

Robert M. La Follette, Sr.: A Man Worth Remembering

By Kris Stahl



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Many years ago, a generation of brothers emigrated to America and settled in the east. One brother, Joe, had a son, also named Joe. This clan went on to have some important family members: a son named Robert; a grandson whose father died when the little boy was barely a toddler; the little boy who grew up missing the presence of his own father in his life; a young widow left to raise her children alone, until she remarried a much older man; a stepfather unable to fill the void left by the little boy's father; a young man who became a senator, stood for what was good and fair for all people, was an effective speaker, and fought against the political bosses; and another young man named Robert who took up the standard and carried on when the first one died.

This family was adored by some people and greatly disliked by others. Elements of jealousy, greed, political maneuverings, fame and recognition on state and national levels, the heights and depths of politics, and the emotional ups and downs of an extended family all had a dramatic effect on the lives of the people of their state and their nation.

Readers may suspect that the family referred to is the Kennedy

family of Massachusetts; however, the family in this case is the La Follette family of Wisconsin, whose most famous member is Robert M. La Follette, Sr. He served as Wisconsin's governor and as its representative in both the House and the Senate, and conducted one of the most successful third-party presidential runs in American history. Unfortunately, La Follette is rarely remembered today, even in Wisconsin, the state he served so long and well. He is worthy of recognition and respect, though, because he stood up for fairness and honesty and opposed the corruption of the political system known as "the machine," run by political bosses.

Robert M. La Follette, Sr.'s personal history and background began with his great-great-grandfather, Joseph La Follette, and his two brothers, French Huguenots who emigrated to New Jersey from France in about 1745. His great-grandfather, also Joseph, and his second wife moved to Virginia, then to Hodgenville, Kentucky (where they were neighbors to the Lincoln family), next to Indiana, and then to Dane County, Wisconsin. His grandfather, Jesse, had six sons, including Josiah. Josiah married Mary Ferguson, who already had a daughter by her first marriage.

They had three children, including Robert Marion La Follette, born June 14, 1855.

Josiah's death from pneumonia when Robert was only eight months old had a profound influence on Robert's life. He idolized his father and never got over the loss of not knowing him. In fact, upon his mother's death in 1894, when Robert decided he wanted his parents buried next to each other, he had his father's coffin dug up and transported to the cemetery where his mother was to be buried. Robert participated in the actual transferral process, and when the rotting coffin was being removed, reached in and took his father's skeleton out of the coffin with his own two hands and stood in the open grave, "trying to visualize the six foot three inch bearded giant who sired him" (Weisberger 6).

In an earlier journal entry Robert had written, "What would I not give to have known the sound of your voice, to have received your approval when it was merited" (qtd. in Weisberger 6). Although he was raised by a stepfather, Robert always, even from the time he was a very young boy, insisted that people use his birth name of LaFollette.

His mother, Mary, had married John Saxton out of necessity—she was alone with three young children. Saxton, a seventy-year-old widower, storekeeper, and Baptist deacon, was thought to have money. However, not only was he not prosperous, he took advantage of Mary by using her estate, which caused her to sell part

of her farm. It took a judge's order to stop him from taking further advantage of her. The lifestyle he set for the family was an austere one: he preached damnation, had mandatory Bible readings, and drew down the shades and had quiet on Sundays.

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As a youngster, Robert was a talented, bright boy who performed recitations, played fife in a band, danced, wrestled, learned hair cutting (which he later did to earn money,) and was well-liked. A turning point in his young life was at age fifteen when he was caught drunk at school and was sent home to his mother. Robert determined to change his ways. When his stepfather died, he became head of the household for his mother and sister and helped support them as he worked his way through college.

Bernard A. Weisberger, author of *The La Follettes of Wisconsin*,

points out that one of the other profound influences on Robert's life and philosophies (and on his future wife) was his education at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. It was where "they grew in awareness of the economic, social, and intellectual revolutions that were hammering old certainties into dust. And there they found ideas of public usefulness that provided a mold into which their energies could be poured" (10). Robert was so extraordinarily energetic and had such a dominating personality that during his political career as a Progressive Republican, he became known as "Fighting Bob" La Follette.

La Follette's Family

Several members of La Follette's family were remarkable in their own right and also had some impact on history.

First of all was his beloved wife, Belle Case La Follette, who was raised on a farm near Baraboo with her pioneer farmer family of Scotch/Irish descent. She not only graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1879, when a woman taking a bachelor's degree was very unusual, but she was also the first female graduate of the Wisconsin Law School. Belle was a devoted wife, mother, columnist, lecturer, and campaigner for suffrage. She wrote on sensible diet, dress, exercise, hygienic housekeeping, and voting rights for women. She also argued against racial segregation and was a committed pacifist. Following La Follette's death, the feminists backed her to fill his Senate seat,

but she refused. She was over sixty years old, and she had never really cared for political turmoil. She died on August 18, 1931, of peritonitis contracted during a routine medical check-up when her intestine was punctured.

