

A  
MEMORIAL  
TO  
JAMES A. CARLEY  
(1869 - 1952)

Prepared and presented  
Saturday, December 12, 1953,  
District Court, Wabasha County

by

Martin J. Healy  
Wabasha County Bar

A  
MEMORIAL  
TO  
JAMES A. CARLEY

James A. Carley, a distinguished member of this Bar, died suddenly at his home in Plainview, Minnesota on May 14, 1952. He was 83 years of age, and, although his health had been failing some in late years, his death was unexpected. He practiced his profession up to the date of his death.

James A. Carley was born on a farm near Oronoco, Minnesota June 17, 1869. After local schooling he attended Wasioja Seminary near Mantorville, Minnesota, Hamline University at St. Paul and the State Teachers College in Winona, Minnesota. He then entered the law school of the University of Minnesota where he obtained his degree in 1894. He then returned to Plainview, Minnesota where he opened a law office. During the early years of his practice he taught rural schools near Plainview in order to supplement his income.

Mr. Carley was destined for a long public life. The first public office which he sought was that of Wabasha County Attorney, to which he was elected in 1896 and served until 1900. Senator Carley many times said that the important thing in connection with that election was his contribution toward making John W. Murdoch, another distinguished member of this Bar, the skilled and successful lawyer that he became, for it was John W. Murdoch that Mr. Carley defeated in this election. Of this Mr. Carley said "By defeating John, I sent him back to his office where he had to learn to make a living from practicing law." We all know how well Mr. Murdoch availed himself of that oppor-

tunity, and I am sure the Bar now thanks Mr. Carley for this contribution. \*

While Wabasha County Attorney, Mr. Carley resided in Wabasha, Minnesota. Here he met and married Mary Chamberlain, October 14, 1899. Of this the writer has more than once heard Mr. Carley say, "Yes sir, I married the best looking girl in Wabasha, and because I didn't trust the rascals around that Town, I immediately brought her with me to Plainview and I intend to keep her here the rest of my life." Mrs. Carley survives him.

After returning to Plainview, Mr. Carley's avid interest in public affairs lead him to the offices of village recorder and mayor of Plainview.

In 1909 Mr. Carley was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives where he served until 1915, when he was elected to the State Senate, the office which he held at the time of his death. It was while a member of the Senate that Mr. Carley acquired an enviable State wide reputation. He was a firey orator, and any press indication that Mr. Carley was to speak assured a full gallery. He was a vigorous and unrelenting investigator. He authored much important legislation and any attempt to summarize it here would be impossible. Early in his legislative career he showed great interest in iron ore taxes. He argued that ore deposits in Minnesota were a State asset and the taxes derived therefrom should inure to the whole State and not merely to the local tax unit in which the mine might be located. Mr. Carley is largely responsible for our present method of taxing iron ore, both from the tonnage and occupational tax view point. He was so foresighted in this matter that he even then anticipated the depletion of the mines and resultant loss in tax

---

\* For bar memorial see "John W. Murdoch (1869-1962)" (MLHP, 2012)

revenues. He then insisted that a part of all current tax revenue be held in trust for future generations. Thus the large balances in our State School funds today are largely due to Mr. Carley's foresight. The Minnesota school children for years to come will be the beneficiaries.

Although State Legislature is elected on a non-partisan basis, its membership generally aligns itself along party lines. Mr. Carley, being a Democrat, considered himself an Independent in the Senate. He held Committee Chairmanships, even though he did not always caucus with the majority. His very nature required him to be independent. None the less, he was a fast friend and confident of such leaders of the majority as the late Senators George Sullivan of Stillwater, Charles Orr of St. Paul and A. J. Rockne of Zumbrota,

As has been said, Senator Carley was a life long Democrat. At the time of seeking his first public office as County Attorney, such offices then carried party designation, and he unhesitatingly filed and was elected as a Democrat in a normally Republican area. His face was a familiar one at all Democratic State Conventions and other party assemblies. In 1918 Mr. Carley was the candidate of the Democratic party for the office of United States Senator for Minnesota. He was a Minnesota delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1940.

