were barely able to survive. Furthermore, efforts to transform the region into a prime tourist destination, although successful during the 1920s, left the region in economic stagnation during the 1930s. The economic troubles of the region, its history of resource extraction, the population's penchant for Progressive politics, and its ethnic makeup all combine to make the Northwoods a unique region within the state. In shaping my own understanding of the peculiar social and economic trends of the region, I am much in debt to Robert Gough's 1997 text *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940*.

The Northwoods holds a distinct place within the Wisconsin imagination. The region is often dismissed by many as the periphery of the state; a land of near primeval wilderness, populated by unsophisticated hunters and farmers. The locals, for their part, often self-parody themselves, playing into the stereotypes; they proudly refer to themselves as "Jack-Pine Savages," and produce bands such as Bananas at Large, whose regional hit, "The Turdy-point Buck," exaggerates the stereotypes of the local residents. Despite some of the negative stereotypes, the region is beloved by many, both by locals, and those vacationers who make the yearly trek north; the deep forests and crystal lakes have drawn countless visitors since the tourism industry became established during the 1930s. In the years since, countless notables, both famous and infamous, have made the Northwoods their residence for brief stretches of each year. Furthermore, the Northwoods have contributed to the folklore and mythology of the

region; some of the first Paul Bunyan stories were first recorded in the lumbercamps surrounding the northern town of Rhinelander.¹³

In addition to the Northwoods, several other regions are important to understanding the political developments during the Great Depression and Post-War eras. The industrial lakeshore region, comprising Milwaukee and southeastern Wisconsin, is vitally important to the resurgence of the Democratic Party, as it was the collapse of the Socialist Party, which had previously been strong on the local level, that provided the opportunity for the Democrats to rebuild themselves as a liberal party. Compromising the most industrialized region in the state, the region was a hotbed of union activity, and the AFL and CIO were particularly strong. Milwaukee, during the period, also played an important role in the development of the Republican Party. Milwaukee Republicans often felt themselves to be overlooked by the leaders of their own party, and, as a result, found themselves in opposition to Thomas Coleman, and the dominant faction of the Republicans; the battles between the Milwaukee establishment and the Republican leadership was just one more factional dispute which weakened the party at the height of its power.¹⁴

Southwestern Wisconsin consists of those counties from, roughly, Dane County in the East to the state's western border on the Mississippi River. This region was largely rural, possessing much of the best farmland in the state, and was one of the first parts of the state to be settled. During the 1930s, through the 1960s, agricultural issues continued to dominate the region; the election of Vernon Johnson, who campaigned in opposition to the agricultural policies of the Eisenhower administration, to Congress in 1954 would prove to be the first great victory of the Democrats outside of Milwaukee and its environs in the modern era. The 1950s

¹³ James P. Leary, *Wisconsin Folklore* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 106-10.; Michael Edmonds, *Out of the Northwoods: the Many Lives of Paul Bunyan* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2009), passim.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 538-542, 564-565, 569

and 1960s also saw this region lose much of its political strength, following the redistricting of the 1950s as a result of the population's shift to urban area and away from rural districts.¹⁵

The Fox River Valley also emerges as a pivotal region within the state. Comprising those counties which encompassed the Fox River drainage basin, such as Winnebago, and Outagamie, it was one of the first sectors of the state to become heavily industrialized. The Fox Valley, with its high concentrations of Catholic voters, in the pre-World War II era had been a deeply conservative bastion of the Democratic Party. Following World War II, many of the voters of the region emerged as Republicans. The Fox Valley was the home of Joseph McCarthy, and one of his strongest bases of support throughout his career.¹⁶

Finally, it should be noted that Marathon County figures prominently in the subsequent chapters of this work. Chapter Two, dealing with Progressivism of the 1930s, examines the careers of several politicians who were associated with this county. Chapter Three focuses on, in addition to others, Clifford Krueger who, although from Merrill, represented western Marathon County as part of his district, and Chapter Four once again relies heavily upon local Democratic leaders from that county. There are several reasons for this. First, the author of this work is intimately familiar with Marathon County and its environs, having grown up in the southeast corner of the county. Above and beyond this, however, Marathon County is largely representative of the region. Robert Booth Fowler, in his study of the electoral history of Wisconsin entitled *Wisconsin Votes*, explained that the county was ideal for this use as it contains a single small city, Wausau, surrounded by a largely agricultural hinterland, dotted with small ethnic communities. Marathon County was chosen for this study for much same reason.

Furthermore, located In North Central Wisconsin, nearly in the center of the state, the

¹⁵ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 6-7, 606-07,

¹⁶ John D. Buenker, *The Progressive Era, 1893-1914* vol. 4 of *The History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1998), 136; Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940 – 1965*, 582, 685, 136

county has a reputation of being a “gateway to the north,” meaning that its political developments during the period covered not only are representative, but also have an impact, upon the development of Wisconsin’s Northwoods. However, having stated that, it must be stressed that every effort was made to examine trends in other parts of the north and, when germane, were included in this work.

The Progressive Party of Wisconsin enjoyed a great deal of success in the 1930s, before crumbling in the years following the election of 1938. Although the party did not dissolve, officially, until 1946, its weakness was perceived by all but the most ardent Progressives. As a result, it became apparent that Progressives would have to find a new home; although the party leadership chose to return to the Republican Party, where most would go down to defeat, a larger number took control of the Democratic Party of the state. This work argues that, although the Republican Progressives were more successful in the northern counties of the state, they became marginalized within their own party, as the state’s Republican Party followed national trends by drifting further to the right. Meanwhile, younger leaders were able to rebuild the progressive coalition within the confines of the Democratic Party, but only after they made substantial gains in the rural agricultural vote of the north in the 1950s. Following this accomplishment, they were able to win state-wide elections and transform Wisconsin into a two-party state, once again.

CHAPTER 2. WE HAD TO BE PREPARED TO ACT:

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE PROGRESSIVE PARTY IN WISCONSIN'S NORTH

The results of the Wisconsin Republican primary election of September 20, 1932 came as a great shock to many of the political observers in the state and across the nation. Although most Progressive leaders in the state had expected a tough fight ahead of them, expecting correctly that the conservative Stalwart faction of the party would attack them for spending too much as the full scope of the Great Depression dawned on many, they had not expected to be so soundly defeated. After all, they had managed to shepherd through several ground breaking pieces of legislation during the past two years, including the first employment insurance program in the nation's history. But lose they had, as Stalwart Republicans were nominated for every statewide office except Secretary of State, even managing to unseat popular Senator and former-Governor, John J. Blaine.¹⁷

The result was devastating for Philip F. LaFollette, sitting governor and son of former Governor and Senator Robert M. LaFollette Sr. He and his wife had been personally savaged during the election. The Stalwarts had launched a weekly tabloid entitled the *Uncensored News* which, in addition to the usual charges of radicalism and boss government, had openly accused LaFollette's wife of using state money to buy goblets for the executive mansion. To make matters worse, LaFollette had lost the nomination for his party to Walter J. Kohler Sr., the Stalwart politician whom he had unseated as governor two years prior. It had been a bruising and exhausting election, and the defeat must have stung considerably worse as LaFollette

¹⁷ Jonathan Kasperek, *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. LaFollette* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 2006), 134-46.

ruminated that he was the first member of his family to lose an election since his father had been unseated, as a young man, in his reelection bid to Congress.¹⁸

The Progressives had been bloodied, but not destroyed. By 1934, the faction had thrown off the shackles of the Republican Party and ventured out on their own as a third party. This Progressive Party would play an influential role in Wisconsin's political scene throughout the 1930s, and leave an indelible mark upon that state's history. Although eventually defeated in 1938, the Progressives would remain active, as a shadow of their former selves, until the Portage Convention of 1946, when they were finally dissolved. At its height, the Progressive Party acted as the liberal party of Wisconsin and the de facto wing of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's political machine within the state. The Party was a broad coalition of smaller liberal interest groups - traditional Progressive politicians, intellectuals, farm-labor supporters, socialists - all found a home within the Party. This created a great deal of factionalism, broadly simplified into a professional, moderate-liberal wing, consisting largely of intellectuals and professional politicians, many of whom had long been associated with the Progressive wing of the Republican Party, and a radical wing, largely consisting of younger farm-labor activists. Throughout the history of the Progressive movement, the Progressives comprised a series of factions which worked together for electoral success. When the party's leadership failed after 1938, the factions became disunited and the party, and movement, crumbled.

Prior to the formation of the Progressive Party in 1934, the Progressives operated as a loose coalition within Wisconsin's Republican Party. This coalition was by no means monolithic, nor was it static; it continued to evolve and adapt to both national and state-based issues. Originally an alliance of young reformers, the Progressives, in the 1890s, organized around the persona of Governor Robert M. LaFollette with the expressed purpose of over-

¹⁸ Kasperek, *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. LaFollette*, 127-36.

throwing the political machine that had come to dominate the state in the Post-Civil War Era. This quest called for breaking the stranglehold that railroads held over the state through the creation of a Railroad Board as well as higher taxes. LaFollette and his allies also called for weakening the power of traditional party bosses with the introduction of the direct primary as well as extending patronage to ethnic communities – namely the Scandinavian and German communities which had migrated to Wisconsin in mass, beginning during the second half of the 19th century, as well as immigrant communities of Slavic and Italian background - that had often been overlooked by the previous leaders of the Republican Party. This coalition of young reformers, ethnic political leaders, and radicals, fell from power in the state as a result of the political stresses brought about by America's entry into the First World War, stresses made even worse by then-Senator LaFollette's outspoken opposition to the conflict.¹⁹

Herbert Margulies, in his classic work *The Decline of the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1920*, argues that the Progressive coalition which emerged from the fires of the First World War was inherently different from the one which had preceded it. Although many of the leaders of the movement had remained -- Robert M. LaFollette, Sr., stands as the most evident example -- the coalition itself had been altered. With the growing strength of labor in the post-war era, and the economic difficulties which plagued farmers throughout the 1920s, the Progressive coalition began to move towards an ideology that focused more upon farmers and laborers during this period. Also important was the growing support of the Progressives by the German-American community of the state, many of whom had looked on in dread as American had moved towards war with Germany during the First World War and had suffered persecution

¹⁹ John D. Buenker, *The Progressive Era, 1893-1914*, vol. 4 of *The History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Madison, 1998), 611-12; Herbert F. Margulies, *The Decline of the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1920* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1968), 193-95.

during the war, and who had greatly approved of LaFollette's anti-war stance.²⁰

The structure of the Progressive coalition in Wisconsin was not unique. In many states, especially those dominated by a single political party, the Progressives acted as a party-within-a-party, working to lessen the influence of the conservative leadership, and gaining control of the political machinery for themselves. For instance, the Progressives of Texas were a coalition of old Populists, members of the Farmers Alliance, and political reformers who acted as a coalition within the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, in North Dakota, the Progressives acted as a coalition within the Republican Party, although they threw their support behind the Democratic candidate for governor, John Burke, in order to circumvent the power of the Republican leadership.²¹

Following the death of Robert LaFollette in 1925, the Progressive coalition found itself undergoing a period of internal crisis, brought on by the sudden leadership vacuum created by the absence of the elder LaFollette, as well as by political issues such as Prohibition. Prohibition would continue to be an issue of deep concern for the Progressive coalition throughout the 1920s, largely because the "wets," who opposed prohibition, and "dries," who supported it, often buttressed their positions by claiming they were in strict accordance with the ideals of the Progressive movement. As a result, the coalition's leadership was largely divided over the issue. Governor John J. Blaine, for instance, found himself in the position of being strongly identified with the wets, while Senator Irvine Lenroot was a vocal dry. Furthermore, the Prohibition issue cut deeply into the ethnic makeup of the coalition. Philip F. LaFollette, writing years later, in his memoir *Adventures in Politics*, would claim that "Wisconsin never believed in

²⁰ Margulies, *The Decline of the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1920*, 244-46.; Paul W. Glad, *War a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940*, vol. 5 of *The History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Madison, 1990), 276-78.

²¹ Worth Robert Miller, "Building a Progressive Coalition in Texas: The Populist-Reform Democrat Rapprochement 1900-1907," *Journal of Southern History* 52 [May 1986]:163-82.; Ray Allan Goldberg, *The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota*, (Fargo: Midwest Publishing, 1948), 10.

[Prohibition]. Those of German, Polish or Italian descent looked on wine and beer as part of their daily food ... Those of Yankee or Scandinavian descent were often ardent supporters of Prohibition.” Another division, which emerged at this point and set rural and urban Progressives against one another, emerged in 1923, when the state Legislature attempted to eliminate a provision which allowed the receipt from the personal property tax to be used to help pay income taxes. This provision not only reduced the state’s total revenue from income tax by 40 percent, but also helped shift the tax burden from rural areas to urban residents.²²

In the spirit of providing a united front against their foes, many believed that the Progressives would be wisest to nominate a member of the LaFollette family. Many of the Progressive leaders felt that Belle La Follette, Robert LaFollette’s wife, would be the perfect candidate, however, she was uninterested in the seat. Of LaFollette’s two sons, Philip was the most likely to desire a spot in the Senate, as he was widely known to be politically astute and deeply ambitious. However, his age acted against him, as he was only 28 and, as a result, too young to take the seat according to the United States constitution. This left Bob LaFollette, Jr., in a difficult position. Deeply loyal to his father, and having served as his secretary in Washington D.C. for many years, he looked to be the perfect candidate. However, by his brother’s own admission, “to most he seemed a natural, skilled, accomplished public official. He was. Yet, were it not for circumstances over which he had little control, he – like his mother – would never have chosen public life.” Whatever “Young Bob’s” own inclinations, he chose to run, and after winning the Republican primary by a vote of more than two to one, his victory was all but certain. The victory of Young Bob over his opponents gave the state’s Progressive coalition the new leadership that it badly needed. It also opened the doors for the second

²² Quotation from Philip LaFollette *Adventures in Politics: the Memoirs of Philip LaFollette* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970) 8.; Glad, War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940, 299-302.

generation of the LaFollette family to make its impact upon Wisconsin and the entire nation. Of this second generation, perhaps the most innovative and engaged was Philip Fox LaFollette, the second son who, unlike his brother, possessed the political ambition and skills of his father.²³

Phil, as he preferred to be called, had first won office as the District Attorney of Dane County in 1924 at the age of 27. His father had begun his own political career in that same position as a young man in 1880, a race which had since become legendary within Wisconsin. Although serving only one term as District Attorney, Phil earned a reputation as a vigorous and creative public official who managed virtually to wipe out the illegal liquor trade in the city of Madison. Following the completion of his single term, he turned his attention toward his law practice, as well as becoming a spokesman of the Progressive faction. Unlike his brother, Phil loved the excitement of the campaign, and possessed the ability not only to speak well on the stump, but also to recruit candidates for office who would be loyal to the Progressives. These traits, coupled with his last name and famous parentage, quickly established him as a proven mover in Progressive politics.²⁴

The political landscape of Wisconsin in the 1920s, however, would prove rocky for the state's Progressives. In 1926 the coalition reeled not only from the death of "Old Bob" LaFollette, but also from a contentious battle for the governor's seat. The elder LaFollette had groomed Herman Ekern, the state's Attorney General, to run for the governor in 1926. However, the state's Conservative Republicans threw their weight behind Fred Zimmerman, the state's secretary of state and a moderate Progressive. The situation was not improved by the LaFollette brothers who, sensing weakness, dropped Ekern and threw their support behind a third candidate, Joe Beck. As a result, with the Progressive bloc fragmented, the Conservatives were able to

²³ Quotation from LaFollette, *Adventures in Politics*, 114; Glad, *War, a New Era and a Depression, 1914-1940*, 308-312.

²⁴ Kasperek, *Fighting Son: a Biography of Philip La Follette*, xiv, 35.

unite behind and elect their candidate, Zimmerman. The feat was built upon two years later when the Conservative, or Stalwart, faction was able to elect Walter J. Kohler, the millionaire owner of the Kohler plumbing company – later “empire.”²⁵

The Progressives went into the 1930 campaign with low hopes; no member of the established leadership had any desire to run against the popular Kohler. Phil LaFollette himself had deep reservations. He was only thirty-two years old and feared that the state’s voters would rebel against the notion of “too much LaFollette” on the ballot. Furthermore, despite the stock market crash, the true strength of the Great Depression had yet to hit Wisconsin, and Governor Kohler remained popular. The Progressives themselves were disunited, and often faced conservative publications which sought to downplay their message. Despite these deficiencies, Phil LaFollette was able to overcome his opponent, according to Paul Glad in his work *War, a New Era, and Depression 1914-1940*, largely by beginning his campaign a full month before Kohler began his, campaigning hard, and capitalizing on the U.S. stock market crash of 1929. The election was a victory not only for LaFollette, but also for the Progressive coalition as a whole; progressives won the nomination for all state officers and every seat in congress, save one.²⁶

Phil LaFollette’s first term as governor would prove a strange contradiction. Although it was by most accounts, a success, national politics would intervene in 1932 and deny LaFollette the consecutive second term that otherwise would be expected. The LaFollette administration had passed a bill providing for the improvement of railroad crossings and the Emergency Highway Act, with the intention of providing work and improving the state’s infrastructure. The state government had also begun to look kindly upon unions, recognizing the right to unionize

²⁵ LaFollette, *Adventures in Politics*, 122-27.

