

President Wilson's Visit To Sioux Falls, 1919

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"Not all citizens can accept the president's views on national and international policies. But differences of opinion on such matters detract nothing from the personal warmth of the welcome which thousands of South Dakotans will give to their president." With this hope for public harmony, *The Daily Argus-Leader* of Sioux Falls noted the impending visit of President Woodrow Wilson and suggested that although South Dakota was "a hard-shell republican state" there would nevertheless be "an enthusiastic welcome to the president," who had been "chief executive during one of the most trying periods of the world's history" and who was traveling "to talk things over with the American people."¹

The time was September 1919; the topic was the Treaty of Versailles. It lay so heavily on the president's mind that he embarked upon a tour stretching from Columbus, Ohio, to California and back to Colorado, where his collapse necessitated the cancellation of his remaining speeches. The president had broken precedent by going to Paris himself to negotiate a treaty following the armistice of November 1918, and when the United States Senate hesitated to approve his work, he took to the road to defend the treaty against both those who demanded modifications and those who opposed the treaty even with proposed reservations. Many criticized incorporating the League

1. *Daily Argus-Leader*, 8 Sept. 1919, p. 4.

of Nations Covenant in the treaty of peace; they asserted the two elements were separate topics and should be kept apart in international instruments.

The chief executive's twelve-car special train had borne the party to formal appearances in Columbus, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Des Moines, and Omaha.² En route to the Twin Cities from Nebraska a two-hour stopover in Sioux Falls was scheduled for the evening of 8 September 1919. Some considered it a triumph over Sioux City that the presidential train paused there for just moments. The chief executive shook hands "and 'joshed' with the crowd but did not make a speech." The president, averred the *Mitchell Morning Republican*, was a "guest of the state of South Dakota." In that paper's view, he was "as much the guest of Mitchell as of Sioux Falls." The stop in South Dakota was part of a tour concentrated in the West. "As compared with eastern states with their cities filled with ignorant or vicious masses, the free expanse of the West affords a most agreeable contrast," affirmed Mitchell's editor. "The people of the western states are readers and therefore they are informed. They have independence, as shown by their settlement of a new country. And their's [*sic*] is the competence of the pioneer who must meet all sorts of obstacles."³

In somewhat less high-flown language, *The Aberdeen Daily American* suggested, "It is conceivable that the president out here on the prairie is getting clearer insight into the national mind than he could in the turmoil of conflicting special interests in Washington or New York. . . ."⁴ Paradoxically, in Western states decisive support for Wilson contributed to his reelection in 1916, and the most determined Senate opposition to the treaty existed under the leadership of Senators William E. Borah and Hiram Johnson of Idaho and California, respectively.

Sioux Falls was no exception to the pattern of mixed reactions, for uniform goodwill did not prevail. In mid-June

2. *Sioux Falls Press*, 8 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Current History*, Oct. 1919, p. 17.

3. (Mitchell) *Morning Republican*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 4; *Daily Argus-Leader*, 8 September 1919, p. 1.

4. *Aberdeen (S.D.) Daily American*, 11 Sept. 1919, p. 4.

former Senator Richard F. Pettigrew confided to Senator Borah, "I would not vote for the treaty if the League were separated from it, because it is an infamous treaty and a breeder of future wars."⁵ Even more menacing than Pettigrew's attitude was intelligence made public almost simultaneously with Wilson's visit that Hiram Johnson, a Senate critic following the route of the president, would be in Sioux Falls on 16 September. An offer of an appearance by the irreconcilable Republican, who opposed the treaty even with revisions, was tendered to the Commercial Club by Representatives C. A. Christopherson. The Commercial Club, perhaps for reasons economic as well as civic, was already active in planning Wilson's visit; it accepted with alacrity the proffered opportunity to attract crowds to the downtown section of the city.⁶

Some who entertained doubts about the president's treaty labored wholeheartedly to make the visit an event the Wilsons could remember pleasantly. *The Daily Argus-Leader*, for example, questioned Wilson's alleged claim that the delay in ratification had already contributed to the high cost of living; however, in its public exhortation the newspaper not only urged his polite reception but also staunchly predicted the crowd would "be measured by the tens of thousands," gave notably complete coverage to preparations and the address, and joined the "Wilson Day Decoration Committee" in an "urgent appeal" for decorations along the route the president would follow to the Coliseum from the railroad station on Eighth Street just east of the Sioux River.⁷

