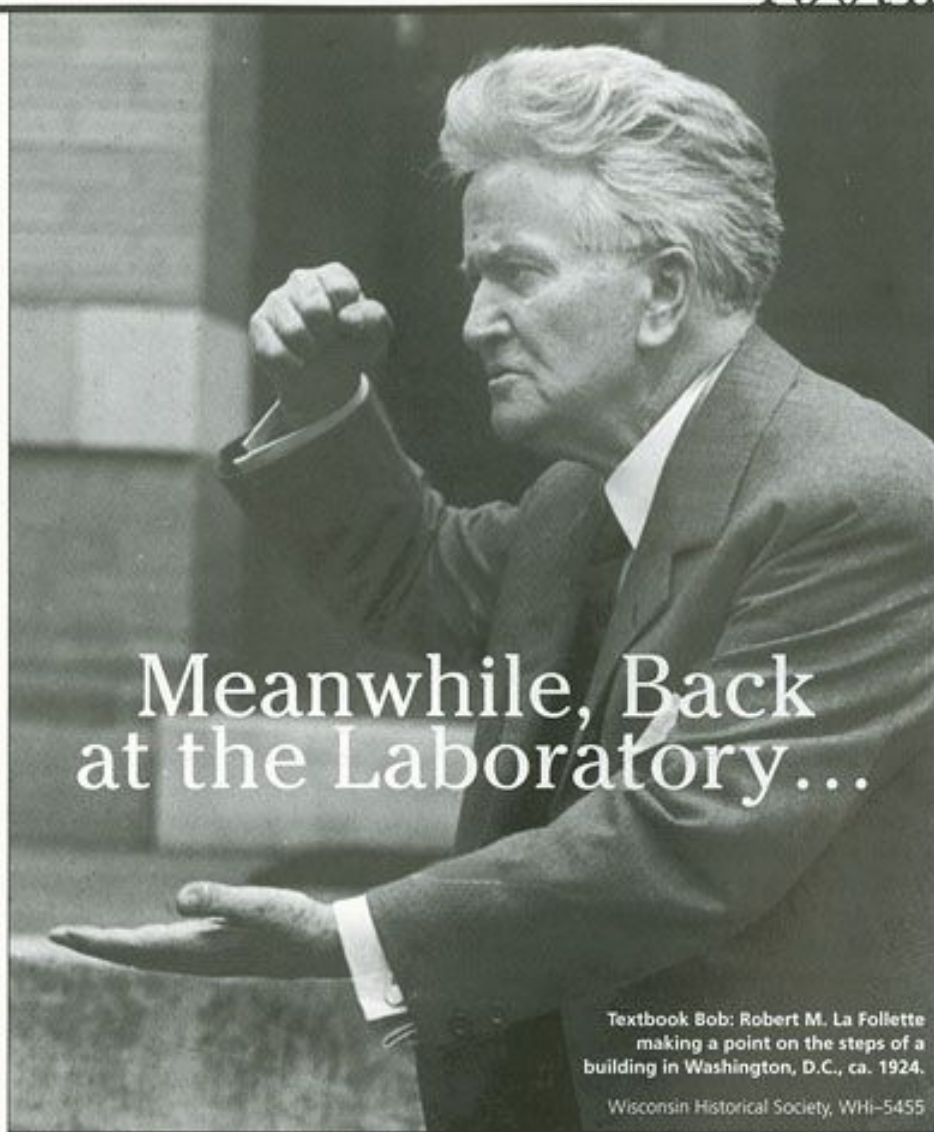


Civil Rights movement and in a variety of subsequent protests and reform efforts. Although the term "progressivism" is frequently misapplied, the authentic progressive spirit still finds expression. Current examples include efforts to expand access to health care and higher education across the board, and to protect the environment from corporate exploitation.

"Mere passive citizenship is not enough," La Follette repeatedly reminded his audiences. "Men must be aggressive for what is right if government is to be saved from men who are aggressive for what is wrong." In Wisconsin, the annual Fighting Bob Fest is held to revitalize the progressive spirit at the grassroots level. Participants, including homemakers, activists, and professional politicians, are working together to make the state once again a celebrated "laboratory for democracy" that will lead the nation in the ongoing fight to protect "the many" from "the powerful few." They, and others nationwide, individually and in groups, continue to fight for progressive goals.

