

# EDWIN H. CANFIELD

( December 27, 1855 - July 13, 1936 )



EDWIN H. CANFIELD  
Who Has Practised Law in Luzerne Thirty  
Years and is a Former State Senator.

(ca. 1911)

Edwin H. Canfield arrived in Luverne, Minnesota, in June 1881, and died there 55 years later. During those decades, he performed many of the roles lawyers were expected to play in their communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A month after his arrival, he was admitted to the bar. Four years later, he was appointed Rock County attorney, and held that post 14 years. Though he was reputed to be “destitute” when he came to Luverne, he “built up a splendid law practice and . . . prospered.” A lawyer, it was thought at the time, had ideal qualifications for the lawmaking work of the legislature. A staunch Republican, Canfield was elected without opposition to the state senate in November 1906.<sup>1</sup> He served one four-year term.

It was, however, his activities outside his law office that formed his legacy to the community. He never attended college and like many “self-educated” believed in the value of education and the importance of reading. One year after arriving in Luverne, he helped form a “voluntary library association, the members of which contributed twenty-five cents a month.”<sup>2</sup> When the Carnegie library was built in

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<sup>1</sup> 1907 Blue Book, at 495. He was elected from the Sixteenth District which encompassed Rock and Pipestone Counties. He received 1,040 votes from Rock, and 1,068 from Pipestone, or a total of 2,108.

<sup>2</sup> When he embarked on this endeavor, Canfield may have recalled Benjamin Franklin’s familiar account of how he established the Philadelphia public library about 1730:

And now I set on foot my first project of a public nature, that for a subscription library. I drew up the proposals, got them put into form by our great scrivener, [Charles] Brockden, and, by the help of my friends in the Junto, procured fifty subscribers of forty shillings each to begin with, and ten shillings a year for fifty years, the term our company was to continue. We afterwards obtain’d a charter, the company being increased to one hundred: this was the mother of all the North American subscription libraries, now so numerous. It is become a great thing itself, and continually increasing. These libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made the common tradesmen

Luverne in 1904, he gave the dedication speech, and served on its board of trustees.

He also served on the school board and helped found the Rock County Historical Society. An interest in local history led him to subscribe to a history of Rock and Pipestone Counties published in 1911. A subscriber to a local history was permitted to have a biographical portrait, usually written or edited by him, included in the book. The following is Canfield's autobiographical sketch:

EDWIN H. CANFIELD (1881), ex-member of the Minnesota state senate, representing Rock and Pipestone counties, and attorney at law of Luverne, is one of prominent and respected citizens of the county. He has been practicing law the city of Luverne for the past thirty years and has a lucrative practice. Senator Canfield is an able attorney and one the city's most public spirited men, having taken an active part in its growth and enterprises.

The subject of this biography was born Westfield, Wisconsin, December 27, 1855, his birthplace being a log cabin on the Wisconsin frontier. He spent the first ten years of his life in his native town and then accompanied his parents to Olmsted county, Minnesota, where he resided with them three years. The family home was then made on a farm in Jackson county, Minnesota, where our subject resided four years. During this time he attended a

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and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defense of their privileges.

*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* was composed over several decades, and published posthumously in parts; it was not published in its entirety until 1868. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin gives two accounts of the formation of the library. The one quoted above is the first and shorter account.

select school in the little village Jackson, and after returning to Olmsted county, where the family home was again made, young Canfield attended the Rochester high school. He engaged in teaching for a time and then was given private instruction.

In 1878 Mr. Canfield married, and thereafter for a time, engaged in teaching school and reading law. He entered the office of C. C. Willson, where he studied law until 1881. He was admitted to the bar in July, 1881. In June, 1881, the young lawyer located in Luverne, then a small village, and hung out his shingle. In that city he has ever since been engaged the practice of his profession. He has built up a splendid law practice and has prospered. He has been called upon to serve in an official capacity a number of times. In 1885 he was appointed county attorney of Rock county to complete the expired term of Hon. P. E. Brown, now a justice-elect of the Minnesota supreme court, and he served in that capacity fourteen years. He was elected state senator in 1906 and served a four year term. For years Mr. Canfield was a member of Luverne board of education.

One of the institutions in which Senator Canfield took a leading part in founding and of which he is justly proud is the public library of Luverne. So early as 1882 he was instrumental in forming a voluntary library association, the members of which contributed twenty-five cents a month. In time the management of this was turned over to another association, organized by the ladies of Luverne, and later the village took hold of the institution, installed the library in the city hall, and supported it by taxation. Some years later Mr. Canfield was successful in inducing a client to donate enough money to purchase the site of the

present Carnegie library. The handsome building now on the site was erected in 1904, and at its dedication on December 21, 1904, Mr. Canfield was the principal speaker. He was chosen one of the first trustees of the library.

