



# "LADY ORGANIZER"

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Sabrie G. Akin and  
the *Labor World*

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**O**n April 11, 1896, in Duluth, Minnesota, a 29-year-old woman brought out the first issue of the *Labor World*. Sabrie Goodwin Akin, a “lady organizer” and the mother of a six-year-old boy, was the biweekly newspaper’s editor, publisher, and sole owner. Like many reform-minded citizens of the 1890s, she was a Christian Socialist who saw the world as a battle between the wealthy industrialists and the working class. The *Labor World*, she promised, “will pat no one on the back to gain patronage or support. The labor question will be handled without gloves by the LABOR WORLD, and if need be with knife in hand.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Labor World*’s motto was “Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor As Thyself.” Akin wielded her editorial pen against the robber barons, who did not live by the Golden Rule. She called railroad magnate James J. Hill “Pirate,” “Slippery Hill,” and “Infernal Hill and his lick-spittel hirelings.” She referred to “Judas Iscariot Rockefeller and his band of gilt-edged highwaymen.” If the poor did not find justice on earth, Akin warned, they would be avenged in the hereafter: “the monopolist, the gold-bug and the slimy capitalistic robber will sink into an oblivion deeper and darker than hell itself, there to remain till the crack of doom.”<sup>2</sup>

The way she preferred to use her given name, rather than her husband’s, announced a feminist iden-

tity. In this, she was in company with other prominent Duluth feminists, including Sarah Burger Stearns, who was a statewide officer in temperance and woman’s suffrage organizations, and Ida Thompson, who served the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) as state superintendent of temperance and labor from 1899 to 1904.<sup>3</sup>

Sabrie Akin was one of the warriors of Duluth’s radical history, the city’s most famous radical woman of the 1890s. It was not in the interests of the mainstream, business-oriented media to retain a memory of such fiery socialist critics. But it is in our interest to restore Mrs. Akin, as her friends affectionately called her, to Minnesota’s historical memory. Her career shows that, one quarter of a century before women won the federal suffrage, socialists and feminists were respected members of the Minnesota reform community. The fascinating question about her is: How did she manage a career as a socialist speaker and publish a successful newspaper, when her audience was the rather cautious labor establishment in Duluth?

SABRIE AKIN learned leadership skills and democratic ideals at home as a child. Her Goodwin ancestors emigrated to Kittery, Maine, from Sussex County, England, in 1652 and lived in New England until the 1850s. The family counted a governor and an admiral’s wife among the its stars. Leadership was expected.<sup>4</sup>

Daniel Goodwin, Akin’s father, was born in Vermont in 1832. Esther Ann Van Patter, her mother, was born in 1836 in Lower Canada, of English-American parents from New York state. Esther and Daniel were married on the Fourth of July, 1859, in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa. They bought a farm near Mason City and had their first son, Charles H., in 1860. Roy M. was born in 1863 and Ellen T. in 1865. Sabra (her birth name), the youngest, was born in 1867.<sup>5</sup>

The Goodwin children learned about economic and personal vulnerability at home. The value of the family

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<sup>1</sup>Will and Probate Court records, Mrs. Sabrie G. Akin, Jan. 23, 1900, St. Louis County Courthouse, Duluth; *Labor World* (LW), April 25, 1896; *Duluth News Tribune* (NT), May 12, 1895. Thanks to Carl Ross, director of the 20th-Century Radicalism in Minnesota project at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), for introducing me to Akin; Pat Maus, director of the Northeast Minnesota Historical Center (NMHC), Duluth, for the clue that located Akin’s newspaper portrait sketch; and Margaret M. Wellen (Iowa), Eleanor Campbell (Illinois), and Virginia Hyvarinen (Duluth) for genealogical research.

<sup>2</sup>Advertisement, *Duluth City Directory*, 1897–98, vol. M-Z, p. 554; LW, June 6, July 18, Aug. 15, May 23—all 1896.

<sup>3</sup>*Minnesota White Ribboner*, April, 1897, Minnesota Woman’s Christian Temperance Union Records, MHS. On Stearns, see Mrs. W. S. Woodbridge, “Tells Life Work of Duluth’s Pioneer Clubwoman and Suffragist,” unmarked article in clippings file, NMHC; Bessie Lathe Scovell, *Yesteryears: A Brief History of the Minnesota Woman’s Christian Temperance Union . . . to 1939* (St. Paul: Minnesota WCTU, 1939), 9, 216, 237.

<sup>4</sup>LW, Mar. 10, 1900.

<sup>5</sup>Here and below, see marriage records, 1855–1880, Cerro Gordo County Courthouse, Mason City, Iowa; United States, manuscript census, Cerro Gordo County, Lake Township, Iowa, 1860, p. 864; 1870, p. 404; John Samuel Goodwin, comp., *The Goodwins of Kittery, York County, Maine* (Maryland and Virginia: Orrin Sheller Goodwin, 1898), 97; LW, Mar. 10, 1900.



*Bustling Superior Street in Duluth, 1899*

farm decreased from 900 to 800 dollars between 1860 and 1870. Tragedy struck both parents. Daniel Goodwin “died a young man.” Esther faced the challenge of hearing impairment, although she was able to read and write. Sabrie showed literary promise early in life, and both she and Roy eventually chose careers that were built with words.

The Goodwins left Iowa, perhaps for northwestern Minnesota, by 1880. The next year, at age 18, Roy Goodwin began his railroad career as a switchman in St. Vincent, Minnesota. In the early 1890s Sabrie found employment in nearby Fargo as labor editor at the *Daily Republican*, a leading newspaper of the day.<sup>6</sup> Workers like her brother Roy at nearby railway hubs were the audience for her labor column.

For both Roy and Sabrie, vocational training came on the job. In her *Labor World* in 1897, Akin thanked her former editor, recalling that “under the editorial supervisory eye of J. J. Jordan . . . many a time [his] blue pencil caused [me] to look with regret on the result of many hours of laborious work.”<sup>7</sup>

When she was in her early twenties, Sabrie Goodwin married and had a boy, Charles. Either because of a divorce or the death of her husband, a Mr. LeFeure about whom little is known today, she had to support herself and the baby. In 1892, when her son was about three, Sabrie married Theodore C. Akin, a traveling insurance agent.<sup>8</sup>

In early 1895 T. C. Akin moved to Duluth, perhaps to capitalize on business opportunities. In 1885 the city’s population had been 18,036; ten years later, with 59,396 residents, it was a boom town. In the mid-1890s Duluth’s public transportation system converted to

<sup>6</sup>“Biographical,” *Railway Times* (Terre Haute, Ind.), Sept. 2, 1895, copy in State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; *Fargo City Directory*, 1893. The Goodwins were not in the 1880 census for Cerro Gordo County.

