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## The Unexpected Belle La Follette

Nancy Unger  
*Santa Clara University*, [nunger@scu.edu](mailto:nunger@scu.edu)

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INSURANCE  
WISCONSIN GENERAL AGENTS  
SOUTHERN SURETY CO.

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1925 NOVEMBER 1925						
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# THE UNEXPEC

Belle La Follette works in the office of *La Follette's Magazine* in 1925.

# ED Belle La Follette



BY NANCY C. UNGER

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Although the *New York Times* eulogized Belle Case La Follette in 1931 as perhaps “the most influential of all American women who have had to do with public affairs in this country,” she faded quickly from popular memory.<sup>1</sup> And when she is recalled, it’s usually in relation to her husband and sons. This minimization of her own accomplishments began with progressive reform giant Robert M. La Follette famously calling her “my wisest and best counselor.” He openly deferred to his wife’s judgment throughout his storied professional life: as a district attorney, three-term congressman (1885–1891), lawyer (1891–1900), three-term governor of Wisconsin (1900–1906), and, most significantly, during his nineteen years in the US Senate (1906–1925).



WHITIMAGE ID 27041

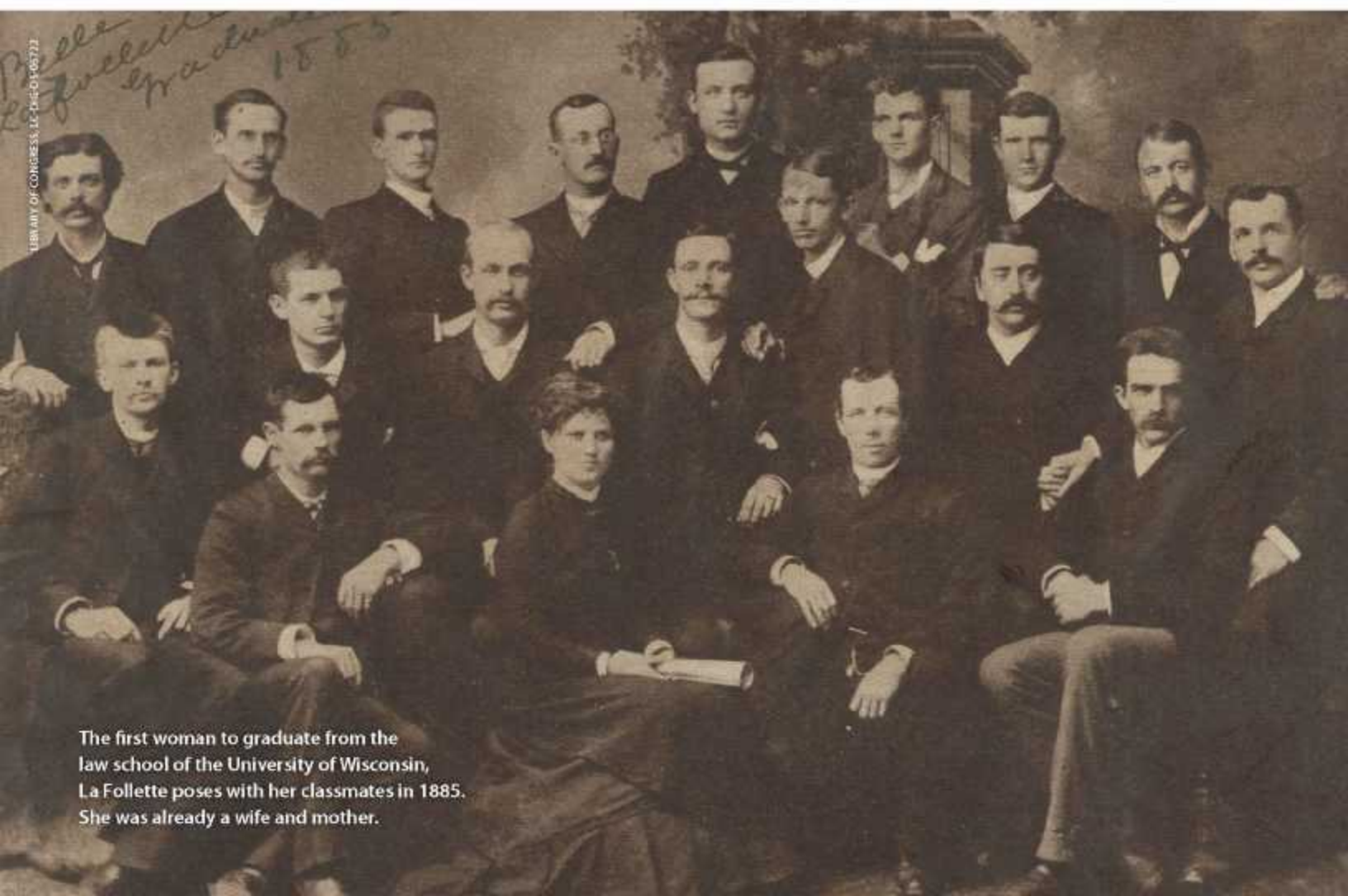


Belle Case, ca. 1865, wearing a checked woolen dress from fabric spun, dyed, woven, and sewn by her grandmother, Lucetta Moore Case.

