

Browne EE 2007

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Waupaca's E.E. Browne rose to prominence as progressive  
By Robert Cloud, Post Editor

Waupaca's most successful politician was also its most progressive.

Edward E. Browne served six years as district attorney, six years in the state Senate and 18 years in the Congress. Although most remembered for his tireless efforts to modernize rural roads, Browne was responsible for an amendment to the state constitution and cast one of 50 votes in the House of Representatives against the U.S. entry into World War I. He was an ally of Robert LaFollette, an advocate for farmers and an enemy of railroad barons and war profiteers.

Born in Waupaca in 1868, Browne was the son of a Waupaca pioneer lawyer, Edward L. Browne. He attended Waupaca High School and the University of Wisconsin before graduating from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1892. After practicing law with his father in Waupaca, Browne was elected as district attorney in 1900. Six years later, he became a state senator, campaigning on the issue of good roads.

A lifelong Republican and a leader in Wisconsin's Progressive movement, Browne advocated good roads because he believed it would benefit the economy and help farmers get their produce to market.

In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rural roads were often little more than dirt trails. They were frequently closed due to flooding or snow.

As a consequence, farmers had to rely on railroads to transport their goods. When only a single company provided rail service in a rural town, the farmers faced exorbitant rates that cut into their profits and increased the price of groceries for consumers.

In 1912, the same year that he first ran for Congress, Browne helped the farmers of Big Falls sue a railroad line in order to force down rates. According to the Waupaca Republican Post, one-third of the total freight cost that the farmers and loggers were paying to ship their goods was just for the six miles between Big Falls and Hunting. They were being forced to haul their commodities by wagon 12 miles to Iola in order to obtain affordable rates. Browne's efforts resulted in the Big Falls railroad company cutting its rates.

Roads would not only give farmers more affordable options when looking to transport their products, they would also, according to Browne, benefit the entire country.

"The wagon road is the primary and universal agency of transportation," Browne said in a speech to the Wisconsin Potato Growers Association in Marinette on Nov. 17, 1915. "It leads from every farm to every market, and over it passes annually the food supplies of the nation. Not only does it carry to market the food supplies and raw materials for domestic consumption, but it is the first step in international commerce."

During his first year in the state Senate, Browne introduced a resolution calling for a state constitutional amendment that would allow the state to invest more funds into road projects. The original state constitution prohibited the state from borrowing money for internal improvements and only allowed the use of land grants to fund roads. The amendment, which was enacted after a state referendum in 1908, allowed the state to raise taxes and fund road projects from the treasury.

Browne was also an advocate of an expanded public school system, compensation for injured workers and a state income tax. At the time, Republicans in Wisconsin favored an income tax as a means of lowering property taxes. They noted that farmers and small businesses faced high taxes based on the value of their property even though their incomes were modest.

"The income tax law enacted by the state legislature is a progressive measure based upon the sound, economic principle that taxes shall be levied according to ability to pay and that net income is a better measure of such ability than the mere possession of property. Its enactment was prompted by the utter failure and injustice of personal property taxation," wrote D.F. Burnham, the editor of the Waupaca Republican Post. "It is not an additional tax and was not intended to increase revenues, but is designed to replace the personal property tax, as soon as its efficiency as a revenue producing measure shall be fully demonstrated."

In 1912, when Browne ran for Congress, both the Republican Party and the national Progressive movement was split. President Howard Taft, handpicked by Theodore Roosevelt to succeed him at the White House, had proven too conservative for most Progressives. Roosevelt, who became president with the assassination of William

McKinley in September 1901, had served two terms and was seeking to return to office in order to restore the Republican Party to Progressive principles. Prior to Roosevelt throwing his hat into the ring, Sen. Bob LaFollette, the leader of the Progressives in Wisconsin and throughout the Midwest, had begun a campaign for the presidency.

After Taft received the nomination, Roosevelt bolted the GOP and began a campaign as an independent. He alienated both Taft conservatives and LaFollette Progressives.

Prior to the Republican convention in June 1912, Browne was on a resolutions committee of Progressive Republicans that met in Marshfield. The resolutions from that Dec. 15, 1911, meeting indicated the Progressives' disappointment with the conservatives who controlled the GOP.

A resolution that Browne helped write noted that the Republican Party was founded "for the purpose of removing from the nation the blot of human slavery." It went on to describe the GOP as "the best-fitted political organization for militantly marching against and overthrowing the forces which have, consciously or unconsciously, directed effort toward fastening upon the nation the incubus of industrial slavery ...

"Realizing that this same Republican Party, through misguided following of false leaders, and through blind adherence to the doctrines and ideas which were far removed from the basic principles of Lincoln, is in a considerable measure responsible for the plight in which our nation now is, we declare our belief that the Republican Party stands today most in need of new leadership."