<sup>7</sup>LW, Feb. 13, 1897.

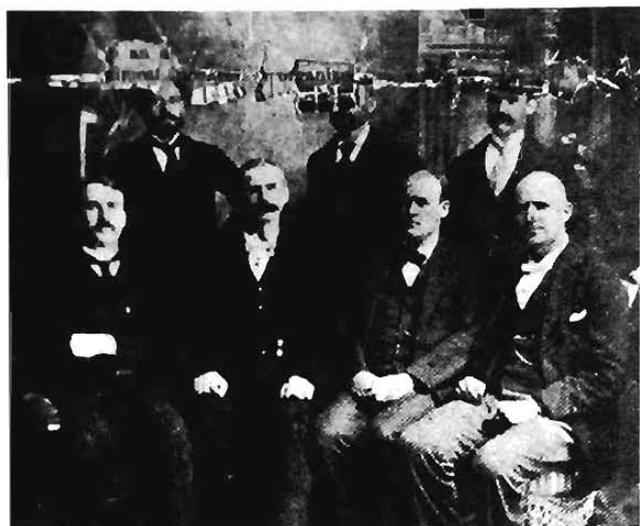
<sup>8</sup>“Marriage license, Sabra Goodwin LeFeure and Theodore Charles Akin, Dec. 20, 1892, Cass County Courthouse, Fargo.

electric streetcars, but mule-drawn cars still ran on Park Point. Once, a hastily built house slipped a little way down the hill. Since housing was in short supply, T. C. Akin lived in a rooming house.<sup>9</sup>

Sabrie followed in March, 1895, but she left her son in Fargo with friends until the fall. It was when she arrived in Duluth that Akin changed her name Sabra to Sabrie and claimed her birthdate to be 1869, not 1867. After moving several times, the Akins settled in a multiple-family dwelling at 1320 East Second Street, in the fashionable Endion neighborhood.<sup>10</sup>

TO DULUTH Sabrie Akin brought a Jeffersonian idealism that made her speeches and, later, her essays attractive to her new audience. She envisioned an Americanized style of socialism where, she wrote, "the people themselves" would have collective ownership "of the wealth of the country." Akin blended this socialist ideal with democratic means. "The ballot is our weapon," she declared.<sup>11</sup>

By the time Sabrie settled in town, Duluth unionists had already met her brother Roy. In 1894 he had resigned as yard master at the Great Northern hub in Grand Forks, North Dakota, to sign on as an organizer of the bold new American Railway Union (ARU). Like the Knights of Labor and populist giant Ignatius Donnelly, who supported them, the ARU had heart. It recruited the young and the unskilled. It included in its ranks female clerks and advocated for them equal wages for equal work. Women won a public presence in the ARU, which counted their groups among the socialist, populist, temperance, and other movements in its coalition. Lizzie M. Holmes, Eva McDonald Valesh,



The seven jailed American Railway Union officials, including Roy Goodwin (bottom row, third from left); Eugene Debs (bottom, right); and Sylvester Keliher (top, right).

Ida A. Harper, and Mary E. Lease were published in the ARU newspaper, *Railway Times*. Such inclusiveness suited young idealists such as Sabrie Akin and Roy Goodwin.<sup>12</sup>

The ARU played well to a midwestern audience. Using familiar imagery, *Railway Times* characterized the two-year-old union as a "young Sampson" fighting numerous foes: "the defiant" J. J. Hill; the bootlicking "old and effete" railroad brotherhoods; "the monster of depravity," George M. Pullman; the "billions of capital" controlled by the railroad owners' General Managers' Association; corrupt federal courts; and the National Guard. In 1894 Minnesota boasted 31 ARU chapters, including 13 in the Twin Cities and others in Duluth, nearby Two Harbors, and Proctor Knott.<sup>13</sup>

Socialistic unions like the ARU had a radical agenda and a strong following. Such radicalism was not unique during this era. The American Federation of Labor (A.F. of L.) had turned away from socialist ideals by 1894, but its platform of the previous year included resolutions for nationalization of the railroads, telegraphs, telephones, and mines as well as for municipal ownership of waterworks, streetcars, gas and electric plants.<sup>14</sup>

The ARU lost its 1894 strike against George Pullman's palace car factory and his brutal company town. For refusing to obey an injunction against organizing, Roy Goodwin, Sylvester Keliher (who was born in Lake City), and four other ARU officers were sentenced to three months in jail. Union president and labor hero Eugene V. Debs was sentenced to six months. Many

<sup>9</sup>NT, Jan. 1, 1896; *Duluth Evening Herald* (EH), Feb. 20, 24, 1896; *Duluth City Directory*, 1895.

<sup>10</sup>EH, Mar. 9, Aug. 17, 1895, Jan. 24, 1900; LW, Mar. 10, 1900; United States, manuscript census, Cerro Gordo County, 1870, p. 404; *Fargo City Directory*, 1893; *Duluth City Directory*, 1895, 1896-97, 1898-99, 1900.

<sup>11</sup>LW, Feb. 1, 1897, June 6, 1896; Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 74-75; Howard H. Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1953), 76-79, 95.

<sup>12</sup>"Biographical," "A Great Bargain," cover illustration, and articles by Valesh, Harper, and Lease—all in *Railway Times*, Sept. 2, 1895; the Holmes article is in the June 1, 1897, issue. See also Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 121-123; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. II* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 255-257. Foner wrote that "the one blot on the A. R. U.'s constitution" was "the ban against Negro members."

<sup>13</sup>"A. R. U. History," *Railway Times*, Sept. 2, 1895; see also issue of Oct. 1, 1894.

<sup>14</sup>Quint, *Forging of American Socialism*, 66.