Second was his son, Robert Marion La Follette, Jr. (also known as “Young Bob”), born in 1895. Elected to fill his father’s Senate seat in 1925, Young Bob supported his father’s principles, but was more willing to compromise and look for the good in other people. His significant accomplishments were with three major national issues: unemployment relief and public works, tax reform, and the Civil Liberties Committee. He became best known for chairing a committee that investigated how employers broke unions by planting thugs and spies in the workplace. The defeat of Young Bob by a very different kind of politician, Joseph McCarthy, in 1946 brought an end to the La Follette era—for forty-six years a La Follette had been either a governor of Wisconsin, a United States senator, or both. On February 24, 1953, at age 57, a tired, discouraged, and ill Robert M. La Follette, Jr. died by suicide, shooting himself.

Third, was his daughter, Flora Dodge La Follette Middleton, known as “Fola,” born in 1883. Fola graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Wisconsin in 1904, became an actress in New York, and was one of the earliest members of the Actors Equity (a still-active performers union.) She became politically active and campaigned for suffrage, spoke up

for civil rights, lectured on social forces in the theater, and taught at a Progressive high school. Fola died in February, 1970.

Fourth, was his son Philip Fox La Follette, born in 1897, in Madison. Following his father’s energetic, ambitious style, Philip took on the leadership of the Progressives and was elected governor in 1930 at age 33 while his brother, Young Bob, was senior senator at age 35. Philip worked for conservation, public power, and tight control of banks and holding companies. After his 1938 defeat, he withdrew from state affairs and the leadership of the Wisconsin Progressives. After Philip left political life, he practiced law, wrote about his career, and continued his efforts at third party action. He died on August 18, 1965 (the exact same date of Belle’s death thirty-four years earlier.)

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Fifth, was his daughter, Mary La Follette Sucher, born in 1899. She died in February 1988 after serving as a civil servant with the

Department of Agriculture and with the Air Force.

La Follette and Progressivism

Robert M. La Follette, Sr. left a legacy of Progressivism, a political movement whose non-doctrinaire philosophy was based on moderation and pragmatism, and which included agricultural, industrial, and intellectual elements. As Donald Young writes in his memoirs on Philip La Follette, “The Progressive Movement was characterized by a commitment to bring equality and human dignity to all people and by a resolve to achieve its objectives within the existing social and political framework rather than through social upheaval and revolution.” Initially, Progressivism was not confined to one particular party, but was a broad, fundamental philosophy that eventually became the most dynamic third-party movement in the history of our political system.

The roots of Progressivism date back to the political unrest and farmers’ economic problems in the Midwest after the Civil War. The period after the Civil War to 1900 has been called the “age of big business.” As expansion pushed the frontier back to the Pacific, railroad magnates and lumber barons utilized railroads and natural resources more than ever before to make the country and certain individuals very rich. “Laissez faire” economics, the theory that government should not interfere with business, contributed importantly to this prosperity, but at the same time created

startling inequities that inspired a political response: Progressivism. Progressivism was found in all levels of government and in the economic, social, and educational fields. Its tone of moderation and freedom from dogmas gave respectability to the movement and drew support from business and professional groups.

In Wisconsin, La Follette began a Progressive program of political, economic, and social reforms that served as models for other states and the national government. The early days of the movement focused on railroads, political bosses, and the direct primary. The Progressives made many contributions through “insistence on sound, intelligent research, careful experimentation, and honest government.” This became known as “The Wisconsin Idea” (Clark 19.)

La Follette’s personal Progressive roots dated back to when he was a young boy on the farm and witnessed uprisings among the farmers who were fighting for their rights. He grew up to think of the farmers as one of the bulwarks of our government.

An incident in 1892 caused him to take a stand against the party machine. Philetus Sawyer, a seventy-five-year-old lumber baron from Oshkosh who used his position as leader of the “Milwaukee Ring” to help make him a millionaire, made La Follette an offer: Sawyer wanted him to get a judge to decide a case in favor of five previous state treasurers and a rich Republican bondsman who had misused funds from the state

treasury. Newspaper headlines shouted “bribery” and there was a scandal in the Republican Party. La Follette refused to take the bribe and during the winter that followed was called a liar, shunned by acquaintances, received death threats in the mail, and suffered with depression (Weisberger 28 ff.) From that time forward, La Follette became a determined crusader for what was right and fair. With a highly moral and ethical viewpoint, La Follette reduced most problems to a black and white perspective—those problems’ solutions were either right or wrong.

Some of the other notable challenges in his career included:

1. When first in Congress, he attacked a bill that proposed some new river and harbor improvements that actually wasted public funds and did not serve the national interest. The bill did pass over his objections, but he had spoken out against it in the face of the profit-minded opposition.
2. La Follette stood up for the Wisconsin farmers when he supported a tax on oleomargarine because he believed that was a direct threat to them.
3. He supported the Republican philosophy of tariff protection because it would help preserve the American workers’ high standard of living and encourage development of new products.
4. He challenged the railroads which were known for dodging taxes, corrupting politicians, and creating a monopoly. He campaigned for railroad regulations by writing leaflets and by speaking tirelessly on the Chautauqua circuit (Thelan 40).

