

# John Harvey Baldwin

( April 4, 1851 – June 19, 1924 )

=◻=



- 1917 -

=◻=

In 1900 John Harvey Baldwin and his family moved to Frazee, a small town of about 1,000 residents in Becker County, Minnesota. It was an unusual time in his life to relocate to a new community and restart his law practice. He was forty-nine years old—beyond middle-age.



Postcard of downtown Frazee, 1910

Yet he succeeded. He became local counsel for the Northern Pacific Railroad, a founder of the Evergreen State Bank, a partner with his son in a real estate firm and member of several fraternal organizations. He was President of the Frazee Park Board. He was also active in the Republican Party.

In 1914 he ran for the state senate in the Sixty-Third District, which covered Becker and Hubbard Counties, two sparsely populated rural counties.<sup>1</sup> Though he was a well-known Republican stalwart, he ran without party designation because in 1913

---

<sup>1</sup> The population of Hubbard County in 1910 was 9,831 and in 1920, 10,136. Becker County's population in 1910 was 18,840 and 22,850 in 1920.

the 38th Legislature enacted a law requiring a nonpartisan ballot and a nonpartisan legislature.<sup>2</sup> The vote totals on November 3, 1914, were:

	Becker	Hubbard	Total
John H. Baldwin.....	2,076	615	2,691
Charles F. Scheers.....	738	757	1,495 <sup>3</sup>

In the 39th Legislature Baldwin was assigned to the Subcommittee on Railroads of the Judiciary Committee and the Public Highways Committee, an assignment he coveted.<sup>4</sup> The 40th Legislature convened in January 1917, and again he was assigned to the Judiciary and Public Highways Committees.<sup>5</sup> In his study of this Legislature, journalist Carl J. Buell wrote:

---

<sup>2</sup> 1913 Laws, c. 389, at 542-550 (approved April 19, 1913). For an account of the background of the law and the twists and turns in the legislature, see Charles R. Adrian, "The Origin of Minnesota's Nonpartisan Legislature," 33 *Minnesota History* 155-163 (Winter 1952).

<sup>3</sup> 1915 Blue Book, at 550.

<sup>4</sup> "Legislators Past & Present," Minnesota Legislative Reference Library. In his study of the 39th Legislature, Carl Buell capsulizes Baldwin:

JOHN H. BALDWIN, Frazee, Becker Co.—Lawyer; for many years a prominent Republican politician; from a wholly dry district; for Sullivan for president pro tem.; against county option, and all temperance laws, except that he voted for the anti-road house bill on final passage; against equal suffrage and easy amendment of the constitution, but was for initiative and referendum on final passage; against civil service, semi-monthly pay day and repeal of the Elwell road law; for street railway bill and boxing bill, but opposed Mayo affiliation.

Carl J. Buell, *The Minnesota Legislature of 1915* 82 (1915). The text is posted in the Archives of the MLHP.

<sup>5</sup> His biographical profile in the 1917 *Legislative Manual* provided:

John H. Baldwin was born in 1851, near Jonesboro, Indiana. Educated in the common schools and at Spiceland Academy, Indiana. Taught school for two years, then studied law. Admitted to the practice of law in 1876. Was criminal prosecutor from 1877 to 1882 of the county in which he was born. Resigned in 1882 and with his family moved to Dakota Territory. Settled at St. Lawrence, Hand County, and continued the practice of law. Was state engineer of irrigation of South Dakota four years. In 1900 moved to Freeze, Minn., where he has continued his chosen profession.

1917 Blue Book, at 614.

The legislature of 1917 is generally conceded by all competent observers to have been the best that ever sat in the State of Minnesota,—the best in the sense of having the largest percentage of clean, honest, intelligent and independent men, who gave careful study to every question, refused to vote until they understood, and then cast their ballot according to their honest convictions.<sup>6</sup>