ARU leaders, including Roy Goodwin and Akin's friend in West Superior, Ellis B. Harris, were blacklisted from railroad work for the rest of their lives, despite the findings of a presidential commission, appointed soon thereafter by Grover Cleveland. Citing testimony by "many impartial observers," the commission concluded that the ARU workers' grievances should have been attended to and that their civil rights had been abrogated by the industrialist giants.<sup>15</sup>

In early 1895, with his jail sentence "hanging over his head," Roy Goodwin traveled to Duluth to arrange for Debs's January 6 speech at the Temple Opera House. The month that Akin moved to town, the "Personals" column in the *Duluth Evening Herald* noted a visit from her sister-in-law, Mrs. R. M. Goodwin. Through her brother and his association with Debs, Akin earned a position in the extended family of labor heroes. These ties lent her courage to be herself in a new setting, for the rank and file identified with the ARU. The *Railway Times* reported that when Debs spoke in 1895 at the Labor Temple in Minneapolis, the vast throng responded to him with "a tumultuous uproar and applause."<sup>16</sup>

Sabrie Akin lost no time in marching, apparently unafraid, into male-dominated spaces. In early May, 1895, she was first introduced to the Duluth Federated Trades Assembly as "a lady organizer," sister of Roy Goodwin.<sup>17</sup>

Later that month, she addressed the trades assembly on socialism and announced her intention to publish a labor newspaper. The *Evening Herald* reported her promise that her paper "would be 'red hot' and 'first, last and all the time' be for public ownership of all corporations." The trades assembly elected her an honorary delegate on the spot.<sup>18</sup>

In publishing a paper Akin recognized an opportunity to empower the labor community by reporting fast-breaking public questions from labor's point of view. That community was a big factor in Duluth's boom-town growth. Trades assembly President Alfred McCallum announced that in the mid-1890s union members and their families accounted for one-fifth of the city's population. The *Evening Herald* called the trades assembly "one of the most powerful labor bodies in the West."<sup>19</sup>

IT WOULD BE less than a year before Sabrie Akin made good her publishing promise. During that interval she managed to do what the men had failed to do: organize the waitresses. The Waiters Union elected her as a delegate in her own right. Akin was the first female among the 150 men in the trades assembly, representing 4,000 men and women in more than 50 unions. In all, she served three six-month terms as a delegate from the Waiters and the Street Railway workers unions. Within

the next two years, five women won elections as delegates to the Duluth Federated Trades Assembly: the Laundry Workers' May S. Cahill and Eva Quade, and the Hotel and Restaurant Waitresses Protective Union's Gelena Bonlore, Gertrude Catlin, and Mary Fleishman. Mrs. Akin and her waitresses and laundresses wedged cracks in the wall that kept women out of men's spaces. That wall, as feminist historian Linda K. Kerber recently wrote, was not a natural construction. It was a social construction.<sup>20</sup>

Akin challenged social customs throughout 1895. Canvassing Duluth business owners, she raised \$80 for striking miners in Ishpeming, Michigan. On behalf of the trades assembly she investigated the working conditions of the department-store clerks and addressed the newly organized Painters and Decorators Union. The right-wing *Duluth News Tribune* reported that Akin spoke on a Saturday evening to "those hustlers and loyal members of organized labor, the longshoremen." She was the only woman to join McCallum from the trades assembly and the body's organizer J. W. Nichols on the speakers' platform.<sup>21</sup>

As the *News Tribune* reminded Duluth readers, women found themselves segregated from men in most of the wage-earning world. A newspaper illustrator portrayed the Bethel, a popular meeting place that stood in the center of Duluth's business district. At lunchtime the businessmen occupied a lively, open space. Women lunched in a small space cut off from the main room by a heavy curtain.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>"Biographical" and "The A.R.U. Memento," *Railway Times*, Sept. 2, 1895; *LW*, June 20, 1896; O. D. Boyle, *History of Railroad Strikes* (Washington, D.C.: Brotherhood Publishing Co., 1935), 59, 61-62; Salvatore, *Debs*, 138.

<sup>16</sup>*EH*, Jan. 5, Mar. 9, 1895; "At Minneapolis," *Railway Times*, June 15, 1895.

<sup>17</sup>*NT*, May 12, 1895.

<sup>18</sup>*EH*, May 25, 1895; *NT*, May 26, 1895.

<sup>19</sup>*LW*, Mar. 10, 1900; *EH*, Jan. 18, Mar. 31, 1896. During this era Duluth labor sought reforms including the eight-hour day, child labor protection, burial of miners after work accidents, and Saturday "half-holidays" in summer; see, for example, *EH*, Feb. 18, May 30, 1896; *NT*, May 24, June 21, 1896; *LW*, June 6, 1896, Feb. 1, 1897.

<sup>20</sup>*NT*, Aug. 31, 1929, June 16, 1895; *EH*, June 24, 1895, Sept. 26, 1896, Mar. 10, 1897; *LW*, Mar. 10, 1900, Jan. 16, 1897; Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June, 1988): 28, 37-39.

<sup>21</sup>*NT*, July 21, Sept. 15, Oct. 6, 1895; *EH*, Sept. 29, Oct. 5, Nov. 9, 1895; Ronald K. Huch, "'Typhoid' Truelsen, Water, and Politics in Duluth, 1896-1900," *Minnesota History* 47 (Spring, 1981): 192, 196. No other female speaker was mentioned in the *Tribune's* or *Herald's* labor columns.

<sup>22</sup>*NT*, April 28, 1895; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1985), 245.



Workers at the Duluth coal docks, about 1900

The waitresses whom Mrs. Akin organized met on equal terms with the waiters at the Bethel one evening in June. Within one year they won raises of 70 cents per week and the right to sign union-scale contracts with every major restaurant in Duluth.<sup>23</sup>

While Akin established her reputation as a labor leader, her brother spent June, July, and August, 1895, in the McHenry County jail in Woodstock, Illinois, with Debs and five other ARU officers. Two months after his release, Goodwin went west to organize along the Great Northern rail lines. When he was jailed in Kalispell, Montana, in November, 1895, the *Evening Herald* featured a story on "agitator" and "ringleader" Goodwin and this, another failed strike.<sup>24</sup>

During these 1894 and 1895 strikes, A. F. of L. President Samuel Gompers moved to the right on the political spectrum. Gompers deserted the ARU, denounced socialism, rejected political activism, and

<sup>23</sup>NT, June 2, 23, Sept. 22, 29, 1895; LW, July 18, 1896.

<sup>24</sup>"On August 22nd," *Railway Times*, Sept. 2, 1895; *EH*, Nov. 5, 1895.

<sup>25</sup>*EH*, Nov. 9, 23, 1895; Quint, *Forging of American Socialism*, 69-71.

<sup>26</sup>*EH*, Sept. 7, Nov. 9, 16, 1895, Jan. 2, 1896.

<sup>27</sup>Duluth Federated Trades Assembly, Minute book, vol. 1, Jan. 10, 1896, Duluth Federated Trades & Labor Assembly Papers, MHS; *EH*, July 6, 1895, Jan. 11, 1896; "Still On," *Railway Times*, Aug. 1, 1894.

<sup>28</sup>NT, Feb. 9, 17, Mar. 21, 22, 1896; *EH*, Mar. 21, 1896.

