



The Reverend Henry Wallace

Wallaces' Farm and Dairy

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THE REVEREND HENRY WALLACE

by

Dr. Richard E. Hattwick
Professor of Economics (Retired)
Western Illinois University

Henry Wallace was a nationally famous promoter of agricultural progress and farmers' rights during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century. He achieved initial recognition as the minority owner of Iowa's largest farm publication. He subsequently founded his own farm magazine which became both a business and editorial success. His son and grandson both worked in the business. They also followed his example by being active in movements to promote farm life and agricultural productivity. The son and grandson both served in the national government as Secretary of Agriculture. The grandson, Henry A. Wallace was also a vice president of the United States and a leader in the hybrid corn revolution.

THE FIRST FORTY YEARS: 1836-1876

Henry Wallace was descended from a long line of Scottish and Irish farmers. His father, John Wallace, immigrated to the United States in 1823 and staked out a farm in western Pennsylvania. Henry was born there in 1836.

At the age of eighteen Henry left the farm intent on pursuing a career other than farming. He chose the ministry and attended Monmouth College in Illinois in preparation for that career.

After completing his theological studies he taught school in northern Kentucky for two years and then became the minister for several churches in Rock Island, Illinois and Davenport, Iowa. He also

married Nancy Cantwell, the daughter of an Ohio landowner and politician.

His ministerial career did not fare well. As explained by the biographers of his grandson (John Culver and John Hyde, p. 5):

"Parishioners in his small Presbyterian churches... were hidebound and difficult. Their strict orthodoxy did not appeal to him, and they found his 'social gospel' altogether too broad-minded."

He took time out from his ministry to serve as an Army chaplain near the end of the Civil War. Perhaps that was the origin of health problems he began experiencing in the late 1860s. Or perhaps the stress of his job began to affect him. Whatever the cause he experienced chronic pain and numbness in his limbs and he began losing weight. He, himself, feared that he was dying of tuberculosis, a disease that had killed his seven brothers and sisters.

When his father died, Henry used the inheritance to buy land several hundred miles west of Davenport in Adair County, Iowa. In 1877 he moved there following the advice of his physician. By that time he and Nancy had five children.

Henry's farm land was in Adair County but the family purchased a house in Winterset, the seat of Madison County. Henry Wallace used a buggy to travel to his farms. He soon established a reputation as a progressive farmer. He introduced Adair County's first purebred hog, first shorthorn bull, and first Percheron horse. He also proved the doubters wrong by being the first to grow clover in that area.

The social gospel preacher in Henry was not quiet for long. As reported by Culver and Hyde (p.6):

"A year after arriving in Winterset, Wallace was invited to give the town's Fourth of July address and he proceeded to roast 'machine' politics, excessive party loyalty, and mediocre schools. He finished with a blistering attack on cheap money, a nostrum highly popular among farmers in the area."

That speech set off an editorial war between the local newspapers. Wallace began contributing to the Republican newspaper. Then he had a falling out with the publisher and purchased a half interest in the smaller *Winterset Chronicle*. Under his direction the paper's

circulation quickly rose from 400 to 1,400. Then he bought the other half interest in the paper and proceeded to push circulation above that of the Republican rival.

Henry's editorials attracted state-wide attention. Among his admirers were two men who joined with him in a number of reform ventures - James "Tama Jim" Wilson and Seaman Knapp. Their first reform effort was an attack on the so-called barbed wire monopoly. The three men formed an organization to manufacture barbed wire in apparent violation of the patents which created the monopoly. Wilson, Wallace and Knapp bet that they would win a patent infringement suit. And so they did, although the case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

The three reformers moved on to establish the Agricultural Editors' Association for the promotion of better farm journalism, and the Iowa Stock Breeders Association which promoted better livestock management. Wilson was subsequently elected to Congress; Knapp became a reform-minded professor of agriculture at Iowa State Agricultural College, and Wallace was appointed editor of the largest farm publication in Iowa, *Iowa Homestead*. He took a one-third interest so that his annual income came from three sources - newspaper salary, newspaper dividends and farm profits.

Henry had been promised complete editorial freedom at the *Iowa Homestead* and he acted as if he believed the promise. His editorials focused on monopoly problems. So did the investigative journalism which he promoted. He achieved one major coup when his paper exposed the price discrimination practiced by railroads. Culver and Hyde claim that it was Henry's expose that led to the eventual creation of the United States Interstate Commerce Commission and the Commission's mandate to regulate railroads. Henry was clearly a success both financially and as an effective social reformer.

Then financial problems arose because of a work place conflict and national economic conditions. A prolonged farm recession imposed losses on Henry's farming investment. The newspaper stopped paying dividends. And, the majority owner of the newspaper began pressuring Henry to cut back on the social reform editorializing and switch to non-controversial agricultural subjects. Henry was not about to be told what to do and the conflict between publisher and editor finally led to Henry being fired.

WALLACES' FARM AND DAIRY

Shortly after Henry was fired by the *Iowa Homestead*, he was invited to take over editorship of an unprofitable newspaper named *Farm and Dairy*. That paper was owned by Henry's son Harry, who had just lost his job as a professor at Iowa State Agricultural College. Henry accepted his son's proposal and renamed the paper *Wallaces' Farm and Dairy*.

The plan was to turn *Wallace's Farm and Dairy* into a profitable business capable of supporting the families of both Henry and Harry Wallace, but money was needed to cover the initial short run losses. That problem was solved when James Wilson signed a

\$5,000 bank note, and Henry borrowed another \$5,000 using his home and life insurance as collateral. Sweat equity was also provided by Harry, Henry, and other members of the family.

