

# Speaker Dunn's platter turns up tarnished in Texas

By Nick Healy

A Texas woman's garage sale bargain turned out to be a long lost memento of a former speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives and a link to an unusual chapter in the history of the Legislature.

Forty-two-year-old Mission, Texas, resident Frances Wilson knew she had found something valuable when she lifted a tarnished platter from the table at a garage sale not far from her border-town home late last year.

"It was so heavy I said, 'Darn, I wonder what that is,'" Wilson said. "I looked at the back and it said sterling silver, so I knew it would be at least worth its weight."

Wilson paid the 50-cent asking price, took the platter home, and later began to scrub away the thick layer of black that covered the entire piece. Armed only with a steel wool pad, Wilson cleaned away enough filth to uncover the Minnesota state seal inscribed on the oval-shaped platter, along with a special message revealing its origin.

"Presented to the honorable H.H. Dunn, speaker of the House of Representatives, by the members of the 37th session. 1911," reads the inscription.

How did an 86-year-old gift to a Minnesota politico find its way to a junk sale at the opposite end of the country? That remains a mystery. Just who was Dunn? That is an interesting story in its own right.

"He must have been a pretty important fellow," Wilson said. "This is not a plaything. This is a very valuable antique."

Indeed, Howard H. Dunn did hold an important post in the Legislature, but he was something of a political oddity with a brief career marked by unusual entrances and exits.

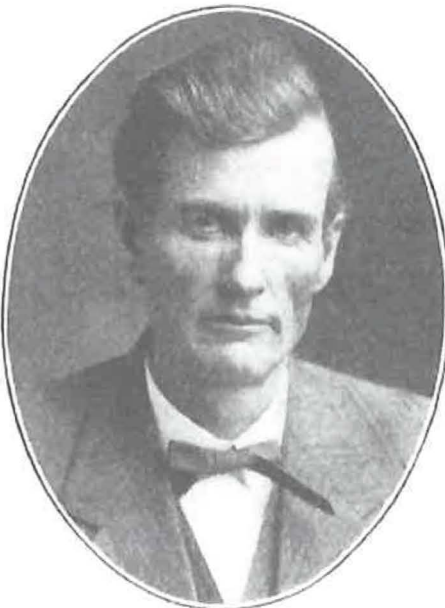
Dunn first came to the Legislature in 1897, when he assumed a Senate seat amid controversy.

The seat in the upper chamber had belonged to Frank A. Day, a Martin County newspaper publisher who held the position of president *pro tempore* of the Senate.

In January 1895, fresh from election to a four-year term, Day was elevated to lieutenant governor when Gov. Knute Nelson was chosen to represent Minnesota in the U.S. Senate and his second-in-command, David M. Clough, moved up to the governor's office.

But Day did not want to relinquish his position in the Senate, and he continued to act as a member of the body.

At the opening of the 1897 session, Day arrived to take his seat, but Dunn, who was practicing law in Fairmont, Minn., at the time, also was there, with a certificate of election in hand and prepared to take the oath of office.



Former Speaker of the House H. H. Dunn

Photo courtesy Secretary of State's Legislative Manual

After some debate, the Senate decided that Dunn was rightly entitled to the seat. He served the remaining two years of Day's term, but Dunn then left politics for more than a decade. (The Minnesota Supreme Court later rejected the Senate's decision, but the ruling came after the conclusion of the 1897 session.)

Dunn's name did not show up on a ballot again until 1910, after he had moved his law practice to Albert Lea, Minn. He was elected to the House as a Republican, and the 44-year-old managed the now-unthinkable feat of becoming speaker in his first term in the lower chamber.

Various accounts of Dunn's climb to the speaker's chair agree that his selection for the job was very much a product of the uncertain political times. The Legislature was dominated by Republicans then, but members of the party were hardly unified.

Many had followed the progressive lead of Theodore Roosevelt, but others were more conservative defenders of the status quo. The temperance movement also produced sharp lines of separation.

The fight for the speakership came down

to Dunn, a "wet" supported by the brewery lobby, and fellow Republican Joseph A.A. Burnquist, a "dry" backed by the Anti-Saloon League of Minnesota.

"[P]olitical agents of the brewers were active in [Dunn's] behalf," according to Dunn critic Lynn Haines in a review of the 1911 session published that year. Dunn's detractors also claimed the "brewery machine" extended generous political favors to those who supported him.

Dunn oversaw the House during the 1911 session and the special session of 1912, neither of which produced significant legislation favored by the prohibition movement.

However, the 1911 session did produce important legislation of another variety. That year, lawmakers passed a measure abolishing capital punishment in the state.

Dunn returned to the House for the 1913 session, but by then the tide had turned in favor of the progressives within his party. He did not seek another turn as speaker, nor did he seek re-election to the House the following year.

For now, the sterling silver platter given to Dunn at the height of his atypical political career remains in the hands of an amateur antique and cookie jar collector in Texas.

Wilson said she would like to see the platter returned to Minnesota, but she wants a fair price for the piece. She is hoping to get \$2,500 for the platter, although an antique dealer told her it could be worth as much as twice that.

"When you know you've got an antique and you know it's worth something, you don't want to give it away," Wilson said.

She contacted the Minnesota Historical Society in December 1996, and was told to take a picture of the platter and mail it in along with a letter indicating the asking price. The historical society would have to consider the historical value of the platter and an acquisitions committee would have to decide in favor of purchasing it before any deal could be completed.

Wilson said she is still planning to send the necessary information to the historical society, but in the meantime, she is open to other offers.

"I know it would be worth more to the people of Minnesota than it is to the people of Texas," Wilson said. 