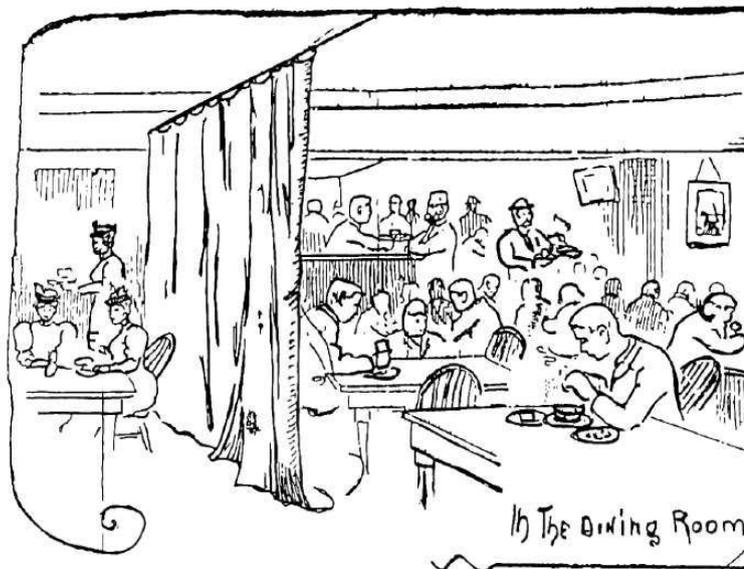
adopted a more capitalistic orientation. Mrs. Akin expressed her political judgment of Gompers at the 1895 Minnesota Federation of Labor convention in Winona. She stood among the minority of delegates who voted against Gompers for A. F. of L. president.<sup>25</sup>

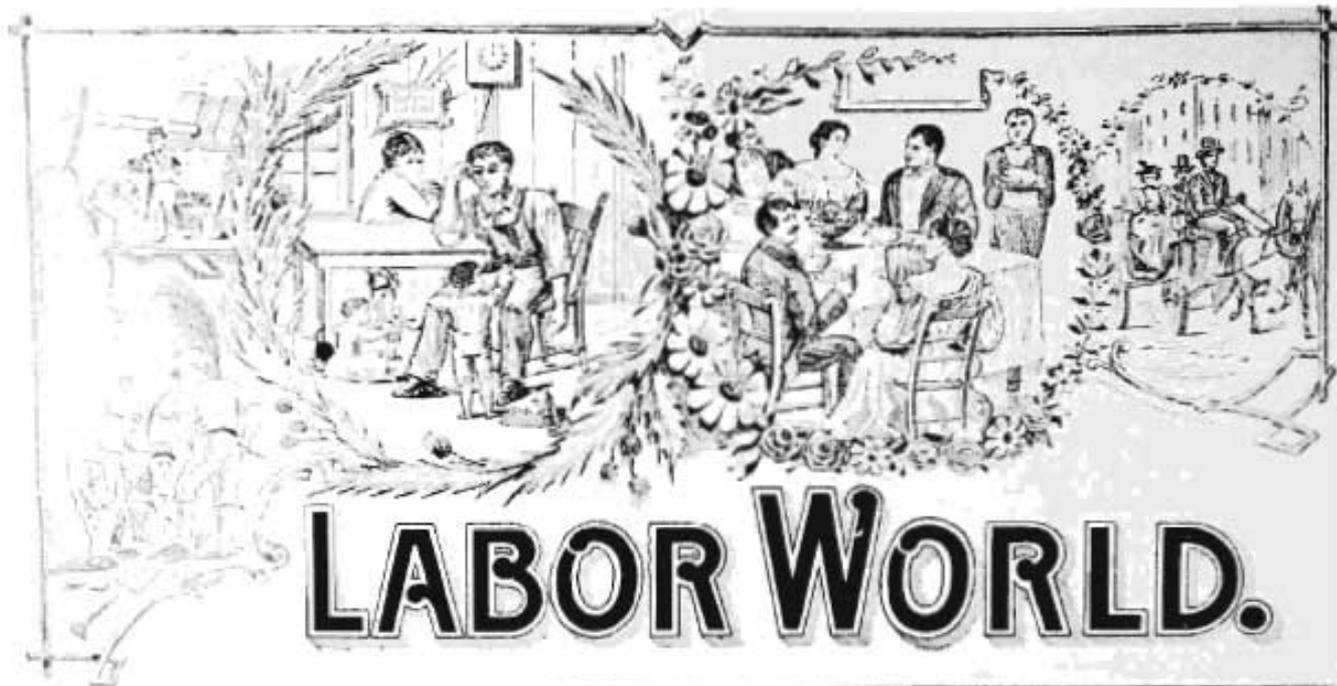
LATE in 1895, Duluth's city council established a retrenchment committee to slash salaries of municipal employees in order to reduce taxes. The trades assembly picked Sabrie Akin as its committee representative. The lone woman among six men from the Commercial Club, the Jobbers (wholesalers) Union, and other prominent businesses, she more than held her own in another male-defined space.<sup>26</sup>

Acting on explicit instructions from the trades assembly, Akin suggested that the city cut salaries of administrators before reducing laborers' and teachers' pay. Her other proposal for cutting taxes earned her her first Duluth headline: "Mrs. Akin Suggests the National Guard Company Be Disbanded." The militia had provoked violence in the Pullman strike, and Akin and the trades assembly were still mad. At an earlier assembly meeting, one delegate had said that the city could cut costs by not renting a drill hall. The guard, he thought, could drill on the ice.<sup>27</sup>

Akin's energetic style of leadership attracted attention. Soon, incoming Mayor Caspar H. Truelson and the city council were convinced of the political disadvantage of cutting the salaries of rank-and-file city workers. Even the *News Tribune* used Mrs. Akin's arguments for maintaining present salaries for the lowest paid.<sup>28</sup>

The Bethel, as portrayed in the News Tribune, 1895





VOL. I.

DULUTH AND SUPERIOR, APRIL 11, 1896.

No. 1.

