

## WILLIAM ALBERT McGONAGLE<sup>1</sup>

William A. McGonagle was born at Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, on March 28, 1861, and died at his home at Hunters Park, Duluth, on August 2, 1930. Conshohocken is on the picturesque Schuylkill River some ten miles from the center of Philadelphia, and it is close to the geographic center of a region of great historic interest. McGonagle's father was born at Pottsville about a hundred miles up the Schuylkill, and his mother, Agnes McKeeman McGonagle, at Norristown, close to Conshohocken. Philip J. Kelly, a schoolmate of McGonagle in his early boyhood, recently wrote of him as follows:

I first knew Al at the age of six years as a school boy at the old Public School on 3rd Avenue, Conshohocken, Pa., a little fat, healthy, clean-minded boy, always attentive and excellently behaved. . . . He had no fads that I can recollect, took no interest in athletic sports of any kind; he was an exceptionally clean-minded, wholesome boy, always studious and attentive to his lessons.

McGonagle passed through the grades and the Conshohocken high school, completing the latter in 1876. He then attended the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia and was graduated in 1881 with high honors as a bachelor of science in civil engineering. With a college friend, Samuel T. Wagner, he laid out an imaginary railroad a mile long, with connections, curves, bridges, and a tunnel, and together they wrote a thesis about it which is now on file at the university.

Young McGonagle went to Minnesota in July, 1881, and after about a year with the Little Falls and Dakota Railroad, now a branch of the Northern Pacific, he entered the service

<sup>1</sup>Read at a meeting of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society on October 13, 1930, in the Historical Building, St. Paul. *Ed.*

of the Duluth and Iron Range Railway Company in 1882 and continued in that and allied service until his death. At that time northeastern Minnesota was a wilderness. In 1880 there were but 4,505 people in St. Louis County and these were largely at Duluth; 106 people in Lake County; 65 in Cook County; and 1,230 in Carlton County. Itasca County counted 164 souls. A forest covered all, broken only by swamps. Iron ore had been found at Soudan and Tower on Lake Vermilion years before when men were prospecting in vain for reputed gold.

The young engineer was sent to a place in the wilderness, now Two Harbors, to aid in laying out a railroad to the iron mines on Lake Vermilion. When he went to Two Harbors there was no development or settlement of consequence north of Duluth. There were plans and hopes, but no railroads had been built. Aside from the Vermilion trail, which was more usable in winter than in summer, the rivers were the only highways; and there were only a few widely separated clearings and log cabins, where settlers expected some day to see cities. Explorers traveling north from Duluth by the St. Louis River in canoes had found iron ore near Tower. The Ely deposits were unknown and the Mesabi Range undiscovered. Young McGonagle had an undeveloped region before him, and it was his destiny and work to help to develop it. Thus he must be enrolled in the ranks of the pioneers.

Decades later he recalled what he saw, whom he met, what comforts and hardships there were back in 1882 when, as a stout and ambitious youth, he began to survey a railroad to the iron mines on Lake Vermilion. In an address presented in 1925 before employees of the Duluth and Iron Range road who had been in its service thirty years or more, he told the story:

When we reached Knife River [December 7, 1882] about twenty miles away, we were forced to land on account of open water, but we took the ice again on the north side of the river

and proceeded to our destination at Agate Bay [*Two Harbors*] where we arrived late in the afternoon and pitched our tents near what is now the land end of Ore Dock No. 1, where Thomas Saxton had built a log claim shanty. We enjoyed a hearty supper in our Cook tent and it was the privilege of a few of us to bunk on the hard timber floor of the shanty where, rolled up in blankets, we tried to sleep.

The next morning it was snowing and continued to snow until there was at least four feet of snow on the level, but nothing daunted, we started out our Engineer Corps to lay out the line of the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad. It was a desperate winter for outdoor work, living as we did in tents with temperatures running forty degrees below zero and lower, but we plodded along, moving our camp every few days, until we finally connected our line with what was known as Case's line near the Whiteface River. Several changes in the line were decided upon to reduce the cost and we moved our Camp back to Stone Lake in August, 1883, where we suffered torments from the mosquitoes that infested the swamps in that locality, but we lived through it and returned to Agate Bay in October. I can distinctly remember that the first iron ore was dumped into the Ore Dock at 11:00 P.M. on July 31st, 1884, winning the race and earning the bonus which was promptly paid by the railroad company.

