

Wayne Lyman Morse Federal Courthouse¹

Plaque Dedication - April 21, 2008

By Alison Voss, WMHPC Co-President

The apostle Luke said “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

Wayne Lyman Morse, was born on October 20, 1900, the youngest of four children in a multi-generational farming family in Verona, Wisconsin. His parents believed passionately in education and the improvement of one’s self and society, but had few worldly goods.

His father, Wilbur – or Wib as he was called -- spent the days working on the family farm (until it was lost in the agricultural depression of 1921), and evenings going to school board meetings and gatherings of supporters of “Fighting Bob” La Follette.

La Follette, a founder of the Progressive Movement, brilliant orator, and a neighboring farmer - spearheaded political reform in Wisconsin and the nation, gaining admiration for his unwillingness to compromise on principles. A cornerstone of the Progressive Movement was that a good education is essential for societal conditions to better, and, in Madison, women’s rights issues in particular became one of its focal points.

Jessie, Wayne’s mother, led nightly dinner table discussions on a myriad of subjects – cattle and horse breeding, religious beliefs, crop conditions, educational reform and politics. All the family was competitive, but Wayne took special pleasure in rhetorical combat. He was a natural and he loved it.

Wayne also loved animals. Wayne had a natural touch with them, and, excelled at animal husbandry. But, his special love was horses. Horseback riding -- a lifelong passion – was encouraged by his father, who used to say, “the outside of a horse is good for the inside of a boy!”

He bred Shetland ponies at eight, and during his school years, raised chickens, waterfowl, rabbits and guinea pigs for extra money. Competing at local and state fairs was a family enterprise – with the men showing livestock and poultry and Jessie displaying flowers, produce and baked items.

Morse continued livestock breeding, horseback riding and competing in regional fairs in later life. At his Eugene and Poolesville farms he bred American saddle horses and Devon cattle. Edgewood Bourbon – one of his favorites – was the horse for whom his Eugene farm was named.

His daughters remember trailing after him as he walked the fence line at Edgewood Farm, talking about their day and the animals, riding their horses in the hills, and going with him to equestrienne meets.

As a Senator, when he wasn’t needed on Capitol Hill, he would often retreat to his Poolesville, Maryland farm, to be with his animals, ready at a moment’s notice to return for voting. And, when he was in his office, he could often be found talking to visitors about animal husbandry. Staff still talks about receiving boxes of baby chicks for his farm at the Washington D.C. office!

¹ Anecdotal information came from Mason Druckman’s book, “Wayne Morse: A Political Biography,” his daughter Nancy Morse Campbell, and a former Morse staffer and WMHPC archivist, Jan Mueller.

Education was another passion, with history being a favorite subject. He did well in everything, except languages (particularly Latin), with his quick intellect and competitive nature.

His teachers were particularly struck by his ability to deal with abstract concepts and that he could read assignments with both lightening speed and high retention.

In high school, under the tutelage of his biology teacher, Miss Lynda Webber, he became fascinated with the logic of scientific methodology and incorporated it into his debating technique. Wayne used to say, “you can’t go wrong if you have all the facts!”

This became a special mantra in his life, and why he went to the floor of the Senate to speak so often – “to give people the facts!” Educating people was a life mission.

In High School he fell in love with his future wife and partner, Mildred “Midge” Downie. They first met in third grade, went to church together in Madison, and attended the same Sunday school. Mildred was his partner in every way. She was class vice-president the year he was president, a successful orator, and senior class valedictorian. They were on many of the same committees, both had been vice president of the dramatic club, and by graduation it was assumed that they had been “twained” for life.

After marrying, Mildred helped support them both while he continued his education, and ran the home and farm during his long working absences. She used to say that she was a “law widow.” He was often so busy in his work away from home; he used to have his staff call Mildred to report where he was and how he was doing.

When Miss Webber learned that Wayne’s family would not be able to pay for him to go to college, she took out a life insurance policy and used the monies to help fund his education at the University of Wisconsin. At that time, UW, was one of the epicenters of American Progressive thought and action, and many of Morse’s political ideas were reinforced and expanded there.

After getting his Bachelors in Philosophy and Master’s in Speech at UW, he went on to get a Bachelor of Law at the University of Minnesota. From there, he eventually made his way to the University of Oregon as an assistant professor of law in 1929.

Two years later – at the age of 30 – he became the youngest Dean of a Law School in the nation. The legend had begun.

In years to come, many people assumed that his political career was shaped after arriving in Oregon. But here we can see that the man he became, remained true to his beginnings.

His tireless work ethic, fiercely held independence, loyalty to family and friends, progressive leanings, commitment to the rule of law and platform of “Principles above Politics” cost him a normal family life, acquaintances, political appointments, and even at the end, his office as Senator.

But, they also enabled him to achieve extraordinary work in his relentless pursuit of what he thought was right for the American people.