



© PETER NELSON '12

Smith Wildman Brookhart

by George William McDaniel

“He represented the progressive spirit in Iowa at a time when the Iowa Farmer was in great trouble.” — Henry A. Wallace

Of the thirty-three men who have represented Iowa in the United States Senate none was as well known in his own time as Smith Wildman Brookhart.

Newspapers from the *New York Times* to the *San Francisco Examiner* reported his speeches and expressed editorial opinion about him. Articles by and about him appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* and an article about him was in the first issue of *Time* magazine. A favorite target of editorial cartoonists, especially the *Des Moines Register's* Ding Darling, Brookhart was called a radical, an insurgent, a Progressive, a socialist, a communist, a buffoon, and was numbered among the Senate's “sons of the wild jackass.”

Brookhart began his life on February 2, 1869 in Scotland County, Missouri. His middle name, which was to follow him as an epithet for the rest of his life, was his mother's maiden name. The Brookhart family moved several times before settling in Van Buren County, Iowa. Young Smith Brookhart received his early education in country schools, went to Bloomfield for high school, and attended the Southern Iowa Normal School in the same city.

He taught in a number of rural schools and filled his spare time by reading law. It was while doing this that he had his first contact with national politics. The lawyer with whom he read was the brother-in-law of James B. Weaver, Greenback candidate for president in 1880 and soon-to-be Populist candidate for president in 1892. Smith Brookhart spent afternoons in the Weaver home drinking tea and listening to Weaver talk of Populism. Years later Brookhart admitted that although he had scoffed at Populist doctrines in those early days, with time he came to see their wisdom.

After passing the bar examination in 1892 Brookhart moved to Washington, Iowa, his home for the rest of his life, and began practicing law. Iowa was in the midst of a liquor law controversy in the early 1890s, and because of this Brookhart became involved in elective politics within a short time of his arrival in Washington. He was, in his own words, a prohibitionist “from his mother's breast.” In 1893 the Iowa legislature passed a series of liquor laws that had the effect of creating a local option policy. To insure that Washington County remained dry, a group of older politicians convinced Brookhart to run for county attorney, the office that would enforce the new liquor laws. He was elected in 1894 and won bids for

reelection in 1896 and 1898. But these were to be his only successful elections until he ran for the United States Senate in 1922.

At the turn of the century, the Iowa Republican party was in turmoil. The standpat, old-line conservative Republicans and the insurgent progressive Republicans were fighting for control of the party. The dominant political and economic force in Iowa at this time was the railroads. In southern Iowa, where Brookhart lived, this meant the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, whose political affairs were managed by Joseph Blythe, the railroad's general counsel. The standpats tended to support the railroads' interests. The Progressives, through a series of reforms, fought to free the political process from railroad control and at the same time free farmers from the high freight rates that had given the railroads enormous economic power. While sympathetic to the progressive cause and its leader, Albert B. Cummins, who was elected governor of Iowa in 1902, Brookhart disagreed with Cummins' "wet" stance on the liquor question and withheld full support from the candidate.

Brookhart had left the county attorney's office in 1900 and resumed his private law practice, but by 1904 Brookhart began to think of running for office again. At the urging of friends, Brookhart went to see Joseph Blythe to get his blessing as a candidate. Blythe showed him a stack of letters from grateful politicians whom the railroad counsel had helped into office and hinted that if Brookhart played along he, too, could be elected. Brookhart would have none of it and walked out.

The following year Brookhart attended a railroad rate regulation convention organized to support President Theodore Roosevelt's efforts to give rate relief to farmers. Brookhart listened to a variety of speeches condemning abuses by railroads and came away convinced that "people do not intend longer to submit to the lawlessness and anarchy of the big corporations." Brookhart was now a full-fledged Pro-



Smith Brookhart's home in Washington, Iowa.
(SHSI)

gressive. Putting aside his earlier reservations about Cummins' liquor stance (Brookhart observed that the governor had enforced the Iowa dry laws) he threw himself into the governor's 1906 re-election campaign with what was to become characteristic Brookhart enthusiasm. Responding to the support, Cummins observed: "You must be omnipresent, for I hear of your work everywhere. I did not believe it was possible for you or anyone to infuse such energy into the campaign as is now manifest in your part of the state."