Born on a farm, Senator Carley never lost his interest in agriculture. At one time he owned and operated some fifteen farms and took great pride in calling himself a farmer. He was interested in improving livestock breeding and soil conservation practices. He strove to make farm life more attractive not only by reducing the physical burdens of the farm work, but in bringing to the farm home modern conveniences. One manifestation of this was his organizing and actively managing the Greenfield

Rural Telephone Company. He was greatly interested in bringing electric light and power to the farm.

Although much of his life was spent in solution of State wide problems, he maintained great pride in his home Town of Plainview and the surrounding territory. As a fitting climax to his public career, Senator and Mrs. Carley recently donated a two hundred acre tract of land to the State of Minnesota for park purposes. Located some six miles South of Plainview, the State of Minnesota has duly honored Senator Carley by designating this tract as Carley State Park.

Mr. Carley was a member of the Methodist Church. He belonged to the Odd Fellows Lodge, the Osman Temple of the Shrine and of the Scottish Rite of the Masonic Lodge.

A man of the varied interests and public spirit of Senator Carley will greatly be missed, not only in Wabasha County, but also in the State at large. His absence from this Court will long be noted, and I am sure that I am speaking for all the members of this Bar in saying to Mrs. Carley that her loss has likewise been our loss.

James A. Carley had a long and fruitful life. May God rest his soul.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Martin J. Healy

Y  
Y

## APPENDIX

In 1915, the four volume *Minnesota: Its Story and Biography* was published. Edited by Henry A. Castle and others, it contained profiles or “reviews” of many prominent residents, who paid to have the books published. In consideration, these “subscribers” had short personal profiles included in one of the volumes. Some subscribers wrote their own, while others edited them if written by the editors. The following profile of James Carley appeared on pages 867-8 of the second volume of Castle’s history.

**JAMES A. CARLEY.** The increased tendency of men thoroughly trained in the profession of law to enter occupations outside of their immediate sphere of activity is resulting in numerous advantages. The natural result of a calling which prepares its devotees for success in more lines of business than any other medium, causing it to be justly regarded as a means, rather than an end, and as an adjunct, rather than an entirety, it necessarily causes an elevation of commercial standards and a general simplifying of conditions owing to a knowledge of fundamental principles. An illustration of this modern phase of law is found in James A. Carley of Plainview, Minnesota, who has been successfully engaged in the practice of law here since 1906, and is also widely known in business circles as the manager of the Greenwood Prairie Telephone Company, in which he owns the controlling interest, and president of the New Wabasha Lumber Company.

Mr. Carley was born at Oronoco, Olmsted County, Minnesota, June 17, 1869, and is a son of Charles B. and Agnes (Dodson) Carley. Charles B. Carley was born January 17, 1836, in New York, a member of an old and honored family of the Empire State, where his parents passed their lives. As a young man he moved to Pennsylvania, and was married in Luzerne County to Miss Agnes Dodson, who was born there January 21, 1832. They resided in Luzerne County from the time of their

marriage in June, 1851, until 1856, when they made their way to Olmsted County, Minnesota, and settled on a small property in the vicinity of Oronoco, which land Mr. Carley subsequently improved and sold, moving to another property, on which the family home was located for a period of thirty years. The parents then removed to Rochester, Minnesota, from whence they came to Plainview in 1895 to make their home with their son, but later moved to their old home in the Town of Zumbro. The mother died July 5, 1914, while the father still survives. They were the parents of ten children, of whom James A. was the ninth in order of birth, and eight are still living. Mr. and Mrs. Carley were members of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, and in his political views Mr. Carley is a democrat. He has lived a long and active life, and has been permitted to witness and participate in the wonderful changes which have transformed this part of Minnesota from a practical wilderness into one of the most flourishing sections of the country.

James A. Carley received excellent educational advantages in his youth, first attending the public schools of Oronoco, later the Wesleyan Methodist Seminary at Wasioja, and finally the Winona Normal School. Following his graduation from the latter, Mr. Carley engaged in teaching school for three years, and then entered the law school of the Minnesota State University, teaching in a night school in order to defray his collegiate expenses. He also took a special course at Hamline University. Mr. Carley is practically self educated for from the time that he left home at the age of fifteen years he has supported himself and has worked his way through the various schools in which he has secured tuition. In 1894 Mr. Carley was admitted to the bar but for two years carried on his former occupation of teaching. In 1896, however, he returned to his profession, and since that time has built up an excellent business in all the courts and is justly considered one of the leading practitioners of his part of the state.

Possessing business shrewdness and acumen, Mr. Carley has been enabled to attain a substantial position in business circles, being one of the founders, principal owner and for the past six

or seven years manager of the Greenwood Prairie Telephone Company and president of the New Wabasha Lumber Company, in addition to which he has a large farm in the vicinity of Rosemont, Minnesota, a comfortable home at Plainview and various other holding. These have all been secured through his native ability for at the outset of his career he was absolutely without capital and had no prominent friends or other favoring influences to assist him.

Probably Mr. Carley is no less prominent in politics than in the law and in business circles. A stalwart democrat in politics, in 1896 he was elected county attorney of Wabasha County, and was reelected to that office in 1904, serving then until 1908. In the latter year he was the successful candidate of his party for the office of representative his district in the state Legislature, but met with defeat because of political conditions at the time. At the present writing he is state senator, having been elected in November by the largest majority any candidate ever received from this district. During the last four years Mr. Carley has served as mayor of Plainview, and it may be stated fear of contradiction that he has proven one of the best chief executives this city has known. Under his capable and progressive administration numerous reforms have been introduced and instituted and much has been done to place the city on a sound civic footing. Fraternally Mr. Carley belongs to Plainview Lodge, A. F. & A. M., of the Masonic Order; Wabasha Chapter, R. A. M.; Lake City Commandery, K. T.; Winona Consistory, S. R.; and St. Paul Shrine, A. A. O. N. M. S.; and Lodge No. 1091, Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. He also holds membership in the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, at Plainview, in which he has passed through the chairs.

On October 4, 1900, Mr. Carley was united in marriage with Miss Mary G. Chamberlain, of Wabasha, daughter of C. L. Chamberlain, a well-known lumber merchant of that city. Mrs. Carley is a member of the Congregational Church, and is well known in social circles of Plainview and Wabasha. □

Five years later *History of Wabasha County, Minnesota* edited by Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge was published, also via subscription. Carley most likely wrote his own profile which appeared on page 238. Together the two sketches, appearing in 1925 and 1920, form his mid-career autobiography:

Carley, James A., senator, attorney, business man and public official, is a splendid example of those native sons of Minnesota, whose parents were pioneers, and who have worthily carried the affairs of the Commonwealth still further along the road of progress and eminence. With but little encouragement he has won his way in the world and in achieving a satisfactory measure of success for him-self, has assisted materially in the public, civic and business development of the state. As farm boy, teacher, attorney, county attorney, mayor, state representative, state senator, real estate, telephone and lumber investor, he has faithfully done his duty as he has seen it, and in so doing has won the esteem and respect of the people with whom he has come in contact. So widespread is his sterling reputation that he has already been prominently exploited in the public press as excellent material for the Governorship, and in 1918 he secured heavy support for the Democratic nomination for that office. James A. Carley was born in Oronoco Township, Olmsted County, Minn., June 17, 1869, son of Charles Brookings and Agnes (Dodson) Carley. With a common school training as a foundation, he secured an excellent education, his alma maters being the Wesleyan Methodist Seminary at Wasioja, Minn.; the Minnesota State Normal School at Winona, Minn.; the Hamline University at Hamline, Minn., and the law school of the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis. In the meantime since the age of fifteen he had made his own way, teaching, working at farming, and at such other employments as promised sufficient financial return. His first school was at Farm Hill, which he had attended as a boy, and subsequently at intervals he taught at other schools, including night classes



James A. Carley  
(ca. 1920)

at St. Paul. He was graduated and admitted to the bar in 1894. He at once opened an office in Plainview, but for two years thereafter continued his career as an educator. Since then his life has been one of ever increasing success. In 1896 he was elected county attorney, and although then inexperienced, he conducted the office in such a manner that he was thrice reelected. At the close of 1908 he retired to take up his duties as a member of the lower house of the Minnesota State Legislature. So excellent was his record in this respect that in 1910 he was persuaded to run for the upper house of the Legislature. Owing to political conditions he was defeated, but in 1914 again became a candidate and was elected. Although a Democrat, and the county was largely Republican, he received the largest majority ever received by a candidate for the senate in this district. In the senate he has made a most notable record, and is one of the influential figures in capitol politics. He was chairman of the Game and Fish Committee, and later of the Civil Administration committee, and a member of the finance, Education, Insurance, Judiciary, Towns and counties, and Public Service Co-operations Committees, all being of the most important in the Senate organization. One of his most notable fights has been for a tonnage tax on iron ores, which after years of effort he and his friends enacted into a law, in 1919, only to be defeated by the Governor's veto. In Plainview, Senator Carley has likewise been an important factor in public life. From 1914 to 1918 he did most excellent work as president of the village. During the world War he took an active part in the various drives, and delivered hundreds of talks in behalf of the loyal support of the government, in his own county and at many points within the state. In business, he has been no less distinguished. He was one of the founders of the Greenwood Prairie Telephone Co. in 1902, and is now president and principal owner, having had the practical management of the company since 1908. He was president of the New Wabasha Lumber Co., at Wabasha, which has recently sold its yards to the Botsford Lumber Co., of Winona, and is one of the founders and president of the North Star Moulding and Frame co., of Minneapolis. He has extensive real estate holdings in the vicinity of Plainview, and a large farm near Mapleton, in

Blue Earth county, this state. He also has a pleasant home in Plainview. Fraternally he belongs to Plainview Lodge, A. F. & A. M., Wabasha Chapter, R. A. M., Lake City Commandery, K. T., Winona Consistory, S. R. M., Osmon Temple, A. A. O. N. M. S., Rochester Lodge, No. 1091, B. P. O. E., and Plainview Lodge, I. O. O. F., besides being a member of many fraternal insurance orders. Mr. Carley was married October 4, 1900, to Mary G. Chamberlain, daughter of C. L. and Loretta (Woodard) Chamberlain. Mrs. Carley is a member of the Congregational church. She is also a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and of the Eastern Star. □

---

#### RELATED ARTICLES

Memorials to other members of the Wabasha Bar posted on the MLHP include: “Harold J. Alton (1903-1937)” (MLHP, 2012); “Charles E. Callaghan (1863-1926)” (MLHP, 2012); “Samuel L. Campbell (1824-1910)” (MLHP, 2012); “E. N. Card (1828-1910)” (MLHP, 2012); Terry Walters, “Remembering Judge [Daniel F.] Foley” (MLHP, 2010); “John R. Foley (1890-1953)” (MLHP, 2012); “Allen J. Greer (1854-1905)” (MLHP, 2012); “Wesley Kinney (1837-1926)” (MLHP, 2012); “Hugh L. Lothrop (1888-1931)” (MLHP, 2012); “Michael L. Marx (1871-1921)” (MLHP, 2012); “John F. McGovern (1860-1905)” (MLHP, 2012); “Henry W. Morgan (1850-1918)” (MLHP, 2011); “John H. Mullin (1842-1907)” (MLHP, 2012); “John N. Murdoch (1831-1898)” (MLHP, 2012); “John W. Murdoch (1869-1962)” (MLHP, 2012); and “James E. Phillips (1866-1935)” (MLHP, 2012).

See also: “Bench and Bar of Wabasha County (1884), and Early Courts and Lawyers of Wabasha County (1920)” (MLHP, 2008).

For an entertaining account of Senator Carley’s activities during the 1935 legislature, see Rome Roberts, *The Minnesota Merry-Go-Round or A Diary of the Legislature of the Age—The Best That Money Could Buy* (1935). A cartoon captioned “Sen. Carley in a passive trance—ala Gandhi” appears on page 69. ■

—V—

Posted MLHP: April 8, 2012;  
expanded July 5 & 26, and  
August 27, 2012.