America, noted Robert La Follette, is "not made, but in the making." "The battle is just on," he recognized in 1909, "it is young yet. It will be the longest and hardest ever fought for Democracy." One hundred and fifty years after his birth, the unique legacy of progressive reform continues. •

*Nancy C. Unger's work on the La Follette family includes the award-winning biography **Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer** (University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Her essay on Belle La Follette's stand against racism will appear in the forthcoming edited collection **Women In Print** (University of Wisconsin Press). Her current book project is **Beyond "Nature's Housekeepers": Women And Gender In Environmental History**. She is an associate professor of history, women and gender studies, and environmental studies at Santa Clara University, and writes for *FightingBob.com* and the *History News Service*.*



Meanwhile, Back at the Laboratory...

Textbook Bob: Robert M. La Follette making a point on the steps of a building in Washington, D.C., ca. 1924.

Wisconsin Historical Society, WHI-5455

BY CURT MEINE

EVERY SCHOOLKID heard the phrase—if only once, in high school American history, sometime around March, somewhere between the Gilded Age and World War I: Wisconsin was once famous as the “laboratory of democracy.” Even kids growing up outside Wisconsin heard it. If you happened to be from Chicago, it

only confirmed your vague impression that the Land of the North was a place of purity, simplicity, and honesty, its politics as wholesome as its milk, its devotion to public integrity downright quaint.

For those accustomed to the cesspool that was Chicago’s machine politics, the clear, bracing waters of Wisconsin’s democracy seemed unfit for real life. You heard unbelievable stories about legislators mortified to learn that they had somehow overbilled the state for their travel expenses, or once forgot to pay for their own lunch. You shook your head and chuckled.

But beneath the chuckle you envied your hinterland cousins, the locals whose farm stands and Dairy Queens you stopped by on the way back to Illinois from the lake. You joked about

cheese. You scorned the Packers. But you always respected, and even took some kind of grudging regional pride, in Wisconsin's politics.

After all, you'd heard about it in history class.

The phrase was linked, in the textbook and in your consciousness, with the picture of this bantam rooster of a senator, this "Fighting Bob" La Follette. You had to like the nickname. In the picture he had preposterously big hair, and he was eternally jabbing his fist into an outstretched palm. (I pull my old text off my bookshelf. It's true! There's Fighting Bob in chapter 23, "Progressivism in Triumph and Crisis," under the subheading "Insurgency," still jabbing away.)

Like all high school history lessons, this one was incomplete. Wisconsin was much more, but we weren't told much about the Black Hawk War or the lumber barons. Joseph McCarthy just barely made it onto the stage before summer vacation, when students were unable to pay attention.

Later, when you came to know Wisconsin, you would hear the phrase more often. Entrenched elected officials and earnest reformers alike would trot it out from time to time. Visiting journalists from distant realms still invoke it on a quadrennial basis, their stock trope for this land of Midwestern mystery where people sometimes vote funny.

Yet the Laboratory of Democracy never quite achieved the status of a proper "brand." It's too hard to put on the back of a quarter. Boosters and marketing consultants fretting about Wisconsin's beer-bratwurst-cheese image ("Outmoded!" "Not sexy enough!" "Unbankable!") are hardly going to hark back to dusty words from forgotten history texts.

Ah, the text. If you look for it, you'll find it.

It's there in its raw form in the very first line of Charles McCarthy's *The Wisconsin Idea*, the stout taproot of Wisconsin progressivism. But the words are not McCarthy's. They are from Theodore Roosevelt's introduction: "Thanks to the movement for genuinely democratic popular government which Senator La Follette led to overwhelming victory in Wisconsin, that state has become literally a laboratory for wise experimental legislation aiming to secure the social and political betterment of the people as a whole." They were the words not of the sitting president, but of the rampaging Bull Moose. *The Wisconsin Idea* was published in 1912, as Roosevelt was leading his (ultimately unsuccessful) anti-Taft, anti-Wilson crusade to reclaim the White House.

