

Gov. Hjalmar Petersen . . .

Income tax sponsor briefly held state's top office

Hjalmar Petersen rose from humble origins to become the state's chief executive, but didn't stay there very long. He has the honor of holding the shortest gubernatorial term ever in Minnesota — 134 days.

Although his stint as head of state was short, Petersen stands tall as a symbol of immigrant success, a small-town newspaperman-turned-politician, buoyed by the waves of populism his immigrant community helped create.

His journey from print shop boy at a remote newspaper in northern Minnesota to head of state in 1936 took place during one of the nation's most exciting times. Industrialization, massive immigration, the First World War, the Depression, and the seeds of the Second World War all occurred during Petersen's professional life. Just as those events played a role in the strength of the populist movement, they contributed to Petersen's transformation from business-oriented Republican to Farmer-Labor representative.

Also influencing his political ideals and practices was Petersen's experience as founder and editor of the *Askov American* weekly newspaper. Whether it was his weekly column for rural newspapers or his aversion to business and political monopolies, Petersen never lost his journalistic instincts.

The literature on Minnesota's 23rd governor is brief. Perhaps that is because he stepped into the office in August 1936 after the revered Gov. Floyd B. Olson died. In Petersen's five months in office, he didn't do anything remarkable — he called a special session, appointed a state Supreme Court judge, an attorney general and helped settle a few metro-area labor disputes. When his term expired, he chose not to immediately run for re-election. He would, however, run later but would not succeed at regaining the governor's office.

But his contributions to Minnesota span decades before and after his gubernatorial term. As a state representative from Pine County from 1930 to 1934, he was a strong Farmer-Labor party member. His second term ended 42 years of Republican dominance in the House of Representatives and he was a key player in electing Charles Munn as Speaker of the House. Naming the former



Hjalmar Petersen, Minnesota's 23rd governor had a rather uneventful five months as the state's chief executive, but was a lifelong champion of populist causes.

Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Republican to the post drew conservatives to support some Farmer-Labor causes and some say it helped pass the session's most important piece of legislation — the state income tax, sponsored by Petersen himself.

The state income tax, last debated in the 1891 session, was a controversial measure that "in the area of government finance . . . 'was to become the single most important contribution of the Farmer-Labor party during its tenure in office,'" according to Petersen's biography, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota*, by Steven Keillor.

As chairman of the powerful Taxes Committee, Petersen argued the lack of purchasing power was at the root of the nation's problems. An income tax would bring aid to public schools and property tax relief to farmers who, according to the *Askov American*, were paying 20 to 50 percent of their incomes in taxes (compared to 4 percent or less for non-farmers.)

Like he did with many issues, Petersen used the pages of his newspaper to promote the income tax. He refuted the charge that an income tax would hurt the masses by hurting the wealthy.

"If we have to bow and scrape and be afraid of the millionaires and billionaires . . . and if

we can't tax them so it will stick under our present form of government then it is high time to make a right about face and change the system," Petersen said, according to Keillor's book.

Petersen spoke for independence from Wall Street interests, big government, and even media monopolization from his first day in public office as village clerk through his term as governor. His fight for incorporation and thus independence from a township board won him the clerk post in Askov in 1918. Years later, he expressed his independence from big business by switching from Republicanism to what he called the "independent" Farmer-Labor Party.

"The farmer by his vote shows that he regards the Farmer-Labor party as the independent party — the one that represents the cause of the masses," Petersen said.

He used the *Askov American* to oppose U.S. involvement in every war, from World War I to the Vietnam War. As biographer Keillor put it, "being against war was almost a religion" for Petersen.

And he fought to make changes in the systems — political and editorial — of which he was a part. He fought against the Farmer-Labor Party's political patronage machine in the 1936 and 1938 campaigns. He criticized the dominance of Knight Ridder and Cowles media companies in Minnesota journalism. He also favored the right to challenge endorsed candidates at primaries, seeking to open up the system to more and purge the system of powerful political bosses.

Petersen tried more than once — albeit unsuccessfully — to round up support for an independent party.

Born in Denmark on Jan. 2, 1890, Petersen came to the United States as a baby with his parents. His father, who had worked hard as a farm laborer to become a small merchant, moved the family to Chicago and soon after settled in Tyler, Minn. There, the family was part of a pioneer community where Danes numbered high and American culture was slow to settle in. The language of the Old Country prevailed and debates over whether to adopt mainstream American ways were always under way.

Continued on page 23

Continued from page 15

That background shaped Petersen's staunch anti-war sentiments. And no doubt his provincial ways fueled his efforts to keep rural Minnesota informed. During his legislative term, he wrote a column on state politics that was carried by a handful of outstate newspapers.

Before winning a legislative election in 1930, Petersen ran unsuccessfully in both 1926 and 1928. After his gubernatorial stint, he was elected the state's Railroad and Warehouse Commissioner and lost four attempts to win the governor's seat. In 1938, he lost the Farmer-Labor gubernatorial primary and in 1940 and 1942, he lost the election as the Farmer-Labor nominee to Harold Stassen. In 1946, he ran in the Republican primary and lost the governor's race to Luther Youngdahl. Eventually, Petersen was re-elected as

railroad commissioner and served two terms. His last big attempt at elected office was against Eugene McCarthy in 1958 when he tried but failed to get the Democratic-Farmer-Labor nomination for the U.S. Senate. He didn't oppose McCarthy on ideological grounds but simply because he loved the political life and wanted a part of it again, according to his biography.

Along with his wife, Medora, Petersen continued to publish the *Askov American* until his death in 1968. Medora continued to write for the paper until she sold it in the 1980s. A political activist herself, she died April 7, 1997, at a nursing home in Willmar, Minn. She was to turn 101 next month.

— Kendall Anderson