

## Dakota Images

Richard Olsen Richards, a Norwegian immigrant who prospered from land and banking investments, was a powerful advocate for progressive political reforms in South Dakota in the early twentieth century.

Richards was born on 2 January 1866 in Sandefjord, Norway, to Richard Martin and Maren Seville. Following Norse custom, he formed his surname from his father's first name. He emigrated to the United States at the age of fifteen. After three years in New York, the young Richards moved to Dakota Territory. Penniless upon his arrival in Mitchell in 1884, he soon found employment in a bank. Two years later, Richards moved to Huron and joined the American Investment Company of Emmetsburg, Iowa, which dealt in farm loans. After this concern failed, he reportedly purchased most of its assets at a receiver's sale in Iowa and set up his own successful trust company in Huron.

Richards entered politics following a controversy over the appointment of the local postmaster in 1902–1903. When conservative Republicans nominated a postmaster who lacked popular approval, Richards denounced the political patronage system. His remedy for perceived corruption was the primary election, which empowered voters to choose the party's candidates for office directly.

Aligning himself with the reformist, or progressive, wing of the Republican Party, Richards lent his organizational and writing skills to successful 1906 gubernatorial candidate Coe I. Crawford. However, after Crawford signed a primary bill that failed to meet his expectations, Richards looked to the initiative and referendum to achieve his goals. Expending much of his personal fortune in the process, the Huron businessman led petition drives that placed various iterations of his signature Richards Primary Law before voters in 1912, 1916, and 1918. Although the people approved the measure twice, the state legislature's efforts to repeal or amend it prevented the use of the primary system as Richards had designed it, except for the 1920 election. While its author had hoped that its provisions for the recognition of minority political factions and mandatory debates would ensure true representative government, the Richards Primary Law was repealed in 1929.

Richards married Grace May Durell in 1891. The couple had six children. He died on 11 May 1930 and is buried in Huron.