According to their son-in-law, playwright George Middleton, "Except John Adams with his Abigail, no man in public life was to have so equal a mate."<sup>2</sup> Books, articles, essays, a short film, and plays, including a full length musical, all hail Belle La Follette as the little woman behind the great man. Only a few go so far as to recognize her as an important reformer in her own right.<sup>3</sup> No account reveals the depth and range of her interests, ambitions, and activism, and the contributions she made to meaningful progressive reform.

### A Myth Is Born

Upon her death in 1931, newspapers across the nation praised Belle La Follette for her selflessness, her willingness to remain out of the public eye, and her contentment in eschewing a career for herself in favor of carrying out a higher calling—that of wife and mother. "She had a masculine mind," one backhanded accolade conceded, but quickly praised her for being "essentially feminine, maternal." Another tribute concluded, "Hers is an interesting career for those women who, of necessity, must remain in the background." Famed journalist Lincoln Steffens (a family friend who really should have known better) painted La Follette as a self-sacrificing woman who consciously surrendered her own ambitions: "She could act, but she was content to beget action and actors."



The first woman to graduate from the law school of the University of Wisconsin, La Follette poses with her classmates in 1885. She was already a wife and mother.



She played, herself, the woman's part: she sat in the gallery in the Congress or at home with the children and the advisors. She could but she did not often make the speeches or do the deeds."<sup>4</sup> This rather tepid portrait bears little relation to the Belle La Follette who was "shoved by a policeman and told to move on" during the Chicago garment workers' strike in 1909.<sup>5</sup> Yet La Follette herself contributed to the myth of her passivity through a series of self-deprecating remarks that were nearly mandatory at a time when modesty was considered a crucial female virtue.

Although this "helpmate-behind-the-scenes" assessment came to dominate the historical record, in reality, Belle La Follette exhibited considerable political leadership. She and her husband worked together to promote the many progressive goals they shared, but she was far from being merely his assistant. She held no elected office and could not even cast a ballot until she was sixty-one years old, yet she overcame her natural shyness to wield tremendous influence as a journalist and public speaker, activities she took on not only out of idealism, but because her family needed money. All those who joined Lincoln Steffens in identifying her primarily as what he called "The Victorious Mother" did her a grave disservice. In truth, she did make the speeches and do the deeds—and the nation improved because of her efforts.

### An Early Commitment to Feminism

Born Belle Case in 1859, she grew up in a farming community where her commitment to feminist principles was cemented at a young age. Even though men and women carried out different (although frequently overlapping) tasks and responsibilities, both were so indispensable to the success of farm life that couples did not quibble over whose work was more important. As she put it later, "While traditions and laws fixing the legal disabilities and the inferior status of women prevailed, their great practical usefulness, [and] highly developed judgment placed them for all practical purposes on an equal footing with men."<sup>6</sup> Such a perspective was consistent with her family's religious views. When her mother, Mary Case, heard Anna Howard Shaw lecture at the family's Free Congregationalist church concerning women's suffrage, she was captivated by the words of this pioneering minister and physician. She later told her daughter that she felt "very indignant" that women did not have the same rights as men.<sup>7</sup> Belle's brother agreed, stating matter-of-factly, "I do not see any reason why I should vote if Belle does not."<sup>8</sup>

Belle Case refused to accept the deferential, meek role assigned to girls. She proudly noted that her mother "was strongly convinced that girls should be prepared to earn a living so that they could be self-supporting in case they did not marry or in case they were thrown on their own resources after marriage."<sup>9</sup> A friend recalled that as a girl Belle Case "frequently discomfited her teachers and fellow pupils by ques-



Belle and Bob La Follette, shown here in a candid, undated photo, were partners in their marriage and in their shared commitment to progressive reform.

tioning and challenging things that were taught and accepted," and "was fearless in insisting on things being understood and being worthwhile before accepting them."<sup>10</sup> Acceptance into the University of Wisconsin fueled her fearlessness. As one professor recalled, "Miss Case, with her eagerness for knowledge and her readiness to pay the price in hard work, profited to the full by its opportunities."<sup>11</sup>

Her University of Wisconsin classmate Bob La Follette pursued Belle Case avidly. It was at her insistence that their engagement remain a secret, and Bob grew increasingly frustrated when Belle seemed far more interested in pursuing her career than planning a life with him. Only after Belle completed two years of teaching did she marry Bob on New Year's Eve in 1881 in a ceremony attended only by the two families and a Unitarian minister, who honored the bride's request that the word "obey" be omitted from the marriage vows.<sup>12</sup>

### An Unconventional Wife and Mother

Eight months and ten days later, Belle gave birth to the first of their four children, a daughter, Flora Dodge, called Fola.