Sabrie Akin kept up the pressure. She issued a bold minority report objecting to the committee's recommended wage reductions to "rank and file of school teachers, firemen, policemen, the day laborer." Female teachers were especially vulnerable, making \$56.74 per month to male teachers' \$104.00 in 1895. The council would not give Akin's report a public hearing, but the *News Tribune* published it. She penned this stinging socialist criticism: "Your delegate respectfully urges upon your honorable body . . . to discontinue the granting of privileges to corporations run in the interest of private parties, whereby money may be extorted from the people, while such corporations escape their just share of the public debt."<sup>29</sup>

TWO MONTHS after Akin's minority report appeared in the *News Tribune*, she brought out her first issue of the *Labor World*. The paper's masthead personalized the traumas of the Industrial Revolution. Laborers, including young boys, worked the iron mines. Waiters and drivers served the ruling class, whose squires were depicted at their leisure. There was nothing abstract about the human cost of progress. When the father was unemployed, the whole family suffered. The masthead wreathed the rich in roses. The working classes were wreathed in thistles.<sup>30</sup>

The *Evening Herald* editorialized that Akin "has been prominent in labor matters here for a long time,

and the *Herald* wishes her a large measure of the success which she deserves." The *Superior Evening Telegram* predicted that the *Labor World* would lead laborers to "think intelligently on the prominent questions." A *News Tribune* editorial called Akin "a thoroughly practical newspaperwoman, a worker with workers' interests at heart and she employs [her] pen in vigorous or entertaining style as the subject in hand merits. The *Labor World* is well patronized and bids fair to be a prosperous factor in the local field."<sup>31</sup>

Like J. A. Wayland, socialist editor of the Kansas paper *Appeal to Reason*, Akin was primarily an educator, not a theoretician. Along with the populists in her own generation and Nonpartisan Leaguers in the next, she believed that ordinary people were the foundation of democracy. The *Labor World* reassured workers of this basic democratic ideal. The first issue boasted: "The school house is planted in every district, reading

<sup>29</sup>NT, Feb. 18, 1896; Board of Education, City of Duluth, *25th Annual Report, July 31, 1895*, p. 105.

<sup>30</sup>LW, April 11, 1896.

<sup>31</sup>EH, April 16, 1896; *Superior Evening Telegram*, quoted in LW, June 20, 1896; NT, April 15, 1896. The *Herald*, April 6, 1896, stated that J. M. Murray of the trades assembly would be business manager of the *Labor World*; no subsequent reference to him in this role has been found.

# The Labor World

A BI-WEEKLY JOURNAL.

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SABRILE G. AKIN, Editor and Publisher.

Letters and articles relating to the social problem are solicited.

matter is accessible to the poorest and every political and social problem now arising in the nation is discussed in the humblest hovel in the land. It follows as a day follows night, that some time, and not many years hence [workers] will take the reins in their own hands." Akin customarily laced her editorials with an intensity that made her audience feel that the future was up to them. Addressing longshoremen in May, 1896, she said: "Now whoop 'em up boys! Don't put your name down, pay your dues and think that is going to raise your wages or hold them at the present scale. . . . Don't stay away from meetings and then complain because things are not run to suit you. . . . come in at the door and do not stand on the sidewalk and do your debating. . . . Remember that while you are loitering along the way

<sup>12</sup>Larry Remele, "'Things As They Should Be': Jeffersonian Idealism and Rural Rebellion in Minnesota and North Dakota, 1910-1920," *Minnesota History* 51 (Spring, 1988): 15-17; Quint, *Forging of American Socialism*, 38, 208-209; LW, April 11, May 23, 1896. Akin built her newspaper on durable ideals. See Curtis S. Miller (*Labor World* editor, 1951-65) interview with Barbara Sommer, Duluth, Jan. 27, 1981, tape recording in collections of NMHC.

<sup>13</sup>Here and below, see LW, April 11, Aug. 1, 29, 1896; NT, May 16, 1895.

<sup>14</sup>LW, Aug. 29, 1896.

<sup>15</sup>LW, June 20, 1896, Mar. 10, 1900.

your enemy, the capitalist, is undermining you every day."<sup>12</sup>

Akin proved her professionalism by giving a hearing to all sides of a controversy, writing with wit and style. For her more conservative audience, the first issue featured a front-page article on C. M. Thomas, current president of the Duluth Federated Trades Assembly, and his "union mercantile" store. On page five she published a profile of the assembly's first president, Emil A. Applehagen, a personal friend and former shopmate of Samuel Gompers.<sup>13</sup>

For her more radical audience, Akin drew upon her connections to the American Railway Union and its heroes. Also on page one of her first issue was Debs's "Is Solidarity of Labor Impossible?" and a poem, "The Labor World," written for her new paper by her friend Ellis B. Harris. Later issues noted correspondence from Harris when he ran into Roy Goodwin on union business in Buffalo, New York. When two blacklisted St. Cloud ARU train dispatchers called on Mrs. Akin at the *Labor World*, she editorialized that they were fired "because they dared to be men and not sneaks and cowards at the time of the A. R. U. strike."

Working-class men and women read Akin's *Labor World* because she helped them to make sense out of the controversies of the day. Socialism was not a "scare word," Akin asserted, but a familiar presence. "The post office," she wrote, "public highways, postal money order, school loan fund, bonded warehouses, the greenback, river and harbor improvement, and so on, are all more or less socialistic."<sup>14</sup>

Akin was particularly careful to clarify an argument when she was in the thick of it. In June of 1896 she was one of five female delegates to the Minnesota Federation of Labor convention in Minneapolis. As a delegate from the street railway union, Akin sided with the socialists and voted for a controversial resolution calling for "possession of the means of production" and "collective ownership" by the Minnesota working class. Trades unionists who voted against the measure wanted to limit the influence of fiery socialists, whom they judged, Akin explained, would cause "the disruption of organized labor's ranks." The resolution failed, she wrote, "after the fight of the mighty 'gladiators,'" 40 to 59. Akin was the only Duluth delegate to vote for the socialist measure.<sup>15</sup>

The ascendancy in 1896 of the antilabor team of President William McKinley and Republican party boss Mark Hanna signaled to many the acceptance of labor bashing. During the election campaign, Akin reported that "In the elevators and mills the men are given to understand that if they want a cinch on their jobs they must sign the McKinley-Morris club roll." The women, she continued, "are often more rebellious than the men. One lady is reported as saying that she . . .

# The Minnesota White Ribboner.

Purity in the Home and God in Government.

Vol. I.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINN., JULY 15, 1890.