In 1910 Brookhart ran in the Republican congressional primary. Although Blythe was dead, the political machine he had built was not. Brookhart was defeated but undaunted. "I was buried deeper than anybody else under the avalanche," he wrote to Senator Jonathan P. Dolliver in the aftermath of the election, "but have already crawled out and ground my battle ax for the next encounter. I would rather be right than be regular any day."

In the decade of the First World War Brookhart occupied himself with two activities: the newspaper business and rifle marksmanship.

In 1911 Brookhart, along with his brother and two others, bought the *Washington County Press*. He took an active part in the business and used the editorial pages to advance the progressive cause and continue his fight against railroad abuses.

Brookhart's military service included joining the Iowa National Guard in the 1890s and serving in the Spanish-American War. While in the army he became convinced of the need for rifle training, and gained repute as a world-class marksman. He trained many award-winning National Guard rifle teams and in 1912 captained the team that won the world marksmanship trophy. During World War I he taught marksmanship to thousands of American officers.

Following the war Brookhart returned to Iowa and rekindled his political ambitions. He was convinced that only government ownership of the railroads would protect consumers from exorbitant rates, so when his old ally Senator Cummins co-sponsored a bill to return the railroads to private ownership after wartime government operation, Brookhart believed Cummins had betrayed the progressive cause. Brookhart ran against Cummins in the 1920 senatorial primary, and although he lost, Brookhart became a statewide figure. By challenging Cummins, however, Brookhart earned the enmity of the Iowa Republican party.

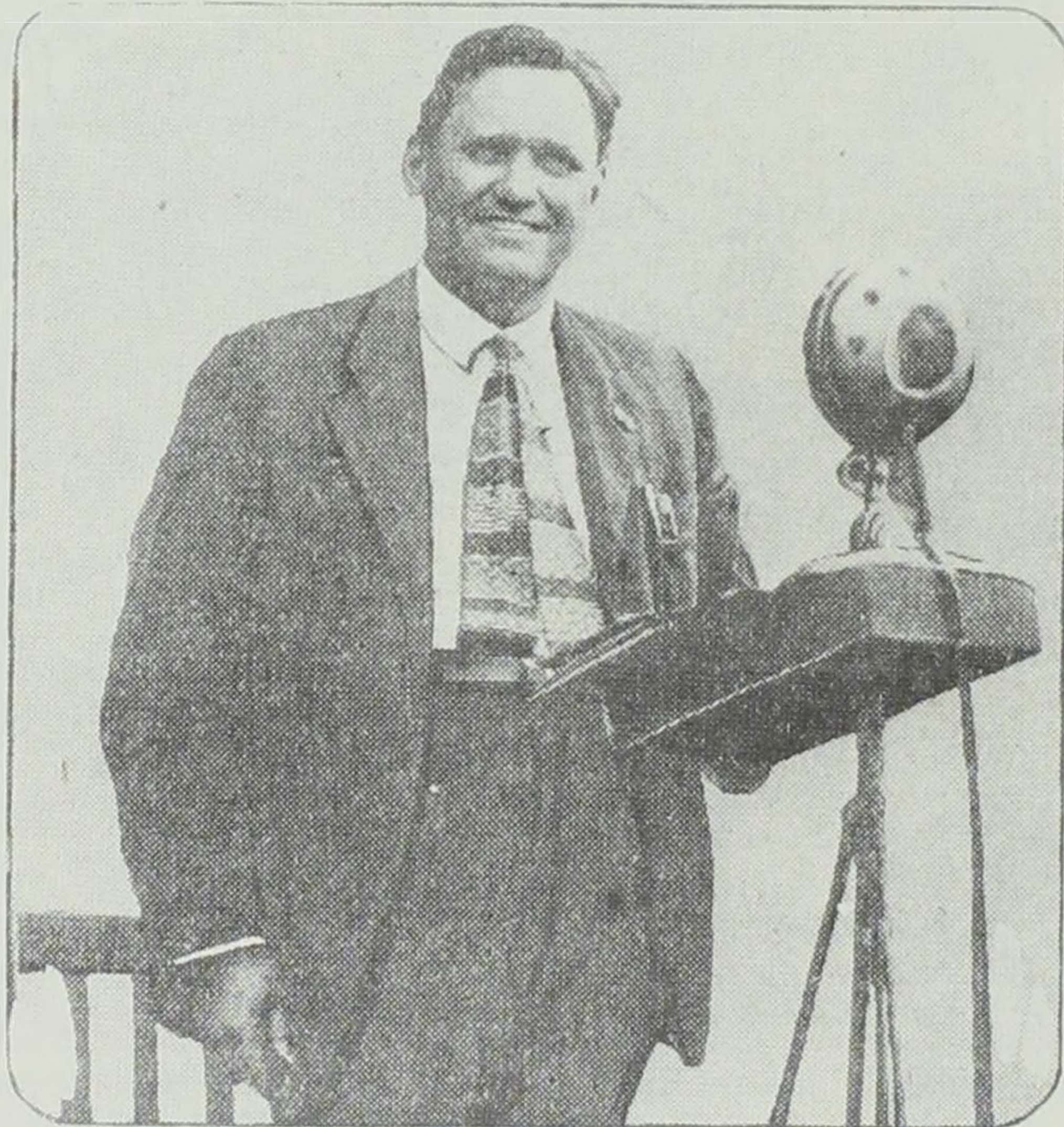
The 1920 primary election set Brookhart against the state party organization. The organization won. In the next six years Brookhart would run for the Senate six more times and in each of those elections the state party organization would do all it could to defeat him. But in each of these succeeding elections Brookhart beat the organization, and his success was based on a factor not present in the 1920 election—a statewide farm depression.