5. Pettigrew to Borah, 15 June 1919, Richard F. Pettigrew Papers, Pettigrew Museum, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

6. *Aberdeen Daily American*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Daily Argus-Leader*, 8 Sept. 1919, p. 3; *Sioux Falls Press*, 8 Sept. 1919, p. 2. "Is there any significance in the fact that the Sioux Falls Commercial Club sent out personal invitations, over the state, to attend the meeting of Hiram Johnson, and asked nobody there to hear the President? It is a long arm that reaches from Business centers to Sioux Falls. But we have learned that organized business leaves no stone unturned when sufficiently interested. And the fact that every Big Business Senator is uncompromisingly against the treaty has caused suspicions." (*Morning Republican*, 18 Sept. 1919, p. 8.)

7. *Daily Argus-Leader*, 4 Sept. 1919, pp. 4, 11; *ibid.*, 5 Sept. 1919, p. 1. The 1920 census recorded a population of 25,202 for Sioux Falls and 42,490 for Minnehaha County.

Phillips Avenue



Sioux Falls after the turn of the century.

Energetic preparations went on apace as the anticipated day came near. The Home Guard, under Captain B. C. Smull, was called upon to help the police force, and assistance from all service men was solicited. Flags, banners, and streamers lined the streets, and strings of electric lights—inevitably red, white, and blue—were strung across the line of march. Chairs were removed from the main floor of the Coliseum so that a larger audience could be accommodated, while badges authorizing access to seats in reserved sections of the balconies were issued to committee members and to clubwomen. Persons in outlying areas in South Dakota and adjacent states were assured that railroads would provide extra facilities to handle the expected influx of visitors. Even the weather was cooperative in early September, and newspaper readers were confidently informed that “roads over practically the entire state are now in excellent

340 *South Dakota History*

condition and it is anticipated that many will make the trip by automobile.”⁸

On the stellar day itself, a “drizzling rain . . . began early in the forenoon,” but it did not appreciably reduce the crowds nor was there believed to be enough precipitation “to make the roads impassable and prevent the hundreds in nearby towns from driving in as they had planned.” A warning, destined to be largely ignored, came from George W. Burnside: the mayor feared that injuries might be suffered in the “dense crowds” or that pickpockets might take advantage of the press. Heedless of the warning, the people massed together, and with some relief it was reported after the event that “no accidents during the evening either at the coliseum or along the streets” had taken place. If pickpockets thrived, reports of their activities were not publicized.⁹

The drizzle stopped before the scheduled arrival of the presidential train at eight o'clock, but by this time the throngs of people, suggested by *The Sioux Falls Press* to be over thirty thousand, had absorbed considerable moisture. Helping to maintain the spirits of those waiting at the station itself, the Shrine band, which had taken refuge under cover, rendered musical selections. Alighting from the train with President and Mrs. Wilson were Joseph P. Tumulty, private secretary to the president; Rear Admiral Cary T. Grayson, personal aide and physician; secret service personnel; and the inevitable press corps of about thirty members. The procession, with police Chief W. H. Martin and the Shrine band preceding seventeen automobiles, traveled a circuitous route of more than a mile to the Coliseum. Impediments to the easy movement of the parade and to the vision of the banks of spectators were avoided by enforcement of a no-parking rule along the route. Although Mayor Burnside had warned in advance against parking, there were violators; and when the owners of contraband automobiles could not be found, the “cars were shunted off into alleys and

8. *Daily Argus-Leader*, 5 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 8 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Sioux Falls Press*, 7 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 1.

