The La Follette Dynasty

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Arguably Wisconsin’s most famous political family, two generations of La Follettes were synonymous with national progressive reform during the first half of the 20th century. Robert La Follette began the dynasty in earnest in 1906, when he was elected to the U.S. Senate and sought to implement nationwide the many programs and initiatives he had enacted successfully as three-term governor of Wisconsin. He spent 19 years in the Senate striving to end abuses of privilege and to return power to the people, becoming one of the most influential and best-known progressives. Although the La Follette sons carried on their parents’ tradition of political activism, Phil La Follette failed to attain national office after serving three terms as Wisconsin’s governor. Robert La Follette Jr. served in Congress even longer than his more famous and charismatic father, ultimately ending the family’s 40-year service in the U.S. Senate when he was defeated by Joe McCarthy. The decline of the family’s influence is attributed to widespread fatigue in the wake of decades of national reform and turmoil combined with La Follette Jr.’s distaste for campaigning. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the power of the La Follette name and tradition of facilitating meaningful reform helped a third-generation La Follette to serve as Wisconsin’s attorney general for more than a decade. In the 21st century, a distant cousin—named La Follette—continues to hold state office in Wisconsin.

Before their marriage in 1881, Robert La Follette and Belle Case attended the University of Wisconsin, whose president impressed deeply upon them their obligation to serve the state. The couple dedicated their lives to providing remedies for Gilded Age problems that included corrupt politics, child
labor, unsafe working conditions, environmental devastation, racism, and sexism, with the ultimate goal of more equitably redistributing the nation’s wealth and power. Bob La Follette pursued this quest through various public offices. Belle La Follette was denied the right to vote as a woman until she was 61 years old; nevertheless, she successfully pursued other avenues to foster change—primarily public speaking and journalism.

The unfailing dedication of Bob and Belle La Follette led to state and national reforms, including women’s suffrage, environmental and worker protections, tax reform, and the direct election of senators. Meanwhile, their refusal to compromise on matters of principle generated considerable controversy, as when they opposed the entry of the United States into World War I and supported civil rights for African Americans.

Although both Bob and Belle were lawyers capable of generating considerable income, they agreed to pursue the common good rather than personal wealth. The entire La Follette family paid a high financial price for Bob and Belle’s altruism. Bob routinely incurred debt to promote his political goals, going so far as to create a magazine that was particularly burdensome, in terms of the time and energy, on his conscientious and frugal wife. Nevertheless, in Belle’s biography of her husband, Robert M. La Follette, she approvingly quoted his assertion, “We have put by the chance to lay up anything for our children’s future. . . . I wish to leave something to the state more lasting than bronze or marble and a better legacy to the state than mere wealth.”

The La Follette family was extraordinarily close, with the couple’s four children—Flora (Fola), Robert Jr., Philip, and Mary—expected to remain, even as adults, personally and professionally involved in their parents’ pursuits. Belle and Bob made clear their expectation that the children, especially their two sons, would also dedicate their lives to progressive reform. Although Phil was the more politically ambitious, only his brother Robert Jr. met the minimum age requirement to run for the U.S. Senate seat left vacant by their father’s death in 1925. Bob La Follette Jr. held that seat and built on the family legacy of progressive reform throughout the Great Depression and World War II. Phil La Follette served three terms as Wisconsin’s governor in the 1930s; however, the Wisconsin Progressive Party created by the two brothers during the Great Depression proved temporary. The family’s influence in national politics came to a halt in 1946 when Robert La Follette Jr. lost the Republican primary to Joseph McCarthy. Although the many political achievements of the La Follette brothers continued the movement pioneered by their parents, the family’s second generation was less path-breaking, passionate, and politically skilled than the first. Continuing this trend, although the La Follette name still generates recognition and votes in Wisconsin, the achievements of subsequent generation La Follettes who have entered public service pale in comparison to their progenitors.
La Follette Political Dynasty Family Tree

1. Jesse La Follette, 1781–1843
   Married Mary Lee
   11 children including Josiah and Harvey

2. Harvey Marion La Follette, 1832–1865
   Married Susan C. Fullenwider
   Eight children including William LeRoy, Grant, and Harvey Marion

   Washington State House of Representatives, 1899–1901
   U.S. House of Representatives, 1911–1919
   Seven children including Suzanne and William LeRoy Jr.