Belle La Follette, with her oldest daughter Fola in 1886.



This formal portrait was taken around 1905–1906, near the end of the period Bob La Follette described as “when we were governor” in recognition of his wife’s contributions.<sup>16</sup>

Although Belle La Follette believed that “the supreme experience in life is motherhood,” she remained convinced that there was “no inherent conflict in a mother’s taking good care of her children, developing her talents, and continuing to work along lines adapted to conditions of motherhood and homemaking.”<sup>13</sup> As a new mother, La Follette refused to waste her time on the activities that most people assumed should take up the day of a middle-class wife. La Follette believed in “simplicity and ease” in dress, furnishings, and even food, asking, “What custom could be more barbarous than a ten course dinner?” She advocated “less kinds [of food], fewer courses, less work.”<sup>14</sup>

Belle La Follette rejected the expectation that women would cling to outmoded conventions at the same time that men flocked to new conveniences that made their lives easier and more efficient. As the telephone came into popular use, for example, she found it absurd that women were criticized as both lazy and extravagant for phoning in their grocery orders, while men were praised for their efficiency in transacting business over the phone. “Why is it,” she asked sardonically, “that those who are most deeply convinced that ‘woman’s place is in the home’ are most concerned when women stay at home and telephone for supplies instead of going to the market?”<sup>15</sup> Following the advent of the typewriter, she complained, women “apologized for a type-written personal letter as though it were an offense even when the deciphering of their handwriting is a most nerve-wracking process.” She believed that women should embrace any innovations that might spare them from unnecessary labor. To those who bemoaned the loss of women’s personal touch, she responded in favor of preserving women’s time, health, and energy: “Many precious associa-

tions with the homemade and the handmade have necessarily been sacrificed to the greater gain.”<sup>17</sup>

Belle La Follette further defied convention by abandoning stays and corsets for more comfortable, looser fitting garments, and she urged other women to do the same. She noted with some disgust, “The man who said women ought not to vote as long as they cannot fasten their own gowns made the best anti-suffrage argument I have heard. It is certainly humiliating that we submit to tyrannies of dress as we do.”<sup>18</sup> La Follette reserved special scorn for the time women were encouraged to waste lamenting their inability to live up to unrealistic bodily ideals. Although she struggled to keep her own weight in check, she strove not to obsess about it, focusing instead on remaining fit. In 1912, she still routinely ran three miles before breakfast, and in 1914, at the age of fifty-five, the *Washington Post* celebrated her scaling of Mount Irazu, a 12,000-foot volcano in Costa Rica.

La Follette’s always passionate belief in “the growing desire of women of leisure to employ themselves worthily, and to share in the work of the world” was reinforced in 1911 by the



La Follette campaigns for women's suffrage in 1912 at a fair in Fox River, Wisconsin.

publication of Olive Schreiner's feminist treatise *Woman and Labour*. La Follette heralded it as being "like an epic poem, majestic, powerful, and thrilling." Schreiner described women who lived empty lives and were wholly dependent upon their husbands' incomes as "parasitic," a term La Follette would use repeatedly in her demands that women be allowed equal opportunities and useful occupations.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Belle La Follette did pursue opportunities that other women—particularly mothers—did not. Early in their marriage, Belle so enjoyed helping Bob with his legal studies that she took up the law course as well, becoming, in 1885, the first woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School. And though she did not enjoy all of the trappings that came with being a politician's wife (she particularly hated Washington small talk), she saw great value in women becoming politically aware. She urged all women to recognize that the problems they thought of as personal were in fact political and therefore required women's political activism: "How much we pay for coal, food, and clothing is very largely determined by the control of natural resources, the tariff, the distribution of tax, and by the regulation of the great private monopolies and freight rates."<sup>20</sup> She found a rich avenue for political expression in writing.

### Innovative Journalist

Belle strenuously opposed Bob's plans to begin a magazine in 1909, anticipating (correctly) that it would overtax not only her

husband's time, energy, and health, but the family's budget. Once the die was cast, however, she devoted herself to making *La Follette's Magazine* (published today as *The Progressive*) a meaningful voice of progressivism. In an article entitled "Foolishness," she railed against the narrow range of superficial topics others deemed suitable for women readers, concluding, "Let's fool these men publishers and put our time on the world's events."<sup>21</sup> In countless columns in the magazine's "Home and Education" pages, Belle La Follette introduced, defined, expanded, celebrated, and promoted progressive reforms.