9. *Sioux Falls Press*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 2; *Daily Argus-Leader*, 7 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 8 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 3.

side streets," to the perplexity of some motorists, who had trouble finding their vehicles.¹⁰

Within the Coliseum, congestion was oppressive. In the balconies a reported two thousand women found seats and another "thousand or more . . . crowded in the aisles," while on the main floor stood five thousand men, by one calculation. There seats were provided only for the press and the band members. Because of the danger of injury from the press of the hordes, women and youths under fifteen were excluded from the main floor. Nevertheless, the first two persons to gain entrance were "a small colored newsboy and a man with a pillow," the former of whom eventually "ducked under the railing, and occupied a seat in the newspaper row."¹¹

The preliminaries to the president's address were simple. The Shrine band struck up "America," and as the honored guest began to sing, the whole audience joined in. The garb of Mr. Wilson provoked little interest among reporters, but they could not ignore Mrs. Wilson, gowned as she was "in a tailleur of gray tricotine and black satin," with accessories of black kid gloves, "slippers . . . of black kid with silver colonial buckles," and a "chic black close-fitting velvet Parisian pattern" hat. As a gift from the women of Sioux Falls "a basket of pink rosebuds and a corsage of deep red Columbia roses" were presented by two small girls, each under four years of age, who walked over to the gracious first lady after peeping "out from Secretary Tumulty's bulking form." Mrs. Wilson's spontaneous response of kissing

10. *Daily Argus-Leader*, 5 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 8 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1919, pp. 1, 3, 8; *Sioux Falls Press*, 9 Sept. 1919, pp. 1, 2. The parade went west from the station of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Omaha Railroad to Phillips Avenue, south on Phillips to Twelfth Street, again west to Main Street, and north on that artery to the Coliseum. (*Daily Argus-Leader*, 4 Sept. 1919, p. 11.)

11. *Daily Argus-Leader*, 5 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 7 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 8 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Sioux Falls Press*, 7 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 2. Favored with seats on the stage with the Wilsons were Governor Peter Norbeck; Commercial Club president Allen R. Fellows, who introduced the governor; and Mrs. Lew Leavitt, a prominent clubwoman, who sat with Mrs. Wilson. Behind these five sat a "large committee made up of prominent people of the state and men and women of Sioux Falls . . .," including W. C. Cook, Republican National Committeeman from South Dakota. (*Ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 2; *Morning Republican*, 10 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 4.) Estimates of the size of the crowd naturally varied: *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (9 Sept. 1919, p. 4) mentioned a "crowd of 7,000 which came out in the rain," but presumably this meant the number in the Coliseum. *The Morning Republican* (10 Sept. 1919, p. 1) indicated fifteen thousand, clearly too many for the Coliseum.

the "fairy-clad little girls" won the affection of the crowd.¹² Governor Peter Norbeck presented the president with remarks distinguished by their brevity. *The Chicago Tribune* suggested that this was "one of the shortest speeches of introduction on record," and it pointedly observed that the governor "expressed no thought about the league of nations." Perhaps Norbeck was disenchanted. With Mrs. Norbeck the governor had gone to Sioux City expecting to board the presidential train, but he learned, to his dismay, that the tour managers had not provided for his joining the party. Thereupon the pair hired a taxi, and despite "two blowouts and some pretty slippery roads" they arrived in time for the introduction of the president.¹³

The president's Sioux Falls address was different from each of the others of the tour, because he was cognizant of both the unremitting publicity given his words and the varying special concerns in the several places on the itinerary. He reiterated some themes used elsewhere, but he drafted the address for Sioux Falls.

Wilson ranged from emotional appeals to calculated self-interest. The world, he began, was at a turning point in history, and as "mankind's fortunes . . . hung in the balance" he hoped the United States would "have the distinction of leading the way." He spoke of women who had lost loved ones in the "great cause . . . of civilization," of American soldiers who were crusaders, "seeking to defeat everything that Germany represented . . ." The president, perhaps to offset charges that he was pro-German,¹⁴ presented a stark picture of a Germany "preparing for . . . war for generations" and "developing every invention which would enable her to master the European world and to dominate the rest of the world." Germany had

12. *Sioux Falls Press*, 7 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1919, pp. 1, 2; *Daily Argus-Leader*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 9; *Morning Republican*, 10 Sept. 1919, p. 1. The two girls were Mary Jane Heinsheimer, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Heinsheimer, and Barbara Carroll, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. George A. Carroll.