²⁶ Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 323-25; Farm-Labor Meeting Held at Local Park, *Wausau Pilot*, June 12, 1930.

and the payment of strike benefits to workers. Perhaps even more important, it was during Phil LaFollette's first term as Governor that the first unemployment insurance program in the nation was enacted in Wisconsin, in response to the growing unemployment issues which arose as the Great Depression began to worsen in Wisconsin. Under this plan employers would deposit money for each employee, until 75 dollars had been accrued, and, in the case of unemployment, an employee could draw 50 percent of their weekly salary for a period of 10 weeks. However, LaFollette, as a Republican, was vulnerable to the excitement created by the candidacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and it would be the New York governor who unintentionally unseated the Wisconsin Progressives in 1932.²⁷

Progressives moving into the Republican primary of 1932 were confident that they would retain the governorship and control of the state government. Historical forces from outside the state, however, would conspire to thwart these expectations. The rise of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the Democratic candidate for President, as well as the unpopularity of the Herbert Hoover administration and the Republican Party in general, opened up divisions in the Progressive coalition. The weakness of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin was temporarily reversed as previously liberal Democrats, who traditionally voted Progressive, returned to their own party to vote in its primary. The loss of Progressive Democrats greatly weakened Phil LaFollette's strength in the Republican primary, especially as the greatest losses occurred in Milwaukee county and northwestern Wisconsin, which long been considered Progressive strongholds. The defections, coupled with mounting Stalwart attacks against LaFollette spelled disaster. Phil LaFollette and the Progressives were overwhelmingly defeated in the Republican primary, which gave its support to former governor Walter J. Kohler. During the general election, months later, Kohler was defeated by his Democratic opponent – resulting in the first

²⁷Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 380-87, 394-95; LaFollette, *Adventures in Politics*, 164-65.

time that a Democrat had held the governorship of Wisconsin since 1895.²⁸

The loss of the 1932 election, despite the successes of the past term, greatly disturbed many Progressives in Wisconsin. LaFollette's primary loss to Kohler had weakened Progressives in the Republican Party, leaving it firmly in the hands of the Stalwarts. Furthermore, Albert Schmedeman, the new Democratic governor, came from that party's conservative wing and was fundamentally opposed to the types of reform which would soon emerge within the New Deal. As a result, the Progressives found themselves marginalized within their own party, and with no support coming from the Democrats. Due to their weakened position within the Republicans, a growing chorus was heard from within Progressive circles, agitating for the creation of a separate party.²⁹

Such a third party would not be without precedent in the Upper Midwest. In North Dakota, the Nonpartisan League (NPL) had been founded in 1916 as an organization to articulate a liberal, economic, solution to the plight of the state's farmers. Although the Nonpartisan League was able to effectively take control of North Dakota's Republican Party until 1920, by running NPL candidates in the Republican primaries, it remained a separate distinct organization. Following the recall election of 1921 which saw then-governor Lynn Frazier removed from the Governor's mansion, in the first gubernatorial recall election in the nation's history, the NPL was weakened, but not vanquished from the political stage. Frazier was elected to the United States Senate in 1923, and William "Wild Bill" Langer, an NPL candidate, was elected as Governor in the election of 1932.³⁰

²⁸ Kasperek, *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip LaFollette*, 132-35.

²⁹ Robert B. Fowler, *Wisconsin Votes: An Electoral History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 144; Kasperek, *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip LaFollette*, 148-49.

³⁰ Ray Allen Goldberg, *The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota*, (Fargo: Midwest publishing, 1948), 10.; Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press: 1985), 320-26.; Roy L. Miller, "The Gubernatorial Controversy in North Dakota," *The American Political Science Review* 29, no. 3 [1935], 418-32.

A closer analogy to the situation in Wisconsin would be the rise of the Farm-Labor Party (FLP) of Minnesota. Emerging in the years following the First World War, the FLP strove to create an alliance between the rural farming communities of Minnesota and urban laborers. Much like the NPL in North Dakota, and the Progressive faction in Wisconsin, the FLP initially ran candidates in the state's Republican primaries, as the Farm-Labor Alliance, and strove to take over that party's political apparatus. However, after being banned from running in the Republican Party, the Alliance became an official party in 1922, quickly electing Henrik Shipstead and Magnus Johnson to the United States Senate. The party would reach its greatest strength during the 1930s with the election of Floyd Olson to the governorship of the state. However, much like their Wisconsin counterparts, the FLP would suffer a disastrous defeat in 1936, and would eventually merge with a resurgent Democratic Party.³¹

Many theories exist as to the reason that third-party movements were more successful in the Upper Midwest than in the rest of the nation. The utter dominance of the Republican Party in the region during the immediate post-World War I era is likely one of the determining factors. Following the completion of the First World War, many of the ethnic communities, especially German Catholics, which had made up the core of the region's Democratic establishment, abandoned the Democratic Party, blaming it for America's entry into the war against Germany. With this exodus, the Democratic opposition, as feeble as it often was, utterly collapsed, as the regional parties became a series of ultra-conservative organizations, far out of the mainstream of the region's voters. Furthermore, as the Republican Party began to move further to the Right in the post-war era, it created a situation in the local political landscape where liberal third-parties could emerge and, for a time, thrive. Richard Valley also postulates that the large bloc of recently-immigrated ethnic voters, especially those from Scandinavian countries, played a factor

³¹ Richard M. Valley, *Radicalism in the States*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], 33-41, 139-56.

as they did not share as great of a loyalty to the Republican Party as did many of their American neighbors, as well as possessing political ideals which were outside of the mainstream of American politics. Many of these same factors would be seen in the rise of the Progressive Party of Wisconsin.³²

Despite the influential position that Phil LaFollette would come to have in the Progressive Party, he had little to do with its initial formation. For years, there had been a growing drift to the left amongst certain segments of Wisconsin's population. Howard Klueter and James J. Lawrence, in their work *Woodlots and the Ballot Box: Marathon County in the Twentieth Century*, detail how Socialism, which had long had a strong influence in the city of Milwaukee, began to spread out from this base. This was partially the result of the ethnic tensions which arose during the years of the First World War; faced with Democratic and Republican parties that both supported the war, many members of Wisconsin's vital and politically active German-American community threw their support to the Socialists, who had denounced the war from the beginning. In 1917 Marathon County elected Herman Marth, a local chef and vocal Socialist, to represent the state's 2nd District in the state assembly. The next year, the county gave its vote to Socialist Victor Berger for the House of Representatives. In the following years, Marathon county residents elected Socialists to many county positions. Although Socialist strength would collapse in the election of 1920, this signaled Marathon county Germans moving into the LaFollette progressive coalition, rather than a total renunciation of Socialism itself.³³

Another popular expression of the growing radicalism within the state was the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool. As described by Glad, the Milk Pool was begun in 1931 to protest the

³² Valley, *Radicalism in the States*, xiv-xv.

³³ Howard R. Klueter and James J. Lawrence *Woodlot and the Ballot Box: Marathon County in the Twentieth Century* (Wausau; Marathon County Historical Society, 1977), 275-87.

low rates Wisconsin dairies were paying farmers for milk, and the organization grew quickly over the subsequent years. The organization's frustration exploded in February of 1933, when protestors attempted to shut down cheese and butter factories in the Fox River Valley by patrolling the main routes to those factories and turning back trucks. Although the Milk Pool strike failed, it was just the opening salvo in dairy farmers' protests over prices. In May the National Farm Holiday Association staged its own strike, which attempted to turn back and dump milk trucks heading to factories across the state. This strike was met with the firm opposition of Governor Schmedeman, who called out the National Guard. After several incidents of violence, and with little chance of actually raising the price of milk, the strike was called off on May 19, 1933.³⁴

The first years of the Depression were difficult on northern Wisconsin. Although Marathon County fared better than many of its neighboring counties to the north, the situation everywhere was dire. Despite the stock market crash in 1929, the true weight of the Depression was not fully felt in the city of Wausau until 1931, when the unemployment rate began to reach high levels. By 1933 the economy had become a crisis when a run on a local bank led to the first bank closing in the city's history. That same year saw the closing of Marathon Rubber, a local business which employed eighty-five workers, after a bank in Milwaukee, facing severe economic difficulties in that city, called in the company's loan after making the decision to restrict credit to all patrons outside of Milwaukee.³⁵

As would be expected, rural citizens of the county fared worse than those in Wausau. The rural economy had begun to decline throughout the 1920s, and the added hardships of the economic Depression had only increased the burden that farmers had to face. In 1934 the county

³⁴ Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 411-17.

³⁵ Klueter and Lorence, *Woodlot and Ballot Box*, 188-96.

was forced to raise a 5.7 percent tax in order to deal with budgetary issues resulting from the Great Depression. This tax fell hard on the countryside, with many farmers forced to cut back on their already meager endeavors in order to pay it; such as a favor from the town of Eaton who sold three of his prize cows for fifteen dollars apiece in order to meet the new tax requirements. As the economic adversity of the era continued to oppress farmers, many began to look to more radical solutions to the hardships they faced; in 1933 farmers who frequented the Athens Creamery refused to sell the company milk, and destroyed dairy products such as butter in order to protest the low prices they were receiving for their products.³⁶

The situation in the Northwoods was even more dire. At the turn of the century, the age of the lumber industry, which had driven the economy of Wisconsin's north for decades, was coming to an end. As a result, efforts were made to transform the region, lands which had been extensively logged were opened up to farmers, and many towns began to develop a tourism industry, hoping to draw vacationers. However, the cutover lands were badly suited for farming, having little of the nutrients to be found in the state's southern regions; with the downturn in farming during the 1920s, and accelerating during the Great Depression, many of the farmers in the region began to suffer greatly. Tourism also proved to be an unviable pursuit in times of economic crisis, as the vacationers that local businesses men relied on for their livelihood were unable to afford a trip to the North. With few local industries not tied to lumber, farming or tourism, the Northwoods suffered a severe economic downturn during the Great Depression.³⁷

In this climate it was the radicals who took the initiative in agitating for the creation of the new party. Of these, perhaps the most vocal was Thomas Amlie. Amlie hailed from Beloit and was a congressman until 1932 when he met the same fate as Philip LaFollette, being

³⁶ Klueter and Lorence, *Woodlot and Ballot Box*, 169-70, 192-3.

³⁷ Robert Gough *Farming the Cutover*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 115-49.

defeated in the Republican primary by a Stalwart opponent. Amlie had come to see the Great Depression as signaling the death of capitalism and wished to form a political alliance between Farmers, Laborers, and the LaFollette Progressive coalition. This drive dovetailed with the political realities of the LaFollette family and other progressives; Bob LaFollette, Jr., was up for reelection in 1934 and there was serious doubt that he would be able to win the election as a Republican in the current national climate. However, as the state Democratic Party was also opposed to the New Deal and liberalism in general, few Progressives wished to associate too strongly with that organization.³⁸

On March 3, 1934, a meeting was held at the Park Hotel in Madison with the intent of discussing the formation of a 3rd party. The meeting was generally successful, and roughly two thirds of the delegates announced their support for the creation of the new party. This was followed up on May 19 with an actual party convention held in Fond du Lac. Even at these early meetings, however, a deep division was evident within the party's structure. Bob, Jr., never as strong a supporter of the party as was his brother, privately expressed his fear and anger that the party would be hijacked by radicals. Perhaps the most visible battle between the radicals of the infant party and more traditional Progressives was the most symbolic: the Fond du Lac convention, at one point, devolved into an argument over the name of the new party. The Socialists and more radical-leaning members pushed to christen the party the Farm-Labor Party, and the Progressives wished for the official designation to be the Progressive party, explaining that the name "Progressive" was already well known to voters and that "Farm-Labor" might scare away potential voters. Although the Progressives won the battle, it foreshadowed future

³⁸ LaFollette, *Adventures in Politics*, 207-10; Glad, *War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-40*, 437-39; Kasperek, *Fighting Son: a Biography of Philip LaFollette*, 148.

conflicts for the party's direction.³⁹

Problems quickly emerged for the new party. The first Progressive primary suffered from an exceedingly low turnout. The results prompted J.L. Stuktevant, a prominent Stalwart leader in Marathon County and the owner and chief editor of the *Wausau Daily Record*, to crow, "The results of Tuesday's primary proved one thing – Wisconsin is a conservative and not a radical state." Furthermore the party had been unable to find a candidate for the governorship who could unite its different factions, except for ex-governor Philip LaFollette. The result was that both Bob, Jr., and Phil would be present on the party's ticket for Senator and governor respectively, opening up the new party to changes that the Progressives were "the personal party of the La Follettes." The split between the radicals and moderates also nearly erupted into the open when the radicals, angered by the Fond du Lac convention's moderation, staged a separate convention, also in Fond du Lac, and created the Farmer-Labor-Progressive federation. Phil LaFollette was forced to appear at the convention and convinced the leadership not to split the party by fielding their own platform and slate of candidates.⁴⁰

Despite these grave difficulties, the Progressive Party managed to marshal its forces and emerge victorious in the November election of 1934. Part of this was likely the attractiveness of the Progressive Party's candidates, but another large factor was Wisconsin's enthusiasm for the New Deal, and the new party's association with that movement. With the state's Democratic and Republican parties effectively controlled by conservatives, the Progressives appeared to voters as the only viable way to show their support for the president. Roosevelt himself understood this, and at an August 9 speech in Green Bay, he praised Bob LaFollette, Jr's., work in the senate. Although this was not a formal endorsement, as he even failed to mention Phil LaFollette

³⁹LaFollette, *Adventures in Politics*, 210-11; Kasperek, *Fighting Son: a biography of Philip laFollette*, 148-50.

⁴⁰ Quotation from J.L. Stuktevant, "The Primary", *Wausau Daily Record*, September 21, 1934; Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 441.

or the new party, many took it as an indication that the president was receptive to the Progressive Party. As the dust of the election cleared, the Progressives had captured the Governorship as well as the offices of Attorney General, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, and State Treasurer. J.L. Stuktevant, who had previously declared Wisconsin to be a conservative state, was apparently left chagrined, for his only editorial comment about the state's election results was to state, "Wisconsin Democrats were feeling a bit chastened. They never thought Brother Phil would slip into the executive office, carrying all the other Progressive state candidates with him, under the shadow of Brother Bob's wing."⁴¹

Victory did much to mollify both wings of the new party, but it did not completely erase the divide between the radicals, usually associated with the Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation [FLPF], and the moderates, who were usually closer to the old LaFollette coalition. This division would become even more pronounced in the 1936 election, when the FLPF announced that it would endorse candidates at its convention, and that only candidates who were members of the organization and fully supported its platform would get the nomination. This decision led the FLPF to refuse to endorse LaFollette for governor in that year, as he adamantly refused to join the organization.⁴²

However, the split was not so clean cut as it might at first seem. Many county FLPF chapters were barely independent of the local progressive organization. For instance, both Marathon and Dunn Counties' chapters of the FLPF were, in many ways, simply reformatted Progressive Clubs, the main organizational unit of the old Progressive coalition. The officers of the Dunn County Progressive club and the FLPF were almost identical, with members holding

⁴¹ Quotation from "Marathon County Vote is Lighter than 2 Years Ago", *Wausau Daily Record*, November 7, 1934; Quotation from J.L. Stuktevant, "The Election", *Wausau Daily Record*, November 7, 1934.

⁴² James L. Lawrence, *Gerald J. Boileau and the Progressive-Farm-Labor Alliance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 131.

the same position in both organizations. In fact, at one point, the two were so close that funds from the FLPF account were transferred to the Progressive Club account to help a deficit in that group.⁴³

Furthermore, not all of the most radical members of the Progressive Party enjoyed cordial relations with the FLPF. Walt Gruenke was the District Attorney of Marathon County and one of the most active leaders of that county's Progressive Party. A strong proponent of the third-party movement, he had been one of the delegates in Fond Du Lac who fought to have the party christened the Farm-Labor Party. As a local organizer he had worked to meld the Farmers Union, Farm Holiday, and Milk Pool supporters together into the very core of the local party. Gruenke would go on to be a vocal supporter of North Dakota's William Lemke in that congressman's attempt to win the presidency as a member of the Union Party in 1936. However, relations between Gruenke and the FLPF were never warm; although Gruenke led the creation of a local chapter in 1935, Marathon County's FLPF chapter was nearly identical in every way to the Progressive Club, and was likely formed in order to keep socialists from forming their own chapter and using it to influence the Progressive Party. In 1936 the state FLPF leadership attempted to punish the Marathon county chapter for not endorsing the Federation's slate of candidates. As a result, Gruenke and other local Progressives simply dissolved the chapter.⁴⁴

The Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation often attempted to exert its independence from the state Progressive leadership. In 1938, at the FLPF convention in Madison, great efforts were taken to declare that the Progressive Party was but one of the eight organizations officially making up the FLPF and was in no position to dictate policy or candidates. However, in practice, the two organizations remained closely tied together, usually with the Progressive Party

⁴³ Dunn County Progressives Ledger, Dunn County Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation Papers, University of Wisconsin-Stout Archives, Stout, WI.

⁴⁴ Klueter and Lawrence, *Woodlot and the Ballot Box*, 329-35.

taking preeminence. For instance, at that same convention in 1938 the FLPF released its official platform, and it had more than a passing resemblance to the Progressive Party's platform of two years prior. Both the FLPF's 1938 platform and the Progressive Party's 1936 platform endorsed the right of labor and farmers to organize, and a public referendum before the nation could enter any war. In fact, in certain cases, the wording of both documents was identical. Both announce, for example, that "No farmer should lose his farm because of economic conditions over which he has no control. Farm mortgages must be refinanced in a plan identical or similar to the original Frazier bill."⁴⁵

Despite the occasional divisiveness of the conflict between these factions, the election of radical or moderate Progressives did not seem to have a geographical basis. For instance, Marathon County elected Gerald Boileau, who was largely associated with the LaFollette family and had served as a Republican in Congress before joining the Progressive Party as its formation. Boileau considered himself a "self-consciously practical Progressive." The county also elected Roland E. Kannenberg, who was associated with the radical wing of the party, to the state senate.⁴⁶

Roland Kannenberg grew up in a family that was inherently tied into the local political scene, and events of his early life brought him into contact with several of the liberal political leaders of the region. Kannenberg's older brother, Ernest Kannenberg, Jr., for instance, was highly involved in Robert LaFollette, Sr.'s, campaign for the presidency in 1924, and his younger brother, John Kannenberg, would do on to become a long-serving and popular mayor of Wausau decades later. Furthermore, Kannenberg worked at the restaurant of Herman Marth, the

⁴⁵ Quotation from Howard F. Ohm, *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1937* (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, 1937), 269-79; The Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation 1938 platform, Charles D. Madsen papers, River Falls Area Research Center, River Falls, WI.

