

A U.S. Senator
from Baraboo
once A
Possibility
Tales of Earlier
Days

By Bob Dewel 888 words
for BNR

This is the story of a home town Baraboo girl who could have been a United States Senator from Wisconsin! Had she chosen to do so she would have been the first woman ever to serve as a Senator from any state. In her time she was a national symbol of modern womanhood.

Yes, it is true, and she's a "home town girl makes good" in so many other ways also. She was the first woman to graduate from the UW School of Law. She was the wife of a Wisconsin Governor and U.S. Senator. She also was the Mother of a Wisconsin Governor and U.S. Senator. And she was Sauk County and Baraboo's own daughter, Belle Case La Follette.

Well, not quite, for she was born on April 21, 1859 in Summit, in Juneau County to our North. The Case family moved to Baraboo when she was only

three, so her formative years and schooling were in Baraboo.

The Sauk County Historical Society will honor her 150th birthday and achievements on April 21 this year with ceremonies at the Society's present home at 531 Fourth Avenue in Baraboo. The program begins at 6:30 and is open to the public at no charge. Citizens are invited to come and learn about this remarkable daughter of our county and of Baraboo.

The Early Years

The State Historical Society publication, The Wisconsin Magazine of History, recently had a 30 page story of her life, far more than this article can review, but recommended for those who wish to learn more. Both the library and the historical society have copies. This article will focus more on her local connections.

Apparently there is no record of her family or of Belle during her first three years of life in Juneau County. The parents are said to be of English and Scottish descent. In Baraboo, her father was a grower of hops. Case Street, just off Lynn Avenue, may have been the location of the farm.

Baraboo had at that time a school on the South side, at the summit of Blake Street. Perhaps her elementary training was there, or at an elementary school near Walnut, Maple, and Cherry Streets.

The high school was on the north side. In previous articles we wrote of life in early Baraboo as it was recounted by Howard Huntington and W.W. Warner. Belle would have related to those descriptions.

Although she is not mentioned, Belle certainly must have been one of the girls who decorated the engine of the first train to arrive in Baraboo in 1871. She may have had memories of the desolate county during the Civil War, with so many of its sons gone.

A Teacher and a Bride

She was apparently a star pupil for she enrolled at the University in Madison at age 16. The young girl was a star pupil at the University also, with little time at first for her suitor, the yet-to-be famous Bob La Follette. At last, on Dec. 31, 1881, she and Bob were married in the Case family home in Baraboo, with just family in attendance. The Unitarian Minister performed the ceremony, which omitted the word "obey" at her request.

There is one more local connection, for upon graduation Belle taught in Spring Green for a year, and then in Baraboo, The High School then had been built in 1871 on the corner of Ash and Second Streets, facing the latter. It was destined to burn in 1906.

Many years later, classmate A.B. Trimmer remembered her as "the brightest scholar in school". Mary Hein has a clipping from 1868 listing her as

"neither absent nor tardy". Later, as a teacher in, 1880 or 1881, one of her students was John Ringling, whom she later described as a "tall, heavy, dark-eyed boy--- good natured, full of fun, but with little taste for lessons or books" .

National Symbol of Womanhood

Interested readers can pursue her illustrious life, as a helpmate, supporter, and at times uninhibited critic of her husband, "Fighting Bob" La Follette. He was Governor for nearly three terms, and U.S. Senator for three terms also.

When he died in office in 1925 Belle's personal reputation was such that she could have had the appointment as the first woman to serve as U.S. Senator, but she chose not to accept. Instead, their son Robert La Follette Jr. was appointed to that unexpired term.

At the time of her death in 1931 the New York Times referred to her as probably the least known yet most influential woman who has to do with public affairs in this country." She was a lawyer, journalist, editor, suffragist, pacifist, and counselor. Sauk County and Baraboo can be proud of this talented daughter!

Again, you are invited to attend the observance at 6:30 on April 21 at the Historical Society building at 531 Fourth Avenue. Wisconsin once led the nation in Progressivism, and Belle was a significant contributor to the movement. Come to the observance of her birthday at

6:30. and learn more about this distinguished daughter of Baraboo.

Flash: Very good rumor has it that the principal speaker will be another woman prominent in government, the Chief Justice of the Wisconsin Supreme court, Shirley Abrahamson!