13. *Morning Republican*, 10 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Sioux Falls Press*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Daily Argus-Leader*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 8; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 4.

14. Paul Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941), pp. 13-14.

Woodrow Wilson



convinced the world these preparations were defensive. The assassination of the Austrian archduke was utilized as the excuse for war. Serbia, asserted Wilson, "had practically yielded to every demand that Germany made of her, and they would not let the rest of the world know that Serbia had yielded." No opportunity had existed for negotiation to avoid war, because "Germany didn't dare to discuss her purpose for 24 hours."

The Treaty of Versailles, his great handiwork, was presented as an instrument that disarmed Germany while "all the other nations of the world" promised "never to go to war" again. But, said the president, some wanted the United States to arm for self-defense and to make itself secure from competition, rather than work with other nations. "I want to tell you," he lectured, "that in the last two weeks the pro-German element has lifted its head again." Then he quickly explained he did not mean pro-German in the sense of active partnership with that country but rather that Americans would "play the same role as the Germans" in remaining aloof from international cooperation and in displaying belligerence. On the other hand, the treaty

undid "the injustice that Germany did," and it would prevent similar injustice in the future.

"It is a laboring man's treaty," continued the president, because it was framed for the benefit of the common people. Unjust annexations were ended, and militarism was superseded by "the concerted force of mankind." After declaring the choice was "between the league of nations and Germanism," he drew a storm of applause and a shout of "Good" when he asserted, "Sometimes the people call me an idealist. That is why I know I am an American."

Brushing aside the provision in the League Covenant permitting withdrawal after two years' notice, Wilson insisted the nation would "stay in in order to see that justice is done." Withdrawal would be unnecessary, because the position of the United States on the League Council would enable it to "determine what action will be taken."¹⁵ And as far as the policy of talk and negotiation was concerned, this was in keeping with treaties the nation already had with "nearly 30" countries.¹⁶

Nearing his conclusion, the speaker continued, "I sometimes think when I wake up in the night, of the wakeful nights that anxious fathers, mothers and friends spent during the weary years of the awful war, and I hear the cry of mothers of the children, millions on the other side and thousands on this side, 'in God's name give us security and peace.' " Then, shifting his approach, he remarked that if one wanted to talk business it was obvious that economic isolation would follow political withdrawal. But then he concluded: "We are not thinking of money, we are thinking more of redeeming the reputation of America than of having all of the money in the world. I am not

15. *The Morning Republican* (10 Sept. 1919, p. 1) reported a feature not generally recorded: "The audience shouted gleefully when the President said a nation which enters the League with the intention of getting out in two years or a little later would be like a fidgetty man at a meeting who sits 'near the door with his hand on the knob.' "

16. William Jennings Bryan served as Wilson's secretary of state from March 1913 to June 1915. Of thirty conciliation treaties negotiated during his tenure, twenty-two went into effect. (Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 8th ed. [New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969], p. 545.)

ready to die for money, and neither are you, but you and I are ready to die for America."¹⁷

A great and sustained ovation followed the presentation. A journalist observed that the address "lasted barely 40 minutes," and with its abrupt ending "an oratorical critic would have said it had no peroration." But to many in the Coliseum the essentials had been covered.¹⁸

While the applause of the assembly still thundered, a minor untoward incident transpired when a man mounted the table in the press box and assayed to clamber onto the stage. His goal was to shake the hand of the president, but the "long strong arm" that grasped him "belonged to a secret service man," who ordered a retreat to the main floor. A reporter for the *Mitchell Morning Republican* traveling with the presidential train explained that the man was "well known to every South Dakotan, both for his loyalty and his good reputation as a former federal officer in South Dakota." The sympathetic scribe withheld the name of the embarrassed admirer.¹⁹

Returning directly to the train, the president immediately resumed his pilgrimage, going to St. Paul for an early morning arrival. The sojourn in Sioux Falls was fleeting, but the impact was more lasting. First came the reactions of the press and of individuals. For the most part, published views were consistent with attitudes suggested before the Coliseum affair or with publicly known political preferences. *The Sioux Falls Press* while admitting some reservations might be necessary, hailed Wilson's message: "The great effect of the president's visit has been to change the apathetic feeling of the public to enthusiasm for a great Christian principle. Sioux Falls and South Dakota were not only glad of this opportunity to entertain the chief

17. Newspapers reported the speech in varying degrees of completeness and with variations in the text. Locally, the purported complete text was printed, while papers at a distance commonly tended to combine summaries with extracts. (*Daily Argus-Leader*, 9 Sept. 1919, pp. 1, 3; *Aberdeen Daily American*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Morning Republican*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, 10 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 Sept. 1919, pp. 1, 4.)