Women readers responded with gratitude, and other journalists celebrated her innovative approach. Selene Armstrong Harmon of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* noted, "One of the clearest and most readable woman's pages in the country is edited by Belle Case La Follette. . . . She was probably the first editor of a woman's department to go on a strike against the conventional formulas for hair dye and accepted recipes for beauty." La Follette, marveled Harmon, was "always independent and fearless in her expression of opinion."<sup>22</sup> In 1911, the North American Press Syndicate engaged La Follette to provide brief articles for syndication six days a week. Her series, "Thought for the Day," covered topics including suffrage, economics, dress, children, women's work, and health. It appeared in fifty-seven newspapers in more than twenty states.

Belle La Follette used the pages of *La Follette's Magazine* to promote a wide range of reforms. In addition to the standard slate of progressive goals, including labor protection, natural



# Home and Education

Conducted by BELLE CASE LA FOLLETTE

## The Color Line

IN OUR issue of August 5, 1911, I wrote what might be called an appreciation of the progress of the colored people in the District of Columbia from the standpoint of a casual observer over a period of twenty or more years. That article cost us subscribers and called forth letters of bitter denunciation. While it is not my purpose needlessly to offend any reader, it seems to me the very essence of editorial obligation to stand firmly for well grounded convictions on important questions, especially when human rights are involved.

Outside of Washington I claim no personal knowledge of the "race question," nor do I profess to speak of it here at the capital with the authority of an expert investigator. But I do feel warmed in saying that considering their opportunities the negroes of Washington have

gotten. Indeed it took no hold upon the public thought. It was only a theory. Quite different is the effect of speeches of men like Senator Vardaman and Representative Heflin advocating with Southern vehemence the suppression of all opportunity for growth and advancement of the colored citizens of the United States. Such an announcement as follows, especially when it is without provocation, is a proclamation of hate and strikes terror to the hearts of the colored race.

SHALL THE NEGRO RULE?  
ALL OTHER QUESTIONS ARE MINUTELLED UNDER THE  
SHADOW OF  
SOCIAL EQUALITY AND PREFERENCE FOR NE-  
GROES  
IN THE EMPLOY OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE  
UNITED STATES  
SENATOR JAMES K. VARDAMAN  
AND OTHER PROMINENT SPEAKERS WILL ADDRESS

And I am curious to know what would become of southern agriculture. With North Dakota offering railroad fare, exorbitant wages, short hours, moving pictures, dances and other amusements to induce laborers to come and harvest the wheat crop, can you imagine what would become of the cotton and the corn if the colored people of the south were transported from their native land to the jungle? They might suffer greater mental anguish, but the white folks would be first to feel the economic tragedy.

THERE are over eleven thousand civil service employees working for the government. More than half of them are in the various departments here in Washington. These employees have competed with whites for their places, taking the same specified examination. I have the information direct from the Secretary of the United States Civil Service Commission that except in positions where the physical qualifications are the important consideration,

On August 23, 1913, La Follette used *La Follette's Magazine* to launch her attack on efforts by the Woodrow Wilson administration to racially segregate federal offices as well as streetcars in Washington, DC.

resource conservation, and tariff and tax reform, she advocated less conventional innovations, such as appointing women to university boards of regents. She called for criminalizing not only the misleading labeling of drugs, but their false advertising as well. She supported the right of a woman to not take her husband's name upon marriage. She promoted the Montessori system of education, opposed corporal punishment for children, and supported sex education. She saved special ire for capital punishment, which she termed, "a survival of barbarism . . . [whose] existence is contrary to the best thought and practice of modern civilization."<sup>23</sup>

## "The Most Consistent Supporter of Equal Rights of All the Women of Her Time"

In 1930, the National League of Women Voters honored seventy-one women, including La Follette, for their service to the league and to the American Woman Suffrage Association. Her name was inscribed on a bronze tablet housed in the national headquarters in Washington, DC. La Follette protested that she did not deserve such an honor, yet her contemporary, Alice Paul, called La Follette "the most consistent supporter of equal rights of all the women of her time."<sup>24</sup> And in a 1912 story on suffrage, one *New York Times* headline declared simply "Mrs. La Follette is Leader."<sup>25</sup> Looking back on the battle she waged for suffrage in Wisconsin that year, La Follette admitted, "I spoke seven



Civil rights activist Nannie Helen Burroughs, founder of the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls, introduced La Follette to an audience in 1914 as "the successor of Harriet Beecher Stowe."

