

Memorial
for
William Hodson

April 25, 1891 = January 16, 1943



(1938)

Hennepin County Bar Association
District Court
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Saturday, February 27, 1943

William Hodson
1891 - 1943

William Hodson, former member of this bar, was born in Minneapolis, on April 25, 1891, the son of William and Hannah Hodson. His father died when he was young, and he and his mother were faced with the problem is education and the support of the family. His mother is a woman of great character and intelligence, and her early influence upon his character and viewpoint continued to be an important factor throughout his life.

He was educated in Minneapolis public schools, and graduated from the University of Minnesota in the class of 1913. He was a member of Beta Theta Phi fraternity, took a prominent part in debating activities, and was managing editor of the *Gopher*. He was elected to the honorary scholarship fraternity of Phi Beta Kappa. After college he entered the Harvard Law School, from which he graduated in 1916.

All his life he held to a steady course from which he never deviated: devotion to the cause of public welfare. In his lifetime he accumulated a vast store of administrative and human experience in this activity. For the next eight years he was in Minnesota, first, as counsel for the Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis. He was given leave of absence from this work to act as Executive Secretary of the Minnesota Child Welfare Commission. Under his direction the Commission prepared a program which the Legislature later and acted into a comprehensive program of child welfare for Minnesota. Ever

since, this State has been considered as a model in this respect throughout the country.

He was appointed the first director of the Children's Bureau of the Minnesota State Board of Control, and it was his privilege to launch the whole program provided in the legislation which put all children's agencies throughout the State under the supervision of the Board.

When he felt that his services were no longer necessary here, he accepted a call to become the Director of the Division of Child Welfare Legislation in the Russell Sage Foundation. This gave him an opportunity to apply his knowledge and experience to the problem of child welfare throughout the country. In 1924 he was elected as Director of the Foundation's whole program of social legislation. A year later, he was appointed Director of the Welfare Council of New York City, a most difficult administrative job. Under his expert guidance this Council increased from a small number of charitable organizations until it included more than 700 of the most important charitable agencies in New York City, all administered upon an integrated basis.

He was appointed by Mayor LaGuardia, in his first cabinet, as Commissioner Public Welfare for the City of New York. To him fell the duty of administering the unprecedented relief problem during the depression years. At the height of this activity he had a staff of many thousands of workers. The magnitude of the problems is apparent from his experience during the first year; over \$200,000,000 was distributed to more than 400,000 New York families, practically one-quarter of the City's population. He had accomplished this immense

administrative task in a matter truly phenomenal. Relief was administered with economy in cost, and with no discrimination as to race, color, or creed, and entirely without reference to political considerations. In spite of the stupendous problem, the whole program was infused with a neighborly and courteous spirit. His deep understanding of the problems of the unfortunate led him to be one of the first to insist that the stigma formerly attached to people receiving public aid should be forgotten, and to recognize the fact that the cases of such people has become a public responsibility. His outstanding performance had the admiration, support and respect of all the elements in the City, and literally thousands upon thousands of obscure people considered him as a personal and always accessible friend.

During this period he was making an impressive contribution to the history of social legislation and welfare in this country. Recognition of this came when he was elected President of the American Conference of Social Workers.

At the outbreak of the war, he was assigned the duty of preparing protection for the city population in case of air raids and other war emergencies, and had charge of arrangements for air raid shelters, food stations, welfare and housing in the event of attack.

When this work was done, he found himself deeply concerned about the war and its outcome.

In December last, he was asked by former Gov. Lehman to act for the State Department as administrator of relief and rehabilitation in North Africa. He took this as a clear call by

his country, and felt that in view of his long experience with such problems his opportunity for service was great and immediate. He accepted the appointment at great personal sacrifice.

He was killed with other government officials in the crash of a transport plane near Paramaribo, in Guiana, January 16, while on his way to his assignment in North Africa.

He is survived by his mother Mrs. Anna Hodgson of this City, and his wife, formally Gertrude Prindle of Minneapolis, and his three children, Judith, William Jr., and Jeremy.

William Hodgson was perhaps the most outstanding figure in his field in this country. His belief in efficient and economical public service amounted to a veritable passion. As was said in an editorial in the *New York Times*, "We can never calculate the loss of men whose work is not finished are cut off..."

He had a zest for life, coupled with a broad tolerance, and a fundamental belief and trust in the goodness of human beings. To him this bitter war was a crusade for a better world; he believed that every citizen, young and old, has a crucial stake in its outcome. He gallantly wagered his life for his country and our way of life. We are honored to have had him as a fellow member of this bar. I shall not see his like again.

