

William Duncan Connor

In 1872 William Duncan Connor, at the age of eight, emigrated with his family from Stratford, Ontario, Canada to Auburndale, Wisconsin. His father, Robert, and his uncles cleared the land for farming and opened an Indian trading post. From these humble beginnings emerged the R. Connor Company, a logging, lumber, farming, and retail store business. William Duncan Connor moved his family and the R. Connor Company offices to Marshfield in 1895. The young entrepreneur expanded to Stratford, Wisconsin (named for his birthplace) and built private telephone lines from Auburndale and Stratford to the Marshfield office to communicate with his ever-growing company. "W.D.", as he was known, became one of Marshfield's most prominent citizens.

In 1886 William married Mary Witter, the schoolteacher at Auburndale and the first Wood County woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin. Mary Witter of Grand Rapids (now Wisconsin Rapids) was from a prominent family where education, cultural pursuits (especially music), and community involvement were important. She and her husband made a positive impact on their community and family of seven children.

Their home was a gathering place for friends, their children's friends, and quoting the Marshfield News, December 31, 1897, some less fortunate: "Mr. and Mrs. W.D. Connor have the untold blessings of two score or more little children that they kindly entertained Christmas eve. They were children from families who did not feel able to provide a tree, but through the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Connor, Santa Claus remembered them. A big tree laden down with good things greeted their eyes, and besides, there was a present for each. It was a happy Christmas Eve that brought sunshine and joy to every heart."

Their home was also a gathering place for businessmen, politicians, relatives, writers, and people from all walks of life. One example from a 1932 Marshfield News Herald article: "One day in May ... 1911 in front of R. Connor Company's office two men met in a handshake that bespoke more than a passing acquaintance. One of them was Hon. W.D. Connor and the other Indian Albert of Kansas. Twenty-five years had elapsed... and as they shook each other's hand there was a feeling akin to brother love expressed in their regard... Albert was chief counselor for all the Potawatomie Indians on the Eau Pleine rivers... He was honest and upright in all his dealings.... His friendship for Mr. Connor was two-fold, first in a business sense and secondly from the assistance he once rendered him when found in the woods crippled by an accident ... Mr. Connor was struck by a falling limb which broke his arm and injured his leg so he could not walk. He was alone As he lay on the ground suffering, Albert and a companion found him and carried him to one of their logging camps. The incident took place in the '80's. Shortly after this occurrence, Albert... with other members of the tribe went to live in Kansas. Upon his first return visit here in 1911, his first inquiry ... was for 'Willie' Connor Albert's hair ... was still the color of the raven's wing, but his years had brought on a tottering step that he aided with a cane. From here he went to Skunk Hill for a visit with a little handful of his people who live there, but dealings.... His friendship for Mr. Connor was two-fold, first in a business sense and secondly



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The William D. Connor family. (Back row-standing): Helen Melissa Connor (Laird), Marion Elizabeth Connor (Rhyner), Donald, William Duncan Connor Jr. (Front row-seated): Richard Malcohm Connor, Mary Witter Connor, Constance Victoria Anne Connor (Modrall), Gordon Robert Phelps Connor and William Duncan Connor.

W.D. Connor sought to bring education and culture to the frontier. He placed special emphasis on the importance of providing books for children. His \$2,500 gift made possible the Marshfield public library, heralded by the Times and News in 1901; "W.D. Connor, whose public spirited, liberality has frequently been shown before" and "This generous and public spirited action on the part of Mr. Connor has earned for him the gratitude of the entire community and more especially the children who crave juvenile literature."

W.D. was a student of history. His special interests were the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln, whom he greatly admired. His own library was extensive.

Active in politics on the local, state, and national scenes, he was a friend of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft. W.D. was Chairman of the Republican State Central Committee and Lieutenant Governor, 1907-8. He served on the Marshfield City Council and the Wood County Board for twenty years.

William Connor was a banker in five central Wisconsin towns. He had an abiding interest in agriculture and animal husbandry. The breeding and showing of horses (his Shires won national prizes) and improvements in agricultural practice were necessitated by logging camp demands for work horses, cattle, pigs, hay for animals, fruits and vegetables. The round barn built by the R. Connor Company at the county fairgrounds in Marshfield is a reminder of this interest.

His interests in politics and banking notwithstanding, W.D. knew that he had to concentrate his efforts on the lumber business. His father had called him home from college to run the business. It took his great energy, foresight, and commitment to cruise timber, oversee land acquisitions, extensive logging operations, lumber sales, and management of an ever-growing corporate enterprise. The American Lumber-man reported in 1906: "Mr. Connor with the necessary faith in an upward turn and the foresight to anticipate it, held on, and in 1896 and 1897 when the real advance in prices came, his company along with two others in the state owned "the bulk of the hardwoods." William Connor knew the necessity of land acquisition for the future of his company. His wife joked that whenever the train stopped her husband would jump off to buy land.

No detail was too small - as voluminous correspondence in the Connor Archives at the State Historical Society attests. W.D. was a man of letters - handwritten letters! He wrote to his children, grandchildren, poets, politicians, businessmen, to various store, mill, farm, and logging managers of the company. Letters to his sons guided them in business decisions, and helped them plan for the future.

William Connor took care of his extended family. Many employees came from Stratford, Canada, some were relatives. He maintained his family home in Auburndale for his sisters, sent them to college, to Europe for the Grand Tour which included a visit with relatives in Scotland and when they married, it was from his home in Marshfield where each was presented with a complete service of sterling silver! One grandchild reminisces: "At the beginning of each summer at Laona we had to play our piano recital pieces for Grandfather - after that our summer was a free, happy, wonderful time. He would take us fishing and walk in the woods with us. When we visited in Marshfield, Grandfather would take us to his farm at Auburndale where we rode a gentle mare named Maud."

A tall, wiry, erect man with sandy hair and penetrating eyes, Mr. Connor had an expectation of excellence to which he held himself and all around him. He was loyal, energetic, honest, and generous. His beginnings were humble; his success was a result of hard work and careful planning. "Eternal Vigilance" and "Knowledge Is Power" were his lifelong maxims - learned in the Brookaden Schoolhouse, Stratford, Canada - they guided this, pioneer for his eighty years 1864 - 1944.

Submitted by Mary Connor Pierce, for the Marshfield History Project, Volume 1, "The Marshfield Story, 1872-1997: Piecing Together Our Past", pages 361-363.