5. When serving on the Committee on Indian Affairs, he discovered that the Coal Trust was after the Indian coal lands and the Oil Trust was after the oil lands. La Follette fought back against their efforts with his great oratorical skills and defeated them. He also defeated the efforts of the lumber barons to acquire the lumber of the Indians on the Menominee Reservation at Keshena (Drier 20, 28).
6. He believed there were white election frauds in the South and that the black voters were deprived of their right to vote. Taking a courageous stand, he worked for the Force Bill of 1890, which would have employed federal officials to guarantee a free, uninterrupted ballot for both whites and blacks in the South (Thelan 10).

Concerned about the industrialization of the United States, La Follette supported domestic reform. His Progressive creed was to use governmental power to reduce the concentration of industrial and financial power, to regulate railroads, to create an income tax, and to have a direct primary. He pushed through bills that provided for open primary elections, fair taxation, safeguarding natural resources from land-grabbers; he created commissions to regulate banks, insurance companies, utilities, and railroads.

During his lifetime, La Follette ruled the Progressives with an iron hand and had complete public support. The National Progressive Republican League

was formed on January 21, 1911, at La Follette's home in Washington, D.C. Their platform was "the promotion of popular government and progressive legislation" (Barton 29). Although not an officer, "Fighting Bob" was recognized throughout the country as its accepted leader. He was the Progressive Party's nominee for President in the 1924 election, and gained 16.6% of the national vote—still among the highest totals ever for a third-party candidate.

Robert M. La Follette, Sr. died of heart failure on June 18, 1925. His body was returned to his hometown of Madison where over 40,000 people viewed his body in the rotunda of the state capitol. By the end of the month, the Wisconsin Legislature unanimously chose him as one of the state's two representatives in the Hall of Fame in the U.S. Capitol. Following his death, there were thirty-four memorial addresses, twenty-two from various other states and twelve from Wisconsin, given in the Senate and House of Representatives. Rep. Berger of Wisconsin said, "Robert Marion La Follette was a man of great industry, exceptional ability, honest motives, and had an unusually high sense of public duty. The world is better because he lived" (U.S. 69th Cong.)

The Legacy

The Progressives continued after La Follette's death in 1925, and on May 19, 1934, the La Follette Progressives established the Progressive party at a convention in Fond du Lac. This

was the first step to a national party, National Progressives of America. In 1938 Philip La Follette designed a symbol for the NPA, an X within a circle which represented American equality in the ballot box, abundance in economic life, equality, and freedom at the polls. Unfortunately, the symbol was ridiculed by its detractors as a "circumcised swastika" (Young 254.)

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Harvey V. Brandt of Columbia University has written, "The Progressive Party was a voice that refused to conform, a positive contribution to the culture and to the refreshing of its creed" (qtd. in MacDougall 880.) The party eventually disbanded at a convention in Portage on March 17, 1946, due to weakness, the coming end of World War II, and the fact that some members wanted to either join the Republicans or Democrats. Growing concern about communism caused a more conservative public attitude wherein it was considered almost disloyal to think of other than main-line policies, and, of course, this included a major third party.

There was a brief revival of

the party in the 1990s. The 1995-96 *State of Wisconsin Blue Book* notes a state platform adopted on March 1, 1995, that specified their philosophy and goals, many of which—sound economic policies, a fair and progressive tax structure, removal of business influence on elections, and equality—are reminiscent of La Follette's and the Progressives' earlier goals. The party is not currently active, but *The Progressive*, a magazine founded by Robert and Belle La Follette in 1909, is still publishing.

A more recent public reference made to the memory of Robert M. La Follette, Sr. came in February 2011, when more than 15,000 Wisconsinites marched on the state Capitol building in Madison in protest against Governor Scott Walker's budget cuts, his proposal to strip public employees of collective bargaining rights, and his threat to use the National Guard if the government workers went on strike. More than 100,000 protestors had joined the protests by the mid-March. Many of the rallies included signs that asked, "What Would Bob Do?" and proclaimed "La Follette forever."

Even before those protests, Walker was acutely aware of the La Follette legacy—so much so that when he held his inauguration in the Capitol rotunda, he made sure it was far from a bust of La Follette, so there was no chance that he might be photographed sharing a frame with the great Progressive.

A 1982 survey of American historians placed La Follette first (tied with Henry Clay) among

Senators for “accomplishments in office” and “long range impact on American history” (Porter). His biographer Bernard Weisberger called him “an immovable rock in the raging current. That was La Follette of Wisconsin, a hero if ever I had met one” (xi). It is time to bring the La Follette name and legacy back to the forefront of our collective consciousness.

Do you know Robert M. La Follette?

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