



Perks of the job

1919 speaker given "unusually lavish" gift

Rank definitely has its privileges in the House of Representatives. But the 1919 session carried with it a special perk for then Speaker of the House William I. Nolan of Minneapolis.

At the end of the legislative session, the members of the House, along with several staff members, gave Nolan a new, six-cylinder touring car.

Though literature about the 1919 session says Nolan was very popular among the House members, no specific reason explains the gift, which was quite extravagant for the times.

However, a few of the Legislature's accomplishments that year might explain it. That was a big year for the state and the nation, as the states were called to ratify Prohibition and women's suffrage amendments.

But there were other interesting political dynamics at the time that may have explained why the House chose to bestow "an unusually lavish gift" on the speaker.

Back then, the Legislature only met during odd-numbered years and the constitution limited them to 90 legislative days.

And from 1913 to 1973, the Legislature was non-partisan, meaning the members were not elected by party affiliation. Members of the Non-partisan League, a driving political force in the state, were primarily rural farmers who banded together to draw attention to issues dominant in the rural setting. They had been most powerful during the decade from 1910 to 1920, exerting the most influence during the elections of 1918.

The League was not a specific political party, and League members represented many parties.

As a result of the non-partisan atmosphere of the time, politicians were characterized more by their stands on pivotal issues, rather than party affiliation.

For example, people and communities on either side of the Prohibition issue were described as "dry" or "wet."

Nolan's political affiliations, including support from Republican Gov. J.A.A. Burnquist, could have sabotaged his bid for speaker. Instead, the five-term legislator and long-time member of the House Rules Committee was elected by an overwhelming majority of members. The vote was 105-23.

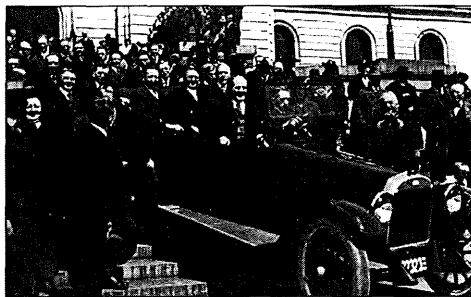


Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Members of the 1919 Legislature presented this car to House Speaker W.I. Nolan at the end of the session. (Can you tell what kind of car it is? If you can, please send a letter or call House Information.)

In his book about the 1919 Legislature, C. J. Buell described Nolan as a fair and efficient speaker.

"His actions were quick, and his rulings were never questioned but once, and then the member raising the question had no one supporting him,"

Buell wrote.

Nevertheless, controversy swirled around the 1919 Legislature, as critics hissed about laws the members were passing and issues that died.

New laws that year established a state Board of Education, a state Agriculture Department and a constitutional amendment to establish a state highway system.

About the only proposal attributed directly to Nolan was the 1919 appropriations law. However, the Legislature designated the highest state budget up to that point — \$31.78 million — and that figure was a \$7 million increase from the previous session.

But many criticized the Legislature for not funding certain needs deemed critical, including unallocated funds to prevent forest fires in northern parts of the state.

Several bits of unfinished business drew members back to the Capitol that September — ratifying the women's suffrage amendment and to establishing a memorial to soldiers from the state who served in World War I.

Nolan served only one session as speaker, saying he would not seek re-election in 1920.

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Sharon Mundy, Feb. 9, 2001

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Instead, there was a buzz surrounding the presentation of the car, that the license number "232323," designated specifically for Nolan by Secretary of State Julius Schmahl, was an attempt to discourage Nolan from a gubernatorial bid.

Though he was not on either the primary or general election ballot in 1920, Nolan did seek and win a term in Congress, representing Minnesota's Fifth District, in 1929.

The car presentation, shortly after noon on the final day of the session in April 1919, created quite a scene. Reports suggest that the car was actually driven up the Capitol steps to the rotunda where it was displayed for the general public to see.

Whatever the reason for the gift — be it Nolan's popularity, leadership, or future political aspirations — might be better explained by one legislative move. The Legislature passed a law in 1919 requiring state residents to register automobile titles with the state, presumably the Secretary of State.

(M. KIBIGER)