18. *Morning Republican*, 10 Sept. 1919, p. 2.

19. *Ibid.*, 10 Sept. 1919, p. 1.

executive of the nation, they are grateful to Mr. Wilson for enlightenment on a doctrine that is destined to make history for generations to come."²⁰ Two federal officers in Aberdeen predictably expressed enthusiasm. "In my opinion," said J. F. Kelly, the postmaster, "the president is making a magnificent fight for the greatest measure ever conceived in the history of the world." Less loftily but with as much force, James Coffy, collector of internal revenue, thought the president had made "the objections in the League of Nations pact look silly." Former governor C. N. Herreid snorted that it was "sheer nonsense" to think the United States could withdraw from Europe, and he slapped at both parties for "playing a clear game of politics." The real essential, in his view, was to "have peace and go on with business." *The Aberdeen Daily American* found in all of the president's addresses "the fundamental object of the treaty and the league—the end of the war." If "reservations" or "interpretations" were necessary, the editor counseled that they be made immediately, and at all events "this plan for a league of nations" looked like "the best suggestion yet" for lasting peace.²¹

Of more interest to many than the judgments of area observers was the promised appearance of Senator Hiram Johnson. His visit on 16 September followed some of the patterns set by the president: the Commercial Club arranged the visit; a band and an automobile parade conveyed the visitor to the Coliseum—from the main floor of which seats were again removed, and the balconies were reserved for women; and many of the same dignitaries who sat with the president were again present to grip the hand of the president's tireless critic. Sioux City was again short-changed—a proposed visit was canceled because proper rail connections could not be made.²²

Even newspapers sympathetic to the president and his views conceded that the response to the 100-minute address of the

20. *Ibid.*, 10 Sept. 1919, p. 2; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Yankton Press and Dakotan*, 11 Sept. 1919, p. 8; *Sioux Falls Press*, 9 Sept. 1919, p. 4.

21. *Aberdeen Daily American*, 10 Sept. 1919, pp. 1, 6; *ibid.*, 11 Sept. 1919, p. 4.

22. *Morning Republican*, 17 Sept. 1919, p. 1; *Sioux Falls Press*, 16 Sept. 1919, pp. 1, 4.

senator surpassed that given Mr. Wilson. Objectively, though somewhat sadly, *The Sioux Falls Press* recorded: "Spontaneous outbursts of cheers and yells, which fairly shook the walls of the huge building, frequently greeted the remarks of the senator as he referred to Wilson's 'covenants openly arrived at' and the 14 points."²³

Divided opinion continued long after Wilson and Johnson had left the state. The absence of consensus in South Dakota was reflected by the state's two senators. On every ballot on the treaty without any change or reservation, Edwin S. Johnson, Democrat, found his affirmative vote countered by a negative response from Thomas Sterling, Republican. On each effort to approve the treaty with reservations, the Democratic senator voted nay, in keeping with his president's insistence upon the treaty without modification. Meanwhile, his Republican colleague chose to support the treaty with reservations. On all Senate votes save one the negative opinion prevailed through majority vote; in one case a majority favored an amended treaty, but the affirmative votes fell short of the requisite two-thirds majority, and peacemaking remained in a suspended state until after President Wilson had left the White House.²⁴

The president's visit to Sioux Falls and other cities failed to carry the day for his program, but he contributed excitement and interest in the affairs of state. And South Dakotans participated in the drama.

23. *Sioux Falls Press*, 17 Sept. 1919, p. 1.

24. U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 66th Cong., 1st sess., 1919, 58, pt. 9:8786, 8802, 8803; *ibid.*, 2d sess., 59, pt. 5:4599.

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