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# E.V. Debs

[a biography from the *St. Louis Chronicle*]

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No notifying committee has come to Terre Haute to inform Eugene Victor Debs that he is the candidate for President of the Social Democracy. He found it out the day he was nominated in Indianapolis [March 6-9, 1900], and, after trying as best he could to avoid the honor, his sense of duty forced him to accompany the committee to the convention hall and accept the responsibility forced upon him.

There is no picket fence about the Debs lawn on North Eighth Street. "We did not have the fence removed in anticipation of souvenir hunters," said Debs, laughingly. Not even Bryan has a finer front porch.

There are eight rooms in the nominee's snuggery, and there is no lopsidedness in literary taste. Debs is a great admirer of Victor Hugo, for whom he bears his second name. No author of note is absent from the mahogany cases.

Shakespeare is well worn. The poets and Debs are fast friends. The works of [James Whitcomb] Riley and Eugene Field, and all who touch the human heartstrings harmoniously, are held in reverence.

Up in the Debs den, the sanctuary of sociology, there are reference books on top of a desk which, in a few volumes, combine the gist of all that has been said and done in the ages past. There is a more elaborate reference library close at hand at the end of the room, if detail is wanted.

In the den Debs told the story of his life.

Debs comes from a line of French revolutionists on both sides. In the drawing room of his father's house there are old pictures showing deeds of ancestors on the battlefield, the glories of which are sung in French volumes that fill the shelves.

Among the treasured letters of the elder Debs are those from his old friend, Bartholdi, who designed the Statue of Liberty, praising the poetry of Debs the elder, and advising Debs the younger to keep out of politics.

It seems that the elder Debs, living on his own property, in Colmar, Alsace, grew tired of the country after it had been ceded to Germany, and determined to see what America was like.

He located in New York, where he married. Then he moved to Terre Haute, and went into the grocery business in a building he still owns.

It is in the old Debs corner that the Social Democrat has his office. Every morning when he comes to work he calls on the old people.

“From them I receive the inspiration for the day,” he says. “In all my struggles and troubles no one ever had stronger supporters than father and mother. I have been in perfect sympathetic relations with them ever since I first saw the light of day.”

Eugene Debs was born in Terre Haute, Ind., November 5, 1855. In May 1870 he began work in the shops of the Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railroad as an apprentice painter. He worked there until December 1871. Then he began firing on a yard engine. He worked at the furnace door until the latter part of 1874.

“I left firing,” Debs said, “because a chum of mine fell under an engine and was killed. My mother asked me to leave the road, and I did.”

His father got him a clerkship in the now great wholesale grocery house of Herman Hulman & Co. On the engine he had studied and kept up with his classes, going to school afternoons. He got one year in the high school, and a touch of commercial instruction, giving him the rudiments of bookkeeping. So he was fairly well equipped for his new work. He did not like it.

Debs was in the store five years. Then he was elected city clerk, and held the office for two terms, until '83, but in '80 was made Grand Secretary and Treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and editor of their monthly, the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*. It was as an editor of this publication that the country found out that Debs could use the English language to convey thought.

### **Formed Trainmen's Union.**

In 1885 Debs formed the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. In 1885 he put in a term in the Indiana legislature. He held the office of Secretary of the Brotherhood until the Cincinnati convention in 1892, when he declined re-

election. He continued to conduct the magazine until September '94, running up its circulation to 30,000. ...[I]n spite of protests and offers of \$10,000 a year, he gave up the magazine in the face of the protest of 425 delegates, and began the formation of the American Railway Union.

"I saw there was power in unity," said Debs. "The new organization included every class of railway employees. While city clerk I took a hand in the great cooper strike, and from the that time on I had a hand in every strike going. In '94 the ARU got its first strike on the Great Northern. There were 9,000 men involved. There was a signal victory for the men and an increase of wages of from 30 to 60 percent."

The Pullman fight came on June 26, 1894. Debs was arrested and tried and imprisoned first on July 10. He got out July 16. Hundreds of injunctions were issued all over New York and Ohio, and as far west as California.

"I was the most enjoined man in the world," said Debs. "Injunctions were issued simultaneously all over the country."

### **Sent to Woodstock Jail.**

In December 1894 Debs began his great journey to Woodstock jail for a term of imprisonment. He and his fellows had been indicted on charges of intent to incite riots, conspiracy against public peace, arson, interference with the United States mails, etc.