Henry Wallace then moved aggressively to grab market share from the rival *Iowa Homestead* and its publisher who had fired him. The strategy was to attract subscribers and advertisers by portraying Henry as the champion of the farmer in the fight against monopolies. Of course, Henry's superb editorial skills would make it easy for subscribers to switch to *Wallace's Farm and Dairy* because it had more appealing content. What followed is summarized as followed by Culver and Hyde (p.7):

*"The result was a huge outpouring of support for the Wallaces. The cloud that had hovered over the family for half a decade broke apart and scattered. Within weeks it was apparent to Wallace and his sons that **Wallaces' Farm and Dairy** would succeed. At the end of three months, the paper registered a small profit ... (A)fter six months in operation, the Wallaces changed the name of their paper to Wallaces' Farmer and Dairyman."*

The campaign for market share drew a combative response from the publisher of *Iowa Homestead* and that paper's owner, James Pierce, stooped more than once to make personal attacks on Wallace's character and talent. One such personal attack accompanied the 1896 national presidential campaign. Pierce accused Wallace of accepting a bribe to publish material that attacked the losing presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan. Henry responded with a \$500,000 libel suit against Pierce. Henry won the suit but the court only awarded him \$1,500.

For the next ten years the Wallace's farm journal prospered as did

farmers in general. The journal's name was changed to simply *Wallaces' Farmer*. A formal credo or mission statement was added - " Good farming, clear thinking, right living." The product was described by biographers Culver and Hyde as follows (pp.9-10):

"The paper...was compact, usually eighteen to twenty four pages, and crammed with articles by, for and about farmers: ' The Model Draft Horse,' 'Potato Culture,'...'Trees on the Farm,' 'Facts about Hog Cholera.' There was a page devoted to news about hogs, a page for dairy farmers, a horticultural page, a market page, and Aunt Nancy's 'Hearts and Homes' page, sprinkled with inspirational poems, recipes, and homemaking tips. ...

"Page Two was ...Henry's domain. There he editorialized on the evil of monopolies, urged better farm tenancy laws, counseled farmers to refinance their debts, and preached the virtues of grass...

Nothing, however, so succeeded in cementing the bond between rural readers and Wallaces' Farmer as 'Uncle Henry's Sabbath Lessons.' No feature was more popular or gave the paper greater credibility with religious-minded farm folk. Henry Wallace himself said the Sunday School lessons were the single greatest cause of Wallaces' Farmer's success. They were, he wrote, 'about the best work I have ever done.'

"Readers across Iowa - and eventually far beyond - began to use the lessons in their home devotionals and to prepare for church meetings. Wallace's Bible lessons became an institution in Iowa."

Henry Wallace's strategy of positioning his farm journal as the farmer's friend included an amazing array of publicity generating projects. As described by Culver and Hyde (p.20):

"(The Wallaces) sent 'corn trains' and 'dairy trains' and 'good roads trains' around the state to lobby for better agriculture, marketing and transportation. They formed clubs and sponsored competitions and imported experts to foster scientific farming practices. They helped organize the Corn Belt Meat Producers' Association and other groups to press the farmer's cause."

The pace of the farm journal's financial success was so rapid that Henry and his sons were able to pay off all debts by the end of five

years and soon thereafter built a modern four story headquarters in Des Moines. *"Indeed, the Wallaces' farm paper began to make so much money that it was referred to in journalism circles as 'Wallaces' Gold Mine.' Uncle Henry was almost embarrassed by the thought of it. Never comfortable with financial matters anyway, he established a trust to handle his personal funds and simply ceased to think about money. The trust provided Wallace and his wife with a small annuity sufficient to meet their needs and distributed the rest to charities and family members "* (Culver and Hyde, p.21).

THE FINAL YEARS

With the farm journal an unqualified success, and with his sons and a grandson up to the task of running the business, Henry Wallace began to take time for activities beyond the paper. He continued to write editorials, Sunday School lessons and other pieces for the journal. But he also expanded the time devoted to lectures, traveling abroad, preaching, correspondence with "what seemed to be hundreds of friends" and politics.

Henry's political activities earned him national recognition as a social reformer. He served with distinction on President Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission (created to recommend ways of improving rural life). He was elected president of the Conservative Congress, an early national environmental protection organization. He also became a pacifist after World War I broke out. He spoke out against "rampant nationalism" and urged President Wilson to take leadership in eliminating war as an instrument of national policy.

On February 22, 1916, Henry Wallace died as he was preparing to open a conference of Methodists in Des Moines. *"The death of Iowa's most beloved figure was followed by a huge outpouring of grief from the great and the unknown alike. Condolence messages numbering in the thousands flooded in from every state of the nation, from virtually every township in the Corn Belt, and from around the world."* (Culver and Hyde, p.42)

When the family of Henry Wallace gathered to hear the reading of his will, here, in part, is what they heard (Culver and Hyde, p 43):

"I desire to express to my children and grandchildren my mature conviction that life is worth while if it be lived worthily... We (Wallaces) have never thought of wealth or social position as ends in themselves, but merely as means of enlarging our possible usefulness to the community at large. Any serious departure from this policy will be fatal to the best interests of the family."

REFERENCES

1. Culver, John C. and John Hyde. *American Dreamer. The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000.

(The main subject of this book is Henry A. Wallace, the grandson of the subject of the preceding profile, Henry Wallace. However, the book contains significant coverage of Henry Wallace because of the significant influence he had on his grandson. The grandson became Secretary of Agriculture under Franklin D. Roosevelt and served one term as Vice President of the United States under Roosevelt. This book also provides detailed coverage of the career of Harry Wallace. Harry was the son of Henry Wallace and father of Henry A. Wallace. Harry Wallace ran the administrative side of *Wallaces' Farmer* and was active in politics. Like his son he served as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture).