



Governor Floyd B. Olson
(1937)

Portrait by Carl Bohnen (1871-1951)

MEMORIAL EXERCISES

FOR

FLOYD B. OLSON

November 13, 1891 ▪ August 22, 1936

Delivered

by

John B. Devaney
Former Chief Justice
Minnesota Supreme Court

Hennepin County Bar Association
Hennepin County Courthouse
Minneapolis, Minnesota
January 30, 1937

FLOYD B. OLSON.

1891 - 1936

Occasions like this call for humility of spirit and of the word. We are reminded once more how short the span of life is, how little one life ordinarily means in the aggregate of lives. Yet in the composite mosaic each life has its place, furnishing a layer of whatever size or color to the pattern of the whole. It is in this spirit that I approach my task.

There is a serene Providence which rules the fate of nations and which makes little account of disasters, conquers alike by what is called defeat or what is called victory. It makes its own instruments, creates the man for the time, trains him in poverty, inspired his genius and arms him for the task. Such a man, trained in poverty and inspired by genius, was Floyd Bjornstjerne Olson. He was peculiarly a product of his time and while always remaining a plain man of the people, an extraordinary fortune attended him.

Minnesota was still on the frontier when in 1890 Ida Marie Nelson, a young peasant girl from Sweden, found in Paul Olson, a railroad shop employee in north Minneapolis, her mate. On November 13, 1891, a son was born whom they named Floyd Bjornstjerne. Those were still the years when the Roll of Honor of Illustrious Pioneers was confined to those whose contributions to the development of the great Northwest was measured in terms of the wealth they were able to amass and the power and influence they wielded over the people. We are gradually emerging from that illusion. We are developing a clearer and a saner understanding of those to whom credit for the building of the Northwest is due. It must go not to the men of wealth or of power, but to the hundreds of thousands who made their way from the East and Central West and from many foreign lands to our prairies and forests and who by dint of great sacrifice laid the foundation for this great state. These sturdy immigrants, at the bottom of the social ladder, asked little, and gave much. It is from this stock of immigrants that Floyd B. Olson came. In the atmosphere of their experience, in the light of their understanding of the problems and hardships of the frontier he grew up. Newsboy, high school debater, following the rougher and more difficult ways of life he graduated from High School and later from the

Northwestern College of Law, in 1915. He had then seen and understood much of the real world. He had worked in the mines of Alaska, in the harvest fields of the Canadian northwest, the railroad camps and on the wharves of the Pacific coast cities. He was rich in the understanding of human suffering and experience which later helped shape his conduct in private and public life. On these modest foundations the broad structure of his fame was laid.

His career at the Bar measured in terms of years was short. On his graduation from law school he went to the office of then Senator George Nordlin, of St. Paul. He later joined Frank Larrabie of Minneapolis, with whom he was associated for three years until the year 1919, under firm name of Larrabie & Olson. Wm. M. Nash, the then county attorney, in search of an able assistant to be added to his staff, consulted Judge Wm. E. Hale and Judge Dickinson of the District Court Bench. Judge Hale was the first to suggest the appointment of a tall, blue-eyed young Scandinavian by the name of Olson, who had made a fine impression on him by the vigorous and effective way he presented his case in the court room. Judge Dickinson brought the same enthusiastic reference to the slim young man of destiny. He became assistant County Attorney. Thus, how slowly and yet how happily prepared steps he came to his place.

In the first months of his work as assistant County Attorney he offered no shining qualities. He did not offend by superiority. He had a face and manner which disarmed suspicion, which confirmed confidence, which inspired good will. In a host of young men that start together and promise so many brilliant leaders for the next age, each fails on trial, — one by conceit, one by lethargy, one by an ugly temper, — each has some disqualifying fault that throws him out of the career. But here was a man, sound to the core, cheerful, persistent and with a love for the work that he was to undertake. In the fall of 1920, at the age of 29, he became County Attorney of this, the most populous county in the state. For ten years he held that office. We need present no further evidence of the confidence that the people of this county reposed in him during that period. In 1930, after his ten years of service as chief prosecutor for Hennepin County, he was elected to the office of Governor of the State and re-elected in 1932 and 1934. But for his untimely death on August 22, 1936, mourned by thousands, the people of this state would have sent him to the Senate of the United States and to yet higher and greater offices and position of trust and confidence. There was no limit to the possibility of growth and

development in the service of his people that was his had he but lived. As County Attorney his service was notable. In 1932 when it was the popular thing to do otherwise, he started prosecutions growing out of the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. The subversive elements which were creating and fomenting race and religious hatreds were not content to stop there but had begun to coerce and libel men in public office. In Floyd Olson they found their master and the people found that he had the fairness and courage to espouse the cause of right even though it might cause him his political career.

In the year 1929 following the indictments brought by the Grand Jury against a number of the city alderman charged with graft, his fame as a prosecutor attracted state and nation-wide attention. Again he was fearless in the discharge of his duties and again the people found that their trust had not been violated. Those who heard him argue in his own behalf in the federal three judge court in the summer of 1934 in opposition to the application of the employers during the truck drivers strike to enjoin him as Governor from using the military forces of the state to maintain order in such manner as he thought best, believe that he never reached a higher peak as lawyer and as advocate. His presentation was able. It was clear. It was lucid and dignified. The decision of the court was unanimous in his favor.

The work of the Pardon Board he found most difficult. He possessed a vast good nature which made him tolerant and accessible to all; fair minded, leaning to the claim of the petitioner, affable and yet sensible to the afflictions which the innumerable visitors brought him. How this good nature became a noble humanity in many a tragic case, those who were associated with him will not forget. And with what increasing tenderness he dealt with the meanest and most abject of those who pleaded for clemency, he felt that all the poor and unfortunate with whom life had dealt harshly had been thrown on his compassion. No man will ever sit on the Pardon Board who had a clearer and a more tolerant understanding and appreciation of the duties of that position and the responsibilities of dealing fairly with the poor, the weak and the unfortunate who appear before it, than had he.

His every pronouncement as a lawyer and as a Chief Executive of the state, marked him as one who profoundly believed in the power of the people to rule through a progressive and liberal democracy. It is my belief that he had no rigid or unyielding social philosophy but by reason of the diversity of his interests problems for him were never solved, but were always in process of solution. His occupying the

position of Governor of this state was a triumph of good sense. He grew according to the need. His mind mastered the problems of the day and as the problem grew so did his comprehension of it. In the midst of fears and jealousies in the Babble of Counsels and parties this man wrought incessantly with all his might and all his singleness of purpose, laboring to find what the people wanted, and how to obtain it. If ever a man was fairly tested, he was. There was no lack of resistance nor of slander nor of ridicule. He handled each problem whether it involved employer or employee, party interests or opposition, dispassionately, showing all the rough edged process of his thought as it goes along yet arriving at his conclusions with an honest kind of every-day logic. He was so eminently our representative man, that when he spoke it seems as if the people were listening to their son thinking aloud.

Floyd B. Olson leaves surviving him his father and mother, wife and child, Patricia, fifteen years of age, all of whom reside among us. Judge Perry of England wrote "the rich have many law books written to protect their privilege, but the poor, who are a greater nation have but few." The list of those who have written the law books of the poor (who are a greater nation) will some day be compiled and when that list is written among the names of those who made a lasting contribution to the amelioration of the wrongs of the poor, will be the name of Floyd Bjornstjerne Olson.

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Afterword

This tribute was delivered at the County Courthouse on Saturday, January 30, 1937. The ceremonies were reported the next day in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*:

HENNEPIN LAWYERS CONDUCT MEMORIAL

Hennepin county lawyers and judges filled the main district courtroom on the third floor of the courthouse to overflowing Saturday to pay tribute to nine of their fellows who died during the last year.

Former Chief Justice John P. Devaney of the state supreme court sat with 11 district court judges to read a memorial to the late Governor

Floyd B. Olson. The city's five municipal court judges occupied seat in a lower tier just in front of the bench.

Judge E. F. Waite, now dean of the district bench, gave the memorial reading for the late Judge Horace D. Dickinson, whom he succeeded in rank. Others memorialized were George M. Bleecker, by George B. Leonard; Ernest S. Cary, by Simon Meshbesher; Walter H. Hennessey, by Paul J. Thompson; Napoleon L'Herault, prepared by Probate Judge Manly L. Fosseen and read by Erland Lind; John P. Nelson, by Florence M. Selander; Amasa C. Paul, prepared by Charles R. Fowler, and read by G. A. Youngquist; and Mose S. Winthrop, by Carl H. Wilson. ●

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