   Washington State House of Representatives, 1937
   Married Helen
   Two children: Mimi and Mary Lee

   Libertarian feminist, journalist

3. Harvey Marion La Follette, 1858–1929
   Indiana state superintendent of public instruction, 1887–1891
   Co-founder, city of La Follette, Tennessee, 1897
   One child: Warner Marion

2. Josiah La Follette, 1817–1856
   Married Mary Ferguson Buchanan
   Four children: William, Marion, Josephine, and Robert

3. Robert M. La Follette, 1855–1925
   District attorney, Dane County, Wisconsin, 1880–1884
   U.S. House of Representatives, 1885–1891
   Governor of Wisconsin, 1901–1906
   U.S. senator, Wisconsin, 1906–1925

(continued)
La Follette Political Dynasty Family Tree (continued)

Married Belle Case, 1859–1931
   Journalist, woman suffrage advocate, peace activist
Four children: Flora (Fola), Robert Jr., Philip, and Mary

   Woman suffrage advocate, labor activist, teacher
Married George Middleton

4. Robert La Follette Jr., 1895–1953
   U.S. senator, Wisconsin, 1925–1947
Married Rachel Wilson Young
Two children: Joseph and Bronson

5. Bronson La Follette, 1936–2018
Married Lynn Godwin
Two children: Robert and Deborah

4. Philip La Follette, 1897–1965
   District attorney, Dane County, Wisconsin, 1925–1927
   Governor of Wisconsin, 1931–1933, 1935–1939
Married Isabel Bacon
Three children: Robert, Judith, and Sherry

Distant relatives
Charles M. La Follette, 1898–1974
   Indiana House of Representatives, 1927–1929
   U.S. House of Representatives, 1943–1947

Doug La Follette, 1940–

The Early Life of Robert M. La Follette

Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette was born on June 14, 1855, to Mary Ferguson La Follette in Primrose, Wisconsin. His politically active father, farmer Josiah La Follette, came from a large, well-educated extended family
of abolitionists, politically active in the newly formed Republican Party. Josiah La Follette served two terms as town clerk before being elected assessor. His political aspirations were cut short by his death at the age of 38, just eight months after Robert's birth. As Bob La Follette was growing up, his mother impressed deeply upon him his responsibility to never do anything to dishonor his father's name. As detailed in *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer,* Bob's longing to know more about this phantom father culminated with La Follette examining his father's remains in 1894 when the grave was exhumed to be transferred for reburial.

Organized religion played little role in Bob La Follette's lifelong dedication to doing right. As a child he resented the elderly, rigidly pious stepfather who preached that La Follette's beloved father's agnosticism condemned him to hell. Although Bob La Follette eschewed church attendance the rest of his life, his years as an undergraduate and law student at the University of Wisconsin honed his commitment to remedying the injustices plaguing society. As he noted in *La Follette's Autobiography,* even before his classes began, a speech by Edward G. Ryan influenced him profoundly. Wisconsin's future chief justice posed the challenge that his young listener recognized as moral as well as political and economic: "Which shall rule—wealth or man; which shall lead—money or intellect; who shall fill public stations—educated and patriotic free men, or the feudal serfs of corporate capital?" The university's president, John Bascom, encouraged students to not only recognize the serious problems emerging from the nation's nascent industrialization and urbanization, but challenged them to translate their concerns and convictions into action. La Follette graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1879 and from its law school the following year, honing his considerable talents as a public speaker.