⁴⁶ Quotation from Klueter and Lawrence, *Woodlot and Ballot Box*, 333-34; Fowler, *Wisconsin Votes: an Electoral History*, 147.

Socialism former-assemblyman, and was a well known guest at the law office of Walter Graunke.⁴⁷

Elected as a Progressive in 1934, Kannenberg ran to the left of Phil LaFollette and most other members of the party. His support for a mortgage moratorium bill was deemed to be so radical that Phil LaFollette himself refused to campaign for him during the election.

Kannenberg also stood out as a vocal supporter of the Townsend Plan, an old-age pension plan which called for all seniors over sixty to be given 200 dollars a month, and was also an avid supporter of Senator Huey Long from Louisiana. In addition, during his tenure in the state senate, Kannenberg introduced an amendment to the state constitution allowing for the creation of state-run utility corporations, as well as two bills meant to help dependent children.

Kannenberg was well respected enough by the radical faction of the Progressive Party that he was encouraged to run for lieutenant governor, although he was not supported by the LaFollettes or other leaders of the dominant wing of the party, and was defeated. This defeat signaled the end of his political career, as the money he had spent in the race left him few campaign funds to fight to retain his seat in the senate. Roland Kannenberg, along with many of the other Progressives, went down in defeat in 1938.⁴⁸

Gerald Boileau stands as an example of the dominant wing of Progressivism during the party's height. First elected to Congress as a Progressive Republican, Boileau joined the new Progressive Party with hesitation. Boileau, as might be expected, had a cool relationship with the FLPF; recognizing that he needed the federation's endorsement in 1936, he joined the

⁴⁷ Roland E Kannenberg, interviewed by Mark F. Smith, May 29, 1981, sound recording, Oral History Interviews of the Former Members of the Wisconsin Progressive Party Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI; Edward Blackorby, *Senator Roland E. Kannenberg*, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire department of History Wisconsin History papers, 1954-1978, McIntyre Library, Eau Claire, WI.

⁴⁸ Kannenberg, interview; Blackorby, *Senator Roland E. Kannenberg*; Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, 459-60.

organization, but was never an active member of its ranks. Instead, he focused his attention upon Congress, where he had become the leader of the Liberal Caucus, a group of liberal Republicans, Democrats, and independents who had formed their own congressional caucus to fight for liberal ideals and to attempt to move the New Deal to the left. Despite his tendency, present throughout the Progressive Party, to attempt to fashion a liberal alternative to Roosevelt and his New Deal, Boileau had no difficulty in associating with the President and his programs, as he did during his re-election campaign of 1936. In doing so he, along with the LaFollette brothers and other leaders of his party, openly repudiated the growing urge to establish a liberal third party. During his tenure in Congress, Boileau would present himself as a member of the loyal opposition to the New Deal, and would also dedicate himself to representing the dairy interest of his state, going so far as to attempt to stifle the emergence of a dairy industry in the South.⁴⁹

During the period from 1934 through 1938, the Progressive Party attempted to navigate through turbulent waters created by the Depression, and to bring real relief to the citizens of Wisconsin. This quest reached its zenith following the 1936 election when the Progressives were also to win control of all state offices, as well as 16 or 33 seats in the Wisconsin State Senate. However, by the end of 1938, the party was in shambles, having lost control of the state government to a rejuvenated Republican Party.⁵⁰

Part of the explanation for this rapid change in fortunes appears to lie in the factional nature of the Progressive Party itself. The divide between the radicals of the party and the moderates, best exemplified by the split between the Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation and the Progressive Clubs, has already been explored in some detail. Indeed, factionalism seemed to increase in potency following the election of 1936. Jonathon Kasperek, in his biography of

⁴⁹ Lawrence, *Gerald J. Boileau and the Progressive-Farmer-Labor Alliance*, 131-33, 141-43.

⁵⁰ Fails to Control Legislature, *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, November 7, 1936.

Philip LaFollette, *Fighting Son*, describes how although the legislature which met following the election was able to pass some key bills, including the creation of a Labor Relations Board, as well as a Rural Electrification Administration, it also sowed the seeds of the party's demise. Factionalism had grown among members of the party, and Governor LaFollette came desperately close to losing control of the legislature as a result. Following the completion of the session, LaFollette complained that members were so busy fighting to pass their own favored bills that there were unable to unite for greater purposes. This led him to call a special session. Once again the legislature passed the needed legislation, including bills relating to a mortgage moratorium, as well as a new Farm and Commerce act. In order to do so, however, LaFollette used Paul Alfonsi, the Speaker of the Assembly, to introduce harsh measures eliminating debate within the body and forcing votes. The opposition, Democrats and Republicans, reacted by marching out of the capital after extending a mock-Nazi salute to the governor and shouting "Heil!"⁵¹

Another contributing factor was the President himself and the Roosevelt Recession of 1937-38. The stock market crash of 1937 and the subsequent recession badly affected New Deal Democrats throughout the nation, as well as those non-Democrats associated with the President in the midterm elections of 1938. The recession certainly played a part in the downfall of Minnesota's Farm-Labor Party during the same year, which found itself mortally wounded after the electoral dust had settled. In fact, the downfall of the Farm-Labor Party bears some resemblance to that of the Progressive Party. In both cases the political parties were beset by factionalism, both between their moderate and radical wings, but also between the farmers and laborers which made up the voting base of the coalitions. The passing of the Wagner Act had opened up the possibility of the split between the American Federation of Labor and Congress of

⁵¹ Kasperek, *Fighting Son: a Biography of Philip LaFollette*, 202-07.

Industrial Organizations, and sometimes bloody battles occurred as a result. This split between the AFL and CIO in Minnesota would fundamentally weaken the Farm-Labor Party. The effects in Wisconsin were less extreme, but enough to cause the creation of the Labor Relations Board to mediate. Any disturbance in organized labor, also, served to undermine Progressive strength in Milwaukee and the Fox Valley, two areas whose defection to the Democratic camp in 1932 had precipitated the split between the Progressives and the Republican Party in the first place. Furthermore, perceived excesses on the part of labor cooled enthusiasm of farmers for a political alliance.⁵²

The changing political nature of the country also played an important role in the collapse of the Progressive Party. The New Deal had fundamentally reconfigured the relationship with the federal and state governments. In 1935 Phil LaFollette had seen this change coming, and had proposed a plan to President Roosevelt which would still allow for innovation amongst the individual states combating the Great Depression. He had requested the Federal Government allot a lump sum to the state government, which would then be spent on the creation of state-relief organizations, rather than the federally allotted program that became the WPA. Bickering amongst members of the state senate, over the creation and constitutionality of state-run corporations to distribute and invest the federal dollars, killed the bill. From that point onward many of the agencies created by the Progressives were simply reflections of federal organizations which all already come into being.⁵³

The effect of these factors upon the party's strength are revealed when analyzing the election of 1938 upon Marathon County. As has been previously mentioned, the county had been

⁵² Richard M. Valley, *Radicalism in the States* (Chicago, University of Chicago Publishing, 1989), 139-56; David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear the American People in the Great Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 350-1; Kasperek, *Fighting Son: a Biography of Philip LaFollette*, 202-7.

⁵³ Valley, *Radicalism in the States*, 155-6; Kasperek, *Fighting Son: a Biography of Philip LaFollette*, 181-87.

a bastion of Progressivism since the 1920s. In the election of 1936, the high water mark of the party, the county gave Phil LaFollette 12,557 votes, while his Republican and Democratic opponents both received less than 7000 votes a piece. During the same election, Gerald Boileau received over 10,000 votes more than his nearest opponent in his race to be reelected to the House of Representatives. The voters of Marathon County narrowly sent Roland Kannenberg to the state senate, while it returned Joseph Barber, a local Progressive leader, to the state Assembly. In short, the county threw its near complete support behind the Progressive Party in 1936; the only holdout being Rudolf Melanor, a Democratic assemblyman, who narrowly defeated Progressive John Dittbrener.⁵⁴

By 1938, the results were dramatically altered. Phil LaFollette was overwhelmed at the polls by Julius Heil, the Republican candidate for governor, 12,310 votes to 7,198 within the county. Gerald Boileau, who had risen to national prominence as the leader of the Liberal Caucus, lost his bid for reelection, 42,652 to 32,442 to Reid F. Murray. Otto Mueller, Kannenberg's opponent in the previous election, was returned to his seat in the state senate, 15,024 to 11,189. Even Joseph Barber, a well respected local Progressive leader, went down to defeat in his attempts to retain his Assembly seat, to Anthony Grueska, after Dan Genrich, another Progressive, entered into the race and shattered the Progressive vote in the process. The party's only victory in Marathon County that year was the narrow election of John Dittbrender to the county's second assembly seat, by only five votes.⁵⁵

The election of 1938 decimated the Progressive Party, but it is still possible that it might have survived as an independent entity had it not also lost much of its leadership in that election. Not only had the election stripped it of most of its elected officials, but the LaFollette brothers,

⁵⁴ Ohm, *Wisconsin Bluebook*, 1937, 391, 426-29.

⁵⁵ Howard F. Ohm and Leone G. Bryhan, *Wisconsin Bluebook*, 1940 (Madison: Democratic Publishing Company, 1940), 606-19.

for separate reasons, were both unwilling and unable, to help sustain the party that had helped to create. The party would linger until 1946, but in a much reduced capacity. Following 1944, the last election cycle before the party's dissolution, the Progressives only sent six candidates to the state assembly, and five to the state senate. These candidates all came from three separate regions in the state, the south shore of Lake Superior and northern Mississippi valley, Dane County, and those counties which lay on the coast of Lake Michigan, south of Green Bay and north of Milwaukee. These regions would constitute the dwindled heartland of the state's Progressive Party in its final years.⁵⁶

Although the party collapsed in 1946, it had suffered its final, crippling defeat in 1942 when Governor-elect Orlando Loomis, the only other Progressive to be elected governor besides Phil LaFollette, died of a heart attack brought on by the stressful campaign. This left Lieutenant-Governor Walter Goodland, a Republican, to serve as Governor for the entire term, and greatly disheartened those Progressives who still associated with the party. Charles Madsen, who had been elected to the state senate in 1944 as a Progressive from the party's old heartland of the northwest, wrote to his associate George Hampel, "I want to say that around here this is no doubt. The Progressive Party is dead." The only remaining question was where should the remaining members of the Progressives go? This was a choice that Madsen spent much of 1944 mulling over. Although he claimed to have little interest in running as a Republican, the Democratic Party in the state was too weak. In 1946 he reluctantly ran as a Republican and won.⁵⁷

He was one of the few. Across the state, many younger Progressives making their first

⁵⁶ Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn, *Wisconsin Bluebook, 1946* (Madison: Democratic Publishing Company, 1946), 673-78.

⁵⁷ Quotation from Charles Madsen to George Hampel Jr. Charles D. Madsen papers, River Falls Area Research Center, River Falls, WI; Charles Madsen to Senator Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., Charles D. Madsen Papers, River Falls Area Research Center, River Falls, WI; Kasperek, *Fighting Son: A Biography of Phil LaFollette*, 222-25.

attempts for office as Republicans went down to defeat in the Republican primary of 1946. However, this was not the case in those regions which had continued to elect Progressives as late as 1944. Of the six Progressives who served in the state Assembly in 1944, five were reelected as Republicans in 1946. The situation was much the same in the state senate; two of the five won the Republican nomination, and the subsequent election, while two more simply retired from politics. The only former-Progressive state senator to go down in defeat was Fred Risser of Dane County, two years later in 1948, where he was defeated by Ruth Doyle, a Democrat.⁵⁸

Marathon County's political status at this time remained ambiguous. Following the election of 1938, it continued to vote strongly Republican. By 1944, the Progressives did not even run a challenger to Martin C. Lueck, one of the county's two Republican Assemblymen. Paul A. Luedke, the second assemblyman, did face a Progressive opponent, John R. Wilson, but easily defeated him 10,687 to 2,032 votes. The strongest Progressive candidate was Clifford Krueger who was defeated for the state senate by the incumbent, William H. McNeight, for the state's 25th senate district which encompassed Marathon and Lincoln Counties. However, Paul Luedke had a reputation as a moderate Republican, and Clifford Krueger was able to defeat McNeight in the Republican primary in 1946, and subsequently won the general election, despite the efforts of his own party to defeat him with a write-in campaign.⁵⁹

Despite this, certain conclusions can be made. The counties which continued to vote Progressive up until 1946 often had much in common. Those northernmost counties upon the south shore of Lake Superior were often noted for their industrial character, reliance on tourism, and lack of a substantial agricultural component to their economies. Furthermore, these counties

⁵⁸ Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn, *Wisconsin Bluebook, 1948* (Madison: Democratic Publishing Company, 1948), 679-80, 681-82, 608-9.

⁵⁹ Ohm and Kuehn, *Wisconsin Bluebook, 1946*, 676; David Obey, *Raising Hell for Justice: The Washington Battles of Heartland Progressive*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 48-9.

often contained well established Scandinavian communities which had been associated with the Progressives as far back as the 1890s. Although Marathon County also contained an industrial urban center, Wausau, and many Scandinavian communities, it was also considered largely rural and agricultural in nature. It would seem likely, then, that the cause of the Progressive decline in that, and other agricultural northern counties, was the result of the defection of farmers to the Republican Party in the early 1940s. However, even in those counties which swung to the Republican column following 1938, a certain sympathy for Progressivism remained. During the Republican primary battle of 1946, sitting Governor Walter Goodland was defeated in Marathon County by Ralf Immanuel, a longtime Progressive leader who had been endorsed by Bob LaFollette, Jr., 3,247 to 2,646. This same feat was accomplished throughout the northern counties of the state, not just those who had remained loyal to the Progressive Party in previous elections.⁶⁰

It would seem, then, that the Progressive Party itself had faltered in the North, as it had throughout much of the state, due to several structural weaknesses and the inability of its leadership to surmount its defeat in 1938. The spirit of Progressivism however, remained latent throughout the North; even if many voters had given up upon the party itself, they had not given up upon the ideals that it represented. The struggle, then, was over which party would best be able to pick up the torch dropped by the Progressives following their decline. While the Democrats, under the leadership of Daniel Hoan, the former Socialist mayor of Milwaukee, struggled to appeal to former voters of the Progressive Party, many Progressives, themselves, were preparing to make the move back into the Republican Party.

⁶⁰ Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), passim.; Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 465; Ohm and Kuehn, *Wisconsin Bluebook, 1948*, 547-617.

CHAPTER 3. THE PROGRESSIVE REPUBLICANS: STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

The heat of the convention hall that day must have seemed extreme to the more than four hundred delegates who had arrived in the small city of Portage, Wisconsin. March in Wisconsin is a notorious month, known for mercurial changes of weather -- a month when the temperature can reach a balmy 70 in the early afternoon, only to be smothered in a blizzard later that night. And yet, whatever chaos that March brought, in the year 1946 it would have been hard pressed to match the verbal and emotional storms which reverberated within the convention hall on March 17th. Progressives had come to Portage that day girded for battle, not against the Republicans or Democrats of Wisconsin, but against one another, and the stakes of the civil war were high indeed. The March 17 Portage Convention was to decide whether or not to bury, once and for all, the Progressive Party of Wisconsin.

The 1940s had been a deeply disappointing decade for Wisconsin's Progressive Party. In many ways, the party had never managed to recover from the humiliating setback it had suffered in 1938, when Governor Philip LaFollette had gone down in defeat in his bid for reelection and taken much of the Progressive leadership with him. Orland Loomis's early death in December of 1942, following his election as Governor a month earlier, had, in many ways, sealed the fate of the Party, denying it not only a hard-fought victory but also its last dynamic leader. 1944 had seen the Progressives run campaigns in less than 12 of Wisconsin's 72 counties and carry roughly 6 percent of the total vote.⁶¹

The convention was divided into roughly three factions: those Progressives who wished to rejoin the Republican Party; those who felt that they should move, as a unit, into the state's

⁶¹ William F. Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, Vol. 6 of *The History of Wisconsin* (Madison, Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988), 446-47.

Democratic Party; and a body of independents, like the fiery Walter Graunkee of Wausau, to whom any talk of dissolving the party was anathema.⁶²

As these factions battled for the soul of the Progressive Party's future, Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., mulled over his future course. 1946 was an election year, and the decision of the convention was of utmost importance to his career. LaFollette, in the opinion of many who knew him, including Carl Thompson, had always been more of a statesman than a politician. Unlike his brother, Phil, he had been unable to give the Progressive Party the leadership it needed in order to remain an active participant in the state's politics. However, he understood the difficulties presented him, and others running, if they remained independent of one of the state's two major parties. LaFollette was disturbed by the recent actions of President Truman, who he felt was taking a conservative direction in both foreign relations and domestic affairs. He felt, too, that Wisconsin's Democratic Party was far too weak to take the state. LaFollette had already decided to return to the party of his father, and of his own political beginnings.⁶³

Fearing that the growing consensus of the delegates was to remain an independent party, LaFollette rose to speak to the convention. Lambasting the Wisconsin Democrats as a "machine minded organization without principle or program," LaFollette pointed to a growing liberal sentiment within the Republican Party, nationally, concluding that, "for the present, Progressives of Wisconsin can advance their cause most effectively within the Republican party." LaFollette had spoken, and he swayed the delegates to his side. The final vote showed 284 votes to rejoin the Republicans, 77 who wished to stay independent and only 51 delegates who wished to join the Democrats.⁶⁴

⁶² Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 446-47; Clifford Krueger and Carl Thompson, interviewed by Mark F. Smith, December 1, 1980, Progressive Oral History Collection, Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

⁶³ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 446-47; Krueger and Thompson, Interview.