From the time of his going to Agate Bay as a subordinate surveyor and engineer, McGonagle moved higher from year to year. When death came, he was at the head of the iron ore railways. He moved up by merit. He pleased those above him and was honored and respected by his subordinates. He understood people. He relieved those above him of work and worry and made it easy for those over whom he had control. When he died there were in one way or another about five thousand workers under his direction. They trusted him, knowing that while he exacted duty, he asked it reasonably as he had always performed it.

On December 6, 1882, the Little Falls and Dakota road having been completed, he accepted an offer made by Colonel John B. Fish to assist him in locating and constructing the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad in St. Louis and Lake counties and later was promoted to the offices of resident

engineer, superintendent of bridges and buildings, and assistant chief engineer. He continued in the service of this railroad until July, 1902, when he accepted the position of assistant to the president of the Duluth, Missabe, and Northern Railway Company. In February, 1903, he was promoted to the office of first vice president, and in March, 1909, he was elected president of the company and continued in that office until his death.

It should be understood that McGonagle's railroading was supplemented by social, political, religious, family, Masonic, and other activities. In whatever activities he took part, he went to the top as a matter of course. No one was jealous of him. He was so essential, capable, and necessary. He was at the head of all the important civic volunteer public bodies in Duluth at one time or another and he was a director of a number of business groups other than railroads.

For a full generation McGonagle was in demand for addresses on various subjects by many groups in northern Minnesota. He was disposed to accept all such calls, but he could not. Time was wanting. But he was on perhaps two thousand programs. Two thousand addresses is not too high an estimate. He regarded speaking as a social duty as well as a duty to the great financial interests that he represented. It was not difficult for him, although it was a heavy draft upon his time and strength. He was a charming orator. He talked on civic progress, trade, public charities, religious freedom, Masonry, safety work, railroading, history, war work, Red Cross efforts, Americanization, pioneering, and many other things. He did not orate in the accepted sense. He talked freely and with ease, so that all could hear. He stirred recollections and he always provoked laughter with his humorous tales. He made no pretense of being a public speaker, and yet crowds always went to hear him.

McGonagle regarded religion as a necessity and hence he was active in the affairs of the Pilgrim Congregational Church

of which he was a member and for a time chairman of the board of trustees. During his later years he often addressed differing groups in support of religious freedom without any proscription for one's views. He remembered many religious bodies in his will, among other bequests leaving a thousand dollars to the Methodist Episcopal church at Conshohocken, in honor of his father and mother.

He was an active Mason and the recipient of many Masonic honors. He was a member of all the Masonic bodies in Duluth and was master of Palestine Lodge no. 79, Ancient Free and Accepted Masons; high priest of Keystone chapter no. 20, Royal Arch Masons; commander of Duluth commandery no. 18, Knights Templars; most puissant sovereign of St. George's Conclave, Knights of the Red Cross of Constantine; and a member of the Societas Rosicruciana, a branch of which was established in Duluth. He was elected grand master of the Masons of Minnesota in January, 1904, and was at the time of his death vice president and a trustee of the Minnesota Masonic Home.

McGonagle's Y.M.C.A. work was extensive. He planned camps for the boys and campaigns for the men. He was instrumental in founding Camp McGonagle and giving it to the Proctor Y.M.C.A. for the use of the children of the employees of the Missabe railway company. He took a leading part in what is commonly known as safety work. The fact that injuries in industry were nearly always due to some oversight or neglect appalled him. Thus his earnest support was behind all efforts to make work safe for workers. Here his warm heart and business sense combined to help people and to aid business of all kinds. He said industrial carelessness "was a disgrace." He was a natural leader in this work and the railroads under him were in the front rank for industrial safety.