**Early Life of Belle Case**

Bob La Follette met Belle Case at the university. They shared a love of public speaking and a desire to contribute to the greater good. As developed in *Belle La Follette: Progressive Era Reformer,* Belle Case grew up witnessing the camaraderie and sense of interdependence and partnership evidenced by her parents and other farming couples. Her childhood cemented her belief that culture, not ability, prohibited women from cultivating and sharing talents outside the domestic realm. Belle's feminist views were reinforced by her highly competent grandmother and by her mother, who had heard physician and minister Anna Howard Shaw promote women's suffrage. Two speakers visiting the university confirmed Case's confidence in women's potential: Olympia Brown, champion for women's educational, legal, economic, and political rights; and Annie Jeness Miller, who promoted women's mental and physical health through exercise and less restrictive clothing.
Bob pursued Belle avidly. At her insistence, she taught school for two years before the couple wed in 1881. At the bride's request, the word "obey" was omitted from the marriage vows. When their first child was still a baby, Belle La Follette joined her husband in the study of law, becoming the first woman to graduate with a law degree from the University of Wisconsin.

**Robert La Follette's Early Political Career**

Bob La Follette became district attorney of Dane County, Wisconsin, in 1881. Four years later, he entered the House of Representatives, where he was elected to serve three terms. In domestic affairs, La Follette's egalitarianism was already evident, which earned him the respect of leaders in the African American community and in the women's suffrage movement. He spoke passionately on behalf of Native Americans and established himself as a foe of pork-barrel legislation and of lumber companies and railroads seeking land grants and other special favors from Congress.

Following his failed congressional reelection bid in 1890, La Follette returned to private law practice in Wisconsin. He claimed that an effort to bribe him in 1891 forced the realization that the United States was fast being dominated by hostile forces thwarting the will of the people and menacing representative government. Previously he had seen the issues of the day,
including the trusts, resource conservation, currency, and railroad regulation, as individual problems. Now he saw them as manifestations of one great struggle: "the encroachment of the powerful few upon the rights of the many." He dedicated himself to breaking this corrupting influence through reforms of the nation's political and economic systems. La Follette sought the governor's chair in 1896. When the bribery of convention delegates cost him the Republican nomination, La Follette championed the destruction of the corrupt caucus and convention nominating systems operating nationwide in favor of the direct primary. Defeated again in 1898 by unscrupulous tactics including both sticks and carrots (threats of job loss as well as bribes to convention delegates totaling $8,300), he ran a third time in 1900, becoming the state's first Wisconsin-born governor.

As governor, La Follette sought to make the political machinery more directly responsive to the popular will—to promote equal rights over special privilege. He assured corporations that he was not against big business per se, but rather was against efforts to control prices, stifle competition, and create monopolies. To implement the primary election law and major tax reform, among other goals, he relied heavily on his alma mater, creating the famed "Wisconsin Idea." La Follette entrusted vast faith to faculty of the university as experts fit to advise, set standards, and administer Wisconsin's reform laws. The University of Wisconsin thereby became the state's unofficial fourth branch of government, and this so-called "Wisconsin Idea" made the state a nationally recognized progressive leader.

Governor La Follette's tenure was marked by the enactment of his direct primary plan (endorsed in 1904, inaugurated in 1906), making Wisconsin the first state to require all candidates for public office be subject to direct election by the people. This and many other reforms, including railroad taxation legislation, increased the focus on Wisconsin as a national model for progressivism. When La Follette left the governor's office to join the U.S. Senate in 1906, his statewide achievements included thoroughgoing and efficient reform of railroads and other utilities, civil service reform for state officeholders, stringent rules for lobbyists, stronger provisions against corrupt government practices, environmental measures including a forest conservation program, and tax reforms. He sought next to implement such reforms on the national level.

La Follette was driven in the Senate by the same righteousness that had served as both an inspiration and an impediment during his gubernatorial years. Although it sparked many successes, his high-mindedness also kept him from making the compromises that are so crucial in the practice of politics. La Follette alienated many a potential ally, including Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. To detail and publicize his political ideas and goals, he began in 1909 La Follette's Weekly Magazine, which later became a monthly and remains in publication as The Progressive. His touted victories included the passage of a variety of national election reforms, the
income tax, and La Follette Seaman's Bill, which ended the virtual enslavement of merchant sailors and improved safety for all ship passengers and crew members.