⁶⁴ Quotation from Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-65*, 447.

The Portage convention and its decision to return to the Republican Party would prove to be monumental in the history of Wisconsin Progressivism. The Republican primary election of 1946 would see many Progressive candidates cut down by party loyalists; LaFollette himself would lose a close primary battle against Joseph McCarthy. The defeat of LaFollette and others would convince members of a younger generation, such as future governor Gaylord Nelson, that the Republican Party was no true home to Progressives. To quote Lester Johnson, a former Progressive, and Democratic Congressman from Wisconsin in the 1950s, “I had to get beat in the GOP primary in 1946, along with Bob LaFollette, Ralf Immell and Gaylord Nelson, before I found out that there is no place for a liberal in that party.”⁶⁵

And yet, a number of Progressives won in the 1946 primary, or would reenter politics as Republicans later on. These Progressive-Republicans generally sprang from the traditional progressive heartland of northern Wisconsin, in particular the region referred to as the Northwoods, or the northern Mississippi valley. Once elected, these politicians proceeded to carve out a powerbase within their districts which not only secured their reelection, but also allowed them to act independently of the traditional hierarchy of the Republican Party. As long as they remained within their own district, their seats were safe; however, electoral defeat was often handed out to those Progressive-Republicans who attempted to secure higher office outside of their traditional regions of influence. Charles Madsen and Paul Alfonsi would both feel the bitter sting of defeat in their separate attempts to transition from the state government to a seat in Congress. Due to this local support, Progressive-Republicans often attained high levels of seniority within the state legislature, and even reached quite influential leadership positions in the process. However, as Wisconsin’s Republican Party followed the national trend in drifting to

⁶⁵ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-65*, 561-62. Quotation from Richard Carlton Haney, “A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin since the Second World War” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1970), 56.

the right, these figures, even while in leadership positions, often found themselves marginalized within their own party, relics of a bygone era.

All of this, however, was in the future on that day in March, 1946. On the face of it, Robert M. LaFollette, Jr.'s, decision to reenter the Republican Party was not surprising. Following the defeat of the Progressives in 1938, the Republicans had regained the position they had enjoyed since the 1890s, as the unrivaled masters of Wisconsin politics. Isolationist ethnic voters who looked in terror upon the aggressive foreign policy of the Roosevelt administration, as well as farmers returning to the party as economic conditions improved, had built the Republican coalition of the post-Depression years. The stalwart Conservatives, under the leadership of fundraiser and organizer Tom Coleman and the Republican Volunteer Committee, had consolidated their power within the party following the Progressive exodus in 1933 and strengthened this coalition.⁶⁶

With success came the advent of factionalism, as it had in the pre-Depression era. By 1946 the party was split between Tom Coleman, one of the most active non-elected leaders of the Republicans, and the popular Governor, Walter Goodland. Fearing that a Progressive return to the party would challenge conservative leadership, conservative Republican legislators passed the so-called "Fence-Me-In" bill, which would have prevented candidates from switching parties from one election to another. Goodland, however, whose base of support was largely independent of the Republican leadership, vetoed the bill and invited the Progressives back into the convention. In response, Coleman helped deny the Governor the endorsement of the Republicans' state convention in Oshkosh that year, which also saw the regular delegates endorse Joseph McCarthy for Senate.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-65*, 409-10.

⁶⁷ Haney, "A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin since the Second World War," 43-44; Thompson, *Continuity and*

LaFollette was largely responsible for the defeat of 1946. Underestimating the strength of the Conservatives in the Republican Party, he also overestimated his own strength. As a result, he refused to form an alliance with Walt Goodland and, in fact, went as far as to endorse Ralf Immanuel, a fellow old Progressive, for the position of governor. LaFollette also remained aloof and distant, visiting the state rarely and spending little money on his own campaign. Joseph McCarthy spent over \$50,000 on his campaign, while LaFollette spent only a paltry \$3,500. The result was that on election day, McCarthy upset LaFollette 207,975 votes to 202,557, and as the senator went, so did much of the Progressive slate of candidates in the Republican Primary.⁶⁸

However, as has already been stated, as influential as this loss was in the future political development of Wisconsin, the Republican Party continued to draw Progressive support and candidates, albeit in reduced numbers. These Progressives, even when rising to prominence within the party, would often have an ambivalent relationship with other Republicans. Clifford Krueger, former Senate minority leader, speaking in the 1980s, at the end of his career, perhaps expressed this attitude best. Although claiming to have been comfortable within the Republican Party, Krueger expressed frustration at conservatives for trying to dictate “who the hell was a good Republican” and stated that that he had “had to fight like hell to get in the Republican party ... my attitude was ‘kiss my ass.’”⁶⁹

Besides Krueger, who would go on to be the most influential of the Progressive Republicans, other examples include Charles Madsen of Polk County in western Wisconsin, and Paul Alfonsi of Minocqua. Each of these men would adapt to their situation in the Republican

Change, 1940-65, 414-17.

⁶⁸ Krueger and Thompson, interview; Haney, “A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin since the Second World War,” 44-48.

⁶⁹ Clifford Krueger, interviewed by Mark F. Smith, February 18, 1981, Progressive Oral History Collection, Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

Party by attempting to rise in prominence and power within the party; two of them were largely successful, while the third found his political career largely brought to a premature end.

Charles D. Madsen was not a native of Wisconsin. Born in Connecticut in 1906, he attended Harvard University before emigrating to Wisconsin to attain his law degree at the University of Wisconsin. Following his graduation, he moved to Polk County in northwestern Wisconsin where he quickly became active in local politics, serving on the village board, as district attorney, as well as justice of the peace. In 1942, he was elected to the state senate as a Progressive. In 1946 he followed Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., back to the Republican Party and was able to hold onto his seat in the state senate.⁷⁰

Charles Madsen may be the shortest serving of those Progressives who made the successful switch to the Republican Party. Elected initially as a member of the State Senate in 1942 as a Progressive, he had been active in local politics for some years previous. Polk County had been a Progressive stronghold since the days of Robert LaFollette, Sr., and its voters continued dutifully to send members of that party to the state legislature up until the ultimate dissolution of the party. Even as late as 1944, all local governmental positions, save the sheriff, were members of the party.⁷¹

By 1944 Madsen, as well as many others, understood that the Progressive Party was nearly dead. On November 30, 1944 he penned three separate letters, explaining his own personal opinion of the matter. To John Wyngaard of the Madison News Bureau, who had previously written asking for Madsen's and other elected officials' views of the future course of the party, Madsen remained somewhat aloof, stating that "it is a lettle (sic) hard to put my personal opinion because I have not yet made up my mind." He did, however break down the

⁷⁰ Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1944* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1944), 36.

⁷¹ Charles Madsen to John Wyngaard, November 30, 1944, Charles Madsen Papers. River Falls Area Research Center, River Falls, WI.

opinion of residents of his county as “about three quarters of the progressive rank and file state that we should join the Republican party.”⁷²

To others, however, Madsen remained much less reserved. On November 20, 1944, George Hampel Jr., a local leader of the Progressive Party in Milwaukee, wrote him, stating that the Milwaukee organization was openly in favor of rejoining the Republican Party and requested that the Polk County organization hold a meeting and decide their preference: whether the Progressives should join the Democrats, the Republicans, the Socialists, or remain Progressives. Madsen replied, once again on November 30, that the “progressive party is dead,” and that “whether we like it or not.”⁷³

Perhaps the most blunt of his November 30 letters, however, was directed at Bob LaFollette, Jr. In describing the sorry state of the local party, Madsen points out that “in Polk county which has always been carried by the Progressives in the past we ran a poor third with only 1300 votes.” He goes on to say, as he had to others, that the consensus was the Progressives should return home to the Republican Party. As for himself, he expressed certain misgivings about such a move: “Personally,” he wrote, “I do not like to go into the Republican Party, but if the vast majority are going in regardless then it would be useless in the next election to run on the Progressive ticket. ... While I don’t like it, it remains that that is the way the rank and file are thinking.”⁷⁴

Despite his own personal feelings about the Republican Party, Madsen was able to find a temporary home within its ranks. He won re-election in 1946, after facing no competition in the general election, and felt comfortable enough in his position to attempt to run for Congress in 1948. As such, he resigned his seat in the state senate, in order to participate in the Republican

⁷² Ibid; John Wyngaard to Charles D. Madsen. November 29, 1944.

⁷³ George Hampel, Jr. to Charles D. Madsen, November 20, 1944; Charles Madsen to George Hampel, Jr., November 30, 1944.

⁷⁴ Charles D. Madsen to Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., November 30, 1944.

primary and attempt to unseat incumbent Congressman Alvin E. O’Konski. In this resulting contest, Madsen carried only 46.7 percent of the vote, losing 20,625 votes to O’Konski’s 23,478. In what can only be considered a harbinger of what was to come, the progressive stronghold of Polk County elected John Olson, a Democrat, in 1948 to fill Madsen’s empty seat in the State Senate.⁷⁵

Madsen’s defeat to O’Konski did not completely destroy his career in public service, but it did rechannel his ambitions. By 1961 he had been elected as county judge of Polk County, a position which he is last referenced as holding in 1975. He never attempted to return to the state legislature, or to run for a position in the state’s executive branch, or even to seek higher office within the judiciary. By entering the judiciary, Madsen followed several former Progressives, such as former Congressman Gerald Boileau, into nonpartisan politics during those confusing and disheartening times.⁷⁶

Charles Madsen’s career within the Republican Party stands as an example of the uneasy position many Progressive Republicans held within their new party. Elected from a safe district with a rich progressive tradition, Madsen may have been expected to enjoy a long career within the legislature. However, his attempt to ascend to a higher position, in this case the United States Congress, and expand the influence of the renewed Progressive wing of the party led to failure. In doing so, he came into open conflict with a candidate who had better established credentials within the party and was more entrenched than himself. This was a contest that Madsen, and many other Progressives, could not hope to win, and he fell by the wayside as the result. Rather

⁷⁵ Our Campaigns, “WI District 10 – R Primary,” Our Campaigns. <http://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID:535350> (October 22, 2010); Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn, eds., *Wisconsin Blue Book 1950* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1950), 757.

⁷⁶ H. Rupert Theobald and Patricia V. Robbins, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1976* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1975), 563; M. G. Toepel and H. Rupert Theobald, eds. *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1962* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1962), 560; James J. Lorence, *Gerald J. Boileau and the Progressive-Farmer-Labor Alliance*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 264.

than acting to increase Progressive influence within the Republican Party, his experience instead was an omen of the future, as his open Senate seat was captured by the Democratic Party, which was slowly rebuilding itself and openly attempting to court Progressive voters. These attempts, only just beginning in the 1940s, would soon begin to bear fruit for the Democrats, and cut deeply into the rural Progressive voting bloc of northern Wisconsin, which the Republicans had long taken for granted.

Paul Alfonsi, another Progressive who moved into the Republican Party, albeit later than 1946, was more successful in his attempts to find a home in his party. Alfonsi was born in Pence, Wisconsin, a small town in Iron County, on the south shores of Lake Superior. Prior to being elected to the state assembly, he worked as a local teacher at Washburn High School, where he was head of the commercial department as well as coach of the school's forensics team. Beginning his political career in the 1930s, Alfonsi was elected to the state assembly, becoming the first member of that body of Corsican descent, an accomplishment of which he was well aware and duly proud. While in the assembly in the 1930s, Alfonsi became closely associated with the Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation and was identified with the radical wing of the Progressive Party. This association with the radicals did not prevent him from quickly rising to prominence, as he quickly became the Progressive Speaker of the Assembly, where he was instrumental in pushing through Phil LaFollette's agenda during the stormy 1937 session. Following the defeat of Phil LaFollette in 1938, he remained in the legislature until 1940, when he made an attempt to secure the Progressive Party's nomination for Governor, although he lost to Orland Loomis. Shortly thereafter he joined the Republican Party and attempted to get that

party's nomination for congress from Wisconsin's Tenth District in 1942, losing, much like fellow Progressive Charles Madsen would six years later, to Alvin O'Konski.⁷⁷

Although Alvin O'Konski may have been the bane of former Progressives who wished to enter Congress, Alfonsi's loss to him did not destroy his political ambitions. However, rather than reentering politics immediately, he instead joined the military, serving from 1943 through 1946 in the Second World War. After leaving the service, Alfonsi returned to his initial career, becoming the supervisor and principal of Minocqua High School, a position he would hold until 1955. Alfonsi returned to the state assembly in 1958, this time as a Republican, and quickly made his way to the position of Majority Leader of that body. In securing this position, he became known to his Democratic opponents as a strong partisan. Retired Congressman Dave Obey, then a young member of the assembly, recounted an early confrontation between himself and Alfonsi in 1962. Alfonsi was instrumental, as majority leader, in overturning a close victory by Earl Effers, a Democrat from Kenosha, against the Republican incumbent Rusty Olson. As the Democrats spoke, expressing their anger at the actions of the assembly, Obey railed against Alfonsi, insinuating that he had forgotten the causes he had fought for during the Depression.⁷⁸

It seems at least somewhat likely that Paul Alfonsi's politics may well have changed and moderated throughout the mid-20th century. However, he remained extremely dedicated to Northern Wisconsin, the region in which he grew up, and which he represented in the state government throughout his career. Whereas the radicalism of the Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation provided solutions to the economically depressed Northwoods, which was also

⁷⁷ Paul W. Glad, *War, a New Era and Depression, 1914-1940*, Vol. 5 of *A History of Wisconsin* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1990), 517-18; Jonathan Kasperek, *Fighting Son: a Biography of Philip F. LaFollette* (Wisconsin Historical Society, 2006), 207, 241-42.; Howard F. Ohm and Leone G. Bryhan, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1935* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1935), 213; Howard F. Ohm and Leone G. Bryhan *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1942* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1942), 527-78; Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1944* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1944), 511.

⁷⁸ David R. Obey, *Raising Hell for Justice: The Washinton battles of a Heartland Progressive* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 58-60; H. Rupert Theobald, *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1966* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1966), 43.

suffering as the lumber industry collapsed and mining slowed, by the 1950s and 1960s, Alfonsi had come to see the Republican Party and its policies as the best solution to the problems which plagued his region.

Despite this reputation as a partisan fighter, Alfonsi did not completely jettison his Progressive roots during his second career in the state legislature. However, those Progressive ideals which he carried with him were the ones which best supported the people of Wisconsin's north. Alfonsi, for instance, in the 1960s, served as chair of the Conservation Committee. Conservation remained important to him, likely as a result of northern Wisconsin's turn to a largely tourism-based economy. In 1970 he was on record as supporting a lowering of the number of deer permits, because of a fear of what over-hunting was doing to the deer herd. He was also vocal in his support of local tourism, and maintained strong ties to local county boards and tourism organizations in order to promote opportunities for the region, such as when he appeared on a panel entitled "What are we doing for Outdoor Recreation in 1969." Furthermore, he was also a strong proponent of granting the Menominee Indian Reservation status as a county, an issue of great importance not only to the reservation, but also the entirety of the Northwoods during the 1960s and 1970s.⁷⁹

This strong focus on the local economy also put him into close contact with both the mining and timber industries. Although he was long known as a supporter of the workers in these industries, he also worked to assist the companies which worked in these areas. His dedication to these issues won him the long-standing admiration of the Timber Producers Association, for instance.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Rognlien Drug Co to Paul Alfonsi, January 19, 1970, Paul Alfonsi Collection, Northern Great Lakes Center, Ashland, WI; Jerome A. Grignon to Paul Alfonsi, correspondence December 8, 1969. Paul Alfonsi Collection; Fred E. Lengfeld to Paul Alfonsi, correspondence September 24, 1969.

⁸⁰ Lloyd Palmer to Paul Alfonsi, correspondence, August 26, 1970. Paul Alfonsi Collection.

Finally, Paul Alfonsi remained dedicated to the Progressive Party's call, articulated as late as 1944 in that year's party platform, for veteran's rights as well as public welfare. In 1970 Alfonsi fought to push a bill through the assembly that would prohibit a reduction of state aid to five percent to the county departments of social services. His actions also won him the support of many veterans for his continued advocacy for their rights and programs, support which may have stemmed as much from his own service in World War II as from lingering Progressive sympathies.⁸¹

Unfortunately for Alfonsi, perhaps due to his nature or because of his leadership position within the legislature, he made a number of enemies during his long career. This exploded during his controversial trial for bribery in 1967, which raised the accusation that he had taken bribes to support a highway bill which would have expanded the state highway system in northern Wisconsin. He was found guilty and stripped of his seat and leadership position within the legislature, but appealed the case to the State Supreme Court, which overturned the ruling.⁸²

Despite the court's initial adverse ruling, Alfonsi remained popular in his own district and quickly won reelection. The overturning of the decision by the State Supreme Court and the ruling of innocent during the subsequent second trial largely vindicated him. Despite this, Alfonsi's years in the assembly were coming to an end. In 1970, in front of the assembly, his son delivered a speech notifying the state of his father's subsequent retirement. Although initially there was some speculation that he would seek the Republican nomination for the position of Lieutenant Governor, Alfonsi dismissed it, citing his age as well as financial worries, as the result of putting both of his children through college at the University of Wisconsin-

⁸¹ Harold D. Bowen to Paul Alfonsi, correspondence, July 3, 1969, Armand F. Cirilli to Paul Alfonsi, correspondence, April 16, 1970, G. H. Stordock to Paul Alfonsi, correspondence, August 10, 1970.

