



Minnesota History: The most interesting state politician you might not have heard of

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As an election-week reminder that Minnesotans voted for colorful characters long before choosing a boa-collared wrestler as governor and a TV comedian as a senator, let's flash back 91 years.

Minnesotans had just elected Magnus Johnson as the only Swedish-born U.S. senator ever, filling the seat in the summer of 1923 after Knute Nelson died. Although elected in July, he didn't show up in Washington until October. He picked up his paycheck, scouted out his office and went home. After all, he had to harvest crops on his central Minnesota farm in Kingston Township.

Unlike his wealthy, urbane Senate counterparts, Johnson's background as a poor immigrant farmer made him a bit of a media darling. The New York Tribune's headline after his election: "No yokel and no man's echo."

And Johnson, a vocal advocate for his fellow farmers back home, knew how to stage events to garner publicity. Among the first orders of business once he settled into D.C. that November: challenging Agriculture Secretary Henry C. Wallace to a milking duel. The event would be "dry hand and pail between the knees, with no handicapping."

They took to their stools Dec. 29, 1923, at a government farm in Maryland and Wallace squirted out five gallons from a cow before Johnson could fill his pail. The Minnesota senator insisted he was given a dry cow.

It was one of many races Magnus Johnson lost in a fascinating career that recently morphed into a permanent exhibit at the Dassel History Center, about an hour west of the Twin Cities. The display chronicles "Magnus' good work, his wisdom, loyalty to his peers as well as his great and earthy sense of humor."

To wit: When he was giving a speech on a farm near Kingston, there was no podium. So he orated from a manure spreader, saying he'd given speeches on boxcars and cabooses but until that day, he'd never spoken from a "Republican platform."

Johnson demanded a rematch two days after losing his cow-milking duel. Round 2 ended in a tie, after which Johnson challenged the ag secretary to a woodcutting contest.

I learned about Magnus Johnson — the most interesting Minnesota politician I'd never heard of — from recent Norwegian immigrant Gaute Sandberg. He e-mailed links and shared research he's done since marrying Johnson's great granddaughter.

Johnson was born in Liljedahl — near Karlstad, Sweden — in 1871 and quit school at 12 to work as a glassblower after his father died. His later booming orations and stump speeches were credited to that early, lung-strengthening job.

He sailed for America at 19 after his mother died, learning English on the fly. After finding work as a lumberjack in La Crosse, Wis., he earned enough to buy 40 acres in Meeker County in 1894.

With what Sandberg called a "rugged, folksy style," Johnson started organizing farmer cooperatives and forming the Farmer-Labor Party — two thirds of today's DFL. He led a successful woodcutters' strike that netted higher pay for his fellow immigrants with axes and saws.

He was considered a radical by many of his neighbors but is credited with pushing through legislation that insured bank deposits during the Great Depression. He also fought for Social Security and equal pay for women while railing against what he considered regressive sales taxes.

Boasting he "wears no man's collar and sometimes not even my own," Johnson was elected to the Legislature before two losing gubernatorial bids in the 1920s. Sixteen months after winning Nelson's vacated Senate seat, he was trounced in a re-election attempt.

He went back to the farm, by then 200 acres near Kimball, only to stage a one-term congressional comeback, serving in the U.S. House in the early-1930s before another failed re-election try.

While running for governor in 1936, Johnson was run over by a car in St. Paul under what Sandberg says were "somewhat suspicious circumstances." He died at 65 after contracting pneumonia during a long hospital stay.



Newly elected to the U.S. Senate, Magnus Johnson challenged Agriculture Secretary Henry C. Wallace to a milking contest.

Feed Loader,



Magnus Johnson

Feed Loader,

Nearly 4,000 mourners crammed into the Litchfield Opera House for his funeral — at the time the largest memorial in Meeker County history. He's buried in the Dassel Cemetery near the museum. His gravestone has an image of the Capitol with the words, "Going to another meeting ..."

Curt Brown's tale on Minnesota's history will appear each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at mnhistory@startribune.com

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