Belle La Follette: Combining Family with Progressive Reform

Belle La Follette rejected the popular early 20th-century assumption that being a proper mother precluded a woman from reaching her highest development personally or professionally. Indeed, she found raising her four children to be much less a strain on her time and talents than were the many needless practices middle-class women were virtually required by society to pursue. Privately and publicly in print, she railed against the complicated, uncomfortable, and expensive clothes designed for women, and the lavish, multicourse meals that women were expected to serve in overdecorated, unhygienic homes. She urged women to reject all such socially constructed barriers to their genuine health and happiness.

Although she shared her husband's commitment to progressive reforms, Belle grew weary of living in perpetual financial debt, and she viewed La Follette's Magazine as a particular strain on her husband's time and energy—and on the family's checkbook. The magazine nevertheless became one of the
prime arenas in which she could promote a wide range of reforms dear to her, including both suffrage and physical exercise for women, public health, the end of corporal and capital punishment, as well as a variety of political goals she shared with her husband, like direct democracy measures (initiative, referendum, and recall) and tax reform. She wrote columns to urge women to recognize that problems they viewed as personal (such as difficulties in household budgeting) were in fact political. She argued women needed to understand the tariff, tax structure, power of big business, and the need to regulate natural resources, private monopolies, and freight rates. Other journalists wrote admiringly of Belle’s work, crediting her with taking seriously the intelligence of her women readers. In 1911, the North American Press Syndicate engaged La Follette to provide brief articles for syndication six days a week. Her “Thought for the Day” series appeared in 57 newspapers in more than 20 states. The publication of Olive Schreiner’s Woman and Labor, also in 1911, confirmed Belle La Follette’s belief that women’s employment outside the home was to the benefit of both sexes and to society overall.

One of the largest barriers to women reaching their full potential, according to Belle La Follette, was their inability to vote. She termed the denial of suffrage to women antithetical to the democratic principles of the nation. Her many exhausting speaking campaigns in support of women’s suffrage carried her throughout much of the country. In 1913, she was chosen to present the “pro” argument to the U.S. Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage, and she was part of a contingent of advocates who met with President Wilson at the White House. Feminist and leading women’s suffrage strategist Alice Paul called her “the most consistent supporter of equal rights of all the women of her time.”

Support of Racial Equality and Opposition to U.S. Entry into World War I

The 1896 Supreme Court decision Plessy v. Ferguson upheld racial segregation under the doctrine of “separate but equal,” yet the resulting Jim Crow laws mandating racial segregation doomed African Americans nationwide to decidedly inferior accommodations and opportunities, leading generations to suffer poverty, discrimination, shorter life spans, and acts of terrorism. Both La Follettes were committed to civil rights for African Americans. They rejected the “scientific” racism that guided the thinking of many white progressives at the time, and believed unequivocally in the complete equality of all citizens in a democracy. In more than one speech on the floor of the Senate, Bob La Follette scolded his colleagues, blaming their racism rather than African Americans, for the nation’s racial disparities. Belle La Follette also believed that blacks were held back not by some inherent inferiority but by the prejudice of whites. She waged war, in speeches and in columns in La Follette’s Magazine, on the efforts of the Wilson administration to racially segregate the federal government. She was bombarded with hate mail from racist whites, but grateful African Americans expressed their deep appreciation. For example,
African American educator and activist Nannie Helen Burroughs publicly hailed Belle La Follette as "the successor to Harriet Beecher Stowe." Although Bob did not share Belle's pacifism, the La Follotes had in common a deep aversion to war. Bob La Follette described war as "the money changer's opportunity, and the social reformer's doom." He dedicated himself to keep his country out of the war raging across Europe in 1914. Belle La Follette was a founding member of the Women's Peace Party, later renamed the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. As war in Europe raged, she sparred in the press with Theodore Roosevelt, declaring the former president "intoxicated with a false idea of war." She likewise insisted that her husband's opposition to U.S. entry in the war was the greatest service he could provide to his country. With Belle's staunch support, Bob led the Senate filibuster against President Wilson's Armed Ship Bill and was among the "little group of willful men" denounced by the president for rendering "the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible." In 1917, Bob was one of only six senators to vote against American entry into the war; his first cousin William La Follette, who represented Washington in the House of Representatives for nine years, also voted against entry into the war. Although Bob La Follette appeared publicly undeterred, he was privately shaken by opposition to his antiwar stance, which included being spat upon and burned in effigy. He answered calls for his expulsion from the Senate with an impassioned plea for the protection of constitutional rights and freedoms, including free speech during time of war. The entire La Follette family suffered intense public hostilities due to their pacifism during the war years, especially in their home state of Wisconsin.