In the years immediately following the war farmers rode the crest of a wave of prosperity. Backed by high crop prices and a generous credit situation, many farmers went deeply

into debt to expand their operations. The prosperity wave crashed on a rocky shore in late 1920 when, in an attempt to tighten credit nationwide, the Federal Reserve Board began to demand repayment of farm loans. The rate of bank failures rose, farm prices fell, many farmers were forced to sell out to pay off their loans, and a farm depression set in. Already convinced that farmers had suffered as a result of exorbitant railroad rates, Brookhart now added the Federal Reserve Board and Wall Street bankers to his list of enemies of the farmers. Brookhart soon had a chance to champion the farmers' cause in an active way. In 1922 Iowa's junior senator, William S. Kenyon, was appointed to the United States Circuit Court of Appeals, and Brookhart sought to fill the vacancy. He ran on a platform that attacked Wall Street and the Federal Reserve Board and demanded relief for farmers.



Smith Brookhart in his WWI uniform. (SHSI)



Brookhart's years in the senate saw the introduction of many campaign innovations. Shown here using a public address system in 1928, Brookhart also made use of the radio and the airplane.



Brookhart greets Hoover at his birthplace in West Branch.



A critic of the Coolidge administration and its failure to give relief to depressed farmers, Brookhart supported Herbert Hoover in 1928 after Hoover assured Brookhart he would work for farm relief. The amity present as the two met in West Branch during the campaign soon disappeared.



Brookhart and Wisconsin Senator Robert M. La Follette were closely allied during their years in the senate. During La Follette's third-party presidential bid Brookhart lent his support but refused to join the Progressive party. In return for Brookhart's support La Follette came to Iowa to help with Brookhart's campaign.

want him."

Thus in five elections, Brookhart had won without the help of the Iowa Republican party, or at the very most, with their grudging support. In spite of large primary victories in 1922 and 1924, the party did its best to ignore him at its state conventions, to the point of not even allowing him a seat on the dais. It was not much different in 1926. Less than two months after Albert B. Cummins' defeat in the primary, Iowa's senior senator died. The party met in convention to select a candidate to serve the remainder of Cummins' term ending March 4, 1927. Brookhart was already the party's nominee for the full term, and it would have been logical for the party organization to choose him to serve the remainder of Cummins' term. Instead, in a final nod to the memory of Cummins and the Brookhart-Cummins battles of the preceding years, they chose Sioux City attorney David Stewart. With the death of Cummins, more party members supported Brookhart now than in the past, but this support was more

in the spirit of resignation than real enthusiasm for him. In the fall Brookhart was easily elected to the full term.

As a senator, Brookhart allied himself with the progressive group, whose members included Senators Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, George W. Norris of Nebraska, and William E. Borah of Idaho. Although he steadfastly insisted he was a Republican, Brookhart did not participate in the Senate Republican Conference, and he even temporarily lost his nominal standing with the Conference when they took away his committee assignments because of his support for La Follette in 1924. The only committee chairmanship Brookhart ever held was the 1924 Select Committee to Investigate Attorney General Harry Daugherty.

