

Frank Wade – Entrepreneur and Splendid Citizen

The March 3, 1919, *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* stated the following: “Fairmont, today, stands with bowed head and heavy heart.” “Death took Frank Wade at the zenith of his powers and usefulness. His work, splendidly begun, was far from finished. What he might have done, what he might have been, is now idle conjecture.” “There is no man in Fairmont, there has never been a man among Fairmont’s citizenship, whose life and deeds meant so much to every resident of the community.”

Frank E. Wade was born on March 6, 1862, at Whitehall, Wisconsin. The Wade family was originally from England.

Wade attended public schools in Wisconsin and rural schools in Martin County. He also attended the Curtis Business College in St. Paul. Much of his early life was spent on a Martin County homestead where he experienced the hard conditions that faced every pioneer settler to the region.

Mr. Wade’s career spanned many years and included a number of endeavors. In 1881, at the age of 19, he became involved with G. W. Sherwood & Company, a firm that built bridges along the Mississippi River. He soon became superintendent of construction, having 370 men under him, and was placed in charge of bridge construction. He moved to Primghar, Iowa, in 1887, and operated the Herrick & Wade General Store and later moved to Sheldon, Iowa. Wade was also a general salesman for Fairbanks & Morse Company of Chicago. He assisted in perfecting the engines manufactured by that firm, and in 1899 led the company in sales of that engine.

Frank Wade made the substantial portion of his fortune in the mining district of the Black Hills of South Dakota. He entered the region in 1902 and was one of the owners of the Homestake Mining Company; he was also involved with the Globe Gold Mining Company from 1902 to 1904.

Mr. Wade returned to Fairmont in 1906 and took over the operation of the Water and Light Commission. That same year he established the Fairmont National Bank, and was named president. He then began to focus his attention on the Fairmont Machine Company, of which he also became president in 1909. The company manufactured the Fairmont gasoline engines, railway motor cars, and many other railway appliances. At that time, it supplied most of the railroads in the U.S. as well as many foreign

markets. Wade's expertise and aggressive salesmanship was instrumental in making the company a leader in the industry. In 1913, the city of Duluth made an attractive offer to move the Fairmont Machine Company to that city; however, the decision was made to expand and remain in Fairmont. In 1915, the company changed its name to Fairmont Gas Engine and Railway Motor Car Company, and in 1919 its name was again changed to Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc.

In addition to his interests in the Fairmont Machine Company, Mr. Wade was president of the Fairmont Boat Company, a public enterprise for boating, fishing, and general outings. Other ventures included being president of the Southern Florida Land Company and vice president of the Tobacco Plantation Company, the largest sugar manufacturing plant in Mexico at that time.

Although a very successful businessman, he was also very civic minded. He was a member of the Christian Science Church. A republican, he was a member of the state central committee, and was elected mayor of Fairmont in 1915. It was during his term as mayor that paving was accomplished, in spite of much opposition. He also served as volunteer game warden and proved fearless in upholding the somewhat neglected laws of game resources of the time. He found time to belong to many local and state organizations including the Chain of Lakes Lodge, the Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias, to name but a few.

In 1915, he purchased land located south of Fairmont and developed it into one of the finest resorts in the Midwest, known as Interlaken Park. Weekend crowds of 4,000 were common, and the 1920s Fourth of July celebrations often numbered in excess of 20,000. It peaked in popularity in the 1920s, and drew praise from as far away as New York and as close as neighboring Iowa.

Frank E. Wade passed away on March 3, 1919. The Directors of the Fairmont Gas Engine and Railway Motor Car Company then elected Harold Wade, son of Frank Wade, as president and general manager.

Frank Wade was undoubtedly one of the most influential and significant figures of his era. His accomplishments impacted Fairmont and Martin County in many ways. An entrepreneur, he was public spirited and he was also a visionary intent on improving his community. His efforts proved

instrumental in enhancing the quality of life in this area and the positive effects of his presence would be felt locally for many decades after his death. He was well loved and respected in Martin County and throughout the state of Minnesota. The following partial quote from the 1919 *Sentinel* article reporting his death seems to clearly summarize his life: “The life of Frank Wade was a life of action.”

You can find out more about Frank Wade’s life and accomplishments by visiting the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.