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Carl Sandburg as a Political Candidate

Harry H. Anderson*

It is generally known that Carl Sandburg, the noted Swedish-American poet and author, was active in the Social-Democratic Party in Wisconsin early in the 20th century, and that he served for a time as private secretary to Emil Seidel, Milwaukee's first Socialist mayor. Yet none of the biographies of Sandburg, nor the studies of his involvement with the Milwaukee Socialists, contain any hint that he was ever a candidate for an elective position under the Socialist party banner.¹ As a matter of fact, however, Sandburg *did* run for public office as a Socialist in the fall of 1910, losing in a three way race for a seat in the Wisconsin State Assembly.

Born in Galesburg, Illinois of Swedish immigrant parents, Sandburg came to Milwaukee in 1907 to work as an organizer for the Social-Democratic Party, then rapidly becoming a power in Milwaukee municipal politics. The Socialists hoped to expand their appeal elsewhere in Wisconsin, and Sandburg labored for several years in the Fox River Valley and Lake Michigan shore districts, seeking to attract voters to the party standard. He later returned to Milwaukee and was employed as a feature writer and reporter for several local newspapers, while keeping up his contacts with the Socialist movement.²

In April, 1910, the Social-Democrats swept into power in the City of Milwaukee, capturing the mayor's office, most of the other important city-wide positions, 21 of 35 aldermanic seats, and two civil judgeships. Later that fall, the party elected a majority on the County Board of Supervisors, won 12 of 16 seats in the State Assembly from Milwaukee County, and gained two of its three seats in the Wisconsin Senate. The voters of Wisconsin's Fifth Congressional District also elected Victor L. Berger, the party leader and chief spokesman, as the first Socialist to sit in the U.S. House of Representatives.³

In spite of these landslide successes, one of the few defeats suffered by Social-Democratic candidates in the 1910 races was the contest in which Carl Sandburg was the party nominee. He had earlier been chosen by mayor-elect Seidel as his private secretary. He also found time to write occasional feature articles for the party's weekly newspaper, the *Social-Democratic Herald*, on such topics as "The Muck Rakers" and "A Labor Day Talk." In early July, 1910 the party referendum to select candidates for the state ticket resulted in Sandburg being chosen to be their standard bearer in the Seventh Wisconsin Assembly District. In

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this capacity he attended the Socialist platform convention in Madison late in September. On occasion he was referred to as "Charles" rather than Carl in newspaper reports, although the latter name was most often used.⁴

The assignment given Sandburg by the Socialists was a difficult one. His candidacy was part of an effort to fill out the Socialist Party ticket for every race in Milwaukee County, even where chances of success were slim. The heavily Republican Seventh District was made up of the rural townships of Franklin, Greenfield, and Wauwatosa (Sandburg resided in the latter); the industrial communities of West Milwaukee and West Allis; and the City of Wauwatosa. Sandburg's principal opponent in the contest was Charles B. Perry, a Republican attorney who also was the three term mayor of the City of Wauwatosa. A Democrat, John J. Mulhaney, was also in the running.

The outcome of the November election was not, therefore, unexpected. In the official final results, published in the *Wisconsin Blue Book*, Perry received 1,886 votes (48.7%), Mulhaney 1,033 (26.7%) and Sandburg 956 (24.7%).⁵ An earlier incomplete tabulation published in the Milwaukee newspapers the day after the election provided a breakdown on the balloting by communities in the district. These preliminary figures, even though incomplete, reveal patterns of voting which help explain both the reasons for Sandburg's defeat and identify the areas where his campaign efforts proved most effective.⁶

	<u>Sandburg</u>	<u>Mulhaney</u>	<u>Perry</u>	<u>Total</u>
Franklin	15	81	89	185
Greenfield	111	127	179	417
Wauwatosa Township	271	409	812	1,492
West Milwaukee	117	37	96	250
Wauwatosa City	57	86	361	504
West Allis	36	18	43	97
	<u>607</u>	<u>758</u>	<u>1,580</u>	<u>2,945</u>
Later returns	<u>349</u>	<u>275</u>	<u>306</u>	<u>930</u>
Official Totals	956	1,033	1,886	3,387