One reform enacted during this session was the restructuring of the State Highway Commission, though curiously Buell does not mention it. The first Highway Commission was established in 1905, and was composed of three men appointed by the governor for short terms.<sup>7</sup> They served without compensation. Such a bureaucracy did not work. Many of Baldwin's constituents were farmers who demanded good farm-to-market roadways. He authored a bill that replaced the commission with a single "Commissioner of Highways," also appointed by the governor. One man would now have the responsibility and be accountable for the state's highways. The bill also authorized the commissioner to appoint a deputy who was required to be an "experienced road builder and engineer." Those qualifications were undoubtedly inspired by Baldwin's personal experiences many years earlier as the State Irrigation Engineer of South Dakota. Baldwin's bill passed on March 29, 1917, and thereafter he was known as the "author of the one-man highway commission bill."<sup>8</sup>

On November 5, 1918, he was easily re-elected.<sup>9</sup>

	Becker	Hubbard	Total
John H. Baldwin.....	1,580	788	2,368
Henry Bjorge.....	1,584	353	1,937

<sup>6</sup> Carl W. Buell, *The Minnesota Legislature of 1917* 107 (1917). The text is posted in the Archives of the MLHP.

<sup>7</sup> 1905 Laws, c. 163, §1, at 198 (approved April 5, 1905, to go into effect, January 1, 1906).

<sup>8</sup> Laws 1917, c. 11, §1, at 148-149 (March 29, 1917). The first section is posted in the Appendix, at 13-16.

<sup>9</sup> 1919 Blue Book, at 676.

In 1922 he ran for a third term but lost to Charles H. Kelson, who was endorsed by the Farmer-Labor Party. <sup>10</sup> The vote totals on November 7, 1922, were:<sup>11</sup>

	Becker	Hubbard	Total
John H. Baldwin.....	2,358	1,265	3,623
Charles H. Kelson.....	3,840	1,484	5,324

He returned to his law practice, but not to trial work. He was in his early seventies and had suffered one heart attack while in the Senate. In his years at Frazee he had been solicited to subscribe to regional histories or compilations of portraits of professional men and he had always turned them down. In 1924, however, he subscribed to J. J. Burnquist's *Minnesota and Its People*. He may have figured that this was his last opportunity to publish an account of his life. And it was. It may be read as a short autobiography.

Hon. John Harvey Baldwin, a venerable and highly respected member of the Frazee bar, has exerted a marked influence in promoting legislation of great value to the state and its citizens and ranks with those men whose careers have been conspicuously useful. He was born on a farm near Jonesboro, Indiana, on April 4, 1851, and his parents were Lindsay B. and Mary (Harvey) Baldwin. He attended the public schools of that locality and the Jonesboro Academy and took up the study of law in the office

---

<sup>10</sup> *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, November 10, 1922, at 1 (listing legislators who had been endorsed by the Farmer-Labor Party).

<sup>11</sup> 1923 Blue Book, at 459. Here is Kelson's biography in the Blue Book:

Chas. H. Kelson was born in Adams county, Wis., in 1872. He came with his parents to Lyon county, Minn., in 1879. He was deputy county auditor of Lyon County from 1894 to 1900, and is president of the First National Bank of Lake Park, secretary of the Lake Park Federal Farm Loan Association and treasurer of the Lake Park and Cuba Fire Insurance Co. He is married and resides in Lake Park, Minn.

Id, at 693.

of a prominent firm of attorneys of that section. He was admitted to the bar in 1876 and began his professional career at Marion, Indiana, where he practiced for six years, serving as county attorney of Grant county during that period. In 1882 he allied his interests with those of the west, locating in St. Lawrence, South Dakota, where he resided for seventeen years, and in addition to caring for a large law practice he served for a time as irrigation engineer for the state, having also made a study of that profession. He also figured conspicuously in political affairs of South Dakota, acting as vice chairman of the republican state committee.

The year 1900 witnessed Mr. Baldwin's arrival in Frazee, which has since been his home, and his pronounced ability has won for him recognition as the foremost lawyer of this part of the state. His knowledge of the law is comprehensive and exact, and he readily sees the relation between cause and effect, bridging the steps from one to the other with ease. This has enabled him to untangle many a knotty legal problem and he has won many verdicts favorable to the interests of his clients. For several years he has been general counsel for the Nicholas Chisholm Lumber Company and for the Northern Pacific Railroad Company and of late has acted principally as a counselor, leaving the work of an advocate to younger members of the profession. He is also successfully controlling financial affairs of importance, serving as president of the Evergreen State Bank, which has prospered under his judicious management.