Senator Canfield is one of a family of two children, a brother, Arthur Canfield, dying at the age of eleven years. His father was a native of Vermont, his mother of New York state. They moved to Wisconsin when young and were married at Waupun. Later they resided at Westfield, Wisconsin, in Olmsted county, Minnesota, in Jackson county, again in Olmsted county, and later located in Luverne, where both died.

The subject of this biography was married at Rochester, Minnesota, March 15, 1878, to Carrie A. Hills, a native of Wisconsin. They have two children, Nina and Arden L.<sup>3</sup>

In the following two decades, Canfield maintained a reputation for “brilliance” but also became known as a constitutional conservative, who railed against reforms such as the primary election law. He did not like much of what he saw in politics “in the autumn of his life.” On December 22, 1933, the publisher of *Rock County Star* published a long profile of Canfield that aimed to inspire the youth of the area to follow his example of hard work, self-improvement and public service.<sup>4</sup> While an unabashed admirer of this “true gentlemen of the old school,” the writer acknowledged that “his ideas may seem obsolete to the younger generation.”

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur P. Rose, *An Illustrated History of the Counties of Rock and Pipestone, Minnesota* 464-65 (1911) (full page photograph is reproduced on page 1, above).

<sup>4</sup> *The Rock County Star*, December 22, 1933, reprinted in its entirety on the editorial page of the newspaper on July 17, 1936, at 2, to accompany Canfield’s obituary, quoted on pages 8-11, below (photo reproduced on page 1, above).

## *He Burned Midnight Oil!*

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### **E. H. CANFIELD SETS EXAMPLE FOR YOUTH**

Profiles interest the Star publisher. In them he sees strength or weakness of character. A striking profile is that of E. H. Canfield, veteran Luverne lawyer. You can see the strong, virile, aggressive, keenly alert personage Mr. Canfield has been. He was in the hey-day of his legal career, and recognized as one of the shrewdest lawyers in the middle west, when the accompanying photo was taken. His services were highly valued by the Hanford Produce Company, of Sioux City, known as the largest creamery under one roof. When the writer moved to Luverne, he was particularly admonished to give the regards of Hanford's to Mr. Canfield.

#### **Example for Boys**

Boys of today, who think there is little opportunity for advancement, should consider the life of Mr. Canfield before they give up hope. Mr. Canfield never went to college. He studied law by candle light while teaching in a small country school. He finished the law course by working as a helper in a law office in Rochester, Minn. It took indomitable will and determination, and many hours of burning the midnight oil, but he finally was ready for the bar examination. He had married and was the father of two babies when he arrived in Luverne on a black Friday, the 13th day of the month in 1881. He was destitute but that aggressive courage that shows so clearly in the accompanying profile,

carried him through. He took the examination in Luverne before Judge Severance and passed with flying colors. He opened a law office here and launched on a legal career that is outstanding for brilliance and success.

His features are considerably softened today, as Mr. Canfield has reached the autumn of life and is able to rest on his laurels. He is not as active in the legal profession as he used to be, leaving the hard work to his partner, a younger man, Frank Michael. But when occasion demands, he still goes before a judge or jury and shows the same intrepid spirit, brilliance and legal acumen that made him a feared opponent in the days gone by.

#### Sticks by Constitution

Mr. Canfield is a strong adherent of sticking to the constitution as it was originally drawn by our forefathers. He points to a hundred years of wonderful progress and achievement by our nation, while it hewed to the constitutional line, and says our present troubles started when the people became restless and drifted from the original plan. He is particularly opposed to the primary law, which he says has enabled demagogues to gain control of congress. He is fearless in his views and preaches them at every possible opportunity, although knowing few will listen to his logic of abolishing the primary system. He also blames much of our trouble to taking away from the courts the judicial powers they originally had.

Mr. Canfield is a true gentleman of the old school, and while his ideas may seem obsolete to the younger generation, present chaotic conditions

makes one wonder whether the new school is any better or as good.

### Brilliant Self-Educated Lawyer

Like Mr. Canfield, many of our ablest lawyers of yesterday were self-educated. Frank Kellogg of Minneapolis, a close friend of Mr. Canfield, was self-educated. He couldn't get a third grade certificate to teach school, but he was recognized as having one of the most brilliant legal minds that ever argued before the supreme court. Lauren Cray, deceased, of Mankato, another close friend of Mr. Canfield, never got beyond the fifth grade in school, but became one of the smartest lawyers in the state. The men who have the temerity and ambition to study at home are the ones who achieve success in their chosen fields in later years.

