

The Promoter



His Life and Times

By

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Introduction

Among my earliest recollections was being embarrassed at school when I was asked what my father did. He never seemed to be gainfully employed at anything except being "father." When I asked my older brothers what I was supposed to indicate as his occupation, I was told that he was a promoter. Their attempts at a meaningful description made little sense to me then. Other children had farmers, jewelers, tailors, salesmen, doctors or factory workers for fathers. Another brother said that he was a lobbyist, whatever that was. I never knew any of my peers who could brag of their dad as being a promoter or lobbyist or whether it was something to brag about, for that matter.

He was a strong, thick-wristed, black-haired Irishman who read several newspapers a day, prayed the rosary occasionally and did a considerable amount of writing which he never allowed anyone to read. He lived to be eighty-seven and seldom talked about anything except his logging experiences. Though he seemed to be much larger than life, what he made a living at remained shrouded in mystery for many years.

As those years went by I became increasingly aware of what an unusual fellow he was. Despite the tunnel vision of being his son, his effect on his family and on the hundreds of others whose lives he touched bore out the accuracy of my mature judgement.

Some time ago I came upon his written account of his youth and logging experiences. Along with this treasure I came in the possession of very nearly everything connected with his career which ended about ten years after I was born - at which time I had hardly reached the age of reason or any degree of discernment whatever. The following narrative is a reconstruction of his life as a promoter.

In The Beginning - A Log Cabin

The Town of Manawa, Wisconsin has a population of 1205 or 1216 depending upon the road by which you enter its city limits. It is located beside the Little Wolf river which curls its way among green hills and rich red soil not unlike that of northwest Ireland, a land from whence most of Lebonon Township's ancestors came several generations ago. It is the vicinity from which the late, boisterous Joseph R. McCarthy rose to national prominence.

However one regards this Shawano native, either as a great hero and scourge of communists or a shameful blot on the great progressive tradition of Wisconsin political history, he did make himself known. The largely Irish inhabitants, mostly conservative Republican farmers, remember him wistfully and, for the most part, fondly.

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This is the story of another Irishman who, had fate dealt more kindly with him and had he a sounder business sense and grasp of financial skills, may have given rise to a dynasty, if not quite as spectacular as the Boston Kennedys, at least as far-reaching and well established with heirs.

It is a story that embodies much of the history of a mid-western state that filled up quite rapidly after the Civil War, struggling to achieve national prominence as a machine maker of great importance, a gargantuan lumber producer and into the Twentieth Century a dairy giant second to none.

Martin O'Brien, my father, had a hand in virtually every phase of the historical development of the Badger State in one way or another. His life covered a period from the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, through the adolescent development of the tens and twenties and ended at the beginning of the Viet Nam War. It was an era that our elderly citizens wax poetic about, the "olden days," when men were clearly men, and feminism was scarcely more

than a precarious and grudgingly bestowed voting franchise.

His career began on a farm in Lebanon Township near Manawa which was named after a famous Indian chief who presided over this portion of Wisconsin in the early Nineteenth Century. However, opportunities and events were to bring him across the state to Eau Claire. The search for who my father was reveals a man's remarkable optimism and perseverance throughout his active career as he went on, completely unaided, to establish over twenty-three businesses, the patenting of numerous inventions and the furthering of untold acquaintances throughout northwest and central Wisconsin.

The environment was peculiarly responsive to his Irishness, good humor and eccentric vitality. His career reveals an entrepreneurship that would gladden the hearts of conservative Republicans, though he never revealed his political preferences, coupled with the kindness and generosity of a true liberal Democrat.

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His life began in a log cabin in Lebanon Township on October 18th, 1876. His mother Susan, gave birth to twin boys, Martin and Thomas. They had been preceded by William (1869-1904), John (1872-1902) and Michael (1873-1963). Susan (Fitzgerald) was but twenty-two at the time, and her husband, Martin Sr., was forty-two. He was born in Ireland in 1833 and arrived at the Port of New York in July of 1852 at the age of nineteen. His employment on the Erie Railroad resulted in the loss of a leg, which litigation in Columbus, Ohio resulted in a settlement of \$500.