Public affairs have occupied a large share of Mr. Baldwin's attention and he has become widely known as the father of good roads in Minnesota. In

1914 he was elected state senator and for eight years was a leading member of that lawmaking body. He was the author of the one-man highway commission bill, for whose passage he fought valiantly for four years in the face of the strongest opposition, finally winning a victory that has made the highways of the state among the best in the country. In his public service he looked beyond the exigencies of the moment to the opportunities and possibilities of the future and the effect of the legislation which he secured will be felt for many years to come in increased benefits to the state.

He has served both his city and state with rare fidelity and is president of the Frazee Park Board. He was largely instrumental in securing for the residents of the city this beautiful recreation center and has always stood steadfastly for progressive measures and for such projects as will prove of greatest benefit to the greatest number.

Judge Baldwin has been married twice. On March 1, 1877, he was married to Miss Estella Wheeler, also a native of Indiana. They became parents of two children: Dot, now the wife of S. F. Anderson, a railroad employe, by whom she has three children; and John M., who is engaged in the real estate and life insurance business in Frazee and is married and has one child. Judge Baldwin's first wife met an accidental death, being thrown from a horse and killed. In 1904 Judge Baldwin was married to Miss Elizabeth Lashway of Wisconsin, and they have a daughter, Ruth Marie. She was graduated from the Frazee high school and is attending the Minnesota School of Art.

In religious faith Judge Baldwin is a Quaker and in politics he is a staunch republican, true to the

standards of the party. His professional connections are with the Becker County and Minnesota State Bar Societies and the American Bar Association. He has long been prominent in fraternal affairs and has been a Master Mason for fifty-one years, a Knight Templar for forty-nine years and a Noble of the Mystic Shrine and an Egyptian Knight for thirty years. He is also identified with the Modern Woodmen of America, the Knights of Pythias and the Ancient Order of United Workmen and has filled all of the chairs in the last named organization.

He is broad-minded, looking at significant questions from a rational standpoint and reaching his conclusions after hard and logical thinking. He has mastered the lessons of life day by day and his postgraduate work in the school of experience has placed him with the men of learning and ability. By application to his daily tasks, by the constant burnishing of his mind against both tasks and thought, he retains the spirit and zest of youth and at the age of seventy-two is still an active and important factor in the world's work — a record of usefulness which few men have surpassed.<sup>12</sup>

He died on June 9, 1924, at age seventy-three. The *Detroit Record* carried the story:

### **DEATH COMES TO JOHN H. BALDWIN**

**Well Known Frazee Attorney  
Succumbs to Heart Disease  
With Scarcely Any Warning**

---

<sup>12</sup> Joseph A. A. Burnquist, ed., *4 Minnesota and Its People* 534-37 (1924).



John H. Baldwin, prominent Frazee attorney, and for two terms state senator representing the Becker-Hubbard District, died suddenly at his home yesterday morning at 9:15 o'clock, of heart disease.

"Judge" Baldwin as he was familiarly known, was a man of very gentle personality, and had an unusually wide circle of friends throughout Northern Minnesota and the state at large.

He was elected to the state Senate from this district in 1914 and reelected again in 1918, being defeated at the election of 1922 by Chas. H. Kelson of Lake Park.

He has been a resident of Frazee for many years, serving as attorney for the Nichols-Chisolm Lumber Company. He was a prominent member of the Masonic Lodge, being a member of the St. Paul Shrine. Of late years he has been interested in the State Bank of Evergreen, which he was instrumental in organizing.

He is survived by his wife, son Milo and daughter Ruth, to whom the sympathy of the entire community will be extended.<sup>13</sup>

It was followed by an editorial in the *Record*:

### John Harvey Baldwin

In the passing of "Judge" John H. Baldwin at Frazee on the 19th instant, the *Record* editor loses a warm, personal friend, the village of Frazee a respected and honored citizen, and the county and state at large a man of high ideals and one whose

---

<sup>13</sup> *The Detroit Record*, Friday, June 20, 1924, at 4 (photograph omitted).

astute statesmanship has accomplish much for future generations.