He led the work of relief after the great forest fires in Minnesota in 1910 and 1918. In 1910 he represented the

American Red Cross and in 1918 he was in charge for the state. Millions were expended under his advice and administration. During the World War, as chairman of the Duluth chapter of the American Red Cross, which has sixty thousand members, he supervised this organization, sending vast amounts of needed supplies to the men at the front.

He was a member of the Duluth Chamber of Commerce; the Duluth Boat Club; the Kitchi Gammi, Northland Country, Ridgeview Country, and Kiwanis clubs of Duluth; the Gitchinadji Country Club of Superior, Wisconsin; the New York Railroad Club; the Los Angeles Country Club of Los Angeles; the Pasadena Golf Club of Altadena; the Minnesota Club of St. Paul; and the White Bear Yacht Club.

In common with most men of unusual mental power, McGonagle loved history. He did not wish that the past, vivid to him, should be forgotten. Hence on all occasions he promoted historical work. He encouraged all movements by his subordinates to preserve history and to organize museums. On February 21, 1913, he became a member of the Minnesota Historical Society and on January 14, 1918, he was elected to its executive council, a position that he held until his death. He was one of the founders of the St. Louis County Historical Society and was a member of its board of governors from the beginning. The writer, who has held an executive place in that local society, recalls that McGonagle attended the meetings of the society with scrupulous care. He always had suggestions of value to lay before the society. He encouraged the society with his influence. He said to the writer a few years ago that he hoped to reduce his general labors within a short time and give most of his energies to historical writing and studies. Perhaps he was then conscious of decreasing strength and wished to do some valuable historical work before the end. However that may be, he did not realize this wish because, while giving historical workers unstinted

encouragement, he remained in business harness until the end. The St. Louis County Historical Society, since it was founded in 1923, has held many program meetings in the cities and towns north of Duluth in the iron country. McGonagle attended many of these meetings, often traveling to them in his special car attached to passenger trains and taking with him as his guests officers of the society and speakers. Once the writer took occasion to thank him for his interest and courtesy. His answer was "Do not thank me. I do this because it is a duty and a pleasure. It is a grand work. I wish I had time to do more."

He was married in 1887 and the bride of his youth, Sarah L. Sargent of Methuen, Massachusetts, survives him. Four children were born to them, of whom two, Robert Emerson McGonagle and Mary McGonagle Tibbetts, both of Duluth, survive. A son, William A., Jr., died in early youth in December, 1920, and another son, Joseph Sargent McGonagle, died on December 23, 1929, leaving a widow and children.

McGonagle was a large man physically, of erect carriage. He was always gracious and friendly. His memory was remarkable for its tenacity, and he was fond of exercising it, comparing the past with the present, noting changes, and planning progress. He had a fine sense of humor and his judgment of men and things was accurate. He was a personal friend of national leaders in business and politics and at the same time on friendly terms with those whose duties entailed manual toil.

In May, 1925, McGonagle was chosen as a member of the Hall of Fame for Duluth. His picture as such a member is hung in the Duluth City Hall. A plaque recording the selection was given to him at a banquet held on May 14, 1925. Thus he knew long ago how the people loved him. In a leading building at Two Harbors, where he began his career in Minnesota, there is a noble fireplace made of native rocks and stones

decorated with iron ores from the mines and inscribed with a fine sentiment of which McGonagle was the author. This was his gift to the city and in part his monument there.

At the hour of McGonagle's funeral on August 5 all work on the railroads in northeastern Minnesota ceased for five minutes. The press was strong in praise of him. The *Duluth Evening Herald* of August 4 concluded an editorial in his honor as follows:

Duluth will never forget him. Among the first as pioneer and railway official, among the first as neighbor, father, and husband, some who knew him will honor him for all his good qualities, some for some one of them, and every man will hold him first for something.

The *Labor World* of August 9 has this:

More than any other human factor it was Mr. McGonagle's fine personality, high character and democratic mannerism that won for the United States Steel corporation the public support it has long enjoyed from this community. It was his contact with the people that in large measure served to temper local public prejudices against this great industrial organization.

WILLIAM E. CULKIN

ST. LOUIS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
DULUTH



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).