In the Senate, Brookhart's principal concern was to obtain relief for farmers. Like many others, he believed agriculture should receive the same government protection that other industries received. Arguing that farmers had suffered at the hands of Wall Street bankers and the Federal Reserve Board since 1920, Brookhart advocated laws to permit farmers to take matters into their own hands by establishing cooperative banks and marketing cooperatives. Although introduced in several forms, the plan never passed, and Brookhart eventually supported the farm relief program proposed by Congress, the McNary-Haugen Bill.

Small businessmen also had a champion in Brookhart. To protect independent businesses he drafted anti-chain store legislation. He also introduced legislation to protect independent movie theater owners from losing control of their businesses to large motion picture companies. Long an advocate of government ownership of the railroads, Brookhart thought other utilities, including the budding radio industry, should be operated by the government in the public interest. And finally, the long-time prohibitionist ended his elected career where he had begun it—fighting relaxation of liquor laws and repeal of the Eighteenth

Note on Sources

There is no published biography of Smith Brookhart. The most complete unpublished work is Ray S. Johnston's "Smith Wildman Brookhart: Iowa's Last Populist," (M.A. thesis, State College of Iowa, 1964). This article relied on Johnston's work as well as newspaper accounts of Brookhart's career (from the *New York Times*, the *Des Moines Register*, the *Washington Evening Journal*, the *Washington County Press*, the *Washington Gazette*, and various newspapers across Iowa.)

Manuscript sources consulted included the papers of Brookhart's contemporaries in the Senate, especially Senators George W. Norris and Robert M. La Follette, both of whose papers are in the Library of Congress, and the records of the various executive departments and in the congress of the United States housed at the National Archives. The records of various Iowa politicians were also a rich source, but none more so than the papers of Albert Baird Cummins and Charles Rawson at the Museum and Archives in Des Moines and the papers of Hanford MacNider at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch.

There is no body of Brookhart manuscripts; what letters and papers exist are owned by the senator's daughter Dr. Florence Brookhart Yount, who has generously allowed me access to these papers. A smaller group of letters written by the senator's wife, Jennie, is owned by their grandson, Charles E. Brookhart, who was equally generous in permitting their use. Of inestimable value was the time and patience spent by Dr. Yount and her brother, Smith W. Brookhart, Jr., and sister, Edith Brookhart Millard, in answering my many questions.

Amendment.

Perhaps Brookhart's most controversial position was his support of Soviet Russia. He made a much publicized trip to Russia in 1923, and on his return he admitted that although the revolution had committed inexcusable excesses, Russia had a stable government and the peasants were better off than under the Czar. "The recognition of a government does not mean its approval," he wrote in 1923; however "the recognition of Russia . . . may tend to settle the world unrest and to restore world prosperity."

By 1932 the rest of the country had joined the Iowa farmers in the Great Depression. But although he had been telling the country of their plight since 1920, Brookhart had been unable to obtain legislative relief for Iowa farmers. So in the 1932 senatorial primary Iowans looked elsewhere and nominated Henry Field of Shenandoah.

Brookhart supported Franklin Roosevelt for president in 1932 and 1936, and in return Roosevelt appointed Brookhart as special advisor for Russian trade in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. It was not surprising that Brookhart ended his public career working for a Democrat. Throughout his public life he never wavered from his belief that where individual rights and welfare were threatened it was the duty of the government to step in and insure those rights. New Deal Democracy was a logical step from his earlier populism and progressivism. As former Iowa Democratic Congressman Otha Wearin remembered Brookhart, "He should have been [a Democrat]. He thought like a Democrat."

When Smith Wildman Brookhart died on November 15, 1944, he had been out of the public eye for a number of years. Prosperity had returned with the war, and the attention of Americans was focused on events around the world. Many remembered him, however. "As you know, I knew your father well," former

Postmaster General James Farley wrote Brookhart's family, "and I liked and respected him. He made a notable contribution to our country's progress." And Vice-President Henry A. Wallace wrote: "I wanted to write you concerning your Father, who suffered from the disadvantage of being ahead of his time. He sensed the eventual possibilities of Russia better than most of us. He also sensed some of the eventual difficulties of the social system here in the United States. He battled resolutely and courageously for that in which he believed. He represented the progressive spirit in Iowa at a time when the Iowa farmer was in great trouble."