Postwar Progressivism

Following World War I, Bob and Belle La Follette sought to shore up the faltering progressive movement. Belle devoted herself to universal disarmament and amnesty for political prisoners as well as more traditional progressive goals. Meanwhile, Bob spoke passionately against the Versailles Treaty, particularly against the proposed League of Nations, which he believed would involve Americans in foolhardy foreign entanglements at the price of progress at home. In addition to successfully keeping the United States out of the League of Nations, La Follette also won important natural resource protections in the Senate and demanded the investigation that culminated in the Teapot Dome oil reserve scandal and resignation of President Warren G. Harding's interior secretary, Albert Fall.

Bob La Follette's Final Battle and Legacy

Bob La Follette ran for president as an independent in 1924 with the planks in his platform reflecting his ongoing commitment to progressive goals.
Despite a tiny campaign chest, he received nearly 5 million votes, roughly 17 percent of the total number cast. He died of heart disease the following year at the age of 70. Throughout his career in public service spanning 45 years, farmers, laborers, and citizens from all walks of life in Wisconsin remained convinced that La Follette was sincerely dedicated to making their homes and workplaces safer; to reducing the disparity between the rich and the poor, and between the powerful and the powerless. These dedicated supporters remained faithful for the duration of his political career, and that loyalty, combined with name recognition, was crucial in launching the careers of the next generation of La Follettes.

**Building the Foundation for a Dynasty**

As parents, the La Follettes promoted among their children a family solidarity that journalist and family friend Elizabeth Glendower Evans called intense beyond any other she had ever encountered. Both parents often appeared resentful of their children's attempts at privacy and jealous of diversions such as friends and outside interests. The children expressed their feelings of family loyalty toward each other as well as their parents. As young adults, the siblings exchanged unusually, even unsettlingly, strong declarations of love, approval, and admiration for one another; and such La Follette family solidarity was not disrupted even by the children's marriages. In-laws were incorporated into the family fold, which often meant joining the La Follette offspring in writing for *La Follette's Magazine* and taking part in various political campaigns.

Bob La Follette took his sons into his political confidence when they were still boys. Both parents made it clear to the boys that they expected their sons to follow in Bob's footsteps by attaining political office. Nonetheless, upon Bob La Follette's death, it was his widow who was petitioned by members of the Wisconsin legislature to complete her husband's term. According to Phil La Follette, his mother rejected the opportunity to become the first female senator because she recognized that her service would be granted more as a tribute to her husband than as a serious political investment—once her term expired, Wisconsin would turn elsewhere for its political leadership. By virtue of his sex as well as his age, Robert La Follette Jr., was far more likely than his mother to be repeatedly reelected and could thereby lead the La Follette progressive movement for years to come and further cement its legacy. Belle La Follette served as her son's campaign manager for the Senate. Despite her support of civil service reform intended to eliminate cronyism, Belle did not hesitate to promote her son as the best man to fill his father's seat, even though the only elected position Bob Jr. had ever held was president of his freshman class in college. She also ignored her son's lack of a college degree and dearth of passion for politics, citing instead his experience gained in six years as his father's private secretary. Belle La Follette also advised her son Phil, who was
politically ambitious but too young to become a senator, in his initial run for governor of Wisconsin in 1930. Upon their elections to office, Belle La Follette served as closest adviser and political confidante to both of her sons. Only her death in 1931 brought a halt to her ceaseless dedication to ensuring the La Follette political dynasty.