days a week in succession, usually three or four times a day, sometimes six or eight."<sup>26</sup> During one twelve-day tour she gave thirty-one speeches in fourteen different counties. She concluded her remarks at the Rusk County fairgrounds in Bruce, Wisconsin, with the direct appeal, "Oh, men of Wisconsin, don't you go back on me! If you should, I should be so disappointed, and so humiliated for our state!" The audience, according to a witness, responded enthusiastically: "How they listened! How they applauded!"<sup>27</sup>

Belle La Follette marched in the great suffrage parade in New York City on May 4, 1912. Less than a year later, the US Senate Committee on Women's Suffrage heard testimony from the public. According to the *Washington Post*, "the suffragists brought along some of their heaviest artillery."<sup>28</sup> One weapon in that arsenal was Belle La Follette. She testi-

fied that women's suffrage was "a simple matter of common sense," before concluding, "You know how Lincoln defined government at Gettysburg. 'Ours is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' And are not women people?"<sup>29</sup> According to the *National Magazine*, "Mrs. Robert M. La Follette made a remarkable and forcible address, and . . . the audience hung upon her words."<sup>30</sup>

Early in the first term of Woodrow Wilson's administration, Belle La Follette was a member of the contingent of suffrage advocates that met with the president. Although





Women filled the balconies at the 1921 Washington Naval Conference in support of international arms limitations.

Wilson listened respectfully, they were hurried out of the White House after ten minutes. Having failed to persuade the US Senate or the president, La Follette took her case directly to the American people. She spoke for sixty-three consecutive days in July and August of 1914 in a tour that included Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. The Senate finally approved the suffrage amendment on June 4, 1919, with Belle La Follette observing from the visitors' gallery. "We . . . shed a few tears," La Follette recorded, noting with pride that Wisconsin was the first state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.<sup>31</sup> Bob La Follette confided to their children that Wisconsin "beat 'em to it" on the suffrage amendment because of "your smart mother." Belle La Follette, worried that Illinois would "try to steal first honors," wired representatives in her home state to be sure that Wisconsin acted first. As soon as a telegram of confirmation arrived, reported Bob, "I went on the floor and had it read into the [Congressional] *Record*. . . . Mamma and all of us feel good, you bet."<sup>32</sup>

### A Passionate Voice for Racial Equality

Belle La Follette was widely acknowledged within the African American community nationwide, but especially in Washington, DC, as a dedicated and fearless leader in the fight for

racial equality. Beginning in 1913, she wrote a series of searing articles decrying the efforts of the Wilson administration to racially segregate federal services. As La Follette denounced the injustice and violation of democratic principles imposed by segregation, she skewered the hypocrisy of whites who supported it. "It seems strange," she observed caustically, "that the very ones who consider it a hardship to sit next [to] a colored person in a streetcar, entrust their children to colored nurses, and eat food prepared by colored hands."<sup>33</sup>

On January 4, 1914, Belle La Follette spoke at the "colored" YMCA on 12th Street in Washington, DC. It was an electrifying event, Wild cheering by the one thousand people present, most of whom were African American, interrupted her speech several times. According to the *Washington Post*, in a front page story headlined "She Defends Negroes—Wife of Senator La Follette Denounces Segregation—Says U.S. Government Errs," La Follette "advised negroes to keep up their fight and said there would be no 'constitution of peace' until the question is settled and 'settled in the right way.'"<sup>34</sup> An ovation of several minutes followed her remarks. An African American woman noted the "tremendous effect upon all who heard" La Follette's stirring speech. It was, she reported, "the topic which overshadows all others" in the African American

community. She concluded her message of thanks, "May God continue to bless you, may He continue to lead you, may He continue to give you courage to do and to dare."<sup>35</sup>

The next day La Follette traveled to New York City to deliver essentially the same speech at the annual banquet of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, offering solutions, not just outrage: "The race issue, like the suffrage question, the sex question, or any other perplexing, unsettled problem disturbing society today, should be freely and seriously discussed in private conversation, in the public press, [and] from the pulpit. The situation does not call for violence, but it demands determination, loyalty, courage, persistence, unfaltering faith in well directed efforts."<sup>36</sup> She added that integration was "in no way a matter of social privilege. It is a matter of civil right."<sup>37</sup>

In *La Follette's Magazine*, La Follette reprinted excerpts from a few of the multitude of letters generated by her writings and speeches on race. One anonymous writer warned her

that "for a white lady to address a Negro Audience is out of place," adding, "it does not raise you very much in the estimation of decent white people." A correspondent from Tennessee denounced her for her "idiotic demands." Other critics exhibited far less restraint. One reader termed Belle La Follette "disgraceful to the white race" and suggested that the only true reason for her actions was that she was herself black—but only "a little light in color." It was signed, "[A] real white person with no black stripes down the back like you."<sup>38</sup>

