

# Gompers speech beats Seward fire as drawing card

No history of the labor movement in the United States would be complete without the name of Samuel Gompers (1850-1924), first president of the American Federation of Labor. Getting him to Bloomington in 1897 for a Labor Day celebration must have been considered a coup the sponsors, the National Quarrymen's Union.

The program was an all-day affair, one of those "The mind cannot absorb any more than the seat can endure" occasions with speakers who apparently can't see far enough to notice that the audience is beginning to squirm. *The* (Bloomington) *World* of Sept. 7 estimated the crowd on the court house lawn at 3,500.

After the Mechanics band had played several selections before the 10 a.m. program began, Henry Splitgerber of the National Quarrymen's Union introduced Bloomington Mayor A.M. Hadley. The politician was politically naive and not sophisticated enough to realize that he should have given copies of his



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

speech to reporters present.

Hadley was smart enough to know he had an unusually large audience to influence and proceeded to relate the reasons for the observance of Labor Day. Reported *The World*, the mayor "then showed the relation of the different classes of society in America and the absence of class and clan. Out of the stability of wages in America had come the present high standard of the American laboring man bringing with it accumulation of wages and homes, a higher standard of living, broader education, refinement, social elevation, self-reliance, self-respect and independence."

When Hadley sat down, if the audience

thought they would then hear Samuel Gompers, they were mistaken. According to the newspaper, Congressman Miers was next. That man was astute enough to furnish reporters with a copy of his remarks, and he was in part quoted in *The World*. In 35 minutes of speaking, Miers invoked the names of Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Lincoln in the kind of "mother, home and country" speech guaranteed to get applause from the audience.

Gompers may have been on the platform in the morning, but he did not have an opportunity speak until after lunch. *The World* reported that the labor leader had barely begun his speech when the loud fire bell sounded. Continued the newspaper, "Mr. Gompers continued his remarks as though nothing out of the ordinary was occurring and held his audience after they were somewhat reassured for more than two hours."

Gompers condemned the Supreme Court for some of its decisions and warned "of the

danger that lurks in the pathway of the republic, pointing out ways of escape there from ... He described the damage to society by the spectacle of two millions of men or more anxious to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows, who are vainly seeking work, and no work is to be found. His condemnation of such conditions of organized society was intense and exciting to a degree and made a lasting impression."

The "exercises of the day" were concluded with a "grand ball" in the Armory of the Bloomington Rifles. The fire bell that did not interrupt his speech was not a false alarm. City Councilman Seward's house at 526 North Morton Street was burning when spotted by W.H. Douglas. Engine No. 1 rushed to the Ninth Street cistern to pump water on the fire.

According to *The World*, some of the Labor Day audience thought the Seward fire was more interesting than the speeches and headed north from the square to have a look.

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