The Second Generation of La Follette Women

Of Bob and Belle La Follette's four children, only one did not dedicate a large portion of adulthood to building the family legacy. Although Mary, the youngest, did contribute to the family magazine and worked in her father's Senate office in her youth, she did not—like her older sister and brothers—make a career in the family business of progressivism. Fala, the older daughter, shared her father's love for theater and the commitment to social justice lived out by both her parents. Fala originally pursued a career on the stage, with brief success on Broadway in 1911, the same years that she married playwright George Middleton (yet retained the La Follette name). She acted in a number of productions promoting women's suffrage and supported the women garment workers' strike in New York City in 1913. Following her mother's death, Fala La Follette edited what Belle had written into what became roughly the first fourth of her father's biography. It took Fala 22 years more to write the more than 1,000 additional pages needed to complete the two-volume study. Critics complained that the work's unblinking focus on Bob La Follette allowed little room for historical context and perspective, but praised the authors for comprehensive coverage and dramatic flair. With a permanent record of her parents' progressivism assured, Fala then began cataloging and organizing the more than 400,000 documents that today make up the La Follette collection in the Library of Congress, work that would occupy her until her death in 1970 at the age of 87.

The Second Generation of La Follette Men

In his work The La Follettes of Wisconsin, author Bernard Weisberger provides an overview of the political careers of the second generation of La Follette men in a chapter aptly titled "The Succession That Wasn't." Both sons shared their father's commitment to reform and, with other key La Follette supporters, joined forces with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, bringing many of Bob and Belle La Follette's goals to fruition in the New Deal. In her jointly authored work Belle: The Biography of Belle Case La Follette, Phil La Follette's younger daughter Sherry describes the feelings of inadequacy felt by La Follette descendants. As an example she recounts how her uncle, Robert La Follette Jr., was taunted during the special election campaign for his father's Senate seat, "You
La Follette Jr. undertook the duty of completing his father's Senate term in 1925 with a deep sense of obligation and a determination to maintain the principles to which his father dedicated his life. Patrick Maney's *Young Bob: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette, Jr.*, argues that La Follette Jr. was one of the best senators in history but also one of the most tragic. At the age of 30, as the youngest senator since Henry Clay a century before, La Follette Jr. embarked on the service that would last 21 years—nearly the rest of his life cut short by suicide. He spent his first few years in the Senate as an able but rather unimaginative successor to his father, but by the end of 1928 he became more self-assured. He served as a transitional figure in the history of modern reform movements; he achieved national attention during the Great Depression as one of the first to develop a coherent plan for combating declining purchasing power. As detailed in Jerold S. Auerbach's *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, the height of La Follette Jr.'s prominence occurred between 1936 and 1940 when he served as chairman of the Senate Civil Liberties Committee investigating unionists' civil liberties' violations by industrialists.

Despite his occasional brilliant successes, La Follette Jr. endured rather than enjoyed public life and grew to resent the intrusions on his privacy over time. The specter of his father always loomed large, and the fears of failing his father's memory were constant. Considered a superior senator but a weak political leader, La Follette Jr. left the Republican Party in 1934 to create the Progressive Party of Wisconsin; however, he did not provide firm leadership for the party and devoted less and less time to Wisconsin affairs. In 1946, he decided to return to the GOP but was beaten in the Senate primary by political newcomer Joseph R. McCarthy. Following his defeat by a man who embodied the antithesis of his family's progressive values and unable to take satisfaction from his own considerable achievements, Robert La Follette Jr. retired from politics, preoccupied by the poor state of his health and suffering from depression and anxiety attacks. On February 24, 1953, La Follette Jr. committed suicide; he left behind his wife, Rachel, and two sons, Joseph and Bronson. Just days before shooting himself, Robert Jr. expressed to his friend Senator J. Lister Hill (D-AL), "how he never should have let McCarthy beat him, how he had let his father down."