Always active in every civic enterprise, he could be relied upon to give freely of his time and means, and he was never called upon in vain by those in need or distress. A man of rugged physique and old-fashioned philosophy, filled with humanitarian precepts of a former generation, yet withal sympathetic to an extreme for the aspirations of the modern youth, he was idolized by young and old, and his passing brought tears to the eyes of hundreds who know him most intimately.

His passing was as he would have had it: free from pain and suffering, and yet not without due notice, he lay down and quietly fell asleep as he took up the journey to that land from which no mortal ever returns.

John H. Baldwin was only human, he made as many mistakes as the average person, but over and above it all he performed so many kindly acts, so many unselfish deeds of real good and service to his fellowmen, that we feel assured he had a large Credit balance on the Books of the Great Accountant. Of him we can say no more than that he was a MAN among men, and his record of deeds on earth leaves a rich heritage for those who are bereaved by his going.

We shall all miss John Baldwin; God grant that there may be more like him and years to come.<sup>14</sup>

From the *Frazee Weekly Press*:

### J. H. BALDWIN PASSES

While not entirely unexpected yet the sudden death of Ex-Sen. J. H. Baldwin at 915 o'clock

---

<sup>14</sup> Id. at 4.

Thursday morning at his home in Frazee, came as a shock to the people of this community where Mr. Baldwin and been for so many years a prominent figure in the business and political life.

His death was caused by a stroke, he having been in poor health for several years, having suffered two previous attacks, from what he recovered, the first being in St. Paul while he was a member of the state senate. He arose as usual last Thursday morning, went to the postoffice after his mail and returning home, lay down on his bed and fell asleep. Shortly afterward, Mrs. Baldwin noticed that he was having difficulty in breathing, and being unable to awaken him, she called assistance, but before help arrived he had passed away.

John Harvey Baldwin was born on a farm near Jonesboro, Ind., on April 4, 1851, and his parents were Lindsay B. and Mary (Harvey) Baldwin. He was educated in the common schools and at Spiceland Academy, Indiana and after teaching school two years, read law in the offices of prominent attorneys in that state. Being admitted to the bar in 1876 he began the practice of his profession at Marion, Ind., where he served as county attorney from 1877 to 1882, when he resigned and moved his family to St. Lawrence, S. D., where he continued the practice of law and was also state engineer of irrigation for four years

In 1900 he came to Frazee where he has since made his home and where he is been prominently identified with every movement for the progress and upbuilding of his home town and county.

In 1914 he was elected to the state senate from the Becker-Hubbard district and served his district with distinction and credit for eight years, being one of the leaders in that body in all important legislation. An author of the one-man highway commission bill,

he was the father of the present good roads movement which has made Minnesota a leader in good roads among the states of the nation. His work for good roads is a monument to his farsightedness and the crowning achievement of his many years of public service.

Senator Baldwin was twice married. On March 1, 1877 he married Miss Stella Wheeler of Indiana and to them two children were born, Ada, who was the wife of S. F. Anderson of Frazee, died in 1904 and J. Milo Baldwin, who has been associated in the real estate business in Frazee with his father.

In 1904 he was united in marriage with Miss Elizabeth Lashway of Chippewa Falls, Wis., who with one daughter, Ruth Marie, survives.

Mr. Baldwin has been prominently identified with the Masonic fraternity for over half a century, is a past master of Frazee Lodge, a Knight Templar, a Nobel of the Mystic Shrine and Egyptian Knight. He was also a member of the Modern Woodmen, Knights of Pythias, and Ancient Order of United Workmen.<sup>15</sup>

At the annual convention of the Minnesota State Bar Association in Bemidji in early July, the following memorial was read:

John H. Baldwin of Frazee, Minnesota, was born in 1851 near Jonesboro, Indiana. He was educated in the common schools and at Spiceland Academy, Indiana. Following his admission to the bar, he was County Criminal Prosecutor from 1877 to 1882, when he removed with his family to South Dakota, and continued the practice of law.

Senator Baldwin came to Frazee in 1900. In 1914 he was elected to the State Senate and served until

---

<sup>15</sup> *Frazee Weekly Press*, June 26, 1924, at 1 (photograph and account of funeral omitted).