Remember that you young fellows who have a lot of time on you hands and don't know what to do with it!

Canfield died on Monday, July 13, 1936, at the age of eighty. Several days later, the weekly *Rock County Star* published his obituary on its front page:

## BRILLIANT LAWYER IS SUMMONED

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Death Ends Long Record of  
Community Services for  
E. H. Canfield

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E. H. Canfield, well-known Luverne lawyer, died at the local hospital Monday afternoon, following a four day illness aggravated by the prolonged heat wave. Mr. Canfield had been in failing health since 1927. He would have been 81 years of age next December. Despite his advanced years and failing health, Mr. Canfield performed his daily duties at the law office of Canfield & Michael until last week. Realizing his health would not permit carrying on a full legal duties, he had partially retired from practice, but enjoyed the thought that he was not compelled to give it up entirely. His work at the office completed, he would take long walks, or would drop in at places where he could converse with friends. Despite his advanced years, his mentality remained keen and bright to the end.

#### Long Record of Service

Mr. Canfield's death removes one of our most public-spirited citizens. He served our community in many ways during the 55 years of residence here. Being a self-educated man and a lover of books, one of his first contributions was the establishment of a public library. He presented the first set of books to the library for public use and through his influence that institution was built up to a high standard. He served as county attorney for 24 (sic) years and, was a member of the school board in the early days and served as its president. He was elected state senator from this district in 1906, and twice attended the national Republican convention as a delegate from Minnesota. He was held in high esteem by the legal fraternity and when the Thirteenth Judicial District Bar association was organized, was elected its first president. At the time of his death, Mr. Canfield was a director of the Rock County Bank.

## An Exemplary Life

Mr. Canfield's life was an enviable one, setting an example to the younger generation of today. He studied law by candle light, his parents being unable to send him to college. In acquiring his legal education Mr. Canfield's efforts paralleled those of the great emancipator, Abraham Lincoln. He concluded his legal training by taking clerical work in a law office. He passed the law examination before a district judge in Rock county in July, 1881. His legal brilliance earned Mr. Canfield wide recognition and his services were in demand by some of the largest firms in the middle west. Accustomed to poverty in his youth and young manhood, it is not surprising that he made the most of his opportunities and laid away sufficient wealth so that he could live in ease and comfort in his declining years.

A firm believer in what he considered right, he didn't hesitate to express his views, though knowing they were contrary to the thoughts of many listeners. He was a staunch Republican and believer in the Constitution. He wrote many articles pertaining to our government which gained national recognition. His passing, though inevitable, is regretted by all who knew him. His familiar figure will be missed on our streets.

## Born in Wisconsin

Edwin H. Canfield was born in a log cabin at Westfield, Wisconsin, December 27, 1855. When a lad ten years of age, he accompanied his parents to Olmsted county, Minnesota. Three years later the family moved to Jackson county, Minnesota, where Mr. Canfield resided a number of years. He

secured a position teaching school near Rochester, Minn. He was studying law and when an opportunity arose to do clerical work in a law office in Rochester he eagerly accepted. He was married to Carrie A. Hills, at Elgin, Minn., March 15th, 1878. With his wife and two children, Mr. Canfield came to Luverne, in June, 1881, which has since been his home. . . .<sup>5</sup>

An obituary in the *Rock County Herald* provided more information about Canfield's "record of valuable service" to the community:

As the first of a number of times that he was called upon to serve in an official capacity, in recognition of his outstanding ability, Mr. Canfield was appointed county attorney in 1885 to fill out the unexpired term of the late P. E. Brown, at the time of his election as district judge. In that capacity he served fourteen years. In 1918 he was again elected county attorney and was re-elected to that positioning 1922. He was elected state senator from this district in 1906, serving a four-year term. At that time the district was composed of Rock and Pipestone counties.

Mr. Canfield also served years on the Luverne board of education. He was a member of the Thirteenth Judicial District Bar association, and a director of the Rock County bank. Other positions of trust and responsibility were filled by Mr. Canfield. He was one of the founders of the Rock County Historical society six years ago. While this organization is not active at present, its influence continues to be felt. It played a vital

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<sup>5</sup> *The Rock County Star*, Friday, July 17, 1936, at 1. (funeral arrangements and list of pall bearers omitted)

part in Rock county's recent Homecoming celebration. Himself a pioneer resident of this community, Mr. Canfield was profoundly interested in its early history and concerned about preserving all records and relics pertaining to that period.