David Shearer

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Appendix

His death was noted in the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. This is from the *Pioneer Press*:¹

William Hodson Killed in Crash

William Hodson, a former Twin Cities resident who was widely known in the nation as a social welfare authority, was killed in an airplane accident in Surinam, formerly Dutch Guiana, his family was notified Wednesday night by the State department.

The crash occurred at Paramaribo, the State department said. Hodson, who took a leave of absence from his post as New York welfare commissioner to join the staff of Herbert Lehman, director of foreign rehabilitation, was killed presumably while en route to North Africa.

Hodson, a native of Minneapolis, had been New York's welfare commissioner since Jan. 1, 1934. He was 51 years old.

He attended Minneapolis schools, was graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1913 and from Harvard university's law school in 1916, and was admitted to the Minnesota bar in the same year. Also in the same year he became chief counsel of the legal aid bureau in Minneapolis, the following year was made executive secretary of the State Child Welfare commission and in 1918 was director of the State's Children's bureau, which he organized, under the old State Board of Control.

In 1922 he was director of the division of child welfare legislation of the Russell Sage Foundation in New York and during 1924 was the foundation's director of welfare legislation.

He is survived by his wife, the former Gertrude Prindle of Minneapolis; two sons, William Jr., who is at the Army officer candidate school in Durham, N. C., and Jeremy, University of Minnesota sophomore; a daughter, Mrs. Thomas E. Street of Washington, and his mother, Mrs. Anna Hodson of Minneapolis.

¹ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 21, 1943, at 11. The *Tribune's* story was longer and was accompanied by a photograph. January 21, 1943, at 18 ("City Expert Dies in Hop to War Post. William Hodson Air Crash Victim").

The March 1943 issue of the *Social Service Review* carried this tribute:

The word that William Hodson had been killed in an airplane accident near the coast of Dutch Guiana on his way to North Africa for Governor Lehman, director of foreign relief, came as a great shock to social workers in all parts of the United States. It was feared at first that the tragedy had also taken Fred Hoehler, of the American Public Welfare Association, who was to have gone to North Africa for Governor Lehman with Mr. Hodson. By a fortunate chance Fred Hoehler missed a connection with Mr. Hodson because the plane from Chicago to Washington was five hours late. Many friends who did not know that Mr. Hoehler had missed the plane feared that he also was lost and mourned over a dual tragedy. But Mr. Hoehler arrived at Dakar the following week and proceeded to Algiers. This means that Governor Lehman, in spite of the tragic loss of William Hodson, has a very able and competent representative in North Africa.

William Hodson was born in Minneapolis and was graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1913 and from Harvard Law School in 1916. He served as executive secretary of the Child Welfare Commission, state of Minnesota, in 1917 and as director of the Children's Bureau of Minnesota under the State Board of Control until 1922 when he became director of the division of child welfare of the Russell Sage Foundation. He became the executive director of the Welfare Council of New York City in 1925 and became commissioner of