With McCarthy's book, La Follette's personification, and Roosevelt's endorsement, Wisconsin's homegrown

progressivism became widely admired and adapted among reformers throughout the country. Wisconsin secured its reputation for "practical and effective" responses to powerful economic interests; for "patient care in radical legislation"; for an educational system that provided its people with "the opportunity to learn how to use their power wisely." For those who fought for and shaped it, the Wisconsin Idea was no platitudinous label. It was an authentic expression of revolt, of sensible rebellion against abused privilege, corrupted policies, wrecked resources, concentrated wealth, and closed government. In response to the political challenges of the emerging modern age, the Wisconsin Idea was a clarion call to devise new ways of self-governance, open to participation, informed by knowledge, and guided by a revitalized vision of the commonwealth and the common good.

The Progressive Era was many things. Its mythology can easily hinder critical understanding of the forces that drove it, the principles that distinguished it, the great achievements and heroic flaws that marked it. But it is especially important in these days of harsh political polarities to recall that progressivism, in Wisconsin and the nation, was not a simple partisan matter. It included Republicans like La Follette and Roosevelt as well as Democrats, independents, and pragmatic socialists. It drew rural farmers and urban workers, small businesspeople and unionists, woman suffragists and clean government campaigners, conservationists and settlement house organizers. Under its broad banner of reform in the public interest, progressivism united disparate constituencies.

And in Wisconsin—its laboratory of progressivism—American democracy reinvented itself.



A century later, the laboratory is a far different place. It now contains highly sophisticated equipment for analyzing our political chemistry, manipulating our opinions, and engineering our poli-



A gathering of the faithful at Wollersheim Winery for a Voices of the Progressive Tradition event in July 2004

Photo by Kurt Eakle

cies. Properly focus-grouped, carefully framed, and effectively marketed, "Wisconsin" ideas are more likely to be distilled in hermetically sealed policy think tanks and distributed efficiently from national party headquarters. The excitement of invention has long since dissipated, replaced by the slick protocols of consultants, pundits, and message machines.

And yet ... back in odd corners of the old laboratory ... back where the cobwebs and dust bunnies reign ... the spirit of rowdy and creative experimentation has defiantly begun to reassert itself.

Two thousand and one marked the 100th anniversary of La Follette's governorship and of Teddy Roosevelt's presidency. The anniversaries passed with nary a commemoration in Washington or Madison. But on September 21, 2001, on an evening still reverberating from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a full house gathered in Baraboo at Annie Randall's bookstore, the Village Booksmith, for "Voices of the Progressive Tradition"—an evening of selected readings from *Fighting Bob* and *TR* and Charles McCarthy, from Baraboo's own Belle Case La Follette, from Portage's Zona Gale, the Town of Fulton's Charles Van Hise, the village of Witwen's Rose Litscher Meyer. Local readers and special guests recited their words. Host and historian Jack Holzhueter wove the threads of the tradition together. A long evening of conversation ensued. Talk inevitably circled around the same theme again and again: "Not much has changed in a hundred years ... We face the same challenges now ..."

Since then, the "Voices of the Progressive Tradition" have continued to be heard. Subsequent readings have been held at Spring Green and Sauk City and Portage and Prairie du Sac, and at the Senate Parlor at the State Capitol. Hundreds of Wisconsin citizens have listened to words from the well-known and the obscure—citizen advocates and teachers, ex-governors and supreme court justices, farmers and conservationists, local officials and business leaders, historians and journalists. The



Crowd scene at Fighting Bob Fest III, 2004

readers have included a similarly wide range of backgrounds and experience.

On that first evening, Tom Holmes read the words of Gifford Pinchot, Roosevelt's "chief forester," who was a leading conservationist and progressive governor of Pennsylvania. Tom and his wife Sue live in Baraboo and run Glenville Timberwrights, their timber-frame construction business. George W. Bush's tax cuts of 2001 had worked their way through the system. Tom and Sue had just received their refund and were mulling over how best to invest it. They decided to dedicate the money to a

"Progressive Voices" lecture series, "designed to bring speakers to Baraboo on hot-button issues not being addressed by the media" and to offer a forum for people "of all political stripes ... interested in progressive change." On a cold evening that December, 150 people gathered to hear the inaugural offering by former gubernatorial candidate Ed Garvey.

In any productive laboratory, all results only suggest the need for further experiments.