La Follette's efforts also generated support. A grateful Wisconsinite thanked her for the "never-forgotten steps you have taken to protect a downtrodden race," and a white Southern woman expressed her admiration for La Follette and her sympathy for the racially oppressed.<sup>39</sup> US Navy Department auditor Ralph W. Tyler, a national organizer of the National Negro Business League, told La Follette that he had read her column "The Color Line" "each time with renewed inspiration, and with renewed courage, because it clearly



In 1924, La Follette, shown here in Mount Lake Park, Maryland, became the first woman to take the stump for her husband in a presidential bid. Belle made a series of speeches and even a radio address highlighting Bob's achievements in progressive reform. Despite running as an independent, he received nearly five million votes.



indicated to me that my race still has good, strong, and eminently fair white friends in this day of threatened segregation, just as we had in the dark days of subjugation before our emancipation." He concluded, "I thank you for your article, and know I but voice the sentiment of my race in so doing."<sup>40</sup> In 1914, La Follette spoke to a predominantly black audience at the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls in Washington, DC. When she was introduced by African American activist Nannie Helen Burroughs as "the successor of Harriet Beecher Stowe," lawyer James H. Hayes bowed his head and said, "Amen." Speaking for his race, Hayes told La Follette, "We thank God for such a white woman as you. We thank God for sending you to us and we thank you for coming. A few more like you would awaken the sleeping conscience of the nation."<sup>41</sup>

### Peace and Disarmament

At the same time she was raising four children, writing for the family magazine, fighting racism, and campaigning for women's suffrage, Belle La Follette took up a new cause, ultimately becoming one of the most recognized leaders in the crusade for world peace. Her ability to articulate that movement's values and aims made her particularly effective in inspiring people to think critically about war, its causes, its futility, and its prevention. She became a pacifist in her late twenties upon reading *Die Waffen Nieder* (*Lay Down Your Arms*) by Austrian peace activist Baroness Bertha von Suttner.

La Follette was profoundly persuaded by von Suttner's assertion that "we must strengthen and develop existing organizations, such as the Inter-parliamentary Union, the Hague Tribunal, etc., and create an international parliamentary political system that will give a legal basis to Universal Peace."<sup>42</sup> La Follette widely promoted this view of war's futility—which came to be known as the "outlawry of war" movement—and the practical possibilities of world peace through binding arbitration. Her impassioned advocacy would bring a rain of denunciation, including questions of her patriotism during World War I, but she steadfastly refused to modify or soft-pedal her beliefs.

La Follette's argument was not that nations did not have reasons to disagree or to compete, but, rather, that in the "struggle for balance of power, this idea that war is the only way of settling differences among nations is a



(Above) In their shared efforts to promote peace, La Follette worked closely with Jane Addams, who is shown here with other American delegates on their way to the International Congress of Women held at The Hague in 1915. Addams is second from left just behind the banner.

(Right) A pin from the WPP, ca. 1915



survival [sic] of the dark ages."<sup>43</sup> On January 10, 1915, Belle La Follette was one of three thousand women who gathered in Washington, DC, at a meeting that culminated in the formation of the Woman's Peace Party (WPP), which four years later became the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. La Follette called the WPP "a permanent organization for building public opinion for the future." She urged that "every woman's club should become a center of activity for the cause of peace," for it is the changing of individuals' opinions "that finally makes public opinion."<sup>44</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt was outraged. On April 16, 1915, the Chicago *Herald* published a scathing assessment of the WPP in which the still enormously popular former president called the party's platform "silly and base," "influenced by physical cowardice," "vague and hysterical," "foolish and noxious," an "ignoble abandonment of national duty," containing "not one particle of good," and which "exposes our people to measureless contempt." Belle La Follette fired back in *La Follette's Magazine* that Roosevelt assumed "that War is the only means of settling international differences and moreover that War is bound to settle them right." She argued, "History demonstrates that [even] imperfect and temporary plans of mediation, conciliation, and arbitration have been more effective than war in securing justice, that therefore the enlightened and progressive thought of the age should be organized to eradi-



cate the madness of war." Roosevelt's charge that the WPP was cowardly and foolish particularly rankled. "Was Christ cowardly?" she countered. "How long did the agitation against human slavery last before it was abolished?"<sup>45</sup>

The vilification endured by her entire family for the peace activism of herself and her husband during the war years did not curb Belle La Follette's postwar efforts to reject military preparedness, which she denounced as "the awful folly of wasting the billions in dollars that should go for education and human betterment." As chair of the advisory committee to the Wisconsin Women's Progressive Association, Belle La Follette toured fourteen cities in 1921 urging voters to reject any candidate not committed to the reduction of preparedness and arms. She called the week-long speaking tour one of the greatest experiences of her life.