The Waupaca Republican Post, which had a history of endorsing Progressive Republican candidates, extensively criticized both Taft and Roosevelt in its editorials.

In the Republican convention in Chicago, the re-nomination of President Taft seemed to please very few except for the fact that it compassed the defeat of his most formidable opponent, Col. Roosevelt." Burnham wrote in June 1912, "Even the friends of President Taft did little shouting, as they were destined so frequently to be reminded that it would be easy to beat him in November. A few weeks later, Burnham predicted that Woodrow Wilson, who had received the Democratic nomination, would carry the votes of Progressive Republicans while Taft would carry the votes of conservative Democrats.

Burnham would describe his loyalty to the Republican Party, in an Oct. 17 editorial, as "something akin to following the coffin of a friend. We are chagrined that the Good Old Party has done things that make us ashamed to shout for it and its chosen leader."

In his first congressional race, Browne would face Arthur J. Plowman, who was originally from Waupaca. Born in Waupaca in 1872, Plowman had graduated from Waupaca High School and moved to Marathon County where he became a farmer and later a bank president.

Plowman, a Democrat, would accuse Browne of not really being a Republican and challenged him to make public which presidential candidate he supported. Browne remained silent on his preference.

Browne won in all six counties in the 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, taking a majority even in Marathon County. He would continue winning races for the next 18 years.

In 1912, Wisconsin was one of five states that held referendums on whether or not to extend the right to vote to women. Burnham wrote frequent editorials in favor of women's suffrage, in one asking his readers, "What's the matter with mother? Isn't she good enough to vote?"

The referendums to give women the right to vote passed in every state except Wisconsin, where it was defeated by a vote of about 224,000 to 132,000. In Waupaca County, women's suffrage lost by a vote of 3,177 to 1,989.

Burnham blamed the referendum's defeat to the color of the special ballot.

"The pink ballot must have had a similar effect upon male votes which a red streamer is attributed to have on males of the bovine species," Burnham noted.

The Waupaca Record-Leader, however, had another take on the referendum's defeat. In an article on July 25, 1912, the Record-Leader ran a story regarding prohibition efforts in California. "We want a sober race of men is the battle cry of organized and enfranchised women in Los Angeles would require salons to close at 6 p.m. and only allow one drink to be sold during lunch.

"Campaigns against intemperance and vice are the first and certain fruits of equal suffrage," the Record-Leader reported.

Prohibition became a hot topic in Waupaca. Beginning in 1910, the city held frequent referendums on whether or not to continue licensing saloons. A slim majority voted against the city becoming "dry" in 1910 and 1911, but in 1914 the majority voted against licensing saloons and they were closed in Waupaca. Prior to adoption of an ordinance making Waupaca dry, the city had 12 saloons.

Within a year, the Waupaca Republican-Post was reporting on jury trials involving the illegal sales of liquor.

On Jan 11, 1916, Eric Whipple, an owner of the Delavan Hotel in downtown Waupaca, was on trial for selling liquor without a license. A detective from Milwaukee had purchased a bottle of whiskey at the hotel the month before. Attorney John C. Hart was Whipple's defense counsel and argued that the detective had lied to Whipple about his intentions when purchasing the whiskey.

"Attorney Hart also referred to the large attendance in court, especially of Waupaca women," the Republican-Post reported. "He doubtless did not know that notice had been given in some of the churches of the city that District Attorney Putnam had complained that the good people of this city had not manifested any sentiment in favor of law and order, that in other places the WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) attended the trial of those charged with violation" of the excise law.

Putnam also cited Whipple's possession of two barrels of whiskey as "strong circumstantial evidence."

The jury, however, found Whipple not guilty after deliberating for 40 minutes. Putnam later complained that he could not get a conviction in the city of Waupaca.

Browne's toughest congressional race would occur in 1918 due to his vote against entering World War I.

In 1916, Wilson had won re-election on the slogan that he kept the U.S. out of the war. Progressives, led by LaFollette, spoke against the war and voted against increasing military appropriations. Once the election was over, however, Wilson began pushing for war. Allied with conservatives in both parties, Wilson more than doubled military spending.

At the same time, the munitions industry financed a massive propaganda effort. A film, "Battle Cry for Peace," was shown at the Lyric Theater and the high school. Describing it as a work of fiction, Burnham noted that the film raised hysteria about a possible attack from Germany should it win the war in Europe.

"Europe will not be one vast graveyard and having been depleted of its men and treasure, the countries of Europe will not be in a condition to carry war across the Atlantic," Burnham argued.

On April 6, 1917, Congress voted to declare war on Germany, Browne delivered an impassioned speech against entering the war.

"It means the sending of an expeditionary force to Europe. It means conscription. It means the strong arm of government will invade the sacred precincts of every American home and snatch an American boy and take him to foreign lands to fight under the flags of kings and emperors and foreign officers," Browne said.