No. 2.

would starve rather than have [her husband] put a gag in his mouth."<sup>36</sup>

Before the next federation of labor convention in December, 1896, the Duluth delegation called a strategy session to solidify its opposition to the socialists who advocated political action by the unions. The mainstream papers also intensified their opposition to socialism, writing that political activism by trades union members, as proposed by the Socialist Labor party in the Twin Cities, was "a menace to progress" for organized labor. The *News Tribune* hounded Akin's friend George C. Findley, a former newspaper editor, secretary-treasurer of his typographical union local, and its delegate to the trades assembly. A typical headline cried: "Is Mr. Findley a Socialist?"<sup>37</sup>

Akin's *Labor World*, then eight months old, gave such detailed labor coverage that it provided brisk competition for the *Evening Herald* and *News Tribune*. When the newspapers mounted this antisocialist campaign, their attack represented both a political and a commercial battle. First, the *News Tribune* planted seeds of a controversy. The next day an *Evening Herald* headline screamed "OBJECT. Mrs. Akin's Credentials . . . Her Socialistic Views Are Responsible For Stirring Up the Trouble." She was rumored to be a delegate to the upcoming state labor convention. The papers implied that she would vote for socialist measures.<sup>38</sup>

Akin knew how to use the press to defend herself. She dashed off a letter protesting that the labor community knew that she had not been a candidate for delegate. She did not temper her socialist commitment, just set straight the facts. Mrs. Akin's denial made the front page of the *Herald*.<sup>39</sup>

Findley also wrote to the *Herald* and insisted that everyone in Duluth already knew that Akin was a socialist; that she never attempted to hide her convictions; and that she never shied from controversy. In a sarcastic tone, Findley marveled at the "forty or fifty husky anti-socialists in the Duluth delegation [who] ought to have little difficulty in protecting themselves against the machination of one solitary, little woman."<sup>40</sup>

Akin covered the convention in her usual professional manner. She editorialized: "Duluth can justly

wear the crown of victory. The socialists owe their defeat to the Duluth delegation, who voted solidly against seating the S.L.P. [Socialist Labor Party] delegates." The next paragraph continued: "The tailors union of Duluth could not afford to send a delegate to the State Federation. A letter was read at the convention, however, stating that their union voted unanimously in favor of [the socialist resolution]." The tailors had a voice, if not a delegate. In Duluth, that voice was heard only in Akin's labor press.<sup>41</sup>

Until spring of 1897 Akin published a 20-page magazine, including literature and costly illustrations. By June, she scaled down the *Labor World* to a tabloid style of four pages or more. She bought up *The Hustler* (Duluth), the *Mountain Iron Manitou*, the *Duluth Citizen*, and the *Duluth Press*. This move placed her paper on a firmer financial base. Her friend Ida Thompson recalled that among Akin's best qualities were her abilities as a practical businesswoman.<sup>42</sup>

Controversy did not dampen Akin's spirit. The anti-socialist fervor intensified again in 1897 when Eugene Debs delivered his first thoroughly socialist address. Akin dubbed it "Debs' Great Speech" and published all of it, which took up nearly one-third of her newspaper. In that June, 1897, issue Akin lectured her audience. Don't assume, she warned, that Debs and all other socialists wear the same political stripes as the doctrinaire Socialist Labor party. Her own socialist ideals foresaw the ownership of labor and of commodities produced, not of the machinery used for production. Akin concluded the editorial in an exasperated tone, writing: "There is a horrible confusion of mind among the people of this country on this question. Men should

<sup>36</sup>LW. Aug. 15, 1896. On coercing voters, see George W. Lawson, *History of Labor in Minnesota* (Minnesota State Federation of Labor, 1955), 24-25. Robert P. Morris was a Duluth Republican elected to the U.S. Congress.

<sup>37</sup>NT, Nov. 15, Dec. 6, 7, 12, 1896. On Findley, see LW, June 6, 1896.

<sup>38</sup>EH, Dec. 5, 1896.

<sup>39</sup>EH, Dec. 7, 1896.

<sup>40</sup>EH, Dec. 12, 1896.

<sup>41</sup>LW, Dec. 19, 1896.

<sup>42</sup>LW, June 19, 1897, Mar. 10, 1900.

know what they are talking about, or keep their mouths shut. Study up.”<sup>43</sup>

ON THE FOURTH of July, 1896, Akin bragged about the role of the dissident press in the labor movement. “The reform press,” she wrote, “is the brains and the backbone of the reform movement. Encourage and sustain them; we will need them all before the fight is over.”

The dissident press was quite popular in the 1890s; historian John D. Hicks speculates that hundreds of newspapers reached hundreds of thousands of subscribers. Midwestern examples alone included the Minnesota Farmer’s Alliance’s *Great West*, the St. Paul Labor Assembly’s *Union Advocate*, and Kansas’s socialist *Appeal to Reason*. Duluth’s black community began the *World of Duluth* in 1896. Minneapolis boasted two reform papers: the *Cooperative Age* and C. St. John Cole’s *Rights of Man*. The *Labor World* was in good company. In one 1897 issue alone, for example, Akin reprinted editorials from three midwestern radical papers: Ignatius Donnelly’s *Representative*, *Coxey’s Sound Money*, and *Silver Knight*.<sup>44</sup>

The leading women’s reform paper in the state was the WCTU’s *Minnesota White Ribboner*, which ran throughout the 1890s. Duluth’s Mrs. Bessie Lathe Scovell served as editor from 1894 to 1897. The WCTU’s national president, Frances Willard, was a Christian Socialist like Akin, and Akin published Willard’s ideas in her newspaper. Willard, who was a folk hero in her day, made more Duluth headlines than any other national female reformer.<sup>45</sup>

Female newspaper editors like Scovell and Akin were no strangers to the industry: Rebecca Taylor edited the St. Paul weekly *Truth*; Mame Starr published the *Tracy Trumpet*; Julia A. A. Wood ran the *Sauk Rapids Free Press*. The *Evening Herald* called Nettie S. Hager the “editress” of the *North Dakota Eagle*, and the *News Tribune* announced in 1895 that



Frances E. Willard

“there were twenty-five women running country papers in Kansas.” Sixteen Minnesota women were journalists in 1890. By 1910 there were 100 of them.<sup>46</sup>

Along with union and industrial growth, more women were entering public life. Women did not win the federal vote until 1920; in the 1890s the arena of change was on school and library boards and in deliberative bodies like church conventions and labor assemblies. By 1900, for example, Mrs. C. R. Keyes of West Duluth served on the library board.<sup>47</sup>

There was a wide range of reaction to women who effected this change. Many members of Duluth’s women’s clubs could not bring themselves to support one of their own for school board in 1899. Miss Mary B. Statham of the Twentieth Century Club said that they needed more training to serve honorably. Club women, Statham explained, did “not propose to force ourselves there against the desires of the men.”<sup>48</sup>

Women had been serving on school boards in Minneapolis since 1876. Journalists like Akin urged women to get out and vote. By the 1890s, according to historian Eleanor Flexner, women had won the suffrage on matters of school policy and local tax authority in 19 states. Harriet Taylor Upton in a *News Tribune* column, “Motherless Institutions,” argued in 1896 that the governing boards of public schools, libraries, lunatic asylums, and soldier’s homes needed women’s skills, con-

<sup>43</sup>LW, June 19, 1897. This is the only known surviving issue of the LW between Feb. 13, 1897 and March, 1900.