When criticized for efforts publicly denounced as futile, if not un-American, La Follette took the long view to counsel other peace activists against discouragement: "Every effort of this kind is slow in actual results—Democracy, slavery, suffrage."<sup>46</sup>

When La Follette learned that Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes opened the Washington Naval Conference on November 12, 1921, by proposing a fifty percent reduction of the three great navies of the world, it took her breath away. She was also thrilled when Senator William Borah (R-Idaho) credited the public opinion that she had been so central in generating as the motivating factor behind Hughes's proposal.

### Engineering a Family Dynasty

Following the death of Robert La Follette in 1925, a petition circulated among members of the Wisconsin legislature asking Belle La Follette to become a candidate to fill her husband's unexpired term. She could easily have become the first woman senator, but she chose not to run. Many women of Wisconsin were not merely disappointed but dismayed when she declined to meet with a large contingent of Wisconsinites intent on changing her mind. A petition signed by hundreds of women asked, "Dear Mrs. La Follette, will you, can you, turn away from your heritage, your people, your shepherdless flock?"<sup>47</sup>

Those who knew her best thought her refusal to run in favor of her son was a typically shrewd political move. Zona Gale observed that "Belle Case La Follette will stand as one who, ambitious for her husband and sons, was ambitious first of all that their ideals of social justice, which were also her



La Follette attends her husband's funeral in 1925, flanked by her sons Robert Jr. (left) and Phil.

ideals, should prevail."<sup>48</sup> According to Phil La Follette, his mother recognized that her term would be granted more as a tribute to her late husband than as a serious political investment. Therefore, "the field would be wide open for one and all in 1928."<sup>49</sup> By virtue of his sex as well as his age, Robert Jr. would be far more likely than his mother to be repeatedly re-elected and could therefore lead the La Follette progressive movement for years to come, further cementing its legacy. With his mother serving as his campaign manager, Robert La Follette Jr. was indeed elected to the Senate seat, which he would occupy for the next twenty-one years.

Following her husband's death, La Follette kept the family magazine alive while also serving as chief adviser to both Robert Jr. and her son Phil (elected in 1930 to the first of three terms as Wisconsin's governor). Although she claimed that writing her husband's biography was her top priority, as the nation sank deeper into the Great Depression, she could not resist continuing to campaign, primarily through the pages of *The Progressive*, for progressive solutions to problems old and new. She denounced President Herbert Hoover for doing too little to alleviate growing unemployment, criticizing him for being a "friend of the Power Trust."<sup>50</sup> She found the treatment of Native Americans "an appalling reflection on our government and our civilization," adding, "Any system that requires them to adopt the habits of the white race . . . tends to undermine the health of the Indians frightfully and to make them unhappy, just as we would be if conditions were reversed."<sup>51</sup> She championed absentee voting and campaigned to "Save





In 1929, two years before her death, La Follette poses with her oldest grandchild, Robert La Follette Sucher, the son of her youngest daughter, Mary.

the Children's Bureau." Only her death in 1931 brought an end to her activism.

Belle Case La Follette deserves recognition for contributing significantly to the political achievements of her husband and sons. But the determination by her peers and by historians to provide that recognition has obscured the contributions she made in her own right to causes of her own choosing, blocking recognition of her full legacy. A closer look reveals an unexpected Belle La Follette: a passionate feminist dedicated to peace, civil rights, and making her nation a better place through a variety of innovative reforms.

## Notes

1. "Wisconsin's Matriarch," *New York Times*, August 20, 1931, 13.
2. George Middleton, *These Things Are Mine* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 96.
3. See, for example, Kate Hemmingsen, "A History of Her Own: The Transformation of Belle Case La Follette, 1859–1914" (Senior Honors Thesis, Georgetown University, 2004); Dee Ann Montgomery, "An Intellectual Profile of Belle Case La Follette: Progressive Editor, Political Strategist, and Feminist" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1975); and Nancy C. Unger, "Belle Case La Follette," in *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer*, 2nd ed. (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2008), 47–68.
4. All quotations commemorating Belle La Follette's life are taken from the memorial issue of *The Progressive* 2, no. 49 (November 7, 1931).
5. Belle Case La Follette (hereafter BCL), "Impression of the Garment Workers Strike," *La Follette's Magazine* (hereafter LM) 2, no. 45 (November 12, 1910): 11.
6. BCL, "The Woman Movement: My Grandmother," speech given in New Harmony, Indiana, 1914, La Follette Family Papers (hereafter LFP), D-40, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