⁸² Obey, *Raising Hell for Justice*, 85-9; Legislative Reference Bureau, "Wisconsin Legislators Charged with Crimes and Violations of Ethics and Campaign Finance Laws, 1939-2004," <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/LRB/pubs/im109im2.pdf> (October, 23, 2010).

Madison. Despite his retirement, he remained active in the Republican Party, acting as advisors for other candidates. As late as 1978 he was Demetrio Verich's campaign coordinator in that candidate's bid for the Assembly. Alfonsi also continued to be a popular speaker at Republican gatherings.⁸³

Despite his reputation as a partisan battler, and his loyalty to the Republican Party during the second half of his political career, Paul Alfonsi remained dedicated to certain Progressive ideals throughout his career, including conservation, veteran's rights, and public welfare. However, many of these same concerns might stem more from a dedication to the Northwoods communities he represented in the assembly than to any strong loyalty to his first political party. It seems obvious that, in order best to represent his district and to come to a position of leadership within the Republican Party, Alfonsi transformed from a radical Progressive, associated with the FLPF organization, to a Republican party regular.

Of all of the Progressives who attempted to make a new home for themselves in the Republican party, none was more successful, and certainly none more colorful, than Clifford Krueger of Merrill, Wisconsin. First elected in 1946, Krueger would continue to be elected until his retirement in 1981. During this time he rose to the position of Minority Leader of the Wisconsin State Senate and was influential as an early supporter of Governor Lee Dreyfus, the man who many credit for revitalizing the Republican Party of Wisconsin following its near collapse in the 1970s. However, despite this eventual prominence, Krueger was never secure in his positions of leadership due to moderate views and Progressive political stances, as evidenced by the attempt to remove him from his position in 1976, and the criticism he eventually received

⁸³ Krueger predicts Dreyfus win at Republican dinner here, *Vilas County News*, November 2, 1978; Press Release, February 18, 1970, Paul Alfonsi Papers.

from within the Dreyfus administration.⁸⁴

Clifford Krueger was born on June 24, 1918, in Madison, Wisconsin. Shortly after his birth, his family relocated to the town of Merrill in Lincoln County. He first became active in the Progressive Party while in high school, although he had been seeped in the Progressive tradition by his father, a local activist who had been elected as county sheriff. Krueger was a large man even as a child, weighing 425 pounds at the age of 19, and would often use his size to help the Progressive cause within Lincoln County. While taking part in the student wing of the Progressive Party in the 1930s, Krueger once organized a circus to help raise funds for local candidates where he played the part of the circus fat man. From 1937 through 1938 he played this roll professionally for the Seils-Sterling Circus. As a result, he gained the nickname “Tiny” which stuck with him for the remainder of his life.⁸⁵

His first chance for elected office came in 1940 when he successfully ran for deputy sheriff. Five years later he was elected a city alderman in Merrill. In addition to these elected positions, Krueger also owned and operated Tiny’s Bar within the city. Already a figure of growing prominence within Merrill, and Lincoln County, at the age of 24, he ran for state assembly in 1942 as a Progressive and lost, only to run again as a Republican in 1946 after a brutal primary election against the incumbent. As a former Progressive, he received no backing from the Republicans, and many of the local party leaders were actively opposed to his victory, both in the primary and the subsequent general election. In fact, William McNeight, the deposed incumbent, ran in the general election as a write-in candidate, at the behest of local party leaders, although Krueger defeated him decisively.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ . Krueger Vows Fight for Post, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 9, 1976; *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, December 30, 1980.

⁸⁵ Clifford Krueger Interview, interviewed by Mark F. Smith; Krueger and Thompson, interview by Mark F. Smith.; Marathon County Historical Society. “Krueger, Clifford W. ‘Tiny’,” <http://www.marathoncountyhistory.org/PeopleDetails.php?PeopleId=845> (accessed April 21, 2010).

⁸⁶ Krueger, Interview; Krueger and Thompson, interview; Theobald and Robbins, *The State of Wisconsin 1975 Blue Book*, 44.

In later years Krueger would admit that his entry into the Republican Party had been fraught with difficulty, and that the party was not always a comfortable home for him. However, he would justify his actions in several ways. Primarily, he argued that few Democrats existed within his district, which included Lincoln and Marathon counties, and that nearly all of the local Progressive voters returned to the Republican Party during that decade. Krueger also explained that Progressivism had always existed as a Republican ideology, arguing that they had always been supportive of business, and, especially during the 1930s, had struggled to maintain the power of the state against the encroachment of Washington. The Progressive Party of the 1930s, in fact, had been a coalition of Moderate Republicans, Farm-Laborites, Socialists and professionals from the university.⁸⁷

Krueger also expressed a certain amount of hostility to the Democratic Party, which makes it unlikely he would have seriously considered running on their ticket, even if enough of a voter base had existed to make such a campaign feasible. Although admitting that Wisconsin's modern Democratic Party did carry on a certain branch of the Progressive tradition, he besmirched the party as being made up of the 'commie' element, which had allied with the Progressive Party. He also suggested that the Democrats could not represent the main branch of Progressivism because they represented liberalism and, as such, were anti-business and believed in centralizing authority with the federal government.⁸⁸

Such partisanship aside, Krueger appears to have had little trouble working with Democrats over issues he strongly cared about. In 1968 a testimonial dinner was held in Krueger's honor, which drew over 400 attendees, and eleven years later, in 1979, a similar

Marathon County Historical Society. "Krueger, Clifford W. 'Tiny'," <http://www.marathoncountyhistory.org/PeopleDetails.php?PeopleId=845> (accessed April 21, 2010). Ohm and Kuehn, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1948*, 679.

⁸⁷ *ibid*

⁸⁸ *ibid*

dinner brought out over 500. Both of these dinners also brought out, in addition to the expected Republicans, influential Democrats who honored Krueger as fair-minded, dedicated to northern Wisconsin, and devoted to such issues as conservation. Cross-aisle alliances were important enough to Krueger that one of his strongest arguments in favor of remaining as Senate minority leader in the 1970s was that a conservative minority leader would pursue an obstructionist policy, which would harm, not just the party, but the entire state.⁸⁹

Much like Paul Alfonsi, Krueger was strongly dedicated to the northern Wisconsin district he represented, picking up the affectionate nickname “the Voice of the North,” during his over three decades in the state senate. As such, Krueger became intimately associated with the conservationist movement in the state, becoming a member of the Senate Natural Resources Committee, as well as promoting the business interests of his native region. This often led him to work with other local elected officials, regardless of their own political affiliation; as early as the 1950s, he was willing to pass information and letters from constituents along to Senator Robert Dean, who was a Democrat and represented the neighboring district. Sometimes these twin passions of conservation and promoting northern Wisconsin business would conflict, such as in 1977 when Governor Patrick Lucey, a Democrat, supported a bill, that imposed heavy taxes on the mining industry. Krueger found himself opposed to the bill, as he and others feared it would damage a vital industry for his constituents, regardless of that business’s impact upon the local environment.⁹⁰

Krueger also remained dedicated to the Progressive tradition of clean government within Wisconsin. As a senator, he was seen as a strong proponent of local government, a position

⁸⁹ Over 500 Attend Tribute Dinner for Senator Krueger, *Owen Enterprise*, May 16, 1979; Over 400 Present at Testimonial Dinner for Senator Krueger, *Merril Daily Herald*, January 18, 1968; Krueger Vows Fight for Post, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 9, 1976.

⁹⁰ Sen. Krueger Terms Mining Bill Intolerable, *Star News*, July 7, 1977; Over 500 Attend Tribute Dinner for Senator Krueger, *Owen Enterprise*, May 16, 1979; *Know Your Legislator*, Clifford Krueger Papers, Stevens Point, WI; D.B. Smith to Clifford Krueger, letter, December 2, 1959, *Robert Dean Papers*, State Historical Society (Madison).

which occasionally caused him to break from the orthodoxy of his own party. While controlling the legislature, the Republican Party once passed a budget that froze tax rates in the state. Krueger was instrumental in preventing the state government from balancing the budget by increasing county government's "welfare charge backs." This same desire also caused him to battle with governors of his own party if he felt their decisions were unwise. In 1980 Krueger, then the Republican Minority Leader, and Governor Dreyfus exchanged a series of letters in relation to the governor's plan to reform campaign finances by funneling PAC money to the chairmen of the different parties to distribute to candidates. Although admitting that reform was needed, Krueger was horrified by the notion, claiming it would lead to the party chairmen becoming all powerful political bosses, and pointing out that Robert LaFollette, Sr., and the Progressives had railed against just such a thing in the first half of the 20th century. Krueger went so far as to write a detailed history of the last century of Wisconsin history, which he sent to the governor in order to illustrate his point.⁹¹

Krueger often found himself assailed by the more conservative members of his party and voting base, especially following his ascension to the position of senate minority leader in 1974. His attempts to guide the party in a more moderate direction, following the collapse of Republican power in the Senate that year, as part of a national trend following the wake of the Watergate investigation and the resignation of President Richard Nixon, did not endure him to conservatives such as James Sensenbrenner, who felt the party should move in the opposite direction. Sensenbrenner, in fact, attempted to force Krueger from his position in 1976, an attempt that failed, but barely, and saw Sensenbrenner elected as Assistant Minority Leader as

⁹¹ *Know Your Legislator*, Clifford Krueger Papers; Lee S. Dreyfus to Clifford Krueger, February 25, 1980, letter; Clifford Krueger to Lee S. Dreyfus, February 20, 1980.

part of a compromise.⁹²

Krueger also found himself drawn into conflict with Lee S. Dreyfus, Wisconsin's maverick Republican governor. Prior to his election as Governor, Dreyfus had served as Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point. Largely uninvolved in politics, Dreyfus had made the decision to run for Governor as a Republican, largely because he felt that Wisconsin was, once again, sliding into the trap of becoming a one-party state. Deriding the large budget surplus left by the Democratic Governor Martin Schreiber, Dreyfus defeated Robert Kasten, the favorite of the GOP conservatives, in the Republican primary, and then overcame Schreiber several months later.⁹³

Clifford Krueger had been an early supporter of Dreyfus, arguing forcibly that he was a stronger candidate than Kasten, who was associated with a rich banking family in Milwaukee. However, rifts soon emerged between the senate minority leader and the new governor. In addition to the difference of opinions about Dreyfus's PAC funneling plan, as described above, Krueger and the governor also disagreed on several other prominent issues. The governor, for instance, was a strong supporter of cabinet-style government, believing that agencies whom had members appointed by the governor and accepted by the legislature were more accountable. Krueger, however, much as his progressive forbearers had, was in favor of independent agencies made up of citizen boards mixed with appointed members. There was also growing discord within Dreyfus' administration aimed at Krueger. William Krause, an aid to Dreyfus, openly attacked Krueger as being a weak leader and not attempting to unite the moderate and conservative elements of the party. These issues appear to have played a large part in Krueger's

⁹² Senate Minority Picks Good Man, *La Crosse Tribute*, December 2, 1974; Krueger Vows Fight for Post, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 9, 1976; GOP Senators Re-elect Krueger, *Capital Times*, November 10, 1976.

⁹³ Lee S. Dreyfus: 1926-2008, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 4, 2008; Kasten is Favorite in GOP vote today, *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 11, 1978.

decision to retire as Minority Leader in late 1980, a move which precipitated his retirement from the Senate in 1982, after thirty-six years of service.⁹⁴

Krueger's career in the state senate was, by almost any bar of measurement, highly successful. Elected initially in 1946, he was able to find a home for himself in the Republican Party without sacrificing many of the ideals of the Progressive Party. Serving in the state senate for thirty-six years, he was able to rise to the level of Senate Minority Leader in the 1970s. However, he owed this position less to the general acceptance of his views by the party, and more to the twin factors of his seniority within the senate, as well as the desperation of many Republicans after the near collapse of their power in 1976. In fact, his position was never secure; Krueger often found himself vigorously pressured by the more conservative members of his own party who resented his moderation and willingness to work with their opponents. Even after the election of a Republican Governor who he, himself, had campaigned heavily for, Krueger found himself falling out of favor.

The truth of the matter is that Clifford Krueger, by the 1980s, was the last of a generation in Wisconsin. A former Progressive, he had moved into a Republican Party that was drifting further and further to the right. Nowhere is this more clear than in one of Krueger's last moves as a prominent politician in the state. In January of 1980, he openly announced his support for Howard Baker's campaign for the Republican nomination for President. In his statement, Krueger pointed to Baker's Progressive Republican principles and declared that Baker would "broaden its (the Republican Party's) base and restore its position as a truly national political party." That year the nomination would go to Ronald Reagan.⁹⁵

Clifford Krueger, Charles Madsen, and Paul Alfonsi were three former members of the

⁹⁴Krueger predicts Dreyfus win at Republican dinner here, *Vilas County News*, November 2, 1978; Clifford Krueger to Lee S. Dreyfus, letter, October 1, 1980; *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, December 30, 1980.

⁹⁵ Clifford Krueger, January 24, 1980 Press Statement.

Progressive Party who, following its dissolution in 1946, moved back into the Republican Party. Despite the fact that two of these men would eventually rise to positions of prominence within the Republican Party, they often found themselves at odds with members of their own party. As a result, they were unable to arrest the slide of their party, both on the national and state level, to the right. As early as 1964, the Republican leadership in the state was actively opposed to much of the moderate reformist message that these Progressive-Republicans delivered, supporting Barry Goldwater both before, and after, his nomination that year. Krueger and Alfonsi were able to stand against the tide, largely because they were established figures in their own locales, with strong bases of support amongst the voters of their respective districts. The Republican Party's organization throughout the post-war years was based upon dues-paying members, and not by career office holders. Although this prevented Krueger, Alfonsi, and others from pulling the party in a different direction, it did create an environment where party leaders were often able to secure a power base outside of the control of the party itself.⁹⁶

By the time Clifford Krueger, the last of those Progressive-Republicans, retired in 1982, he had become a relic of a bygone age, respected by many, beloved by some, and largely out of touch with his own party. The Republican Party of Wisconsin was firmly in the hands of conservatives. In fact, in the 1983 special election called as a result of Krueger's retirement, his seat was won by a Democrat. It was, perhaps, the final battle by the Democratic Party to win over the hearts and minds of Progressive voters. Lincoln, Marinette and Vilas county Progressives had finally been won over by the Democrats, as their brethren in the rest of the state had been years earlier.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 416-417; Leon D. Epstein and Austin Ranney. "Who Votes for Goldwater; The Wisconsin Case," *Political Science Quarterly* 81 (1966):82-94.

⁹⁷ H. Rupert Theobald and Patricia V. Robbins, *The Wisconsin Blue Book 1983-1984* (Madison: The State of Wisconsin, 1984), 44.

CHAPTER 4. REBORN LIKE A PHOENIX:
THE DEMOCRATS IN NORTHERN WISCONSIN AND THE REFORMING OF THE
PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

On April 26, 1960, a group of reporters and photographers gathered in Wisconsin's governor's mansion to record what was, in retrospect, an acknowledgement of a passing era. As the flashes popped, two men stood beaming at the cameras: Gaylord Nelson, current governor and the first Democrat elected to that office in Wisconsin since 1932, and Philip F. LaFollette, the dynamic governor of the 1930s who had found the Progressive Party before being denied a fourth term by voters in 1938. Gaylord Nelson, in the midst of his first term as Governor, had named May "Rural Electrification Month" to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the passing of the Rural Electrification Act. As LaFollette stood next to the governor, the walls behind him proudly decorated with portraits of himself and his father, one can only guess at the mixed emotions which must have been coursing through him.⁹⁸

The past twenty-two years, since the election of 1938, had not been easy for the former governor. He had seen himself denounced in the press for his active participation in the American First movement prior to the onset of the Second World War; he had watched his Progressive Party in Wisconsin wither and die; his last political crusade, attempting to secure the Republican presidential nomination for his friend, General Douglas MacArthur, had ended in failure and confused those supporters who he had left. The suicide of his brother, Bob, Jr., after his failure to win reelection in 1946, had also been a grievous emotional wound to a man who had come to believe that he had been forgotten by his own nation and never properly appreciated for the sacrifices he had made in his efforts to preserve it during the Great Depression.

⁹⁸ Jonathan Kasparek, *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. La Follette*. (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2006), 257-60.

The photo opportunity also confirmed, and was meant to, what was a growing belief amongst the people of Wisconsin: that the Democratic Party, reviled by Progressives during the 1930s and before as backward and reactionary, had become the true heir of the Progressive Party. Gaylord Nelson saw himself, and wanted others to see him, as the inheritor not only of the legacy of Albert Schmedeman, but also that of Schmedeman's conqueror, Philip LaFollette. The struggle of the Democratic Party to achieve this goal was a long and hard-fought battle. The Democratic Party of Wisconsin began to grow in strength during the 1940s prior to its rise to power in the late 1950s. Central to its rise was its ability to bring together a coalition of older members of the defunct Progressive Party and a newer generation of political leaders who had come of age during the course of World War II. Although Democratic successes in Dane County and Milwaukee relied heavily upon the party acting as a vehicle for the Labor movement, the party struggled to make headway in the northern counties, which had long acted as a bastion of the Progressive Party. This was largely a result of the fact that many of the remaining elected Progressives had reentered the Republican Party during the election of 1946, and been elected. As a result, the Democrats were not able to claim this wing of the Progressive movement until the 1950s, when voter dissatisfaction over the agricultural policies of the Eisenhower administration opened the door to the Democrats in this region, in effect recreating the old Progressive coalition of the 1930s.