In January 2002, the Holmeses joined a gathering in Wisconsin Dells convened



Dressing their parts at *Voices of the Progressive Tradition* (2004), including *Review* authors Jack Holzhueter (back row, far left) and Curt Meine (front row, far left)

Photo by Kurt Eakle

Photo by Patricia Kennelly Denker

by Garvey and by Hiroshi and Arlene Kanno, leaders in the struggle against the Perrier/Nestle corporation's proposal to build a large water-bottling plant in Adams County. The gathering brought together farmers, business owners, and representatives from grassroots groups concerned with local conservation and environmental issues, campaign finance reform, and the influence of big money in state politics. More meetings followed. Soon another idea was hatched: hold a come-one-come-all "chautauqua" where citizens could learn from one another, compare notes, listen to other voices, discuss shared concerns and needs—and celebrate Wisconsin's progressive heritage. Thus was born "Fighting Bob Fest." Kari Nelson Argo of the Dells suggested the name.

The first Fighting Bob Fest was held at the Sauk Prairie Fairgrounds in Baraboo on September 7, 2002. Its organizers had no idea how many people to expect. Maybe 50 ... or 100 ... would care enough to show up that morning. One thousand citizens came, from all across Wisconsin. With the Holmeses leading an army of volunteer organizers and Garvey serving as master of ceremonies, Illinois' former Senator Paul Simon opened a day of spirited speeches. "Mere passive citizenship is not enough," Fighting Bob once insisted. Simon echoed his words and spirit. "We all change history," Simon said, "either by what we do positively, or what we do negatively, or through our indifference, turning it over to others. All of you who are here happen to be involved in something that is very key to the future of civilization. I want you to change history positively!"

Sadly, Simon's voice was stilled in 2003, but the spirit of his invocation was not. The second Fighting Bob Fest, in September 2003, drew 2,500 people. The third, in September 2004, drew 4,000—twice as many people as attended the state Republican and Democratic conventions combined. The event had grown not only in numbers, but also in the breadth of political persuasions represented, the depth of its discussions, and the age range of its attendees

(no, young people do not listen to those who caricature them as shallow slackers). A fourth Fighting Bob Fest is planned for September 2005.

Throughout Wisconsin a thriving network of engaged citizens continues to emerge, experiment, and grow. The Grassroots Citizens of Wisconsin draws members from Iowa, Sauk, Lafayette, and Grant Counties. A new Voices for Change group meets in Walworth County. A new Coalition for Responsible

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. came to Fighting Bob III (2004)



Photo by Patricia Kennedy Denker

Regional Development gathers in Medford. A new independent progressive publication starts up in Rock County. FightingBob.com carries on discussions over the Internet. This past January, some 1,100 "politically homeless" Wisconsin citizens, representing diverse political philosophies and coming from every county in the state, gathered in Madison for "The People's Legislature." The goal was to bring together at least 804 people—one more than the number of registered lobbyists in Madison.

The stereotype that progressive thinking and action is endemic only to Milwaukee and Madison, and confined to certain portions of the conventional

right-to-left political spectrum, is being broken. Citizens, and even some politicians, are nurturing native ideas for better governance throughout the state. Guided by La Follette's conviction that "permanent progress can only be secured through intelligent discussion"—a conviction that runs exactly counter to the power politics of the day—they work to revive, challenge, and extend Wisconsin's progressive tradition from within. They are not waiting for others to do so.

What results will these experiments yield? Will they reflect history's lessons? Will they merely retread the progressivism of the past, or will they reinvent it for the future? As scientists invariably recommend, "further research is needed." Back here, beyond the shiny think tanks, the research is ongoing. •

*Curt Meine counts himself among the "politically homeless." He is a consulting conservation biologist based in Prairie du Sac and has authored several books, including the biography **Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work** (University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) and the recently published **Correction Lines: Essays on Land, Leopold, and Conservation** (Island Press). Meine serves as senior fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation and as a research associate with the International Crane Foundation. He is also active in local conservation as a founding member of the Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance. He was a leader in such Wisconsin Academy projects as conferences about Wallace Stegner and Aldo Leopold, and, more recently, the three-year Waters of Wisconsin initiative.*