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Minnesota History Vignettes - John A. Johnson

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A Minnesotan Who Was Almost President

"The best brain and the surest brawn of the nation is found here (in the Midwest) and it should be organized into one mighty moral, material and patriotic force to overthrow paternalism and plunder, and regenerate politics and the Republic."

John A. Johnson
Governor of Minnesota, 1905-1909*

Minnesota natives have played a significant role in this 2012 presidential election with Congresswoman Michele Bachmann winning the Iowa straw poll along with our former governor Tim Pawlenty being an early contender and later being a possible vice president selection. In the past other Minnesotans have been close to the presidency, most notably Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale both receiving the nomination of their Democratic Party. Unfortunately, none have ever won the presidency. There was another almost forgotten favorite son who arguably had one of the best chances to become president.

John A. Johnson was the 16th governor of Minnesota and the first native-born Minnesotan to serve in that post. Born in St. Peter to very humble circumstances, his mother struggled to hold the family together after being abandoned by an alcoholic husband. Her eldest son John learned hard work early as he dropped out of school at age 13 to help his mother as she washed clothes to pay the bills. He also took odd jobs just to keep food on the family table.

One of those odd jobs was clerking at a local store where the industrious young man caught the eye of local Democratic leaders. They helped him get a position for the local Democratic paper where his natural skills as a political thinker and orator began to flourish. He soon launched his political career, winning a seat in the Minnesota State Senate as a Democrat in a prominently Republican district. He followed that up with a surprising 1904 gubernatorial victory as a progressive from the Democratic Party in a state that had been dominated by Republican politics since the Civil War.

At the time Minnesota was in the midst of a significant political realignment known as the "progressive era". Political leaders, farmers, laborers and small business leaders from rural Minnesota ushered in progressive policies that reshaped our transportation system, commodities markets, employment relations, and economic structure. Minnesota was a leader in this movement that resulted in such things as cooperatives, antitrust laws, women's suffrage, direct election of U.S. Senators, labor rights, and workers compensation -- things so commonplace to our social structure today that we would be stunned at the political struggle in the early 1900s that was necessary to put them in place.

Johnson was one of the giants of this progressive movement both in Minnesota and nationally. His leadership ushered in or laid the groundwork for many of the progressive initiatives. His political stardom was shining so bright by 1909 that most Democrats viewed him as the presumptive Democratic nominee for president in the 1912 election. The Democratic Party was looking for someone other than the Prairie Profit Williams Jennings Bryan who had just lost another election in 1908 to William Taft. They wanted someone who could continue to ignite the midwestern prairie populism kindled by Bryan, hold his own with the intellectual elite of the East, and not alienate Southern Democrats. Johnson's name quickly rose to the top of the list.

Unfortunately a sad fate intervened with his premature death in September of 1909. He always had a somewhat sickly disposition and after a fourth surgery for intestinal problems at the Mayo Clinic he passed away at the age of 49 from surgical complications. An estimated 50,000 mourners would pass his casket that was placed in the Minnesota Capitol rotunda prior to his funeral, a huge number at that time.

The Democrats' second choice for the 1912 election was New Jersey Gov. Woodrow Wilson who bore a striking physical resemblance to Johnson but most agreed lacked his great speaking ability. Wilson had a surprise victory when a divided Republican Party that nominated beleaguered incumbent William Taft, who lost votes from the third-party challenge by former

president Teddy Roosevelt and his Bull Moose Party, opened the door for him.

So there is a good argument to be made that John A. Johnson had the best chance of any to have been Minnesota's first president of the United States of America. As a result of his broad base of popularity throughout the state and his untimely death, he is ranked as one of our most beloved governors, but surprisingly a century later he is almost forgotten. Nonetheless, Minnesota's deep love for John A. Johnson was recognized by placing his statue at the beginning of the front steps of our Capitol - one of only two that have the honor of guarding the front of the Capitol's entrance.

*A good book to learn more about the shifting political allegiances at the beginning of the 1900s is *The Progressive Era in Minnesota*, Carl H. Chrislock, Minnesota Historic Society, 1971. The above quote appeared on p36 of the book.

A couple of short pieces of information from the Minnesota Historical Society to start researching Gov. Johnson are the [Minnesota Encyclopedia](#) and [Governors of Minnesota](#).

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