

Carl Sandburg and Milwaukee Politics

by Harry H. Anderson

Carl Sandburg, the Swedish-American literary giant, was early in his career a resident of Milwaukee and politically active in local politics as a member of the Social Democratic party. In 1910, after the Socialists captured the Milwaukee Mayor's office and control of the common council, Sandburg served as private secretary to Emil Seidel, the city's new chief executive.

Later that year, the Socialist party caucus selected "Charles" Sandburg (as he was then known) to run as their candidate in the race for Wisconsin's Seventh Assembly district. This district encompassed the townships of Franklin, Greenfield and Wauwatosa (Sandburg resided in the latter), the industrial communities of West Milwaukee and West Allis, and the heavily Republican city of Wauwatosa.

In the election race, Sandburg ran against candidates from both the regular Republican and Democratic parties and wound up finishing a fairly respectable third in the contest. The vote totals, out of 3,385 ballots cast, were: The Republican winner, 1,886 votes (48.6%); the Democratic runner-up, 1,033 votes (26.7%); and Sandburg, 856 votes (24.7%). Two years earlier in a similar three-way race, the Social-Democratic candidate (not Sandburg) received only 14% of the votes cast in the district.

In March, 1911 Sandburg quit his post at the mayor's office, disenchanted with the day-to-day routine of public service (he had become tired of answering phone calls from irate citizens complaining that their garbage had not been collected on time). Sandburg subsequently moved to Chicago and eventually literary fame and never again was a candidate for public office. None of the several Sandburg biographies contain any mention of his 1910 venture into the political arena.

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