It is significant that Sandburg actually ran ahead of his two opponents in the late returns. (The difference between the initial post-election day figures reported in the press and the final tabulation included in the official canvas.) Much of this support undoubtedly came from West Allis, a working class community, whose total vote of 97 in the preliminary count was obviously too low for a city of over 6,600 residents. The initial plurality assembled by winner Perry, however, was too great for Sandburg's late surge to overcome.

Perry, the Republican, ran strongest in the city and township of Wauwatosa, where he had long been active in politics and was well known. Sandburg's best showing was in West Milwaukee, also a working class community, where he

undoubtedly benefitted from the close ties between the Socialist movement and organized labor. In the final official overall totals, the 32 year old Sandburg finished only 2% and 77 votes behind the Democrat Mulhaney. All considered—his short residency in the district, the rural conservative nature of much of the constituency, and his status as a third party candidate—Sandburg ran a very creditable race. In the same district two years earlier, the Social-Democratic candidate had received only 14% of the vote in another three way contest.

Sandburg remained a member of Mayor Seidel's staff until March, 1911 when he resigned, disenchanted with the mundane day-to-day demands of public service and hopeful of spending more time writing for the *Herald* and the Socialists' new daily paper, *The Milwaukee Leader*. In September, 1912, he moved to Chicago, and except for occasional visits, thus ended his Milwaukee career. As far as is known, Sandburg never again offered himself as a candidate for public office.

Notes

¹For example, see: North Callahan, *Carl Sandburg: Lincoln of Our Literature* (New York, 1970); Harry L. Golden, *Carl Sandburg* (Cleveland, 1961); Helga Sandburg, *A Great and Glorious Romance: The Story of Carl Sandburg and Lillian Steichen* (New York, 1978) and *Where Love Begins* (New York, 1989). The Milwaukee studies include Will C. Conrad, "Carl Sandburg's Milwaukee Days" and Walter Wyrich, "As Milwaukeeans Remember Carl Sandburg" in *The Historical Messenger of the Milwaukee County Historical Society* (June, 1953, vol. 9, no. 2) pp. 6-10, 11-12; and Gary F. Keller, "Carl Sandburg's Wisconsin Years," *The Historical Messenger of the Milwaukee County Historical Society*. (Winter, 1974, vol. 30, no. 4), pp. 106-116.

²Gary F. Keller, "Carl Sandburg's Wisconsin Years," *The Historical Messenger of the Milwaukee County Historical Society* (Winter, 1984, vol. 30, no. 4) pp. 106-110.

³Marvin Wachman, *History of the Social-Democratic Party of Milwaukee, 1897-1910* (Urbana, Illinois, 1945), pp. 70-72.

⁴*The Social Democratic Herald* (Milwaukee), July 9, July 23, September 3, September 27, October 1, 1910.

⁵J.D. Beck (compiler), *The Blue Book of the State of Wisconsin* (Madison, 1911, p. 771 (biographical sketch of Charles B. Perry provides official vote totals for the 1910 assembly race).

⁶*Milwaukee Journal*, November 9, 1910; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 9, 1910; *Social-Democratic Herald*, November 12, 1910.

Who Was Benjamin Suel?

In 1846 the Swedish King, Oscar I, presented the North American sea captain, Benjamin Suel, his royal medal, *Illis quorum meruere labores* ("to those who through their labors are deserving") in gold for aiding the crew of a Swedish vessel in distress. Who was Benjamin Suel and what was the nature of his rescue action? The motto of this royal medal, still in existence, is taken from the Roman poet, Sex. Aurelius Propertius' *Elegiae*, IV, 4, 21.