Such a large scale movement of political factions from one political party to another seems to be relatively unique to the Upper Midwest during this era. In North Dakota, during the same period, the Nonpartisan League moved, first, into an official alliance with that state's Republican Party, before merging with the Democratic Party in the 1950s, creating the Democratic-Nonpartisan League. Minnesota, likewise, saw a similar phenomenon in the 1940s

as the remnants of the Farm-Labor Party merged with the Democrats to form the Democratic-Farm-Labor Party. However, such movements were much rarer in the rest of the nation, possibly as a result of a lack of strong independent third-parties. The closest analogy may well be the movement of southern conservatives from the Democratic Party into the Republican Party during the 1960s and 1970s. However, the latter case does not mark a movement of an independent voter bloc from one party to another, nor does it involve the merger of a third party with an established national organization.

Although the Progressive Party was not officially buried until 1946, at the fateful convention in Portage, many of its supporters had already seen the writing on the wall. Although Bob LaFollette, Jr., would, at the convention, declare that he intended to run as a Republican, he had previously been approached by leaders of a developing liberal wing of the Democratic Party to run under their banner. In fact, the Democrats had made a vigorous attempt to have pro-Democratic delegates elected to the convention. LaFollette based his decision partly on a romantic attachment to the party of his youth, but also on what he viewed as the perennial weakness of the Democratic Party's apparatus within Wisconsin, as well as its reactionary nature. LaFollette went so far as to state, "It is clear from the record that the Democratic party is not our hope for a liberal instrument for political action . . . The Democratic party of this state is a machine-minded organization without principle or program."⁹⁹

Many other Progressive leaders, prior to and after 1946, questioned LaFollette's decision. As early as 1942 the Democrats had fielded Francis McGovern, a former two-term governor of Wisconsin who had been a close political ally to the elder LaFollette, in their attempt to regain the governor's mansion. McGovern faltered badly, and was handily defeated by Orlando

⁹⁹ Richard Carlton Haney "A History of Democratic Party of Wisconsin Since World War II." (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison. 1970), 45-6.

Loomis and Julius Heil, coming in a distant third. However, in the years which followed, several other important progressives would make the move to the Democratic Party, in an attempt to turn it into a vehicle for the state's liberals and progressives.¹⁰⁰

Of these, one of the most important was Daniel Hoan. Hoan had, prior to his joining the Democratic Party, been a member of Milwaukee's vibrant Socialist Party, and it was under the designation of a Socialist that he served as Milwaukee's mayor for twenty-four years. Following his defeat in 1940, he migrated to the Democratic Party, feeling that the Socialists and Progressives no longer had any reasonable chance of attaining needed changes within the state. It was as a Democrat that he would run twice for governor and, in the process, build the framework of a modern Democratic Party in Wisconsin.¹⁰¹

Hoan's migration into the Democratic Party was, in many ways, a formal acknowledgement of a trend which was already underway. Although the Socialist Party remained strong in Milwaukee for years to come, it held little sway outside of that urban setting. Perhaps its last gasp of being a truly statewide party had occurred in the early 1920s, when Marathon County, briefly, fell under Socialist rule in reaction to the support of both of the two major parties for the First World War. Beginning in the 1930s and continuing into the years of the Second World War, Milwaukee had become a bastion of the Democratic Party, at least when it came to presidential elections, largely as a result of that party's support for the labor movement.¹⁰²

Hoan brought something into the Democratic Party which had been badly needed: credibility. Not only having served as Milwaukee's mayor for twenty-four years, Hoan was an

¹⁰⁰ William F. Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1945-60*, vol. 6 of *the History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988), 433.

¹⁰¹ Thompson, *Continuity and Change*, 35-7.

¹⁰² Thompson, *Continuity and Change*, 27-8.; Howard R. Klueter and James J. Lawrence, *Woodlot and the Ballot Box: Marathon County in the 20th Century* (Wausau: Marathon County Historical Society, 1977), 275-8.

established name within the state's liberal circles; in 1938, for instance, he garnered the support of the Farm-Labor-Progressive Federation to run for Senate, although he eventually turned down the honor. Hoan would gain the party's nomination for Governor in both 1944 and 1946, in the 1944 election managing to secure 41 percent of the vote. Just two years earlier the Democratic candidate for governor had managed to poll only 11 percent in a three-way race.¹⁰³

The movement of labor into the Democratic Party was the marked beginning of liberal migration into the party. Much of Hoan's vote in 1944 and 1946 came from Wisconsin's industrialized Southeast, as well as the city of Superior. This proved enough of a base in order for Hoan and his allies to take control of the party chairmanship with the election of Robert Tehren of Milwaukee over a conservative candidate. However, this situation also produced problems of its own, as it left the Democratic Party largely in the hands of the labor movement throughout the 1940s. With the final collapse of the Progressive Party in 1946, and the migration of its members, as well as a younger generation of liberals, into the Democratic Party following the conclusion of World War II, the party found itself split along a Milwaukee-Madison axis. Furthermore, this liberal drift alienated arch-conservative regions, such as the Fox Valley, which had previously been Democratic strongholds and now found themselves aligned with the Republican Party.¹⁰⁴

The second group to move into the party was the so-called "Young Turks." The Young Turks were members of the younger generation, many of them World War II veterans, who had initially been members of the Progressive Party, but migrated to the Democratic Party following the Progressive collapse. These younger members were often professionally trained, many of

¹⁰³ Thompson, *Continuity and Change*, 22-3.; Farm Labor Progressive Federation Condensed Convention Proceedings, May 22, 1938, Charles M. Madsen Papers, Area Research Center and University Archives, River Falls, WI.

¹⁰⁴ Thompson, *Continuity and Change*, 24-5. Haney, "A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin Since World War 2," 82-3.

them lawyers, and were intrinsically associated with Madison and the University of Wisconsin. This younger generation found itself organized within the Democratic Organizational Committee, a voluntary committee constructed with the intent of organizing the liberal elements of the party and raising money. The DOC saw itself as inherently Progressive, going so far as to declare itself “The only surviving legitimate heir of the Progressive movement.”¹⁰⁵

Historian Richard Haney has claimed that, after 1948, the state Democratic Party was, in truth, if not in name, the Progressive Party of old. Certainly, if one views the party’s labor faction as the remnants of the Socialist Party, and the Young Turks as the heirs of the Progressive Party’s Madison leadership, then the Democrats of the late 1940s certainly resemble the Progressives. However, there was still one key part of the old Progressive alliance which was missing at this date. Namely, the Democrats had yet to make much of a dent in the vote of farmers, in general, and specifically the dairy farmers of Wisconsin’s north. These same counties had not only been bastions of the Progressives in the 1930s, but also had been instrumental in that party’s efforts to gain power in the state. So, too, it would prove with the Democrats. Following the advent of the Second World War, the state’s farmers drifted into the Republican Party where they would remain for over a decade. Although a Democrat, John Olson, had replaced the Progressive-turned-Republican Charles Madsen of the 19th assembly district by 1950, the Democratic Party would continue to struggle with the farm vote well into the 1950s. Only after securing the farmers of the northern counties would the Democrats expand their power out of the Southeast and become a truly statewide party, able to win elections and secure power throughout the state.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Quotation from Haney, “A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin Since World War Two,” 61-6, 83-5.

¹⁰⁶ Haney, “A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin after World War Two,” 83-4.; Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1950* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1950), 36.

Although the Democrats continued to grow in strength throughout the 1950s, their first major breakthrough in securing the farm vote occurred in 1953. Earlier that year Congressman Merlin Hull of Wisconsin's 9th Congressional District, a traditional Progressive who had moved into the Republican Party following 1946, passed away at the age of 82. In the subsequent special election, both Republicans and Democrats nominated former Progressives; the Republicans ran Arthur Padrutt, while the Democrats favored Lester Johnson. The 9th District of Wisconsin, in many ways, was the exact sort of district which the Democrats had long striven to pick up; the population was largely self-described Germans and Scandinavians, and it had been a Progressive stronghold from the days of the elder LaFollette. Furthermore, the 9th district ranked first in dairy production for the entire state. During the election Lester Johnson campaigned vigorously, largely attacking the agricultural policies of the Republican Party. When the votes had been totaled, Johnson had gained nearly 57 percent of the vote, as opposed to Padrutt's 43 percent. This election would prove a watershed, as the Democrats would use it as a blueprint in future years for campaigning in largely agricultural districts.¹⁰⁷

This victory would prove vastly important for the party. In the past, the rural and farm vote in Wisconsin had traditionally been associated either with the Progressive or the Republican parties. Following the First World War and continuing after the Second, many traditionally Democratic ethnic groups, most notably Catholic Germans, fled from the Democratic Party to the Republicans, leaving only the Polish and Irish communities. As a result, the Democrats had fared badly in rural districts, on the state-wide level, for years, and gained a reputation, as evidenced by the earlier quote by Bob LaFollette Jr., as being a corrupt urban party.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Haney, "A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin after World War Two," 210-17.

¹⁰⁸ Haney, "A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin after World War Two," 220-1.; Klueter and Lorence, *Woodlot and the Ballotbox*, 295, 301.

However, following the 1953 special election in the 9th Congressional District, the Democrats began to feel they had a chance to make significant gains of the farm vote. Farm policy, after all, was an economic issue, and since the policy of the government could have a major impact upon the pocketbooks of farmers, farm policy could effectively be used as a wedge issue to pry formerly progressive rural voters away from the Republican Party and into the ranks of the Democrats. In this goal the Democrats were helped by an unlikely source -- the Republican Party itself or, more specifically, the Eisenhower administration. Ezra Taft Benson, Eisenhower's choice for Secretary of Agriculture after his election in 1952, had become a controversial and divisive figure shortly after taking office. In 1958, Benson's efforts to promote Republican candidates in the largely agricultural West backfired, largely due to his reputation as being anti-farm. This reputation, at least in Wisconsin, had been earned by the secretary's proposals to slice dairy price supports from 90 percent to 75, at a time when surplus butter, for instance, had increased from 42 million to 321 million pounds from 1952 to 1953. As a result, Democrats were able to hammer away at local Republicans for supporting agricultural policies that were disastrous to their constituents and, in the process, chip away at that party's hold over the farm vote.¹⁰⁹

Although the election of Johnson over Padrut was a watershed moment for the Democratic Party in Wisconsin, it was not the first victory that they had had in the formerly Progressive stronghold of northern Wisconsin. In 1948, Charles Madsen of the 29th state senatorial district resigned his seat to run unsuccessfully against Congressman Alvin O'Konski for the Republican nomination. In the subsequent special election to fill the Madsen's vacated senate seat, the people of Dunn, Baron and Polk counties elected John F. Olson over his

¹⁰⁹ Thompson, *Continuity and Change*, 597-8, 606.; Frank H. Jonas, "Western Politics and the 1958 Election," *The Western Political Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1959): 241-56.

Republican opponent. Olson was later replaced by William E. Owen, a Republican, by 1952. Shortly thereafter the 29th senatorial district was redistricted, and Baron, Dunn, and Polk counties joined the 23rd. Despite this, the district had become competitive for the Democrats several years prior to the Johnson, Padrut election, which had marked such a change for that party's chances in the North.¹¹⁰

The 29th, and later 23rd, district remained somewhat of an anomaly throughout the North. The 11th Senatorial District, comprising Douglas, Bayfield, Washburn, and Burnett counties, was a better representative of the trends of the former northern strongholds of the Progressive Party. In 1946, following the decision by the Progressive leadership to reenter the Republican Party, Elmer C. Peterson, the Progressive senator of the 11th, made the decision not to seek reelection. This left the senate seat open, and the struggle for the Republican nomination came down between Arthur A. Lenroot, Jr., and William Foley, both of whom had served in the assembly, Lenroot as a Republican and Foley as a Progressive. In the subsequent Republican primary of 1946, Lenroot defeated Foley 6,645 to 5,680, while a Democratic candidate ran unopposed and only secured 860 votes. Although Lenroot had been a Republican, even prior to 1946, he was a moderate, focusing much of his attention in the Senate upon issues of conservation and matters of the local economy. This, along with his family connections to the region (he was the nephew of the former moderate Progressive-Republican senator Irvine Lenroot) gave him a strong base of support. Following his defeat of Foley, Lenroot never received a challenge for the Republican nomination. In 1946 he handily defeated Charles H. Stoddard, the Democratic candidate, by nearly 6,000 votes. In 1950 he was again able to win reelection, this time over challenger Elizabeth Hawks, by nearly the same margin. However, in the election of 1954, a year after the

¹¹⁰ Howard F. Ohm and Hazel K. Kuehn, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1950* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1950), 36, 758.; M.G. Toepel and Hazel L. Kuehn, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1954* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1954), 32.

Democratic victory in the 9th congressional district, Lenroot was narrowly upset by Carl E. Lauri, his Democratic challenger, 13,557 to 13,091. Here, as elsewhere in the North, the Republican domination of the region was ended, as Progressive voters began to switch their allegiance to the Democratic Party.¹¹¹

This process came to a head in 1958, when Gaylord Nelson, the Democratic candidate for Governor, was able to win the election over his Republican opponent, incumbent governor Vernon Thomson. In this election Nelson carried not just the state's industrial southeast, as well as Dane County, as Democrats had in previous elections, but also carried those counties such as Oneida, Jefferson, and Lincoln; those ethnically Scandinavian agricultural counties had long been considered strongholds of the old Progressive Party. This agricultural vote helped turn the tide and swept the Democrats into office for the first time since 1934. In the process, the Democrats had managed to unite three disparate factions into a single whole: the Labor vote of Milwaukee and the southeast, the intellectual and professional elites of Dane County, and the farmers of the North. This election, in effect, marked the final reconstituting of the old Progressive Party under the democratic moniker.¹¹²

Perhaps the county which best exemplifies this political restructuring on the local level is Marathon County. Located in the north central region of the state, Marathon County is, by land area, the largest county in Wisconsin. The county, although possessing the small urban center of Wausau and its environs, also contains a large rural population, which, traditionally, was largely employed in the dairy industry. Although not considered part of the cut-over region of northern Wisconsin, Marathon County maintains strong ties with the region, beginning before the turn of

¹¹¹Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1944* (Madison, State of Wisconsin, 1944), 45.; Ohm and Kuehn, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1948*, 32, 608.; Ohm and Kuehn, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1950*, 757.; M. G. Toepel and Hazel L. Kuehn, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1952* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1952), 78, 748.; M.G. Toepel and Hazel L. Kuehn, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1956*, (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1956), 750.

¹¹²Thompson, *Continuity and Change*, 676-8.

the century when Wausau was dominated by the lumber industry. Furthermore, Marathon County, since the period directly following the end of the World War I, was viewed as a stronghold of progressivism. As a result, the county garnered a great deal of attention from the emerging Democratic Party, and an examination of it can shed light on the process by which the Democrats spread their influence into northern Wisconsin and finally succeeded in recreating the Progressive Party of old.

From the 1920s through 1938, Marathon County was considered a hotbed of Progressivism, sending to Madison such important figures as Joseph Barber and Roland Kannenberg, and electing Gerald Boileau to the House of Representatives. However, following the collapse of the Progressive Party in the election of 1938, Marathon County followed state-wide trends of turning back to the Republican Party. By 1946, the Republicans were firmly in control of Marathon County, and had been for eight years. Clifford Krueger, the former Progressive-turned-Republican, was elected that year to represent Marathon and Lincoln counties, while Marathon was represented in the assembly by Martin Lueck and Paul Luedtke, both Republicans who had become established in the years following the Progressive collapse. Both Lueck and Luedtke faced only a nominal challenge from the Democratic Party, and the Democrats failed to even run a contender against Krueger who faced an independent in the general election. Joseph McCarthy, who had recently vanquished Bob LaFollette, Jr., in the recent primary, also carried the county by nearly 2500 votes ¹¹³

Even at this early date, however, there were signs of hope for the Democratic Party. Although Walter Goodland was to carry Marathon County in the general election for governor, he did so by roughly 2500 votes over Daniel Hoan. It would seem that certain blocs of ethnic

¹¹³ Howard F. Ohm and Hazel L. Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1948* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1948), 37, 56, 679-82, 675.

voters, such as the Polish, remained loyal to the party in the region and could be used as a base to rebuild the Democrats' strength. In fact, in the small Polish community of Bevent, Hoan actually defeated his opponent 135 to a mere 28. It was in Wausau where the Democratic candidate actually ran worst, whereas he did much better in certain rural towns. Furthermore, Truman carried the county two years later 15,898 to 11,494 for Dewey, indicating that voters in the county were willing to vote the Democratic ticket for the Presidency, even if they continued to be loyal to the Republican Party for all statewide elections.¹¹⁴

The Democratic Party of the state seemed to have understood that Marathon County could become contested. In 1951, for instance, the party chose Wausau as the site for its state convention in the lead up to the 1952 election. Wausau and the entire county also likely drew attention from the Democratic leadership because Ruth Doyle, a member of the state legislature and a leading figure in the party, had grown up in the region. This faith seemed well-placed as, from 1948 onwards, the Democratic vote in the county continued to climb. In the election of 1950, Carl Thompson, the Democratic candidate for Governor, was defeated by the Republican governor candidate Walter J. Kohler Jr., but only by a bit over 700 votes.¹¹⁵

Marathon County, along with several other northern agricultural counties, was to enter the Democratic column for the first time since 1932 in the election of 1954. That year the people of the county gave William Proxmire 14,488 of their votes against only 11,771 for Walter J. Kohler, Jr., Proxmire's success, however, did not necessarily translate into victory for those candidates who were down ticket of him. Wisconsin's state senate districts had been adjusted in 1954, and the voters of Marathon and Shawano County chose to send Hugh Jones to the new

¹¹⁴ Ohm and Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Blue Book*, 1948, 641-2.; Ohm and Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Blue Book*, 1950, 702.

