
Life of Eugene V. Debs, Grand Secretary and Treasurer.

[September 1888]

Published in *Opening Exercises of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen: Atlanta, Ga. — Monday, September 10, 1888, (n.c.: BLE, 1888), pp. 35-37.*

At every convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, the remark is made by distinguished citizens invited to address the representatives of the Order, that the great majority are young men in the prime and strength of their young manhood. This is true — and when it is remembered that the Brotherhood, guided and controlled by young men since its birth in 1873, has been equal to every emergency and has achieved success, the fact bears testimony of capabilities of a high order and is fruitful of instructive reflections.

Eugene V. Debs, the subject of this sketch, the Grand Secretary and Treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, was born in the city of Terre Haute, Indiana, November 5, 1855, and is now in the 33rd year of his age. His parents were natives of Alsace, once a province of France, where the love of liberty and independence characterized the people, as it has for a century. The great body of the French population in coming to the

United States were not required to be educated to bring them into sympathy with American institutions and ideas, and as a consequence the boyhood home of Eugene was a place in which every lesson taught was well calculated to develop an ardent love of American ideas and principles of government.

At the proper age the boy was sent to the public schools of his native city and advanced through the various grades of the high school, from which he retired at the expiration of one year to enter a commercial college to obtain a thorough business education. Always distinguished for studious habits and the rapid acquisition of knowledge, he mastered his studies with an

each characteristic of genius and won the approval of his teachers.

At the age of 15 years, young Debs entered the Vandalia Railroad paint-shop as an appren-



tice. To the decorative art, while not distasteful, he preferred a more active life, and in 1871 accepted a position as fireman on a Vandalia locomotive, and continued to fire the machine till 1874. At 19 years of age he was tendered a position as clerk in the large wholesale house of Hulman & Co., of Terre Haute, in which he remained till 1879. At this time, the public career of Mr. Debs, then 24 years of age, began, and his great popularity in his native city was demonstrated by his triumphant election to the office of City Clerk by a majority of 1,100 over ten competitors. His first term in office was so distinguished by industry, ability, and integrity that he was reelected by an increased majority.

Though no longer handling pick and scoop in the cab, Mr. Debs did not permit his interest in the welfare of firemen to wane. He was initiated a member of Vigo Lodge, No. 16, February 27, 1874, and became one of its most active and efficient members. With a thorough business education obtained in college, in a large business house and in office, he brought to the Brotherhood a mind trained for practical work, an unbending will coupled with indefatigable power for work. He could with rare facility bring order out of confusion, and inspire confidence where doubt had gained ascendancy. This being true, it is not surprising that in the year 1877 he represented his lodge in the annual convention of the Order at Indianapolis [4th: Sept. 11, 1877], at a time when the Brotherhood was entering upon trials and vicissitudes that challenged all its resources of intelligence to maintain its position. In 1878 Mr. Debs was a delegate to the annual convention at Buffalo [5th: Sept. 10, 1878], where his services were of great value, as Assistant Secretary, and the Brotherhood, then recognizing his literary abilities, made him the associate editor of *The Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*.

In June 1880, Mr. Debs was appointed by the then Grand Master, F.W. Arnold, to the office of Grand Secretary and Treasurer of the Brother-

hood, and in September 1880, he was elected to that office by the convention held in the city of Chicago, and has held the office since that date. In saying that Mr. Debs has displayed capacities of the highest order in conducting the office of Grand Secretary and Treasurer is simply echoing the verdict of the Brotherhood without a dissenting voice.

Since Mr. Debs assumed control of the office of Grand Secretary and Treasurer the Brotherhood has grown from 98 lodges to 384, with a corresponding increase of duties and responsibilities — and yet order, method, accuracy, and integrity have been maintained. Under his management of the finances of the brotherhood it has marched from despondency bordering upon despair, until in the pride of its strength the only question is, what shall be the sweep of its future victories.

This sketch of E.V. Debs, Grand Secretary and Treasurer, would be incomplete without special allusion to his connection with the Locomotive Firemen's Magazine, the organ of the Brotherhood. At the convention held in Boston, Mass. in 1881 [8th: from Sept. 12, 1881], Mr. Debs was elected editor of this publication. At that time its monthly circulation was about 3,000 copies, while at the present time it has reached the grand circulation of 30,000 copies. To say that such success is phenomenal is a tame expression, but the fact is eloquent of the tireless devotion of its editor to the duties of the arduous position and of his comprehensive knowledge of the education and literary wants of the Order.

In the year 1884 Mr. Debs was put in nomination by his fellow citizens of Vigo County for the responsible position of a representative in the Indiana Legislature to meet in January 1885. His great popularity and his mental endowments, together with his earnest defense of labor against the oppressions to which it had been subjected, marked him as the proper man to represent one of the most populous counties and one of the largest cities of the commonwealth, and he was tri-

umphantly elected. His duties as a Legislator did not interfere with his duties to the Brotherhood, either as Grand Secretary or Treasurer or as the editor of the magazine.

In this connection it is worthy of remark that Mr. Debs was earnestly and time and again solicited to become a candidate for Congress, with every assurance of success, but his fealty to the great Brotherhood triumphed over the solicitations of political friends and every ambition for political distinction, and held him fast to the fortunes of the Brotherhood, in which by unwavering devotion and ceaseless labors for 8 years he had earned the confidence of the membership and flattering prominence.

Mr. Debs is now in the prime of his young manhood, and with hosts of friends and a happy home, the future holds out to him many dazzling prizes, to secure which he has only to put forth his mental and physical energies. As a writer, Mr. Debs has warmth, courage, and great versatility; his mind surveys the whole field of labor, and while devoted to the Brotherhood of which he is a member, he has generous words for other Brotherhoods and for all the toiling masses.

As a speaker, Mr. Debs is fluent, cogent, and persuasive, and often rising to height of eloquence, is greeted with appreciative applause. Affable and companionable, Mr. Debs win friends and holds them in bonds which grow stronger the better he is known.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.