Standing as a permanent and wholly fitting monument to his memory is the Luverne public library. Mr. Canfield took a leading part in its founding, being instrumental in 1882 in organizing a voluntary library association, the eventual aim of which was to establish such an institution here. The management of this association was turned over after a while to a local ladies' group, formed for that purpose. Later the town council assumed the objective, instituting the library in the city hall, where it was supported by taxation. After a number of years, a client of Mr. Canfield was induced to underwrite the purchase of the site on which the present Carnegie library was located. The building was erected in 1904. The well deserved honor of being chosen as one of the first trustees of the library was conferred upon Mr. Canfield. At its dedication on December 21st, 1904, he was the main speaker.

Apart from his professional legislative and civic accomplishments, Mr. Canfield found time for energetically promoting the sound and fundamental principles of American government, of which he was at all times a staunch defender. A penetrating student of national affairs, he was deeply anxious for the future of his country and its institutions.

One of the most capable and convincing platform speakers in this section, he freely contributed his

talents to innumerable programs of different types. Sometimes he was called upon for commencement talks and ethical and philosophical discourses before various church meetings in addition to his political activities.

His versatility of expression extended into the field of writing. He wrote occasional articles for weekly newspapers and also contributed to publications of national circulation. In politics he was a firm Republican, unequivocally committed to the constitutional form of government upon which the United States was founded. A sharp foe of the primary election law, he launched many a brilliant attack upon demagoguery and unfitness in high office.

The senior member of the law firm of Canfield & Michael, the deceased had been connected with many notable court trials. From participation in widely known cases, he had attained an enviable reputation in the legal profession.

During the fifty-five years that he had practiced law in Luverne, Mr. Canfield rendered meritorious service, which leaves a lasting impression upon the community that he had helped to develop from its comparative infancy. His fellow citizens over a wide area join with his legal associates in feeling the heavy loss occasioned by his passing to his eternal regard. They join with his family and other relatives in mourning the loss of a wise counselor and loyal friend.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Rock County Herald*, Friday, July 17, 1936, at 1, under headline "E. H. Canfield Called to His Eternal Reward. Veteran Attorney and Former State Senator had Practiced in His Profession Here for 55 Years. Leaves Record of Valuable Service. Served Many Years as County Attorney; Led in Founding Public Library; Promoted Sound Citizenship." (Description of last illness and account of funeral are omitted).

An editorial in the *Rock County Herald* described the community's debt to Canfield:

In the death of Mr. E. H. Canfield there passes from the life of the community one of its oldest and most distinguished citizens. Over the fifty-six years of his life in this community, he wielded an influence for betterment which has been constant and which will long remain a potent factor.

A lawyer of the "old school" in the sense that he acquired his legal education by studying law in the offices of practicing frontier lawyers, he seemed to have acquired an unusual insight into fundamentals, and early in his career began to enjoy a wide reputation for high ability in his profession. The sturdiness of character demanded of the life of the pioneer was reflected in the seriousness of his profession, but in his regard of the purpose and proper functions of law.

While it can truly be said that no man in Minnesota ever took a deeper interest in politics, this interest was not reflected in a personal ambition. Politics with Mr. Canfield was the avenue of sound government and his interest was always in this angle instead of in the turning of politics to his personal advantage. With this thought uppermost in his mind, he always took an active interest in politics and, as a staunch Republican, rendered his party invaluable service without ever seeking anything in return.

With the exception of a four-year term as state senator, the only public office Mr. Canfield ever accepted was in the realm of his profession. In 1885, four years after he located in Luverne, he was

appointed county attorney to fill the vacancy created when the late Philip E. Brown became district judge. He held that office for many terms at different times, always discharging his duties with high credit and fidelity.

Throughout the state news of Mr. Canfield's passing will create sincere regret, for over the state, as in his home community, he enjoyed the greatest respect and highest esteem of all who knew him. His sturdy championship of the ethics of his profession, of law and order, and of sound government, everywhere won him friends and admirers, just as at home these things plus a great kindly nature and ever ready desire to help and befriend those about him won the deeper sentiment that comes of close association overlong years.

It can truly be said that this community is better in many ways because more than half a century of Mr. Canfield's life was spent here. And that the influences for good he radiated will not soon be forgotten.<sup>7</sup> ■

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Posted MLHP: February 10, 2013.

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<sup>7</sup> *Rock County Herald*, Friday, July 17, 1936, at 4.