¹¹⁵ County Vote Favors GOP; Margin Close, *The Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, November 8, 1950; Interest in the Election Teaches a High Pitch Here, *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, November 1, 1952.; Haney, "History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin since World War Two," 151.

senate seat over Robert W. Dean, a local activist who had served as the county chairman of the local Democratic Party. The party had more success in the assembly elections, where Ben Riehle, a local farmer and long time liberal activist, was elected over Martin Lueck. Riehle's election, and the success of Proxmire, shouldn't have been surprising to most observers. Coming as it did only a year after Lester Johnson's upset victory in the special congressional election of 1953 it was the first election where the Democrats had been able to fully implement their new attack strategy of hammering the Republican Party's agricultural policy. On the local level, Ben Riehle was the perfect candidate to exploit this new tactic as he was himself a farmer, and well known in the community because of his previous attempts to run for office. Robert Dean, however, was a lawyer and had no experience in agriculture. Although it is true that his opponent, Paul Luedtke, also was not a farmer, it would seem that that the voters of Marathon County preferred to return a longtime public servant to the state house, rather than elect an unknown Democratic lawyer.¹¹⁶

Marathon County once again went Democratic in the election of 1958, which finally saw the Democratic Party gain the governorship and control of the Assembly in Wisconsin for the first time since 1934. Although this election can be seen as a great breakthrough for the Democrats in Marathon County and the North, it was not a clean sweep. Although Ben Riehle won a substantial victory over his opponent, winning by over a 2-1 margin, Robert Dean was sent to the state senate by a much slimmer margin, gaining 19,281 votes against his opponent, Hugh Johnson's 16,702. Paul Luedtke was also able to eke out another victory, and his seat would not be held by a Democrat until David Obey's upset victory over him in 1962. The elections for upper-level offices also showed this scattershot approach by the voters of the

¹¹⁶ Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, 606.; M. G. Toepel and Hazel L. Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1956* (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1956), 750-3.; Ohm and Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Bluebook, 1946*, 52.

county. Marathon County voters agreed to send William Proxmire, who had secured Joseph McCarthy's senate seat in the 1957 special election following the Senator's death, back to the Senate, and also voted in substantial numbers for Gaylord Nelson for governor. However, Melvin Laird, who would go on to serve as Richard Nixon's Secretary of Defense, won an easy election in the 7th Congressional district, and Marathon chose him over his opponent, Ken Trager, 15,003 votes to 12,997.¹¹⁷

Although 1958 marked a substantial breakthrough for the Democrats in Wisconsin, and those in Marathon County, it can be seen that key Republicans continued to do well in certain races that year. This can be attributed to the relative independence which has traditionally been associated with politics in Wisconsin. By 1958 the voters of Wisconsin's northern counties had come to feel comfortable voting for a Democrat, but that in no way meant that they were willing to vote a straight ticket. Voters seem to have genuinely felt a connection with William Proxmire in 1958, just as they had shown when he ran for governor in 1954, and were willing to support Gaylord Nelson. However, at the same time, they also felt that they would be well represented by men such as Melvin Laird and Paul Luedtke. In other words, by 1958, Marathon County voters had displayed a tendency to vote for the candidate, not for the party.

1958 also marked the year in which two of the county's most prominent Democrats were both able to secure office. Although Ben Riehle had been able to enter into the state assembly in 1956, Robert Dean would not come to the senate until after the 1958 election. These two men are interesting as they represent the two dominant wings of the Democratic Party which existed in Marathon County at the time. While Robert Dean was almost an archetypical Young Turk, Ben Riehle represented those members of the Progressive Party who, after a time in the political

¹¹⁷ M. G. Toepel and Hazel L. Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Blue Book*, 1960 (Madison: State of Wisconsin, 1960), 695-9.; David R. Obey, *Raising Hell for Justice* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 53.

wilderness, had found a home within the Democratic Party.

The Young Turk faction of the Democratic Party has been described as those members who came to leadership positions in the years following the completion of the Second World War. Many had been members of the Progressive Party in their youth and had migrated into the Democratic Party after the Portage convention of 1946. Several, such as Gaylord Nelson, had attempted to follow Robert LaFollette, Jr., back into the Republican Party, but had met with defeat in 1946 Republican Primary. Most of the Young Turks were professionals who had been trained at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and, as a result, were largely associated with the city of Madison and its social circles. The Young Turks often found themselves struggling for control of the Democratic Party with the labor bosses of Milwaukee, and were often derisively referred to as “silk shirts.”¹¹⁸

Robert Dean was in many ways the prototypical Young Turk. Born in the northern town of Tomahawk in 1923, he came to the University of Wisconsin on a football scholarship in 1942. During World War Two he served in the Air Force, leaving it in 1946 and returning to Madison to obtain a law degree. Upon settling in Wausau in 1951, he opened up a law practice, and became involved in local politics. Before being elected to the State Senate, he would serve as the chairman of the Marathon County Democratic Party, and also sat on the party’s platform committee.¹¹⁹

As has previously been stated, Robert Dean’s quest for public office was a difficult one. Before finally securing office in 1958, he had previously run in 1956 and lost to the more popular Paul Luedtke. There may well have been several reasons for his initial difficulty; Dean

¹¹⁸ Haney, “A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin Since World War Two,” 64-7, 84-6, 122.

¹¹⁹ Marathon County Historical Society, “Dean, Judge Robert W.,” Marathon County Historical Society, <http://www.marathoncountyhistory.org/PeopleDetails.php?PeopleId=768&View=D&ItemName=> (Accessed, January 31, 2011).

was a lawyer attempting to appeal to an electorate which was largely rural farmers or workers in the Wausau metropolitan area. He also came to the region in 1951, meaning that he may also have been viewed as a outsider by some. Certainly the electorate never warmed up to his as much as it did to Ben Riehle or, later, Dave Obey. Dean, despite rising quickly to Senate Minority Leader in 1962, would be narrowly defeated for reelection later that year.¹²⁰

While in office, Dean associated mainly with the, now mature and dominant, Young Turk faction of the party. He was tapped for a leadership position while in his second term, and worked closely with Gaylord Nelson even before this point. In a 1961 “Report from Madison,” an editorial he frequently wrote and distributed to local newspapers updating the people on his dealings in the state capital, Dean spoke about Bill 605, S., legislation he had co-authored and introduced as the personal request of Governor Nelson, which would prove for a “\$50 million ten-year program for resource development and outdoor recreation,” to be funded by a one-cent increase in the cigarette tax.¹²¹

Dean’s main focuses while in the state senate seem to have been conservation (he was a member of the state conservation committee), as well as working to update the tax code and generally modernize the state. In one interesting episode, he became involved in a highly controversial effort to limit billboards along the highway, which he and others felt were eyesores that detracted from the natural beauty of the state’s rural landscape, to the pain of local motorists and tourists. Dean’s conservation commitments went beyond simply clearing the highways of eyesores for motorists. He was a staunch supporter of the national and state park systems, believing that they were held in trust by the government for the people of the state. As a result, he found himself opposed to a 1959 effort in the senate which would mandate that residents of

¹²⁰ Obey, *Raising Hell for Justice*, 52-3.

¹²¹ Report from Madison, June 2, 1961, Robert W. Dean papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.

the state to purchase a two-dollar sticker for each vehicle entering into a state park. Dean found that the bill would put the weight of maintaining the parks upon those who would be most unable to bear the price. He also felt that the measure was not cost-effective, and that implementing the plan would cost more than the funds it would bring in.¹²²

Dean also strove to improve education for the state as well as his district, favoring increased funding and restructuring of the state's vocational school system, as well as the state Radio Council, which provided educational programs for both television and radio. Furthermore, Dean showed a keen interest in the expansion of Wisconsin's vocational education system. In particular, he wished to see the vocational schools, located in urban centers, to expand their programs to include the rural towns of their region, and to appropriate more state funds to the system in order to do so.¹²³

The economic conditions of the senator's constituents, and those of all residents of the state of Wisconsin, were of vital importance to Robert Dean throughout his career in the state senate. In 1959 the state legislature debated the so-called Agricultural Marketing Act. That same year Dean had written in his frequent editorials to local newspapers that he was in full support of federal support for Wisconsin's dairy industry, which had gone into a slump, as the purchasing power of milk had declined 25 percent since 1952. The Agricultural Marketing Act was meant, in the words of Governor Gaylord Nelson, to "enable our agricultural industries to develop farmer-controlled self-help marketing programs to help improve the quality and marketability of their products, increase the effectiveness of their selling efforts, and raise

¹²² Press Release, March 30, 1961. Robert W. Dean papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.; Report from Madison, January, 1961. Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.; Report from the state Senate, April 1, 1959, Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.

¹²³ Report from the state Senate, April 1, 1959, Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.; Lawrence B. Hoyt to Robert Dean, January 23, 1959. Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.

farmers' incomes." The act did stir some levels of controversy, mainly from Republicans who complained that the bill would implement too high of penalties against those dairy farmers who did not comply with it, as well as by the lumber industry, as pulpwood would be included in the act as an agricultural commodity. Despite these concerns, Dean voted in the affirmative for the bill, an action which garnered him the support of the Wisconsin Farmers Union.¹²⁴

In addition to his support for the Agricultural Marketing Act, Dean was also a supporter of many other acts which were meant to improve the economic livelihood of the people of his district. In 1959, Dean authored a bill which would provide for the care of the dependents of deceased step-parents. Dean also was an advocate for the liberal administration of the veterans' loan program which had been set up in the state following the Second World War, to provide cheap loans to veterans so that they could purchase homes, educate themselves or start a business. Dean believed that the way the program was administered was wrong, as it was too conservative in giving out funds, meaning that many veterans were not able to benefit from the program. Finally, Dean was also a proponent of the 1961 minimum wage law which would provide a minimum wage for men employed in interstate commerce and business, as well as the author of an amendment to a Republican sales tax bill of 1961 which would exempt food from tax.¹²⁵

Robert Dean was an effective legislator, as his quick rise through the party leadership indicates. During his time in the state government, he was a strong proponent for the interests of

¹²⁴ Quotation from Governor Gaylord Nelson to Robert Dean, November 9, 1959. Robert W. Dean papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.; Report from Madison, 1959, Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical society, Madison, WI.; C.M. Green to Robert Dean, November 30, 1959, Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.; Gilbert Rohde to Robert Dean, January 13, 1960, Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical society, Madison, WI.

¹²⁵ Robert Dean to Wisconsin Legislative Library, January 2, 1959, Robert W. Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.; Report from Madison, January, 1961, Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.; Report from Madison, March, 29, 1961, Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.; Press Release, 1961, Robert W. Dean Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.

his own constituents, continually addressing their economic needs in the bills that he wrote and those that he supported. Considering the importance of the environment to local tourism and industry, Dean's staunch support for conservation can be seen as a personal belief, indebtedness to the Progressive traditions which he found himself a part of, as well as a pragmatic understanding of the economy of north-central Wisconsin. Despite his position of leadership in the state senate, his active attempts to modernize many aspects of the state's government, and his efforts to remain connected to his constituents, Robert Dean failed to win reelection in 1962. Dave Obey, writing years later, blamed the loss on local media, namely the local television station, WSAW, whose owners favored the Republican Party. Obey describes how Dean attempted to purchase air time for a series of commercials on WSAW, then the only local television station, and was rebuffed in a blatant violation of the law. Dean, as a senate minority leader, was a target who needed to be defeated, no matter the cost. However, it stands to reason that Dean continued to be associated too closely with the Madison wing of the party and, as a result, failed to connect with the voters of Marathon County as closely as he might otherwise have. Certainly, when compared to the vote totals gained by his fellow elected official Ben Riehle and, later Dave Obey, his elections were always much narrower. It should also be pointed out that Dean found his greatest successes after leaving partisan politics; he would serve as a Marathon County judge from 1964 to 1978.¹²⁶

If Robert Dean represents the Young Turk faction of the Democratic Party in Marathon County, then Ben Riehle represents the older generation of Progressives who migrated into that party following the disasters of 1946. Ben Riehle was born on May 15, 1897, in the small town

¹²⁶ Obey, *Raising Hell for Justice*, 51-3.; Marathon County Historical Society, "Dean, Judge Robert W.," Marathon County Historical Society, <http://www.marathoncountyhistory.org/PeopleDetails.php?PeopleId=768&View=D&ItemName=> (Accessed, January 31, 2011).

of Reitbrock, Wisconsin, located in the northwestern corner of Marathon County. Riehle would leave school after attaining an 8th -grade education and become a dairy farmer, a career which he would hold for the remainder of his life. Riehle appears to have been drawn to public service from an earlier age, and, in addition to his tenure in the state assembly, he was also secretary-treasurer of the local milk co-op, served on the local school board, and served in many professional farming associations.¹²⁷

By the time Riehle was elected to the state assembly in 1954, he was already a well known name in the area. Riehle had previously made several other attempts to gain political office in the county. He had first attempted to unseat Martin Lueck in 1948 as a member of the Progressive People's Party, a vehicle of former Vice-President Henry Wallace. Riehle, that year, had also served on the nascent party's state platform committee, and helped produce the platform which ridiculed the Democrats and Republicans for beginning the Cold War, called for an end of racial discrimination, and demanded an end to the, "strangle hold of Wall Street monopoly on our government, and their drive towards World War III." In the general election, he would secure only 228 votes.¹²⁸

Four years later, Riehle would return, this time having made peace with the Democratic Party. In the election of 1952, he once again faced Martin Lueck and, once again, was unable to defeat his opponent. However, what is notable is that, with the support of a major party, Riehle was able to fair substantially better in the encounter, gaining 5,175 votes. Although not enough to overtake Lueck, who was able to get 9,200, Riehle's total was much more respectable than the drumming he had received four years previous. It was apparently enough that the Democrats

¹²⁷ Marathon County historical Society "Riehle, Bunchard Anton.," Marathon County Historical Society, <http://www.marathoncountyhistory.org/PeopleDetails.php?PeopleId=868&View=R&ItemName=> (Accessed, January, 31, 2011.)

¹²⁸Quotation from Ohm and Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1948*, 566-7, 760

won his loyalty, as he ran again as a Democrat in the next election and was able to win a seat in the assembly, narrowly defeating his old opponent Lueck, by a vote of 5645 to 5145.¹²⁹

Ben Riehle would go on to serve in the State Assembly until his death in 1967. During this time he came to be seen as a strong proponent for the farmers of his district. In 1967, for instance, shortly before his death, he and Dave Obey, a fellow assemblyman from Marathon County, issued a press release calling for an end to an anti-trust suit which had been brought by the federal government against the National Farmers Organization, arguing that the law was being used in an unfair manner, in effect to persecute that people who the law had initially been written to serve. At roughly the same time, he also fought hard against a proposed bill which would have made it legal to sell artificially colored oleo margarine as a butter substitute. Riehle also sponsored many bills, the two most prominent of which both reflected traditional progressive areas of interest. In 1965 he sponsored a joint resolution calling for an amendment to the constitution to allow for bussing of children to parochial schools. In 1967 he introduced Assembly Bill 283 to allow the changing of the local of a branch or parent bank by amending the bank's articles of association, pending the approval of the bank commissioner.¹³⁰

Riehle's support of the local farmers, as well as his progressive heritage, comes out in his opposition to oleomargarine. In 1965 he voted, much as progressives had for nearly sixty years, to oppose the legalization of the butter-substitute, oleomargarine, within the state. Oleo, as it was often called for short, was seen by many dairy farmers as a dangerous competitor, because it was cheaper than butter, and many questioned its nutritional value. Riehle was vehemently

¹²⁹ Toepel and Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Bluebook, 1954*, 763.; Toepel and Kuehn, *The Wisconsin Bluebook, 1956*, 753.

¹³⁰ Ben A. Riehle to Herbert R. Zimmerman, March 22, 1967, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research Center, Stevens Point, WI.; Press Release, March 31, 1967, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research Center, Stevens Point, WI.; Assembly Joint Resolution, 1965, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research Center, Stevens Point, WI.; Assembly Bill 282, March 1, 1967, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research Center, Stevens Point, WI .

opposed to the sale of the oleo which he feared would damage the dairy farmers of Wisconsin, of which he was also one. By 1967, however, the fight was nearly over. In 1967 Governor Warren P. Knowles, a Republican, signed into law a bill which allowed for the selling of artificially colored yellow oleomargarine. Despite Reihle's opposition, the battle was lost, a reminder of an earlier day.¹³¹

In addition to his opposition to oleomargarine, Riehle was vitally concerned with many issues of economic interest to his constituents. Much like Robert Dean, Riehle was a staunch conservationist while in the state legislature. He often acted as a go between his constituents and the government in matters of conservation. For instance, in 1965 he was asked by Frank Romblaski of the Town of Bevent Fish and Game Club to investigate the proposed purchase of 6,600 acres in the towns of Reid and Ringle for a wildlife area project. The assemblyman was also a supporter of the competent management of natural resources, sponsoring a bill in 1965 which allowed for properly educated and trained foresters to register with the state, allowing for a public database of competent foresters.¹³²

It is interesting to point out that although Ben Riehle came from a radical progressive background, by the 1960s he was slowly finding himself out of the mainstream of liberal thought. This became most evident when the political discussion about family planning and contraceptives became a major issue in Wisconsin. In 1967 two bills came before the Wisconsin state legislature, one of them focused on liberalizing the distribution of birth control in the state

¹³¹ Mrs. Ervin Bergman to Ben Reihle, January 26, 1965, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research center, Steven's Point, WI.; Ben Reihle to Herbert R. Zimmermann, March 22, 1967, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research center, Steven's Point, WI.; Owen K. Hallberg to Ben Reihle, May 22, 1967, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research center, Steven's Point, WI.