"When we began to outline on the stand our evidence," said Debs, "showing the causes of the fires and the riots with an army of witnesses, the court was alarmed and a juryman was taken suddenly sick. That juryman is not well yet. His illness ended the trial. We would have fixed absolute responsibility for the whole thing with the railway company and the deputies if they had not stopped that trial. We have continually demanded a reopening, but have never been able to get it."

### **Wanted the Minutes.**

"We not only had a great array of witnesses, including Chicago policemen, to testify about fires and riots, but we called for printed proceedings of the General Managers Association. Only one copy for each general manager is printed. Each is kept in a safe. When those

proceedings were called for the juryman got sick, and he got sick quick.

“We asked to go in with eleven, or to put on a new juror. When the eleven walked out they walked over to me and said, as they grasped me by the hand, one by one, ‘Sorry, we meant to have acquitted you.’

“Up to the time I got on the stand and told things that had been hidden, these jurors would have sent me to the penitentiary.

“The railroads could have kept us in jail forever, but for the display of public opinion which was shown while we were at Woodstock,” said Debs. “That was their first intention. There were hundreds of indictments in the federal courts. One after another could have been tried. I was advised to call on John Harland, son of Chief Justice Harland, and retain him to aid Clarence Darrow, Judge Gregory, and W.W. Ervin, now of St. Louis. We all called on Harland. When we told him our mission, he looked surprised. He said he would have to take the matter under advisement. We called next morning to get his decision. He gave the opinion that I would be tried on the same theory upon which the Chicago Anarchists were tried, and with the same result. He declined to come into the case. He freely expressed the opinion that I would be hanged.”

### **Pays ARU Debts.**

For five years Debs has been paying the debts of the American Railway Union. When the strike ended the railway companies followed Debs with detectives and made organization impossible. The trials had cost \$40,000. The organization was bankrupt and deeply involved in debt. For the past five years most of the money from Debs' lecturing tours has been used in lifting the load. It is nearly all paid off.

The ARU at the June convention in 1897 departed from the old lines and became the Social Democracy. In June 1897, at Chicago, it became international, and *The Railway Times* was changed in Name to *The Social Democrat*. It started with 30,000 subscribers. In 1898, a year later, the Social Democratic Party split. The political wing withdrew. It nominated Debs for president at Indianapolis in March [1900].

Since becoming a socialist, Debs has spoken from the pulpit of the Terre Haute First Baptist Church and the Methodist church.

Rev. Dr. Holmes Park, the Baptist pastor, who introduced Debs, said: "It is two years since I met the man who is to address you. The occasion was on the reception after the Great Northern strike. I went to hear him that night with great prejudice. I remember that there was not an innuendo or a single fling at the men who had been his enemies. I said that he was a born leader, and I have never taken it back."

I asked Carl Stohl, of the clothing manufacturing firm of Stohl, Urber & Co., Terre Haute, what he, as a businessman, thought of Debs and his theories.

"I am not able to judge of his theories," he said. "Debs believes in them. But he also believed in populism, and before that he was a Democrat. There could be no better citizen than Eugene. We call him Eugene here. None is more respected. None is more deeply beloved. The children all look upon him as an elder brother. He is a splendid man. I never did agree with his theories. I guess he'll get a good vote here. He ran like a deer when he was elected city clerk."

### **His Domestic Relations.**

"My domestic relations are as beautiful as those of any man living," said Debs. "I have always been a busy man, and I was not married until I was 30. I had four sisters to whom I was strongly attached. I had seen in my time so many girls marry men unworthy of them that I made up my mind that no sister of mine should so wed. So my brother and I agreed not to marry until our sisters were married. Three married, and the fourth was engaged before I married. I met my wife two years before, and it was almost a case of love at first sight. The friendship very rapidly matured into love, and we were married June 9, 1885, and that was the happiest day of my life. My wife has been the source of my inspiration. She has been a good right hand to me, and in every bit of work I've done and in all my trouble and adversity she stood loyally by my side and shared it all. We have no children. I spend much of my time with children. I love them, especially if they are not yet old enough to have acquired the deceits and other ignoble qualities incident of maturer years. I may be getting on myself, but as has been said, there are no wrinkles in my heart."

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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