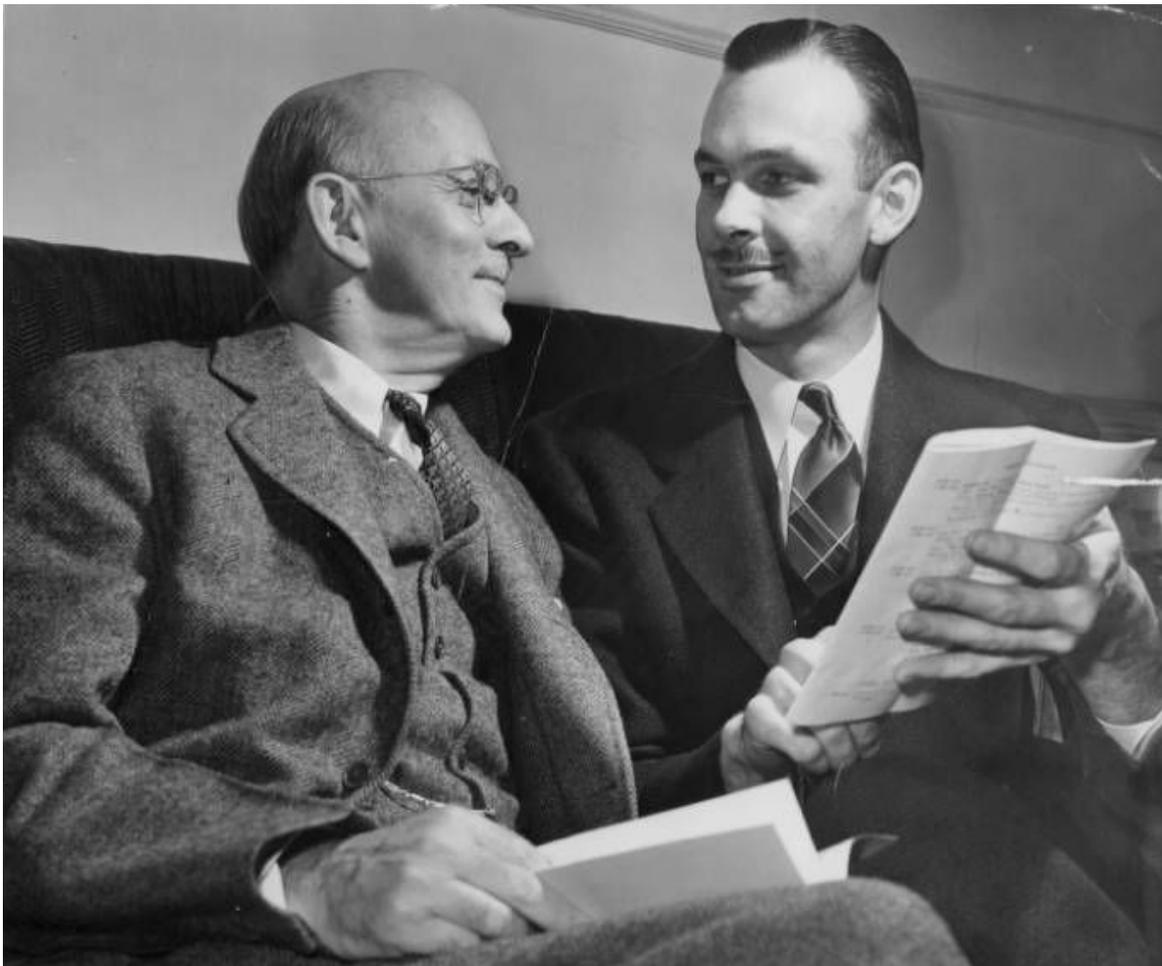
public welfare in New York city in 1934. He was at one time chairman and executive director of the New York City Emergency Relief Bureau, and he served also as a member of the board of the New York T.E.R.A. He was President of the American Association of Social Workers. during 1924-1926 and president of the National Conference of Social Work in 1934. He served as president of the American Public Welfare Association in 1940.

The *New York Times* in a fine editorial said that Mr. Hodson had been a "gifted administrator" in his work as executive director of the New York Welfare Council and as Mayor La Guardia's Commissioner of Public Welfare. The *Times* editorial said further:

"In a single year, 1934, William Hodson held a key position in the distribution of \$200,000,000 in Federal, State and Local funds to one-fourth of the population of New York City. Systems of relief were under constant fire, and so was he, but no one successfully impeached his integrity, his efficiency or his fairness. He carried his really terrible burden calmly and modestly. Vast sums and great numbers of relief clients did not destroy his essential humanness. He insisted on courtesy toward those who had to ask [for] help. He believed in the worth of the unlucky citizens on relief and did all he could to restore their confidence in themselves. Many of them, now reestablished as earning workers, will understand that in William Hodson they have lost a good friend."

At a memorial service in New York both Governor Lehman and Mayor La Guardia spoke with deep feeling of their appreciation of his work. Homer Folks, speaking at the same meeting, said that William Hodson had "lived the life of a crusader and died a crusader's death." ²

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Community Chest and Council of Hennepin County Public Relations Director, John Louis (right), the Executive Director of the St. Louis Park Chamber of Commerce, meets with New York City Commissioner of Welfare, William Hodson (left).

² *17 Social Service Review 96-97 (March, 1943).*

Photograph Credits

The photograph on the first page was taken on March 19, 1938, when Hodson, then New York City Commissioner of Welfare, appeared before the United States Senate Unemployment and Relief Committee in Washington, D. C. He suggested modification of the Unemployment Insurance Act so that the basic payment to an unemployed person will provide an allowance for his dependents. Hodson pointed out that in New York the maximum unemployed benefit averages between \$10 and \$12 a week, with no regard as to whether the family contains two or five persons. It is from the Harris & Ewing Collection, Library of Congress.

The photograph on page 9 is from the Minneapolis Newspaper Photograph Collection of the Hennepin County Library. The date attributed to this photograph, March 6, 1952, is clearly erroneous. It likely was taken in 1930s.

Writings

In histories of relief programs during the Great Depression, Hodson is frequently mentioned. E.g., Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal, 1933-1935* 264 (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958); Philip R. Pople, *Social Work Practice and Social Work Policy in the United States: A History* (Oxford Univ. Press., 2018).

And his writings are cited as well: E.g., William Hodson, "Community Planning for Social Welfare," *Proceedings, National Conference of Social Work, 1929* 436 (1930); "The Social Worker and the New Deal," *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work* 3 (1934); "Federal Aid for General Relief," *32 American Labor Legislation Review* 103 (1942).

His papers are in the Archives of the New York Public Library.

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