1922. Senator Baldwin was always active in politics and took an especial interest in all matters pertaining to the upbuilding of the County of Becker and the Village of Frazee. <sup>16</sup>



## Appendix

The One-Man Highway Commission Law  
Laws 1917, c. 119, §1, at 148-149 (March 29, 1917).

### CHAPTER 119—S. F. No. 609.

An act abolishing the state highway commission; creating the office of commissioner of highways; providing for the appointment of an incumbent of such office; prescribing his compensation; appropriating money for the payment thereof; prescribing his powers and duties and devolving upon such Commissioner of highways the powers, privileges and duties heretofore vested in, granted to and imposed upon the state highway commission; providing that such office shall be, in effect, a continuation of such state highway commission; providing for the payment of the expenses of the highway department and salary of said commissioner from the state road and bridge fund; appropriating money therefrom for the payment of such expenses and salary; limiting the amount which may be so used for such expenses and salary and also amending sections 3, 7, 10, 11, 18, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 30, 31, 40, 65, 70, 73, 75, 81, 87, 88

---

<sup>16</sup> Proceedings, Minnesota State Bar Association 94 (1924). The text is posted in the Archives of the MLHP.

and 90 of Chapter 235, Laws 1913, as amended, by chapter 116, Laws 1915, and chapter 160, Laws 1915, which said chapter 235 is entitled: "An act relating to public highways; the powers and duties of counties, towns, villages and cities in relation thereto; the creation of a state highway commission; prescribing its powers and duties, appropriating money therefor and providing for the payment of state aid for the construction and improvement of roads and authorizing and directing the levy of taxes for highway purposes."

*Be it enacted by the Legislature of the State of Minnesota:*

**Section 1. State highway commission abolished and appointment of commissioner of highways authorized with power of commissioner defined—office of deputy highway commissioner established.—That the state highway commission be and it is hereby abolished and the office of each of the persons constituting such commission is also hereby likewise abolished; that, forthwith upon the passage of this act the Governor of the state is authorized and directed to appoint a commissioner of highways upon whom shall devolve all the powers, duties, rights, privileges and obligations heretofore imposed upon, granted to and vested in the state highway commission under the laws of this state, and especially chapter 235, Laws 1913, as amended by chapter 116, Laws 1915; it being the intention hereof to create the office of commissioner of highways; provide for the appointment of an incumbent thereof and that such person as such commissioner of highways shall hereafter exercise the powers and privileges and perform the duties heretofore devolved upon the state highway commission, and**

that except as hereinafter provided, that such commissioner of highways, shall hereafter continue and carry on the governmental work heretofore carried on by said state highway commission and that such officer shall be the successor of said state highway commission and shall take over the office equipment and organization thereof and continue the same, with power and authority, however, to make such changes therein and the personnel thereof, and the compensation of the present officers and employes thereof as to such commissioner of highways may seem desirable. Such organization shall be known and designated as the highway department.

The offices of "Secretary of the Highway Commission" and "State Engineer" are hereby abolished. The commissioner of highways shall preserve the records of the state highway commission as heretofore constituted and shall have the custody thereof. He shall cause a record of his official acts and determinations, which shall be denominated orders, to be made and preserved in his office. He shall appoint and may at pleasure remove a deputy highway commissioner, which office is hereby created. The person so appointed shall be an experienced road builder and engineer. Such deputy shall have charge under the general supervision and control of the commissioner of highways, of the technical work of the assistant engineers.

The compensation of such deputy commissioner shall be fixed and determined by the commissioner of highways and a certified copy of the order so fixing such compensation shall be filed with the state auditor; provided, however, that the salary of said deputy commissioner shall not exceed four thousand dollars (\$4000.00) per annum.

All rules and regulations heretofore promulgated by the state highway commission and in force at the time of the passage of this act shall thereafter continue in full force and effect as rules and regulations of the commissioner of highways until such time as the same shall be revoked or altered by him.

=☉=

## Acknowledgments

For the photograph of the Senator on page one:  
“Legislators Past & Present,” Minnesota Legislative Reference Library.

For the picture of the main street of Frazee on page 2:  
LakesnWoods.com

=☉= =☉=