<sup>44</sup>Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 131; Lauren Kessler, *The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984), 119; LW, Jan. 2, Feb. 1, 1897; EH, Feb. 22, 1896; Quint, *Forging of American Socialism*, 232, n.90; “Rights of Man,” *Railway Times*, May 15, 1897.

<sup>45</sup>Scovell, *Yesteryears*, facing p. 24, 92; LW, Aug. 1, 1896. On Willard, see Ruth Bordin, *Frances Willard, A Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 175.

<sup>46</sup>*Bede’s Budget* (St. Paul) Dec. 6, 1896; EH, Feb. 6, Sept. 22, Nov. 14, 1896; NT, May 7, 1895; U. S., *Census, Population*: 1890, part 2, p. 319; 1910, 4:120–121.

<sup>47</sup>*White Ribboner*, March–April, 1900.

<sup>48</sup>EH, Sept. 21, 1899.



Delegates to the state Federation of Labor convention in Duluth, 1899; note Sabrie Akin, top row, center, wearing the straw boater.

ceding that she was "a little more radical than many women." In this, she had Sabrie Akin's company.

AKIN'S POPULARITY in middle-class reform circles, as in the labor movement, proved that socialist feminists were not marginalized but accepted and appreciated. In 1898 Akin was elected a founding officer and corresponding secretary of the elite and "conservative" Duluth Twentieth Century Club, which functioned as an umbrella for the Daughters of the American Revolution, social and literary groups, and Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic women. She was an active member of its civic and home departments. Akin opened a new women's space in the Duluth business district when she collected membership dues for the club at her *Labor World* office. She crossed cultures from the male-dominated labor movement to the women's club movement and was a frequent speaker at educational gatherings. In February, 1896, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, for example, invited her to address the topic of child labor at its annual St. Louis County meeting.<sup>30</sup>

In her speeches and in the *Labor World* Akin asserted a socialist feminist viewpoint. Women's work was valuable, she proclaimed, and she demanded—and won—their right to honest jobs at living wages. Often, however, middle-class women did not understand. Those who were poor and vulnerable were segregated into male-dominated spaces near the waterfront, like St. Croix Alley and the Bowery. The only others there were laundresses, waitresses, and prostitutes. The *News Tribune* lumped all of these women together as "dark-eyed Rachels."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (Reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 3:653–654, 973–974; *LW*, Oct. 10, 1896; Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 176; *NT*, June 28, 1896.

<sup>31</sup>*EH*, Feb. 22, 1896, Sept. 10, 1898, Sept. 21, 1899; clippings in Twentieth Century Club Scrapbook, NMHC.

<sup>32</sup>See, for example, "Honor," *LW*, May 2, 1896; *NT*, Oct. 20, 1896.

The mainstream newspapers reinforced this judgment of those who stepped out of women's spaces by sensationalizing their personal tragedies. "Duluth Woman Dead," cried the *News Tribune*. Mamie Enright died alone in Montana after a self-induced abortion. Mrs. Sharp of Duluth spent a night in a St. Paul hospital. She became drunk and distraught while desperately searching for Mr. Sharp, who had deserted her. "Mrs. Sharp's Troubles," the *Evening Herald* announced. Routine stories about court appearances by prostitutes popularized labels like a "galaxy" of "frail sisters" and "house of ill fame." Stereotypes such as these reinforced the perception held by some middle-class reformers that poor women were not morally strong.<sup>52</sup>

Akin thought that blaming women deflected attention from the root of their problem: economic exploitation. Her role in the club movement was to explain dilemmas of the poor to privileged women who never ventured into the Bowery or the laundries. A friend testified that Akin taught the club members that they had a moral obligation "to raise the social and economic status of women in our town by bringing all classes of women into closer and more sympathetic relations."<sup>53</sup>

Akin's friend Ida Thompson, who lived in the new hilltop community of Glen Avon, struggled with this question. She put it this way: "Mrs. Akin thought poverty the cause of drinking while I held the reverse. . . . Woman, she would say, will never gain a just portion of the world's good things unless she claims them . . . although some may deem it unfeminine, but if refusing to be [the] starved of the earth is that, then a large number of women are united."<sup>54</sup>

Sabrie Akin was a bridge builder. In her articles and her speeches she helped the various reform movements to recognize common cause. Historian Meredith Tax described socialist women leaders like this: they "did not see themselves as part of an autonomous movement, but as part of more than one movement—the

human links between the feminist movement, the labor movement, and the socialist movement."<sup>55</sup>

Akin enjoyed honors for her public leadership. Debs rewarded her for her devotion to him and the ARU. When he visited Duluth in October of 1896, Sabrie Akin rode in the carriage procession with Debs and the other labor elite. Her friends also credited her with bringing presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan to Duluth that same month. Bryan addressed 6,000 men in the car barn and 4,000 women at the Lyceum. The ladies, Akin wrote, "outdid the men in their enthusiasm, clapped their hands till they ruined their gloves, and cheered themselves hoarse just like their fathers and brothers."<sup>56</sup>

Akin basked in the reflected glory of the success of other women, as well. She predicted a great future for her socialist friend, Kate Keating from the St. Paul garment workers, when Keating won election as second vice-president of the Minnesota Federation of Labor. Akin's rousing speeches helped to inspire the organization of the laundry workers. When 75 "laundry girls and waiter girls" rode in carriages in the 1896 Labor Day parade, Akin crowed about "the first public appearance here of any considerable number of women trade unionists."<sup>57</sup>

THERE ARE ONLY clues to Akin's personal life. Every so often the "Personals" column of the *Evening Herald* noted that T. C. Akin was on his way to Minneapolis on business, or coming home from a business tour of the west. His sales territory stretched into the Dakotas.<sup>58</sup>

*Workers at the Yale Laundry, Duluth, about 1910*



<sup>52</sup>*EH*, Mar. 21, 23, 1896; *NT*, Jan. 14, 1895; Mary S. Fergusson, "Boarding Homes and Clubs for Working Women," *Bulletin of the Department of Labor* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, Mar., 1898), 3:142-143.

<sup>53</sup>*LW*, Mar. 10, 1900.

<sup>54</sup>*Duluth City Directory*, 1900; *LW*, Mar. 10, 1900.