"I believe that voting for this resolution means the signing of the death warrants of thousands and perhaps millions of the young men of this country and the placing of a staggering tax burden on the future generations. I believe that by entering the European war we forgo the supreme vantage ground we now occupy as the one strong neutral by whom great mediatory steps may be taken in bringing about an early and lasting peace. I believe that in throwing 100 million people who are happy and at peace, who are busy producing what is keeping the rest of the world from famine, into the world war, we are wiping out the last great civilized area as yet unswept by hatred, the world's one remaining resource for reconstruction. I believe that by entering the European war we will nullify our power and postpone for maybe a century the day when international disputes shall be settled by international courts of arbitration instead of those methods that have wrecked Europe."

A rabid form of jingoism was also sweeping America at the time. Those who questioned the decision to enter World War I were accused of being traitors.

In June 1917, in order to quell opposition, Wilson proposed and Congress passed the Espionage Act. Less than a year later, the Sedition Act became law. It became illegal to criticize the war in any fashion or the government that was conducting the war. The post office could refuse to deliver newspapers that criticized the government. Pamphlets, speeches and articles that opposed the war could be confiscated and the people responsible arrested.

In his April 6 speech, Browne noted this trend and asked, "With these doctrines for our guide, tell me, tell the American people, what is the difference between your American democracy and the most odious, most hateful despotism that a merciful God has ever allowed a nation to be afflicted with?"

In July 1917, the Waupaca Republican Post and the Waupaca Record-Leader merged to form the Waupaca County Post. Burnham became the publications business manager, E.E. Payne became the new editor and the paper took a more conservative stance on the war.

In Waupaca, a local chapter of the Loyalty League was formed with Payne as its president. The organization encouraged neighbors to report any suspicious conversations.

“To find fault, no murmur and grumble is not patriotic nor right.” Payne wrote in a Jan. 24, 1918, editorial. “The individual in private life is not fully posted as to facts and conditions, and even if he knew mistakes were made, it is imperative that personal opinion should not stand in the way of prompt compliance with established authority, where so much is at stake. And for the good name of America, and to the discomfort of German intrigue it is gratifying to note that the people of America recognize this fact and give every support and ready obedience without question or demur.”

The new paper considered LaFollette, who continued opposing the war, as an obstructionist, described him as “dangerous to our country,” and supported the state Legislature’s vote to censure LaFollette.

Browne, although he initially opposed the war, voted in favor of nearly every subsequent bill to support the country’s efforts to defeat Germany. At the same time, he attacked the munitions companies for their enormous profits, which he argued were up to 3,000 percent higher than prior to the war. He urged an 80 percent tax on war-related profits.

In the election of 1918, Browne faced stiff opposition in the Republican primary from M.G. Eberlein, who accused the congressman of being unpatriotic, of being pro-German and of not wanting the U.S. to win the war.

Browne responded by pointing to his subsequent voting record and asking Eberlein to declare how he would have voted when a majority of his constituents opposed the war. Browne told voters he had received petitions from his district with nearly 10,000 signatures against the war.

In the primary, Browne received 7,809 votes to Eberlein’s 6,295. A third candidate, F.A. Walters, received 2,001 votes.

In 1919, the war ended and two federal constitutional amendments became law. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment prohibited the sale of liquor and the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave women the right to vote. Wisconsin redeemed itself by becoming the first state to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The Espionage and Sedition Acts were repealed in 1921. American returned to a period of “normalcy”.

Locally, Burnham returned to his position as editor of the Waupaca County Post and was elected to the state Assembly in 1928 as a Progressive Republican.

Browne continued to be an advocate of good roads, subsidies for farmers and laws prohibiting child labor. He was also a proponent of Prohibition, which probably cost him the election of 1930.

Instead of creating a sober country, Prohibition resulted in a crime wave as a profitable, often violent, black market in alcohol emerged. Even Waupaca had its speak-easies and the Waupaca County Post printed frequent stories of drunken driver fatalities. One article estimated that 100,000 cases of whiskey a year were passing through Waupaca on the way from Canada to Milwaukee and Chicago. Some of that whiskey didn’t make it past Waupaca.

In April 1930, Gerald Boileau, a district attorney from Marathon County, announced that he would run against Browne in the Republican primary. He advocated that Prohibition be amended to allow the sale of beer and wine.

Americans had grown weary of the failed national experiment in enforced virtue.

Although Browne won in five of the six counties in the 8<sup>th</sup> District, Boileau won Marathon County, which opposed Prohibition, by more than 6,000 votes.

Browne returned to Waupaca and resumed his law practice. He would also serve on the State Conservation Commission and as a curator for the Wisconsin Historical Society before his death in 1945.