7. BCL, ribbon copy of biography, LFP, D-61, 84.
8. BCL, untitled speech to suffrage school, LFP, D-40.
9. BCL, Phil's copy of biography draft, chapter 3, LFP, D-59, 111.
10. "Interview with Maggie Moore Williams," n.d., Albert O. Barton Papers, Box 6, File 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
11. Edward A. Birge, "A Reminiscence of Undergraduate Life," *The Progressive* 2, no. 49 (November 7, 1931): 6.
12. Lucy Freeman, Sherry La Follette, and George Zaborski, *Belle: A Biography of Belle La Follette* (New York: Beacon, 1986), 22.
13. Belle Case La Follette and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 54–55.
14. BCL, "Standards," n.d., LFP, D-42, 19.
15. BCL, "Woman Suffrage in Wisconsin," LM 3, no. 24 (June 17, 1911): 10.
16. Zola Gale, "Americans We Like: The La Follette Family," *Nation* 126 (February 15, 1928): 180.
17. BCL, "The Typewriter," LM 5, no. 26 (June 28, 1913): 6.
18. BCL, "Thoughts about Clothes," LM 3, no. 41 (October 14, 1911): 10.
19. BCL, "Standards," 29, 30, 32.
20. BCL, "Why the Homemaker Should Vote for La Follette," October 17, 1924, LFP, D-42.
21. BCL, "Foolishness," LM 5, no. 44 (November 4, 1913): 10–11.
22. Selene Armstrong Harmon, "A New Sort of Women's Page," reprinted in LM 6, no. 24 (June 13, 1914): 6–7.
23. BCL, "Capital Punishment," LM 4, no. 35 (August 31, 1912): 16.
24. Montgomery, "An Intellectual Profile of Belle La Follette," 225.
25. "Mrs. La Follette Is Leader," *New York Times*, September 11, 1912, 6.
26. BCL, "Belle Case La Follette," 1913, LFP, D-43.
27. Elizabeth Gardiner Evans, "How Voters and Future Voters Braved a Storm," LM 4, no. 39 (September 28, 1912): 10.
28. "Storm Capital Again: Suffragists Have Mrs. La Follette Talk on Tariff," *Washington Post*, April 27, 1913, 4.
29. BCL, "A Question of Democracy," LM 5, no. 19 (May 10, 1913): 6.
30. Sketch, Joe Mitchell to BCL, 29 May 1913, LFP, D-12.
31. BCL to family, February 16, 1919, LFP, A-24.
32. Robert M. La Follette to family, June 10, 1919, LFP, A-27.
33. BCL, "Colored Folks in the District of Columbia," January 5, 1914, LFP, D-40.
34. "She Defends Negroes," *Washington Post*, January 5, 1914, 1.
35. BCL, "Color Line to Date," LM 6, no. 4 (January 24, 1914): 7.
36. BCL, "Colored Folks in the District of Columbia," 32.
37. BCL, "Color Line to Date," 7.
38. Ibid.
39. BCL, "The Color Line: Various Points of View," LM 6, no. 13 (March 28, 1914): 6.
40. Ralph W. Tyler to BCL, "An Appreciation of 'The Color Line,'" LM 5, no. 40 (October 4, 1913): 6.
41. James H. Hayes to BCL, February 18, 1914, LFP, D-13.
42. BCL, "At the Congressional Club," LM 4, no. 51 (December 21, 1912): 10.
43. BCL, "The Germans," LM 6, no. 42 (October 17, 1914): 6.
44. BCL, "Start a Peace Circle," LM 7, no. 5 (May 1, 1915): 10.
45. BCL, "Mr. Roosevelt's Attack on the Woman's Peace Party," LM 7, no. 5 (May 1, 1915): 5.
46. BCL to Elizabeth Glendower Evans, July 24, 1915, LFP, D-26.
47. Edna Chynoweth, et al., Acting for the Wisconsin Women's Committee for the Candidacy of Mrs. Robert M. La Follette for the United States Senate, July 26, 1925, LFP, D-17.
48. Zola Gale, "Brotherhood. It Was as Simple as That," *The Progressive* 2, no. 49 (November 17, 1931): 2.
49. Donald Young, ed., *Adventures in Politics: The Memoirs of Philip La Follette* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 113.
50. BCL, untitled speech on unemployment, 1930, LFP, D-35.
51. BCL to Lucy Hall, June 4, 1930, LFP, D-27.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Nancy C. Unger**, professor of history at Santa Clara University, is the author of a new biography, *Belle La Follette: Progressive Era Reformer* (Routledge, 2016). Her obsession with the La Follettes began with her prize-winning *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, revised paperback, 2008). Nancy has also published dozens of scholarly articles and essays on topics ranging from sacred Navajo lands to teaching gay and lesbian history, as well as the book *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (Oxford, 2013).