¹³² Frank Rambalski to Ben Reihle, August 8, 1965, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research center, Steven's Point, WI, Ben Reihle to Frank Rambalski, September 15, 1965, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research center, Steven's Point, WI.; F.N. Fixmer to Norman C. Anderson, April 12, 1965, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research center, Steven's Point, WI.

which, up until that time, had been available only to married women, and another which would have liberalized the state's abortion laws. Riehle found himself vehemently opposed to such legislation; he also grew to feel that his opposition was putting him outside the mainstream. In a letter to Mrs. N. J. Powers, he thanked her for her letter condemning such bills and then felt compelled to say, "It is very encouraging to note that at least some people are opposed to bill 381A . . . the bill was reported out of the public Welfare Committee of which I am a member by a vote of 9 to 2. I was one of the 2." Riehle was 70 years old by this time and, although coming from the radical progressive tradition of earlier decades, he found himself largely out of step with the new cultural liberalism which was sweeping the country.¹³³

In retrospect, Ben Riehle's career is somewhat ambiguous. Beginning in the early 1940s, Riehle was associated with the far left-wing of the Progressive movement. His association with the People's Progressive Party did not seem to harm him in any way once he made the decision to formally move into the Democratic Party. What is most interesting is that, once elected, Riehle's record in the assembly was not radical. Although this may be ascribed to his growing more conservative as he aged, it seems just as likely that the source of his political radicalism stemmed from his devotion to the farmers of his district. Once elected, a great deal of his effort went into serving this constituent, and giving it a voice within the state government. As a result, it becomes clear why the Democratic Party continued to support him, despite his earlier affiliation with the People's Progressive Party, and two failed elections; beginning in the 1950s, the Democrats had come to see the farm vote as the key to their success in the state, and a figure such as Ben Riehle could do nothing but help them in this cause in Marathon County.

Ben Riehle and Robert Dean represent the two dominant wings of the Democratic Party

¹³³ Lawrence Giese to Ben Riehle, February 6, 1967, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research Center, Stevens Point, WI.; Ben A. Riehle to Mrs. N. J. Powers, September 7, 1967, Ben A. Riehle Papers, Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives and Area Research Center, Stevens Point, WI.

in Marathon County, namely, the Young Turks and the older generation of progressives.

Although Marathon County did contain industry, mainly focused upon the city of Wausau and its environs, labor was not a large enough segment of the population to develop its own wing of the local party. Much as Progressivism in the county was comprised of rural agrarian interests and professional intellectuals in the 1930s, it would prove to be so again in the 1950s and 1960s.

This pattern was largely copied throughout the northern counties of the state. Save for Douglas County, which possessed the port town of Superior, labor, although present, did not constitute a large enough bloc of voters to become a viable wing of the local party establishments. Instead, these local parties were built by local professional elites, sometimes with the help of, sometimes in opposition to, the local ethnic communities which had remained loyal to the Democratic Party throughout the first half of the 20th century. Beginning in the 1950s, the Democratic Party was able to make substantial headways into the rural agricultural vote of the northern counties, breaking the Republican monopoly on this bloc in the process. This, in turn, weakened many of the Progressive-Republicans who remained in the North, and gave younger Progressives, or those who had remained leery of the Republicans in general, an alternative party within which to run. In doing so, the Democratic Party was able to truly reform the old Progressive coalition under its own auspice, and turn Wisconsin into a true two-party state.

CHAPTER 5. THE WISCONSIN IDEA CONTINUED: AN EPILOGUE

Progressivism remains a vital tradition in Wisconsin to this very day. In the state's capitol of Madison, one cannot help but notice the public busses sporting banners on their side, carrying the picture of Senator LaFollette and advertising the local 'progressive talk radio' station. "Fighting Bob Fest," a political festival which bills itself as carrying "on the tradition of Robert 'Fighting Bob' La Follette by providing a forum for progressive ideas on issues facing Wisconsin and the nation," has been operating for a decade. The tradition even finds an expression on the local political scene, with Dane County being dominated by the Progressive Dane party for much of the past decade.¹³⁴

The Progressive tradition remains of importance not just on the left end of the spectrum however. A June 6, 1996 issue of the *New York Magazine* trumpeted then-Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson as being cut from the state's progressive cloth for his innovative reforms of the state's welfare system. Scott Walker, in the midst of the public battle over the state budget in 2011, also portrayed himself as coming from the state's progressive tradition, claiming that his effort to limit the power of public unions in the state was an example of progressive reform. There is nothing new in the efforts of local politicians to argue that they are simply following in the footsteps of previous progressive political leaders, no matter what party they choose to run under. Bronson LaFollette, attorney general and son of Bob LaFollette, Jr., openly campaigned as a Progressive first and a Democrat second in his failed bid for the governor's mansion in 1968. Ten years later, Governor Lee Dreyfus, a Republican, couched his iconoclastic policies in progressive rhetoric.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Quotation from fighting Bob Fest, "Fighting Bob Fest," Fighting Bob Fest, <http://www.fightingbobfest.org> (accessed July 10, 2011).

¹³⁵ Jacob Weisberg, "Cheese Whiz," *New York Magazine*, June 3, 1996.; Democrats, Republicans and Independents for La Follette, "These are Troubled Times, but There is an Answer, Bronson LaFollette Governor," 1968.

The very fact that individuals from vastly different places on the political spectrum struggle to claim for themselves a place in the progressive tradition exemplifies two important facts about progressivism. The first, which has been addressed above, is that the term “progressive” remains an idea with particular power in the state of Wisconsin. The second is the great difficulty in defining the term itself. To use the example of the recent political upheaval in the state during 2011, what can be determined if both the Governor wishing to limit the strength of public unions, and the protestors attempting to stop him, both claim to be a part of the state’s progressive tradition?

One is left with two extreme notions of the criteria needed to claim to part of progressivism. On the one hand is the urge to create a stringent ideological checklist and to assess each political figure on how well he or she scores. On the other is the understandable desire to throw ones hands up in confusion and declare that someone is a progressive as long as they declare so. Neither of these extremes, however, is particularly useful. Even Philip F. LaFollette, the governor of the Progressive Party during its brief reign over the state in the 1930s, was at a loss to describe progressivism in ideological terms when he stated, “We investigate problems very thoroughly, whether it be a depression among the farmers, or unemployment. Out of this, shall we say scientific investigation of causes, we seek after remedies.”¹³⁶

And, with that quote, one begins to ascertain the true problem in forming a functioning definition of progressivism in Wisconsin: no such definition ever truly existed. In general, the progressives were a center-left political group who believed in expanding democracy, were opposed to corruption, and instituted scientifically researched social and economic reforms to bring greater political and economic freedom to the people. However, they were never a

¹³⁶ Quotation from Jonathon Kasperek, *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. LaFollette* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2006), xvi.

homogenous group, but rather a collection of interest groups that were continually moving in and out of the progressive camp, drawn more by their desires for individual reforms, or out of loyalty to certain political leaders, than by an overarching political ideology.

This confederate nature of the progressives offers a unique challenge to the historian attempting to chart their development following the collapse of the Progressive Party in 1946, and the dissolving of the central progressive political organization. Although many historians have made the claim that following 1946, the majority of progressives made the trek into the Democratic Party which then became the heir of the Progressive Party, they overlook the fact that, traditionally, the progressives had been proud members of the Republican Party, and many found a home waiting for them in their old party. The conglomerate nature of the progressivism made this possible, as individual politicians were able to build bases of support amongst the voters aside from their political affiliation. As many of the remaining members of the Progressive Party in 1946 followed Bob LaFollette, Jr., back into the Republican Party, were from the northern tier of the state, their victory in that year created a bloc of Republican-Progressives which resisted the efforts of the Democratic Party to resurrect the old Progressive Party. It was until the mid-1950s when the farm policy of the Eisenhower administration began to alienate rural voters in these counties that the Democrats were able to draw in the farm vote and reconstruct the Farmer-Laborer-Professional alliance which had formed the basis of the Progressive Party in the 1930s.

The historiography of this period of Wisconsin political history often overlooks the importance of both the Progressive-Republicans and northern Wisconsin in the eventual triumph of the Democratic Party in the 1950s. Richard Carlton Haney's 1971 doctoral dissertation "A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin since World War II," later forming the basis of his

publication *A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin 1949 – 1989*, remains the definitive political history covering that era. This work would go on to become the main source of William F. Thompson when he described the development of the Democratic Party in *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, the fifth volume of the *History of Wisconsin* series.

Haney's work deserves high regard for its in-depth analysis of the internal workings and structure of the Democratic Party, as well as his ability to capture and explore the personalities of the men and women who, literally, took over the defunct party and built it into a vehicle capable of competing against the dominant Republican Party across the state. However, certain weaknesses and biases still find their way into the work. First of all, Haney is telling the story of the Democratic Party, not the progressives. This leads him to accept, without question, the Democrats' claims to be the true heirs of the progressives, and dismiss what progressive tradition might still have existed amongst the Republicans during this time.

Second, Haney's true interest is in the internal workings of the party. In fact, his dissertation could best be described, at heart, as an organizational history. As a result, he has a particular interest in the interplay between party leaders and their struggles to create a political organization. By its nature, this focuses his attention upon the cities of Madison and Milwaukee which, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, were the heart of the renewed Democratic Party. Although this focus on southern Wisconsin is understandable, as the southern region of the state contains a majority of the state's entire population, it leads Haney and others to overlook political developments in the northern tier of the state. Although he does pay particular attention to Democratic victories in the Mississippi valley, and the south shore of Lake Superior, in the 1950s, such victories are often blamed solely on the population's anger over the Eisenhower administration's agricultural policy, with little focus on the political realities of the region prior

to that time.

These same biases are found, to a greater or lesser extent, in much of the scholarship focusing on this period of Wisconsin history. This work here began as an attempt to begin to rectify these holes in the historiography. First, it is a study of Progressivism from the founding of the Progressive Party through the political realignments of the 1950s and 1960s, and not a study of either the Republican or Democratic Parties. Second, it attempts to turn the focus of the study away from Madison and Milwaukee and to northern Wisconsin, a region which has been one of the strongholds of progressive politics from the 1890s through to the present. Finally, there has been made an effort to illustrate the presence of self-proclaimed Progressives, all of whom had ties to the old Progressive Party, who made a career for themselves in the Republican Party. In doing so, it has been the hope of this author, not to effect dramatic change in the accepted narrative, but rather to strengthen it by fleshing out an area which has not received the attention which is its due.

The question remains, aside from attempting to expand upon the extended narrative, what is the importance of this work? To answer that question, one must turn, once again, to the modern political situation in Wisconsin; a state which is currently host to a very vibrant, and sometimes volatile, two-party system. Prior to the 1930s, and again from 1938 until 1957, this was certainly not the case. During those periods the state was, in effect, a one-party system, with the Republicans guaranteed victory in every election, and the Democrats relegated to the state of perpetual political outsiders. Prior to the establishment of the Progressive Party, the Republicans were divided into two factions, the conservative Stalwarts and the liberal Progressives, who continually battled for dominance of the party and the state. Following the collapse of the Progressives, the Republicans returned to dominance, but with the growing draw

of the Democrats and the disasters of 1946, with a significantly reduced Progressive wing to the party.

Wisconsin was not unique in this respect. Throughout the Upper Midwest, the situation was largely the same. During the 1920s and 1930s, Minnesota's Republican hegemony broke down and saw the election of the Farm-Labor Party. Almost simultaneously with the collapse of the Progressives in Wisconsin, the Farm-Laborites of Minnesota also found themselves swept from power and forced to make compromises with a previously weak Democratic party. North Dakota, in the 1930s, saw the resurgence of the Nonpartisan League under Governor William Langer. By the 1950s the Nonpartisan League had switched its allegiance from the Republican Party to the Democrats, creating the Democratic-Non-Partisan League. Within the region, the first half of the 20th century may best be summed up as the breakdown of one-party control, first through the creation of a distinct liberal wing in the dominant party, and later by the establishment of an independent liberal party, which was later to be subsumed by the Democrats.

All of this was a part of the political realignment which began in the 1930s and continued until the 1960s, which saw the Democrats emerge, on the national stage, as a central-left party, and the Republicans as an organization aligned with the center-right. This political realignment was desired by many, not the least Bob LaFollette, Sr., who campaigned on the need for realignment in his 1924 independent campaign for the presidency, but its eventual emergence caused political chaos on the state level. This chaos itself should draw the interest of many scholars, for through it, one witnesses the birthing of the modern American political system.

This work shines a light upon a little-observed corner of these events and, in the process, shows that it was not a simple transition. Although many progressives did move into the Democratic Party, many also remained in the Republican Party, where they put up a fight to

prevent their party's continued drift to the political right. Also, many of those progressives who moved into the Democratic Party had not held previous office as Progressives but, instead, were younger figures that possessed progressive sympathies but were just taking their first steps into the political arena. In many cases, the older generation of progressives found themselves outside of the mainstream in the Democratic Party as well, valued for their past experience, but viewed as relics of a past era, out of touch with the modern world.

Although following regional and national trends, the emergence of a viable two-party system in Wisconsin was not preordained. History is dynamic and, although certain events and trends are more likely to occur than others, it cannot be viewed in a deterministic fashion. Even the most likely of events can still turn on the edge of contingency, influenced by the personalities of those involved, as well as by chance. For instance, to use a simple example, the downfall of the Farm-Labor Party of Minnesota has often been blamed upon the death of Governor Floyd Olson of stomach cancer, while still in office. With his death, the office passed to his less able successors, Hjalmar Peterson and Elmer Benson, who were unable to hold together the factionalized party. Had Olson survived, as he was only forty-four at the time of his death, the party might well have been able to recover from its own collapse in the election of 1938.

So to, it is conceivable that history in Wisconsin might well have turned out differently. Had Bob LaFollette, Jr., made different decisions during the election of 1946, then the political landscape of the state might have been radically altered. For instance, LaFollette's loss in the Republican primary of 1946 has often been blamed upon his lack of zeal for campaigning in that election; he was so sure of victory that he spent only minimal time in the state and, instead, focused his attention upon senatorial business in Washington. If he had spent more time campaigning, it is possible that he would have defeated Joseph McCarthy in the primary and

would have been elected in the general election later that year.

In addition to sparing America one of its most infamous demagogues, a LaFollette victory would have had important ramifications on the political landscape of the state. As the preeminent progressive on the ballot, his victory would likely have had coattails; it seems likely that he might have been able to swing enough votes to Ralf Immell to secure for him the Republican nomination for governor. Furthermore, many future Democratic leaders, such as future governor Gaylord Nelson, ran in 1946 as Republicans; their loss convinced many that there was no place for progressives in the Republican Party. A more vigorous campaign by LaFollette might well have secured the election of many of these rising stars as Republicans.

In such a situation, the Democrats would have continued to liberalize, but it is unlikely that they would have reached the prominence that they did in actual history. Certainly they would have retained leaders Ruth and James Doyle, Sr., but without members such as Gaylord Nelson, and other progressives who initially had run as Republicans, it seems unlikely that the Democrats would have expanded much out of the Milwaukee region, although they may have become competitive in Dane county. They would have likely developed to fill the void left by the dwindling Socialist Party. In effect, it is plausible that 1946 could have seen the progressives reintegrated into the Republican Party, effectively recreating the political structure that had existed in Wisconsin prior to the onset of the Great Depression.

How long this situation could have remained viable, of course, is a matter of debate. Although Wisconsin would elect Democratic governors throughout much of the 1960s, the state continued to lean Republican when it came to presidential elections, casting its vote for Nixon in 1960, as well as in 1968 and 1972. It seems likely that, much as in history, in a world where LaFollette won in 1946, the progressives in the Republican Party would have grown

uncomfortable as the national party began to drift further to the right throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s under Ronald Reagan.

Of course, none of this happened. Bob LaFollette, Jr., lost the Republican primary to Joseph McCarthy in 1946, and many of the progressives who ran with him were also defeated, save for those in Northern Wisconsin. Many of those who were defeated then fled to the Democratic Party and helped forge it into an organization which could be competitive throughout the state -- one which claimed, with much justification, to be the Progressive Party reborn, and the true heir of the progressive tradition in Wisconsin.

On January 2nd, 2011 Scott Walker was sworn in as the 45th governor of Wisconsin. It was noted at the time that he chose to take the oath of office on the opposite end of the capitol rotunda from the bust of Robert M. LaFollette Sr. In doing so, he was breaking a tradition that spread back nearly a century; for over eighty years the governors of the state, Republicans, Democrats and Progressives, had been sworn into office, in front of the statue of the man who had first brought Wisconsin to importance on the national state.

Progressivism remains a powerful force within Wisconsin, and one which is still capable of stirring up powerful emotions. During the recent political battle over Governor Scott Walker's budget bill, protestors surged into the state capitol, taking over the building and refusing to leave for over a week. During that time the bust of Bob LaFollette, Sr., became a rallying point for those dissatisfied with the current governor; the protestors decorated it with flowers and hung signs from it with messages such as "What Would Bob Do," and "In LaFollette we trust." The memory of the progressives and the Progressive Party still remain strong in Wisconsin, a point of pride to many, and a call to action for many others. Although the Progressive Party itself may have failed, its legacy continues to live on, and it remains a living

tradition to this very day.

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