

## JAMES MOORE McCONNELL<sup>1</sup>

James Moore McConnell was born in Armstrong County, Pennsylvania, on May 28, 1868, and died at his home at 77 Langford Park Place, St. Paul, on April 29, 1933, after an illness of nearly four months. His parents were William and Rebecca Moore McConnell. He was graduated from the Edinboro State Normal School in 1889 and engaged in the study of law at Warren, Pennsylvania, in 1890. In the same year he began his career in the field of education as a rural teacher in his native state.

He came to Minnesota in 1892 and taught in the Wilder Farm College, then located near Windom, until 1895, when he became superintendent of schools at Heron Lake. In 1893 he was married to Margaret Jeannette Graham of Kittanning, Pennsylvania. To them were born six children, three of whom died in early childhood. The three sons living are Harold Graham, deputy commissioner of the state banking department, St. Paul; James Eugene, department supervisor for the Investors Syndicate of Minneapolis; and John Ross, who is connected with the research department of the Dupont Manufacturing Company at Wilmington, Delaware. Mr. McConnell was superintendent of schools at Winnebago from 1900 to 1904, when he was elected to the superintendency at Mankato. In 1909 he was appointed to the chair of American history and government in the Mankato State Normal School. He was graduated from Carleton College at Northfield with the degree of bachelor of arts in the year 1910.

Mr. McConnell was appointed by Governor J. A. A. Burnquist in 1919 as state superintendent of public instruction. The legislature of that year created the state board

<sup>1</sup> Read at a meeting of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society on October 9, 1933. *Ed.*

of education, which appointed him state commissioner of education. This position he held at the time of his death.

Commissioner McConnell was a man with broad interests and extensive and important connections both within and without his profession. He was grand master of the Masonic Order for Minnesota in 1923, president of the Minnesota Education Association in 1908, and a member of the National Education Association and of Phi Delta Kappa fraternity. He was deeply interested in the Minnesota Historical Society and in the history of his adopted state. He became an annual member of this society in 1919 and five years later a life member. In 1924 he was elected to its executive council. He was the first president of the National Council of State Superintendents and Commissioners of Education. The following tribute comes from the present secretary of that organization and sets forth the esteem in which he was held by this distinguished group of educators:

The National Council of State Superintendents and Commissioners of Education pauses in its deliberation to pay its respect to the memory of Superintendent J. M. McConnell of Minnesota, who has passed away since the Minneapolis meeting this year. The Council recalls that Doctor McConnell was its first president and at all times has been a leader in the deliberations.

His friendliness, poise, sober and calm judgment, and depth of character are missed. Those of us who were privileged to enjoy his hospitality in that most interesting tour of the Arrowhead country will ever associate him with the development of a great program in a great north central state. Those of us who knew him as a neighbor will not soon forget the kindnesses shown. All of us have lost a comrade whom we respected and relied upon for his appreciation of vital values.

It is futile to attempt to add here to his fame or to throw light upon the qualities that distinguished Mr. McConnell among the great leaders in the field of public education of the present day. His contemporaries know and will never forget his contributions to this field and the personal characteristics back of these contributions. But history should

record them for the guidance and the inspiration of future generations.

For Commissioner McConnell, public office was a sacred trust. To him the headship of the public school system of this state carried with it a sense of personal responsibility which transcended in importance everything else in his life. He weighed every problem of education, even in the most remote and the smallest community, with thoroughness, with intelligence, and always with regard to the welfare of its children. Mr. McConnell had the judicial attitude toward all problems. He wanted facts. Having them, he knew how to interpret them sanely, constructively, fearlessly. He was keen to distinguish between fact and supposition and to use the latter only for what it was worth.

He knew how to meet and deal with people as he met them. He detested insincerity and was quick to detect it. Yet he was preëminently patient and fair. He admired frankness and was himself frank, sometimes almost to the point of bluntness. But he cured the sting with a kindly humor, keen and subtle, but never malicious. He never failed to make himself understood, and one never doubted that what he said he meant. In his relations with the state legislature he was especially fortunate because it was understood that he always knew the facts of a case and that he was presenting them without reserve, or misrepresentation, or fear of consequences. Mr. McConnell called forth the best there was in his department associates. He selected them with exceptional care, gave them specific fields of service and responsibility, supported them fearlessly, and demanded of them the same sense of responsibility for results that characterized his own daily life.

It is to be noted that Mr. McConnell was thrice chosen commissioner by the state board of education; that this board has had but one change in membership since it was created fourteen years ago; that the membership consists

of five persons from various walks of life—independent, capable of doing their own thinking, and habitually disposed to do so. Yet through the long, trying years of his association with the board, Mr. McConnell came with the respect, the confidence, the admiration, the friendship of its members, who suffered a sense of loss of leadership at his death which was personal and pathetic. “Here was a man. When comes such another?”

In closing, it is fitting to attempt an enumeration of the specific accomplishments of Commissioner McConnell's administration. During his fourteen years of service he completely and effectively reorganized the department of education, and brought about a more effective administration of school law. He succeeded in creating a rural division, in establishing teachers' institutes for the benefit of the rural schools, and in enlarging high school tuition facilities to provide a reasonable degree of educational opportunity for pupils residing in country districts. Mr. McConnell was really the author of the very effective teacher certification law of 1929. Under his leadership the courses of study for elementary and high schools have been written and revised from time to time, making this curriculum offering one of decided assistance to the schools of the state and attracting favorable attention and comment from other states. Under his guidance and encouragement a program of physical and health education has been widely promulgated and has become effective in producing healthier and better citizens, even in the smallest of rural schools. It was also under his leadership that a statistical division of the state department of education was established, making it possible to obtain accurate and usable information upon any important questions relating to public education. Perhaps Mr. McConnell's most significant work, as it relates to the teaching profession of this state, is to be found in the service he rendered in securing the passage of the

state-wide Teachers' Retirement Fund Act of 1931. It was his insight and his persistent effort that brought this act through the legislature, despite many adverse forces and misunderstandings.

Here is a record of great service. In future years, students of public education in this state will turn back to it and bless the name and the work of the man who brought about these results.

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