\$500 being a considerable sum of money at the time, he with his typical Irish generosity and love of kin, returned to Ireland and financed the passage (steerage) of over fifty Irish couples and their relatives to settle in and around Lebanon, several miles north of what is presently New London and east of Manawa and Wau-paca. Meanwhile he had been betrothed to Susan

Fitzgerald of Hartford, Connecticut, she never having met her wooden-legged fiance. Together they set up homestead on a 250 acre plot, bristling with granite boulders and intermittent forests and swamps.

Life for this couple was, as one might expect, harsh, with stumps to grub and boulders to clear away for sod-busting. It was joyfully punctuated by the arrival of seven boys in all: William, John, Martin and Thomas, Michael, Robert and Frank. Their abode was of log construction with the building and land clearing shared cheerfully by neighbors, the grim tasks lightened on Sundays with devout attendance at nearby St. Patricks church and a day of well-deserved rest.



Sarah, like a pouting Gibson Girl, and Martin exchanged vows in 1903 and were on thir way.



A somewhat stern portrait that masked a multitude of cares and caring, taken about 1875 of Amelia Quilling.

A Grand Time

The Eau Claire Theater Company with its Grand Opera House and the newly built City Auditorium on Barstow Street attracted many of the leading theatrical celebrities of the day. Ole Bull, the great Norwegian violinist, was the first to grace its stage, followed by Sarah Bernhardt, the great actress, Galli Curci the contralto, the world-acclaimed ballerina Pavlova, who may have inspired my sister, Marion, to endure endless and painful toe dancing routines, the popular Winniger brothers out of Wausau with their slapstick sketches, Houdini, Paderewski - all traveling the circuit and concert programs from Minneapolis to Chicago were booked.

The O'Brien box seat was never empty from the day Martin helped promote it through subscriptions until the film craze closed its doors in the late twenties. My brother relates how they mischievously deposited stacks of handbills in the west side dump near the Water Street Bridge they were to have peddled of coming attractions at the "Grand." They would be collectors items today but searches have discovered precious few if any survived.

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George, the eldest O'Brien, paid for his heroism one evening when he scooped up a youngster from the path of an oncoming car in front of the Grand, only to have its bumpers shatter his two knee caps in the process. Two doctors worked feverishly to patch them together with wire and set them in casts.

Several weeks later the knitted and stiff legs had to be bent by brother Jack, another though reluctant hero, by lowering his weight on them as screams of pain reverberated about the neighborhood from George's strapped down body on the den bed. Such was the orthopedic technique of the day. Strangely enough, his badly damaged knees did not prevent him from enlisting in the Air Force to complete a somewhat distinguished career as an officer in the

The Gillette Rubber Company

Investment money was readily available, much of it from farmers who had prospered so dramatically during World War I. Martin's reputation for gathering capital through his wide-ranging acquaintances attracted the attention of an enterprising tire manufacturer from Benton Harbor, Michigan, Raymond B. Gillette.

He arrived in Eau Claire in 1916 with his brother, Herbert, who had perfected a tire liner (innertube) designed to improve the durability of the tire casing. "R.B.", as Raymond was affectionately known, was congenial, formidable in appearance but somewhat uninspiring as a promoter. Furthermore, he lacked sufficient local capital to get his rubber factory underway.

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A Dayton, Ohio corporation had obligated \$260,000 as seed funding for the venture if local capital could be added to it. Some years later "R.B." related what then took place. "I brought in a Mr. Wilson from New York to sell stock. He was unsuccessful. We bought back all but \$12,500 and I called in O'Brien. Within five months he gathered one million dollars from local businessmen, about a third of it from his own pocket. Shortly afterward the Hutchins boys arrived, Ralph and Howard, and up went the plant!"

It was constructed on the north bank of the Eau Claire River from land purchased from the Northwestern Lumber Company. The first Gillette Safety Tire came off the assembly line on May 23rd., 1917. The design was a square-woven one built on a metal core. A production schedule was set at 200 tires a day which by 1919 had risen to 1,000.

When the location, capital, and demand along with the proper economic climate fit together, this business success may serve as a paradigm for what was happening all over the