<sup>55</sup>Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), 14.

<sup>56</sup>*EH*, Oct. 22, 1896; *LW*, Oct. 17, 24, 1896, Mar. 10, 1900.

<sup>57</sup>*LW*, Aug. 15, Sept. 12, Dec. 19, 1896.

<sup>58</sup>See, for example, the issues of May 23, 1895, and Aug. 17, 1896. Akin retired in 1929 in South Dakota; author's conversation with Steve Lorkin, personnel department, Northwestern Mutual Life, Milwaukee, Dec. 4, 1989.

He was not at home when Sabrie Akin died on January 23, 1900. It was a sudden illness diagnosed as catarrhal enteritis (an intestinal blockage), and she was only in her thirties. The Duluth reform and labor communities were shocked, and the newspapers documented a great outpouring of grief.<sup>30</sup>

I read Sabrie Akin's will and probate court records at the St. Louis County Courthouse. Two details were disturbing: her husband's address was listed as Watertown, South Dakota, and she named Charles, her 11-year-old son, sole heir. Until he reached 14 years of age, Charles was to be under the guardianship of Oliver F. Collier, their neighbor and the printer of the *Labor World*.

Akin's grave was not marked with a headstone. The Forest Hill Cemetery map locates her burial site in the Colliers' four-person plot, next to Oliver, who died in 1927. Sabrie Akin's unmarked grave is a depression in the ground.<sup>31</sup>

Why did Akin make a will six months before she died? Did she have an earlier attack? Did she and Mr. Akin have a falling-out? He was not the father of her child. All we can guess is that there must have been something wrong for her not to trust her son to her second husband.

"I hereby revoke," Akin wrote in a will dated August 5, 1899, "all other last WILLS and TESTAMENTS of every disposition of my property heretofore made by me and executed, making and constituting this my last WILL and TESTAMENT." Attorney Austin W. Gindley and stenographer friend M. A. Armstrong witnessed the document.<sup>32</sup>

Akin's personal things were sold: three beds, 50 yards of carpet, a cooking stove and equipment, a dining room set, parlor furniture, two bookcases, and 100 books. The books, worth \$50, and the *Labor World*, which sold for \$400, were her most precious worldly possessions. Her life was her son, her work, and her friendships with labor and reform workers.

Akin's relationship to the women's, labor, and other reform movements was a personal one. Without the freedoms already won by American feminists and labor—the freedom to own her own property, to keep her own wages, to determine her son's guardianship, to make an independent will, to be a professional—Sabrie Akin would have been much more vulnerable than she was.

There is another legacy from Mrs. Akin, besides my own discovery of a heroine. Today a woman is serving her second term as president of the AFL-CIO-affiliated Duluth Central Labor Body, elected by 11,000 members representing 70 unions. Mary Rosenthal is a librarian and a leader in the American Federation of State and Municipal Employees. Mary Rosenthal is a fan of



Obituary sketch of Sabrie Akin, from the *New York Journal*, March 18, 1900

Sabrie Akin and has found inspiration for her speeches and writing in the *Labor World*.<sup>33</sup>

SABRIE AKIN was mourned. Prominent businessmen served as pallbearers, including the publisher of the *News Tribune*. The Twentieth Century Club canceled meetings of its home and civic departments, and its president, Marie H. Marshall, wrote a tribute in the *Evening Herald* about Akin's "clear head . . . warm heart and ever ready sympathy."<sup>34</sup>

Civic leaders Ida Thompson and Marshall wrote of "true friendship"; they spoke of Akin's gift of advocat-

<sup>30</sup>EH, Jan. 23, 1900.

<sup>31</sup>Lot record and map of Forest Hill Cemetery; NT, May 17, 1927

<sup>32</sup>Here and below, see Akin will and probate court records. For Armstrong, see *Duluth City Directory*, 1900.

<sup>33</sup>*Minnesota Women's Press*, Dec. 20, 1989–Jan. 2, 1990, p. 1; LW, Feb. 22, 1990, p. 5; author's conversations with Mary Rosenthal.

<sup>34</sup>EH, Jan. 23, 25, 26, 1900.

ing for wage-earning women among their more privileged circles. The St. Paul Labor Assembly's organ, the *Union Advocate*, worried about her son, "a lovely boy whom the deceased heroine leaves to face the storms of a brutal world."<sup>64</sup>

William McEwen, longtime trades assembly officer and statewide labor politician, bought the *Labor World* from probate court. The *Evening Herald* announced that he would depend on it for his livelihood. In his first edition, he penned an eloquent obituary. A politician who was careful not to be out in front of his constituency, McEwen admired Akin's idealism. "She never altered from [socialism] and advocated it fearlessly and courageously until she died." She had built and sustained the *Labor World*, the new editor stated, by working "earnestly and sincerely, day and night, sometimes aided, more times alone. . . . Many men, with more courage than she possessed, have abandoned lighter tasks in despair."<sup>65</sup>

We know from Ronald Huch's article on Mayor Truelson, Akin's contemporary, that the "plain people" of Duluth had a great capacity for loyalty to leaders who helped to empower them. The city's laborers were

devoted to Mrs. Akin. The trades assembly paid five dollars for the wreath on her casket. Members met at the Kalamazoo Hall 15 minutes before her funeral was to begin in order to march together to the service at Akin's home.<sup>66</sup> The tribute by the trades assembly in the *Evening Herald's* labor column on January 27, 1900, was Mrs. Akin's last headline.

#### Great Sorrow in Labor Circles Over Mrs. Akin's Death

When a worker falls out of any rank, the great world rumbles on, quite unmindful of the tragedy. . . . But those who have stood shoulder to shoulder with Mrs. Akin in her fight for organized labor, knowing her many good qualities and feeling the heart-beat of her daily life, can not dismiss the tragic event from their minds. . . . recalling her many kindly impulses that always moved her to temper justice and mercy, and thinking upon the graces of an unclouded, sunny spirit, invariably responsive to the demands of fair friendship, the working people of Duluth feel that death has once more sought out a shining mark.

The illustrations on p. 209 and 218 are used courtesy of the author; all others are in the MHS collections.

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<sup>64</sup>*LW*, Mar. 10, 1900.

<sup>65</sup>Akin probate court records; *EH*, Feb. 24, 1900; *LW*, Jan. 16, 1897, Mar. 10, 1900.

<sup>66</sup>Duluth Federated Trades Assembly, Minute book, vol. 2, Jan. 26, 1900, Trades & Labor Assembly Papers; *EH*, Jan. 24, 1900.



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