As noted in Jonathan Kasparek's *Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. La Follette*, the La Follette's second son, Philip, proved to be an aggressive, flamboyant, controversial, and influential leader whose political style was reminiscent of his father's. Despite his ambition and dedication, as governor of Wisconsin Phil La Follette was unable to master a dependable political majority in his attempt to have Wisconsin provide leadership during the Great
Defeated after his initial term as governor from 1931 to 1933, Phil went on to serve two more terms from 1935 to 1939; however, the last was plagued by controversy, especially after his creation of the National Progressives of America (NPA) in 1938. For example, even among Governor La Follette's supporters, many people found his design choice for the NPA's logo to be disconcertingly similar to the Nazi Party's swastika logo. La Follette strove to create a new national party while simultaneously running for a fourth term as governor, and he failed at both. He was only 41 when he left office for the final time in 1939 and returned to the practice of law.

During World War II, Phil served on the staff of General Douglas MacArthur, then returned to his law practice at the war's end. Increasingly diverging from the family's liberalism, in the 1940s and 1950s he promoted the presidential campaigns of MacArthur, Earl Warren, and Dwight Eisenhower. Although Phil struggled with depression and alcohol abuse, he served as president of Hazeltine Electronics in New York from 1955 to 1959 before returning to Wisconsin. In the midst of writing his political memoirs, Phil died in 1965. He was survived by his wife, Isabel, and three children—Robert, Judith, and Sherry.

Subsequent Generations and the Family Legacy

Bronson La Follette was 16 when his father, Robert Jr., took his own life. Amid five terms as Wisconsin's attorney general from 1965 to 1969 and again from 1975 to 1987, Bronson made an unsuccessful run for the governor's chair in 1968. He was reelected as Wisconsin attorney general in 1982, despite a drunk driving conviction the previous year; but after an ethics investigation earned him a reprimand, he failed to earn reelection in 1986. Bronson retired from public service, but to date appears occasionally at events honoring his famous predecessors. He has two children, Robert and Deborah.

The only family member to remain active in politics is Doug La Follette, Robert La Follette's first cousin twice removed. Although name recognition likely contributed to his early success in local politics, a steadfast dedication to some of the progressive goals associated with that name, especially environmental protection, has led to his constant reelection as Wisconsin's secretary of state, a position he has held since 1983. Doug La Follette's multiple efforts at other positions, including two runs for federal office, have not been successful.

Despite meaningful contributions to the La Follette's progressive reform agenda by subsequent generations, the dynasty's originator, Robert La Follette, remains by far the most well-known and celebrated politician. In 1982, the National Governors Association ranked Robert first on its list of 10 outstanding governors of the 20th century; and in 2000, a Senate resolution recognized him as one of the seven greatest senators in American history. Each of
the 50 states is allowed up to two symbolic statues in the rotunda of the nation's capitol, and they sometimes update their choices: to this day, a statue of Robert La Follette represents Wisconsin. The La Follette political dynasty was intense but short-lived—blazing brightly but then virtually burning out, suffocated by its own shadow before the end of a second generation.

**Notes**

4. Ibid., 760.
8. Wilson asked Congress for authority to arm merchant ships so that they could fire upon their attackers. Critics of the Armed Ship Bill, including La Follette, argued that this move would almost certainly bring about an exchange of fire that would inexorably lead to a declaration of war. Wilson’s “willful men” charge against those who organized and participated in the filibuster that kept the bill from coming to a vote was part of an indignant formal statement that was widely circulated. See “Sharp Words by Wilson,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1917, 1.
Further Reading


